



UDC 81-13

<https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2687-0215-2020-2-2-160-164>

## COMMITTING BLASPHEMY: A POLEMIC AGAINST THE HOLY BOOK OF LEXICOGRAPHERS

Sh. Naeem<sup>✉1</sup><sup>1</sup> The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong

**Abstract.** Despite the profane wordings in the title above, this paper will be a civilized and academic inquest into the sacrosanct “compendium” the world has come to venerate. Touted by the lexicographer as the panacea to every linguistic worry, the dictionary has indeed become a source of reference and reverence from essentially every walk of life. This essay on the other hand, will be in direct contention with deeply and erroneously held views by laymen and linguists alike, holding the purpose of interrogating and deconstructing said views through an integrationist lens. Integrationist linguistics, or Integrationism, calls to the stand the institutionalized and so-called “correct” Linguistics we know today, and terms it “Segregationist linguistics” for its wrongful view of language existing as an independent entity. Integrationism, on the other hand, acknowledges and supports the integration of language and meaningful human activity.

In the specific context of the dictionary, the essay will uncover three major myths continually espoused by the lexicographer. The first of these is a misinformed veneration of history through etymology. We will then move into contradictory objectives such as increasing, not reducing, semantic indeterminacy accomplished through glossing the many pages of the book. The final key issue lies in the unrealistic attempt to impose upon readers one-size-fits-all definitions which are just about all devoid of contextualization, and in many cases hold no relevance whatsoever to the experience of the person consulting the book. Carrying the aim of resolving these gaping holes, this paper will also shed light on the way forward in approaching the dictionary and the place it holds within the realm of language.

**Keywords:** integrationist linguistics, dictionary, lexicography, meaning, words, Roy Harris.

### Where lexicography went wrong

The “went” in the subheading does not in any way suggest that lexicography faulted only in the past. In fact, it very much continues to do so in the modern era. Yet the “went” alludes to what the two epochs have in common — an obsession with history. Lexicographers, in their defining of words, play into the misconception that words are “something authoritatively established by previous generations” (Harris, Hutton 2007, 78). It would however be unfair to posit that this misconception remains solely on the part of those who compile dictionaries.

Rather, the issue finds its footing in segregationist linguistics that puts forth a fixed-code mentality which suggests that language is governed by a predetermined set of patterns or rules and that every speaker of the language adheres to these rules, sans which understanding is compromised (Harris 2013). Segregational linguistics takes this a step further through a reocentric belief that words stand determinately for things and ideas external to the language itself (Harris 1980). It is this exact ideology that shapes the dictionary in the way we know it. Lexicographers take this “authoritative gospel” from the past in unison with the fixed-code fallacy when it comes to compiling their Holy Books. On the contrary, everything begins to break down when the varying flaws with this approach are revealed.

## A compendium of what?

The dictionary writer and user have to proceed with caution when terming the book itself with the word I have placed within scare quotes in the abstract. If the dictionary is to be considered a “compendium” of the community’s semantic knowledge, it falls short of that title. If it is to be seen as a collection of the glossing practices of said community, it has failed miserably alongside segregationist linguistics. The former is problematic because a dictionary with every word in every speaker’s semantic knowledge would violate the confines of a book. The latter poses equally troublesome issues in that the dictionary is written from the perspective of the lexicographer and the needs of the community as they themselves perceive it. It is within this perception that conscious decisions are made as to what should be included or omitted, in addition to how it is to be organized in the book’s different sections.

## Semantic indeterminacy

Ironically, despite the seemingly neat and alphabetically organized contents of the dictionary, users are often left scratching their heads. There are two main reasons for this confusion, with the first having to do with the very purpose of the book. When people consult the dictionary, it is in hopes of reducing semantic indeterminacy. Yet the very opposite happens a lot of the time as can be illustrated in the examples below.

### **Unstable (adj.)**

Likely to give way; not stable

Source: Oxford English Dictionary

If I were to look up the word “unstable”, it is very likely that I do not understand “stable” either. At hand, I have the renowned Oxford English Dictionary and reach for it, flipping to the correct page. The entry informs me that “unstable” is an adjective and that “unstable” means “not stable”. The other part to the entry puts forth “likely to give way” and I feel content in associating “unstable”, albeit wrongly and unknowingly, with somebody who is kind enough to let people pass when they utter “excuse me” because I was taught by my teachers that it is good manners to “give way” when someone wishes to pass.

