

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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9 Semantics and Lexicography



1. Introduction

For years, I have argued that semantics as a scholarly discipline must prove itself in lexicography. “Lexicography needs linguistics, and linguistics needs lexicography. As Zgusta (1971: 111) points out, for the treatment of meaning in dictionaries to be radically improved, preparatory work has to be done by linguists. (Wierzbicka 1987*a*: 1–2). I believe that during the two decades which have elapsed since Zgusta made this comment, much of this preparatory work has in fact been done. In this chapter I will try to show that, as a result of this work, the treatment of meaning in dictionaries can indeed be radically improved.

2. Scope versus Adequacy and Truth

Dictionaries are books about words. Unlike, however, various more or less selective “studies in words” (e.g. Lewis 1990), dictionaries are meant to be relatively complete—at least with respect to one thematic domain, or one aspect of language. Since they are also meant to be practically useful and commercially viable, one of the first dilemmas for a dictionary-maker is how to combine completeness with a reasonable size.

It is at this point, I believe, that a practical lexicographer often becomes impatient with theoretical lexicography. Theoretical lexicographers tend to maintain that to adequately describe one word one needs a great deal of space (many pages, if not many dozens, scores, or even hundreds of pages). As one leading lexicographer and semanticist Igor Mel’čuk (1981: 57), put it: “Not only every language, but every lexeme of a language, is an entire world in itself.” In a sense this is true—but if so, then of course a practical lexicographer does not have the room to do justice to even a single word, let alone to the thousands of words with which he or she usually has to deal.

An earlier version of this chapter was published as one of two “lead papers” in a special issue of the journal *Dictionaries* (14. 1992–3: 44–78), devoted to the theory and practice of lexicography. In the same issue, a number of commentaries on the two lead papers were published, along with the authors’ replies (*Dictionaries*. 14. 1992–3: 139–59). Several of these commentaries are referred to in this chapter.

One possible response to this situation on the part of practical lexicographers is to turn their back on theoretical lexicography and to continue doing what they have always done: to rely on experience and common sense. I believe that in doing that practical lexicographers have frequently produced valuable and useful works, and can still do so. But I also believe that if they try, instead, to look theoretical lexicography in the eye and to take from it what it has to offer, they can do a lot better.

Landau (1984: 5) writes: "A dictionary is a book that lists words in alphabetical order and describes their meaning." It is only as an afterthought that he adds: "Modern dictionaries often include information about spelling, syllabification, pronunciation, etymology (word derivation), usage, synonyms, and grammar, and sometimes illustrations as well."

I agree with Landau's emphasis: although a good dictionary has to include, as Apresjan (forthcoming) points out, morphological, syntactic, prosodic, pragmatic, and phraseological information, as well as information about meaning, it is the latter which normally constitutes the core of a dictionary. In what follows, I will not try to comment on all aspects of the relationship between theoretical and practical lexicography, but rather will focus, primarily, on the one feature which is truly essential: the description of the meaning of words.¹

My main thesis with respect to this central problem is this: The description of a word's meaning may vary, legitimately, in completeness from one work to another, but it should not differ in its basic content. A "definition" is meant to represent the truth about a word's meaning, and there is only one such truth, whether it is to be presented in a research paper devoted to one particular word or in a dictionary intended for a general audience, including various dictionaries addressed specifically to "children", "learners", "students" and so on.

It is a curious but wide-spread illusion that, by saying things which are untrue, meaningless, obscure, or theoretically untenable, the dictionary-maker can gain in either insight or space, and that the dictionary user is thus better served. If space is of paramount importance in a "commercially viable" dictionary, then all the space available, however limited, should be used for saying things which without being complete are nonetheless true, meaningful, illuminating, and clear.

It might be thought churlish to deny that reputable commercial dictionaries do say, by and large, things that are "true, meaningful, illuminating, and clear". But unfortunately they often don't.

¹ One particularly important area which has not been discussed at all in this chapter is that of relationships between meanings of words and their syntactic properties. For both general discussion and ample exemplification, see Wierzbicka (1987*a*). See also Ch. 5.

3. Saying Something that is not True

Sometimes dictionary definitions say things which are simply false. For example, the *The Oxford Australian Junior Dictionary* (OAJD 1980) offers the following definition of *sure*:

sure—knowing something is true or right

But of course “knowing” and “being sure” are two very different things, and even in a dictionary intended for children they should never be equated. An “adult” dictionary, the *Oxford Paperback Dictionary* (OPD 1979) offers a more complex and “sophisticated”, but in fact equally false, definition:

sure—having or seeming to have sufficient reasons for one’s beliefs, free from doubts

The apparent afterthought “free from doubts” is basically right, but *doubt* itself is defined by the OPD via *certainty*, and *certainty* via *doubt* (*doubt*—“feeling of uncertainty about something”; *certain*—“having no doubts”). Leaving aside this circular detour (see Section 10), we will note that for subjective certainty (being sure of something), having sufficient reasons for one’s belief is neither necessary nor sufficient.

Similarly, *announce* is defined by the OAJD as “to say something in front of a lot of people”. But in fact, one can also announce something (for example, an important decision) to one’s parents, and the presence of a lot of people is not necessary at all.

Bold is defined by the OAJD as “brave and not afraid”. But this is wrong, too: one can be bold without being brave, and be brave without being bold. In particular, boldness is shown in relation to other people, whereas one can be brave even in solitary confinement (see Wierzbicka 1992a: 208–9).

Standard is defined by the same dictionary as “how good something is”. But in fact, it is rather “how good you think something has to be”.

Threat is defined as “a promise that you will do something bad if what you want does not happen”. However, a threat is not a kind of promise, although it can be called that ironically; and one can say, for example, *threats and promises*, whereas one cannot say **spaniels and dogs* (because a spaniel is indeed a kind of dog).

Ability is defined by the OAJD as “the power to do something”. But although the notions of ‘ability’ and ‘power’ are related, the former cannot be reduced to the latter: ‘power’ implies that one can do things that someone doesn’t want, and so it implies actual or potential conflict of wills; ‘ability’, however, does not imply this.

To show that errors of this kind occur also in ambitious, prestigious, and innovative modern dictionaries, I will conclude this section with two

examples from *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (Cobuild 1987).

Thus, *Cobuild* defines *empathy* as “the ability to share another person’s feelings and emotions as if they were one’s own”. But in fact, as shown by Travis (1992), *empathy* does not imply that one *shares* another person’s feelings (but rather, that one understands them, as if they were your own); and, for example, an empathetic counsellor cannot be expected to *share* his or her patient’s feelings.

Similarly, *Cobuild*’s definition of *forgive* implies incorrectly that to be able to forgive someone one has to be first angry with them and want to punish them: “if you forgive someone who has done something wrong or forgive a bad deed that someone has done, you stop being angry with them, and no longer want to punish them.” But stories of saints and martyrs abound in examples of sentences in which someone is said to have forgiven his or her persecutors without any implication that at first he or she was angry with them and wanted to punish them. Likewise, in the Gospel story of the prodigal son (which for many people epitomizes forgiveness) there is no implication that the father was at first angry with his son and wanted to punish him.

4. Saying Something that is Superfluous

Given space constraints under which practical dictionaries usually operate it is surprising to see how often they waste precious space for saying things which are entirely superfluous. For example, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOTEL 1984) defines the word *weapon* as follows:

weapon—an instrument of offensive or defensive combat; something to fight with

The simple phrase “something to fight with” is perhaps not a perfect definition of *weapon* but it is a pretty good approximation; the definition is spoilt, however, by the completely unnecessary addition of “an instrument of offensive or defensive combat”. One can almost sense the nervousness of the lexicographer who, having produced an excellent short definition, realizes that he or she has nothing to add to it—and panics at what appears to be an unfamiliar, unconventional level of simplicity, and tries desperately to add something to make it longer, more complex, more “respectable”. Theoretical lexicography can be very useful at this point if it can reassure the practical lexicographer: “There is no need to add anything; the simple short definition is okay; on the contrary, it is the longer one which is faulty, because, as Aristotle pointed out twenty five centuries ago, in a definition every superfluous word is a serious transgression.”

