

Meaning and definition

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In this chapter, we will go over the main choices that a lexicographer is faced with when dealing with semantic information in dictionaries. There are basically five:

- do I focus on the senses of individual words ?
- which readings of a word do I consider relevant ?
- which type of meaning do I have to define ?
- which linguistic perspective do I take ?
- which definitional format do I use ?

Although the exact impact of these questions may be largely unclear at this point, note that they are meant as a succession of steps to narrow down the range of definitional choices that confront the lexicographer. At each successive step, we will give an overview of the main choices, select the most common one, and focus the next question primarily on the selected option. The latter point implies that the present article will not be able to deal with all possible approaches to definitions in dictionaries. If, when responding to the five questions, we were to branch off towards an option other than the one we will single out as the most usual, other aspects of meaning description in dictionaries might be highlighted than the ones presented here.

Unless stated otherwise, all the examples and the quoted definitions in the following pages are taken from the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (NSOED), version on cd-rom 1997.

Do I focus on the senses of individual words ?

When we think of dictionaries as we usually encounter them (i.e. as alphabetically ordered descriptions of the range of meanings of a single word), the question might seem decidedly odd: of course, semantic description in dictionaries is concerned with defining the individual meanings of individual words. However, semantic information in dictionaries goes beyond the description of separate words and word meanings. Words, in fact, do not exist in isolation, but they are related to each other in various ways: they may be synonyms, or they may have opposite meanings, or they may simply be related by the fact that they belong to the same conceptual domain (like kinship terminology, or colour terms, or terms for kitchen utensils). In the terminology of semantics, this distinction between looking at words only and looking at the sense relations that exist between words is expressed by the terminological distinction between *semasiology* and *onomasiology*.

Semasiology takes its starting-point in the individual word and looks at the semantic information that may be associated with that word – basically, what are the meanings of the word ? *Semasiology*, in other words, is concerned with polysemy and the definition of the polysemous readings of words.

Onomasiology takes the opposite perspective. Whereas a *semasiological* perspective investigates which concepts are associated with a given word, *onomasiological* research takes its starting-point in a concept, and investigates which words may be associated with that concept. This could be a fairly broad concept like ‘colour’ at large, or it could be a highly specific one, for instance when it is established that ‘cinnabar’ is a synonym of ‘vermilion’.

Given the distinction between *semasiology* and *onomasiology*, it is clear that our main focus will lie with *semasiology* if we are interested in definitions: although there may be other ways of expressing *semasiological* information (see the next paragraph), *semasiological* information is predominantly expressed through the definition of the individual senses of a word. But what about *onomasiological* information? What are the mechanisms that dictionaries may use to describe *onomasiological* information? Basically, the *onomasiological* information can be added to the alphabetical dictionary, or it can form the basis of an entirely different type of dictionary, the ‘*onomasiological dictionary*’.

Adding *onomasiological* information to an alphabetical dictionary means indicating the sense relations that exist between different words, like summing up synonyms or antonyms (words with an opposite meaning) in an entry devoted to a specific headword. Another way in which *onomasiological* information may appear in dictionaries is in the form of thematic labels like *med.* ‘medicine’ or *math.* ‘mathematics’: such labels may indicate that the word belongs to a specific conceptual domain.

Note, in addition, that *onomasiological* information in an alphabetical dictionary may sometimes be implicit. For instance, if we define the non-colour reading of *cinnabar* as ‘a moth, *Tyria jacobaeae*, with bright red wing

markings', then this implies that there is a taxonomical relationship between *moth* and *cinnabar*, that is to say, *moth* is an overarching term that covers the term *cinnabar* in the relevant reading (or, in technical parlance, *cinnabar* is a hyponym of *moth* and *moth* is a hyperonym of *cinnabar*).

If sense relations lie at the basis of the organisation of the dictionary, we talk about an *onomasiological dictionary*: a dictionary that goes from concepts to words rather than from words to concepts. Such onomasiological dictionaries may take several forms, of which the thesaurus is the most typical one. A *thesaurus* lists words that have similar meanings, like different words for talking about anger, or different words expressing the concept 'big' (or colour terms, or kinship terms, or kitchen utensils). These semantic groups are further systematically related by means of a taxonomical superstructure. The set of words relating to 'anger', for instance, would be part of a larger group relating to the human emotions, and the latter might be included in an even larger group devoted to the human mind.

Which readings of a word do I consider relevant ?

