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An About–Turn Halfway Through the Completion of a Multi Volume Overall–Descriptive Dictionary — Gallantry or Folly?

Abstract

This article examines two questions concerning a drastic break in continuity halfway through the compilation of a multivolume overall–descriptive dictionary. The questions are: (i) is acceleration in itself motivation enough for a drastic break in the continuity of an overall–descriptive dictionary, and (ii) at what stage in the ever continuing development of a language should an overall–descriptive dictionary be compiled and can an ill–timed starting date justify a break in continuity? It is argued that acceleration can under certain conditions justify a break in continuity and that an overall–descriptive dictionary can only be compiled when a language is considered to be standardized.

1. Introduction

Is a radical break with preceding volumes justifiable if it becomes evident that an overall–descriptive dictionary will not be completed within the customary period of between 70 and 100 years? Is it justifiable to adopt drastic measures aimed at acceleration which will change the appearance and character of a dictionary which would otherwise take the best part of 200 years to complete? The dictionary in case is the Afrikaans overall–descriptive dictionary *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal (WAT)*.

The theoretic principle at stake is whether acceleration in itself is motivation enough for a drastic break in the continuity of an overall–descriptive dictionary.

When the Dutch historic dictionary *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal (WNT)* was confronted by a similar situation in 1972, 120 years after its inception, a new generation editorial staff decided on dynamic and innovative measures. The aim was the completion of the project before the year 2000 (Van Sterkenburg 1984: 75–76). This led to the decision in 1976 that no material dating after 1921 would be included in the dictionary, which meant that the last 12 volumes of a planned total of 37 volumes would contain no simplexes, derivatives, compounds or usage examples dating after 1921 (W. de Clerck 1976: 17). These volumes would therefore be of a limited historic character since they are aimed at a completed period (Gouws 1989: 63), namely 1500 to 1921, and do not describe the contemporary language usage at the time of compilation like the previous volumes.

After the implementation of the 1921 caesura and other accelerating measures like the enlargement of the editorial staff, production increased in spectacular fashion (Van Sterkenburg 1984: 77) and presently the *WNT* is heading straight towards the year 1998 as the date of completion (Moerdijk 1992). Two supplementary volumes will update the dictionary to 1976 on a macrostructural level regarding lexical items not included as a result of for example the 1921 caesura (Van Sterkenburg 1992: 150–152; 1993). These volumes will also to a great extent solve the problem of references which could not be honoured in volumes published after the implementation of the 1921 caesura.

A second principle at stake is at what stage in the ever continuing development of a language an overall–descriptive dictionary should be compiled.

Gouws and Ponelis (1992), in support of Gallardo (1980:16), argue that one of the most important prerequisites for the compilation of a comprehensive or overall–descriptive dictionary is an established standard language with fixed norms. Gallardo maintains that bilingual dictionaries are instruments of ongoing language standardization, whereas monolingual dictionaries come into existence only after completion of the standardization process.

According to Gouws and Ponelis this implies that the lexicographical process in any given language first has to produce a bilingual and a standard dictionary before a comprehensive dictionary can be obtained. Contrary to Gallardo's point of view they are of the opinion that the compilation of monolingual dictionaries is not precluded if a language is still in the process of standardization. Standard dictionaries can be either bilingual or monolingual and both have an assignment in the standardization process of a given language.

According to Zgusta (1971: 210) both standard–descriptive dictionaries and overall–descriptive dictionaries are usually compiled only when the respective language has a written literature.

2. Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal

2.1 1926–1945: a standard descriptive dictionary in preparation

When the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal (WAT)* was established in 1926 the idea was that Prof. J.J. Smith would compile a dictionary comparable with the Dutch *Van Dale*, a standard descriptive dictionary, which was to be completed within three years. At that stage Afrikaans literature was restricted and the linguistic description of Afrikaans still in a preliminary phase. Judging by the dicta of Gallardo and Zgusta the *WAT* was typologically aiming at the wrong target. According to Gouws and Ponelis the idea to compile an Afrikaans standard descriptive dictionary was in

accordance with the general parallel between language development and dictionary typology.

