

Carmen Raluca Nițu

**Writing Specialized Dictionaries:
An Anthology of Representative Texts**



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Referenți științifici:

Lect.univ.dr. Roxana Marinescu

Facultatea de Relații Economice Internaționale
Academia de Studii Economice București

Lect.univ.dr. Ana-Maria Popescu

Facultatea de Litere
Universitatea din Pitești

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Str. Brestei, nr. 156A, Craiova, Dolj, România

Tel.: +40 251 598054

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1. Defining Lexicography

Hartmann, R.R.K. & Gregory James. *Dictionary of Lexicography*. New York. Routledge. 1998.

Lexicography = the professional activity and academic field concerned with DICTIONARIES and other REFERENCE WORKS. It has two basic divisions: lexicographic practice, or DICTIONARY-MAKING, and lexicographic theory, or DICTIONARY RESEARCH. The former is often associated with commercial book publishing, the latter with scholarly studies in such disciplines as LINGUISTICS (especially LEXICOLOGY), but strict boundaries are difficult to maintain and, in any case, are being bridged by such means as professional training, societies, conferences and publications. There are as yet no internationally agreed standards of what constitutes a good dictionary, but human ingenuity (and computer technology) produces new types every day against the background of various historical traditions, to meet people's insatiable need for rapid access to information, linguistic as well as encyclopedic.

Depending on the orientation and purpose of such reference works, several branches of lexicography can be distinguished, each with its own practices and theories: Author Lexicography, Bilingual Lexicography, Biographical Lexicography, Computational Lexicography, Cultural Lexicography, Dialect Lexicography, Encyclopedic Lexicography, Etymological Lexicography, Frequency Lexicography, Historical Lexicography, Legal Lexicography, LSP Lexicography, Medical Lexicography, Monolingual Lexicography, Multilingual Lexicography, Musical Lexicography, Onomastic Lexicography, Pedagogical Lexicography, Period Lexicography, Regional Lexicography, Rhyme Lexicography, Slang Lexicography, Specialised Lexicography, Technical Lexicography, Terminological Lexicography, Text-Specific Lexicography, Thesaurus Lexicography, Usage Lexicography.

Kirkness, Alan. “Lexicography” in *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics*. Alan Davies & Catherine Elder. (eds.) Oxford. Blackwell Publishing. 2006.

Lexicography is almost as old as writing. From its beginnings several thousand years ago it has served primarily the real-life needs of written communication between members of human communities using different languages or different varieties of one language. Those needs change just as all living languages constantly change. In many literate societies lexicography has a centuries-old tradition with word lists and word books in scripts based on hieroglyphs, logograms, or letters and in media from clay tablets to the computer. Since print culture replaced scribal culture some five centuries ago and ushered in the modern period in European lexicography, the printed book has predominated. Worldwide, no book on a language or on languages has been and is more widely used in education systems and in communities at large than the dictionary. It has long been and still is an essential source, if not indeed the principal source, of information on language for all members of literate societies who might have questions on any aspect of the form, meaning and / or use of a word or words in their own or in another language. Lexicographers can be regarded as descriptive linguists in that they empirically analyse and describe (a) language with a traditional emphasis on individual items of vocabulary. However, they do not require linguistic knowledge alone, but according to the particular dictionary project, may draw on other non-linguistic disciplines including information technology, publishing, history, and the natural and social sciences amongst others. Nor is their description of (a) language primarily an end in itself. Its aim is not primarily to advance linguistic theory, however much theoretical linguists may and do draw on lexicology for their own purposes and however much lexicographers might seek to apply relevant findings of theoretical linguists in their work. Rather it is in principle a means to an end, namely to make knowledge about (a) language available to various sectors of the wider public and to mediate between different kinds of language knowledge and different kinds of user needs. This aim is clearly reflected in the vast range of different dictionary types designed to respond to the different needs

and interest of different user groups. To a greater or lesser degree depending on the nature and purpose of the particular dictionary project, lexicographers essentially mediate between the community of linguists and the community at large. This is true especially of general-purpose trade dictionaries, less so inevitably of scholarly historical works, which have a more limited audience. In this sense lexicography must be regarded as quite central to applied linguistics, however defined. At the same time, it must also be seen as a complex activity *sui generis* with its own principles, practices, problems, and traditions.

Over the past 20-30 years lexicography had changed fundamentally and irreversibly. The main factor has been the dramatic impact of the computer: the electronic storage of vast textual material in corpora and the varied electronic presentation of lexicological and lexicographical work represent a quantum leap in lexicography, a leap still to be measured. A secondary factor has been the rapid emergence of metalexicography or dictionary research as an academic discipline with an explosion of writing on and about dictionaries. [...]

