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Definitions of the Oxford English Dictionary and Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary of I. Mel'čuk

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Abstract: The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) was an innovative dictionary from many points of view. The paper focuses on one of such innovative features of the OED, namely the method of description of word meaning. One of the ambitions of the OED team was 'to show more clearly and fully than has hitherto been done, or even attempted, the development of the sense or various senses of each word from its etymology and from each other'. For this purpose, the OED editors described semantic structures of English words, mechanisms of development of transferred senses from different semantic components of word meaning. This approach transformed the OED definitions into a very valuable source for the study and investigation of semantic structures of English words.

I. Mel'čuk's theory has a considerable impact on the development of methodology of semantic description of different languages. This theory, from my point of view, is also interesting as it has returned to the lexicographic practice and further elaborated long forgotten great ideas of the OED editors, and particularly James Murray. The paper discusses some parallels between the OED semantic theory and the Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary (ECD) of I. Mel'čuk.

Key words: the OED; semantic theory; I. Mel'čuk; the ECD; polysemous models

1. Introduction

On April 19, 1928 the last, 125th fascicle of *The New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* was printed and it was immediately followed by the publication of the full Dictionary in ten bound volumes. The appearance of the second edition of the Dictionary in twenty volumes in 1989, under the new title - The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), had enormous response from the public and the media: '... the great publishing event of the century', '... a scholarly Everest', '... one of the wonders of the world' – these are a few excerpts from newspaper articles of the time¹.

This enthusiasm and positive reaction to the publication of the OED is in no way an exaggeration. The dictionary, conceived and created in the second half of the XIX century fascinates not only by the scope of work implemented in it, but also by innovative approach to all aspects of dictionary-production. 'I feel that in many respects I and my assistants are simply pioneers, pushing our way experimentally through an untrodden forest, where no ... man's axe has been before us', - wrote J. Murray, one of the longest serving editors of the OED (Mugglestone 2000: 1). The OED team collected the biggest corpus for the project, over 10 mln illustrative sentences for sense discrimination and description. This material was collected from 5,000 sources, covering seven centuries of the development of the English language. 249,300 etymologies, included in the Dictionary were based on the scholarly approach, introduced by the comparative-historical method; all 2,412,400 usage quotations of the OED had references to sources and dates, and many others.

These principles were developed long before the electronic age. But it was exactly this innovative approach, which enabled software developers of the end of the XX century to create a CD-ROM version of the OED second edition (1992) with numerous search functionalities. E.g. it is possible to search English words by date of their appearance in English; It is possible to search for cognates of English words in Sanscrit, Latin, Greek, Avestan, Old Irish, Lithuanian, Old Church Slavonic or any other old/dead or/and new Indo-European languages, because this information is provided in etymologies of words; It is possible to search for Shakespearean quotations in the Dictionary, which helps to understand the Shakespearean meaning of a word, often different from its Modern English meaning. Likewise, it is possible to look up biblical quotations, or quotations from any other authors, included in the OED, etc.

2. Semantic Theory of the OED

The present paper focuses on one of such innovative features of the OED, namely the method of description of meaning of English words.

One of the achievements of the OED was the separation of etymology from semantics, rigorous scholarly research of the empirical material and fine sense-division. Besides, the Philological Society had an important principle, well formulated in the quotation given below from *Proposal for the Publication of a New English Dictionary by the Philological Society* (1859): 'In the treatment of individual words the historical principle will be uniformly adopted; - that is to say, we shall endeavor to show more clearly and fully than has hitherto been done, or even attempted, the development of the sense or various senses of each word from its etymology and from each other' (Silva 2000: 78). This

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_English_Dictionary [accessed 24.01.2020]

principle aimed to reveal the mechanisms of appearance of transferred senses either from the primary meaning of a word, or from its other polysemous meanings.

