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To discriminate between discrimination and inclusion: a lexicographer's dilemma

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Abstract

The overall theme of this paper is the balance between descriptive adequacy and discrimination in dictionaries. More specifically, the purpose is to describe the process of revising dictionary articles related to the grounds of discrimination in the forthcoming edition of the Swedish monolingual dictionary *Svensk ordbok utgiven av Svenska Akademien* [The Contemporary Dictionary of the Swedish Academy], which is expected to be published in 2020. The focus of the article is on the semantic fields related to sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation and age. Updates of the lemma list, based on a more diverse data set, are presented. Furthermore, revisions of definitions and linguistic examples, motivated by the new data and principles of inclusion, are shown. We also discuss usage labels of negatively charged words and explore cross-references and their role in facilitating non-discriminatory word choices. Moreover, methodological questions are raised, and the role of corpora and other data gathering methods are considered.

Keywords: critical lexicography; Swedish; the Swedish law of discrimination

1 Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been a distinct increase of public awareness of the ways language is intertwined with systems of power, and the ways power relations are embedded in everyday language use. In Sweden, the public concern about the relationship between language and power has increased after the implementation of a new law on discrimination in 2009. The law covers seven grounds of discrimination: sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation and age (The Equality Ombudsman 2020).

In this paper, we wish to address lexicographical challenges with respect to words like *hora* ('whore'), *blatte* ('wog'), *rödskinn* ('redskin'), *funktionsvariation* ('functional variation'), *miffo* ('freak'), *bög* ('gay', 'faggot') and *hedersrelaterad* ('related to honour'). Our examples will be drawn from the ongoing update of *Svensk ordbok utgiven av Svenska Akademien* [The Contemporary Dictionary of the Swedish Academy] (henceforth SO) – a two-volume, mainly corpus-based, definition dictionary consisting of roughly 65,000 words (also available online and as app). The first edition of the dictionary was published in 2009; the updated edition (SO2) is scheduled for publication in 2020.

The dictionaries of the Swedish Academy have a special status among lexicographic resources in Sweden. Since 2017, SO, as well as two other Academy dictionaries, are freely available at a web interface (<https://svenska.se/>), with an increasing number of views. Furthermore, in contrast to most other lexicographic resources of contemporary Swedish, SO is based on a database unique in its scope, developed at a university department (the Department of Swedish, University of Gothenburg). The vocabulary covered by SO, and how this vocabulary is presented, have, undoubtedly, an impact on language policy and planning, which is noted by e.g. Josephson (2018:249-251). Relatedly, the edition from 2009 has several merits, but it is also clear that much can be improved and modernized. Large parts of its contents were developed in the 1980s. The editorial team's judgment is that some of the material ought to be revised, if the aim is to provide a correct description of contemporary Swedish, which will be useful for the intended users (both first and second language speakers) in supporting reception and production (cf. Malmgren 2009). The editors wish to provide a resource that is both descriptively adequate and free from discrimination, and should be understood with these facts in mind.

2 Data and Method

In 2009, the editorial team in office at the time worked on lexicographical issues related to gender. The current team, including the authors of this paper, has a somewhat broader perspective. It focuses not only on gender, but also on other areas. The grounds of discrimination mentioned above have the role of semantic fields demarcating the focus of the practical work. There are other fields of controversial words, for example the fields of body shape, political views, social class, etc. (see e.g. Veisbergs 2002 for a discussion of the definitions of political terms; cf. also Hartevelde & van Niekerk 1996), but the grounds of discrimination offer a non-arbitrary method for the identification of problems.