The next question to tackle involves the polysemy of natural language. *Cinnabar* is polysemous: its first meaning is defined as 'native mercury sulphide, a bright red hexagonal mineral which usu. occurs in massive form and is the only important ore of mercury; this mineral used as a pigment, vermilion', and its second meaning describes the moth referred to above. Faced with such multiple senses, the lexicographer has to decide which meanings to incorporate into the dictionary. This process of selection is essentially the same as selecting words for inclusion: the same criteria apply. Depending on the audience and the purpose that the lexicographer has in mind for his dictionary, he may focus on the most common words and senses only, or he may include less common ones. He may restrict his efforts to general vocabulary, or he may include marked words or readings, i.e. elements that have a specific geographical distribution (like dialect words), that are restricted to a specific style or register (like literary words), or that belong to an older stage of the language.

Interestingly, the selection may also take place on semantic grounds: focusing on expert definitions, the dictionary may be restricted to words and meanings that belong to a specific technical or scientific subject field (like medicine or mathematics). We may then use the term *technical dictionary* or *terminological dictionary*.

However, dealing with the polysemy of words entails more than just selecting a set of senses. These meanings are mutually related, and dictionaries may try to make such relations explicit. Sense relations exist onomasiologically between words, but they also exist semasiologically within a word. There are broadly two ways in which dictionaries describe such *semantic relations*: by labelling or by grouping.

For the labelling approach, consider *circumcise*. The initial reading 'cut off the foreskin of (a male), as a religious rite' is supplemented in the NSOED with the reading 'in biblical translations and allusions: purify (the heart etc.)'. The semantic relationship between the first and the second meaning is indicated by the label *fig.*, which makes clear that the second reading is a figurative extension of the first. The label *fig.* is a member of a set of semantic labels that includes, among others, *metaphorical* and *metonymical*. Dictionaries do not systematically apply such labels, i.e. the semantic relationship between the different senses of a word is hardly ever exhaustively labelled. Rather, dictionaries would seem to apply such labels predominantly as pointers for the reader, as a warning that the ensuing definition has to be read in a specific way.

Alternatively, dictionaries may indicate sense relations by grouping meanings in specific ways. The common desk dictionary has numbered meanings that usually come in one layer of numbering only, but this shallow overt structure may hide more subtle groupings. Let us have another look at the first definition of *cinnabar*: 'native mercury sulphide, a bright red hexagonal mineral which usu. occurs in massive form and is the only important ore of mercury; this mineral used as a pigment, vermilion'. This definitional text, numbered as meaning no. 1, actually covers two different meanings: one referring to a mineral, and another referring to a colour. (It is only in the latter sense, in fact, that *vermilion* is a synonym of *cinnabar*: *vermilion* cannot be used to refer to the mineral.) Against the background of the numbered meaning no. 2 ('a moth, *Tyria jacobaeae*, with bright red wing markings'), this is a way of indicating that the colour reading and the mineral reading are semantically closer together than either of them with regard to the insect reading. In some dictionaries (specifically in multi-volume historical dictionaries like the *Oxford English Dictionary*), such higher-order semantic groupings may be made explicit by means of different levels of numbering, for instance, by using the Roman numerals I, II, III ... for groupings of the basic senses that are indicated by Arabic numbers, and by using a), b), c) for nuances of the basic senses.

Which type of meaning do I have to define ?

When the lexicographer has moved down to the level of the individual meaning of a word, he or she is confronted with another form of variety. We tend to think of word meanings as referring to the world. Roughly, without going into philosophical questions about the relationship between language and the world, we think of word meanings as conceptual descriptions of the things (in the largest possible sense, including abstractions and events and actions and properties and so on, next to material objects) that correlate with the words. If *cinnabar* refers to a specific mineral, the definition of *cinnabar* specifies the concept associated with that mineral – what we know about cinnabar.

But now consider a word like *hello!* What would be the ‘thing’ referred to by this expression? *Hello!* has a clear function within the language: it expresses a greeting or perhaps tries to draw the attention, but there is nothing that it refers to, nor does it have a conceptual content that describes something in the outside world, in the way in which we think of *cinnabar* as describing something out there. There are other types of meaning, in short, than the descriptive meaning that we usually think of.

Technically speaking, the referential, descriptive type of meaning is often referred to as *denotational meaning*. Although semantic theory does not agree on the overall classification of the different types of meaning that need to be distinguished, we may identify at least three non-denotational types of meaning.

