Indirect Offensive Language in Dictionaries

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Abstract

Our craft, lexicography, requires a meticulousness that the layman easily confuses with hair-splitting. It is not unthinkable that from this misunderstanding or prejudice the word *lexicographer* develops into a nickname for a *nitpicker / hair-splitter*. If someone were called a *lexicographer* in this derogatory new sense, who would feel offended? The punctilious person whose behaviour inspired the invective and who heard himself called a 'lexicographer' of course. And I, a proud practitioner of the art and craft of lexicography.

This paper discusses the indirect offence and considers various possible approaches to the lexicographical treatment of offensive language. Examples are adduced to illustrate how the semantic development of words and changes in social circumstances can cause particular complications.

Giving information on the possibly offensive character of terms that originate from stereotypes is certainly something that can increase both the value and popularity of a (certain) dictionary. Developing criteria for selecting the terms that qualify for such an editorial treatment is necessary and far from easy.

Introduction

If I were to characterise the organisation of a scientific conference as typically *Italian*, you might assume that I was referring to, for example, the grace and verve of the opening ceremony. But if I were to specify *Italian* as *Sicilian*, it is likely that many in the audience would take it as negative criticism with the implication that the time schedule is not being followed properly. Or perhaps the presentations of the members of the board and close friends of the organisers are planned in the most attractive time slots. Whether we like it or not, prejudices like these regarding Sicilians and Italians, both positive and negative, do exist in our western culture, and very likely in the rest of the world too. Hollywood strongly supported them with movies about the Mob.

Such prejudices can, and often do, take the form of a fixed element in a language; they then enter a dictionary and fossilise. Even after the original prejudices have disappeared, the word or expression can survive. I am not aware of any example of a lexicalised prejudice against Sicily or Italy in any language that I know. (Chess players know the *Sicilian opening*, but that is another issue.) However, in Dutch a similar prejudice regarding other southern Europeans, the French, resulted in an idiomatic expression, namely *iets met de Franse slag doen*, literally 'do something with the French stroke', in a slapdash manner, fast and not thoroughly.

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There are at least two groups who could feel offended by my characterisation of the conference organisation as Sicilian, or being done with the *Franse slag*. The first is of course the conference organisers themselves; they are offended directly. The other group is the Sicilian or French people. By using a general stereotype against them, as a benchmark for something that is being done improperly, I indirectly offend them.

Direct and Indirect Offence

There is a distinction between two types of offence that can be evoked by the use of a term. The first kind is the direct offence. The speaker addresses, or describes someone else unkindly or worse, usually - but not necessarily - with a deliberate intention. The direct offence is almost synonymous with calling someone names.

The indirect offence results from a reference to a general, negative prejudice against a group. The following examples may illustrate the difference.

Term	Meaning	Direct	Indirect
Jew	niggard, avaricious person	offensive	stereotype, offensive
faggot	homosexual male	offensive	-
nigger	black person	offensive	-
Jesuit	intriguer	offensive	stereotype, offensive
Dutch treat	pay for yourself 'treat'	-	stereotype, negative

Stereotypes

It goes without saying that stereotypes are culture and time specific (which makes it hard to find international examples). The stereotypes are widely shared within the cultural and linguistic community in which the offensive reference develops. A group can by stereotyped in many ways and sometimes there is even an *-ism* (racism, sexism, ageism, locofaulism) to indicate the type of discrimination:

- race (Jew, Moor, Cossack)
- looks (slant-eye, mongol)
- nationality (Dutch courage, gipsy [< Egyptian], Jap/Nip)·
- profession (butcher, whore, peasant)
- religion (papist, Jesuit, Moonie)
- gender (womanish, unmanly)
- age (childish, old-wives' tale)
- proper name (Tom, Dick and Harry, Joe Bloggs)

The degree to which the stereotype is felt as offensive varies from culture to culture and is not static. Often we use stereotypes without realising it. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable when others make us aware of prejudices in our language that we use unconsciously. No civilised, decent, educated person would like to be caught in the act of publicly insulting or offending others. Especially when religion, race or nationality is involved we are more conscious than ever. The interesting cases to look at are the less obvious ones. They can be

found where society moves, where changes take place. I will discuss a few examples of the various types.

