

We all stand together, don't we? – African renaissance through dictionaries

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Abstract

Co-operative lexicography involves co-operation between lexicographers, between lexicographers and theorists and between lexicographers and dictionary users. Such co-operation has been slow to materialise because of long standing differences between the parties, especially between theorists and lexicographers. Recently a number of projects in Africa have however benefited greatly from co-operation on all three levels. The hope is expressed that as the Renaissance was marked by the emergence of dictionaries spreading the light of learning across the Continent, the much talked about African Renaissance will, through lexicographic co-operation, be characterised by the emergence of dictionaries for all African languages.

1 Introduction

Co-operation between lexicographers and theorists, and between lexicographic projects themselves have been slow to materialise. A number of projects in Africa have however recently benefited greatly from co-operative lexicography.

2 Co-operative lexicography involving theorists and lexicographers

Linguists and metalexicographers alike have been frustrated by the fact that lexicographers tend to cling to outmoded ideas and unsatisfactory lexicographical practices. The lexicographer on the other hand always has to bear in mind that the majority of dictionary users are rather conservative, preventing lexicographers from implementing new terminology or theories [Iombard 1994: 297].

However, although dictionaries are conservative and traditional they do sometimes change. Sometimes a serious effort is made to break away from tradition, as was the case with the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* (Dictionary of the Afrikaans Language). The *WAT*, that is the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal*, is the comprehensive monolingual explanatory dictionary of Afrikaans. The work on this multivolume dictionary was started in 1926. After a long delay the first volume (A-C) was published in 1950 and the tenth (M) in 1996. The eleventh volume (N-O) is to be published in May 2000. In 1989 the dictionary was redesigned with the co-operation of nine metalexicographers, breaking with traditions stretching over forty years. Not only was it the first time in the history of lexicography that a multi volume overall-descriptive dictionary was drastically changed halfway through the completion of the dictionary, it was also the first time that a dictionary was redesigned in co-operation with metalexicographers. A new style guide was developed and over a period of two years manuscript was prepared according to

the new style guide which incorporated as many of the suggestions of the metalexigraphers as was thought practically possible. After two years a second working session was held with the co-operating metalexigraphers whereafter certain adjustments were made. The result of it all was a more modern, user friendly dictionary reflecting the linguistic and lexicographic principles of our time.

Ironically some of the changes to the dictionary resulting from the suggestions of the metalexigraphers were already propagated in 1952 in a review of the first volume of the *WAT* [Labuschagne 1952]. Because of the rift between the dictionary and the metalexigraphy the dictionary users had to wait 40 years to reap the benefits of co-operation between theory and practice.

The exercise was not only to the advantage of the lexicographers as the metalexigraphers had the opportunity to have their theories tested in practice. The co-operation has a further advantage in that the metalexigraphers now consider themselves to be partners in a joint venture and have become more balanced and knowledgeable in their criticism of dictionaries.

A discussion group formed by editors at the *WAT* invites linguists and metalexigraphers to discuss linguistic related problems in dictionary making. The Bureau also have linguists and metalexigraphers as collaborators. A recent development is that postgraduate students in Lexicography from the University of Stellenbosch make an in-depth study of the latest volume of the *WAT*. This is followed by an open discussion between the students and their professor and the editorial staff of the *WAT* on the merits and shortcomings of the latest volume. Provided that both parties keep their cool and experienced lexicographers do not take offence when their work is criticised by students, such discussions can be very enriching. It is hoped that lexicography in South Africa will eventually reap the benefits of this co-operation between theory and practice.

3 Co-operation between lexicographer and dictionary user

The public reacted furiously when Philip Gove included slang and swear words unlabelled in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*. In doing so, he was reflecting the linguistic thinking of the day, but users saw it as an opening of the door to vulgarity [Zgusta 1980: 8]. According to [Zgusta 1980: 8] the source of the trouble was not only the strictly empirical approach adopted by Gove but also the lack of an intelligent discussion of the problem with the users of the dictionary, linguists and lexicographers.

In an effort to solve the problem regarding the inclusion of racist items the *WAT* in 1994 brought together a group of people consisting of dictionary users representing different cultural groups, the editorial staff of the *WAT* and metalexigraphers from South Africa and Europe. Over a period of three days they would try to reach consensus on the development of a strategy for the treatment of racist lexical items [Buro van die *WAT* 1994: 1]. At the outset the clashes between dictionary users and metalexigraphers were severe, until the users realised that the insistence of the metalexigraphers on the inclusion of racist items was not due to insensitivity, but due to an effort to be truly scientific in the portrayal of a language. At that stage it was nevertheless felt by the majority of users that the inclusion of racist lexical items in the *WAT* would be undesirable during the period of reconciliation in South Africa. After slightly more than a year had elapsed contact was again made with the participants and by then the climate in the country

had changed to such an extent that a revolutionary policy regarding the inclusion of racist items could be agreed upon. According to this policy no usage examples of racist lexical items are included in the printed version of the dictionary. A full treatment of the items is however done in the electronic manuscript which is available on request. The *WAT* regards this as one of the most rewarding and enriching experiences of co-operative lexicography in its history.