- *Emotive meaning* involves the emotional response of the speaker with regard to the thing being talked about. Using a pejorative or derogatory word like *queer* rather than a more neutral one like *homosexual* expresses a negative attitude with regard to the referent of the expression. Similarly, *French* in *excuse my French*, *pardon my French* has the same referential value as *bad language*, but its emotive overtone is euphemistic, neutralising or attenuating the overtly negative aspects of *bad language*. In cases such as these, words like *queer* and *French* have a denotational value alongside a non-denotational one.
- *Grammatical meaning* involves words that express a specific grammatical function. The complementizer *that* (as in *I know that my Redeemer lives*) cannot easily be associated with a clearly identifiable aspect of the extralinguistic situation. Rather, its primary function is to overtly mark an aspect of the syntactic structure of the sentence, in this case, to introduce a subordinate complement clause.
- *Pragmatic meaning* is exemplified by the *hello!* case. What is being achieved (rather than described) by using the word is a discursive function, a speech act, a communicative action. *Hello!* does not describe the concept of greeting, but it expresses it.

These non-denotational types of meaning require a different form of definition than what is common in cases of denotational meaning. The denotational meaning of *cinnabar* can be described by enumerating the characteristics of the thing cinnabar, but if there is no such thing (as in the case of *hello!*), other definitional means have to be invoked. Basically, there are two.

First, emotive and stylistic overtones are usually identified by means of *semantic labels* like *derogatory*, *pejorative*, *euphemistic*. In quite a number of cases, though, the negative or positive aspects of words remain implicit in the denotational part of the definition, or rather, the denotational definition is formulated in such a way that the non-denotational value may be derived from the choice of words in the definition. When, for instance, *curse* receives the definition ‘an annoying, wretched, or despicable person’, the negative charge of the adjectives in the definition may suffice to indicate the pejorative load of the headword.

Second, in the case of grammatical and pragmatic meanings, a specific definitional pattern is invoked, the so-called *metalinguistic definition*. A metalinguistic definition defines a word (or more generally, a linguistic expression) rather than a thing. Now, of course, all lexicographic definitions define words, but in the common denotational case, this is achieved through the description of a thing (again, in the broadest possible sense). The word *cinnabar* is defined by describing the thing cinnabar, and the thing cinnabar is described by identifying a larger category to which it belongs (like ‘a moth’), and at the same time stating the specific features of cinnabar within this larger category (like ‘with bright red wing markings’). The definition ‘a moth with bright red wing markings’ may be read either as ‘the cinnabar is a moth with bright red wing markings’ or ‘*cinnabar* is a word referring to a moth *etc.*’. In a metalinguistic definition, only the latter reading is possible. Thus, a definition of *hello!* as ‘greeting or expressing surprise on encountering’ should be read as ‘*hello!* is a word used for expressing greeting or surprise on encountering’. Similarly, if the conjunction *that* is defined as ‘introducing a

subordinate clause expressing a statement or hypothesis’, this reads ‘*that* is a word that has the function of introducing a subordinate clause *etc.*’.

Two additional remarks are necessary with regard to metalinguistic definitions. First, note that metalinguistic definitions are not syntactically substitutive. For ordinary definitions, the rule is that the headword of the definition is of the same syntactic class as the term to be defined: nouns are defined by nouns or nominal phrases, verbs are defined by verbal expressions, and so on. As such, definitions can be inserted in the same syntactic slots as the defined words. In a sentence like *A cinnabar flew up*, the definition ‘a moth *etc.*’ can replace ‘a cinnabar’. Whether such a substitution fits semantically depends on the conceptual adequacy of the definition, but at least syntactically, the ‘definiens’ (the definition) can replace the ‘definiendum’ (the defined word). Metalinguistic definitions, however, do not allow such substitutions.

Second, the use of metalinguistic definitions is clearly not restricted to the expression of grammatical or pragmatic meanings. Note, for instance, how the NSOED defines *carissima*: ‘a term of endearment to a woman: dearest, darling’. This definition combines a metalinguistic part describing the emotive meaning of the term with a non-metalinguistic enumeration of synonyms.

Which linguistic perspective do I take ?

