Linguistic semantics and lexicography: a troubled relationship

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The present paper considers the relationship between linguistic semantics and lexicography, with special emphasis on what linguists have to offer to lexicographers, and vice versa, in the description of lexical meaning. The relationship may be described as a troubled one. General semantics, though often referred to as "the study of meaning", has tended to focus on *how* words mean rather than on *what* they mean. Lexical semantics, in turn, appears to concentrate on lexical relations. In contrast, the actual description of lexical meaning has always been the primary concern of lexicographers. Suggestions by semanticists concerning the description of meaning in dictionaries have been received less than kindly by lexicographers, and have been branded as unrealistic. On the other hand, semanticists have been known to accuse lexicographers of having no theoretical foundation for what they are doing. The inadequacy of traditional linguistics as a theoretical foundation for lexicographic practice has caused lexicography to develop its own theoretical discipline: metalexicography (theoretical lexicography). Apart from linguistic considerations, metalexicography takes account of the extralinguistic context of dictionary-making and dictionary use, which theoretical linguistics resolutely ignores. Further, some semanticists give themselves the privilege of abstaining from defining the meaning of a subset of lexical items (usually referred to as semantic primitives); lexicographers simply cannot afford such comfort. It is relatively rare that theoretical semantic insight goes hand in hand with lexicographic practice: a shining example is the original Meaning <=> Text project of the Moscow linguists(now developed into a full-blown Meaning-Text Theory), whose relative success suggests that co-operation or even integration between semantics and lexicography is possible. The corpus revolution has had a major impact on lexicography, resulting in new approaches to lexicography, meaning, and the advent of Corpus Linguistics, which however is not a unified theoretical model so much as a bundle of methodological approaches. Charles Fillmore's Frame Semantics model, which combines the insights of the more traditional semantic functions and the more modern cognitive schemata, also shows good promise for successful lexicographic application. Finally, it is worth pointing out that linguistics not only has something to offer to lexicography, but also owes some debt to it.

Lexicography has had a hand in the rise of modern linguistics and has continued to remind linguists of the importance of meaning in language.

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