

IS LEXICOGRAPHY A FIELD IN SEMANTICS?

Dr. Parman Singh

Principle Investigator (CSI-DST)
Central Institute of Indian Languages
Mysore

ABSTRACT

Lexicography is an art and craft of dictionary compilation. It is a common perception that lexicography is a field in applied linguistics. But the maximum number of people consults dictionaries to search the right, current and most frequent meaning of a word. Dictionaries are considered authority over word and their meaning therefore lexicography concentrates mostly over the accuracy of meaning. In this article we will explore the relationship of lexicography with semantics.

Being precise, lexicography is an art and craft of making dictionaries. It is concerned with the professional activity and academic field of the compilation of dictionaries and similar other type of reference works. Depending on the nature, purpose and user of such reference works, at present several branches of lexicography can be distinguished with regard to their practices and theories.

The dictionary making activity is as old as the field of linguistics. Scholars started cultivating this field from the very early age of our civilization. In India the discipline of lexicography started with the collection of obscure words as exemplified in the Nighantus during the first millennium BC. Through a long historical course, lexicography have evolved and established as one of the areas of linguistic research with application both in applied linguistics and language technology.

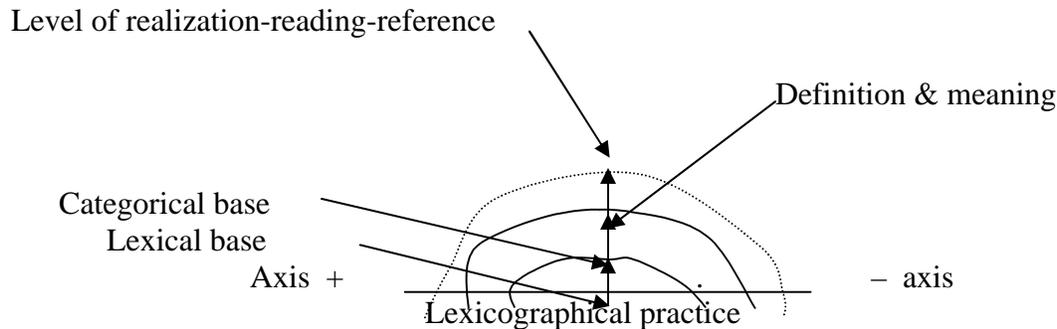
Semantics and Lexicography:

Scholars placed lexicography within the field of applied. The suggestion is made to the effect because linguistics offers basic tools of analysis for lexicographical practice. For instance, most of the descriptive categories like noun, verb, adjective, adverb and so on that are used in dictionary making are sourced through linguistics. There is, therefore, quite some wisdom in claiming lexicography as a part of applied linguistics.

The view of lexicography as an applied linguistics survives in its full scope till the problem of 'definition' and 'meaning' does not surface in dictionary making. Once the problem comes to the fore, it leaves the issue of category and the like far behind.

Put differently, as the problem of definition and meaning arises, it demands refocusing of the entire lexicographical practice. Consequently, though categorical base remains relevant, yet the

new side of the problem introduces a kind of rising above the categorical base. The architecture (see Rangila 2004-2006 and 2009 for details) below summarizes the extension:



The new foci at every stage tend to redefine the entire practice of lexicography. The lexicographical analysis now moves into an outright semantic analysis. Bahri (1985: VI) also supports the idea when he said, “Lexicography in its ideal form, cannot develop without the development of semantic studies”. Arguably, no rigorous sense of meaning can be claimed at the descriptive level of linguistic observation.

Geurts (2008: 226) writes in his paper:

According to Durst and his school, semanticists are in the business of defining meanings, and meanings are, first and foremost word meanings. That is to say, the project and methods of the semanticist are those of the lexicographers. But no matter how central the lexicon may be and how tenuous the distinction between lexicon and grammar or between meaning and use, the project of reducing all of semantics to lexicography is just a pie in the sky.

Frawley (1993: 1) uses an interesting metaphor when describing the relationship of semantics and lexicography: *Semantics is to lexicography what economics is to accountancy*. Further, numerous other positions on the disciplinary status of lexicography are possible. To mention some of the more interesting ones, Spevak (1987) treats both lexicography and semantics as part of lexicology, while Charles Fillmore describes “*the effort to analyze the frame-setting background of a word’s meaning*” in modern English monolingual learner’s dictionaries as “*a kind of ethnography*” (Fillmore 2003: 284).

