Principles and Practice of South African Lexicography

R.H. Gouws and D.J. Prinsloo
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Preface

The last decade has witnessed the emergence of a new wave of professional lexicographers in South Africa. The establishment of the Pan South African Language Board’s National Lexicography Units, one for each of the eleven official languages, and the growing interest in lexicographic principles and practice among academics, freelance lexicographers and publishers, created the need for a theoretically-based book directed at the needs of experts, both in the lexicographic practice and in the field of theoretical lexicography. *Principles and Practice of South African Lexicography* is a response to this need. The book endeavours to cover significant phases and features of a lexicographic process, with a focus on the historical orientation of theoretical lexicography, the preparation phases in the lexicographic process, including material collection and corpus building, and various aspects of the data distribution programme, e.g. different lexicographic structures. Different facets from the general theory of lexicography are applied to the lexicography of the South African languages and from the perspective of lexicographic challenges confronting the South African languages suggestions are made to enhance the general theory of lexicography. This book wishes to promote the desperately needed interaction between theory and practice in the field of lexicography.

The authors wish to thank their respective Departments and Universities, i.e. the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at the University of Stellenbosch and the Department of African Languages at the University of Pretoria, for research opportunities and assistance without which they would not have been able to write this book. They are also indebted to many colleagues, both locally and abroad, and students who have contributed in various ways and over many years to the ideas put forth in this book.

*Rufus Gouws and Danie Prinsloo*
The development of lexicography: 
A brief historical perspective

1.1 Introduction

In this modern age, characterised by a knowledge explosion and a sophisticated information highway, dictionaries are still used as utility tools and their users rely on them as authoritative containers of knowledge. Although dictionaries are not an invention of the twenty first century, the twenty first century still sees them as household products, fulfilling their role as practical instruments as they have done for many centuries, cf. McArthur (1986) and Al-Kasimi (1977) for a discussion of some aspects of the history of dictionaries. Today the field of lexicography is seen as having a twofold nature, i.e. a theoretical component and a practical component. The theoretical component focuses on research regarding e.g. the form, contents and functions of dictionaries whereas the practical component leads to the compilation of dictionaries. Lexicography has not always had this twofold character and an overview of the development of lexicography will give ample evidence that the theoretical component can be regarded as a relative late-comer because lexicography has originally only been associated with the practice of dictionary-making. Although it is today widely accepted that any good dictionary needs a sound theoretical basis, this has not always been the case. Dictionaries are much older than lexicographic theory and for many years dictionaries developed in a pretheoretical era, cf. Gouws (1989).

One of the salient features of dictionaries throughout many centuries is their function to assist users with real problems. This tradition of practical assistance had already been introduced in the early dictionaries, e.g. those compiled on clay tablets by the Assyrians to assist children in understanding Sumerian writings, the early Egyptian dictionaries written on papyrus leaves and the Arabic dictionaries giving their users access to the holy scriptures of Islam. As practical instruments these dictionaries were sources of knowledge, directed at the specific needs of specific user groups. Likewise the glossae collectae, compiled in Christian monasteries during the medieval era, were attempts to assist the students, qualifying themselves for a clerical career, in their confrontation with the biblical and classical languages. The compilation of these reference works was motivated on practical grounds and no theoretical framework or model had an influence on either their content or their structure.

The practical component of lexicography developed well into the second half of the twentieth century before it was complemented by a theoretical component. The advent of theoretical lexicography led to a number of early publications but by far the most important work and the first major publication to establish theoretical

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1 This chapter is a revised, shortened and adapted version of Gouws (2004b).
lexicography as a research field was the monumental *Manual of Lexicography*, authored by Ladislav Zgusta and published in 1971.

Soon after the publication of the *Manual of Lexicography* the influence of Zgusta’s ideas was already noticeable, resulting in the rapid growth of theoretical lexicography but also in an improvement in the quality of new dictionaries.

The *Manual of Lexicography* clearly linked lexicography with linguistics, e.g. when Zgusta (1971:15) states it categorically that “lexicography is a very difficult sphere of linguistic activity.” Zgusta also argues that a lexicographer needs to be familiar with linguistics in a much broader sense and has to take into consideration not only the whole structure of the language in question but also the culture of the respective linguistic community. By referring to the culture Zgusta makes way for an approach which compels lexicographers to contextualise the language in terms of the more general world of the relevant speech community. The advent of theoretical lexicography had been positioned within the broader linguistic framework. This would demand that lexicographers take cognisance of developments in linguistic theory and that the data presented in a dictionary should result from a sound linguistic analysis.

The publication of Zgusta’s book heralded a new approach towards lexicography. The first four chapters of his book are not primarily concerned with lexicography but rather with linguistics, focusing on topics like lexical meaning, formal variation of words, combinations of words and variation in language. By including chapters on the formal variation of words and variation in language Zgusta gave a clear signal that linguistic influence does not only, or even primarily, run along the lines of formal grammar but the dictionary needs to reflect the real language usage and not only the language of the ideal speaker-hearer. In this regard lexicography constituted a form of opposition to the ideas of the Transformational Generative Grammar and could rather be seen as a forerunner of some of the ideas of sociolinguistics. Zgusta (1989) yet again focuses on the role of dictionaries in the development of the standard and in reflecting linguistic change. This emphasises a descriptive approach in lexicography in stead of the prescriptive approach that played such a dominating role in dictionaries.

Given the then scepticism prevalent among some linguists regarding the position of lexicography as a subdomain of linguistics this effort by Zgusta gave a clear signal that a sound lexicographic theory utilises sound linguistic principles. Zgusta’s book, however, went further than this. Already in the introductory chapter Zgusta indicates the bivalent approach needed by a lexicographer when he says that the lexicographer is doing scientific work but publishes it for users whose pursuits are always more practical (Zgusta 1971:16). Once again one has to negotiate the very real distinction between the theoretical lexicographer and theoretical lexicography on the one hand and the practical lexicographer and the lexicographic practice on the other hand. Important in this statement by Zgusta is the fact that lexicography may not be regarded as a theory merely for the sake of theory. The broad and inclusive domain of lexicography has to be regarded as directed primarily at the process of dictionary compilation. Theoretical lexicographers devise theories aimed at enhancing the efforts of the practical lexicographer in his/her process of dictionary compilation. A dictionary can, among other things, rightfully be regarded as the display-window