5. Confusing Meaning with Knowledge

Another way to waste space in a dictionary is to include in it technical or scientific knowledge. For example, *LDOTEL* defines the word *dentist* as follows:

dentist—a person who is skilled in and licensed to practise the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of diseases, injuries, and malformations of the teeth, jaws, and mouth and who makes and inserts false teeth

It may be instructive for a reader to learn that a dentist does all the things enumerated in this definition, but information of this kind, however useful, is out of place in a dictionary. The short definition offered by *OAJD* (though not perfect) is much more satisfactory:

dentist—someone whose job is to look after teeth

The line between knowledge and meaning is not always easy to draw, but in principle it can be drawn (see Wierzbicka 1985 and Chapter 11), and in any case dictionaries are often full of information which quite clearly belongs in an encyclopaedia, not in a dictionary. Consider, for example, the following definition of *sugar* (*LDOTEL*; my emphasis):

sugar—a sweet substance that consists wholly of *sucrose*, is colourless or white when pure, tending to brown when less refined, is usually obtained commercially from sugarcane or sugar beet, and is nutritionally important as a source of *carbohydrate* as a sweetener and preservative of other foods

Clearly most of what the *LDOTEL* definition offers is not part of the everyday concept at all (not to mention the fact that *sugar* is defined here via *sugarcane* and *sugar beet*; see Section 10). As usual, the *OAJD* definition, though not perfect, is much more plausible: “a sweet food that is put in drinks and other foods to make them taste sweet”. (It would probably be better still to say something like this: “something that people add to things they drink or eat when they want to make them taste sweet; it comes from some things growing out of the ground (i.e. plants); it is normally white”.)

McCawley (1992–3: 123) suggests that, in one respect, the *OAJD*'s definition of *sugar* “is more accurate than Wierzbicka's, since *OAJD*'s initially puzzling use of 'food' in the definition neatly distinguishes sugar from such sugar substitutes as saccharine and Nutrasweet”.

But while *sugar* should indeed be distinguished from saccharine, do we have to call *sugar* a “food” (something that McCawley himself finds counter-intuitive) to achieve this goal? If *food* stands, roughly, for things that people eat, then it is understandable why people would normally not call *sugar* “a food”: one normally doesn't eat sugar (on its own). To distinguish

between *sugar* and *saccharine* we could say that while both *sugar* and *saccharine* are “added” to some things that people eat or drink, only of *sugar* can it be said that people can “eat it as part of some things they eat”.

Consider also the following definitions of *horse* from three different dictionaries:

a solid-hoofed perissodactyl quadruped (*Equus caballus*) (SOED 1964)

a large solid-hoofed herbivorous mammal (*Equus caballus*) domesticated by man since a prehistoric period (Webster's 1988)

a large solid-hoofed plant-eating 4-legged mammal (*Equus caballus*, family Equidae, the horse family), domesticated by humans since prehistoric times and used as beast of burden, a draught animal, or for riding; esp. one over 14.2 hands in height (LDOTEL 1984)

It hardly needs to be pointed out that definitions of this kind do not represent what ordinary speakers of English have in mind when they talk of horses. The information included in such “definitions” is, for the most part, entirely superfluous in a dictionary of English. It would be much better to say simply that a *horse* is “a kind of animal called *horse*”. It would be better still to try to explicate, in an abbreviated form, the folk concept encoded in the English word *horse*; but if a dictionary cannot afford the space to do this, why waste space on information which is given in all encyclopaedias and which has nothing to do with ordinary speakers’ knowledge of their language anyway? (For further discussion, see Chapter 11).

6. Definitions which are too Broad

Definitions which are too broad do not contain any falsehood (because everything they include is true), but their implications are false (because they leave out certain necessary components).

For example, *talent* is defined by the *OAJD* as “the ability to do something very well”. But this implies that an acquired skill could be called talent, which is not true. The definition misses the crucial component ‘inborn’ (“if someone can do things of a certain kind very well not because he/she did something to be able to do them well”).

To succeed is defined as “to do or get what you wanted to do or get”. By this definition if one gets a present that one wanted to get, this could be described as succeeding; once again is not true. (To succeed one has to do something; the disjunction “do or get” is therefore wrong.)

To defy is defined as “to say or show that you will not obey”. But if a child says to his or her brother or sister, “You are not my mother or father, I will not obey you”, this would not be described as defying. (One can only

defy orders given by someone who actually does have authority over one and can be expected to be obeyed.)

The definition of *steal* says “to take something that does not belong to you and keep it”. But this could refer to robbery as well as to stealing. For stealing, it is essential that the actor does not want people to know what he or she is doing, and expects that they will not know it.

Secret is defined as “something that must be kept hidden from other people”; but this could refer to physical objects, whereas in fact *secret* stands only for something that one knows (and must not tell other people about).

Thirst is presented as “the need to drink”; but in fact it refers to a sensation, to what one feels (“when you feel you need to drink”).

A *ribbon* is, according to the *OAJD*, “a strip of nylon, silk, or some other material”. But if this were true, any strip of any material could be called a ribbon, which of course is not true. In fact, the word *ribbon* (in the relevant sense) refers only to a kind of thing made (by people) in order to make something look good. (See Section 9).

To shed is defined as “to let something fall” (and it is illustrated with the sentences “trees shed leaves, people shed tears, and caterpillars shed their skins”). But this implies that if I let a book fall I am shedding it. The crucial concept missed by this definition is that of ‘part’: *A* can only shed *B* if before the event *B* can be thought of as part of *A* (and after the event, cannot).

Finally, *a woman* is according to the *OAJD* “a fully grown female”, which turns a bitch or a mare into a woman.

Needless to say, definitions can also be too narrow, but this fault seldom occurs on its own, and I will discuss it in the context of other errors with which it is most commonly combined. Here, just one example will suffice.

The *OAJD* defines *appointment* as “a time when you have arranged to go and see someone”. This is too restrictive, because the lawyer who receives clients, or the professor who sees students, can also have an appointment, without having to “go” anywhere outside their office.

7. Capturing the Invariant

Although this may sound too grand for (what tends to be seen as) the humble task of a lexicographer, the process of constructing a lexicographic definition is—or should be—a search for truth. To find the truth about the meaning of a word means to find the invariant concept which is part of the native speakers’ tacit knowledge about their language and which guides them in their use of that word.

Yet lexicographers often lack the confidence, the resolve, the boldness to reach for the invariant, and thus become unfaithful to their task of searching

for the lexicographic truth.

Consider, for example, the following definition of *complain*, offered by the *OPD*:

complain—1. to say that one is dissatisfied, to protest that something is wrong; 2. to state that one is suffering from a pain, etc.

Two meanings are postulated here, but for neither of them is an attempt made to capture the invariant: the alleged second meaning ends with an *etc.* which, as far as the reader knows, could stand for anything, whereas the alleged first meaning is stated in two different and non-equivalent ways. It hardly needs to be pointed out that one can complain without feeling (or even pretending that one feels) pain; that one can protest that something is wrong in a situation which could not possibly be described as complaining (e.g., Amnesty International protests, but does not complain, about human rights' violations in different countries); or that one can say that one is dissatisfied with oneself without complaining about anyone or anything.

But in addition to being wrong in almost everything it says, the whole entry exudes lexicographic despair and apathy: "It is impossible to capture the invariant, or even to decide how many different meanings are involved; or if it is, we do not know how to go about it."

If the lexicographers responsible for this entry had a reliable lexicographic theory at their disposal, they would have need neither for their half-hearted positing of (unjustified) polysemy nor for their sad and defeatist *etc.*

In fact, the invariant of *complain* is not particularly difficult to capture. Roughly speaking (for a detailed and more precise discussion see Wierzbicka 1987a), the complaining person has to convey the following message: "something bad happened to me—I feel something bad because of this—I want someone to do something because of this". ("Doing something" does not necessarily refer to changing the situation and removing the grounds for complaining; it can also refer to expressing sympathy, commiserations, and so on.)

