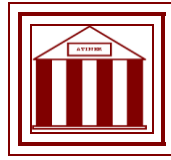


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**Etymology and Bilingual Dictionaries:
The Case in African Languages**

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Etymology and Bilingual Dictionaries: The Case in African Languages

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Abstract

A complete definition of a lexical item involves the provision of word category, pronunciation, spelling, structure, illustrative examples and etymology. However, bilingual dictionaries are mainly concerned with the meaning of lexical items. For a dictionary user to have a deeper meaning of a lexical item, the component of etymology should be included in the definition of a lexical item. African languages are developing languages. As a result, lexicography work is concentrated more on bilingual dictionaries than monolingual dictionaries. The definition of lexical items in African languages bilingual dictionaries is mostly restricted to the provision of equivalents and meaning. The component of etymology is excluded. As developing languages, African languages borrow vocabulary from a range of other languages, including other African languages. Therefore, there is a need for the provision of information about the origin of some of the lexical items in order to discover their true meanings. This article seeks to highlight the importance of the inclusion of the component of etymology in the definition of lexical items in African languages bilingual dictionaries.

Keywords:

Introduction

The main reasons for consulting dictionaries are to discover the meaning of words and checking their spelling. Jackson (2002:126) states that dictionaries have a double function: as a record of the vocabulary of a language, i.e. a lexical description, and as a reference work to meet the needs of users for information about words and their usage. A complete definition of a lexical item, however, involves a number of elements, amongst them, the provision of word category, pronunciation, spelling, structure, illustrative examples and etymology. A full description of a lexical item (involving the elements mentioned above) can only be realized in large dictionaries, especially monolingual dictionaries. Small and bilingual dictionaries in particular, are mainly concerned with the meaning of lexical items. Elements such as pronunciation, morphology, etymology and illustrative examples do not receive much attention in these dictionaries.

African languages are developing languages. Serious lexicography work, initiated by the Pan South African Language Board, has just started in the indigenous languages of South Africa. Although the emphasis of lexicography work in these languages is the production of monolingual dictionaries, concentration is more on bilingual dictionaries. As indicated above, in most cases the definition of lexical items is mostly restricted to the provision of equivalents and meaning. Components such as etymology are excluded in this regard. The exclusion of the other components in the definition of lexical items in these dictionaries is due to lack of space. Heller (1965:116) states that the failure of lexicographers to etymologize all words in dictionaries is, one overt reason and a more subtle covert one. The author states that the overt reason is the practical necessity of saving space, always a major consideration in lexicography; and that the covert reason is the avoidance of rather difficult processes of historical development. Drysdale (1979) also states that etymological information in dictionaries is often ignored; and that this may be because of the kind of information that is given and the way in which it is presented. The author poses the following questions in this regard:

Are etymologies given in dictionaries for the reader's enlightenment, for the editor's satisfaction, or out of a sense of duty or obligation? Furthermore, if it is true that the etymologies in dictionaries are largely ignored, does this neglect arise from the reader's lack of interest or from the way in which the information is customarily presented? (Drysdale 1979:39).

In this regard, Drysdale (1979:44) comes up with two impediments.

One is that the formulas in which etymologies are usually expressed have tended to limit the kinds of information that can be given, while emphasizing the listing of unproductive intermediate and cognate forms. The second is that dictionary editors and publishers seem as yet to have developed no basis for

judging how much or how little etymological information to provide for a particular audience.

One other reason for the exclusion of a component such as etymology is that it is seen not as important in the acquisition of meaning. Landau, cited by Jackson (2002:127) says that etymology does not have the same status as other elements of lexical description in a dictionary because: it does not make a contribution to the description of the contemporary meaning and usage of words; it offers no advice to one who consults a dictionary on the appropriate use of word in the context of a written text or spoken discourse. According to Landau, it merely provides some passing insight for the interested dictionary browser with the requisite background knowledge and interpretative skills. In many instances, information regarding etymology is provided in the larger general purpose dictionaries.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of including the component of etymology in the definition of a lexical item in bilingual dictionaries of the African languages.

