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PRESCRIPTIVISM IN ROMANIAN LEXICOGRAPHY

Abstract. The article argues that prescriptivism in dictionary making is a pervasive feature, despite the lexicographers' claims that the dictionary they present to the public is descriptive in approach. Since prescriptiveness is a matter of degrees rather than an absolute and, moreover, it can occur under different guises, we use the case of a major Romanian dictionary project in order to highlight some reifications of normative attitudes identifiable in the outside matter, macrostructure and microstructure of dictionaries.

Keywords: prescriptivism, macrostructure, microstructure, usage labels.

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ПРЕСКРИПТИВИЗМ В РУМЫНСКОЙ ЛЕКСИКОГРАФИИ

Аннотация. В статье утверждается, что прескриптивизм в составлении языковых словарей является широко распространенной чертой, несмотря на заявления лексикографов о том, что словари, которые они составляют, носят описательный характер. Поскольку прескриптивизм – это относительная, а не абсолютная величина, и, более того, он может проявляться в разных формах, авторы используют пример крупного румынского словарного проекта, чтобы выделить некоторые воплощения нормативных установок, которые реализуются во внешнем виде, макроструктуре и микроструктуре языковых словарей.

Ключевые слова: прескриптивизм, макроструктура, микроструктура, стилистическая помета.

1. Introduction

In relation to the monolingual dictionary and its users, lexicographers will adopt a (mostly) descriptive or a (mostly) prescriptive attitude. In the former case, they describe how people speak or write the language, while in the latter, they regulate the use of language, indicating what is correct and what is not [cf. 1, p. 164]. Although in the practice of dictionary making one of the two approaches tends to dominate, lexicographic products are usually a combination of the two, and more often than not, they are predominantly prescriptive. One of the main reasons for this relates to the users' expectations: as Dolezal [5, p. 730] aptly notes, dictionary users "do not just want answers to questions, they want *authoritative* answers" (emphasis added). It is this kind of expectation that accounts for the fact that prescriptivism seems to be a ubiquitous feature of dictionaries.

With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to overview some of the manifestations of prescriptive attitudes as reflected in the lexicographic products (section 2). The evidentiary support

used here originates in some of the major dictionary projects conducted in the Romanian context (section 3).

2. Prescriptivism in lexicography: an overview

Taking stock of the lexicographic practice so far, Bergenholtz and Gouws (2010) point out that it is rather difficult to determine whether a general language dictionary is descriptive or prescriptive: "Both description and prescription are processes. Dictionaries mostly displayed single occurrences of, for instance, prescription, because the approach had been directed at single phenomena and not at the entire dictionary. It would have been equally difficult to classify a given dictionary as descriptive, because such a classification depends on the way a lexicographer decides to present data to ensure that a function identified for the specific dictionary can be achieved" [2, p. 28].

Although the aim of dictionaries is to record language as used by speakers in their verbal interactions based on the evidence available at a particular time, the history of lexicography has quite early on recorded the presence of "prescriptive impulses". As Curzan points out, "the discourse of legitimacy, authenticity, and purity in relation to words has been circulating since the very first dictionaries were created" [5, p. 98]. This can be put down to, on one hand, the mission that lexicographers take upon themselves (e.g., to regulate the language, to educate the users, to record language "as is") and, on the other, the users' expectations as to what a dictionary should be: a guide for good (i.e., accurate, appropriate) language behaviour. The sometimes conflicting views of dictionary makers and dictionary users are also reported by Dolezal [6, p. 727]; as the author puts it, "Dictionary makers generally describe their work as describing the language, while users generally look to a dictionary for guidance, thus emphasizing the dictionary as an authoritative arbiter and prescriber of correctness".