It may be pointed out, incidentally, that the definition of *complain* cited above illustrates the link between proposing definitions which are too narrow and the failure to even aim at capturing the semantic invariant. The lexicographer realizes that the phrase "to state that one is suffering from a pain" is too narrow as a definition of *complain*, but instead of looking for a less restrictive formula he or she simply adds an *etc.* (and, for good measure, posits polysemy as well).

The link between positing false polysemies and the failure to look for a semantic invariant, is also manifested in the following definition (from the *OPD*) of *bold*: "1. confident and courageous; 2. without feelings of shame, impudent." There are concepts which are inherently positive (that is, which reflect a positive evaluation), for example 'brave' or 'courageous'; and there

are others which are inherently negative (that is, which reflect a negative evaluation), for example 'reckless', 'foolhardy' or 'impudent'. 'Bold' belongs to neither of these two categories, being compatible with either a positive or a negative evaluation. By splitting it into two supposedly different meanings, one positive and one negative, the dictionary is misrepresenting the truth about this concept and blurring the difference between the neutral concept 'bold', the positive concept 'courageous' and the negative concept 'impudent'. (Needless to say, 'bold', 'courageous', and 'impudent' differ also in other respects; for detailed discussion see Wierzbicka, 1992a: 203–11).

Another characteristic example is the *OPD* definition of *boast*: "to speak with great pride and try to impress people, esp. about oneself". This time no polysemy is postulated, but the little *esp.* (especially) is no less of a sigh of resignation (or a moan of despair?) than the *etc.* of the previous definition. Clearly, the authors of the entry could not make up their collective mind as to what the essential features of *boast* are. If they had a reliable lexicographic theory to lean on, they would have known that an *esp.* is a sign of defeat and they would have felt obliged to think a little longer. If they had done this, they would have realized that the concept of 'boast' always involves oneself (whether directly or indirectly), and that it is not different in this respect from 'pride'. Again, for detailed discussion the reader is referred to Wierzbicka 1987a; here, it will suffice to say that boasting always involves the following attitude: saying something very good about someone or something, thinking something very good about myself, comparing myself with other people ('other people are not like me'), and wanting other people to think something very good about me. Thus, if a father says something very good about his children, evidently thinking something very good about himself, comparing himself with other people ('other people are not like me'), and wanting other people to think something good about him because of this, then this can indeed be described as boasting.

It may be noted in passing that the *OPD* definition of *impress*, via which the *OPD* defines *boast*, is equally inadequate: "to make (a person) form a strong (usually favourable) opinion of something". *Usually*, like *especially*, suggests that the component of "favourable opinion" is not necessary, whereas in fact it is absolutely necessary both for *boast* and for the relevant meaning of *impress* (as in "He wanted to impress her").

The failure to capture the invariant is manifested in a particularly spectacular manner in the use of the conjunction *or*, with which dictionary definitions are usually peppered.

For example, the *OPD* defines *tempt* as follows: "to persuade or try to persuade (especially into doing something wrong or unwise) by the prospect of pleasure or advantage". The first *or* can be dispensed with immediately:

tempting can of course be successful, but so can trying; it is enough, therefore, to say “try to persuade”, there is no need for “to persuade or try to persuade”. The disjunction “something wrong or unwise” can be reduced to “something bad” (not necessarily ‘evil’ or ‘morally very bad’, but something that is thought of as a bad thing to do); and the “prospect of pleasure or advantage” can be reduced to the prospect of “something good (for the temptee)”. The qualifier *especially* can be dispensed with altogether: one simply cannot tempt somebody to do something good, it has to be something that is seen as “something bad” (although the speaker can of course be using the word *tempt* in jest).

In conclusion, devices such as *or*, *especially*, *usually*, the use of multiple glosses (whether words or phrases) to portray the same meaning, or the positing of arbitrary polysemies, are all different manifestations of the same basic failure of practical lexicography. This failure mars most entries in most of the existing dictionaries, and makes them much less useful to the reader than they otherwise could be (under the same limitations of space and other practical constraints). A rigorous and consistent lexicographic theory, with a firmly established principle of determinacy of meaning, can easily remedy this weakness.

In particular, a sound lexicographic theory can prevent the common phenomenon of unfounded proliferation of meanings, as well as the (less common, but even more harmful) conflation of meanings which are related but not the same. It can prevent the confusion of ironic, sarcastic, jocular or metaphorical usage with the literal meaning of words (as in the case of *threat*, discussed earlier). It can offer lexicographic criteria on the basis of which meanings can be firmly separated from one another, clearly identified, and intelligibly stated.

8. Standing Firmly on the Ground of Discreteness

One of the major reasons that most dictionary definitions are much less useful than they could be, is the widely spread lack of faith in the discreteness of meaning. As Aristotle realized better than many contemporary linguists do, there are few things harder than constructing a good definition. How can a lexicographer be expected to undertake the necessary effort if he or she does not believe that the task is feasible at all? Theoreticians who undermine the lexicographer’s faith in the possibility of stating the meaning of words truthfully and accurately are doing both the lexicographer and the dictionary user grievous disservice. In fact, most of the problems which plague practical lexicography are linked with the issue of discreteness.

For example, how can lexicographers search with all their might, and patience, for an invariant if they do not know whether they can expect to

find a definite number of meanings? To recall the *OPD* definition of *complain*, cited earlier: “1. to say that one is dissatisfied, to protest that something is wrong; 2. to state that one is suffering from a pain etc.”. On the face of it, two meanings are postulated here, but in fact the first alleged meaning is stated twice, in two different ways, and the relation between these two different attempts at a definition is left unclear. The use of numbers 1 and 2 implies that this particular lexicographer does believe in the discreteness of meanings, but the constant practice of throwing together different formulations of what is counted as “one meaning” indicates the shakiness of this belief. If the lexicographer felt obliged to state just one definition for each (hypothetical) meaning, this would encourage him or her to look for the true invariant; as a result, the multiple meanings postulated in present-day dictionaries would often be reduced to a smaller number, invariants would be captured, superfluous phrases would be omitted, space would be gained, semantic relations between different meanings (and different lexical items) would be made much clearer, and, on top of all this, the language used would be much simpler and clearer, as well as more economical. For example, as pointed out earlier, for *complain* one could propose just one unitary formula, and there would be no need for positing polysemy, no need for an *etc.*, and no need for agonizing between two non-equivalent phrases “to say that one is dissatisfied” and “to protest that something is wrong” (not to mention other advantages linked with a standardization and reduction of the metalanguage used).

Or consider the way *LDOTEL* defines the English verb *to pray*:

- 1*a.* to entreat earnestly; esp. to call devoutly on (God or a god)
- b.* to wish or hope fervently.
2. *archaic or formal* to request courtesy—often used to introduce a question, request or plea.
3. *archaic* to get or bring by praying: to address God or a god with adoration, confession, supplication, or thanksgiving; engage in prayer.

Although three figures are used (1, 2, and 3), the actual number of meanings postulated is far from clear: Is (*a*) a separate meaning? Or (*b*)? and what about all those *especially*, *ors*, *oftens*, semicolons? The relationship between the different alleged meanings is even less clear than the number of meanings postulated. For example, why should the meaning “to address God or a god” be given under heading 3, and “to call devoutly on (God or a god)” under 1? Are these two alleged meanings more different from one another than those listed under 1(*a*) and 1(*b*) (only one of which mentions God)? Why is the alleged meaning “to engage in prayer” given under 3 and “to call devoutly on (God or a god)”, under 1?

I am not saying that it is easy to define *pray* in a satisfactory way, and I sympathize with the lexicographer’s painful efforts. But I believe this pain

could have been alleviated, and the efforts rewarded with more satisfactory results, if theoretical lexicography had sent a clear and unequivocal message that meaning is determinate, that a definite (and minimal) number of meanings must be looked for, that there are no “shades” of meaning, no (*a*)s and (*b*)s, and that no hedges (no *especially*, *often*, *etc.*) are necessary or acceptable; and if, in addition to this message, clear criteria for establishing and distinguishing different meanings had been provided. I believe that if such a clear message had been sent, and if the necessary guidelines had been provided, the entry for *pray* would have ended up with just two meanings, one archaic and one contemporary (without any submeanings), and that these two meanings would have been stated clearly and accurately (without any hedges, *ors*, *etc.*, or other visible signs of indecision and analytical failure; see Wierzbicka, 1993*d*).