Following our restrictive strategy, let us assume that we are not defining metalinguistically, and that we are describing denotational meanings only. The next choice that we will have to make involves the distinction between an intensional and an extensional definition. The difference between both refers to a distinction that is made in semantic theory between, on the one hand, the features that characterize a category (i.e. the intension), and on the other hand, the members of that category (i.e. the extension). A bird for instance may be characterized as a living species that can fly, has feathers, has a specific shape etc., but at the same time, we may list the various members of the category ‘bird’: robins, eagles, ostriches and so on. An *intensional definition*, then, is one that specifies the common attributes of the members of a category, while an *extensional definition* enumerates those members. Intensional definitions are generally favoured in dictionaries, but we will see presently that there is a specific role for extensional definitions.

Intensional definitions usually conform to a specific pattern that we have already encountered: the headword of the definition identifies a broader category to which the definiendum belongs, and the rest of the definition specifies the characteristics that single out the definiens within that broader category. In this way, for instance, *cinnabar* is defined as a moth (headword indicating a superordinate category) with bright red wing markings (the specific features that distinguish cinnabars within the hyperonymous set of moths). With a terminology borrowed from medieval scholastic philosophy, this type of definition is sometimes called a definition ‘per genus proximum et differentias specificas’, i.e. consisting of the closest taxonomical hyperonym (genus proximum) and distinguishing features with regard to that generic term (differentias specificas). More common, however, is the term *analytical definition*: a definition that analyses the definiens into constituent features.

Analytical definitions contrast with *synthetic definitions* (or *synonym definitions*), in which the intensional description of a word is given by means of a synonym (‘*cinnabar*: vermilion’). The contrast between analytical and synthetic definitions may be generalized when we realize that it basically involves a contrast between a more parsimonious definition style (the synthetic option) and a richer definition style (the analytical one). But between economy and richness, there is a cline. Compare the following definitions of *income tax*:

- ‘Tax on one’s income’ (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1978)
- ‘Income tax is the tax that you have to pay regularly to the government and which is a certain percentage of your income’ (*Collins Cobuild*, 1987)
- ‘Income tax is payable on taxable income, such as earnings, pensions, investment and rental income. Individuals pay income tax each year, net of personal allowances and other reliefs they may be entitled to. The tax is payable at various rates depending upon your level of income. Employees pay tax via the Pay As You Earn system before they receive their salary. Tax on benefits in kind is collected via a restriction to the notice of coding. The self-employed generally make payments on account of their tax liabilities on 31 January and 31st July each year. Any balancing payment becomes due on 31 January following the year of assessment. Some forms of income are exempt from income tax, for example, National Savings Certificate interest, interest on ISAs, income from Premium bonds and student grants/scholarships’ (*Digita Tax Center*: yahoo.digita.com/taxcentral/home/incometax/, September 2002)

The second definition corresponds best to what we have just called an analytical definition. The first one is more parsimonious, although it does not go as far as to just list a synonym. What it does is essentially reproduce the morphological elements that constitute the compound term *income tax*, and specify the semantic relationship between them. Such a morphological schematic definition is sometimes called a *morphosemantic definition*. The third definition (taken from an internet glossary of financial terms) contains all kinds of highly specific and practical information, a lot of which is not universally valid (as it applies to the tax system in one country only). Such a maximally rich definition, reflecting world knowledge rather than merely knowledge of the language, is usually called an *encyclopaedic definition*.

The distinction between parsimony and richness may be also be applied to extensional definitions. If we were to list exhaustively all the members of the category to be defined (like all the types of birds), we get a rich extensional definition. However, except perhaps in some technical dictionaries, this type of definition is only seldom used. A more economical form of an extensional definition consists of listing only some of the most conspicuous or typical members of the category. In most cases, dictionaries will employ this technique in combination with an intensional definition, as may be illustrated by the following examples:

- *abiogenesis* ‘The production of organic matter or compounds, other than by the agency of living organisms; esp. the supposed spontaneous generation of living organisms’
- *baritone* ‘The male voice between tenor and bass, ranging typically from lower A in the bass clef to lower F in the treble clef’
- *heart* ‘A central part of distinct conformation or character, e.g. the white tender centre of a cabbage, lettuce, etc.’
- *tea* ‘A meal or social gathering at which tea is served. Now esp. (a) a light afternoon meal, usu. consisting of tea, cakes, sandwiches, etc. (also more fully *afternoon tea*, *five o’clock tea*); (b) (in parts of the UK, and in Australia and NZ) a main meal in the evening that usually includes a cooked dish, bread and butter, and tea (also more fully *high tea*)’

In each of these definitions, words such as *especially*, *e.g.*, *typically*, and *usually*, together with simple enumerations (‘of a cabbage, lettuce, etc.’) introduce extensional elements that identify typical examples or instances of the category. The advantage of this technique is double. First, it makes the abstract, intensional definition more understandable by illustrating it: it is easier to understand the description ‘a central part of distinct conformation or character’ when you learn that it applies to things like the centre of cabbage. Second, it familiarizes the dictionary user with the most common contexts of application of the category.

