Who is a Lexicographer?

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1. Introduction

Lexicography can be and has to be regarded as an independent discipline—no longer a subdiscipline of linguistics or a form of applied linguistics or even applied lexicology. Long gone are the days with the focus merely on the linguistic contents of dictionaries and the discussion about dictionaries exclusively dealt with by linguists. We recognise the fact that the linguistic contents will always be an important feature of certain dictionaries, but it is as important to realise that many aspects of the practice of lexicography as well as the theoretical discussions go beyond the realm of linguistics. This does not only apply to subject field dictionaries, e.g. dictionaries of psychology or chemistry where linguistics plays no role in the planning or compilation, but also to general language dictionaries where the success of the dictionary consultation process is not only determined by the linguistic contents but also by the structures and the functions of the dictionary. A good dictionary allows a specific user in a specific situation of use to retrieve the information that he/she needs for solving a specific problem. Access to the relevant data and the selection and presentation of data in such a way that the required lexicographic function can be achieved, remain of prime importance.

However, when speaking about lexicography it is of extreme importance to have an unambiguous interpretation of that person or those persons involved in the discipline, i.e. those people calling themselves lexicographers. In the lexicographic discussions of the past centuries,

this question has never really been posed. People have worked with different assumptions regarding this issue and even among lexicographers no clear answer has been given, as can be seen in the dictionary definitions of the word *lexicographer* given in the following paragraphs:

(1) "a person who writes or compiles a dictionary" (*Webster's New World College Dictionary*)

This dictionary gives the following synonyms for the word *lexicographer*:

> dictionary writer, definer, etymologist, philologist, polyglot, dictionary maker, dictionarist, lexicologist, lexicographist, glossarian, glossarist, glossologist, glossographer, glottologist, philologer, vocabulist, phonologist, philologian, phonetician, phoneticist, wordsmith*; see also linguist

The word *compile* can be understood as "to collect and arrange (material) into a list, book, etc." (*Pocket Oxford Dictionary*). The definition of *lexicographer* allows for more than the mere writing of a dictionary by making provision for the collection and arrangement of the material. However, this definition restricts the scope of the word *lexicographer* to someone participating in the lexicographic practice. With the exception of *dictionary writer* the synonyms are at best partial synonyms which are heavily context-dependent.

(2) "a compiler or writer of a dictionary; a student of the lexical component of language" (*WordNet ® 2.0*)
Synonym: lexicologist.

This definition ascertains the explanation of the previous definition but adds another dimension, i.e. "a student of the lexical component of language". This broadens the scope of the meaning of the word *lexicographer,* bringing the theoretical component of lexicography into play. The given synonym is once again misleading and adds to the confusion regarding the boundaries of lexicography as an independent discipline.

(3) "an author or editor of a dictionary" (*Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary*)

In this definition the word *editor* may be seen as comparable to *compiler*

in the previous definitions. Nothing new is added and the definition lacks reference to the theoretical component of lexicography.

(4) "A person devoted to lexicography is called a lexicographer." (*Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*)

The *Wikipedia* definition goes unspecified in terms of theory or practice.

(5) "One who writes dictionary definitions" (*Urban Dictionary*)

This definition in the *Urban Dictionary*, an internet dictionary compiled by subscribers to the website, does not only limit the scope of the word *lexicographer* to someone participating in the lexicographic practice but further to one specific part of the lexicographic practice. The writer of a bilingual dictionary offering translation equivalents is excluded by this definition from being called a lexicographer. This exclusion also applies to the authors of many other dictionary types like word frequency dictionaries, pronunciation dictionaries, orthographic dictionaries, etc.

In contrast to these definitions in general dictionaries, the lexicographers of two dictionaries focusing on lexicographic terms explicitly acknowledge that someone involved in the writing of dictionaries as well as someone participating on a theoretical level could be called a lexicographer:

(6) "One who engages in lexicography, either as a compiler or as a metalexicographer." (Hartmann and James: *Dictionary of Lexicography*)

(7) "A lexicographer is a person specialising in *lexicography* as the practice, result, and theory of dictionary-making, i.e. a specialist in *metalexicography* regarded as lexicographic research and/or a dictionary maker or editor." (Burkhanov: *Lexicography*)

Although they increase the scope of the meaning of the word *lexicographer* these dictionaries still fail to clarify the nature and extent of the involvement in the theory and practice.

The most famous definition of a lexicographer, albeit not the most accurate, remains that by Samuel Johnson (1755), as presented in his

Dictionary of the English Language:

(8) "A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words."

In this article, it is not contested that a lexicographer might be a harmless drudge but it is argued that a broader spectrum of people involved in the theoretical and practical activities should be regarded as lexicographers—and that these people are not, as some synonyms given in dictionary articles indicate, lexicologists or linguists. When working as lexicographers they are involved in an independent discipline, lexicography, albeit that their primary work might be in a different discipline.