Some Examples

A few centuries ago the word *Turk* did not have a very specific meaning in Dutch. The state of Turkey did not exist yet and the Turks lived far away. We fought them during crusades, they dressed awkwardly and worshipped the wrong deity. For some time the word *Turk* was practically synonymous with Moor: anyone with a dark skin. Against this historic background the idiom *aan de Turken overgeleverd zijn* (be at the mercy of the Huns) and the simile *eruitzien als een Turk* (look dirty, untidy) developed. They are two examples of former stereotypes or prejudices that fossilised into fixed expressions in my mother tongue.

These days Turkey is a modern state, a candidate for EU-membership. Many former inhabitants settled in the Netherlands and many young Dutchmen have roots in Turkey. For some of them it is unacceptable that their language, Dutch, contains expressions with such a strong negative reference to their country of origin. Not long ago our publishing house was formally accused of discrimination by a young Turk (not fig.). He demanded that the expressions be eliminated from our leading, authoritative dictionary, the *Grote Van Dale*. We stated that 1) our obligation to register lexical facts prevents us from censoring the dictionary 2) that the label 'beledigend' (offensive) precedes the items. In a public debate (articles and letters to the editor in national newspapers) there was a lot of support for our point of view. I wondered whether we deserved that support and that uncertainty provoked this paper.

In recent Dutch dictionaries the **proper names** *Johnny* and *Anita* (in Belgium *Marina*) show up as common nouns meaning fashion-sensitive, lower class youngsters from what we call the *patatgeneratie* (couch-potato-generation). A distressed mother called the editor complaining that her daughter Anita was pestered by her classmates on the authority of the Van Dale school dictionary. She demanded that we exclude the item from future editions.

Moors, black Africans from Mauritania, never played a significant role in our society. The word *moor*, however, did enter the Dutch language in the 13th century as a general term for a person from Africa. Eventually Berbers and blacks were not distinguished and the word *moor* simply meant 'black person'. Later it was also used for other black creatures, like horses and cats. The derivative *moorkop* or *moorenkop* (Moor's head) was a horse with a black head. By comparison, a chocolate-covered cream puff was named a *moorkop*. In the 1980s Dutch confectioners collectively decided that this term did not sound politically correct and they abandoned it. You can buy *moorkoppen* all over the Netherlands, any Dutch person knows the word, but among those who produce and sell them, the common name of the artefact is a taboo word.

The Dutch word *slager* (butcher) is commonly used for professionals who have a rough, inconsiderate way of operating: surgeons of course, but also soldiers and even CEO's and interim managers. Yet most people respect the craft of meat-supplying butchers, who minimised the amount of visible blood from their aprons and shop windows. Whether real butchers do feel unjustly associated with the perfunctoriness of other professionals, I do not know. Nor am I aware of any dictionary that mentions the stereotype as being potentially offensive.

When a non-prostitute female dresses or behaves indecently according to the judgement of prudent men, like fathers and husbands, or jealous other women, she risks being called a *hoer* (whore). In the Netherlands prostitution is gradually developing into an accepted profession. Whores are subject to registration, to medical procedures, and they pay income tax on their earnings. There is even a trade union for professionals in the trade. For law-abiding workers in the sex industry it might be offensive to be the point of reference for tasteless clothing or behaviour of others. But no whore has yet approached Van Dale with a request to delete the derived meaning of the word *hoer*. Most likely the fact that the term *hoer* is a street-equivalent for the neutral, or more formal term *prostituee* (prostitute) plays a role here.

Sometimes a nickname or term of abuse becomes an honorary title. The *Geuzen* (beggars) were Dutch rebels against the Spanish government in the 16th century and they proudly adopted the nickname. This resulted in the Dutch term for this phenomenon: *geuzennaam*. A more recent example is *dyke*, a term of abuse that lesbians proudly adopted.

