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A4 [Text z: Beaugrande, Robert de. Functionalism and corpus linguistics in the "next generation"]

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My two final issues are eminently practical ones that have already given rise to notable controversies, probably because vested interests feel more directly involved and disturbed than they would in respect to the more theoretical issues explored so far in this section. Yet these controversies have been unproductive
5 insofar as the spokespersons of the vested interests do not adequately address or respect the theoretical aspects but either ignore them or else enlist them defensively against the impulses coming from corpus work. These would-be defenders may resort to arguing, perhaps against their own better judgement, that the state of the art in producing reference works and in teaching languages
10 is satisfactory already without any help from the corpora.

One important concern has been the production of dictionaries in the field of 'lexicography', as opposed to 'lexicology' in linguistics. As far as I can see, modern linguistics has not manifested much interest in the field. I would
15 surmise that the main deterrent has been the prominent differences in methods and goals. Lexicographers must produce and publish a reasonably complete and final description, whereas linguists can occupy themselves indefinitely with elaborate theoretical disquisitions and 'prolegomena' (like Hjelmslev's in the English title) which ratiocinate about how a description should be done
20 but which are not obliged to provide concrete products (Hjelmslev's book does not give single demonstration of an analysis). In consequence, lexicographers always work directly with the 'speech facts' modern linguists since Saussure have symptomatically marginalised, and project a picture of 'language' differing sharply from theirs. Above all, lexicographers must commit themselves in

- 25 print to formulations of all the grainy details about the size and contents of the ‘vocabulary’ of the language and of the ‘meanings’, and have no use for making the ‘lexicon’ into a limbo for ‘idiosyncrasies’ and ‘irregularities’ you can safely ignore — a tactic I diagnosed for linguistics in section C(E).
- 30 In return, lexicographers have understandably not been much devoted to the exposition of ambitious theories. Most dictionaries contain brief prefaces dealing chiefly with practical matters: how to use the dictionary and how to interpret its symbols and abbreviations, or how the dictionary got compiled. The publishers doubtless expect that the general public would have little interest in the actually
- 35 quite complex and difficult theoretical issues and problems of lexicography, and would not bother to read extensive prefaces which explore them. At least implicitly, lexicographers hold functionalist and pragmatic theory of language through their method of determining the meanings of words from their usage.
- 40 But several other criteria that are somewhat inconsistent with this method have been favoured by the peculiar situation of having to find and publish great quantities of ‘meanings’. One conventional criterion is to look for the word’s ‘original’ or ‘basic’ meaning, whether or not this would be the most common or useful one. Typically, clues were derived from the historical
- 45 derivation or etymology of the word, issues which would seldom be relevant from the standpoint of the ordinary speaker, e.g., when the first meaning given for ‘flamboyant’ in Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (1963) was ‘characterised by waving curves suggesting flames’, as in ‘flamboyant curtains’ (p. 316) — a use I have never encountered. The preface of the same book justified
- 50 the practice whereby ‘the earliest ascertainable meaning is placed first’ on the

grounds that ‘the historical order is of especial value to those interested in the development of meaning, and offers no difficulty to the user who is merely looking for a particular meaning’ (p. 5a); most users look up an item when they don’t know its meaning, particular or otherwise, and they are far less ‘interested in the development of meaning’ than lexicographers are; besides, the earliest
55 meaning is also the most likely one to be out of date.

A corpus-driven dictionary like the Collins COBUILD (1987 edition based on the 20 million word corpus, as are all other quotes) can instead ‘take the point of
60 view of a user who encounters’ the item and ‘does not know much about English etymology’ (Sinclair 1988: 13), e.g., giving as the first meaning ‘someone who is flamboyant behaves in a very noticeable, confident, and exaggerated way’ (COBUILD, p. 546) — a use so up-to-date I have heard it applied to myself.

65 Another conventional criterion inconsistent with usage has been to treat the single word as the unit to list and define unless a longer unit unmistakably constituted an ‘idiom’. Collocations were thus represented far less than their importance in the language would merit, e.g., when the same Webster’s listed the erudite ‘sotto voce’ (p. 834) but not the very common ‘so to speak’.

70 A third conventional criterion might be called ‘noticeability’, resulting from the standard practice of lexicographers to collect ‘citations’, each being ‘a short quotation, usually only a few words long, that has caught the attention of a reader’ (Sinclair 1988: 3). Lexicographers could justify this tendency on
75 the grounds that such words are quite likely to send ordinary speakers to a dictionary. Yet several problematic side-effects impend. One of these is that

most citations represent written discourse rather than spoken; and often written discourse that is considered prestigious as well. The result has been a powerful bias toward erudite discourse, as produced by writers who would enjoy displaying their vocabularies and intended for readers who would appreciate the display. Words appear and persist which you might never encounter outside of dictionaries unless you encounter finicky people who, for instance, do not 'belch' and 'sneeze' but emit 'eructations' and 'starnutations' (both in the same Webster's, pp. 282 860, with no warning of being rare).

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This side-effect can lead to a relentlessly antiquarian and acquisitive posture of accepting as a legitimate word every item proposed by the authors of your sources, including such detritus as 'indwell' meaning 'to exist as an inner active spirit', 'imbrute' meaning 'to sink to the level of a brute', and 'discalced' meaning 'unshod, barefooted', all given by Webster's Seventh (430, 416, 237), again with no warnings. Clive Holes (1994: 174) has reported an entry in an English-Arabic dictionary published in 1987 (and much used by my students here at the United Arab Emirates University) for the verb 'disembosom' 'not marked by the compiler as in any way unusual or rare' and, to judge from the Arabic gloss, meaning 'get it off your chest', an expression which the same dictionary disdains as 'slang'. 'On checking the Oxford English Dictionary', Holes 'found it with three literary attestations dated between 1742 and 1836'. The embarrassment awaiting the hapless Arab student of English who uses this verb in conversations with native speakers can be vividly imagined.