

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Diachronic Boundaries of the "Century Dictionary"

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Abstract

The article analyzes one of the central problems of lexicography - the issue of determining the diachronic and synchronic boundaries of vocabulary. It shows the principles of determining the lower and upper chronological boundaries of vocabulary on the example of large dictionaries of the English language. It also reveals the specific features of historical and explanatory dictionaries and the theoretical and practical differences in their chronological coverage.

KEYWORDS

Vocabulary, diachronic boundary, synchronic boundary, chronology, historical dictionary, archaism, lexical fund.

INTRODUCTION

Lexicography – is not just a collection of words, but rather a process of defining the shores of a vast ocean. The most delicate and controversial point in this process is the definition of the boundaries of vocabulary. Language is a living, breathing organism in constant motion. As society changes, new concepts invade our lives, while old layers gradually sink into the depths of memory and become archaic. Some words, while remaining the same in form, take on a completely new meaning. This birth and "death" of lexical units forces the lexicographer to reckon with time. Therefore, each author sets himself the responsible task of clearly delineating the boundaries of the "upper" (present-day breath) and "lower" (historical roots) of the language.

METHOD

The problem of the boundaries of vocabulary - diachronic and synchronic - represents one of the most central problems of lexicography. "The question of what to include in a dictionary and what not to include," wrote the famous English lexicographer R. Chapman, "perhaps presents the lexicographer with the most perplexing (puzzling) task" [4. 11].

The Preface to the "Century Dictionary" states that it is intended to cover "practically the entire body of English speech" from the time of the merger of Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) with Old French (usually placed at the end of the 11th century – the beginning of the 12th century) [1. 49-51] to the present day [2. V], that is, the end of the 19th century. In this regard, the main principle followed by the compilers of the Dictionary is of interest. The authors believed that the task of a comprehensive dictionary is not the selection of lexicon, but its collection. Lexicographers who express their opinion that the compilers of the dictionary fully reflect the lexicon of the language both diachronically and synchronously fully support the position of that section. The dictionary opens up a wide range of vocabulary, and this applies primarily to archaisms, dialectisms, professionalisms, and some other lexical categories. The problems of diachronic and synchronic boundaries of vocabulary are becoming increasingly relevant from the perspective of the dictionary.

The vocabulary of a language is constantly changing. New words are created to express new concepts, and at the same time, some words that have existed for a long time are gradually removed from the imagination, "forgotten" from the

language, or they are replaced by words denoting other, "old" concepts, or the realities expressed by words become obsolete. [2. 140]. The fact that the vocabulary of a language is variable, in particular, forces the compilers of dictionaries to indicate the diachronic boundaries of vocabulary.

The "upper" chronological limit, as a general rule, is set as close as possible to the beginning of the year the dictionary was published. At the same time, the index card of a dictionary usually includes cards with examples taken from the works of contemporary writers; the same is true of the "Century dictionary".

The complexity of resolving the issue of the "lower" limit of vocabulary is illustrated by the fact that English dictionaries cover a significantly larger "chronological field" than dictionaries of other languages (Webster's 1934 Dictionary records vocabulary from 1500 [5. XI], Webster's 1961 Dictionary - from 1765). The earliest "lower" limits of vocabulary are found in historical dictionaries (the Great Oxford Dictionary - 1150), that is, the beginning of the Middle English period. The most frequently put forward criterion for the "lower" limit is the literary literacy of the language community, with which the lexicographer works. Such a criterion, of course, is only correct if the dictionary is intended as a kind of "helper" in reading works of literature of past centuries. In general, the "reading experiences" of a language community can be determined only approximately.

The "Century Dictionary" defines the "lower" chronological boundary as, as previously noted, the end of the 11th century - the end of the 12th century, that is, in essence, the beginning of the Middle English period. This is fully consistent with the tasks of the dictionary, which, in addition to being the first chapter of an explanatory dictionary of the modern language, is also considered a "comprehensive" dictionary with aspects of a historical dictionary. However, a closer examination of the Dictionary shows that the real historical framework of the Century Dictionary is somewhat narrower than it is solemnly proclaimed: the factual substantiation of the earliest meanings of the words reflected in the Dictionary goes almost exclusively through the monuments of the 14th century (that is, the period of Middle English, but not its beginning). Quotations are often made from the works of Chaucer (1340-1400), Gower (1325-1408), and Wyclif (1320-1384).

The process of defining the diachronic and synchronic boundaries of a language's lexical system holds both theoretical and practical significance, especially in the context

of modern technological development. Today, lexicography has evolved beyond traditional methods due to the emergence of digital dictionaries, corpus linguistics, and artificial intelligence tools, which allow for more accurate collection and analysis of lexical data. Corpus-based studies, in particular, provide empirical insights into word frequency, semantic shifts, and contextual usage, enabling lexicographers to determine lexical boundaries based on objective evidence rather than subjective judgment. At the same time, globalization plays a crucial role in expanding lexical systems, as new words and expressions—especially from widely used global languages—continuously enter and reshape existing vocabularies. Social, cultural, and technological changes also contribute to this process by generating new concepts that require linguistic representation, thereby driving the ongoing evolution of language. Consequently, lexicographers must constantly update and refine dictionaries to reflect current usage while preserving historical depth. The integration of diachronic and synchronic perspectives is therefore essential, as focusing solely on either historical or contemporary aspects cannot fully capture the complexity of language development. A balanced approach ensures that both the origins and present-day functions of lexical units are adequately represented. Ultimately, lexicography stands as one of the most intricate and responsible fields of linguistics, as it not only records the vocabulary of a language but also reflects the cultural and intellectual heritage of its speakers, making the determination of lexical boundaries a continuously relevant and significant scholarly challenge.

In addition to technological and social factors, cognitive and communicative aspects also play a crucial role in shaping lexical boundaries. Language users do not simply adopt or discard words mechanically; instead, lexical change is influenced by human perception, memory, and conceptualization processes. Words that are more easily processed, frequently encountered, or semantically transparent tend to remain active within the language, while less accessible or contextually limited units gradually fade into passive vocabulary. This cognitive dimension highlights that diachronic change is not only a historical process but also a reflection of how speakers mentally organize and prioritize linguistic information. Moreover, register variation and stylistic differentiation significantly affect the inclusion of lexical items in dictionaries. Scientific, technical, colloquial, and dialectal vocabularies each operate within their own functional domains, and lexicographers must decide whether such units

meet the criteria for broader representation. This decision becomes particularly complex in multilingual and multicultural contexts, where language contact leads to hybrid forms and code-switching phenomena. Another important consideration is the role of standardization institutions, such as language academies and educational systems, which influence the stabilization or marginalization of certain lexical units. Their prescriptive norms often interact with descriptive realities, creating tension between "correct" usage and actual language practice. As a result, modern lexicography increasingly adopts a flexible and inclusive approach, recognizing variation as an inherent feature of language. These perspectives demonstrate that defining lexical boundaries requires not only linguistic analysis but also an understanding of cognitive behavior, communicative needs, and institutional influences, making it a deeply interdisciplinary endeavor.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the boundaries of vocabulary over time represent the nature of language as a living organism. The experience of the "Century Dictionary", "Oxford Dictionary" and "Webster Dictionary" reviewed in the article shows that the expansion of chronological boundaries is directly related to society's interest in its history and the stabilization of the literary language. Therefore, defining vocabulary boundaries in lexicography is not simply a matter of choosing a time period, but rather a process of systematizing the cultural and spiritual experience of a people expressed through language.

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