Specialised lexicography: 20 years in slow motion

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Abstract

This article discusses the development of specialised lexicography during the past twenty years. It first looks at the practical products published in this period and indicates that although the number of specialised dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other lexicographical works have never been bigger, there is no noteworthy development in terms of quality; to this should be added that this branch of lexicography has only to a limited degree exploited the possibilities created by the new electronic media, especially the Internet. The article then comments on the theoretical development of specialised lexicography in the period in question. Although some positive steps have been taken, it points to an astonishing lack of interest in this type of theoretical work, a fact expressed in the relatively reduced number of publications that does not correspond to the growing flow of practical works published in the same period. Finally, the article mentions some of the possible reasons for this lack of interest in theory as well as the challenges in head of specialised lexicography in this respect.

Keywords: specialised lexicography, specialised dictionaries, online dictionaries, information tools, function theory.

Resumen

Lexicografía especializada: 20 años a cámara lenta

En el presente trabajo se estudia la evolución de la lexicografía especializada durante los últimos veinte años. En primer lugar se analizan los materiales prácticos publicados a lo largo de este periodo y se señala que si bien el número de diccionarios, enciclopedias y demás trabajos lexicográficos de índole especializada nunca ha sido mayor, el desarrollo alcanzado desde el punto de vista de la calidad no ha sido sobresaliente. A esto habría que añadirse que esta

rama de la lexicografía ha sacado muy poco partido a las posibilidades que ofrecen los nuevos medios electrónicos, y especialmente Internet. Seguidamente se estudian desde una perspectiva teórica los avances de la lexicografía durante este periodo y se señala que, a pesar de haberse alcanzado ciertos logros, se hace muy patente el desinterés en los trabajos de naturaleza teórica. Esto se manifiesta por la existencia de un número relativamente reducido de publicaciones que no está en consonancia con el aumento de trabajos prácticos publicados en el mismo periodo de tiempo. Por último, se mencionan algunas de las posibles razones que pueden justificar este desinterés en los estudios teóricos así como los consiguientes desafíos que hoy por hoy se encuentran en la vanguardia de la lexicografía especializada.

Palabras clave: lexicografía especializada, diccionarios especializados, diccionarios en línea, herramientas de información, teoría funcional.

Introduction

In an overall historical perspective, twenty years is a short span of time. But in the middle of a headlong scientific and technological rush, twenty years may rightly be regarded as oceans of time, or at least sufficient time to make considerable progress. It is in this perspective that the relative development of specialised lexicography during the last twenty years should be viewed and reviewed. Although the limits of this article do not allow any detailed analysis it should initially be stated that the theoretical and practical achievements of specialised lexicography during the past two decades are rather disappointing, especially when it is recalled that several scholars expected the 1990s to be the golden decade of specialised lexicography after the noteworthy upsurge in general lexicographical discussion and theory-making during the previous decade or two.

Specialised lexicography is the branch of lexicography dealing with the theory and practice of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and other information tools covering areas outside general cultural knowledge and Languages for General Purposes (LGP), mainly, but not exclusively, disciplines related to technology, natural and social sciences, and humanities. Although still frequently referred to as Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) lexicography, specialised lexicography by far transcends the mere description of the various specialised languages and also treats the very content of these disciplines themselves providing direct, punctual access to their cognitive achievements.

In today's society, frequently (but misleadingly) called the information and knowledge society, with its huge and never-stopping development of technology and science, there is a big and unprecedented need for lexicographical tools that provide quick and easy access to carefully selected and prepared data from which the users may retrieve the punctual information needed to support their cognitive formation or to perform a big variety of specific tasks in their daily life and solve the corresponding problems (Tarp, 2007). This is reflected in the ever-growing number of specialised dictionaries and other lexicographical information tools, whether printed or online, that have seen the light during these past two decades. In this view, it is astonishing that quality has not followed quantity.

Practice

The specialised dictionaries and information tools published during the past two decades may be divided into three groups: 1) traditional printed dictionaries; 2) electronic dictionaries published by publishing houses and academic or public institutions; and 3) other online dictionaries.

