

PRESCRIPTIVISM IN LEXICOGRAPHY. A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

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Abstract: This paper considers the relation between prescriptivism and descriptivism in practical lexicography. Using data extracted from two major dictionary projects conducted in different cultural contexts, we argue that these notions are easier to tease apart in theory than in practice. First, we point at the mismatch between the linguistic neutrality aimed for by lexicographers and the authority status conferred on dictionaries by the general public. We then posit that the labels *descriptive*, *prescriptive* cannot apply to a dictionary as a whole since, in the process of dictionary making, some tasks are factual and objective, while others call for the lexicographer's ruling on what is right or wrong in terms of language use. It is such rulings and the factors that determine them that are the focus of attention here, in keeping with the places in which they are likely to occur: the front matter, the macrostructure, and the microstructure of the dictionary.

Keywords: monolingual dictionary, prescriptivism, descriptivism, front matter, usage label

1. Introduction

The descriptivist vs. prescriptivist stance in the practice of dictionary making has been a constant point of interest for metalexicographers (Bergenholtz 2003, Bergenholtz & Gouws 2010, Curzan 2014, Finegan 2020); to their scholarly endeavours we owe the typologies of prescriptivism and useful insights into the various forms it has taken on in the course of time. Whether unmitigated descriptivism is preferable or altogether possible in lexicography is still a matter of debate in the specialist literature. On the other hand, research into dictionary use has shown that “dictionary users have come to care deeply about dictionaries’ responsibility to differentiate good usage and good words from bad”, and “tend to see dictionaries as largely prescriptive” (Curzan 2014: 103-104). It follows from here that prescriptivism is not only the outcome of what lexicographers do as a matter of course, but also of what they are expected to do by the public they target. This means that even the most neutral description of language found in a dictionary is likely to be taken as a point of reference in terms of correctness and appropriate linguistic behaviour; as Dolezal (2020: 730) argues, dictionary users “do not just want answers to questions, they want *authoritative* answers” (emphasis added).

The aim of the present paper is to highlight prescriptive attitudes found in two lexicographic projects with a longstanding tradition in Romanian and English lexicography: the *Dictionary of the Romanian Language*¹ (*DTLR*, henceforth), and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*, henceforth). For the *OED* we have used a 1961 reissue of the first edition (1933), as well as two supplements edited by R. W. Burchfield and published in 1972 and 1976, respectively. The focus of attention in our survey has been the motivation behind the lexicographers’ choices and the impact of their decisions on both the end product and the dictionary user.

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Section 2 of this paper overviews the notion of prescriptivism in dictionary making and lists some of its manifestations in different lexicographic projects; sections 3 and 4 particularize the discussion by providing examples of prescriptive attitudes identified at the macro and microstructural levels of the two dictionaries under investigation.

2. On prescriptivism in lexicography

To begin with, prescriptivism in lexicography is not an easy concept to define. It is often discussed in connection or in contrast with descriptivism. Finegan (2020), for example, singles out the steps in the process of dictionary making that are by default descriptive:

The fundamental task of a general-purpose dictionary is to provide a description of the ‘general’ vocabulary that is as accurate as possible, limited only by the raw materials – usually written texts (books, newspapers, magazines, blogs) – that lexicographers rely on, materials that are richer and more abundant now than ever before, with the availability of gigantic online reservoirs of writing and transcribed speech. The principal object of description in a dictionary is what the raw materials show about which words writers and speakers use, how they use them, and what they use them to mean. This is a descriptive task – listing headwords in alphabetical order, with part of speech and meanings, as well as pronunciations and in some cases etymology, though the last two cannot usually be extracted from the data reservoirs of writing. (Finegan 2020: 49)

While we agree that some of the aspects mentioned by Finegan above, i.e. providing information about the part of speech, pronunciation, or etymology, are simply a matter of description, no less true is the fact that other tasks (e.g. determining the usage of a lemma, providing exegetic information) rely more on the lexicographer’s interpretation of the available data. This will inevitably blur the dividing line between prescriptivism and descriptivism in dictionary making, as suggested below:

Both description and prescription are processes. Dictionaries mostly displayed single occurrences of, for instance, prescription, because the approach had been directed at single phenomena and not at the entire dictionary. It would have been equally difficult to classify a given dictionary as descriptive, because such a classification depends on the way a lexicographer decides to present data to ensure that a function identified for the specific dictionary can be achieved. (Bergenholtz & Gouws 2010: 28)

The chief objective of most linguistic dictionaries has professedly been that of objectively recording language based on evidence available at the time. And yet, this effort seems to have been hampered by a prescriptive undercurrent; as Curzan (2014: 98) notes, “the discourse of legitimacy, authenticity, and purity in relation to words has been circulating since the very first dictionaries were created”. On the one hand, this could be a

consequence of the mission that lexicographers have taken upon themselves, i.e. to regulate the language, to educate the users, or to record language “as is”. At the other end of the lexicographic process, there are the users’ expectations as to what function a dictionary should fulfil, whether or not it should be a guide to “what is normal and standard and good” (Dolezal 2020: 73) language behaviour. According to Curzan (2014), today’s prescriptivism is mainly user- and reviewer-driven:

No matter how hard contemporary lexicographers may protest that their work is descriptive, no matter what the prefaces of contemporary dictionaries say about their role in tracking language change and actual usage, users and reviewers still tend to see dictionaries as largely prescriptive. (Curzan 2014: 104)

These conflicting views held by dictionary makers and dictionary users are also noted by Dolezal (2020: 727): “Dictionary makers generally describe their work as describing the language, while users generally look to a dictionary for guidance, thus emphasizing the dictionary as an authoritative arbiter and prescriber of correctness”. The lexicographers’ intention to produce dictionaries which are models of descriptivism have met with some measure of criticism, with users decrying lexicographic projects as too permissive and likely to contribute to the deterioration of the language (Curzan 2014: 103). Such expectations come in stark contrast to Urdang’s (2000) non-prescriptive view that “[i]t is not the function of a dictionary-maker to tell [one] how to speak, any more than it is the function of the mapmaker to move rivers or rearrange mountains or fill in lakes” (in Bergenholtz 2003: 74). Most lexicographers, however, take a mid-ground position by trying to achieve a balancing act between describing language and providing guidance about ‘correct’ use, as expected by some speakers (Finegan 2020: 48).

In the camp of metalexicographers, some have argued that the descriptive-prescriptive dichotomy is sometimes unrealistic (see Finegan 2020: 50) or even counterproductive for the advancement of lexicographic theory and practice; moreover, as Adams (2020: 164) points out “language is constantly changing; change is normal (that is, not something to worry about or resist); [...] correctness depends on how people actually speak; and usage is relative, due to regional, gender, and class identities, among others”.

In lexicography, the prescriptive approach can be explicit, i.e. when it is taken deliberately and acknowledged openly by practitioners in the front matter of their dictionaries, where prefaces, introductions or forewords often include statements of their intentions or lexicographic policy. In the case of historical projects, like the ones under analysis here, these texts represent the best (and sometimes the only) way to catch a glimpse of the rationale behind the compilers’ choices. However, since most dictionaries are the result of long-term ventures, at times the lexicographers’ initial statements fail to paint an accurate picture of the end product; the lexicographers may discover that their initial principles are more difficult or even impossible to uphold, they may be faced with unanticipated circumstances forcing them to abdicate from certain rules, or even change their attitude midstream. A notorious case in point is Samuel Johnson, who set out “to fix” the English language, only to gradually realize that such a bold aim “neither reason nor experience can justify”. Johnson’s famous conclusion was that protecting his dictionary against “corruption and decay” was an impossible feat (Morton 1995: 205).