What Is Lexicography?

It is difficult to arrive at a succinct and satisfying working definition of lexicography. Even a cursory glance in dictionaries and other reference works and in the secondary literature reveals many variations on a theme, reflecting a variety of standpoints. In a narrow sense lexicography may be described as the art and craft of writing a dictionary. Certainly, a lexicographer is essentially someone who writes or contributes to a dictionary or dictionaries, be it as an individual or a member of a team, as freelancer or an in-house employee, as a full time professional or part-time alongside other activities such as university lecturing. Lexicographer is also used more generally to refer to writers of other reference works, including encyclopedias. Like other definitions, however, and indeed like much dictionary writing itself, this definition of lexicography is derivative (Landau, 2001), and it is a compromise for the sake of brevity. It raises many questions: why dictionaries, why not e.g., thesaurus, lexicon, or encyclopedia and other reference works? Why write, why not, for example, plan, edit, publish, or make, produce, compile, let

alone study, review, or use? Why art and craft, why not, for example, activity, process, techniques, science, job, profession or practice, let alone history, study, use, or theory?

There are justifiable answers to such questions. The dictionary is widely regarded as the prototypical work of lexical reference, but this claim requires much further explication. Writing the essential lexicographic activity, especially writing and rewriting semantic, pragmatic or etymological descriptions; planning and data collection precede and accompany the writing, editing and publishing follow it. Good lexicography is more than compilation. Extracting meanings and uses from authentic texts and explaining them clearly and fully in a minimum of words is an art, as is the selection of appropriate illustrative examples. Writing with dictionary users uppermost in mind in an attempt to meet their needs is a practical and useful activity, a craft. Defining lexicography in this narrow sense as the art and craft of writing a dictionary is meant to locate it explicitly at the centre of the applied linguistic endeavour and to emphasize the high degree of human knowledge, insight, judgment and skill required to produce the text of a successful reference work designed to be of practical use and benefit in real-life situations. Certainly, a dictionary that does not prove useful is unlikely to prove successful. Commercial constraints – the triple nightmare of space, time, and money (Murray, 1977) – have traditionally dictated the relationship between lexicographers and their publishers.

The advent of electronic corpora and media can make the lexicographer's work better, but no necessarily easier. Computers can store and process quantities of textual data quite unmanageable by humans. Where several million manually and painstakingly excerpted citation slips were once considered a sufficient basis for a multi-volume scholarly dictionary, now even one-volume trade dictionaries rest on hundreds of millions of rapidly and automatically entered running words. The differences are not only in quantity, but more importantly in quality. Lexicographers now have at their disposal vastly superior language data. Neutral frequency counts of masses of words can act as a counterbalance to intuition, memory and even bias in many of the decisions they must make in accordance with the specifications of the particular dictionary project. They help determine which usages are central and which are peripheral, which

new items should be included and which items should be excluded as obsolescent or archaic, which combining forms and multi-word items warrant status as main lemmas or headwords rather than as run-ons and sub-lemmas, or how homographs and senses can be ordered, to mention but a few possibilities. Lexicographers have been at the forefront in utilizing language corpora and applying the finding of corpus linguistics to good effect in their analysis and description of lexis and hence to the benefit of their users. The corpus revolution is very real; computerphoria would be misplaced, however. There may be huge savings in storage space and processing time, but it is humans who continue to choose the texts and analyze the vastly increased data, which can now in fact require more time, experience, and skill to process than before. Humans discern and describe sense distinctions in polysemous words and between sets of synonyms, antonyms, and hyponyms. They select appropriate illustrative examples or establish usage and usage restrictions in tune with changing sociocultural conventions. And specialist material from a directed reading programme still has a place alongside the mass data entered by means of optical scanner, magnetic tapes and the like.

Similarly, electronic media open up quite new possibilities for the presentation and use of lexicographical material. They can, for instance, help overcome the constraints of space that have long plagued lexicographers and their editors and limited the coverage, description and illustration of lexical items even in comprehensive or unabridged dictionaries. The size of the computer screen and of the “search word” box remain limitations, however, and favor directed searches for specific items over the incidental consulting of neighboring entries and the general, even random browsing so dear to word and dictionary buffs brought up on printed books. They can help overcome the tyranny of the printed alphabet that had severely limited accessibility and fostered the modern dominance of the alphabetic mode of presentation over the older thematic or systematic mode. Access through the alphabet has become a practical necessity for most users, however, and modern thesaurus are either arranged alphabetically or have an alphabetical index. Online e-dictionaries and e-cyclopedias available free or by subscription on the Internet and CD-ROM are already vying with and in some cases supplanting conventional printed books. Large and expensive multi-volume