Etymology Defined

Etymology is the study of word origins (Malkiel 1976). Other scholars define etymology as a branch of linguistics dealing with word origins. Kirkness (1984:109) writes: “Etymology may be defined for present purposes as a description of the origin and history of both form and content of lexical item with regard to related items (i.e. to word families and semantic fields) and to equivalent or cognate items in related languages.” The definition of the concept etymology is centered on the history of the word. Landau (1984:98) cites Pyles who says the following on the subject: “There is widespread belief held even by some quite learned people, that the way to find out what a word means is to find out what it previously meant – or, preferably, if it were possible to do so, what it originally meant ...” Dasgupta, Ford and Sigh (2000) add to the above by stating that etymology involves discovering the true meaning of a word by “unfolding” it. When a dictionary user traces the origin and history of a word, he or she is involved in unfolding the true meaning of the lexical item. It helps in describing a word’s form and meaning when it first appeared and further describes its intermediate and ultimate forms and meanings in other languages.

Dictionaries are not only read for the purposes of the meaning and spelling, but also for information regarding the history of the lexical entry. Landau (1984:98) argues that although meaning is certainly most often sought by dictionary users, it does not have the cachet of etymology, which combines knowledge of other languages. Drysdale (1979:46) identifies three good reasons for including etymologies in a dictionary, i.e.:

- to provide raw material for the scholar and the student of the history of the language.

- to increase understanding of, and stimulate interest in, both languages in general and one language in particular.
- since a dictionary is a record of the culture of those who speak the language it describes, etymology is included to provide clues to the history of that culture and its relationships to others.

The sources of words in a language are diverse, a small proportion is original, many are borrowed from a range of other languages, therefore there should be some justification for providing information at least about the origin of a word (Jackson 2002). Hence it is important to include the component of etymology in a definition of a lexical entry, especially for words borrowed from other languages. Landau (1984:103) has this to say about the importance of including etymology in the definition of a lexical item: “To divorce a language from its past misses the opportunity to show language in its context, even though particular words may be very well defined without etymology.”

The Importance of Etymology in African Languages

African languages, especially indigenous languages of South Africa, are characterized by the use of words borrowed from other languages. Much of their terminologies, especially in the fields of science, mathematics, economics and health sciences, depend on borrowings from developed languages such as Afrikaans and English. In some other cases, the origin of words in Afrikaans and English can be traced to languages such as Greek and Latin. Providing the equivalent and meaning for such words is not enough for dictionary users. The original meaning of such a word should be unfolded in order to find out the true meaning.

Borrowing in African languages should not be restricted to developed languages; words can also be borrowed from other neighbouring languages or African languages. In order to unfold the true meaning of the word borrowed from another African language, the component of etymology must be included in the definition of the lexical item. Until such time the monolingual dictionaries will be produced in abundance, the element of etymology must be included in the definition of lexical entries in bilingual dictionaries, particularly for some words borrowed from other languages. At present time the inclusion of borrowed words and the component of etymology cannot be left to larger dictionaries in African languages. Since concentration of the production of dictionaries in African languages is on small and bilingual dictionaries, it is imperative that etymology of this type of lexical items be provided in these dictionaries so that dictionary users can have a clear understanding of the real meanings. The point is, there are no dictionaries of etymology in many African languages. Very few lexicographers in African languages have produced dictionaries which deal with the origin and history of lexical items.

Therefore, the element of etymology must be included in the definition of lexical entries in small and bilingual dictionaries of the African languages. If

the etymology of some borrowed words is not provided, dictionary users find it difficult to understand the real meaning of the lexical item. The problem being the fact that lexicography in African languages is concentrated in small and bilingual dictionaries which do not have enough space for the inclusion of other elements of the definition of a lexical entry, other than the provision of equivalent or meaning and equivalent.

The vocabulary of a language may be coined or borrowed from other languages. On this point, Kirkness (1984:111) states that a word form may be either taken over from foreign language or coined within the domestic tradition, mainly by composition and derivation. Borrowing can occur because of two reasons, firstly because of different language communities coming into contact and secondly because of development. African languages communities had contact with respective colonial language communities. An evidence to show that there was contact between these language communities is the element of borrowing. As Landau (1984:10) writes: "When one alleges that a word was borrowed from the language of another culture, there must be evidence that the two peoples actually came into contact." By the time these languages came into contact, the colonial languages were far ahead in development when compared to African languages. Although colonial languages and African languages borrowed from each other, African languages borrowed more words than colonial languages. New vocabulary in the fields of science, economics, health, etc. was introduced in African languages. This vocabulary was meant to be used in schools and in peoples' daily life.