Finally, consider the lists of quasi-equivalents offered in definitions such as the following ones from Webster’s (1959):

- reply (noun) — an answer; response; counter-attack
- resign (verb) — to yield to another; surrender formally; withdraw from; submit calmly
- report (verb) — to give an account of; relate; tell from one to another; circulate publicly; take down (spoken words)
- request (noun) — desire expressed; petition; prayer; demand; entreaty
- order (noun) — method of regular arrangement; settled mode of procedure; rule; regulation; command; class; rank; degree; a religious fraternity; an association of persons possessing a common honorary distinction ...

What is most striking about such lists is the fact that the lexicographer is making no attempt to indicate how many different meanings are involved in each case. Should the first four entries above leave anybody in doubt as to the lexicographer’s motivation for this failure, the hotchpotch of quasi-equivalents thrown into the entry for *order* makes it quite clear that in fact the only possible motivation is despair. This despair is understandable but it is not justified. As I have tried to show in my *Dictionary of English Speech Act Verbs* (which includes, in particular, the verbs *reply*, *resign*, *report*, and *request*), meanings *can* be sorted out from one another, and (*pace* Wittgenstein and followers) boundaries between meanings *can* be drawn. The doctrine of “family resemblances” must not be used as an excuse for lexicographic laziness or as justification for lexicographic despair. (For further discussion, see Chapter 4.)

As one final point related to the question of discreteness, let us consider Hank’s (1994: 102) claim that there is no reason why “dictionary definitions are to be read as mutually exclusive”, and that “in practice, the wording of definition 1 normally colors the interpretation of definition 2”. I agree that,

from a reader's point of view, the wording of one definition may colour the interpretation of the other definitions of a polysemous word. The main problem, however, is to establish whether the word in question is really polysemous, and to ensure that its meaning or meanings be correctly identified. If this is achieved, then I think there is no need for such a "cross-fertilization of definitions".

For example, Hanks quotes a sentence describing two girls as "simultaneously bold and innocent", asking: "Does *bold* here mean forward or impudent or daring?"; and he answers: "A bit of both, really". But why should we assume that *bold* really does have two meanings which can be stated as (1) forward or impudent and (2) daring? If none of these supposed "definitions" fits the sentence well, it is, I think, not because there are two meanings which colour one another, but because neither of the proposed "definitions" of *bold* is correct. (For an alternative definition, and justification, see Wierzbicka 1992a: 208–9).

A definition should always be able to stand on its own. If a word is genuinely polysemous, then each of its meaning should be stated separately, and each definition should be able to defend itself. This is not incompatible with Hanks' statement that "secondary meanings have a tendency to contain traces of primary meanings". I, too, believe that different meanings of a word are usually interrelated, and that adequate definitions should reveal those links. (For many illustrations, see Wierzbicka 1987; cf. also Mel'čuk's concept of "semantic bridges", Mel'čuk *et al.* 1987). But this does not change the basic requirement that each definition should be able to stand on its own.

9. Distinguishing Polysemy from Vagueness

One of the main reasons why lexicographers often find it difficult, indeed impossible, to capture the semantic invariant is that they do not know how to distinguish polysemy from vagueness. It is not that lexicographers do not believe in polysemy: frequently, polysemy is posited in dictionaries on a truly massive scale; but it is posited on an *ad hoc* basis, without any clear guidelines or general principles.

Consider, for example, the definition of *ribbon* mentioned earlier: "a strip of nylon, silk, or some other material" (*OAJD*). As pointed out, this definition implies that ANY strip of material could be called *ribbon*, whereas in fact many different "strips of material" (e.g. a piece of sewing tape) would not be so called (because their function is clearly different from that of ribbon: sewing tape is clearly not made for tying things and, equally clearly, it is not made for a decorative purpose).

But the generalization proposed here may seem to apply to *many* (even

most) cases rather than to *all* cases. For example, what about *typewriter ribbon*? Is it meant for tying things? Or is it decorative? And yet it is called *ribbon*, too, isn't it?

Confronted with an apparent exception of this kind, lexicographers often tend to lose faith in the existence of a semantic invariant, take recourse to hedges, qualifiers, and various other *ad hoc* devices, and lose the generalization.

But in fact the counter-example is apparent rather than real: The so-called *typewriter ribbon* is not called *ribbon* but *typewriter ribbon* (even if it can sometimes be referred to, *elliptically*, as *ribbon*).

The common belief that a modifier-head construction must indicate a taxonomic ('kind of') relationship is based on a fallacy, which feeds on the fact that compounds with such a structure can often be abbreviated, in an appropriate context, to the head alone.

For example, it is often assumed that an artificial leg is a kind of leg, that a plastic flower is a kind of flower, that an electric chair is a kind of chair, or that a house of cards is a kind of house. Since people cannot live in a house of cards, and since "a house of cards is a kind of house", the generalization that houses are made for people to live in appears to be easily refuted. Similarly, since plastic flowers do not grow out of the ground, and since "a plastic flower is a kind of flower", the generalization that flowers grow out of the ground may also seem to be easily refuted.

Reasoning of this kind is fallacious because it confuses semantic relationships based on the notion of 'like' with those based on the notion of 'kind' (i.e. "horizontal" and "vertical" relationships; see Bright and Bright 1969; Berlin 1992). For example, a rose is a kind of flower, but a plastic flower is *like* a flower, not a *kind* of flower. Similarly, a deck-chair is a kind of chair, but an electric chair is not a kind of chair ("something for people to sit on ..."); rather, it is an object which is *like* a chair, but whose function is quite different from that of a chair. Finally, typewriter ribbon is not a kind of ribbon; rather it is something which is like a ribbon, but whose function is quite different from that of a ribbon.

There is, however, one important difference between the case of *typewriter ribbon* and that of *plastic flowers*: The fact that one can call a plastic imitation of a flower a *flower* is language-independent, whereas the fact that the "typewriter strip" is called in English *ribbon* (*typewriter ribbon*) is language-specific (e.g. in Polish the corresponding compound is *taśma do maszyny*, lit. 'typewriter tape'). Consequently, *typewriter ribbon* has to be listed in a dictionary as a separate item, with its own definition, whereas *plastic flower* does not.

To prove that a *typewriter ribbon* is not 'a kind of ribbon' and that the definition of *ribbon* does not have to cover typewriter ribbon, we proceed as follows: We first assume, for the sake of argument, that *typewriter ribbon*

does have to be covered in the definition of *ribbon* and we ask what the two categories have in common; when we establish the common denominator (roughly, “a strip of material”) we ask whether any object which fits this common denominator can be called by the word in question (*ribbon*); we find that the answer has to be negative; from this we conclude that the supposed common denominator cannot account for the word’s range of use; and from this we infer the existence of polysemy.

If we proceed in this way we can arrive at definitions with full predictive power not in a diachronic sense, explaining why certain objects came to be called by certain names (e.g. why the “typewriter strip” came to be called in English by a compound including the word *ribbon*, whereas, for example, in Polish it came to be called by a compound including a noun which on its own means ‘tape’), but in a synchronic sense, which means that the definition matches a word’s actual range of use. This procedure will enable us to be precise and to dispense with hedges and qualifying expressions such as *usually*, *often*, *typically*, or *etc.*, which are meant to make up for the inaccuracy of the definition itself.

Another way of making basically the same point is this: a *hair ribbon* differs from other kinds of ribbons in only one respect, specified by the modifier (being used for tying hair with), so there are no grounds for positing polysemy in this case. But *typewriter ribbon* differs from other ribbons in more than one respect (it is used in typewriters, it is not suitable for tying things with, it is not decorative); in this case, therefore, polysemy has to be postulated (see Chapter 8).