Immediately two gaping loopholes are exposed. The first is that the dictionary is apparently littered with the expectation that if words are repeated to readers as the definition to themselves with the addition of “not”, they would magically comprehend them. The other problem is that in cases like “give way”, consultees can be misled because that is the very nature of phrasal verbs sans explication or pre-existing knowledge. Lexicographers cannot blame readers for misinterpreting “give way” as “provide space” instead of “collapse” or something along those lines.

Should I realize my previous assumption was inaccurate, my only options are to consult other relevant entries or to put the book down in disappointment.

### **Cricket (n.) (INSECT)**

a brown or black insect that makes short, loud noises by rubbing its wings together

Source: Cambridge Dictionary

Not counting entomologists (scientists who study insects), most people have limited knowledge of bugs. Anyone who looks up “cricket” in the Cambridge Dictionary will not get very far with “brown or black insect”. Cockroaches, for instance, share that color. Many beetles do too. Even if we were to include “noises by rubbing its wings together”, the possibility of assuming a cricket as something identical to leafhoppers, grasshoppers, locusts, or cicadas cannot be eliminated for they all can produce noise with their wings.

This is among the many examples the dictionary leaves ambiguous. It is also unclear what is achieved in defining some insects while leaving out others or including subspecies whereas an entire genus itself could be left out.

**Screw (n.)**

a simple machine of the inclined plane type consisting of a spirally grooved solid cylinder and a correspondingly grooved hollow cylinder into which it fits

Source: Merriam-Webster Dictionary

When peering into the Merriam-Webster Dictionary for the meaning of “screw”, both learners of English and native speakers alike would regret such a decision. The former because there are five or possibly more words in that definition with a difficulty exceeding the word being glossed itself. The latter, however, who are likely familiar with the concept of a screw but are merely looking for a way to define it, would be equally treated to a brainteaser. For instance, what is in fact an “inclined plane type”? Does it refer to an upright surface? Is there an actual category or type of such “planes” that requires inferencing? To most people, a screw is one single entity. Therefore the “spirally grooved solid cylinder” fitting into a “correspondingly grooved hollow cylinder” adds a layer of unnecessary complexity to an otherwise simple object.

It is understood that the vast majority of people would not engage in glossing for a simpler word through harder words. One would think that a picture would suffice and even if specific parts were involved, arrows pointing to an area in the picture could help immensely. But in doing so, the lexicographer loses their prestige. The purpose for looking up simple words in the lexicographer’s eyes therefore becomes a quest of obtaining esoteric knowledge or terminology (Harris 2010). But what is somebody who genuinely comes across “screw” for the first time to do? Not consulting the dictionary would perhaps be a good start.

### Decontextualization amidst “words”

What the lexicographer presents in the dictionary is a make-believe continuum of decontextualized glossing. The definition provided is already devoid from the integrated nature of reading, listening, or however else the need for glossing arose. Not only this, but the consultee’s personal experiences are detached completely in the case of the dictionary entry. As Harris (2010, 85) eloquently analogizes with a traffic accident: “The decontextualization involved is rather like supposing that when you are personally involved in a road accident your first concern is with whether such a thing has ever happened to anyone else. No: your first concern is with *these* injuries, *these* responsibilities, *these* consequences”.

It does not matter how many times the word has been used previously because none of those instances are applicable to the reader’s or listener’s perspective. Even the very nature of the “word” is problematic upon closer inspection, at least in the segregationist account. Words, or linguistic signs do not, on their own, carry any meaning. This fundamental aphorism is crucial to understand if any progress is to be made in the dictionary and beyond. A sign cannot acquire meaning so long as it exists in a decontextualized paradigm. It loses any significance when there is no integration of activities. The readers of this paper may find this assertion of myself and other integrationists hypocritical in that to understand the contents of this very paper, are you not reading words that have meanings established centuries in the past?

It is understandable to hold on to such reservations but dispelling them is of paramount importance. The reason why lay language users and linguists alike fail to realize the previously mentioned aphorism is due to the emphasis on the written form of the word which is being seen and also present in one’s mind. However, they, in fact, are not words but rather remnants of

previous instances of writing. Even as you read these words now, you are engaging in integrating these remnants into a context differing from the one they appeared in originally. As such, the context is given on part of the reader, not the writer. The lexicographer cannot do this for dictionary users either. Similarly, the appeal to history in establishing word meanings is fallacious. Signs are not in existence prior to being created by their sign-makers, nor can they exist beyond the constraints of the time they were produced in (Orman, Pablé 2016). Even if you reread this paper at a later point in time, you will not be associating the exact meanings and opinions with every point made by me or the work of those I cite in the paper as you did in the first reading. The contextualization and experience you bring later will not be the same as today's reading, undoubtedly you will engage with your newly acquired ideas in critically assessing my arguments.