Lexicographers were also affected by the introduction of new vocabulary. Lexicographers included this new vocabulary in their lexicography works, both in monolingual dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries. As indicated above, lexicography work is mainly concentrated in bilingual dictionaries and small dictionaries in African languages. Words such as *abunomala*, *alimanaka*, *baolodzhi*, *dzhafurou*, *katekisima*, *mathematiki*, *dzhege*, *ekonomi*, and *gazete* do appear as lexical entries in some Tshivenda dictionaries. Lexicographers of these dictionaries provide equivalents, sometimes accompanied by word categories in the definitions. The provision of equivalent and word category does not address the problem of the true meaning of the lexical item. Although the meaning of the lexical entry can at times be explained, the true meaning of the lexical entry can be realized when etymology forms part of the definition of a lexical entry. For example, the equivalent of *etymology* can be provided as *etimolodzhi* in Tshivenda. The provision of the equivalent of this word does not provide dictionary users with the meaning. It is good that dictionary users will know the equivalent of this word in Tshivenda, but this does not provide them with the meaning. Only those who are involved in the study of etymology will be in a position to know the meaning of this word. When looking at its etymology, one finds that *etymology* originates from the Greek word *etymon* which meant literal sense of a word. Etymology is formed by *etymos* (true) + *-logy* (currently it means the origin and development of a word or the tracing of a word or words back as far as possible) (Guralnik 1981). The information regarding the etymology of this word can help unfold the true meaning of the

lexical entry. A dictionary user is in a position to trace the historical development of the meaning of the word *etymology* in this regard.

Some of the lexical entries defined in some Tshivenḁa bilingual dictionaries are as follows:

economics *ekonomi (cl n-) cf Afr 'ekonomie'* p.149

gazette *gazete (dzi-) cf Eng* p.153

gas *gese (dzi-) cf Eng* p.153

science *saintsi (cl n) cf Eng* p.175

(Wentzel & Muloiwa 1982)

In the above-mentioned examples, lexicographers did not provide the meaning of lexical entries, but the equivalents thereof and languages of origin, sometimes accompanied by word categories. In the first example (*economics*) the lexicographers provided the equivalent and the word category, whereas in the second and the third examples (*gazette and gas respectively*) the lexicographers provided the equivalents and the plural forms. The meaning of the lexical entries is not addressed. The component of etymology can be of great value towards bringing out the true meaning of the lexical entries in this regard. For example, if we can look at the etymology of the lexical entry *gazette* we will find the following:

[Fr. < It. *Gazetta* < *dial. Gazeta*, a small coin, price of a newspaper] a newspaper, official publication containing announcements and bulletins (Guralnik 1981:393).

From the etymology of the lexical entry given above, a dictionary user gets to know that the language of origin of the word is Italian, which shifted to French, and that there has been a shift of meaning in the word. However, the idea of 'newspaper' is common in all the meanings. At origin the meaning was attached to the prize of a newspaper, but the current meaning in English refers to the official publication containing announcements and bulletins.

The etymology of the lexical entry *economy* is as follows:

[< L. < Gr. < *oikonomos*, manager < *oikos*, house + *nomos*, managing, *nemein*, to distribute] management of income, expenses, etc; careful management of wealth, resources, etc. (Guralnik 1981:301).

The original word for *economy* is the Greek word *nemein*, which meant *to distribute*. Latin borrowed the word and was known as *Oikonomos*. *Oikonomos*

is formed by *nomos* (managing) + *oikos* (house). *Oikonomos* means manager. However, the current meaning of *economy* is management of income, expenses, etc; careful management of wealth, resources, etc. The etymology of this word has revealed much about its meaning. Dictionary users are able to unfold the shift of meaning of the lexical entry through the provision of etymology in its definition. The same holds for the lexical entry *science*. Its etymology is provided as follows:

[OFr. < L. < prp. Of *scire*, to know, orig., to distinguish, separate:
for IE]
(Guralnik 1981:860).

As shown above, the lexical item *science* originated from Latin, with its original meaning *to know*. At present the lexical item means the *state or fact of knowing*.

There is no language which exists in isolation. South Africa is a multilingual society. There are about nine African languages spoken in the country. African language communities live together, or share borders. As a result, there exists an element of borrowing words from one African language to another. The element of etymology as part of a definition of a lexical item should therefore not be restricted to words borrowed from developed languages such as Afrikaans and English, but should also be extended to lexical entries borrowed from other African languages. For example, Vhavenda share borders with Basotho ba Leboa, Vhakalanga and Vatsonga. It is not surprising to find that these languages share a lot of terminology in their daily communication. Tshivenḁa has borrowed words such as *musimana* (a boy); *liswuhana* (a young man) and *mutshato*, (a wedding feast).

