FILOLOGIA

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Lexicographic Functions and Pedagogical Lexicography: Some Critical Notes on Sven Tarp's "Lexicography in the Borderland between Knowledge and Non-*Knowledge*"

Introduction

Dictionary-writing is an important activity with a very long history, and is vigorously practised in this age of international – and interlingual – communication. Yet, lexicography is still severely underserved when it comes to theoretical foundations of the practical activity of dictionary making. In this connection, an appearance of a work that proposes a coherent theoretical foundation is an important event for the discipline. The most recent such work is Sven Tarp's Lexicography in the Borderland between Knowledge and Non-Knowledge, which appeared in 2008 as an English translation of the author's postdoctoral thesis defended at the Århus School of Business, University of Århus, Denmark. The book has a somewhat cryptic – and intriguing – title, but the subtitle, *General Lexicographical Theory with Particular Focus on Learner's* Lexicography, more clearly communicates the core issues of the work: it is a theoretical proposal anchored in the modern theory of lexicographic functions – developed largely in Århus by Sven Tarp, Henning Bergenholtz, and collaborators (Tarp 1992, 1998; Bergenholtz and Tarp 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005) – with emphasis on dictionaries for foreign language learning and teaching.

Brief background to the modern theory of lexicographic functions

Appropriately, the work starts off by sketching the relationship of the proposed theoretical approach with several others, theoretical or pre-theoretical. The overview of the literature is well-focused, covering just those authors and works which are most relevant to the paradigm proposed by Tarp, and concentrating on key issues.

Historically, the function theory of lexicography is most closely related to Herbert Wiegand's approach, but the two are also characterized by some important differences. The most salient of these, and one which receives a significant degree of attention in the book, is that while Wiegand starts out with a detailed analysis of the structures of existing dictionaries, and derives purposes and functions from them, Tarp adopts a reverse order, starting out from an identification of such needs in potential users that can be satisfied by dictionaries, and from them deriving postulates on the content and form of lexicographic data,[200] to produce just such

[200] Tarp is careful to distinguish between lexicographic data, the actual matter found on dictionary pages, and lexicographic information, what the user consulting this matter gets out of this data

lexicographic works which would optimally satisfy the needs identified.

Which user needs are lexicographically relevant? Lexicography versus other disciplines

One rather important question which presents itself in this connection is how to correctly identify potential users' needs. On this issue, Tarp has the following to say:

> But how can theoretical lexicography find the relevant situations? In principle, it could go out and study all the hypothetical social situations in which people are involved. But that would be like trying to fill the leaking jar of the Danaids. Instead, initially lexicography needs to use a deductive procedure and focus on the needs that dictionaries have sought to satisfy until now, and on the situations in which these needs may arise. (Tarp 2008: 44)

Now, if I understand the above well, Tarp concedes that the theoretically correct way to identify lexicographically relevant situations and needs (but see below) is a daunting task, and so settles provisionally on a pragmatic compromise of reconstructing the needs and situations from actual instances of dictionary use. I couldn't be more sympathetic towards such a pragmatic compromise (interestingly, this is the daily stuff of practising lexicographers!). But what seems a little unexpected in this context is the degree of criticism launched against efforts at reconstructing users' needs from existing dictionaries (Wiegand's approach), and research into real-life dictionary consultation. It would seem that especially the latter could provide a solid starting point for identifying lexicographically relevant needs and situations – although I agree with Tarp entirely that this approach may fail to unearth those needs and situations which existing dictionaries cannot readily help with because of their limitations as tools, or because of the users' less-than-perfect reference skills and entrenched habits.

Another, but related, question is this: given that we somehow do identify the needs apropriately, how do we now decide which of the needs are the ones that lexicography can/should try to satisfy? If the potential features of lexicographic tools are seen as an open set which can only be derived from the needs, and if no independent constraints are imposed on what can constitute lexicographic data, how exactly do we separate the needs that are lexicographically relevant from the ones that are not? For example, if a tourist in a foreign city wants to find the way to the train station, she might need to know the lexical item **train station** in the local language, so that she might need to orient herself against the physical surroundings by examining a spatial model of the city. The need for the expression "train station" can be satisfied lexicographically, and the need for a spatial model cannot be satisfied lexicographically, but can be satisfied

cartographically. But – wait – how do we know this? Either by referring to what we are accustomed to seeing in *today's* and past dictionaries and maps, or by seeking the etymological meaning: lexicography is about words, cartography about maps. If we now reject (with Tarp) the first approach, and discount the second as irrelevant, all constraints disappear and we are free to put in dictionaries maps and anything else a human might need in any situation. To avoid such uncontrolled expansion of lexicography, some constraints are needed, either on what can be found in dictionaries, or the range of situations, or needs. Perhaps there is a case to be made for a distinction between lexicography conceived more narrowly and reference science (or accessology? - compare McArthur 2003), dealing with reference needs, reference acts and reference works in general. Lexicographic theory and research have much to offer to the latter in terms of findings and models, but need not necessarily morph into it and discard its traditional purview.