There is no denial of the role that, descriptive level of a language plays in the making of meaning. Even definitions in dictionary are rooted through the structural descriptions of a language. But it is important to observe that the phenomena called meaning and definition acquire their proper shape and focus mainly within the semantic make up of language. It is this discovery, the relationships that bring in the element semantic centrality or call it semantic rootedness that places lexicographical practice in the field of semantics.

The semantic rootedness has its very far-reaching consequences for the field of lexicography as such. The foregoing section puts lexicographical practice in the field of semantics. Landau (1984: 5) writes: “*A dictionary is a book that lists words in alphabetical order and describes their meaning.*” In other words, dictionary is a reference book of arranged lexical units in alphabetical order and it describes the meaning of the lexical units. Latter on he adds:

“Modern dictionaries often include information about spelling, syllabification, pronunciation, etymology..., usage, synonyms, and grammars, and sometimes illustrations as well.”

Wierzbicka (1993: 46) agrees with the Landau’s emphasis. He makes emphasis on the second part of the early definition that is *meaning*. The first part that is alphabetical order is a common convention by tradition, not essential. It is the second part, that is meaning which normally constitutes the core of a dictionary.

The main point of departure in this study lies in the way it deals with the issue of meaning. There is no illusion about meaning lying in the mind of an individual. Why? There is no individual in lexicographical practice. There is either a page, or a surface-space of any kind that has to have and hold meaning in this practice, as well as, in the discipline of lexicography as such. If one takes a page, which is exactly what is available in the print format, the whole of the play of dictionary making will have to be only with and in words. There is, therefore, a necessary condition that anything and everything in lexicography, including meaning has to be conducted with words.

There are some consequences of the position on meaning presented above. For instance, it can be understood as if lexicographical practice in general is an exercise in lexical semantics. It may be quickly said that this is not the case. Lexical semantics is the field of lexicology, not that of lexicography. The reason for the above realization is simple. The fact that lexicographical practice deals with words gives rise to an impression as if it is an issue in lexicon. Contrary to the problem of lexicon, lexicography deals with problem of definition also. This is where the field of reference goes much beyond the one within the range of lexicon. Definitions are formed in *words*, but they are sourced through the fields of specific information that lay much beyond the limits of words.

Whatever form of participation lexicography may admit get relegated to the background role-play. That is why it does not surface on the surface of a page. This practical problem, or call it limit, puts condition on everything that happens in dictionary making. This is also the reason for there being difference in the take of the field of semantics and that of lexicography. The major function of dictionaries is considered to lie in explaining, describing and defining the meaning of words and on these basis dictionaries are judged. The reader consults a dictionary primarily to know the meaning of a lexical unit.

Sharing his view on word definitions Guralnik (1958: 155) writes:

In selecting and writing his definitions, the lexicographers is of carefully aware that he is not actually recording the “meaning” of a particular word, but that he is merely trying to suggest, within the available space, as many of the aspects of the thing defined as will recall it to the reader or will allow him to form an idea of it in his mind.

Meaning is the relationship between words or phrases and the objects or ideas that they designate (Hartman and James 1998: 92). In other words meaning is a bridge between linguistic unit and its referent(s) in the extralinguistic world. A word can have a single meaning or several different meanings. Scholars have done several groupings of meaning. Two of the important groupings are the core or central meaning and peripheral or subsidiary meaning and the oldest meaning and recent meaning. However the arrangement of meanings in dictionaries is a separate problem and there are many guiding principles available.

Conclusion:

The posited or captured difference between lexicography and semantics should not lead to an impression as if lexicography is merely a word tabulating exercise and it is only semantics where all the theoretical charm lies. Quite contrary to such possible impression lexicography not only owns semantic theories as developed in the field of semantics, but it also provides a platform to test such theories.

It may also be clarified that no suggestion is being made for lexicography to stand and wait till theories of meaning description and definition are developed in the field of semantics. It is equally a possibility that lexicographers themselves develop such theories that not only help them in conducting lexicography but also in semantics proper.

It is held at the very outset of the article that the field of lexicography is a branch of applied linguistics. It is also true to the fact that lexicography is a field basically in Semantics. However, it is not an opposite statement because semantics is also a branch of linguistics, the subject matter of which is the study of meaning. These two (lexicography and semantics) areas of human endeavor have natural affinity. Both are often viewed as twin disciplines, both being concerned with meaning and its interpretation.

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