Thus, although with respect to nouns polysemy often has to be established on purely semantic grounds, this does not mean that there are no guide-lines for establishing whether a word has one meaning or two (or more).

With respect to verbs, the task of establishing the number of meanings is often facilitated by differences in syntactic frames. This point can be illustrated with the English verb *to order*.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD 1964)* offers for this verb the following glosses: “put in order, array, regulate ... ; ... ordain ... ; command, bid, prescribe ... ; command or direct ... ; direct tradesman, servant, etc., to supply (~ *dinner*, settle what it shall consist of)”.

These glosses do not make it clear how many meanings are being posited (and perhaps the underlying assumption is that the different meanings of this verb cannot be sorted out from one another). But in fact, if the syntactic frames are sorted out in orderly fashion, clear semantic distinctions emerge, too.

Leaving aside (for reasons of space) the meaning illustrated with the sentences “He ordered his affairs” or “He ordered his troops”, I will focus here on the distinction between what I will call *order*₁ and *order*₂, which can be

illustrated with the sentences “She ordered him to leave” and “She ordered a steak”, respectively. In fact, I will reproduce here with only minor changes the discussion of this distinction which appears in my *Dictionary of English Speech Act Verbs* (Wierzbicka 1987a: 86–7).

A person who *orders*₂ a meal in a restaurant or a book in a bookshop wants the addressee to cause him to have that thing and expects him to do so; to that extent *order*₂ is similar to *order*₁. But there are numerous assumptions which are present in *order*₂ but absent from *order*₁. The person who *orders*₂ something wants to have something; an action by the addressee is necessary for this desired state of affairs to eventuate, but it is only a means to the goal, not the goal itself; it does not matter who carries out the *order*₂ (which waiter, etc.), as long as it is carried out. This semantic difference is reflected in a syntactic difference: one *orders*₁ a person (to do something), but one *orders*₂ a thing (from a person). One cannot *order*₂ a waiter, one can only *order*₂ a steak, and one cannot *order*₁ a steak (as one cannot *give orders* to a steak), even though concrete nouns can be reported as *orders*₁ (“‘The door’, he ordered”).

The direct object represents the focus of the speaker’s interest. For *order*₁, the direct object has to refer either to the addressee or to the action (“He *ordered*₁ her to leave”, “He *ordered*₁ an inquiry”). For *order*₂, it has to refer to an object (“He *ordered*₂ a steak”), with the addressee being conceptually and syntactically demoted to a prepositional phrase (‘X *ordered*₂ Y from Z’). The speaker who *orders*₂ something assumes that the addressee has things that many people may want to have and that he is willing to provide people with some of these things, on certain conditions. The addressee’s task concerns not only the product which the speaker wants to have, but also some services: the addressee has to do something to the object desired (i.e. get it, prepare it, wrap it, serve it, and so on). For his part, the speaker undertakes to do something, too: whatever is required (for example, to pay). He also has to wait, because his wish cannot be complied with immediately (as in the case of buying), but only after some delay, allowing the addressee to perform the necessary actions.

Finally, the person who *orders*₂ something does not assume that the addressee has to do what he wants him to do; he does assume, however, that the addressee is willing to do so. A person who *orders*₁ someone to do something is very confident about the outcome (‘I think that you have to do it’). A person who *orders*₂ something is a little less confident, because the addressee may be unable to carry out the *order*₂. But, in this case, too, the speaker is reasonably confident (‘I think that if you can do it, you will do it’).

One can hypothesize that *order*₂ has developed out of *order*₁ by a shift of emphasis from the addressee to the object provided by the addressee, and by a concomitant disappearance of certain assumptions concerning the

relationship between the speaker and the addressee: *order*₁ implies that the addressee is subordinated to the speaker and has to do what the speaker wants him to do. In *order*₂, this assumption is absent; instead, there are new assumptions which emphasize the object ('something has to be done to it') and which de-individualize the addressee: he is not seen as an individual subordinated to the speaker but as a person or group of persons who willingly provide certain kinds of objects to unspecified customers.

Thus the last gloss in the *COD* entry for *order* ("direct tradesman, servant, etc., to supply") confuses two different meanings, associated with different types of social relationship and with different sets of assumptions: it is one thing to order someone (e.g. a servant) to do something, and another to order something from someone (e.g. from a tradesman). In an adequate lexicographic description, these two senses would have to be clearly distinguished, and the readers would have to be informed of the different grammatical frames associated with the different meanings.

10. Avoiding Circularity

There was one thing that Edith could not beat, and that was the dictionary. "The Larousse is a big cheat. You look for a word, you find it, they send you back to another word and you haven't got anywhere."

Berteaut 1973: 103)

Conventional dictionaries are, generally speaking, vitiated by all-pervasive circularity in their definitions. Some dictionaries are better in this respect than others (for example, the *OAJD* is much better than all the Oxford dictionaries addressed at adults), but while there are differences of degree, there are hardly any exceptions—circularity is a malady (in a more or less advanced form) to which virtually no conventional dictionary is immune.

Practical lexicographers are often well aware of the circularity of their definitions, but not knowing how to avoid it they try to make a virtue of "necessity", and attempt to justify this circularity as something that may bother theoretical semanticists but that is quite acceptable in a practical dictionary and which will never bother the ordinary user. In fact, however, they are deceiving themselves (and unwittingly insulting the intelligence of their intended audience). A few examples.

The verb *to jump* is defined by the *OPD* as "to move off the ground etc. by bending and then extending the legs or (of fish) by a movement of the tail" (first meaning) and "to move suddenly with a jump or bound, to rise suddenly from a seat etc." (second meaning). As for the first definition, one might query the unexpected attention it gives to fish (as well as its use of *etc.*), but it is the second definition which is relevant in the present context. For what is "a jump"? The *OPD* offers several definitions, but the relevant

one appears to be the first: “a jumping movement”. Thus *to jump* is defined via *a jump*, *a jump* via *jumping*, and *jumping* is not defined at all, being treated, naturally enough, as a form of the verb *to jump*. Substituting the definienses for their definienda, we obtain the following: *to jump* - “to move suddenly with a jumping movement”; that is, “to move suddenly with a movement characteristic of moving suddenly with a movement characteristic of moving suddenly with a movement”. And so it goes on—like a record caught in a groove. It would take a real jump of faith to believe that that is the kind of definition which will serve the dictionary user best.

To take another example, the *OPD* defines *fate* as “a person’s destiny”, and *destiny* as “that which happens to a person or thing thought of as determined by fate”. Replacing the word *fate* with its definition we get the following: *destiny* is “that which happens to a person or thing thought of as determined by that which happens to a person or thing thought of as that which happens to a person or thing” (and so on, *ad infinitum*). Quite apart from the fact that a definition of this kind is an insult to the readers’ intelligence, what use could it possibly be to them? If somebody knows what *fate* means, what *destiny* means, and how they differ from one another, then they don’t need any definitions at all; but if they do not know, or are not quite sure, the dictionary will not teach them anything. Both the producer’s and the buyer’s money is wasted on definitions of this kind.

It might be added that *fate* is also given another definition in the same dictionary, “a power thought to control all events and impossible to resist”, and that *destiny* is also defined as “fate considered as power”. This time, replacing *fate* with its definition we get: *destiny* is “a power ... considered as power”—hardly a more illuminating result.

It might be objected that this last example is unfair because the concepts of ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’ are particularly difficult to define. But in fact circularity is so pervasive that the easiest concepts are often defined in the same way.

For example, *LDOTEL* defines *best* as “excelling all others”. *Excel* is defined, in turn, via *superior* and *surpass*, *superior* via *surpass*, and *surpass* via *better*, as well as via *exceed*, with *exceed* being defined in turn via *superior*. What baffles the reader most is why *best* couldn’t have been defined via *better* in the first place (“better than all the others”), instead of going round the circles involving *superior*, *surpass*, and *exceed*.