As pointed out above, it has been noted in the literature (e.g. Finegan 2020) that some tasks in dictionary making are by default descriptive; by the same token, there are aspects of the lexicographic process or product that are more prone to prescriptivism e.g. the selection of entry words, the treatment of usage labels, usage notes or comments, or the choice of examples of language use. In the selection of lemmata, prescriptivism can be manifest in the choice of the items to be included on the word list, but it is even clearer from the omission of certain items, usually for reasons of acceptability. As shown by Brewer (2010a: 27), the first edition of the *OED* did not include “rude” words – a decision motivated by “notions of propriety and social nicety”. At other times, a general dictionary may provide a skewed or incomplete image of a language by representing only certain language varieties at the expense of others.

Referring to the treatment of usage labels, Finegan (2020: 50) posits that “the centuries-old practice of labelling words and meanings sits on the edge between description and prescription”, because “some labels inevitably exert a prescriptive influence”, even without the lexicographer’s intent. The discussion covers labels such as “substandard”, “low”, “illiterate” (2020: 51), which act as warning signs against the use of such words in standard language. Beyond such cases of word flagging, other forms of usage guidance are also instantiations of prescriptiveness, i.e. comments made by the lexicographers under the form of glosses or usage notes, or even opinions incorporated in the definition (see section 4 below). Brewer (2010a: 29) provides examples from the first edition of *OED* and its subsequent supplements: “of doubtful usefulness”, “a tasteless word”, “of little value”, “a regrettable use”, “fortunately rare”. In *OED*, the lexicographers’ prescriptive attitude is also signalled by the use of a special sign – the paragraph mark [¶] – “to indicate what the editors judged to be ‘catachrestic and erroneous uses, confusions, and the like” (Brewer 2010a: 25), most often followed by a short explanation.

Another indication of the lexicographers’ prescriptive attitudes towards language can be found in the selection of the sources of examples. Thus, for Curzan (2014: 103), Johnson’s use of literary quotations within entries “could be read as an acknowledgement of the importance of usage or as a prescriptive selection of what constitutes ‘English undefiled’”. Closer to our times, similar decisions to tap into canonical literature for samples of good language use were made by the editors of *Le Petit Robert* (1979) or *OED*. Referring to *OED*, Brewer (2010a: 28) shows that in contrast to such highbrow texts, “colloquial, slang, domestic and everyday sources were by no means neglected, but they were represented in far smaller numbers”.

The following two sections highlight some instances of prescriptivism in two major lexicographic projects, *DTLR* and *OED*, identifiable in the macrostructures (section 3) and microstructures (section 4) of these dictionaries.

3. Prescriptivism at the macrostructural level

The likeliest places to look for prescriptive attitudes in dictionaries of such magnitude are the texts that form their front matter. Such attitudes may be conveyed more

or less explicitly but, in either case, they relate to the lexicographers' credo as to their mission as well as to their dictionary's aim.

The case of *DTLR*, the most comprehensive monolingual dictionary of the Romanian language is particularly interesting and deserves a little background information that would help understand the change in attitudes within the frame of one and the same project. *DTLR* consists of two distinct dictionaries compiled over the course of roughly a century. The first, originally known as *The Academy's Dictionary (DA, henceforth)*, was developed between 1906 and 1944, and covered the letters A to De and F through most of L. The second picked up in 1959 where *DA* had left off but under a different name, *The Dictionary of the Romanian Language (DLR, henceforth)*; this is the name under which the two conjoined dictionaries would finally be published in 2010 (see Burada & Sinu 2020: 97).

Considering the time span and the troubled nature of the times that work on this project traversed, it is unsurprising that the approaches adopted in the two parts of the end product, *DTLR*, diverge in certain respects. In *DA*, Sextil Pușcariu, the lead compiler and editor states that his dictionary does not include all the words in use; by Pușcariu's own admission,

A wise selection from the vast material available to me is one of my chief concerns. [...] instead of searching for rare words, I have tried, at the risk of being incomplete, to eliminate the words which seemed better suited in a collection of curiosities than in the dictionary of the Romanian language. (Pușcariu 1913: xii, our translation)

On the other hand, the editors of *DLR* dedicate an entire section of their Introduction to arguing the prescriptive approach taken in their dictionary: "In our work, prescriptiveness is understood as indicating the standard norms for using words. [...] In the Dictionary of the Romanian Language, the norm is applied starting with the headword, written in its standard form." (Jordan et al. 1965: xiii, our translation)