The methodology of defining meaning in the XIX century dictionaries followed the tradition of Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy, which is known as a definition ‘per genus proximum et differentias specificas’, i.e. ‘by stating the superordinate class to which something belongs, together with the specific characteristics that differentiate it from the other members of the class’ (Geeraerts 2010: 76). But the OED editors went even further and, in their definitions, brought forward and described supplementary features of meaning, different so-called potential components of meaning. As N. Hultin writes in his ‘The Web of Significance: Sir James Murray’s Theory of Word-Development’: the dictionary reflects ‘an implicit theory of language in which reason acts as the guide for the development of word signification’ (Silva 2000: 79). This principle was implemented in dictionary definitions of the OED transforming it into a very valuable source for the study and investigation of semantic structure of English words.

The adoption of this principle, revealing semantic transfer processes, implied description and explication of the basis of this change in a dictionary definition, i.e. a concrete semantic component of the semantic structure of a word, which served as the basis of metaphor, metonymy and other mechanisms of semantic change and determined the appearance of this or that new sense.

Moreover, the OED entries have several levels of numbering, using Roman numerals, Arabic numerals and letters of the alphabet in order to show the **sense-structure** of a polysemous word.

As an example, below will be given the analysis of dictionary definitions of some polysemous meanings of the adjective **thick**: 1) dense, crammed (*thick forest, thick hair ...*); 2) numerous, occurring in large numbers in a limited area (*a thick crowd ...*); 3) viscous in consistency (*thick coffee, thick soup, thick greese*); 4) having the component particles densely aggregated so as to hinder vision (*thick fog, thick smoke, thick mist ...*).

The definitions from the OED, namely definitions 4.a., 5.a., 6.a., 7.a – reveal the semantic component - **consisting of closely occupied, filled or set individual components** - which is the basis for the above-cited meanings of **thick** (see Picture 1).

Picture 1.

4.a. Closely occupied, filled, or set with objects or individuals; composed of numerous individuals or parts densely arranged; dense, crowded. Of hair: Bushy, luxuriant.

5.a. Of the individual things collectively: Existing or occurring in large numbers in a relatively small space, or at short intervals; densely arranged, crowded; hence, numerous, abundant, plentiful.

6.a. Having great or considerable density, either from natural consistence or from containing much solid matter; dense, viscid; stiff. (Said of liquids, semi-liquids, etc).

7.a. Of mist, fog, smoke, etc.: Having the component particles densely aggregated, so as to intercept or hinder vision. Hence of the weather, etc.: Characterized by mist or haze; foggy, misty.

Individual components, as is clear from the OED definitions, may be trees (as in a forest), or human beings (as in a crowd), or solid matter (as in liquids), or hair, or particles of mist, fog, smoke and so on.

Thus, from the analysis of the OED definitions it is possible to reconstruct the development of transferred meanings of **thick**:

- 1) dense, crammed
thick forest, thick hair ...
(**consisting of closely occupied, filled or set hair, trees**)
- 2) numerous, occurring in large numbers in a limited area
a thick crowd, thick throngs of young people
(**consisting of closely occupied, filled or set individuals**)
- 3) viscous in consistency
thick coffee, thick soup, thick greese
(**consisting of closely occupied, filled or set components of solid matter**)
- 4) having the component particles densely aggregated so as to hinder vision
thick fog, thick smoke, thick mist, the air was thick
(**consisting of closely occupied, filled or set component particles of mist, fog, smoke, etc**).