Similarly, *OPD* defines *question* as “a sentence requesting information or an answer”, and *answer* as “something said or written or needed or done to deal with a question, accusation, or problem”. Omitting, to save space, the numerous *ors*, we get something like this: an *answer* is “something said to deal with a sentence requesting something said to deal with a sentence requesting ...”—and so on, *ad infinitum*. And yet the essence of a *question*, or an *answer*, is not difficult to state: the *question* refers to a situation

when, roughly speaking, someone says “I want to know something, I want someone to tell me” and *answer* means, roughly, “telling someone something that they said they wanted to know” (for more precise definitions, see Wierzbicka 1987a).

The examples given above were relatively simple, with *A* being defined via *B*, and *B* via *A*. Typically, however, vicious circles are like huge webs enveloping whole extended families of words, or like gigantic tentacles extending throughout the pages of a dictionary. For example, *A* is defined via *B*, *B* via *C*, and *C* via *A*; or *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E* and *F* are defined via one another—in circles, criss-crosses, and all imaginable sorts of combinations and patterns (for example, *A* via *B* and *D*; *B* via *D*, *E* and *F*; *D* via *A*, *B* and *C*; *C* via *A* and *B*; and so on)—with repercussions throughout the entire dictionary, which becomes an entangled web of overlapping circles. For example, in the *OPD*, one can find the little circle (Fig. 9.1) and a larger one, with the little one within it (Fig. 9.2).

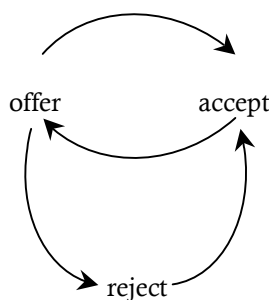


FIG. 9.1

In a system of this kind, every answer generates new questions, and these new questions lead us either to further questions or bring us back to the starting point (or both). It is just as Descartes said in his “Search after truth” (speaking through the mouth of Eudoxus and referring to the so-called metaphysical steps or the tree of Porphyry):

EUDOXUS. You pay no attention to my question, and the reply that you make to me, simple as it may appear to you, will bring us into a labyrinth of difficulties, if I try ever so little to press you. Were I for example to ask Epistemon himself what a man is, and were he to reply, as is done in the Schools, that a man is a rational animal; and if, in addition, in order to explain these two terms which are not less obscure than the first, he were to conduct us by all the steps which are termed metaphysical, we should be dragged into a maze from which it would be impossible for us to emerge. As a matter of fact, from this question two others arise, the first is what is an animal? The second, what is reasonable? And further, if, to explain what an animal is he were to reply that it is a living thing possessed of sensations,

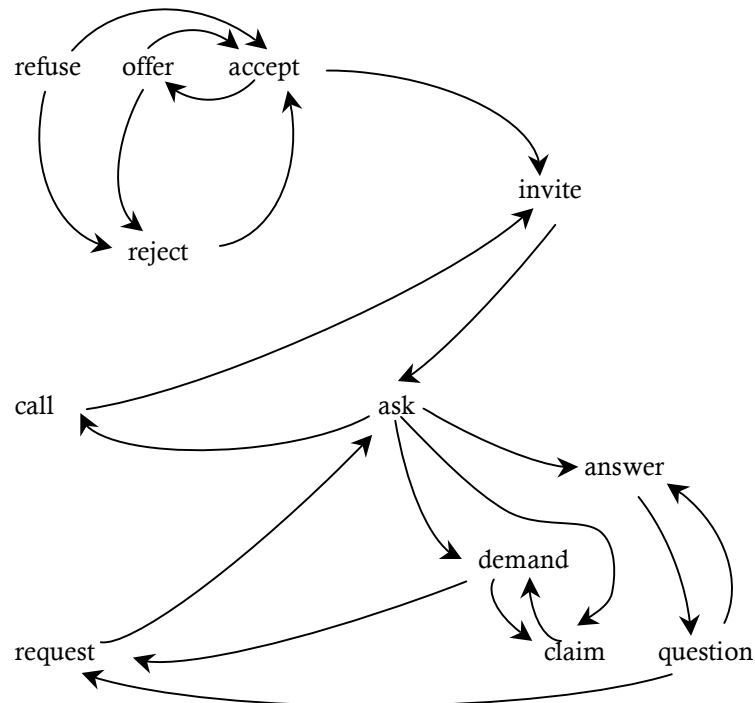


FIG. 9.2

that a living thing is an animate body, that a body is a corporeal substance, you see that the question, like the branches of a genealogical tree, would go on increasing and multiplying; and finally all these wonderful questions would finish in pure tautology, which would clear up nothing, and would leave us in our original ignorance. (Descartes 1701/1931: 318)

Circularity involves the same kind of *regressus ad infinitum*.

Pascal denounced circularity with his mock-definition of *light*. He wrote:

There are people who go as far in absurdity as to explicate a word by itself. I know some who have defined *lumière* ('light') like this: "La lumière est un mouvement lumineux des corps lumineux" [Light is a luminary movement of luminous bodies]; as if one could understand the words *luminaire* and *lumineux* without understanding *lumière*. (Pascal 1667/1954: 580)

Three centuries, and hundreds of dictionaries later, the problem of circularity has not only not been solved (in practical lexicography) but, on the contrary, has by and large ceased to be seen as a problem! The hydra of circularity is rearing its ugly heads with more and more self-assurance. There can be no doubt that—although dictionary makers are, naturally,

reluctant to admit it - what is sacrificed to this hydra is, above all, the interest of the reader.

11. Relying on Indefinables

One cannot define everything. For any sound lexicographic undertaking it is crucial to decide which words are going to be defined and which can be taken as indefinable. The point has been made so many times, so clearly and forcefully, that one feels embarrassed having to repeat it again and again (see, for example, the quotes given in Chapter 1). Yet repeat it one must, until this basic point is generally understood and finally universally accepted. But how should a lexicographer decide on the set of indefinables on which the dictionary is to be based?

For obvious reasons, the set of indefinables must be reasonably small. For example, if half the words in a dictionary were defined and the other half not, the reader would have the right to complain, and perhaps even to demand a 50 percent refund.

Second, the indefinables must be chosen from among words which are intuitively clear; otherwise, they are useless (or worse than useless) as building-blocks out of which the definitions of all the other (definable) words are constructed. For example, if the words *good* and *bad* are defined, directly or indirectly, via *moral* and *immoral* this is useless to the reader because the former pair is by far clearer and more intelligible to everybody, (including small children), than the latter. Thus, explaining *good* via *moral* or *bad* via *immoral* is a parody of an explanation. And yet this is how dictionaries often proceed—not because their makers are foolish but because they do not have a firm and clear semantic theory at their disposal. To illustrate, the *OPD* offers the following:

bad — wicked, evil
 wicked — morally bad, offending against what is right
 evil — morally bad, wicked

If one pursues the leads offered a little further, the web of vicious circles thickens:

to offend—to do wrong
 wrong — morally bad, contrary to justice or to what is right
 moral — of or concerned with the goodness or badness of human character or with the principles of what is right and wrong in conduct

This means *bad* → *wicked* → *bad*; *wicked* → *offend* → *wrong* → *bad* → *wicked*; *bad* → *wicked* → *moral* → *bad*; on and on.

The *OAJD* shows more wisdom, in that it does not attempt to define *bad*

at all, and thus is free to define both *evil* and *wicked* via *bad*, imperfectly, no doubt, but at least without circularity:

evil — very wicked
wicked — very bad

Unfortunately, the same wisdom was not shown in the case of *good*, which *is* defined, causing, predictably, a vicious circle (and, incidentally, committing the dictionary to a dubious and dangerous doctrine that ‘good’ is the same as ‘socially acceptable’):

good — of the kind that people like and praise
praise — to say that someone or something is very good

The solution to all this is very simple: to accept that both *good* and *bad* are among the most basic human concepts and that they neither can nor need to be defined—and then to define everything else clearly and accurately.