The mission to educate the user and to protect the Romanian language against unnecessary borrowing further underscores the prescriptivist attitude in *DA*:

Every time I was able to provide a Romanian equivalent to [a] neologism, I did it and, as the writing of the dictionary progresses and I accrue more knowledge about the richness of the Romanian language, I will do it even more often. *In this way the dictionary can better help weed out the unnecessary neologisms, whether literary or scholarly.* Doctors will learn the laypeople's names for the diseases, foreign geological terms will be replaced by their Romanian counterparts, even the train driver, for example, who uses French words in order to describe his locomotive, will be able to replace some of them with Romanian words, since many of the components of the locomotive are also to be found in our farmers' wagons [...]. (Pușcariu 1913: xii, our translation, emphasis added)

By contrast, Murray's first introduction to *OED*, entitled *General Explanations*, is a very technical text, in which the author describes his methods, expresses his intention to

include as many words as possible, while admitting that making room for all the words of a language is an impossible feat:

a Dictionary has definite limits: the lexicographer must, like the naturalist, ‘draw the line somewhere’, in each diverging direction. He must include all the ‘Common Words’ of literature and conversation, and such of the scientific, technical, slang, dialectal, and foreign words as are passing into common use, and approach the position or standing of ‘common words’, well knowing that the line which he draws will not satisfy all his critics. For to every man the domain of ‘common words’ widens out in the direction of his own reading, research, business, provincial or foreign residence, and contracts in the direction with which he has no practical connection; no one man’s English is *all* English. The lexicographer must be satisfied to exhibit the greater part of the vocabulary of *each* one, which will be immensely more than the whole vocabulary of *any* one. (Murray 1884: vii, emphasis in the original)

Although *OED* declares itself descriptive, aiming to “furnish an adequate account of the meaning, origin, and history of English words now in general use, or known to have been in use at any time during the last seven hundred years” (Murray 1888: vi), its entries include judgements, expressions of opinion, and recommendations on language use. However, the descriptivism professed in the front matter of *OED* is disproved in practice. This is a point of commonality between Pușcariu and Murray: both embraced the idea that a dictionary should describe the language without ruling which words are good or bad. In spite of this, there is clear evidence that on occasion the two lexicographers abdicated from this principle (see Ștefănescu 2014: 396-398).

Another interesting example of prescriptivism relates to the treatment of profane, taboo, or sensitive vocabulary items, whose omission “was motivated by factors other than legality”, according to Brewer (2010a). For example, *OED* included the word *lesbianism*, but omitted its sexual sense from the 1933 Supplement, because it offended “the sensibilities of their chief lexicographer”, despite the insistence of some of the editors to uphold “*OED*’s scholarly commitment to descriptivism” (Brewer 2010a: 27), and despite the fact that the word *homosexuality* (which technically includes lesbianism) was listed in the Supplement for the first time in the dictionary’s history (2010a: 27).

4. Prescriptivism at the microstructural level

As far as microstructure is concerned, prescriptivism is apparent in the use of labels, usage notes, comments, other elements of dictionarese, as well as by the sources of illustrative examples. Generally speaking, in order to express their opinions about a certain lemma, lexicographers may employ what Svensén (2009: 331) calls “dianormative labels”, which mark “words and expressions whose acceptability is questioned as regards linguistic correctness”. The author attributes this feature to monolingual dictionaries, stating that it reflects either the purist efforts of certain languages, such as French, or to learner’s dictionaries, where lexicographers take care to inform the users about

substandard or non-standard forms and meanings, most commonly with the help of usage notes. In *DTLR*, deviations from the norm are marked with the help of the label *impropriu* 'inappropriate', present both in *DA* and *DLR*. In 1a, the label signals a deviation from the standard or accepted use in the first case, or an unacceptable extension of the original meaning for the lemma in the second case.