These meanings of **thick** have several level of numbering. Apart from using Arabic numerals and letters, Roman numeral II is also used to show that meanings 1) – 4) develop on the basis of one semantic component. Thus, definitions reveal not only semantic component and mechanism of semantic change on its basis, but an entry also shows the **sense-structure** of a polysemous word. The next 3 meanings of **thick** have Roman numeral III, indicating that they are

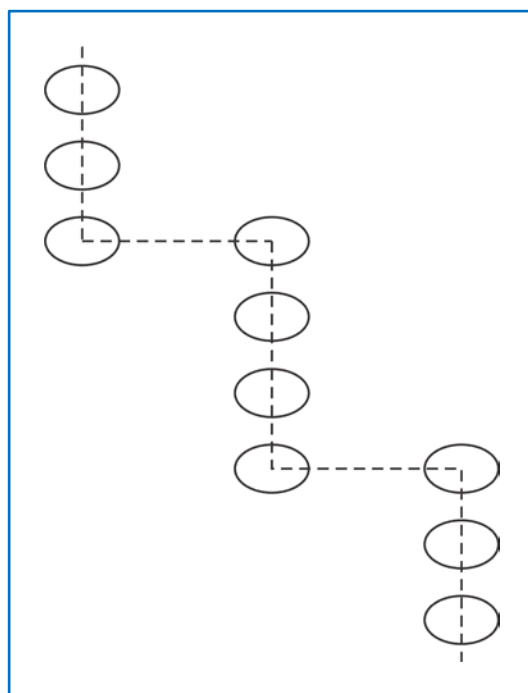
developed on the basis of the semantic component *being indistinct*. This component itself is generated from the meaning of **thick** - having the component particles densely aggregated so as **to hinder vision** (definition 7.a.).

- 1) not clear, foggy, misty (of weather)
thick day, thick morning, thick weather
(being indistinct in vision [because of haze, fog, etc])
- 2) imperfectly articulated, muffled, guttural
thick words
(being indistinct in sounding)
- 3) (of hearing) dull of perception
thick of hearing
(being indistinct in hearing)
- 4) obtuse, stupid
thick-headed
(being indistinct in mind, understanding).

As a result of this analysis, the polysemous model of the adjective **thick** can be drawn (see Picture 2). I termed this model a **tiered model** (Margalitadze 1982). A dotted line indicates the semantic component, the basis for the development of transferred senses, an ellipse represents a polysemous meaning, developed on the basis of this semantic component. Thus, the sense structure shows three strings of senses: The first one, the primary meaning of **thick** has the semantic component *having relatively great extension between the opposite surfaces*, which also generates some other meanings:

- 1) having relatively great extension between the opposite surfaces
thick book, thick wall, thick glass
(having relatively great extension between the surfaces)
- 2) deep
(having relatively great extension from top to bottom)
- 3) heavily built, burly, muscular
thick shoulders, thick figure, thick arms
(having relatively great bulk "from one surface to its opposite").

The second string of senses is generated on the basis of the semantic component: *consisting of closely occupied, filled or*



set individual components. The third string has the semantic component: *being indistinct* (see the discussion above).

Picture 2.

A different method is adopted for the description of nouns and their meanings in the OED. Dictionary definitions of the noun **heart** (*The hollow muscular or otherwise contractile organ which, by its dilatation and contraction, keeps up the circulation of the blood in the vascular system of an animal*) reveal numerous semantic components **heart** is associated with in English: *the seat of life; the seat of one's inmost thoughts and secret feelings; the seat of the emotions generally; the seat of love or affection; the seat of courage; the seat of the mental or intellectual faculties; the innermost or central part of anything; the vital, essential, or efficacious part, etc.*

Below are given definitions from the entry **heart** which contain the above-cited semantic components:

Definition 2. Considered as the centre of vital functions: **the seat of life**; the vital part or principle; hence in some phrases = life. Obs. or arch.

Definition 6.a. **The seat of one's inmost thoughts and secret feelings**; one's inmost being; the depths of the soul; the soul, the spirit.

Definition 9.a. **The seat of the emotions generally**; the emotional nature, as distinguished from the intellectual nature placed in the head.

Definition 10.a. More particularly, **The seat of love or affection**, as in many fig. phrases: to give, lose one's heart (to), to have, obtain, gain a person's heart. Hence = Affection, love, devotion.

