Importance of dictionaries, in the preservation and development of languages

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Lexicographers anonymous?

“Among these unhappy mortals (= ‘those who toil at the lower employments of life’) is the writer of dictionaries; whom mankind have considered, not as the pupil, but the slave of science. … Every other author may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach …”

(Samuel Johnson, 1755)
Importance of dictionaries

- The average language user (and often translator) relies on a dictionary as authoritative source of information.
- People typically refer to the dictionary; not a dictionary.
- Important but the authority of a dictionary is only that of the person who made it.
Dictionaries and the preservation of language

• Looking at the history of lexicography it is clear that dictionaries played an important role in making information available to their users.

• *Thesaurus*: = storehouse, treasure.

• Modern-day lexicography still has this assignment, employing a variety of dictionary types.
Dictionaries and the development of language

- General dictionaries reflect the actual language usage of a speech community in its day to day communication.
- Specialised dictionaries reflect the languages for special purposes, representing a variety of technical fields.
- Dictionaries should be compiled and used accordingly.
The obligation of the lexicographer

The compilation of any dictionary should be preceded by:

– An unambiguous identification of the target user of the dictionary;
– An identification of the user and usage situation;
– An identification of the needs and the reference skills of the intended target user.
Dictionary functions

• The user-perspective demands an early identification of the lexicographic functions of the dictionary:
  • A cognitive-directed dictionary
  • A communication-directed dictionary
    - directed at text production
    - directed at text reception
  • Dictionary functions have to be identified for both general and specialised dictionaries.
The genuine purpose of a dictionary

The identification of the functions results from an important question the lexicographer has to answer: **What do I want my user to be able to do with this dictionary?** This is what the user-perspective is all about.

If a dictionary is compiled in such a way that all its functions prevail that dictionary has achieved its genuine purpose.
Dictionary structures

- Once the functions have been determined, the lexicographer decides on the relevant lexicographic structures. This has to comply with the needs and the reference skills of the target users.
- Dictionary structures constitute the package that ensures the successful access to and preservation of data.
The contents of a dictionary

• Once the structures have been identified the lexicographer determines the contents of the dictionary.
• A lemma candidate list is compiled.
• The data types to be allocated to each article are determined.
• The data distribution structure is devised.
The data distribution

• As a carrier of text types a dictionary can achieve an optimal data transfer by means of a frame structure.

• A frame structure makes provision for front matter texts and back matter texts to complement the central list.

• The data distribution structure determines what should be accommodated in the central list and what should go to the outer texts.
General and specialised dictionaries

- The one-size-fits-all approach does not prevail in lexicography.
- Distinctions between dictionary types are real but not absolute.
- The introduction of hybrid dictionaries.
- User/usage situation determines
Terminology?

- Language is also developed through the development of its terminology.
- Terminology needs to be presented and treated in dictionaries.
- The terminologist helps to create terms; the lexicographer includes and treats them in a dictionary.
- Lexicographers do not make terms; terminologists do not make dictionaries.
LSP dictionaries

• To be the result of a team effort: lexicographer, terminologist, subject expert.
• Then the user will have every reason to rely on the dictionary as a source of information.
Which dictionary should preserve terms?

• LSP lexicography is directed at the presentation and treatment of terms.
• LGP lexicography is directed at the presentation and treatment of other lexical items.
• However: the user situation often determines that some terms should also be treated in an LGP dictionary.
• LSP and LGP do not function in isolation.
Lexicographers anonymous?

“I am not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven.”

(Samuel Johnson, 1755)