Clearly, these are issues of much concern for Sven Tarp, as he proposes a new type of concept which he calls the leximat (Tarp 2008: 121), different from the (traditionally and more narrowly conceived) dictionary, but a complementary concept within a broader category of lexicographic tools. Now, in our information age, information-related tools are developing very rapidly indeed, and not just multiplying, but leading to completely new quality. It is unavoidable that numerous problems with regard to domain demarcation crop up. Which discipline should concern itself with the new creations? More than one existing disciplines could potentially lay claims here, as well as entirely new competitors. In terms of demarcation issues, science is not unlike politics, and so it is quite natural that representatives of specific disciplines are willing to appropriate as much of new ground as they see fit. The adjudication of demarcation disputes is a very difficult thing indeed, as typically there are no disinterested experts, and even if there are, they typically have no authority over such issues. If a leximat should consist of a database with an access interface, the obvious competitors to lexicographers would be experts working in human-computer interaction and computer interfaces.

To reflect on the role of tradition and innovation in lexicography, it is interesting to observe that many of Tarp's proposals – which follow, as the author explains, from putting on hold past preconceptions and starting with new principles – actually vindicate the best practice in modern practical lexicography. For example, some of the procedures presented in some detail in Chapter 4 are reminiscent of the planning stage implemented in practice in some actual lexicographic projects by the leading lexicographic teams. On the other hand, in some ways Tarp can still fall for the old traps of lexicographic tradition and repeat its classical errors. An example of this is the dictionary entry for **barn** (Tarp 2008: 222) proposed for English-speaking learners of English, and reproduced below:

> **barn** SUB <et; barnet, børn, børnene> child
> […]

Surely, the POS information should here be presented in English, the native

language of the user, rather than with the cryptic SUB abbreviation?

The role of the users' native language

To dwell on the interesting issue of the native language of the user (L1); when discussing the relative advantages and liabilities of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries (or lexicographic solutions, the term the author now seems to prefer), Tarp, in my judgement, sometimes underestimates the very powerful indexical value of L1, even for advanced learners. Evidence of this position can, for example, be found on p. 153 (with reference to advanced learners), or on pp. 264-5, where it is argued that onomasiological dictionaries are the best option for finding word combinations for production. This position appears to be somewhat dogmatic: are we to assume that bilingual access structures starting with L1 do not deserve a serious consideration in this context?

After all – as argued convincingly by Piotrowski (1994) and supported by substantial empirical evidence going back to Oskarsson (1975) – starting with the native language clue may actually often be the most efficient, and not uncommonly the only possible, path to get to the appropriate L2 lexical unit. As an example, consider a Polish advanced learner who is looking to express in English the meaning whose best English rendition is **the coast is clear**. Now, this target expression is a multi-word unit; some authors would perhaps prefer to refer to it as a formulaic expression by virtue of its salient pragmatic component and rather complex syntax (it is a construction at the level of a clause); still others would like to call it an idiom. Whatever the exact lexico-grammatical classification, what is important for the learner is that this quite specific phrase has no one semantically predictable lexeme (at least for the Polish learner). How, then, is the Polish (advanced) learner going to arrive at the phrase when she needs it? It is unlikely that she will think of either **coast** or **clear** as the starting lemmata for her search in an alphabetically-organized monolingual English dictionary. An onomasiological dictionary, organized thematically (ideologically), would also probably present a challenge in terms of searching for this item. The obvious solution is to use an L1 expression as a starting point. A Polish-English bilingual dictionary appropriate to the task should list the English expression as an equivalent of the Polish **droga wolna**, listed at least under **droga** 'way, road' (because it is a noun, syntactic head of the whole phrase, and because it is the first content word), possibly also under the adjective **wolny** 'free' in a paper dictionary, or including a cross reference there. In an electronic dictionary, the item should be accessible under both lemmata and also via the inflected adjectival form **wolna** (feminine of 'free').