- (1) a. **BALIGĂ** (Eng. *dung*)
P. ext. (**Impropriu** (sic!) în glumă) Excremente de om
[By extension (Inappropriate noun in jokes) Human excrements]
P. ext. (**Impropriu**) Gunoiu
[By extension (Inappropriate) Garbage]
- b. **PROFÉSOR, -OĂRĂ** subst. (Impropriu) Învățător
[Teacher for levels above primary school (Inappropriate) Primary school teacher]
- c. **VEDEĂ**³ vb. (Eng. *see*)
(**Impropriu**, despre surse de lumină) [(Inappropriate, about sources of light)]
(Impropriu, despre ochelari) [(Inappropriate, about glasses)]
- d. **BISERICĂ** 3. (Impropriu, numai în Cod. vor.)
[(Inappropriate, only in Cod. vor.)]

The same label is used to flag an incorrect synonym in examples 1b and, respectively, the misuses of the lemma in question in 1c above. In 1d, the meaning marked by inappropriate was identified only in one source, abbreviated as Cod. vor.²

An interesting case is the label *neobișnuit* 'unusual' which co-exists with *rar* 'rare', indicating that it does not refer to frequency of use, but rather to more exotic or irregular forms or meanings. In fact, Puscariu (1913: xiv) states that this label is used to signal that the forms and meanings to which it applies are isolated, used sparingly. Another label found only in *DA* (as far as we could check) is *suspect* 'doubtful' which appears to mark uses encountered only in one source. In both cases, the lexicographers seem to be pointing at items situated at the periphery of the language.

- (2) a. **NAȚIONALÍSTIC, Ă** adj. (Neobișnuit) Național
[NATION-LIKE (Unusual) National]
PENSIONĂ vb. 2 (Neobișnuit; în forma *pansiona*)
[RETIRE (Unusual; under the form *pansiona*)]
PRIMITIVIZĂ vb. (Neobișnuit)
[TURN PRIMITIVE (Unusual)]
PRIMITIVIZĂRE s.f. (Neobișnuit)
[ACTION OF TURNING PRIMITIVE (Unusual)]
- b. **AVALMĂȘ** s.m. = **devălmaș**. (Suspect). Numai la PONTBRIANT.
[ASSOCIATE (Doubtful) Only in PONTBRIANT]
AVĂLMĂȘIE s.f. = **devălmășie**. (Suspect). Numai la PONTBRIANT.
[ASSOCIATION (Doubtful) Only in PONTBRIANT]

² According to the bibliography section, COD. VOR. refers to "Codicele Voronețean, cu un vocabulario și studio asupra lui, de Ion a lui G. Sbiera, Cernăuț, 1885".

Prescriptivism can also be inferred from the “diaevaluative labels” that lexicographers resort to, which indicate the language user’s attitude (Svensén 2009) in terms of whether a word or expression is humorous, ironic, derogatory, pejorative, etc. It could be argued that such a judgement involves the lexicographer’s subjectivity in interpreting the textual material under investigation. Examples 3a-f below include excerpts from *DA* and *DLR* in which the labels *disprețuitor* (also *desprețuitor* in *DA*) ‘depreciativ’, *depreciativ* ‘deprecating’, *peiorativ* ‘pejorative’, *glumeț* ‘jokingly’ and *ironic* ‘ironical’ are used.

- (3) a. **BĂLȚAT** 4. (Desprețuitor) Îmbrăcat în haine boierești
[SPOTTED (Depreciative) Dressed in noble clothing]
- b. **POETÁRD** s.m. (Depreciativ) Poet mediocru
[POET (Deprecating) Mediocre poet]
POETÁSTRU s.m. (Depreciativ) Poet mediocru
[POET (Deprecating) Mediocre poet]
POETÁȘ s.m. (Depreciativ) Diminutiv al lui poet
[POET_{DIM} (Deprecating) Diminutive of poet]
- c. **MITOCÁN** s.m. (peiorativ) om cu comportări grosolane
[YOB (pejorative) man with a coarse behaviour]
- d. **SOLDĂȚÓI** s.m. (Peiorativ) Augmentativ al lui soldat.
[SOLDIER_{AUG} (Pejorative) Augmentative of soldier]
MILITĂRÓS, -OĂȘĂ adj. (De obicei peiorativ) Specific militarilor, de militar
[MILITARY-LIKE (usually pejorative) Specific to military people, about the military]
- e. **PROFESIÚNE** (Glumeț)
[PROFESSION (Jokingly)]
- f. **COCOSTÁRC** s.m. 4. Fig. (ironic) Om slab și cu gâtul lung.
[HERON (ironical) Thin man with a long neck.]
PRICOPSI vb. 3. (Adesea ironic, în construcții exclamative) 4 (Ironic)
[TO LINE ONE’S POCKETS (Often ironical, in exclamations) 4. (Ironical)]