Critics are often sceptical of the defining power of simple and general terms such as *good* and *bad*. For example, Landau (1992–3: 115) asks how *bad* can be sufficient “to distinguish between, say, mistake, blunder, lapse, wrong, and sin”; but I believe that simple and general words such as *bad* can achieve this goal much better than the unrestricted set of words used in conventional dictionary definitions. Consider, for example, the set of circular definitions offered by *AHDOTEL* (1973) (abbreviated here for reasons of space):

mistake — an error or fault
error — ... 4. a mistake
fault — ... 2. a mistake; error
sin — 1. a transgression of religious or moral law, especially when deliberate; 2. any offense, violation, fault, or error
violation — 1. the act of violating ...; 2. an instance of violation; a transgression
transgression — 1. the violation of a law, command, or duty

Pictorially this is represented in Fig. 9.3.

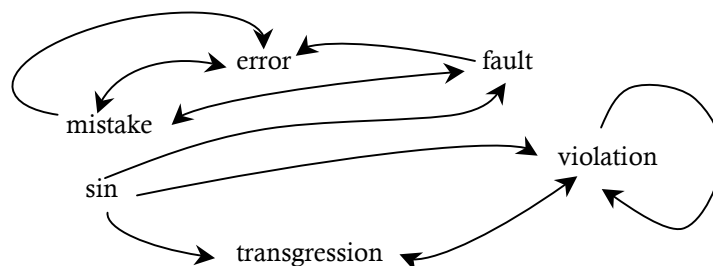


FIG. 9.3

Cobuild takes a different approach, but, in my view, it is also far from successful. For example:

mistake 1.1. an action or opinion that is incorrect or foolish, or that is not what you intended to do, or whose result is undesirable; 1.2. something or part of something which is incorrect or not right

The comment on the margin says, in addition, that “mistake = error”. If the definitions offered by *AHDOTEL* are striking in their blatant circularity, those offered by *Cobuild* are striking in their failure to capture an invariant. In my view, however, *mistake* (noun) does have a unitary meaning, which can be stated as follows:

mistake (*X* made a mistake)
something bad happened
because *X* did something
X didn't want it to happen
X wanted something else to happen
X thought that something else would happen

By analysing the concept of ‘mistake’ into its components, we can not only avoid circularity and capture a unitary meaning, but also show the differences as well as similarities between related concepts such as ‘mistake’, ‘blunder’, and ‘sin’.

For example, *Cobuild* defines *blunder* as “a big mistake, especially one which seems to be the result of carelessness or stupidity”. But not every “big mistake”, or even “terrible mistake”, is a blunder, not even if it is due to carelessness. Something like “stupidity”, on the other hand, is a necessary part of this concept (so it shouldn't be introduced in an “especially” frame). I would propose the following:

blunder (*X* made a blunder)
something bad happened
because *X* did something
X didn't want it to happen
if *X* thought about it a short time, *X* wouldn't have done it
people can think something bad about *X* because of this

Landau doesn't believe that a general and simple word like *bad* could be used in defining both a word like *mistake* (with no moral or religious implications) and a moral and religious concept like *sin*. But if I am not mistaken, and if I am not sinfully over-confident, it can be done. Here is my *sin* (in the serious, non-jocular, use of the word):

sin (*X* committed a sin)
X did something bad
X knew that it was bad to do it

X knew that God wants people not to do things like this
X did it because *X* wanted to do it
 this is bad

The simplicity of all the elements used in this definition (except the concept of ‘God’, which is not very simple, but which underlies the concept of ‘sin’) allows us to avoid circularity, portray structural relations, and to avoid blind alleys such as the one in which, for example, both *AHDOTEL* and *Cobuild* find themselves in its attempt to define *sin* via *law*. To illustrate from *Cobuild*:

sin or a sin — is an action a type of behaviour which is believed to break the laws of God
 law — 1. is a system of rules that a society or government develops over time in order to deal with business agreements, social relationships, and crimes such as theft, murder, or violence.

Clearly, the definition of *law* quoted above does not allow for any “laws of God”, so the attempted definition of *sin* via *law* does not allow for any coherent interpretation.

Finally, a few words about *wrong* (adjective), for which *AHDOTEL* finds itself obliged to posit no less than seven different meanings, and *Cobuild*, as many as eleven, without being able to show what all these supposed meanings have in common. Of course one could write a whole study about the concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, but basically, the meanings of these two adjectives are quite simple. In essence, they could be stated as follows:

It is wrong to do this (like this). =
 it is bad to do this (like this)
 if one thinks about it one can know it

It is right to do this (like this). =
 it is good to do this (like this)
 if one thinks about it one can know it

Unlike the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, which are universal, the concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are culture-specific, and in fact they are very revealing in the links which they postulate between values (‘good’ and ‘bad’) on the one hand and ‘thinking’ and ‘knowing’ on the other (see Wierzbicka 1989*a*; and in Wierzbicka 1992*a*, ch. 1).

A list of indefinables that has proved itself valuable in lexical semantics should be of great potential benefit to practical lexicography. Since the same indefinables, and the same simple syntactic patterns, which appear to be most useful for analysing the English lexicon appear to be also very useful in analysing the lexical resources of other languages (including ones as diverse as Japanese, Pitjantjatjara and Ewe), the conclusion does not seem

premature that the same set of indefinables can be used as a core of a “natural lexicographic metalanguage” suitable for both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in most, if not all, languages of the world. The practical advantages of such an outcome would seem to me to be huge, as any language learner would thus have relatively easy access to dictionaries of any language via their common core.²

12. Using Simple Language

The issue of indefinables is linked closely with that of simple language. The use of excessively complex and obscure language is one of the greatest obstacles to effective communication in any area of human endeavour; but in a dictionary, which seeks to *explain* the meaning of words, it is particularly out of place. Arnauld refers, in this connection, to the writings of the philosopher and mathematician Gassendi, and he writes: “Gassendi’s exposition makes clear that there is scarcely a more reprehensible turn of mind than is exhibited by these enigmatical writers who believe that the most groundless thoughts—not to say the most false and impious ones—will pass for grand mysteries if reclothed in forms unintelligible to the common man” (Arnauld 1662/1964: 88)

Despite repeated pleas from thinkers like Gassendi, the use of complex and obscure language is a great plague of Western civilization, which mars, in particular, most encyclopaedias, textbooks, manuals, printed instructions for the use of machines and devices of different kinds, and so on. More often than not, it also mars, and diminishes the usefulness of, dictionaries of different kinds.

Consider, for example, the definitions of the words *obligatory* and *optional*, given by *AHDOTEL*:

obligatory — 1. legally or morally constraining; binding; 2. imposing or recording an obligation. 3. of the nature of an obligation; compulsory.
optional — left to choice; not compulsory or automatic

Wouldn’t it be better to explain what these words mean in very simple words, along the following lines:

² I am not suggesting that the Natural Semantic Metalanguage devised by the author and colleagues should be used, unaltered, as a lexicographic metalanguage, but only that it can be used as the core of a lexicographic metalanguage. Nor am I suggesting that all lexical items in a dictionary should be defined directly in terms of the indefinables. In particular, the names of natural kinds (e.g. *cat*, *mouse*, *butterfly*) or of cultural kinds (e.g. *bottle*, *bicycle*, *chair*) require a different approach, with a much larger defining lexicon than abstract vocabulary does (see Wierzbicka 1985: also Ch. 7).

obligatory — everyone has to do it

optional — one can do it if one wants to, one doesn't have to do it

(I'm not proposing these as fully accurate definitions, but only as an improvement on those offered by the dictionary.)

My respect for the work of practical lexicographers is so high that I would not wish to be seen as accusing them of passing (as Gassendi put it, according to Arnaud) “groundless and the most false thoughts” for “grand mysteries”, but I think it is fair to demand of them that their definitions avoid being “clothed in forms unintelligible to the common man”.

13. Exploring New Models of Definition

Lexicographic definitions can be improved immensely while maintaining a more or less traditional form. This can be done, above all, by simplifying and regularizing the language of definitions, by using a discrete model of definitions, by trying to capture invariants (and thus banishing all *ors* and *etceteras*), and by getting rid of circularity. It is possible, however, to improve definitions still further, if one is prepared to give up the traditional forms of definition and to explore new formats and new models (drawing on the discoveries of contemporary semantics).