When Smith retired in 1945 after 19 years of lexicographical labour not a single volume had been published. However, manuscript ranging from a preliminary to a revised state had been prepared up to the letter M in the style of a standard dictionary (*WAT* archives).

There are various answers to the question why nothing had been published in nineteen years. *The Afrikaans language had not been standardized by 1926*. No extensive recording of the Afrikaans language had been undertaken and there was only a very limited literature which could be excerpted. No comprehensive study of the Afrikaans grammar had been undertaken and many spelling issues still had to be solved while there was an almost complete lack of technical terms. The contradicting advice from leading linguists added to the general uncertainty surrounding the project. In one instance completed manuscript of the word *hand* was presented to two linguists for judgement. Prof. Kempen was of the opinion that it was a brilliant piece of work and had special appreciation for the treatment of idiomatic expressions in the article. Prof. Boshoff, however, was convinced that the article of *hand* was an excellent example of how it should not be done. He was especially dissatisfied with the treatment of the idiomatic expressions in the article (Gericke 1991: 72–75).

Two other impeding factors were the complete lack of existing etymological research, on which much time was spent, and contradicting opinions on the inclusion of Dutch words. Some critics were convinced that the data base of Smith was too Dutch orientated whilst others propagated the inclusion of more Dutch words.

In the meantime there had also been a considerable amount of other lexicographical activity in Afrikaans and two Afrikaans–English bilingual dictionaries were published in 1926 and 1931 and a descriptive desk dictionary, *Verklarende Afrikaanse Woordeboek*, in 1936. These first editions were speedily followed by several revised and greatly improved editions.

2.2 1950–1989: an overall–descriptive dictionary excites and disappoints

When the first volume of the *WAT* (A–C) was published in 1950 it was not a dictionary in the tradition of a *Van Dale* or *Shorter O.E.D.* as had always been expected. It had the character of a comprehensive overall–descriptive dictionary and was well received by academics, writers and users in general (Gericke 1991: 95–96). The letters A and C were edited de novo whilst B was a revised version of the Smith manuscript. It can therefore be argued that 1950 marked the real beginning of the *WAT*.

The dictionary typology used by Gouws and Ponelis is confusing. They describe the first Afrikaans desk dictionary published in 1936 as a standard dictionary and apply the same term to *Van Dale* and the *Shorter Oxford*. To a certain extent this jeopardizes their argument that the *WAT* was a radical

deviation from the normal lexicographic pattern that an overall–descriptive dictionary should be preceded by a standard dictionary as the first *WAT* volume was only published in 1950.

To compensate for the lack of Afrikaans technical terms, Dutch terms were included in the first volume of the *WAT* (Schoonees 1950: introduction). Following the advice of leading linguists, other Dutch words were also included on the grounds that they could be needed in Afrikaans in the future (Gericke 1991: 75) although they were not part of the Afrikaans vocabulary at the time of compilation. None of these words really became part of the Afrikaans lexicon as Afrikaans and Dutch continued to move further away from each other. No etymologies were given but the language of origin was given in the case of loan–words.

Thus, by the time the first volume of the overall–descriptive *WAT* (A–C) appeared in 1950, no standard descriptive Afrikaans dictionary had been published. By 1950 Afrikaans had a well–established written literature and compilers of dictionaries could benefit from a greatly but not completely standardized language.

Volumes II to IV (D to I) were also enthusiastically received but from volume V to VIII the criticism was mainly aimed at the slow alphabetic progress, the encyclopedic treatment of lemmas and the strong accent on technical terms (Combrink 1979, Gouws 1985, Swanepoel 1989).

2.3 1989–1994: drastic measures cause drastic acceleration

The fact that the completion of the letter K took almost 30 years gave rise to predictions that it would take more than 200 years to complete the *WAT*, which would then to a large extent not be a true reflection of the Afrikaans language. In May 1989, two years before the publication of volume VIII which marked the completion of K, the Board of Control of the *WAT* made several far–reaching proposals. The most drastic of these proposals was that the work on the *WAT* should be stopped for a period of ten years during which time a *standard Afrikaans dictionary* would be compiled by the editorial staff. Once again the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* and *Van Dale* were mentioned as the type of dictionary that was envisaged.

