3.14 Lexicography

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Abstract

A brief introduction to lexicography (dictionary work) locates it as cross-cultural science with immediate applications in central Australia. To exemplify some of its methods a brief study is made of a single term of Aboriginal English.

Introduction

Lexicography is about making dictionaries, and about studying a language from the viewpoint of its words and their meanings. For a recent survey of the field see Hartmann, 1969. There are many kinds of dictionaries. In the context of Australian Aboriginal languages there are the following broad types:

- bilingual dictionary, relating an Australian language to English (or, less commonly, vice versa);
- monolingual dictionaries, written entirely in an Australian language, relating the harder words to the easier ones.

Kriol and similar kinds of Aboriginal English are usually included under the expression “Australian (Aboriginal) language”.

I use the term “dictionary” in this paper in a wide sense, to cover a number of different kinds of work, such as:

- word list;
- vocabulary;
- glossary;
- thesaurus.

In practice, dictionaries merge in with other reference books, as some words call for virtually an encyclopaedic entry, or are best defined through a diagram or illustration.

Lexicography as a Cross-Cultural Discipline

If one seriously aims to understand “community needs, social attitudes and scientific knowledge as they pertain to problems in Aboriginal development”, one has to come to grips with the world view of the Aboriginal groups concerned. A variety of techniques are used by outsiders, among which the direct interview and questionnaire rank low in effectiveness. The cross-cultural truism “always ask” has to be in the context of “listen”. When the Aboriginal is best able to express him/herself in an Australian language, then we have to do the work of “listening” in that language. We need to seriously try to understand the concepts and the relations between concepts that are expressed in that language. For instance, most of us have probably learnt that in local languages the term “purdananyan”, “kulminina”, etc. covers a range of ideas expressed in English as “listen, hear, understand, think, recall, remember”. Knowing this, the request that we “listen” carries the full force of the English term, if not more. We all know, at least when we are asked to reflect, that there is not a simple word-for-word correspondence between the bundling of concepts in Aboriginal languages, and in English.

Now, how extensive is the lack of simple correspondence? To what extent does one Aboriginal group differ from another in the details of their world view? Such questions can only be properly answered after a vast amount of lexicographical research. The full realisation of the different slant on the world, its similarities and its differences, comes from being bilingual. The next best way is to study a dictionary of the other language — a dictionary with elaborated entries and with relationships between words indicated, not just a word-list. Until there is proper lexicography of central Australian languages, merging into the encyclopaedic, we cannot say we have seriously tried to understand Aboriginal “social attitudes”, or to have listened effectively towards an understanding of Aboriginal “community needs”. Hence, Aboriginal lexicography is a high and enduring priority. It may not be a project with an immediately perceptible need, like health or housing, but it does not follow that it is less important.

Lexicography as Science

With the considerable growth in the study of Australian languages in the last two decades, the promotion of bilingual education in Aboriginal schools, and other developments, linguistic studies in Australia have slowly assimilated Hale’s (1965) observations about the spurious differences between “informant” and “colleague”. Lexicography, no less clearly than other areas of linguistics, is research which cannot be pursued far without the active intellectual collaboration of those who know the Aboriginal languages — “native speakers” as linguists have termed them.

To illustrate the way linguistic knowledge can be teased out in a controlled way, consider a possible school lesson focussing on the distribution of the Warlpiri locative case suffix, an ending on words with a meaning corresponding to the English prepositions “at, on, in”. The Appendix presents a possible assignment, of a type which could be used whether the students’ first language is English or Warlpiri. Of course, the way the problem is approached is different where the students have further data at their mental “finger tips”, that is, for Warlpiri students, though their knowledge of further data by no means guarantees that they come to perceive the patterns more easily.

This example is as pre-digested as any school textbook question, but I hope that it suggests that the scientific method is no less applicable in language study than in the “hard” sciences: generalisations and hypotheses about the relations between words and their meanings are tested against the data of knowledge of the relevant languages: theories of lexical structure are made, refined.
Discarded. This research relates also to grammatical enquiry into the other structures.

