

# Is the dictionary of quotations a dictionary?

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper argues that the definition of the word "dictionary" in most dictionaries is not adequate enough to cover such dictionaries as the dictionary of quotations. The writer maintains that the word "dictionary" has undergone a semantic extension. The distinctive feature of the dictionary is no longer the type of information it provides, rather the order in which this information is arranged. Having established that a dictionary of quotations is a proper dictionary, the writer deals with its compilers, entries, indices and typological classifications.

## 1. Introduction

Although the use of quotations in speech and writing has gone out of fashion during the twentieth century and is no longer as popular as it was during the preceding centuries, the present century has witnessed the birth of a larger number of dictionaries of quotations of all sizes, types and values. The increasing number of editions of some of those dictionaries attests the fact that they appeal to a wide spectrum of users and respond to a noticeable demand in the book market. A recent print-out of the data bank of Indiana University Libraries in Bloomington comprises 646 entries of various dictionaries of quotations, and certainly, the list is not exhaustive<sup>(1)</sup>.

However, lexicographers and applied linguists have so far paid very little attention, if any, to this peculiar genre of dictionaries. Likewise, neither lexicography courses nor symposiums deal with dictionaries of quotations.

## 2. Does the definition of "dictionary" cover the dictionary of quotations?

### 2.1 Definition of "dictionary"

If we examine the definition of the word "dictionary" in most medium-sized Arabic, English and French dictionaries, we find, more or less, the same statement. A dictionary is defined as book containing a selection of words of a language usually

arranged alphabetically with information on their meaning, pronunciation, spelling, etc., in the same language or in another one<sup>(2)</sup>.

Such a definition may cover general and special dictionaries, monolingual or binlingual, but it does obviously not take care of dictionaries of quotations.

### 2.1.2 Why do definitions of "dictionary" seem to exclude the dictionary of quotations?

Two answers are possible:

(a) Dictionaries of quotations are a recent innovation in the fast-moving field of lexicography and limited to a specialized audience. A layman in an English-speaking country would think of a lexical dictionary when hearing the word "dictionary". It would not occur to him that the word might have a wider application. A dictionary of jokes would be an unlikely publication as the word "dictionary" would deter people seeking laughter and amusement.

(b) Dictionaries of quotations are not dictionaries in the proper sense, and thus lexicographers are justified in not referring to them in their definition of "dictionary". This attitude might explain why several publishers do not tend to label their books of quotations as "dictionaries"; instead, they entitle them books, treasuries or, simply, quotations.

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<sup>(1)</sup> ISESCO (Morocco)

entitle them books, treasuries or, simply, quotations.

However, two facts make it difficult for us to accept either answer. First, dictionaries of quotations are not a recent development. The first book of quotations in Arabic was compiled in the tenth century (Al-Hilu 1983). The first British dictionary of quotations was published in 1779 (MacDonald 1779), and its American counterpart saw the light in 1885 (Barlett 1980). Secondly, some lexicographers and publishers issue dictionaries of quotations and language dictionaries of quotations, as illustrated, for example, by Robert (1988, 1989) and Larousse (1983, 1989).

One way of looking at the matter is to admit that the word "dictionary" has recently undergone a certain kind of "semantic extension". Accordingly, a dictionary is no longer limited to a selection of words and relevant information, but it may contain topics or items of a certain subject or activity arranged alphabetically. In other words, the distinctive feature of the dictionary has shifted from content to form; it is no longer the type of information the book provides but the order in which that information is arranged to provide users with easy access thereto. Examples of this "semantic extension" include various dictionaries of jokes (e.g. Nègre 1973), dictionaries of films (e.g. Sadoul 1976), dictionaries of symbols (e.g. Chevalier and Gheerbrandt 1969).

## 2.2. What is a dictionary of quotations?

To produce an acceptable definition for the "dictionary of quotations", one should thoroughly examine a large number of books carrying that label on their title cover. Having done so, the writer suggests the following definition: "A dictionary of quotations is a reference book containing familiar sayings or citations arranged in a convenient way, usually alphabetically, by subjects or authors".

### 2.2.1 The nature of quotations

A quotation has been defined as "a passage borrowed from another author who can be considered as an authority" (Littre 1958). Although the definition is basically sound, it goes without saying that a dictionary of quotations cannot assemble all quotations on various topics. It must adopt a criterion for the selection of its entries. In general, this criterion is called "popularity" or "familiarity". If the quotation is popular or familiar, it is included in the dictionary. In other words, the selection must be restricted to actual quotations and exclude phrase which the compilers believe to be quotable. (Oxford 1953, xiii).

In addition to this formal distinctive feature of quotations, there is a structural one when the quotations become fixed phrases. Fixed phrases have different phonological, syntactic and semantic features from free phrases (see Hill 1958, 126-129). However, a thorough examination of a large number of quotations proves that not all of them are fixed phrases. Some of the proverbs, saying and other quotations are fixed phrases such as "A stitch in time saves nine" (proverb), "A swarm of bees in May is worth a load of hay" (saying), "To be or not to be", [that is the question] and "East is East and West is West" [and never the twain shall meet] (quotations). The more uniform the usage of any given quotation, the more predictable of fixed is each constituent word in relation to the others in the phrase, as pointed out by Mackin (1978, 150-153).

### 2.2.2. Familiarity of quotations

The application of the popularity or familiarity criterion in the selection of the entries assists in distinguishing between a dictionary of quotations and a literary anthology of poetry or prose.