Idealizing to some extent, the following steps of the editorial process can be distinguished. First, a semantic field is chosen, e.g. sexual orientation, ethnicity or some of the other grounds of discrimination. In some cases, the work is made from scratch. Then, the lexicographers pick words from lists of novel word candidates. In other cases, a relevant word is already present in the database. In such situations, the lexicographers may have to reconsider hypotheses and decisions made by earlier members of the editorial team. This sometimes results in revisions of dictionary articles. Differences in judgements can depend on examined data, changes in language use, or choices of theories, studies and guiding principles. The editorial team uses several methods for data gathering, for example the following:

- Corpus searches in Swedish texts, including newspaper articles from various papers and magazines, Wikipedia entries, social media text, etc.¹
- Google searches
- Discussions within the editorial team
- Discussions with colleagues at seminars, conferences, etc.
- Examinations of informal word lists and dictionaries from relevant organizations, such as the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex rights (RFSL)
- Readings and discussions of relevant studies

SO is to a large extent based on corpus data. An overwhelming part of the corpora used for the 2009 edition (and its predecessors) contained newspaper texts and novels (see Introduction, SO 2009: XII). The data investigated by the current team is more diverse, and contains, among other genres, social media texts. The choice of data has consequences for the lists of novel word candidates, and the uses of words in the data bear on the dictionary descriptions.

3 Previous and Related Research

Nunberg (2017) argues that derogatory aspects of words, in particular of so-called “slurs”, depend on the social and historical background of the expressions. Consider *redskin*, a slur used of native Americans. According to Nunberg, the derogatory aspect is not a component of the meaning of the word; but the word has been used, and is still used, within social groups with negative or stereotypical attitudes towards native Americans; furthermore, the history of the word matters for its derogatory aspect. Our treatment of usage labels is in line with this reasoning, as will be shown in what follows.

Moon (2014) focuses on English learners’ dictionaries and issues relevant for non-native speakers of English. Her area of interest is ideologically loaded words. The article investigates themes such as age, sexuality and ethnocentrism. Chen (2019) suggests that the study of dictionaries can be subsumed under the broader research program of critical discourse analysis (see e.g. Fairclough 2010, van Dijk 2015). Dictionaries are sometimes ideologically loaded and reproduce illegitimate power structures in society, Chen argues. Wojahn (2015) discusses language planning and linguistic activism, i.e. attempts to change language with the purpose of changing, for instance, inequality between women and men, between persons with different sexual orientations or between gender identities. In the editorial team’s work on controversial words, a different, perhaps more modest, approach is taken, compared to the outlook of Moon, Chen and Wojahn. Our aim is to provide a discrimination free product, but the editorial team has no (further) ambition of addressing social problems. Our theoretical viewpoint is primarily descriptive. However, some questions concerning the design of the database are not purely descriptive, as will be discussed below.

4 Review and Revision

During the editorial work on dictionary articles thematically related to the grounds of discrimination, the lexicographers in the SO project focus on the following information categories and issues:

- Lemma list: What words are included in the lemma list? And what words are not included but should be?
- Meaning descriptions: How are lemmas related to the grounds of discrimination defined? What words are used in the definitions of these words?
- Usage labels: How are labels like “derogatory” and “can be perceived as derogatory” used? How can distinctions between different usage labels be motivated?
- Examples: What linguistic examples (of compounds, phrases and sentences) are presented in the dictionary?
- Cross-references: Which lemmas and meanings are cross-referenced? What lemmas could but should not be linked?

Examples from each of these information categories are presented below.

4.1 Lemma list

A revised lemma list is of course an integral part of the forthcoming revised edition of SO. In addition to the challenges mentioned above, several words pertaining to semantic fields like disabilities, sexual orientation and ethnic background, often possess such an emotive charge that their inclusion, preservation or exclusion equally is the cause of media attention and user indignation.

When it comes to e.g. the semantic field disabilities (both physical or mental), SO (2009) includes several lemmas related to this theme: *adhd* (‘ADHD’), *assistansersättning* (‘assistance compensation’), *funktionshinder* (‘functional disability’), *gruppboende* (‘group home’), *hyperaktivitetssyndrom* (‘hyperactivity syndrome’) etc.