2. Different kinds of experts working as lexicographers

The thesis is that lexicography as an independent discipline should be taken seriously. Of course this does not imply that lexicography has no relations to other scientific disciplines. Neither does it imply that lexicography cannot be classified under another scientific discipline. But it is not a subdiscipline of linguistics. Many metalexicographers working within linguistic departments regard lexicography as part of linguistics and often as part of applied linguistics. This can be explained by the fact that the recent metalexicographic theories introduced since 1970 have primarily been formulated by scientists attached to linguistic departments and involved on a practical and theoretical level with general language communication dictionaries. The term *communication dictionaries* (often mistakenly referred to as "language dictionaries")[1] refers to those reference works that assist specific user types with text reception, text production and translation problems. Where these dictionaries deal with the general language, two types of experts are required:

(1) at least one lexicographic expert, and
(2) at least one language expert, i.e. a linguist.

In other cases additional experts are required for the compilation of communication dictionaries. This is especially true for subject field

dictionaries, where a subject field expert undoubtedly needs to participate in the compilation of the dictionary, e.g. when compiling a text reception dictionary for music. In for instance Bergenholtz (1996) or Bergenholtz et al. (2009) the most important co-worker has been

(3) a subject field expert.

A comparable argument applies to bilingual subject field dictionaries where at least three types of experts are needed:

(1) lexicographic experts,
(2) subject field experts, and
(3) language for special purposes experts from the relevant subject field.

In for instance Kaufmann and Bergenholtz (1998) the participating molecular biologist had no linguistic expertise but he had at least a partial command of the language for special purposes from the field of molecular biology for both English and Spanish. In principle it is possible that one person can fulfil both or all three expert roles but this would rather be the exception. It is important to realise that these dictionaries, e.g. of music or molecular biology, may not be regarded as the results of lexicography as a subdiscipline of linguistics. With regard to linguists and lexicographers, we are dealing with two different, and in the case of subject field dictionaries, with three or more groups of experts:

(1) Linguists, e.g. general linguists, Anglicists, Germanic or Romanic scholars, etc.—always working within the field of the humanities.
(2) Subject field experts working in their specific scientific fields.
(3) Lexicographers whose field of expertise, lexicography, can be seen as part of information science which could be regarded as both a social and a natural science.

Both linguists and scientists from other scientific disciplines can be regarded as lexicographers when they participate in the planning and compilation of a dictionary. However, they can only be regarded as experts in their own subject field; they are not lexicography experts

with the necessary metalexicographic expertise.

3. Different categories of lexicographers

The preceding paragraphs have focused on the different experts participating in the compilation process of different types of dictionaries. In the earlier paragraphs it has been argued that people involved in the planning and compilation of dictionaries as well as those people engaged in lexicography on a theoretical level should be seen as lexicographers. In this regard it is important to have a clear picture of the nature and extent of this involvement. The scope of the term *lexicographer* should not be restricted too much. In its interpretation it could be useful to look at the scope of some other words referring to a given activity, occupation or job.

The *South African Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the word *chef* as "a professional cook, typically the chief cook in a restaurant or hotel". The word *cook* is defined by the same dictionary as: "a person who cooks, especially as a job." The way in which the word *cook* is used in general language shows that it can refer to different categories of people participating in the process of cooking. The word can refer to any person doing the cooking of a meal at a specific time, e.g. "Today my husband has been the cook in our house." It can, as the given dictionary definition indicates, refer to someone who does cooking as a profession, i.e. a person with the necessary training in this field or who is a trainee in a kitchen. It could also refer to the chief cook, i.e. the person in charge of other cooks, although the word *chef* will likely be used here. On account of their participation in related activities, teachers in a school for chefs could also be referred to as cooks and sometimes even someone writing reviews of dishes, restaurants, etc. ("She is our magazine's cook.") Similarly words referring to other occupations can have more than one interpretation to refer to people involved in different aspects of the specific occupation.

Within the broad field of lexicography, a diverse range of participants can be identified. These include people writing dictionaries—dictionaries dealing with both language for general purposes and languages for

special purposes, someone writing about dictionaries, someone reviewing dictionaries, someone teaching lexicography as a subject, someone being trained in theoretical lexicography and someone with a degree or diploma in lexicography. All these people can be referred to as lexicographers. One can further make a more general distinction between people involved in the lexicographic practice, i.e. those compiling dictionaries, and those discussing dictionaries theoretically. This distinction partly resembles that made by Wiegand (1984: 13)—'partly' because Wiegand does not give explicit features of the two categories of lexicographers. Within the category of people involved in theoretical lexicography, one can distinguish different subcategories—in line with the distinction Wiegand (1984: 15) makes between the different components of theoretical lexicography, i.e. the history of lexicography, the formulation of a general theory of lexicography, dictionary criticism and dictionary use. People writing about these topics can thus be regarded as lexicographers, because writing about lexicography is part of metalexicography. It is, however, important that these discussions have to be related to dictionaries. A mere discussion of the history of the lexicon or a lexicological analysis of lexical items should not qualify as (meta)lexicographic activities and the people involved in these activities do not qualify as lexicographers. With regard to a study of the lexicon, it is important to note that lexicology has to be regarded as a subdiscipline of linguistics but that lexicography is not a subdiscipline of or the practical application of lexicology. Lexicologists are therefore not lexicographers. Similarly people working within the field of terminology who coin new terms are terminologists and not lexicographers. However, the lexicographic presentation of terms, also known as terminography, is part of lexicography, i.e. that part of lexicography dealing with languages for special purposes, and a terminologist who is involved in the making of LSP dictionaries is therefore also regarded as a lexicographer.