When explicit, the prescriptive approach is announced in the outside matter, where the lexicographers present their work philosophy. But whether openly acknowledged or not, there are aspects of the lexicographic process or product which are more likely to display prescriptivism: they relate to the selection of entry words, the treatment of usage labels, or the choice of sources for quotations, examples of language use and illustrations. Sometimes, the lexicographer's attitude may change midstream, during the process of dictionary making. This is the case of, for example, Samuel Johnson, who initially expected "to fix" the English language, only to gradually come to the realization that "neither reason nor experience can justify" that expectation and that it was impossible for a lexicographer to protect his dictionary against "corruption and decay" [cf. 9, p. 205].

As far as the lemmata selection is concerned, prescriptivism mostly manifests itself through the omission of certain items, usually for reasons of acceptability. Brewer [3, p. 27] quotes as an

example the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED1, henceforth) which left out "rude" words – a decision motivated by "notions of propriety and social nicety". At other times, a general dictionary may only represent certain language varieties and not others, thus giving a skewed or incomplete image of that language.

In the case of the treatment of usage labels, Finegan [7, p. 50] believes that "some labels inevitably exert a prescriptive influence", even without the lexicographer's intent. This prompted the author to state "the centuries-old practice of labelling words and meanings sits on the edge between description and prescription" [7, p. 50]. The discussion refers to labels such as "substandard", "low", "illiterate" [cf. 7, p. 50], but also to comments made by the lexicographers (under the form of glosses or usage notes), such as "of doubtful usefulness", "a tasteless word", "of little value" found in OED1 [cf. 3, p. 25]. In OED1, the lexicographers even used a special sign – the paragraph mark [¶] – "to indicate what the editors judged to be '*catachrestic* and erroneous uses, confusions, and the like" [3, p. 25], most often accompanied by a short explanation, which signals a clearly prescriptive attitude.

The sources of examples and illustrations can also indicate the lexicographers' prescriptive attitude towards language. Thus, Curzan [5, p. 103] mentions Johnson's use of literary quotations within entries, which "could be read as an acknowledgement of the importance of usage or as a prescriptive selection of what constitutes 'English undefiled'". In the same spirit, Brewer [3, p. 28] quotes OED1, where the editors used predominantly the works of great writers (literary, historical, philosophical, religious) to illustrate good language use. By contrast, "colloquial, slang, domestic and everyday sources were by no means neglected, but they were represented in far smaller numbers" [3, p. 28].

In the following section, we will be looking at examples of prescriptivism in Romanian lexicography, with a focus on the most comprehensive reference work, namely the *Dictionary of the Romanian Language* (DTLR, henceforth)[1].

3. Prescriptivism in DTLR

Drawing on the Romanian lexicographic tradition, we will be focusing on DTLR, the most comprehensive dictionary of the Romanian language, whose compilation began in 1906 and concluded in 2010, the year of its publication. DTLR is in fact made up of two separate components, two dictionaries in their own right: the first is *The Academy's Dictionary* (DA, henceforth)[2] compiled between 1906 and 1944, and covering the letters A through most of L. The

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[1] DTLR = *Dicționarul tezaur al limbii române* (1913-2010). – Bucharest: Editura Univers.

[2] DA = Puşcariu, Sextil et al. 1913–1949. *Dicţionarul limbii române (A-De, F-Lojniţă)*. – Bucharest: Academia Română/Socec/Universul.

second part is *The Dictionary of the Romanian Language* (DLR, henceforth)[3] which picked up, in 1959, where DA left off, being completed in 2010; its name would eventually be extended to both parts of the nineteen-volume dictionary available today. In what follows, we will illustrate the normative attitude of lexicographers with examples extracted from the outside matters, macrostructures and microstructures of both DA and DLR.