Other important proposals were that *strategic planning* be undertaken by the Bureau of the *WAT*, that the *computerization* of its activities which was started in 1987 should be expanded to its fullest extent, and that Afrikaans linguists should be involved in pursuit of optimally user–friendly future volumes of the *WAT* (De Vries 1989).

In its response the editorial staff pointed out that it took 30 years to produce the *Shorter Oxford* using the completed *O.E.D.* as source and that the revision of the 10th edition of *Van Dale* took eight years. Therefore 10 years were viewed as unrealistic for the compilation of a standard dictionary and the fifteen or more years required was seen as too long an interruption

of the work on the *WAT*. The other proposals put forward were however accepted.

In a first step to accelerate the production of the *WAT* strategic planning was undertaken. The whole editorial staff was involved and a mission was defined, aims and goals were formulated, action plans were worked out and target dates were set. Ten focus areas of the Bureau were identified, namely the editorial process, data collection, marketing, public language service, research, personnel, finance, editorial support, planning and management, and layout and printing. By November 1989 the strategic planning of the *WAT* was completed (Bureau of the *WAT* 1989).

It was evident that a drastic revision of the editorial process was essential to rid the dictionary of all lexicographical practices which had become outdated and to reflect the state of the art of linguistics as far as it is practically possible. A 'new' Afrikaans overall-descriptive dictionary was about to be born.

The design of the 'new' *WAT* was done in close co-operation with nine leading South African linguists who are all involved in a variety of lexicographic projects and mostly also lecture in lexicography. The co-operation culminated in two working sessions held in an island situation at Stellenbosch. In the first session of three days articles from the most recent volume were analysed to the bone and the subjects of discussion ranged from something as concrete as typography to the style of definitions.

In the next two years a new editorial manual was developed which covered all aspects of lexicography and according to which new manuscript was being prepared. The suggestions of the linguists were tested and as many as were practically possible were included in the manual.

After two years a second working session was held with the nine co-operating linguists during which manuscript written according to the new manual was evaluated and after which certain adjustments were made.

The most important aspects of the break in continuity in the dictionary are the following: a new but better organized field structure of articles of which some changes were necessitated by the in-house developed computer programme for on-screen entry into the dictionary; modern and user-friendly typography; a newly formulated system of labelling; fonetic transcription of all lemmas; shorter, less encyclopedic definitions; fewer technical terms; less, but better chosen usage material; a more broad-minded approach regarding the inclusion of English loan words and examples of language variation; and most important of all, a drastic break from the average number of years taken to produce a volume. The first volume of the 'new' *WAT*, which covers the letter L, took 2 years to complete (published March 1994) as opposed to the average of 7 years of the three preceding volumes.

Another important break with the past, from the side of the editors, is that they are no longer bound by references from the 'old' volumes which do not reflect the true usage of the language at the time of compilation. The word

beeldradio (literally *vision radio*) could for instance in 1950 have had a higher frequency than *televisie* (*television*) which today has the higher frequency in Afrikaans. Therefore *beeldradio* would have been supplied with a definition and *televisie* given as a lesser used synonym. The *WAT* being a synchronic dictionary it would not be a true reflection of the language if this reference was honoured at *televisie*. But editors are now free to provide a definition at *televisie* and give *beeldradio* as a lesser used synonym.

3. Conclusion

Acceleration is sufficient motivation for a break in the continuity of a multi-volume overall-descriptive dictionary *if the relevance of the dictionary can be harmed by the slow progress and if the break is not necessitated by inferior lexicography over a long period*. If the user is assured of a better product which is also published in quicker succession his interests are best served.

The break in continuity regarding the *WAT* can be motivated on the grounds that acceleration of the process had become imperative, Afrikaans had not been fully standardized by the time the first volume was published, and most important, the changes in the dictionary are to the advantage of the user.

Drawing from the experience of the painful renaissance of the *WAT* it can be stated that an overall-descriptive dictionary can only be compiled when a language has been standardized, and if the compilers have a representative data base at their disposal and possess the required knowledge and skills to compile a dictionary according to the lexicographic principles of their time.

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