On the whole, though, Tarp does appear to appreciate the importance of the native-language lexicon for foreign language learners. Towards the end of his book (pp. 266-8), Tarp is rather enthusiastic about the idea of what he refers to as 'bridge L1-L2 dictionaries', each with limited L1-based microstructure leading

back to the core L2 part.[201] This idea underscores the indexical benefits of L1 discussed above, although Tarp is of the opinion that these benefits become questionable for learners at the advanced level. The rationale behind offering simplified microstructure on the L1-L2 part is, Tarp claims, that rich microstructure can be confusing, by offering too much of a good thing. While this seems eminently sensible, and the 'less is more' approach does get some empirical support (Lew 2004), there is also some evidence pointing to the benefits of a rich L1-L2 microstructure in production, such as in the so-called Bilingual Dictionary Plus (Laufer and Levitzky-Aviad 2006). In addition, reducing the L1-L2 part to a simple index suffers from the following two potential problems:

1. certain important types of lexicographical data (multi-word units; word combinations for specific L1 senses) cannot in principle be relegated to a purely L2 monolingual section in a way that will allow satisfactory access to them
2. there is good reason for concern (see e.g. Tono 1984; East 2008) that users will actually economize on the effort of moving to the full treatment included in the L2 section, and will instead tend to stop at the barebones L1-L2 index, with obvious detrimental effect to consultation success

Fortunately, with the possibilities afforded by modern electronic technology, the difference between the 'bridge' format and the Bilingual Dictionary Plus actually rapidly melts away, and is reduced from a difference in kind to one of degree. The simple index and the extended treatment can now be linked virtually, with the fuller treatment only a click away. And, electronic dictionaries can have hierarchical "exploding" entries that can easily combine simplified and fuller microstructure.

Going back to the arguments for and against monolingual and bilingual treatment, one notion that is often – all too often – invoked in the discussion of the alleged benefits of monolingual dictionaries is that of thinking in the foreign language. Tarp also invokes this notion repeatedly, as in the following passage:

> For advanced learners, who are defined here as learners who think and receive in the foreign language concerned, both monolingual and bilingual solutions are possible as they were above; but the former are undoubtedly the most appropriate because the thinking and thereby reception of such learners takes place primarily in this language. (Tarp 2008: 186)

[201] We might note in passing that a detailed valency dictionary of English whose proposal is discussed by Tarp on p. 248 has already been published and has been available since 2004 (Herbst et al. 2004).

I have addressed the problem of thinking in the foreign language at some length elsewhere (Lew 2004: 9-10) and will not repeat the discussion here. Suffice it to say that there does not seem to be any hard evidence available for the psycholinguistic reality of 'thinking in the foreign language', and so the notion, though perhaps an attractive slogan, remains largely pre-theoretical. And yet, in Tarp's new book quite a few hefty conclusions appear to rest precisely on the opposition between 'thinking in the foreign language' and 'thinking via the mother tongue' (e.g. p. 59). The broad consequence of this is, it would seem, an underestimation of the usefulness of L1-based explanation to advanced learners.

More specifically, to address the Polish tradition in lexicographic research, it is encouraging that Tarp is intimately familiar with the Polish research into dictionary use, but what should be taken into account in discussing Tomaszczyk's (1989) translation study is that Tomaszczyk and his subjects did not (and could not) have at their disposal a Polish-English dictionary that would provide appropriate assistance with foreign language production (such as the now available Fisiak et al. 2004). Because of this, Tomaszczyk's findings cannot be directly extrapolated into situations where such improved lexicographic tools are available. If lexicography is to make real progress, then lexicographic theorists need to derive principles that can lead to the production of a single tool to answer all the questions.

User research and grammar in dictionaries

In terms of Tarp's epistemology, much of the discussion in the book is introspection-based. Tarp is somewhat suspicious of empirical user studies, largely because they are constrained by the existing dictionary formats and existing habits of the users. While this objection is justified with reference to the more naturalistic types of user research, the more experimental approach can surely be used to test the effectiveness of various lexicographic solutions and dictionary formats. A good example is Tarp's discussion of what could possibly be the best way to indicate in a learner's dictionary the family of wh-words in English (p.238-9); such questions are amenable to experimental testing, and I strongly believe that actually presenting users with the different options and observing the outcomes is superior to speculating about the amount of mental effort needed of dictionary users to process the different indicators. This particular question is actually closely related to the issue of indicating verb syntax in dictionaries, for which Dziemianko (2006) convincingly shows, on the one hand, how the experimental approach can uncover facts not open to introspection, and on the other how some of the seemingly commonsensical assumptions turn out to be incorrect when subjected to systematic scrutiny.