Definition 11.a. **The seat of courage**; hence, Courage, spirit. Especially in to pluck up heart, gather heart, keep (up) heart, lose heart.

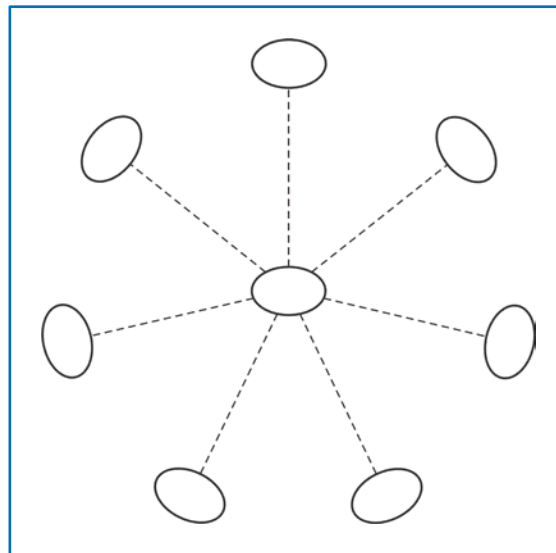
Definition 12. **The seat of the mental or intellectual faculties**. Often = understanding, intellect, mind, and (less commonly) memory. arch. exc. in phrase by heart.

Definition 17.a. **The innermost or central part of anything**; the centre, middle.

Definition 20. **The vital, essential, or efficacious part** (essence)

And so on.

Dictionary definitions clearly point to the fact, that above-cited semantic components are features, associated with **heart**, therefore they are supplementary components of the main meaning of the word. The transferred meanings of **heart** are based on these semantic components, as is seen from the definitions above. They surround the main meaning of **heart**



like rays of the sun (see Picture 3). Hence the name, I gave to this model – a **solar model** (Margalitadze 2006).

Picture 3.

Still another method of description is adopted for adjectives, denoting very general features. The entry for the adjective **straight**, for example, brings forth the general semantic component – *free from curvature, bending or angularity* (definition 2.a.) which is present in every lexical unit of the adjective **straight**, but in each sense it is concretized by different features: e.g. human body, deportment, course, flight, conduct, socially acceptable behavior and so on. This type of description enabled me to identify one more model of polysemous adjectives (and also verbs), which I call **one-dimensional model** (Margalitadze 1982; 2014).

Each entry of the OED is a real treasure for semantic analysis of a word and is a proof that the OED editors remained true to their intention “... to show more clearly and fully than has hitherto been done, or even attempted, the development of the sense or various senses of each word from its etymology and from each other” (Silva 2000: 78).

3. Method of Analysis of Dictionary Definitions

The OED was a well-known dictionary in Russian, and generally, Soviet lexicology and lexicography. *A New English-Russian Dictionary*, edited by an outstanding Russian linguist and lexicographer Ilya Galperin (NERD), one of the best bilingual dictionaries published in Russia, was largely based on the OED. This fact, from my point of view, influenced the popularity of the Distinctive-Feature Semantics in Soviet linguistics which viewed word meaning as a structure consisting of semantic components arranged in a hierarchical order (Margalitadze 2018: 250–253).

The knowledge of the OED, the knowledge of the method of defining meaning in the OED in an analytical way, by splitting it up into more basic semantic components, gave rise to the development of one of the methods of componential analysis of meaning – the so-called definitional method of analysis (see e.g. Arnold, 1966), or method of analysis of dictionary definitions, Дефиниционный Метод Анализа. The method is based on the comparison and analysis of definitions of comprehensive explanatory dictionaries, primarily definitions of the OED. Definitions of an entry are not always explicit about semantic structure of a lexical unit. Therefore, a variety of this method was developed later, called the Method of Transformation of Definitions (Arnold, 1979). According to this method, when a dictionary definition is not sufficient and does not fully reveal semantic structure of a lexical unit, in this case, some words from this definition are replaced by their definitions from the same dictionary and this process continues until the whole semantic structure and components of meaning of a word are revealed.