A. In the thirty-two-page *Report* (1913) which prefaces DA, its lead editor, Sextil Pușcariu, provides some insights into the philosophy behind the compilation of his dictionary. While portraying DA as a descriptive reference work, he admits that, in certain respects, it is normative in both spirit and in deed. Therefore, the stated aims of DA are "to **paint** a comprehensive picture of the language spoken across time in all the regions and principalities inhabited by Romanian natives" as well as to "to **educate** the users, while **preserving** and **promoting** the Romanian language" [emphasis added] [4, p. 101, 106]. The educational role that lexicographers take upon themselves foreshadows the prescriptive stance further evident in the stated principles – admission and omission – underpinning the selection of archaisms and neologisms:

1. "[…] we will also provide old words, no longer in current use and dialectal forms, which have not entered the current use. Many of these old words have been forgotten, only because they are not known, because people do not read enough the writing of our ancestors, and <u>it is useful to refresh them</u>, and to give them back the place they were usurped by foreign words" [10, p. xiv];

2. "Every time I was able to provide a Romanian equivalent to a neologism, I did it and, as the writing of the dictionary progresses and I accrue more knowledge about the richness of the Romanian language, I will do it even more often. <u>In this way the dictionary can better help weed out the unnecessary neologisms, whether literary or scholarly.</u>" [10, p. xxii] (emphasis added)

In a different vein, the lexicographic team behind DLR is quite straightforward, in their *Introduction*, about the normative character of their work. In essence, they "create the norms of language use by prioritizing some word forms in terms of use, spelling, pronunciation, and morphology, while demoting others" [4, p. 106]. In the lexicographers' own words, "In our work, prescriptiveness is understood as indicating the standard norms for using words. […] In the Dictionary of the Romanian Language, the norm is applied starting with the headword, written in its standard form" [8, p. xiii].

B. As already mentioned above, prescriptivism is also manifest in the selection of sources for the examples used to illustrate the different meanings of the lemmata. DA relies on the works of prominent Romanian authors and scholars, regarded as models of good language use; at the same

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[3] DLR = Iordan, Iorgu et al. 1965–2010. *Dicţionarul limbii române. Serie nouă (D-E; L-Z)*. – Bucharest: Academia Română/Editura Academiei Române.

time, employing such texts as illustrative material, it was deemed, would pay double dividends: while contributing towards the development of our national standard, it was an effective way to promote their authors, while safeguarding their work. DLR, on the other hand, taps into a wider range of sources, including the newspapers and magazines of the time.

C. At the microstructural level, worth mentioning is the presence of the dianormative label "impropriu" (Eng. improper) in both DA and DLR, but explained only in the *Introduction* to DLR. Generally speaking, this label is a feature typical of monolingual dictionaries where it is used in order to flag "words and expressions whose acceptability is questioned as regards linguistic correctness" [11, p. 331]. In Example 1 below, the label signals a deviation from the standard or accepted use (a), or an unacceptable extension of the original meaning (b), for the lemma.

Example 1 (from DA)

BALIGĂ (Eng. dung)

(a) 1. P. ext. (Impropiu (sic!) s în glumă) Excremente de om

[By extension (Improper noun in jokes) Human excrements]

(b) 2. P. ext. (Impropriu) Gunoiu

[By extension (Improper) Garbage]

In DLR, the label "impropriu" (improper) flags an incorrect synonym (Example 2a) and, respectively, misuses of the lemma in question (Example 2b):

Example 2 (from DLR)

a. PROFÉSOR, -OÁRĂ subst. (Impropriu) Învăţător

   [(Improper) primary school teacher]

b. VEDEÁ vb. (Impropriu, despre surse de lumină); (Impropriu, despre ochelari)

   [Improper, about sources of light];   [Improper, about glasses]

Another relevant example is represented by diaevaluative labels indicating the language user's attitude [cf. 11]. They clarify whether a word or expression is humorous, ironic, derogatory, pejorative, etc. As such, it involves the lexicographer's subjective interpretation of the textual material under investigation. Example 3 illustrates three situations from DLR in which the labels depreciativ (Eng. deprecating), peiorativ (Eng. pejorative) and glumeţ (Eng. jokingly) are used.

Example 3 (from DLR)

a. PROFESORÁŞ (Depreciativ) Diminutiv al lui profesor

 [LITTLE TEACHER (Depreciative) Diminutive of teacher]

b. ŢĂRÁNCĂ (Peiorativ) Femeie lipsită de educaţie, de maniere, mojică

 [PEASANT WOMAN (Pejorative) Woman without education, manners, from the lower classes]

c. PROFESIÚNE (Glumeţ)

  [PROFESSION (Jokingly)]

At other times the lexicographer provides pragmatic information about the lemma, delivered either in the form of glosses (Example 4a and 4b, from DA) or integrated with the definition itself (Example 4c, from DLR).