### The dictionary: An integrationist perspective

Once readers, speakers, and every other person who engage in communication realize that they are not language-users but indeed language-makers, the above-mentioned point on contextualization becomes all the clearer. We can now move toward bringing the right kind of enlightenment to the Holy Book of lexicographers. The very first issue to acknowledge is that the dictionary does not document so-called “semantic truths” about the language. The “lemma plus gloss” presentation is problematic because of attaching meanings to signs that simply do not exist. These are further distorted into a banal decontextualized representation as discussed earlier.

This is not to suggest that the goal of a dictionary should not be to lessen semantic indeterminacy. However, the means of achieving said goal remains dubious under the segregationist account. The integrationist posits rather, that the book incorporates a process of communication that caters to particular communicational needs. The lexicographer's creation *proposes* but not *reports* correlations in accordance with the communicational needs *as perceived* (Harris 2010). This point about perception cannot be more pivotal because according to the integrationist, communication is “a lay perspective (an interpretation) and not a fact that can be established from the outside” (Pablé 2019, 2). The starting point in dictionary reform, I suggest, is therefore the attention that should have been directed centuries ago, to the lay perspective and needs of glossing. It is time to let go of taglines such as “The definitive record of the English language” offered by the Oxford English Dictionary, because dictionaries are neither compendiums nor “comprehensive written constitution[s] of the English language” (Toolan 1999, 105). They should instead be seen as “guides”, proposed by lexicographers as tools holding the primary objective of diminishing semantic indeterminacy.

Lexicographers themselves are language-makers and their assumptions regarding compiling dictionaries inform those decisions as well as the perceived motivations of readers in using dictionaries in the first place. While there is no such thing as a perfect dictionary that can be applicable to the context of every user, simply elucidating those assumptions on part of the lexicographer can go a long way. Instances of the community's glossing practices can be incorporated as well. Admittedly, this is easier said than done considering the temporal and spatial constraints of the dictionary genre, but it is the very genre that requires reform. Instead of packing each entry with a lexical lemma followed by a gloss and examples of usage and the snippet of passages they come from, a note on the assumptions made in offering a certain definition and another such on how this particular word has been glossed by certain users of the dictionary need to be included.

It is only when the previously mentioned misconceptions regarding words and language are deconstructed and dictionary users are given a bigger role to engage in communication as opposed to obtaining so-called “infallible, invariant definitions”, that the dictionary can move beyond a travesty of a factual account to the genuine glossing practices of the public and lexicographers, whom with the former, communicate as language-makers.

## References

- Harris, R. (1980) *The language-makers*. London: Duckworth, 194 p. (In English)
- Harris, R. (2010) *Linguistic inquiry*. S. l.: s. n. (as a manuscript), 223 p. (In English)
- Harris, R. (2013) *The language myth in Western culture*. London: Routledge Publ., 228 p. (In English)
- Harris, R., Hutton, C. (2007) *Definition in theory and practice: Language, lexicography and the law*. New York: Continuum Publ., 250 p. (In English)
- Orman, J., Pablé, A. (2016) Polylinguaging, integrational linguistics and contemporary sociolinguistic theory: A commentary on Ritzau. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 19 (5): 592–602. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2015.1024606> (In English)
- Pablé, A. (2019) Is a general non-ethnocentric theory of human communication possible? An integrationist approach. *Lingua*, 230 (4), article 102735. (In English)
- Toolan, M. (1999) Integrationist linguistics in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century theories of language: Some connections and projections. *Language & Communication*, 19 (1), 97–108. (In English)

---

### Author

Shahryar Naeem, ORCID: 0000-0003-2294-4670, e-mail: [shahryar\\_theunknown@hotmail.com](mailto:shahryar_theunknown@hotmail.com)

**For citation:** Naeem, Sh. (2020) Committing blasphemy: A polemic against the Holy Book of lexicographers. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Lexicography*, 2 (2): 160–164. <https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2687-0215-2020-2-2-160-164>

**Received** 17 December 2020; reviewed 7 April 2021; accepted 9 April 2021.

**Copyright:** © The Author (2020). Published by Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia. Open access under [CC BY-NC License 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).