This method was actively used in the Soviet linguistics as one of the methods of study word meaning. The editorial team of the Comprehensive English-Georgian Dictionary (CEGD) also largely relied on the OED and its definitions for the analysis of English words included in the CEGD. I still use this method as one of the methods of semantic research and, alongside with other methods, teach it to my students of MA program in lexicography (Margalitadze 2006).

4. Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary of I. Mel'čuk

Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary (ECT) of I. Mel'čuk, which is based on his Meaning-Text Theory (MTT) is a complex theory which cannot be dealt in all details in the present paper. The aim of this chapter is to discuss some important aspects of semantic description of word meaning in the ECD, which, from my point of view, are reminiscent of the great ideas of the OED editors and particularly James Murray.

I. Mel'čuk, an outstanding Russian and Canadian linguist, lived in Russia till 1977, before emigrating to Canada. He undoubtedly had deep knowledge of semantic theories based on the OED, wide-spread and popular in Soviet linguistics. This knowledge is perceptible in some parts of his theory.

I. Mel'čuk introduces three linguistic conditions that the definition of a lexical unit (LU²) must conform to in the ECD: denotational potential of a LU, showing its links with the extralinguistic world; paradigmatic potential, explicating semantic links of a LU with related LUs in the lexicon; and syntagmatic potential showing syntagmatic links of a LU with other LUs in the sentence (Mel'čuk, 2013: 282). Thus, description of a paradigmatic potential of a LU aims at revealing its semantic links or 'semantic bridges' with other related LUs of a lexicon. Description of a paradigmatic potential of a LU comprises polysemy, derivation and phraseology (Mel'čuk, 2013: 298). A 'semantic bridge' is a very important concept in the theory of I. Mel'čuk. In case of polysemy, 'semantic bridges' link LUs of a vocable³ by revealing hidden semantic links between them. An example of a 'semantic bridge' is discussed for LUs of the vocable CLOUD on the page 298 (Mel'čuk, 2013).

LU = CLOUD^I is defined as 'accumulation of grayish white substance... that partially hides the sky'. 'Semantic bridge' in this definition is '...that partially hides the sky'. This 'semantic bridge' appears in the definition of the other LU of the vocable CLOUD, CLOUD^{III}

(σ)⁴ = (... that partially hides the sky);

LU = CLOUD^{III} 'fact X ... that (partially) spoils the positive character of the fact Y [as if X were a cloud that partially hides the sky]' (as in *This sad news was the only cloud on the otherwise excellent vacation*).

The existence of CLOUD^{III} shows the linguistic relevance of the component (σ) in the definition of CLOUD^I. The semantic link between CLOUD^{III} and CLOUD^I is obvious to an English speaker – it is a comparison with CLOUD^I [a live, even if conventional, metaphor]; it has to be shown in the definitions of both lexemes. On the other hand, according to the concept of vocable, two lexemes of the same vocable should explicitly manifest their semantic bridge. As a result, we have to include the component (σ) in the definition of CLOUD^I, which allows us to have the component (as if X were a cloud that (partially) hides the sky...) in the definition of CLOUD^{III}, and the semantic link – a semantic bridge – is ensured (Mel'čuk 2013: 299).

'Semantic bridges' reveal hidden semantic transfer mechanisms functioning between different polysemous meanings of a word, linking them to one another. LUs of a vocable maybe linked directly by a 'semantic bridge' or indirectly by a chain of 'semantic bridges' via other LUs of a vocable. Different configurations of 'semantic bridges' result in radial polysemy or chain polysemy (Mel'čuk 2013: 325).

It is not difficult to see similarities between 'semantic bridges' and the definitions of the OED, discussed in chapter 2 of the present paper. The OED is a historical dictionary and the aim of its editors was to show the development of senses from the primary meaning of a word or from each other. In order to reveal this mechanism of sense development, editors

² LU corresponds to a polysemous meaning of a word.

