

Reflections on the concept of a scholarly dictionary

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The current age is frequently characterized as the era of information. Characteristics of this time are indeed the increasing dependence on information technology and the ever higher demands on information itself in terms of accuracy, completeness, interrelatedness, timeliness, etc. This development has strongly influenced dictionaries as containers/suppliers of lexical information. According to present-day standards of e-lexicography, the conception of dictionaries as merely linear, alphabetically-ordered sequences of self-contained entries has long since become outdated. Applications like the inter-connection of lemmas in more comprehensive semantic relationships such as hypernymy and hyponymy, or the introduction of the onomasiological search function from concept to corresponding lemmas, may suffice as examples here. For collections of dictionaries as well, the image of a linear arrangement on bookshelves is on the verge of becoming antiquated. Here, too, a three-dimensional virtual reality, as it were, is being developed by cross-connecting dictionaries by means of portals.

In other words, lexicography and dictionaries are undergoing a fundamental development at present. It is therefore at an opportune moment that the organization of European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) has established a platform named the European Network of e-Lexicography (ENeL). ENeL aspires to play a stimulating role in bringing together lexicographers and linguists to reflect on building a comprehensive and modern Web portal for dictionaries of the European languages. The keyword therefore is widening the perspective. In line with this we like to avail ourselves of the opportunity to explore other means of communication, such as this newsletter, to draw the attention to one of the central issues that has to be dealt with in implementing the project.

At first instance, building such a portal implies reflection on its content. Even though a digital environment is always expandable, it is recommended to 'map' the area in advance. ENeL's own website describes its first aim in the following general terms: "to give users easier access to scholarly dictionaries and to bridge the gap between the general public and scholarly dictionaries". This entails the necessity to gain more insight into what is

to be understood by a *scholarly dictionary*. Although the idiom occurs regularly in the professional literature, its definition is rarely at the centre of interest. Any definition attempt soon reveals that this concept is no exception to the general rule that defining is far from easy, which holds for both concrete and abstract nouns. Even for the former, which are generally easier to define, Landau states in his standard work *Dictionaries. The Art and Craft of Lexicography*: "There is no simple way to define precisely a complex arrangement of parts, however homely the object may appear to be. One obvious solution is not to define it precisely; but modern dictionary users expect scientifically precise, somewhat encyclopedic definitions" (2001: 167). This applies not in the least to abstract nouns, the complexity of which is usually more difficult to grasp. In the following, rare definition of *scholarly dictionary*, the shorter way according to Landau appears to have been followed. By means of only a *genus proximum* 'the next higher category' and two features, Hartmann and James (1998) give the following description: "a type of reference work compiled by a team of academics as part of a (usually long-term) research project, e.g. linguists working on a historical dictionary or dialect dictionary". In this definition, the distinctive semantic features are specifically related to the authors and to the research-related nature of the information offered. The previous definition marks the contours of the meaning of the idiom in a general way. Compared to this and consistent with the quotation from Landau above, the semantic features can be specified in a far more detailed way. This line was followed when the concept was the subject of a presentation at the Vienna meeting of ENeL last February. Participants had answered the call to send their views on the characteristics of a scholarly dictionary and their specifications fit in with the general definition above, concretizing it to a considerable degree. We summarize their views below.

Primarily, the scholarly dictionary was seen related most often to an academic environment, both on the production side and the demand side. The former was described as including 'academic editors or supervisors', 'academic publishing houses' and 'academic institutions', while among the ranks of the latter were counted 'linguistic researchers', the 'academic community', a



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‘scholarly audience’ and ‘users concerned with advanced linguistic studies and professionals on a fairly advanced linguistic level’. Indicative of this environment is also the notion that a scholarly dictionary is generally not produced on a commercial basis. The academic level of the authors and the primarily intended users accordingly implied high demands with respect to such dictionary’s content. More specifically, the vocabulary had to be described on the empirical base of a processed corpus or of scholarly harvested examples, and several standards had to be met such as the pursuit of completeness in the scope of entries, comprehensiveness as to textual genre and language variation, and detailed information beyond the communicative support for reception and production purposes, all on an authoritative level. Regarding content, adequate room should also be reserved for encyclopedic information when relevant. Apart from the factors *author*, *content* and *user*, also the approach of the content was considered characteristic of a scholarly dictionary’s profile. Based on the lexicographic standards of its time, analysis and description had to add new knowledge on the lexicon from a descriptive, not primarily prescriptive, perspective. This had to be realized using analytical definitions, scholarly terminology and the quotation of good dictionary examples as evidence, and the results had to be suitable for linguistic research. Finally, the last group of characteristics mentioned by respondents bore upon the contact with the user. Due to the often voluminous size of scholarly dictionaries, this is often established either digitally in the form of updates or in print by means of instalments. To convey the specialized information, the edition is often supported by a scholarly apparatus. In digital versions the user also often avails of functions giving access to many categories and also making the material collection searchable, and preferably expandable and linkable to other collections and tools.

Including this information according to Landau’s previously-mentioned explicit description style, we can propose the following working definition of *scholarly dictionary*:

knowledge-oriented dictionary compiled by (usually) academics to provide detailed word descriptions for the pursuit of lexical insight and research support according to the linguistic and lexicographic standards of their time, and traditionally designed with such main features as the pursuit of completeness with regard to the entries relevant to subject matters, a preference for analytic definitions, the use of an

extensive corpus of observed discourse, the inclusion of documenting example sentences with bibliographic references, the availability of a scholarly apparatus like descriptions of method and project plan, a bibliography of sources, and, in digital specimens, the implementation of advanced search and application tools

The inclusion of an important definition element as “according to the linguistic and lexicographic standards of their time” indicates that a certain flexibility has been built into the definition. This chronologically relative point of view implies that not every scholarly dictionary can meet all the characteristics enumerated at any time. The tenor of the definition is in other words prototypical. The term is used here in the linguistic sense referring to the prototype theory. A prototype is the ideal example of a semantic category. The arrangement of a category may be conceived as follows: surrounding the core of the prototype are the instances of the category that share certain, but not all, of the characteristics of the prototype. Viewed from this angle the enumeration in the definition above is exemplary rather than exhaustive and certainly not meant as a list of necessary and sufficient characteristics. The latter is still often too narrow a way of characterizing definitions.

At present we carry out further research on this definitional issue with respect to the concept of a scholarly dictionary. A possible approach may consist of trying to specify what is at the centre of the category and resembles more the prototype and which dictionary types are more on the periphery.

Research of this kind is stimulated by the wealth of possibilities for discussion that are characteristic of the era of information mentioned in the introduction. Networks are not only devised between dictionaries, but the lexicographer as well is encouraged to consider his/her own position as a constituent part of a larger whole. While this development makes work more complex on the one hand, on the other hand it also makes communication easier both within the profession and outside it.

Comments and suggestions regarding the working definition above are welcome as cause for reflection (scholarlydictionary@inl.nl).

References

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