An interesting, but extremely touchy case is the lexicographical treatment of terms related to **Jews**. In many European countries Jews were both numerous and influential before the Second World War. In our parts the general attitude that non-Jews over many centuries had towards the Jews was aloof and standoffish. Stereotypes about them were strong and common and this was reflected in language, and in dictionaries. These stereotypes did not necessarily develop into anti-Semitism. A word like *brillenjood* (spectacle Jew) simply means 'four-eyes', anyone who wears spectacles. What happened during 40-45 turned common expressions that referred to the stereotypical Jew into taboo words. Shame prevents us from using these words now, and they can justly be excluded from contemporary dictionaries. But diachronic dictionaries cannot simply erase terms that were once common elements of the daily language, but which now make us feel uncomfortable.

Indirectly Offensive Items in Dictionaries

The issue at stake – stereotypes and related offences as properties of words – is not unique in being socially sensitive. In many cases the line between linguistic and social information is not easy to draw. Although we tend to think of dictionaries as neutral and purely linguistic, there is a political or social aspect in many types of information dictionaries offer. Even a seemingly innocent feature as spelling can be politically sensitive. When I, a non-native speaker of English, decide to write my English words in the British English spelling, I reject the American variants and thus I take a position. In many languages certain inflections, however frequent, are considered as sub-standard and will be marked as such if they are included in a dictionary at all. And only a small number of the pronunciations that occur in a region will be described in a general dictionary. With a publishers' or editors' choice for a specific pronunciation as RP we enter social territory. When dictionaries register facts about the denotation and connotation of words, it only becomes more obvious that we approach the boundaries of the realm of language. And the more sensitive the issue, like general prejudices against human beings, the harder it is to draw the line between linguistic and social or cultural information. And the more information a dictionary offers (on a specific subject),

the more explicit the treatment will have to be. The stronger the cultural orientation of a given dictionary, the more appropriate is an indication of possibly offensive stereotypes.

An example of a type of dictionary in which no note of warning is required is a bilingual dictionary in cases where a true translation equivalent is available. If in language X the fictitious 'drunk as a Scot' has an equivalent in language Y 'drunk as a Swede', attributes or labels like (offens), (derog.) or (slang) add nothing that a native speaker of one of the two languages needs to be made aware of.

In comprehensive dictionaries that do explicitly give cultural information, the user certainly appreciates a remark on stereotypes and their possibly offensive character in a cultural note, or an explanatory phrase like "People from this race consider the word Eskimo offensive and prefer to be called Inuits." from *Eskimo* in the Longman Dictionary of Language and Culture. However, the examples above show that developing criteria for the selection and editing of the terms is not an easy task. Should one try to be consistent (if *gipsies* and *peasants* are coded, then should *Cossacks* and *butchers* be too)? Or is the self-assertion of members of the offended group the criterion (if someone claims to feel offended, an editorial alteration will be made in the text of the dictionary article)?

And what should we do with words which do have an unpleasant connotation for members of the reference group, but which do not deserve an annotation in the eyes of the average member of the linguistic and cultural community. Two Dutch examples are: *geitenwollensokkentype* (open-sandals-and-woolly-socks type of person) and *konijnenvoer* (rabbit food) for vegetarian dishes. It may sound far-fetched, but *stomme koe* (stupid cow) is an unpleasant expression not only for the person whose stupidity is thus described, but also for the poor herbivore. We are not used to considering cattle as beings that can be insulted at all. But members of action groups that preach a change of attitude towards animals with slogans like 'animals have rights too', will certainly be in favour of a phrase that makes dictionary users aware of the unflattering stereotype that cows are stupid.

Conclusion

We must face the fact that the lexicon does reflect many unpleasant stereotypes, we have to decide upon the relevance of this specific type of information for the type of dictionary that we wish to bring about, and we must determine the adequate form in which we will present this information and then be as consistent as possible in following the chosen procedure.

Paying lip service to the public is easier than developing a consistent editorial policy. Without proper criteria for the selection of offensive stereotypes, a modish political correctness will soon prove to be a lexicographer's pitfall.

Paying proper attention to the phenomenon discussed here will certainly help to increase the recognition of the general descriptive dictionary as a reflection of the (current common opinions in the) society from which it originates. And propagating political correctness is certainly an effective policy from a commercial point of view.