Lexicographers have always used such extensional additions to intensional definitions, but it is only in the last two decades that semantic theory has recognized the importance of typical examples and central members for our knowledge of the language. The theoretical approach in question is known as ‘prototype theory’ (where the prototypes of a concept are its central members). Extensional definitions of the type illustrated above may therefore be called *prototypical definitions*.

Which definitional format do I use ?

In the previous pages, we have already come across definitional techniques that could be called ‘definitional formats’. Apart from the choice for analytic or synthetic or prototypical or metalinguistic definitions (and so on), there are two rather more formal aspects of writing definitions that need to be mentioned: definitions may be controlled or not, and definitions may be sentential or not. In both cases, specific choices will be based on the expectation that a particular definitional format will be most suited for making the definition understandable for the intended audience of the dictionary.

Controlled definitions make use of a *defining vocabulary*. The dictionary specifies which words the reader is supposed to understand already (before consulting the dictionary), and further tries to formulate its definitions as much as possible in terms of these words. This is a technique that is specifically used in learner’s dictionaries: assuming a basic vocabulary knowledge in the dictionary user (usually a set of a few thousand words), the dictionary tries to make things easy for the user by couching the definitions in the words that he already knows.

Sentential definitions are definitions that take the form of a whole sentence rather than a phrase. Where a normal definition would say something like ‘*vermilion*: a bright red colour’, a sentential definition of *vermilion* reads: ‘Something that is vermilion is bright red in colour’. (This definition is taken from the *Collins Cobuild English*

Language Dictionary of 1987, which systematically uses sentential definitions.) Sentential definitions are somewhat less artificial than classical definitions; they are closer to a natural and spontaneous manner of defining. Compare, for instance, the definition of physical education in the NSOED: 'regular instruction in bodily exercise and games, esp. in schools' with what we find in *Collins Cobuild*: 'Physical education consists of children at school doing physical exercises and playing physical games'.

Summary

In the course of this chapter, we have introduced two different sets of concepts relating to meanings in dictionaries. On the one hand, we have presented a number of different semantic phenomena: semasiological versus onomasiological information, denotational versus emotive, grammatical, pragmatic meanings, intensions versus extensions. On the other hand, we have given an overview of the main descriptive techniques that lexicographers may use to describe these phenomena: labels, the ordering of information, and specifically, various types of definitions – – analytical, synthetic, morphosemantic, prototypical, encyclopaedic, metalinguistic definitions. In addition, we have paid specific attention to the interaction between the two sets of phenomena: some definitional techniques are most suited for a specific type of semantic information. With the exception of the final step that we took, table 1 summarizes the path of successive questions that we followed, charting the relationship between the phenomena that we introduced and the descriptive techniques that we discussed.

TYPES OF SEMANTIC PHENOMENA	TYPICAL LEXICOGRAPHICAL TECHNIQUES
<i>do I focus on the senses of individual words?</i>	
- focusing on onomasiological information:	- compiling an onomasiological dictionary - enriching the alphabetical dictionary (with synonyms, antonyms, thematic labels)
- focusing on semasiological information: <i>which readings of a word do I consider relevant?</i>	
- focusing on polysemy and sense relations:	- labelling sense relations (with labels such as <i>figurative</i>) - ordering or grouping senses in relevant ways - including specialized or less familiar senses (as in e.g. technical, terminological dictionaries)
- focusing on individual senses: <i>which type of meaning do I have to define?</i>	
- focusing on non-denotational meaning:	- labelling senses as <i>pejorative, jocular</i> and the like - using metalinguistic definitions
- focusing on denotational meaning: <i>which linguistic perspective do I take?</i>	
- focusing on extensional information:	- adopting a parsimonious approach: defining by (proto)typical example - adopting a rich approach: enumerating category members
- focusing on intensional information:	- adopting a parsimonious approach: using synonym definitions or morphosemantic definitions - adopting a rich approach: using decompositional analytical definitions or encyclopaedic definitions