The pragmatic information about the lemma may also be supplied under the form of glosses or be integrated with the definition itself. The former situation is illustrated in extract 4 below, where further usage information is given in parentheses to indicate the speakers’ attitude as perceived by the lexicographer, e.g. *disparaging*, *jokingly*, *hateful*.

- (4) **COAMĂ** 2. P. anal. Părul capului omenesc (se zice mai ales cu o nuanță batjocoritoare s. de glumă despre părul lăsat să crească prea lung al bărbaților)
[MANE 2. By analogy. The hair on the human head (it is said especially disparagingly or jokingly about the overgrown hair of men)]
COCOȘNEĂȚĂ s.f. (În batjocură s. ca termen de dispreț s. de ură) Femeie simplă care vrea să joace pe cocoana.

[WANNABE LADY (Scornfully or as a disparaging or hateful word) Simple woman who imitates a lady.]

JIDÁN 1. Nume popular (adesea cu înțeles disprețuitor) dat Evreilor

[KIKE 1. Popular name (often used disparagingly) for Jews]

In example 5, the definitions incorporate the attitude towards the word with the help of adjectives such as *insulting*, *deprecating*, which accompany the words *epithet* (5a), *augmentative form* (5b), *name* (5c).

- (5) a. **PAȚACHÍNĂ** s.f. 2 (Familiar) Epitet injurios pentru o femeie îmbrăcată și fardată strident; epitet injurios pentru o femeie de moravuri ușoare.
[ROSE MADDER 2. (Familiar) Insulting epithet for a woman with strident clothing and makeup; Insulting epithet for a woman of easy virtue]
VENETIC II S.m. și f. Epitet depreciativ pentru o persoană venită din alte locuri și considerată străină în locul unde s-a stabilit.
[FOREIGNER 2. Deprecating epithet for a person from another place considered a foreigner in the place they settled]
SCÓRPIE s.f. 4. Epitet depreciativ pentru o persoană (mai ales femeie) foarte rea (și extrem de urâtă).
[SHREW 2. Deprecating epithet for a very mean (and extremely ugly) person (especially a woman)]
- b. **MILITĂRÓI** s.m. Augmentativ depreciativ al lui militar.
[SOLDIER_{AUG} Deprecating augmentative form of soldier.]
ȚĂRĂNÓI s.m. Augmentativ depreciativ al lui țăran.
[PEASANT_{AUG} Deprecating augmentative form of peasant.]
- c. **BARAÓN** s.m. Nume dat Țiganilor, în batjocură sau cu despreț
[BARAON Name given to the Gypsy, deprecatingly or disparagingly]

It is worth mentioning that examples in 3 above are functionally identical with those in 4 and 5, except for the position the usage information occupies in the entry. Thus, the labels in 2 are clearly distinguished from the rest of the microstructural components, while glosses or comments often become an integral part of the definition, whether between or without parentheses.

As for *OED*, Brewer (2010a: 25) believes, as already mentioned in section 2, that the most obvious indication of prescriptivism is the use of the paragraph mark [¶] to introduce the lexicographers' explanations of what they consider incorrect or confusing. However, as seen in the examples under 6a, the notes inserted by the *OED* lexicographers are either very similar to general usage notes or complete the information given in the definitions; at other times, the explanations provided are not clear, because they are elliptical, as seen in 6b below.