The State of Central Australian Aboriginal Lexicography

What progress has been made in lexicography in central Australia? Wordlists and dictionaries of various kinds exist for most dialects of central Australian languages. Some of them are really only accessible to users with some linguistic training. The current growing dictionaries involving ongoing teamwork are:

1. Arrernte Dictionary Project (IAD);
2. Warlpiri Dictionary Project (Yuendumu, Lajamanu, MIT);
3. Pintupi/Luritja Dictionary (Papunya, Finke River Mission);
4. Western Desert Language compilations, including the Yankunytjatjara dictionary project at IAD.

Results start flowing fairly quickly. For instance, the Warlpiri dictionary is available in various forms even at this early stage:

1. Wordlist, about 2,000 items (Hale, published by IAD);
2. Thesaurus (Kenneth Hale);
3. Vocabulary (Steve Swartz);
4. Selected domains vocabulary (David Nash based on Hale 2);
5. Dictionary fascicles for certain semantic domains (Mary Laughter and others);
   (a) body parts: health
   (b) 115 simple verbs
   (c) fauna: land and wildlife research,
   (d) flora: management
   (e) material culture: technology, contact history
6. Working card file, about 7,000 items (Yuendumu, MIT);
7. Sign language dictionary (Adam Kendon).
   In progress:
8. More dictionary fascicles for semantic domains, including revision of above distributed fascicles;
   (3, 4, 5, 9 are on computer media)

Applications of Lexicography

Dictionary work endeavours links naturally with bilingual education, literacy, cultural survival, use of multi-purpose technology such as that used in book-production (e.g. photocopiers, off-set press, computers, cameras). Other applications are not so much in current use. Preliminary analyses of vocabulary in special domains can be carried out upon request from an interested party. This can happen as part of the commissioning of a translation on a particular topic, providing the commissioning agency allows the necessary time and funds for the lexicographic research. This approach is taken for granted by SFL (Wycliffe Bible Translators), who specifically allow at least ten years for the work needed to prepare a translation of the New Testament. The IAD Interpreter and Translating program has confronted medical and legal terminology, for instance. The results of such focussed analyses can feed into not only good quality translation and interpreting, but also briefing for outsiders on the cross-cultural implications of their specialist area, and in particular cautions about likely misunderstandings.

For instance, workers in “land management” may profit from a study of the details of the toponymic domain of the relevant Australian language. To what extent are body-part terms used in extensions for landscape terms? What is the range of meaning covered by terms as seemingly simple as “road” or “track”? For example, the English word “track” has related senses “road” and “foot-print” for instance, whereas in Warlpiri the translation equivalents cover different ranges:

wirliya: “foot, footprint, wheel (of vehicle), pedal” (alternate warliya)

yiwarra: “path, road, sequence of sites of one Dreaming” (Lajamanu Warlpiri)

yiwarra: “Milky Way” (all Warlpiri)

yirdisi: “road, route” (Yuendumu and Lajamanu Warlpiri)

wirli: “road, route” (Eastern Warlpiri)

Case Study of the Lexical Item “Bush”

Consider vocabulary in the domains relating to items introduced recently (relative to the speed of language change) to the physical world of central Australia. There is an application of linguistics to situations of rapid cultural change which has been called “language engineering”. Usually this has meant a select committee of experts designing and attempting to codify a standardise new vocabulary, as is generally known in connection with French, or in south-east Asia.

For those contemplating such intervention in central Australian languages, it is instructive to note the language engineering already undertaken by the speakers of these languages. Loan concepts are expressed in a variety of ways, calling on the resources of the Australian language as well as borrowing from English. See O’Grady (1960), Leeding (1980), Hudson (1983), Simpson (1985), for studies in particular languages.

Larger scale indigenous language engineering can be seen in the evolution of Aboriginal English, which meets a range of needs which I do not go into here. I propose just to exemplify lexicography work by showing what is involved in the preliminary compilation of the dictionary entry for just one term of Tennant Creek Aboriginal English, and, through the range of the examples, simultaneously illustrate one method of indigenous language engineering. The lexical item I have chosen is “bush”. This is used as a noun, and as a compounding element in compound nouns.