In the first group we register surprisingly few changes and improvements. On the one hand, there is still a considerable number of bilingual – or plurilingual – dictionaries being printed that are virtually word lists with equivalents and almost nothing else, that is without definitions and the grammatical – especially syntactic – data needed to provide qualified assistance to translation as well as foreign-language text production and reception which are the most relevant functions in relation to bilingual dictionaries. Some of these dictionaries have even been generated automatically by means of computer programs without the intervention of a trained lexicographer or a subject-field expert for which reason the results are less than confidence-inspiring. Such dictionaries may occasionally provide some assistance to their users but more often they create new problems and even mislead them due to the lack of relevant lexicographical data and the existence of direct mistakes. The publishers of these dictionaries seem to follow a deep-seated tradition without paying much attention to the real needs of their users, probably due to the fact that they still sell their products to users in urgent need of lexicographical assistance but with few alternatives (that they are aware of). One of the very few bilingual dictionaries that have tried to swim against the current and experiment with new lexicographical

solutions is Kaufmann and Bergenholtz's (1998) English-Spanish, Spanish-English twin *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Gene Technology*, a multifunctional specialised dictionary which contains a carefully prepared and well-structured set of data intended to meet the big variety of communicative and cognitive needs that the envisaged user group may have in various situations covered by the dictionary (for a detailed discussion of this dictionary, see Tarp, 2005). Another innovative dictionary in this respect is Fata's (2009) Hungarian-German, German-Hungarian *Fachwörterbuch zur Rentenversicherung* which is designed as a learner's dictionary for professional translation students and introduces several new ideas of how to conceive such a dictionary. Apart from these "adult" dictionaries, a number of promising bilingual specialised school dictionaries have seen the light in various countries; especially in multilingual countries like South Africa and Estonia (see for instance Kaalep & Mikk, 2008).

On the other hand, there is as continuous flow of monolingual dictionaries and encyclopaedias which also seem to follow the tradition with no big surprises. Some of these are of dubious usefulness, especially those which – most often tacitly – pretend to cater for various cognitive and communicative functions without including, or only partially including, the corresponding lexicographical data. By contrast, others which mainly concentrate on providing up-to-date cognitive information about one or several subject fields are distinguished by their good or even excellent quality. Their authors are, as a rule, subject-field experts, sometimes even vanguard researchers, interested in transmitting information about their disciplines and following a laudable tradition going back several centuries. These dictionaries and encyclopaedias from which other specialised lexicographical works could learn a lot, especially in terms of expert knowledge and methodology, are contrarily to all logics seldom analysed and discussed in the theoretical literature and at lexicographical conferences. Among them are some of the big encyclopaedias but also specialised monolingual dictionaries like the ones published by *Oxford University Press* dealing with archaeology, classical civilization, military history, philosophy, law, economics, sociology, art, music, chemistry, biology, nursing, and a number of other relevant topics. To this list can be added some specialised school dictionaries that have appeared during the last years, for example the South African *Illustrated Dictionary of Natural Sciences and Technology Today* (Basel & Banks, 2006) which, like other similar school dictionaries, introduces the school children of various grades to the world of science and technology.

The second big group of specialised lexicographical works are the electronic ones prepared by academic and public institutions or traditional publishing houses. The electronic media, especially the Internet, has given a strong impetus to specialised as well as general lexicography with a growing amount of online and other electronic dictionaries published during the past twenty years. However, this impetus has mainly expressed itself in the adaptation of traditional dictionaries to the new media and not in the rethinking of the whole discipline and the maximum exploitation of the new technologies with a view to designing and producing completely new types of high-quality lexicographical tools that may meet the growing demand for quick and reliable information in present society. The big majority of these electronic dictionaries are either "copycats", that is mere copies of printed dictionaries, or "faster horses", that is traditional dictionaries with quicker access by means of search engines and links (Tarp, 2011). In spite of these limitations, some of them at least maintain the qualities of their printed ancestors in terms of content, while others are of a real dubious quality and usefulness, even if they have been baptised with fancy high-tech names like "terminological knowledge bases" and made from scratch such as the plurilingual *Inter-Active Terminology for Europe* (European Union, 2007), probably the world's most expensive lexicographical work ever. One of the reasons for this obvious contradiction between spending and quality is the theory, if any, and methodology used in these projects as well as the fact that public funding of research and product innovation is frequently wasted in endless projects which seldom get further than the so-called "prototypes". In a critical review of this situation, Fuertes-Olivera (forthcoming) writes:

> The Internet has allowed the compilation of new types of information tools, e.g. the so-called terminological knowledge bases. These proliferate around the world, especially because they obtain public money easily, although most of them do not deliver much. For instance, around 90% of the terminological dictionary projects funded by the Spanish R+D funding agency are still "prototypes" after several years of continuous and generous funding.