- (6) a. **Mare** 1. ¶ Used for: the mother, dam (of a horse).
Mass 2. ¶ c Shakespeare's mention of *evening mass* is prob. due to ignorance or forgetfulness of the fact that mass was not (normally) celebrated in the evening. In ecclesiastical antiquities, however, the

expression is a literal rendering of L. *missa vespertina*, where the sb. has the wider sense mentioned in the etymological note above.

Mate 2. ¶ b. App. used for: to destroy; to kill

Merchant 1. ¶ As a mistranslation of L. *mercenarius* ‘hireling’

Minded 4. ¶ b. The combinations with adv. have sometimes been used in the senses more properly expressed by parasynthetic formations with the corresponding adjective

Mineral 1 ¶ b *nonce-use*. Deeply buried; recondite

Mare 2. ¶ For *Shanks’s mare* (i.e., one’s own legs as a means of conveyance) see SHANK.

b. **Which** ¶ c. In anacoluthic construction, as in *THAT rel. pron.* 8 *rare*.

Blur 6. ¶ Cf. BLARE, BLORE *v.*

Dick ¶ To this (in the commercial sense of ‘declaration’ as to the value of goods) is perhaps to be referred the vulgar phrase *Up to dick*: as adj. up to the proper standard, excellent, ‘proper’;

Fornicated ¶ With word-play on FORNICATE *v.*

Matron 1 ¶ b. in personifications.

In this latter case, understanding the comments depends heavily on the other elements of the entry, e.g., definition, etymology, etc. For example, it appears that the note for *fornicate* introduces an explanation for the 1750 context quoted above it, while the note for *matron* clarifies the examples that follow. For *which* and *blur*, the note introduces cross-referencing to other meanings or spellings of the words.

As for the use of labels, *OED* also employs the diaevaluative labels *derogatory*, *contemptuous*, *jocular*, *ironical*, as seen in 7 below. Although they are not always marked by parentheses, they often stand out from the rest of the text because they are written in italics or given in abbreviated form.

(7) **Coon 2.** c. A Negro *slang*. (*Derog.*)

Aged 1. a. *aged parent*, applied *joc.[ularly]* to a parent (whether elderly or not)

Dick 1. a. *clever Dick*: a clever or smart person; usu. *ironical*: a ‘know-all’

Mannish 2. Of a woman, her attributes, etc.: Resembling a man, man-like, masculine. Chiefly *contemptuous*.

The lexicographer’s attitude can also be expressed through comments added to the definition. In this case, unlike the comments marked by ¶, the observations are clear and pertain to the editors’ sense of the language as in 8a, or fall in the category of dianormative information in 8b, e.g. *erroneous*, *avoided by careful writers*.

(8) a. **Insinuendo** [A portmanteau blending of INSINUATION and INNUENDO]
A tasteless word.—Ed.

b. **Media 5.** Also *erron.* as sing. in the same sense.

Agenda. Plural of AGEND (sense 3), treated as a singular (a use now increasingly found, but avoided by careful writers).

Opinionatre, -atry, (-astry), erroneous ff. OPINIATRE, -ATRY, (-ASTRY), conformed to *opinion*.

In a manner similar to *DTLR*, as illustrated in 9 below, there are also comments provided inside the definition, to mark offensive, rude, angry, depreciatory, or playful usage, most frequently in combination with the words *usage* or *sense*.

- (9) **Kike** A vulgarly offensive name for a Jew
Nig-nog² A coarsely abusive term for a Negro
Muck 2. *fig.* contemptuously applied to money
Mare 1. c. Applied contemptuously to a woman.
Manufacture n. 1. g. In depreciatory sense applied to production involving mere mechanical labour, as contrasted with that which requires intellect.
Manufacture n. 2. c. In depreciatory sense: Something produced by mere mechanical industry, or made to supply the demand of the market.
Manufacture v. 3. *fig.* In disparaging sense: To 'fabricate', invent fictitiously; to produce (literary work, etc.) by mere mechanical industry.
Mess 2. c. In contemptuous or disgusted use: A concoction, jumble, medley.
Miss 3. c. In angry or contemptuous use.
Mortal 2. b. Often used playfully for 'person'. In negative context an emphatic equivalent for '(any) one', '(no) one'.