“bush”:

- bush tomato (Solanum spp.)
- bush raisin
- bush banana
- bush potato (yam)
- bush carrot (Pencil yam)
- bush onion
- bush peanut
- bush plum (Catham spp.)
- bush tobacco
- bush apple (?)
- bush lolly (gum)
- bush coconut (insect galls)
- bush tucker
- bush medicine (substances)
- bush well (soakage)
Appropriate Technology (D) Communications

bush comb (*Sida* spp. threaded on stick)
bush welder (spinifex wax)
bush road (footpath through bush, ad hoc vehicle track)
bush camp (1. camp for ceremonial purposes 2. outstation)
bush marriage
bush meeting (ceremony, greeting ceremony)
bush name (Aboriginal personal name, ceremonial name)

One may be born "longa bush", or be buried "bush way". In Aboriginal English one is "longa bush" or "in the bush", and comes "out to go to town. The bush has connotations of as Aboriginal place away from "whitefella", and in particular of ceremony, it seems to be used where the equivalent non-Aboriginal item (the source of the second part, the X in "bush X") is felt to be inferior to the Aboriginal item. This is further detectable when "negative data" are considered. Not all combinations that might be expected are actually used in Aboriginal English (* means "unattested"):

- bush dog (wild dog, dingo)
- bush cat (unless "pujikat" is so analysed)
- bush chair
- bush table
- bush spoon
- bush plate
- bush bucket (coolamon)
- bush frog
- bush mattress
- bush matches
- bush paper (paperback)
- bush toilet
- bush toy
- bush money
- bush voting

Common (lexicalised) combinations of the form "bush X" are to be distinguished from descriptions which are probably not lexical items in their own right, but spontaneous formations, such as:

- bush plate (ark dish)
- bush rope (vine spp.)

Indeed, some of the combinations listed above as "unattested" may occur, but coined on the spot in this fashion.

If a contrast with "bush" needs to be specified, "shop" or "store" can be used. Thus in Warumungu: manjaj "bush potato, potato"
manje shop-warinyi (commercial) potato"
manjaj bush-warinyi "bush potato" (contrastive form) (or muru-warinyi)

In sum, "bush" in Aboriginal English means something like "Aboriginal, our own, true" in situations where a contrast needs to be drawn with an equivalent item in the "whitefella" world.

It is instructive to compare the meaning of the related term in Australian English, especially in the N.T. dialect. To distinguish, I capitalise it. First "bush" is used as a location contrasting with "town" or "station":

- Bush trip
- Bush turkey
- Bush school
- Bush teacher
- Bush sports

(A more detailed study would distinguish between the different stress patterns, between compound noun-noun and adjective-noun combin-
Aboriginal collaboration, practical cross-cultural communication, and the production of a “cultural artefact” of lasting value.

Bibliography


APPENDIX: A Sample problem set.

What is the Pattern?

In the Warlpiri language, the locative suffix has two forms, -na and -ngka, and each Warlpiri noun occurs with just one of these. Some examples are set out below, with each noun in the column headed by the form of the suffix that it takes.

What determines which of the two forms of the ending occurs with which noun?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ngka</th>
<th>-na</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pini “rock”</td>
<td>mingkirri “anted”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yarla “yam”</td>
<td>watiya “stick, tree”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nguru “seed”</td>
<td>Yurntumu “Yuendumu”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mirdi “knee”</td>
<td>mirmirdi “daughter’s child”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kamina “girl”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaminakamina “girls”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wini “burnt area”</td>
<td>winiwini “country with burnt areas”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kurdu “child”</td>
<td>kurdukurdu “children”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yankirrikirri</td>
<td>(place)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngurrpa “ignorant”</td>
<td>ngurrpa “throat”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nyampu “this”</td>
<td>yali “that”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngarnija “eating”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wangkara “speaking”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinja “acting on”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kanja “carrying”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment

The data are graded into lettered sections in a way which suggests a sequence of hypotheses leading to a comprehensive statement of the pattern. On the basis of limited data like A., the student may notice any number of patterns. A hypothesis which successfully carries over to the further data in B is that a stem of two syllables takes -ngka, and a longer stem takes -na.

Successive sections require modification (but not complete abandonment) of the hypothesis.
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