Example 4

*a. **AOLÉU** interj., subst. Se întrebuinţează de multe ori <u>în glumă şi în ironie</u>.*

[AOLÉU interjection, noun It is often used <u>humorously and ironically</u>.]

*b. **JIDÁN** 1. Nume popular (<u>adesea cu înţeles dispreţuitor</u>) dat Evreilor*

[KIKE 1. Popular name (<u>often used disparagingly</u>) for Jews]

*c. **MĂGÁR** 2 Epitet <u>batjocoritor</u> pentru un om obraznic, ingrat, leneş, încăpăţînat sau prost*

[JACKASS 2. <u>Disparaging</u> epithet for a cheeky, ungrateful, lazy, stubborn or stupid man]

The instances illustrated in Example 3 above are no different functionally than those in Example 4; what differentiates them is the position they occupy in the entry, the former are clearly distinguished from the rest of the microstructural components, while the latter are inserted in the definition between or without parentheses (4b and 4a, 4c, respectively).

4. Conclusions

The lexicographers' intentions explicitly formulated in the front matter of DA i.e., to describe the language for the benefit of both researchers studying the Romanian language and the general public with an interest in it [cf. 10, p. xi], would recommend it as a descriptive lexicographic work; however, as shown above, their dictionary is prescriptive on several levels.

First, as shown in subsection 3.1 above, prescriptiveness is manifested in the selection of lemmata. Since this is a paper dictionary, it makes sense that sifting through the lexical data collected is not only reasonable but also a mandatory step to take. The question is, just how principled is this selection? In DA the admission or omission of lemmata in the wordlist is guided by the lexicographers' belief that the dictionary should serve as much as a guide for good language use, as a gatekeeper against the proliferation of alienisms that might compete with and eventually sideline their vernacular counterparts. DLR is comparatively more permissive in this respect, although its compilers are unambiguous about the normative character of their work. While the selection of the lemmata is underpinned by criteria explicitly laid out in the front matter, the lexicographers' prescriptive attitude relates, *inter alia*, to the morphosyntactic form of the word they decide to lemmatize. Conceivably, the import of such decisions is quite significant: some lemmata will by default be associated with the standard variety of language, whilst the alternatives will be relegated to the status of (diatopic, diastratic, diaphasic) variants thereof.

Second, prescriptivism is apparent in the sources that lexicographers tap into for examples of good language use. DA takes a more exclusive stance by resorting, for its best part, to the canonical literature. This is consistent with its lexicographers' credo as outlined in their *Foreword*

(subsection 3.1, *q.v.*) While also drawing on canonical literature, DLR is more inclusive in approach by also extracting illustrative examples from journals, magazines and newspapers – sources that are likely to paint a more up-to-date picture of the linguistic landscape at the time of compilation.

Third, prescriptivism appears to be a function of the lexicographers' subjective perception of what the real language users mean when they use particular words. This calls for the use of specific labels (i.e, dianormative, diaevaluative) whereby the lexicographers signal the pragmatic value of the lemmata in question and, in so doing, they overly or covertly prescribe or proscribe acceptable or unacceptable language behaviour.

Judging by the case study discussed succinctly above, and relying on concurring data stemming from other major dictionary projects, we can safely claim that descriptivism is more of a desideratum than a reality. This obviously applies to those dictionaries that purport to be descriptive in approach. To some extent, this is understandable, since descriptivism in language study, in general, and in lexicography, in particular, connotes objectivity, neutrality, lack of bias. But inasmuch as a dictionary is the outcome of a sum of lexicographic decisions, and these decisions are based to some extent on individual perceptions of what is right, language-wise, there will always be room, we believe, for overt or covert prescriptiveness even in the most descriptive of dictionaries.

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