OED lexicographers seem to resort more to this type of marking than to classical usage labels, but more extensive research would be needed to validate this assumption.

As mentioned above, another manifestation of prescriptivism is found with the selection of sources of examples illustrating the different meanings of the lemmata. In *DA*, examples came from the works of prominent Romanian authors and scholars seen as models of good language use. This reflects the lexicographers' belief that using such sources would, on the one hand, contribute to the development of the national standard and, on the other, it would be an effective way to promote national authors and perpetuate their work. Although the issue is not discussed in the front matter, searching the content of its entries has shown that *DLR* exploits a wider range of sources, including the newspapers and magazines of the time.

In the Preface to Volume I (1888) of *OED*, Murray states that the quotations included in the volume come from

all the great English writers of all ages, and from all the writers on special subjects whose works might illustrate the history of words employed in special senses, from all writers whatever before the 16th century, and from as many as possible of the more important writers of later times. (Murray 1888: v)

The language Murray samples is that used mostly (but not exclusively) in the works of Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Milton, Chaucer, Dryden, Dickens and Tennyson. According to Brewer (2010b), the extensive use of these sources is consistent with *OED*'s emblematic image as "the nation's dictionary in a way which assumes unproblematic and self-evident connections between high literary culture, national identity, society and language" (Brewer 2010b: 95). The frequency data that Brewer's (2012) statistical analysis generated based on the second edition of the *OED* which was

digitalised led the author to the conclusion that the lexicographers' choice of language samples is more culturally motivated than driven by linguistic considerations.

5. Conclusions

The main conclusion to be derived from the discussion above is that any attempt to classify major dictionaries like *DTLR* or *OED* in terms of either *prescriptive* or *descriptive* is fraught with roadblocks that make such categorizations quite difficult, if not altogether impossible. As posited above, there are several reasons for this. One relates to the lack of consensus in the literature as to what prescriptivism and descriptivism involve and how they work in lexicographic practice; this makes the two concepts hard to capture in clear-cut definitions. Another reason is that, given the long time they took to come to fruition, neither of the lexicographic projects under discussion here possesses a monolithic structure. In both cases, this is arguably the result of the shaping influence exerted by the context of dictionary making, and the changing philosophy underpinning it.

Setting aside the conceptual fuzziness of the two notions, we found that total, unmitigated descriptivism is more of a desideratum than a fact. It seems to be the elusive target that some lexicographers aim for but hardly ever reach. This is rather unsurprising: since the process of dictionary making is based on a series of lexicographic decisions, there will always be room for the overt or covert prescriptivism ushered in by the choices that practitioners deem fit to make. In this paper, some of these decisions have been illustrated with evidence collected from the front matter, the macrostructure and the microstructure of *DTLR* and *OED*. In so doing, we aimed to be descriptive, rather than take a contrastive approach to these dictionaries; nevertheless, on occasion, comparing and contrasting them seemed too interesting to overlook.

We provided, among others, examples of usage labels and comments that evidence the lexicographers' subjective perception of language use. Specific labels, such as *dianormative*, *diaevaluative*, are used to mark the pragmatic value of certain lemmata; as a result, they implicitly or explicitly regulate language behaviour. Further, we have shown that the selection of sources for illustrative examples can also be indicative of prescriptive intentions. *DA* and *OED* favour canonical literature, while *DLR* adopts a more inclusive approach by extracting examples from journals, magazines and newspapers, which provides a more accurate description of the linguistic landscape at the time the dictionary was compiled.

Overall, our survey has shown that, at least as far as the two lexicographic projects discussed above are concerned, descriptivism and prescriptivism are inextricably linked. Whether or not prescriptivism is necessarily something to be avoided or simply embraced and admitted openly is a function of how the lexicographers view their own role (i.e. gatekeepers or record keepers), and the role of the dictionaries they create (i.e. arbiters of appropriate language behaviour or repositories of language).

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