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LEXICOGRAPHY AS A POLITICAL ACT.A GENERAL DISCUSSION

Abstract

This article highlights an interdisciplinary, collaborative and multi-dimensional character of lexicography, its role in a social context, its functions that go beyond describing and documenting a language. Particular attention is given to the capacity of lexicographers to consider not only a language domain or linguistic qualifications of word entries, but also to reflect values, social and political trends of the particular speech community. The article claims that compiling a dictionary (especially in modern times) can be a distinctly political act. Lexicographers of our times (well equipped with ICT tools, means of quick access to knowledge and data) select the frequently used, trendy words or phrases that usually go viral. By knowing and acknowledging dictionary users' needs, lexicographers make impact.

The article makes one of the well-established dictionary publishing brands into loop – Merriam Webster that stood out and responded against the US politician Donald Trump through its blogs, posts, trending words and even not including definitions of Trump's vocabulary in the dictionary.

Keywords: lexicography, interdisciplinary, dictionaries, politics.

1. Introduction -Scientific Status of Lexicography

In his introductory discussion on the status and independence of lexicography, Aarhus University Professor Sven Tarp suggests a plain and quite straightforward explanation of what the discipline deals with –, Dictionaries and other reference works designed to be consulted in

order to retrieve information” (Trap, 2018:19), however, despite this simplicity of the definition, the author highlights a ‘deep-rooted dispute’ over the disciplinary status of lexicography. It is frequently claimed that the scientific status of lexicography is debated, and several groups of opinion have long discussed whether it is an independent discipline, or a science or a sub-discipline of linguistics. While a group of scholars regards lexicography as ‘art and craft’ (Landau 2001), others believe it has the full status of an independent scientific discipline (such as Scerba 1940, Kempcke 1982) with its object of research – a dictionary. In this context, the dispute on theory (of lexicography) is also noteworthy. In his book, *The Lexicography of English*, Henri Béjoint (2010) claims: " I simply do not believe that there **exists a theory of lexicography**, and I very much doubt that there can be one. Those who have proposed a general theory have not been found convincing by the community and for good reasons. A theory is a system of ideas put forward to explain phenomena that are not otherwise explainable. A science has a theory, a craft does not. All natural phenomena need a theory, but how can there be a theory of the production of artefacts? There are theories of language, there may be theories of lexicology, but there is no theory of lexicography. Lexicography is about all a craft, the craft of preparing dictionaries, as well as an art, as Landau (2001) says. It may be becoming more scientific, but it has not become a science”.(Béjoint, 2010: 381).

Coming back to Sven Trap’s discussion on the status of lexicography, this article spotlights the author’s statement - lexicography is not subordinate to other disciplines and, more importantly, ‘Lexicography is characterized by a big interdisciplinary vocation and collaboration’ (Trap, 2018:21).

1.1 A strong Interdisciplinary Focus

Sandro Nielsen (2018) puts forward a strong interdisciplinary as well as the multi-dimensional character of lexicography. He claims that while analyzing a dictionary work, one is expected to have a clear understanding of the **social context** and should be able to see the value of

interdisciplinary networks, lexicography concerns the development of theoretical and practical principles as well as the production of lexicographical tools, therefore, several disciplines are involved in any dictionary project (Nielsen, 2018:102). Lexicographers consider available tools, language domain, culture and of course, they develop a dictionary strategy in line with the needs of **users**.

A similar approach is shared by Atkins and Rundell (2008). The authors explain how lexicographers describe a language in context, within a speech community: "For us, a dictionary is a description of the vocabulary used by members of a speech community (for example, by 'speakers of English'). And the starting point for this description is evidence of what members of the speech community do when they communicate with one another" (Atkins, B.T.S., Rundell M. 2008:2).

1.2. Methodology of the present paper

The present work provides a review of relevant academic literature to support its key arguments on interdisciplinary character of **an independent research field** – lexicography. While discussing political implications, the article selects the potential of 'Word trending' as part of dictionaries. Examples are discussed from two English monolingual dictionaries of well-established, popular publisher houses: Merriam-Websters and Oxford University Press.

2. Political implications: definition of political terms, suggesting word trends in the era of social media, 'Alternative facts' 'Post-truth' and 'Covfief'

As the above discussion suggests, lexicography is a dynamic, often disputable, multi-dimensional discipline with one explicit characteristic – it **describes** and **documents** the use of

language and reflects subsequent processes happening in a particular speech community. Among the highly diverse circumstances, potential roles and outcomes of dictionary-making, the present article aims to highlight one of the impacts of lexicography in the political context. This may imply defining political terms in specialized or general dictionaries considering a particular period, as explained by Andrejs Veisbergs: „Especially English monolingual (including learner's) dictionaries are in a particular position in this aspect as, being a tool for the most widespread foreign language, they are also used by a large number of speakers of other languages and, to some extent, can create and consolidate biased perceptions of the meaning of various language units (Veisbergs: 2016:657). More notably, it can largely refer to word entries, **trending** words (the word or expression of a day or a month, the word of the year...) or posts in the contemporary era of social media and digital tools.

A recent article by Marian Carrasquero on the National Public Radio¹ communicates a well-thought and planned trending of words and phrases by the Merriam-Webster's Twitter account :

‘Merriam-Webster has a message for the Trump administration: There is no such thing as an "alternative fact." There are facts, and then there are falsehoods’ the article says.