Consider, for example, the *LDOTEL* entry for the verb *to punish*:

- 1a. to impose a penalty on for a fault, offence or violation
- 1b. to inflict a penalty for (an offence)
- 2. to treat roughly, harshly, or damagingly

Many weaknesses of this entry are quite apparent: the positing of a completely unjustified polysemy (1 vs 2) and semi-polysemy (1a versus 1b); the failure to capture the invariant (what do “fault, offence or violation” have in common?); the latent circularity.

The curious distinction between “impose” (1a) and “inflict” (1b) collapses in the entry for *inflict*, which is defined as “to force or impose (something damaging or painful) on someone”. *Penalty* is defined, predictably, via *punishment*: “punishment imposed for, or incurred by, committing a crime or public offence.” And if that much circularity was not enough, more is introduced via *crime*, which is defined as “an act or omission punishable by law” (*punish* → *penalty* → *punishment*; *punish* → *penalty* → *crime* → *punish*).

Here as in many other cases, the simple and unitary definition offered by OAJD is incomparably better:

to punish—to make someone who has done wrong suffer, so that he will not want to do wrong again

In fact, this simple short definition can be made even better by shortening it further: since one can speak of “capital punishment” (by death) or of “eternal punishment” (by hell), the corrective purpose cannot be a necessary part of the concept. We are left, therefore, with the short formula “to make someone who has done wrong suffer”, and this is probably almost as good as one can get within the traditional model. The definition is no more, however, than an approximation: it does not capture correctly all the components of the concept, and in some respects it manages to be over-specific. In particular, it posits suffering as a necessary part of punishment, whereas in fact an intention to cause suffering is sufficient, even if no suffering actually occurs. What is missing from the definition is some indication of the relationship between the punisher and the punished, and of the punisher’s view of the action as morally justified. For example, if a little boy (Johnny) hits his younger sister (Suzie) on the head, and Suzie retaliates by biting Johnny’s finger, the *OAJD* definition would fit the situation (since Johnny did something wrong and Suzie made him suffer because of it), but the word *punish* would not. To portray the concept of ‘punishment’ accurately we need, I think, a scenario, not a definition of the traditional kind:

X punished Y [for Z]. =

(a) [Y did Z]

(b) X thought something like this:

(c) Y did something bad [Z]

(d) I want Y to feel something bad because of this

(e) it will be good if Y feels something bad because of this

(f) it will be good if I do something to Y because of this

(g) X did something to Y because of this

Component (a) refers to the culprit’s action, (b) to (f) describe the punisher’s attitude, and (g) refers to the punisher’s action. The punisher’s attitude includes, roughly speaking, a desire to inflict pain (d), and three assumptions: that the target person did something bad (c), that it will be right and just if he or she “suffers” (feels something bad) because of this (e), and that the punisher is called upon to inflict the necessary pain (presumably, as the person in charge).

Cruse (1992–3: 89) questions my analysis of the verb *punish* on the grounds that “the punisher may actually hate having to cause suffering”. I entirely agree that the punisher may hate having to cause suffering; but this is not incompatible with an intention to cause suffering. For example, the father or mother imposing the punishment on the child may suffer intensely themselves; but if they didn’t intend to cause some pain for the child they wouldn’t be “punishing” him or her. On the other hand, if the child doesn’t really feel any pain this doesn’t stop the parents’ action from being describable as *punishment*.

As a second example of the need for a scenario, consider the concept of ‘revenge’, which the *OPD* defines as follows:

revenge—punishment or injury inflicted in return for what one has suffered

The definition is unsuccessful for many reasons, two of which can be linked with the use of the words *punishment* and *return*. Contrary to what the definition implies, *revenge* is not a kind of punishment, because it does not imply the assumptions which as we have seen are part of the latter concept. The expression *in return* is not defined at all, and the definitions assigned to the noun *return* are useless and irrelevant from the point of view of defining *revenge* (e.g. “coming or going back”).

Again, the definition offered by the *OAJD* is much more satisfactory (“a wish to hurt someone because he has hurt you or one of your friends”), but is not quite correct: *revenge* refers to an action, not merely to a wish, the mention of “friends” is superfluous, and the crucial idea of “doing the same” is missing. To portray the concept of ‘revenge’ accurately we need a scenario:

- Y took revenge on X [for Z] =
- (a) someone (X) did something bad [Z] to someone (Y)
 - (b) because of this, Y felt something bad
 - (c) after this, Y thought something like this:
 - (d) this person (X) did something bad [Z] to me
 - (e) because of this, I want to do the same to this person (X)
 - (f) Y thought about it for a long time
 - (g) after this, Y did something bad to X because of this

Component (a) refers to the action of the offender, and (f) to that of the revenger; (b) shows what the revenger felt, and components (d) and (e) show his or her thoughts (with their focus on “paying in kind”).

Finally, consider the concept of ‘tempting’, which *Webster’s Dictionary* (1959) “defines” as follows: “*tempt*—to put to trial; test; persuade to evil; defy; allure; entice.” It is hardly necessary to point out that this entry does not tell the reader whether the verb *tempt* is supposed to have one meaning or more, and if more, then how many; that no attempt is made to capture the semantic invariant or invariants; and that the entry offers no clues as to the differences in meaning between all the different verbs which it lists as supposed equivalents of *tempt*. It does not require much imagination to guess that the same dictionary will “define” *entice* and *allure* via *tempt*.

As pointed out earlier, a much more illuminating alternative is provided by the *OAJD*, which offers the simple, short definition “*to tempt*—to try to make someone do wrong”. But of course this is only an approximation; for example, one can “try to make someone do wrong” by threats, and this

could not be called *tempting*. To portray this concept adequately we need, I think, a scenario along the following lines:

- X* tempted *Y* to do *Z*. =
- (a) *X* wanted *Y* to do *Z*
 - (b) *Y* thought something like this:
 - (c) if I do *Z* it will be bad
 - (d) because of this, I don't want to do it
 - (e) *X* knew this
 - (f) because of this, *X* said something like this to *Y*:
 - (g) if you do it, something very good will happen to you
 - (h) you will feel something very good because of this
 - (i) *X* thought something like this:
 - (j) maybe *Y* will do it because of this
 - (k) *X* wanted this

I am not suggesting that new models of definition such as those illustrated here with *revenge*, *punishment* and *tempt* should be necessarily accepted in all practical lexicography, although I think it would be useful to adopt—or to adapt—them for some types of dictionaries. But I believe it is useful for the practical lexicographers to know that new models of definition are available—and to let them draw on whatever is available in ways which they would judge most appropriate in any given case.

14. Conclusion

There is more to practical lexicography than getting the meanings right, but trying to get the meanings right is vitally important—more important, I think, than anything else. If theoretical lexicography could not help in this respect—by providing ideas, principles, criteria, models, and guidelines—one could really doubt its *raison d'être*. I have tried to show, however, that theoretical lexicography indeed offers all these things.³ Most importantly (from the present writer's point of view), it offers a tool which can by itself remedy a large proportion of the ills of traditional lexicography: a natural lexicographic metalanguage, derived from the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, and based on universal semantic primitives.

³ For brilliant discussions of various aspects of theoretical lexicography and of the principles of lexicographic definition, see in particular Apresjan (1974, 1992, forthcoming), Mel'čuk (1974*b*), and Bogusławski (1988). For discussion of the lexicography of the concrete lexicon, see Wierzbicka (1985), and Ch. 8. For some recent dictionaries which overcome the indeterminacy and the circularity of traditional lexicography, and which aim at empirical adequacy without departing from traditional models, see, e.g. Apresjan and Rozenman (1979); Bogusławski (1983), or Goddard (1992*a*). For a new model of a monolingual dictionary, see Mel'čuk & Žolkovskij (1984); Mel'čuk *et al.* (1984, 1988, 1992) and Rudzka *et al.* (1981).