Nevertheless, popularity of familiarity is very difficult to measure. What is the standard of familiarity? Can a panel or a jury of educated speakers of the language decide whether a quotation is familiar enough to be

combination of both orders. His dictionary AT-TMATHIL WA-L-MUHADARAH comprises all sorts of quotations from the Quran, the Old Testament and New Testament, the Hadith (oral tradition of the Prophet Muhammad), proverbs of the Arabs and non-Arabs, sayings of Caliphs, Ministers, Philosophers, doctors, poets and men of letters, as he rightly indicated in his short introduction (Al-Hilu 1983, 5).

Consequently, Al-Thaalibi adopted, in the same dictionary, two types of arrangements: the order by author for the quotations whose authors had been known to him, and the order by subject for the quotations which were mostly anonymous such as proverbs and verses attributed to no particular poet. The first chapter of the dictionary follows the arrangement by authors and the other four chapters are ordered by subjects.

In the first chapter of AT-TAMTHIL WA-L-MUHADARAH, the order of authors is chronological. For example, poets are arranged from the most ancient to the most recent ones. Under each poet, verses which are most popularly quoted are arranged in no order. In the other four chapters, quotations are arranged under subject headings. In the chapter dedicated to human character, for example, the headings are as follows: youth, grayness of hair, dye, old age, wealth and money, poverty, poor man, happiness, unhappiness, security, fear, work, etc. These subjects are not arranged alphabetically, and the quotations under each one of them are of no deductible order either.

### **3.2. Range: limited vs. Wide-range dictionaries of quotations**

In regard to range, dictionaries of quotations can be divided by:

**3.2.1 Linguistic range:** dictionaries of quotations can be monolingual, bilingual (e.g. Hoyt 1894) or multilingual (e.g. Jones 1923). It is noticed that English bilingual dictionaries of quotations were more popular

when Latin, Greek and French had a stronger presence in the literary life, whereas nowadays one rarely finds this type of dictionaries.

**3.2.2 Geographical range:** dictionaries of quotations can be classified in the light of the geographical area they cover. There are dictionaries that are limited to quotations from the homeland only (e.g. McMahon 1984) or to foreign quotations (e.g. Collison 1958); others include quotations from all over the world (e.g. Montreynaud 1979).

**3.2.3 Historical range;** dictionaries of quotations can be divided on the basis of the period from which the quotations are drawn. Accordingly, there are dictionaries of contemporary quotations only (e.g. Green 1982), and dictionaries of quotations from all ages (e.g. Bradley 1969).

**3.2.4. Genre range:** one can classify dictionaries of quotations according to the particular literary genre from which their materials are drawn. Accordingly, there are unigenre dictionaries whose quotations come from poetry only (e.g. Bohn 1983) or from novels only (e.g. Powell 1985) or from proverbs only (e.g. Taylor 1958). However, most dictionaries of quotations are multigenre dictionaries comprising quotations of several literary genres.

### **3.3. Speciality: general vs. Special dictionaries of quotations**

A general dictionary of quotations deals with different subjects and fields of knowledge (e.g. Henry 1955), whereas a special dictionary of quotations handles quotations related to one subject or one field of knowledge such as success (e.g. Uttenhove 1988), business (e.g. Thomsett 1990), definitions (e.g. Brusell 1988), humour (e.g. Esar 1949), etc.

### **4. Difference between language dictionaries and dictionaries of quotations**

These two types of dictionaries differ from each other at various levels such as the objective, the compiler, the entries and the index.

#### 4.1. Objective

Although both types of dictionaries are designed to serve almost the same audience, i.e., students, teachers, lawyers, journalists, public speakers and the like; in other words all those who use language in speech and writing, they differ from one another as the objective. Whereas the language dictionary provides its users with certain linguistic information about the words and expressions of the language, their meaning, spelling, usage, pronunciation, etymology, etc., dictionaries of quotations provide well-known citations about various topics.

#### 4.2. Compilers

Whereas general language dictionaries are made by linguists and lexicographers, dictionaries of quotations are usually compiled by literary scholars. The team of specialists who compiled the OXFORD DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS included experts on Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Tennyson and Dryden (Oxford 1953, viii). The compiler of the first Arabic dictionary of quotations, Al-Thaalibi, was a prolific author whose works exceeded one hundred books, some of several volumes. He was a man of letters, a poetry critic, an

historian, a linguist and a lexicographer at the same time (Al-Hilu 1983, 7-41).

#### 4.3. Entries

Entries of language dictionaries are usually made up of morphemes, words, idioms or expressions; whereas entries of dictionaries of quotations consist of names of authors or subject headings.

#### 4.4. Index

No language dictionary has an index, except for a short list of abbreviations or symbols used. In a dictionary of quotations, an index normally occupies about one third of the entire book. The index itself may cover names of authors or subjects, depending on the scheme of arrangement followed in the dictionary.

In conclusion, a common ground where both types of dictionaries function complementarily is that, while the language dictionary reflects the cultural and scientific progress attained by a given society, the dictionary of quotations manifests the social and ethical values of this society as expressed by its best minds. It may be that the language dictionary does both when it uses illustrative quotations consistently; otherwise, "a dictionary without quotations is a mere skeleton", as Voltaire rightly put it (Rey 1979, vi)<sup>(4)</sup>.

## Endnotes

1- Many of these dictionaries of quotations have several editions and numerous printings. For example, **BEST QUOTATIONS FOR ALLOCCASIONS** has reached its thirty-fourth printing, although it was first published only in 1955 (Henry: 1990).

2- Look up, for example, the entry "dictionary" IN THE **ADVANCED LEARNERS' DICTIONARY**, **LAROUSSE ILLUSTRE**, **MICRO ROBERT**, **MODERN AMERICAN DICTIONARY**, **WEBSTER'S NEW**

**COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY**, and the Arabic Language Academy's dictionary **AL-WASIT**.

3- Notice, for example, the titles used in Carruth 1988, Hurd 1964, Thomsett 1991, Barlett 1980 and Henry 1990.

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