When it comes to the issue of representing grammatical information, Tarp offers some very sensible solutions (p. 240-2). However, one point that is in my opinion debatable is his opposition to the customary abbreviations sth, sb, which in many

English-language dictionaries represent slots to be filled by inanimate and animate noun phrases, respectively. Tarp argues that they should always be printed as full words (thus something, somebody). His rationale is that these abbreviations are – like many abbreviations – too cryptic, and he may well be right on this point. The main motivation behind having such abbreviations was – I suspect – the savings in printed dictionary space, quite substantial savings in fact, if grammatical templates involving these slot markers are to be given systematically throughout the dictionary. But, equally importantly, also in electronic presentation, the abbreviated format marks an important systematic difference, which I have explained elsewhere as follows:

> The importance of marking the special metalinguistic status of such items, however, becomes obvious when we consider an English phrase skeleton such as **somebody is something of a something**. It takes more skill than an average dictionary user possesses to know that the first somebody and the last something are merely symbolic placeholders to be replaced with other NP's, but the something in the middle should not be so replaced, so that we can say 'she's something of a genius', but not '*she's a genius of a something'. (Lew 2008: 197)

The separation of lexicographic functions

Tarp's new work introduces the function-based approach to pedagogical lexicography. Specialized-function dictionaries perhaps become viable only now, with electronic products which are capable of offering a variety of alternative presentations. In contrast, paper dictionaries are of necessity highly polyfunctional, which may be why a systematic functional approach has not been conceived of before. There are, however, reasonable practical limits to lexicographic-functional specialization; an excess of specialization conflicts with seeing the user-dictionary interaction as a long-term process extended in time, consisting of repeated consultations and acquisition of reference skills, general and dictionary-specific. In view of the above, there is some danger in a practical implementation of a doctrinal separation of functions, a position which would be guided by the following reasoning (Tarp 2008: 87):

> User needs are always needs for information which can be extracted from lexicographical data. Once this information has been extracted, it can be used to solve the communicative problems that led to the dictionary consultation in question. But it can also take root in the brain in the form of knowledge, even though this was not the purpose of the diction-

> ary consultation. Such knowledge is quite simply a bonus which is in principle irrelevant.

I think we must realize that any long-term effect of dictionary consultation in the form of acquisition of knowledge is beneficial in that it may make some future consultations (even though still aimed at immediate communication) entirely dispensable, and others quicker, more successful, or both. I suspect that Tarp would agree with my reservations here, as he is in fact quick to add that "in some types of dictionary – learner's dictionaries, for instance – this »bonus« may actually be extremely relevant" (Tarp 2008: 87). And, language use in the context of the language learning process is often not spontaneous communication driven; rather, much of it arises in connection with exercises, drills, etc. (depending on the teaching approach); this pragmatic factor also argues against a strict separation into cognitive and communicative functions.

Focus on the context of language learning

One of the many valuable observations that Sven Tarp has to offer in his book is that the users' needs will vary depending on the setting – such as when the learner is based in the target-language speaking area, is immersed in the target language and culture; or when the learner receives instruction via a specific didactic method. Naturally, in the latter case the learner's vocabulary needs will be rather more restricted than in the former. But also the teaching method used will impact on the optimal features of the lexicographic support the learner will need, and this is a very good point by Tarp. Naturally, one can hardly expect a whole set of different dictionaries to be readily available per each method and approach to foreign language teaching. But, in a well-developed dictionary culture there may be enough different dictionaries on the market to allow an informed choice to be made by the stakeholders in a language course: instructor and students.

Other issues

There are many interesting issues in lexicography which may be raised and developed with reference to lexicographic functions. One of such issues, hardly touched upon in Tarp's new book, is what types of (bilingual) equivalents would work best for specific functions. And so, on page 63, when discussing assistance when translating from and into the mother tongue, it is ultimately necessary to reflect on the types of equivalents that are offered. The issue is especially salient in the case of culture-specific concepts (compare for example Tomaszczyk 1984). If we, for example, take the Polish item **bigos** being treated in a Polish-English dictionary, different users will have different demands on the entry: those non-native speakers of English wishing to understand the Polish term will need an (extended) gloss in English; those familiar with the term but wanting to render it in an English text will appreciate a more succinct approximate equivalent (e.g.

cabbage stew), or encouragment to borrow the original form (**bigos**), again depending on the type and purpose of the text being translated and the prospective target audience (recipients) of the translated text.

Conclusion

Sven Tarp's "Lexicography in the Borderland between Knowledge and Non-*Knowledge"* is certainly an important milestone in the development of lexicographic theory. While many issues still remain open or underdeveloped, and a number of reservations can still be made (some of which I have tried to sketch in the present contribution), Tarp's new book is a coherent, relevant, and timely (because of the electronic revolution) theoretical proposal. Moreover, Tarp's approach has significant practical usefulness, as the focus on lexicographic functions can help in arriving at the right decisions in the process of dictionary planning and design, and offers a principled motivation for these decisions.

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