In the dictionary, you also find the lemma *invalid* (‘invalid’, noun) and compound examples including the noun (e.g. *invalidbil* ‘car for invalids’, and *invalidbostad* ‘house for invalids’). These words now have a more negative emotive charge than they had when the first edition of the dictionary was published, and the frequency of them in the corpora is significantly lower today. In the SO2-database, a usage label marking the archaic tone of *invalid* is provided, and the compounds are excluded.

¹ Primarily provided by Språkbanken Text (2020), Mediearkivet (2020) and Kungliga biblioteket (2020).

A new lemma in the next edition will be *funkofobi* ('funcophobia') with the meaning 'prejudice or discrimination against people with functional disabilities'. In 2014 the members of Förbundet Unga Rörelsehindrade ('The association for young persons with disabilities') campaigned for greater recognition and dissemination of this word, which had been created in analogy with words like *homofobi* ('homophobia') and *xenofobi* ('xenophobia'). The campaign was successful: the usage of the word has increased and is now included in several dictionaries.

Furthermore, numerous words related to the fields of sexual orientation and gender identity have been added to the SO2-database, e.g. *cisperson* ('cisgender' or 'cis person'), *hbtq* ('LGBTQ'), *hen* ('they', singular), *heterosexualitet* ('heterosexuality'), *icke-binär* ('non-binary'), *könsbekräftande* ('gender confirming'), *könsdysfori* ('gender dysphoria'), and *polyamöros* ('polyamorous'). By including these lemmas, it could be said that the existence of the sexual orientations etc. that these words denote is acknowledged. At the same time, it should be noted that not only expressions referring to norm-breaking conditions, etc. are added, which *heterosexualitet* ('heterosexuality') exemplifies. It may seem strange that the noun *heterosexualitet* has not been recorded before, but it probably has to do with frequencies in corpora. The word *homosexualitet* ('homosexuality'), which is included in SO (2009), occurs 83,353 times in all Swedish texts in Mediearkivet, the largest digital news archive in the Nordic region. However, the word *heterosexualitet*, which is now listed in the SO2-database, occurs only 2,903 times in corresponding material.

Moreover, it can be noted that the newly established Swedish pronoun *hen*, which has attracted international attention (see e.g. *The Guardian* 2015 and *La Vanguardia* 2015), has developed radically in Swedish since the compilation of the first edition of SO. The pronoun, which is now included in the SO-database, has two meanings, namely 'gender-neutral expression denoting someone referred to, explicitly or implicitly, in the discourse context' and 'expression denoting persons who do not want to, or cannot, unambiguously categorize themselves as men or women'.

4.2 Meaning Descriptions

Some definitions from SO (2009) are also revised during the review process. For example, the meaning descriptions of the noun *kön* ('sex' or 'gender') in SO (2009) have been revised. In the forthcoming edition, a new meaning referring to self-perceived identity is recorded, in addition to the already included meaning of biological gender. This identity-related meaning of gender is relevant in lexicalized compounds like *könsidentitet* ('gender identity'), and in phrases such as *psykologiskt kön* ('psychological gender').

Furthermore, some meaning descriptions in the forthcoming edition of SO will be more inclusive than the corresponding ones in the first edition. This is the case with several words describing family relations, e.g. *svärdotter* ('daughter-in-law'). In SO (2009), it is defined as 'the wife of one's son', but in SO2 the definition will be as follows: 'the female partner of one's adult child'. The new definition thereby encompasses both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Other lemmas redefined according to the same principle are, for example, *svärson* ('son-in-law'), *svärfar* ('father-in-law'), *svärmor* ('mother-in-law'), *man* ('husband'), *make* ('husband'), and *hustru* ('wife').

In connection with this work, the lexicographers have regarded the discussion in Moon (2014), which reports on a study of how different sexual orientations are represented in five major English learning dictionaries. Moon discusses more inclusive meaning descriptions and non-heteronormative examples in the dictionaries (see section 4.4 below). Furthermore, the Swedish version of the user-generated dictionary Wiktionary, which is relatively progressive in this respect, has served as a source of inspiration.