This act was Merriam-Webster's quick reaction against an earlier interview of Trump's Counselor Kellyanne Conway on NBC News (interview date: January 22, 2017). When asked why the president had asked the white house press secretary (Sean Spicer²) to come out in front of the podium for the first time and utter a falsehood', Counselor Kellyanne Conway replied that the secretary Sean Spicer provided 'alternative facts'. A few hours later, Merriam-Webster

¹ The article can be accessed at <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/01/26/511694558/the-merriam-webster-dictionary-has-been-trolling-trump-for-months>

² Sean Spicer about the attendants on Donald Trumps swearing-in ceremony *‘the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe’*. The statement can be accessed at <https://time.com/4642689/kellyanne-conway-sean-spicer-donald-trump-alternative-facts/>

tweeted a definition ‘A fact is a piece of information presented as having objective reality’. Moreover, the publishers online section - Trend Watch³ as of **22 Jan 2017** - reads:

„In contemporary use, fact is generally understood to refer to something with actual existence, or presented as having objective reality”.

Another example of Merriam-Webster’s response to the politician is when Donald Trump tweeted in May 2017: “Despite the constant negative press **covfefe**.” It was immediately cited as the puzzling word with the ‘secret meaning, hanging there’ (The Guardian 2017). Much can be said about the reaction of press, media, social media users, however, the prime concern for the present article is how the Dictionary publisher stood out and responded. On the same day, Merriam-Webster tweeted in response to **covfefe**:

„ Wakes up.

Checks Twitter.

Uh...

🔍 Lookups fo...

Regrets checking Twitter.

Goes back to bed.”



The tweet immediately went viral. As indicated by several well-known media sources, including, for instance, Washington Post: " Merriam-Webster has gained online fame for trolling Trump' (Washington Post, 2017). Even though the publishing house has mocked ‘word’

³ As Merriam- Webster explains, ‘Trend Watch tracks popular lookups to see what people are talking about’. Trend Watch on ‘Alternative Facts’ can be accessed at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/news-trend-watch/conway-alternative-facts-20170122>

usage, till now, the dictionary does not provide any definition, explanation, or reference to the word ‘**covfefe**’, even though people started to look up for the meaning/definition. Merriam-Webster's editor at large Peter Sokolowski claims it was ‘a typographical error’, that triggered the curiosity, however, ‘We don't typically collect evidence for typos’.

Speaking about word trends, it is widely accepted and popular to declare words of the year – words or expressions that attracted great attention. The top publisher of the world, the Oxford University Press, Oxford Languages section declared "post-truth" as its 2016 international word of the year. The OUP choice followed Brexit and the US presidential election. It has been often highlighted that in the current era of ‘Post-truth,’ emotional charisma shapes public opinion much more than objective facts. The Oxford Learners Dictionaries define the word as follows:

‘Relating to circumstances in which people respond more to feelings and beliefs than to facts’

The article ‘The word of the Year 2016’ on the compound word reads:

*‘The concept of post-truth has been in existence for the past decade, but Oxford Dictionaries has seen a spike in frequency this year in the context of the **EU referendum in the United Kingdom** and the presidential **election in the United States**. It has also become associated with a particular noun, in the phrase post-truth politics.’*

By fostering the concept, highlighting it as the word of the year, the OUP indeed loops public attention to major political events and triggers public interest towards the context – the way the meaning of ‘Post-truth’ is related to the EU referendum in the UK and Presidential elections in the US, and the reasons behind this linkage.

3. Conclusion

The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography (Atkins and Rundell 2008) provides an introduction and a guide to the creation and compiling of a dictionary. Although the guide claims there is no ‘right way to produce a dictionary, still it thoroughly lists and explains all the steps that are to be taken ‘From linguistic data to dictionary’. Among a number of suggestions and explanations illustrated in the guidebook, this article gives primacy to the most practical, I would say, functional recommendation ‘**KNOW YOUR USERS**’, consider the speech community, humans, their needs, their realities, possible application and **IMPACT** of dictionary work. Users as well as dictionary planners or lexicographers are human beings, accounted as ‘political animals by nature’ since ancient times. By all means, knowing and acknowledging the users implies significant implicit and often quite explicit political acts. Lexicography has much to offer to political and social sciences both in terms of diving into history as well as understanding present trends.

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Author's biographical data

Mariam Keburia (MA in American Studies, MA in Leadership for Sustainability, PhD in English Philology) has been engaged in academic work since 2009. She is an invited lecturer of Tbilisi State University, Faculty of Humanities and the language Centre. Throughout different semesters Mariam has delivered lectures and seminars as part of the English Philology BA and MA programmes (some of the courses include - an introduction to English Philology, Practical phonetics, History of Georgian and English Lexicography etc.). In addition to her teaching experience, Mariam has been engaged in various research projects (mainly related to analyzing English and Georgian texts and discourse analysis). Her PhD thesis 'Linguo-pragmatic Aspects of Persuasion and Practical Argumentation in Political Discourse (Using the examples of Georgian and American public speeches)' applies Critical Discourse Analysis to study argumentation schemes of the selected sample.