musimana 1 (So.) mutukana p.238

liswuhana 5 (So. lesogana) muḁhannga p. 130 (Van Warmelo 1989)

mutshato (mi-) troue(ry), bruilof, huweliksfees | wedding (feast), marriage festival p. 39 (Wentzel & Muloiwa 1982)

-shata; Zu. -shada, Xho. -tshata), wedding dance, wedding celebration

In the examples given above, lexicographers provided the language of origin, class and the synonym of the lexical entries. This unfolds the relationship between the neighbouring languages. The information is interesting to a person who wants to know the history of the language. However, the etymology does not unfold the meaning of the words in the language of origin. For dictionary users to have a clear understanding of what

the borrowed words mean, information about the meaning in the language of origin must be provided. For example, the meanings of lexical entries *musimana* and *liswuhana* are not provided. The definitions of the lexical items entail the word class, language of origin and the synonym. The provision of etymology is incomplete in this regard.

Because of the changing economic conditions in the world, people abandon rural areas in favour of urban areas and migrate to cities to look for work. People from different parts of the country come into contact in large cities. Smaller languages tend to borrow words from dominating languages. When these speech communities go back to their rural areas, the borrowed words are adopted and form part of the standard language. For example, all ethnic groups flock to the Witwatersrand region searching for work. Through the intermingling of these people, Vhavenda borrowed words such as *mutshato* to enrich their vocabulary. These words now form part of lexical items in their dictionaries. *Mutshato* is a word borrowed from the Nguni languages, i.e. *umtshato* in isiXhosa and *umshado* in isiZulu. In Wentzel and Muloiwa (1982) the English equivalents of *mutshato* are *wedding dance* and *wedding celebration*. The lexicographers do not reflect on the meaning of the lexical item. Had the lexicographers brought in the component of etymology in the definition of the lexical item *mutshato*, this would have assisted them in providing the meaning as provided in the original language. For example, *mutshato* is defined as follows in isiZulu:

-shado (umshado, 3.2.9.9. imishado) n. [*<*shada.*] Christian marriage, marriage by civil rites (Doke et al 1990:730)

The Tshivenda definition refers to an action, i.e. *wedding dance* and *wedding celebration*. However, the isiZulu definition of *umshado* refers to a type of marriage, and in this case it is a Christian marriage. The Tshivenda definition entails all types of marriage, i.e. Christian marriage and native marriage. Had the lexicographers tried to search for the etymology of this lexical item, they would have known that the meaning of *umshado* is restricted to Christian marriage and not a wedding celebration for any type of marriage. The equivalent of *umshado* in Tshivenda is *mbingano*. Therefore, *mutshato* can also be used as a synonym for *mbingano (ya Tshikhiresite)*. This is information which should have been included in the definition of the lexical item *mutshato*.

Musimana is a Sesotho sa Leboa word with its English equivalent *boy*. The word *boy* is defined by Guralnik (1981:110) as a male child from birth to adulthood. The provision of the synonym of *musimana*, which is *mutukana*, does not address the problem of meaning. The meaning should be given before the synonym is provided. The lexicographer achieves this through tracing the origin of the lexical item in the language of origin. It is indicated that *liswuhana* has been borrowed from Sesotho sa Leboa *lesogana* which means *young man*. However, the meaning thereof is not provided in the definition. Full etymology must be provided in the definition of words of foreign origin.

Lexicographers should not despair of the problem, but should search for better ways of selecting and presenting the etymological information that they give.

Conclusion

It is true, etymology does not have the same status as other components of lexical description in a dictionary, particularly in bilingual dictionaries. However, for African languages, the inclusion of the component etymology is imperative, especially for borrowed words from other languages. Through etymology, users of the language are able to see how their vocabulary has been constructed. Etymology demonstrates that language changes in form and meaning. According to Drysdale (1979), etymologies enhance the total entries and enrich the readers' understanding of the continuity of language and humanity, of how people have used and adapted language to reflect the needs of their culture, and of how the building of culture and the development of language go hand in hand. Users of the language are given the opportunity to have a deeper understanding of the historical development of their language. Through etymology, both sense and form are accounted for, and one sees evidence of the processes of word borrowing and adaptation, and meaning transfer (Drysdale 1979). As indicated above, lexicography work is concentrated in bilingual dictionaries in African languages. Therefore, this type of dictionaries should be used to study the history and origin of words borrowed from other languages. However, not all lexical entries borrowed from other languages should include the component of etymology in their definition. Etymology should be provided to those entries whose meanings seem to be unclear.

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