The semantic aspect of the editorial work also concerns words used in definitions of lemmas, and the connotations of these definition words. For example, in the forthcoming edition of SO, the noun *ras* ('race') is replaced with other words or phrases such as *etnisk bakgrund* ('ethnic background') and *hudfärg* ('skin colour') in the definitions of lemmas like *apartheid* ('apartheid'), *eskimå* ('Eskimo'), *halvblod* ('half-breed'), and *mörkhyad* ('dark-skinned') (cf. the discussion of racist terms in dictionaries in Cloete 2013).

4.3 Usage Labels

The precise set of usage labels is not an obvious fact. They also tend to be fairly "square", which makes them difficult to apply to words with unstable or context-dependent meanings (see e.g. Norri 2000; Schutz 2002). In the editorial team's recent work, the labels have been carefully examined and the set of usage labels modernized. Hopefully, they are thereby clearer to the dictionary users.

The example *bög* ('faggot' or 'gay')² can illustrate our process of developing suitable usage labels. SO (2009) and the current SO2-database provide the following information about the word:

bög [...] homosexuell man <ngt vard.> *bögskräck*; *rätten för bögar att gifta sig och adoptera barn* [...]

'gay/faggot [...] homosexual man <somewhat informal> *fear of gays/faggots; the right of gays to get married and adopt children* [...]' (SO 2009)

bög [...] homosexuell man <något vardagligt; kan uppfattas som nedsättande> *bögpar*; *rätten för bögar att gifta sig och adoptera barn* [...]

'gay/faggot [...] homosexual man <somewhat informal, can be perceived as derogatory> *gay couple; the right of gays to get married and adopt children* [...]' (SO2-database).

As is seen above, the usage label 'somewhat informal' is attached to the noun *bög* in SO (2009). This is a comment about

² The emotive charge of the Swedish word is context dependent; it is, therefore, difficult to translate.

style: the word is marked for register and is not appropriate in more formal genres. In SO (2009) we find, furthermore, a more elaborated style comment, according to which *bög* is a reclaimed word, which previously was derogatory. It is now a perfectly neutral expression, according to the comment.

However, we disagree with the style comment in SO (2009). If a homosexual man uses the word about himself, it is probably not derogatory but neutral. But the word is still used in contexts, especially among boys and young men, where it is possible, even likely, that the word is associated with homophobic attitudes. Following the reasoning in Nunberg (2017), the word can be said to be used in social groups with negative attitudes towards homosexuality. Native and non-native dictionary users should be informed of this fact. Therefore, the style comment has been removed, and the usage label ‘can be perceived as derogatory’ has been added.

Interestingly, the current design of the dictionary article differs from the recommendations of the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex rights (RFSL). In accordance with SO (2009), RFSL holds, in their informal online dictionary, that *bög* is a reclaimed, neutral word.³ The difference between our judgment and RFSL’s probably depends on viewpoint and aim. RFSL’s approach is arguably linguistic activism, in contrast to our more descriptive outlook.

Furthermore, we have changed one of the language examples in the lexical entry *bög*. Instead of the mildly homophobic *bögskräck* (‘fear of gays/faggots’), we have chosen the expression *bögpar* (‘gay couple’), which, in addition, is more frequent in our corpora.