³ Vocable corresponds to a polysemous word.

⁴ A symbol of a 'semantic bridge'.

had to describe and explicate in dictionary definitions those semantic components, semantic links, ‘semantic bridges’ in the terminology of I. Mel’čuk, which served as the basis for the appearance of transferred senses of polysemous words. Unlike the OED, the ECD is not a historical dictionary, therefore it aims to show how LUs are linked. For this purpose it is necessary to describe the linking semantic components, ‘semantic bridges’ in dictionary definitions. It is not also difficult to see parallels between radial and chain sense structures and sense structures suggested by the definitions of the OED, discussed above.

Further I. Mel’čuk expounds on the linguistic relevance of a semantic component in a dictionary definition for derivation and phraseology. The similar approach to this issue can be also amply illustrated by the OED definitions.

Like the OED, I. Mel’čuk also introduces several levels of sense numbering with Roman numerals, Arabic numerals and letters. Roman numerals express larger semantic distances between LUs, Arabic numerals – smaller ones, and letters – the smallest distances between LUs.

5. Conclusion

Great ideas that lexicographers developed in the XIX century, theories of description of word meaning proposed by them, were well forgotten in the first half of the XX century. After being the philologists' prime object of investigation in the XIX century, the lexicon had been neglected in favour of syntax and phonology, as it was more difficult to describe and encapsulate it in rules (Bejoint 2010: 264).

As you surely know, one of the many surprising facts about the discipline of linguistics in the 20th century was that the study of lexis and meaning was largely neglected in America, Britain, and their spheres of influence. Honourable exceptions were in the European Saussurean tradition — notably German semantic field theorists such as Trier, Porzig, and Weisgerber and the Romanian Eugene Coseriu; British Firthians such as Halliday and Sinclair, Russians such as Mel’čuk and Apresjan, and others. But these past researchers were hampered by, among other things, lack of evidence and the political crises of their time", wrote Patrick Hanks in the new proposal of the University of Wolverhampton "Studying meaning in the 21st century" (Margalitadze 2018).

It is very disappointing to realize that this theory of description of lexicon of a language, and generally, the study of semantics was neglected for decades after the tremendous achievement of the OED team (Margalitadze 2018: 250). I. Mel’čuk’s innovative theory has considerable impact on the development of methodology of semantic description of different languages. This theory, from my point of view, is also interesting, as it has returned to the lexicographic practice and further elaborated long forgotten great ideas of the OED editors, and particularly James Murray.

Why is the OED semantic theory important for the modern theory of lexicography, as well as dictionary-making practice? The OED theory of description of meaning provides excellent scientific study of each word, its meaning, its semantic structure, semantic transfer mechanisms underlying its polysemous meanings, sense structure of polysemous meanings of a word. The study of each word is based on rigorous scholarly research of the vast empirical material. Such description of word meanings turns the OED into a reliable source for the study of polysemy or meaning in general, for the comparative study of word meanings in different languages, for the study of complex semantic processes which are at play in a language. The OED is one of the reliable sources in bilingual projects, as its entries help bilingual lexicographers understand every shade of meaning of a word in order to provide it with adequate equivalents in another language. The dictionary helps bilingual lexicographers solve many problems, including the problem of equivalence between languages. Our editorial team has worked with the OED for 35 years, while editing entries of the CEGD and we know the efficiency and reliability of this great lexicographic endeavor from our personal experience.

I strongly believe that implementation of the OED approach is important in monolingual, explanatory dictionaries and I. Mel’čuk’s theory is the proof that I am not alone in this belief.

“The structure now reared will have to be added to, continued, and extended with time, but it will remain, it is believed, the great body of fact on which all future work will be built”, – James Murray (Silva 2000: 94).

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