Dictionaries are often compiled by people with a linguistic training. In the compilation of dictionaries dealing with language for general purposes, the linguistic contents of these dictionaries play an important

role and, as indicated earlier, when working on these dictionaries, these linguistic experts are lexicographers. This does not imply that all lexicographers have to be linguists or need to have a linguistic training. In the compilation of LSP dictionaries, linguistic training has little or no influence. Here the expertise from the relevant subject field and the expertise to plan and produce a good dictionary will determine the success of the eventual product. These subject field experts are lexicographers on an equal basis as the linguists working on general language communication dictionaries but they are by no means to be classified as linguists.

Although people from different subject fields who participate in the planning and compilation of dictionaries can be regarded as lexicographers, the tradition since more or less 1970, the time when lexicography came to the fore as part of university curricula, has been that the majority of lexicographers attached to institutions of higher learning, are accommodated in departments or institutes of languages or linguistics. Lexicography courses are also typically offered in these departments or institutes. This is a historical fact and does not reflect the reality of modern-day lexicography and modern-day lexicographers. With lexicography endeavouring to give access to data, an institute or department of information science might be a much more applicable venue for this discipline, emphasising once more that when working on their dictionaries, lexicographers are not linguists and when subject field experts work on a dictionary, they are lexicographers.

Although lexicographic training has to be regarded as important and although theoretical expertise can play an active role in enhancing the quality of a dictionary, it does not imply that a dictionary compiled by a non-expert in the field of lexicography is necessarily a bad dictionary or that a dictionary compiled by an expert in the field of lexicography is necessarily a good dictionary. Only a brief look at a few existing dictionaries gives more than enough evidence of the failure of many trained lexicographers to compile a good product. One of the reasons underlying both the success and the failure of lexicographic products can be found in the fact that a dictionary, any dictionary, is a tool conceptual-

ised and compiled to assist specific users with specific needs in specific situations of use. If this assistance is not achieved, the lexicographer runs the risk of having produced a bad dictionary. Success in this regard implies a good dictionary—whether written by an expert or a lay person. An example of a successful dictionary written by a lexicographic lay person is the dictionary compiled in the year 1800 by Jens Leth, a Danish priest. He compiled this dictionary for young people preparing themselves for confirmation in the church. Part of their assignment in this preparation process was to read edifying texts. However, the problem was that they only had four years of school education and that they found the reading of these texts extremely difficult. With his dictionary, *Dansk Glossarium. En Ordbog til Forklaring over det danske Sprogs gamle, nye og fremme Ord og Talemaader for unge Mennesker og for Ustuderede* (*Danish Glossarium. A Dictionary with Explanations of Old, New and Foreign Words in the Danish Language for Young People and those who have not Studied*), Leth attempted to provide these students with a tool that could assist them in understanding these texts. It is not known whether this dictionary had been a commercial success but it was successful as a lexicographic product, aimed at the specific needs of specific users in a specific situation of dictionary use.

Since the advent of theoretical lexicography, one also finds lexicographers restricting their lexicographic endeavours to the level of metalexicography. They may have an excellent theoretical knowledge of dictionaries, the planning of dictionaries, the structures, functions and contents of dictionaries without ever having ventured into the lexicographic practice. On account of their involvement in the theory of dictionaries, they qualify as lexicographers. But just as a lecturer in a chef school will not necessarily be a good cook when it comes to the preparation of a meal, the metalexicographer will not necessarily be a successful writer of a dictionary. When asking who is a lexicographer, one has to recognise those people writing dictionaries but equally those people writing about dictionaries. In the cooking world, it is accepted that the proof of the pudding is in the eating thereof; in an ideal lexicographic world, the proof of the theory is in its practical application and there-

fore the success of the endeavours of a metalexicographer is determined once his/her theories are put to practice.

4. Conclusion

In the process of trying to define the word *lexicographer,* it has become clear that a lexicographer could be a person with a practical and a theoretical involvement in lexicography. The theory of lexicography is theory formulated in order to enhance the quality of the lexicographic practice. The theoretical lexicographer strives to formulate theories and theoretical models that can be put to practice by the practical lexicographer. The theoretical lexicographer aims his/her theories in the first instance at the planning and compilation of dictionaries, not only general language communication dictionaries but also dictionaries belonging to a vast typological range. Important as these theories may be to lexicography, they often have a much wider scope and can play an important role in the planning and compilation of other sources of reference in order to give users the best possible access to data contained in these sources.

NOTE

1) The expression "language dictionary" is misleading because it also refers to dictionaries that have not been conceptualised as an aid in concrete communication problems like the reception, production or translation of texts, e.g. etymological dictionaries or frequency dictionaries.

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