It is debatable whether the usage label ‘can be perceived as derogatory’ is the best option. The label is written from the perspective of the hearer. One could argue that the relevant perspective is the speaker’s: words can be said with different intentions. However, we have chosen to keep the listener’s perspective, for taxonomic reasons. A revision of the taxonomy would be too time-consuming. Moreover, there are theoretical reasons for focusing on other aspects than speaker intentions. Nunberg (2017) argues, as we saw above, that the social or historical background is what matters most for a word’s negative or positive charge; given that account, speaker intentions do not seem to be the only central factor. It can, finally, be discussed whether *bög* has one main meaning, and an emotive charge depending on context, or, alternatively, if the neutral and the negative use constitute two different meanings. Given our taxonomy and standard design, it is more parsimonious to start from the descriptive meaning, rather than the emotive charge. But admittedly, it is difficult to see any strong theoretical reason for or against the alternatives. One can, therefore, put less weight on the descriptive definition, and let the emotive charge motivate two meanings, if one prefers that kind of design of dictionary articles.

4.4 Examples

In some dictionaries, examples illustrating the use of derogatory words have been suppressed (see e.g. Hartevelde & van Niekerk 1996). Within the SO project, no such general decision has been made. However, compounds, phrases and sentences included in SO (2009) have been the subject of a detailed examination and many examples have been replaced. Since SO is rather a corpus-influenced dictionary than a strictly corpus-based resource, the editorial team puts a lot of effort into adapting the examples to the dictionary.

Nikula (2008) has examined how age is represented in Swedish dictionaries. She observes the following:

Today elderly people in many ways radically differ from those of former generations. One consequence of this is that terms like *pensioner* (Sw. *pensionär*) with their connotations are often not felt to be adequate any more. The same concerns the stereotype of old people as generally poor, ill and disabled. The lexicographic examples in the entries of Swedish monolingual dictionaries to an astonishingly great extent repeat this stereotype. (Nikula 2008: 337).

Nikula questions whether the one-sided description of the elderly can be defended, from an ethical point of view (see also Moon 2014 for a discussion on ageism in English dictionaries).

In connection with this semantic field, the adjective *gammal* (‘old’) can be mentioned. There are several well-established Swedish word pairs including this particular adjective, e.g. *gammal och grå* (‘old and grey’), *gammal och trött* (‘old and tired’) and *gammal och ful* (‘old and ugly’), i.e. phrases with negative connotations, painting a grey and depressing picture of older people and of ageing. However, the word combinations are lexicalized in Swedish; therefore, they are included in the dictionary. This fact does not prevent the SO2-lexicographers from including some new examples under headwords like *pigg* (‘healthy, alert, lively’), e.g. the collocation *pigg pensionär* (‘active pensioner’) and the lexicalized expression *vara pigg för sin ålder* (‘be nimble for one’s age’).

In accordance with the previous reasoning, the lexicographers of the project also aim to provide a more multifaceted and varied picture of sexual orientations and related fields. For example, consider the lemma *sexualitet* (‘sexuality’). In SO (2009), the article contains two compounds illustrating the usage of the word: *heterosexualitet* (‘heterosexuality’) and *homosexualitet* (‘homosexuality’). In the SO2-database, these two compounds have been supplemented with the following expressions: *asexualitet* (‘asexuality’), *bisexualitet* (‘bisexuality’) and *hypersexualitet* (‘hypersexuality’) (these words are also lemmas in the current database).

In the next edition of SO, several phrases and sentences describing homosexual relationships will also be given (cf. Moon 2014). For example, in the dictionary article *blivande* (‘future’) the users will find the example *hon träffande sin blivande hustru i USA* (‘she met her future wife in the United States’) and under the idiom *lära känna någon/något* (‘get to know somebody/something’) (in the article *lära*), they will find *han lärde känna sin blivande make i Paris* (‘he got to know his

³ See <https://www.rfsl.se/hbtqi-fakta/begreppsordlista/> [accessed 24/04/2020].

future husband in Paris’).

However, it should be noticed that examples of this kind are few in number, relatively speaking. They mainly appear in dictionary articles where the definitions have been modified (cf. the discussion of the new definitions of e.g. the lemmas *man* ‘husband’, *make* ‘husband’ and *hustru* ‘wife’ in section 4.2 above). It is much more common to incorporate gender-neutral phrases and sentences like *han har förlovat sig med sin nya kärlek* (‘he is engaged with his “new love”’). In this example, the gender of the “new love” is unknown. Another relevant example is *flytta ihop med sin flickvän* (‘move in with one’s girlfriend’) under the lemma *flytta* (‘move in’). This latter type of shorter example is common in the SO2-database and is in line with the examples already included in SO (2009).