However, there are a few dictionaries that have successfully taken the step from "faster horses" to "Model T Fords" in correspondence with the famous quotation from Henry Ford, that is dictionaries which based upon an advanced theory of lexicography have made almost full usage of the present technologies. One such an example is the Danish, English and Spanish *Accounting Dictionaries* (*Diccionarios de Contabilidad*) which constitute a

series of 13 interconnected Danish, English, Danish-English and English-Spanish dictionaries and another series of various interconnected Spanish, English and English-Spanish dictionaries (a Spanish-English dimension will be added later) that provide assistance to the envisaged user group in a number of specified situations such as first language (L1) and second language (L2) text reception and production, L1-L2 and L2-L1 translation, knowledge about accounting in L1 and L2, etc. As such they are based upon the postulate that "a good dictionary is a monofunctional tool" (Bergenholtz, 2011: 187). One of the central ideas behind these two series is the distinction between the data base, which contains all the data, and the individual dictionaries which pop up on the screen by means of the interface and only provide the data needed by the user in each situation. In this way it gives an original and convincing answer to one of the big lexicographical discussions in terms of the possibilities opened by the new technologies: on the one hand the present data bases allow the storing of "as much data as possible" that may be useful for the users in one situation or another, and on the other hand the well-conceived dictionary programmes allow the presentation on the screen of "as little data as possible" in each consultation, thus avoiding unnecessary data which only disturb the quick and easy retrieval of the needed information.

The third group of specialised lexicographical works published during the past two decades is made up by the big number of online dictionaries put on the Internet by individuals. The appearance of such dictionaries, some of them with very few words, others relatively big and covering a whole discipline or subdiscipline, is probably one of the most surprising but also most welcome developments in recent years. First of all, it must be said that the bulk of these dictionaries are of a very low technological and lexicographical quality due to the fact that the authors, with a few exceptions, do not have the necessary lexicographical skills or programming knowledge to produce high-quality and high-tech dictionaries. It may therefore be problematic to use their dictionaries as anything else than inspiration, never as final resources to substantiate or solve a lexicographically relevant problem. However, the very fact that they are published shows on the one hand that there is a big demand for specialised lexicographical products within a big number of disciplines, and on the other hand that there are plenty of people interested and willing to use their time to make such products available. Although they may need lexicographical guidance and technological assistance, this is above all a welcome fact that is auspicious for

the future of specialised lexicography. It is therefore important not to discourage the people behind this trend which probably is an old trend that now surfaces due to the new possibilities provided by the Internet for the publication of their efforts.

Theory

A fundamental precondition for raising the quality of specialised lexicographical works is the existence of an advanced theory that may guide the conception and production of such works. However, while specialised lexicographical practice has produced a continuous flow of new results, the corresponding theory has almost been at a standstill during the past two decades. The start was far from disappointing: in 1995 a team of Danish scholars published the *Manual of Specialised Lexicography* where the authors (see Bergenholtz & Tarp, 1995) discussed a broad variety of topics and gave relevant instructions on how to plan and compile various types of specialised dictionaries. The fact that this *Manual* is still the most quoted book on specialised lexicography is a reflection, on the one hand, of the importance and relevance of such a work, and on the other hand, of the theoretical poverty of the discipline. The *Manual of Specialised Lexicography* was strongly influenced by the lexicographical function theory, or more precisely, by an early variant of this theory which has subsequently been further refined (Tarp, 2008), a development which is still not sufficiently reflected in the theoretical literature on specialised lexicography. Since its publication 17 years ago, only a few books and editions treating various aspects of specialised lexicography has seen the light, among them Tarp (1997), Wang (2001), L'Homme (2006), Fuertes-Olivera & Arribas-Baño (2008), Fata (2009), Fuertes-Olivera (2010) and Leroyer & Tarp (forthcoming), to which should be added a few Ph.D. theses and various – but still relatively few – articles in books and journals.

Outside the area of theory-building in the narrow sense of the word, Cowie (2009), which includes the term "specialised dictionaries" in its title, deals with the history of English lexicography but only one of the 17 contributions (Hoare, 2009) treats scientific and technical dictionaries while the rest discuss dictionaries of synonyms, place-names, personal names, pronunciation, phraseologisms, quotations etc., that is topics more related to general cultural and linguistic knowledge. A refreshing surprise with a new

approach to specialised lexicography is Besomi (2011) where a number of experts in the history of economics, that is neither lexicographers nor linguists, use economic dictionaries and encyclopaedias published during the past three hundred years as primary sources in order to analyse how economic thought about crisis and cycles has developed in this period.

The books, theses and articles referred to above develop various relevant aspects of specialised lexicographical theory, frequently related to one or a few specific dictionaries, but it is no exaggeration to say that a comprehensive, up-to-date theory of this branch of lexicography is still urgently missing. One of the major problems here is the troublesome relation between lexicography and terminology and the correct understanding of the philosophical status of lexicography (Tarp, 2010). Although in flagrant contradiction with facts, it is still frequent to meet different variants of the postulate that lexicography deals with general dictionaries while terminology – or terminography – deals with specialised dictionaries, see for instance Bergenholtz and Kaufmann (1997) and Bergenholtz and Tarp (2010) who discuss various arguments put forward by scholars from the two "competing camps". The underlying vision seems to be that lexicography is a subdiscipline of linguistics, or even "applied linguistics", whereas specialised lexicography is a subdiscipline of "specialised linguistics", that is terminology. In this view, linguistics and terminology, respectively, are regarded as theories while lexicography, whether general or specialised, is regarded as practice subordinated to these theories.