4 Co-operation between lexicographers

Up to 1994 South Africa only had two official languages, namely Afrikaans and English and Government subsidy was only provided for the dictionary units of Afrikaans and South African English. Dictionary units for two African languages, namely isiXhosa and isiZulu, have however existed for about three decades and are more or less managed like research centres at the Universities of Fort Hare and KwaZulu-Natal. According to the new South African constitution there are now eleven official languages and the government has committed itself to the establishment of a dictionary unit for every official language. This meant that an urgent need for the training of lexicographers suddenly arose in South Africa. Metalexicography is taught at least five South African universities, but there is a definite need for more practical and less time consuming training.

For the past five years the Bureau of the *WAT* has been offering a lexicographic training course dealing with General and Computer Lexicography, and the Planning and Management of a Lexicographic Project. The course is presented twice a year and stretches over two weeks. Since 1995 especially practicing lexicographers and persons destined to become involved in dictionary compilation in the new dictionary units have attended the course. Members of the isiXhosa and isiZulu dictionary projects were among the first to attend the training course at the *WAT*. Trainees have also come from as far as Angola, Namibia, Gabon, Tanzania and Zambia. In 1997, two staff members of the Bureau also presented the course at the Centre International des Civilisation Bantu (CICIBA) in Libreville, Gabon, where six African countries were represented.

Training sessions have also been presented by the African Association of Lexicography (AFRILEX). The first of these was organized by the Dictionary Unit of South African English and was presented by the English lexicographers Sue Atkins, Michael Rundell and Edmund Weiner. Follow-up courses in Pretoria dealt with specific aspects of African languages concerning lexicography. AFRILEX also presented a training course at the Institute for Kiswahili Research at the University of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania

The Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), has been entrusted with the task of establishing dictionary units for the eleven official languages of South Africa. Over the past two years PANSALB has organised several meetings bringing together the existing dictionary units and representatives of those which are still to be established. The meetings usually stretch over three days and experienced lexicographers and metalexicographers lead discussions on vital topics like dictionary typology, the planning of a dictionary project, a data collection policy and the creation of a database, an inclusion policy, lexicographic processes and data types, dictionary design, etc. The meetings take place in a truly co-operative spirit and the ideal is that the co-operation will continue when all the units have been established.

A prime example of co-operation between lexicographers, in this case involving Europe and Africa, is that between a group of Swedish and Norwegian lexicographers and the ALLEX project in Zimbabwe, a neighbouring country to South Africa. This joint venture between Scandinavians and Zimbabweans started in 1992 and has demonstrated that an electronic data base can be built up in a relatively short time and that a Shona dictionary can be compiled using a specially designed computer programme. Zimbabwean lexicographers involved in the ALLEX project also visit Sweden and Norway regularly for advanced training.

An exciting development is the willingness of Swedish companies to support the development of a computer programme which could be used by all South African dictionary units. In this way the training and ongoing support of the still to be established dictionary units by the existing units in South Africa will be facilitated. The same Swedish lexicographers involved in the ALLEX project in Zimbabwe are responsible for the development of the programme.

There has been long-standing co-operation between the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of South African English* and between the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* and the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* which have been of invaluable importance to all the parties involved and which has led to various other publications. Some dictionary projects try to remain in touch with one another by exchanging lexicographical products, annual reports, etc., but such contact could be extended considerably [Van Schalkwyk 1995].

There is currently a lively interest in lexicography in Africa. The interest has been sparked by a new appreciation all over Africa for their indigenous languages. There is a desire to return to the indigenous languages and this is expressed in The Language Plan of Action for Africa which was accepted in 1987 by the Organisation of African Unity in Addis Ababa. This led to the development of lexicographic growing-points like the African Language Lexical Project (ALLEX) at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare in 1992, the Institute for Kiswahili Research at the University of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania and the Groupe de Recherches en Langues et Cultures Orales (GRELACO) established in 1998 at the Omar Bongo University in Libreville, Gabon to do research on eight indigenous languages and to compile dictionaries. In 1999 two and in 2000 three students from Gabon completed the training course at the Bureau of the WAT and then enrolled for a five year course in Lexicography at the University of Stellenbosch.

5 Conclusion

Much has recently been said about the African Renaissance and in October 1999 the African Renaissance Institute was launched in Pretoria, South Africa with as one of its main aims "*The rediscovery of Africa's creative past to recapture peoples' cultures, encourage artistic creativity and restore popular involvement in both accessing and advancing science and technology.*" [Radebe 1999: 3]. During the Renaissance the art of dictionary making flourished, spreading the light of learning across the European continent. The African Renaissance could be marked by the emergence of dictionaries for all the African languages through lexicographic co-operation on the African continent and between Africa and Europe.

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