4.5 Cross-References

Finally, the SO editors have updated the guidelines with regards to cross-references between different dictionary articles. In the project, the lexicographers aim to give cross-references from derogatory words to more neutral synonyms etc., but not the other way around (cf. e.g. Coffey 2010). However, it is debatable, if this strategy is compatible with the dictionary’s primarily descriptive approach and its aim to give an exhaustive description of the lexical relations between Swedish words.

The strategy has been applied to several examples in the semantic field of ethnic background. In SO (2009) there is a cross-reference from the neutral *same* (‘Sami’) to the derogatory *lapp* (‘Lapp’). In the SO2-database, this reference is deleted. However, there is a link from *lapp* to *same*. In the case of the neutral noun *rom* (‘Rom, Romani’), the more controversial expression *zigenare* (‘gypsy’), is referred to, in SO (2009); in SO2, there is no link in that direction, but the cross-reference from *zigenare* to *rom* is still there.

The dictionary user is thereby offered an alternative form of expression, if she searches for *lapp* and *zigenare* (see Malmgren 2009 for a discussion about information in SO that supports production). By offering a cross-reference in one direction, from negatively charged alternatives to neutral ones, but not in the other direction, the user is guided from derogatory formulations to the expressions that the ethnic groups referred to prefer. This guidance is motivated by our aim to provide a discrimination free product, rather than the ambition to develop a resource that describes Swedish objectively.⁴

5 Final Remarks

This paper reports on ongoing work on words related to different grounds of discrimination in the development of a new edition of the Swedish monolingual dictionary *Svensk ordbok utgiven av Svenska Akademien* [The Contemporary Dictionary of the Swedish Academy] (SO), which is expected to be published in 2020. Words related to semantic fields associated with the grounds of discrimination are, in relation to the dictionary’s list of 65,000 lemmas, few in number. However, the words are important in the social debate, and many of them also have a symbolic value to dictionary users. As was mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the overall goal of the work is to make the content of the dictionary more inclusive and more descriptively adequate. The lexicographers in the project aim to develop a product that is as discrimination free as possible, and to construct a resource that correctly describes the Swedish language.

In the paper, we have presented various aspects of the work. The lemma list is revised. And the lexicographers are making efforts to use as neutral words as possible in the meaning descriptions and to make the definitions more inclusive. Furthermore, the set of usage labels is reviewed. The examples from the first edition are examined and new ones, including ones based on norm-breaking relationships, have been added. Finally, the guidelines for cross-references have been updated: the editors add references from negatively charged words to neutral ones, but not in the opposite direction. The decisions made in the process are sometimes difficult, and balanced judgments that, on the one hand, respect the Swedish law of discrimination and, on the other hand, live up to demands of descriptive adequacy, are not always easy to attain.

One important issue, which is only partially addressed in the article, is how the lexicographers find words that are – or can be perceived as – discriminatory in the database they are revising. Certain lemmas are, through usage labels etc. noted beforehand, but language is developing rapidly and a word that has previously been relatively neutral can quickly become controversial (for example through influence of other languages).

Another central question is how negatively charged (or biased) words are identified. The lexicographers may use sources such as e.g. RFSL’s glossary, but informal dictionaries do not always fit the purpose of the professional lexicographer. Here, appeals to linguistic intuitions may emerge as central, but such methods are not free from risks. Another question is how lexicographers become aware of the stereotypes that can be found in other seemingly harmless articles (cf. Moon 2014). These reflections, or developments of them, can perhaps serve as research questions for future lexicographic work, by our team or others interested in balancing between descriptive adequacy and discrimination.

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