It goes without saying that the use of words and language is not a prerogative of linguists. All scientific theories are formulated by means of language; all scientific discussions take place by means of language. The discussion and definition of central concepts and terms is a normal practice among scientists from all disciplines. Linguistics studies language (LGP) and specialised linguistics (terminology) studies specialised language (LSP) from various angles whereas the different sciences, by analogue, study and formulate theories about the phenomena belonging to their respective subject fields. The subject field of specialised lexicography as an independent discipline is the conception, production and use of dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other similar consultation tools whose objective is not to present the scientific achievements of linguistics and terminology but to provide the type of lexicographical data – and only this type of data – from which the users may retrieve the information needed in each consultation. It

may happen, but is very seldom that users consult dictionaries in order to get a description of language, whether LGP or LSP. For some types of specialised dictionaries and similar works the authors have to rely on – but not necessarily to reproduce – the achievements of linguistics and terminology; however, for the production of other types of dictionaries and works, other types of knowledge are required as it is very well reflected in the 650 dictionaries of economics analysed in Besomi (2011).

The core of specialised lexicography is what is left when an abstraction is made from the various types of specific knowledge needed to produce one or another type of lexicographical work. The development in recent years has clearly shown that lexicography is closely related to information sciences – see Bothma (2011), Heid (2011), Leroyer (2011) and Tarp (2011). In fact, dictionaries and other lexicographical works are per excellence information tools with the genuine purpose of meeting the punctual – in contrast to global – information needs of specific types of users in specific types of situations. This means that the producers of these information tools should carefully determine which kind of data is required to solve the needs of the users of their respective tools in the situations covered by these, and after doing so they should also determine which kind of knowledge and interdisciplinary teamwork is necessary to ensure that these data are high-quality and confidence-inspiring to the users. This presupposes the existence of an advanced theory different from the ones used within linguistics, terminology and any of the other areas of human knowledge needed to produce the different types of lexicographical works and tools. Regretfully, the development of this highly necessary theory has been very slow during the past two decades and does not at all match the growing flow of practical lexicographical works of a dubious usefulness published in the same period and in urgent need for theoretical guidance.

Challenges

Specialised lexicography has produced a big and growing quantity of practical products during the past two decades; however, when it comes to the quality of these products and the underlying theory that has to support and guarantee this quality, specialised lexicography – including terminography – has more than anything else been characterised by twenty years in slow motion. As some vanguard projects indicate, there are elements of a good theory that may guide very specific projects but it is nevertheless surprising

that so little has been done to develop a comprehensive, up-to-date theory of this branch of lexicography. The explanation of this deplorable situation is, of course, partially that the existing theoretical work has not been found convincing and attractive by the majority of the community who have preferred to do business as usual and throw themselves into the electronic word without sufficient theoretical baggage or – and this is more or less the same – with an inadequate baggage in this respect.

However, there are also some important external factors that may explain this lack of theoretical motivation. One of these is, as already mentioned above, the role played by the public research and development funding agencies that continue to spend a considerable part of their money to finance projects with fancy high-tech names that seldom get further than the so-called prototypes. This practice is by no means a motivation for the development of a theory that may ensure not only the quality of future specialised lexicographical tools, but also the productivity in terms of finishing these projects in less time and with fewer resources.

Another external factor to be taken into account is the role of the publishing houses. We are living in a world characterised by the production of mass consumer goods where the companies reduce their costs at the expense of a generally declining quality. The publishing houses are no exception to this rule. When they can earn money through the production of more or less automatically generated low-quality dictionaries, they will continue to do so as long as they can sell their products. However, when it comes to other more "serious" dictionaries which, as mentioned above, are fortunately also produced today, it is quite surprising that the publishing houses have still not discovered the philosopher's stone and taken advantage of it in the sense that they could save a lot of money if they based the production of such dictionaries on an advanced theory which, among other things, could kill two birds with one stone, that is contribute both to a growing productivity and to a higher quality.

To sum up, the experience of the past twenty years does not only show that a comprehensive theory of specialised lexicography is necessary in order to raise the quality of its practical products. The experience also shows that such a theory quite clearly needs the right conditions and right environment to grow and prosper. The creation of these conditions and this environment is probably the major challenge today for specialised lexicography.

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