



A BRIEF HISTORY OF LEXICOGRAPHY

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Abstract: This article analyzes the historical formation and development stages of lexicography from a scientific perspective. It highlights the evolution of dictionaries from ancient glossaries to modern electronic dictionaries and reveals the importance of lexicography in linguistics and cultural development. The study also briefly discusses the theoretical and practical aspects of dictionary compilation.

Key words: lexicography, dictionary studies, dictionary, linguistics, historical development, electronic dictionaries, terminology, philology, dictionary compilation, language culture.

Lexicography is the art and science of compiling dictionaries. The history of lexicography dates back thousands of years and reflects the development of human language, writing, and culture.

The earliest dictionaries appeared in ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and India. Around 2300 BCE, the Sumerians created bilingual word lists to explain difficult words and translate between languages. These early glossaries are considered the first examples of lexicography.

In Ancient Greece and Rome, scholars compiled lists of rare and literary words to help readers understand classical texts. During the Middle Ages, monks and scholars in Europe continued this tradition by writing glosses and vocabulary lists in manuscripts.[1]



The invention of the printing press in the 15th century greatly influenced lexicography. Printed dictionaries became more accessible and standardized. One of the earliest English dictionaries was created by Robert Cawdrey in 1604 under the title *A Table Alphabeticall*. It contained difficult English words with simple explanations.

In the 18th century, lexicography became more scientific and systematic. Samuel Johnson published *A Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755, which became one of the most influential dictionaries in English history. Later, the creation of the *Oxford English Dictionary* marked a new stage in historical and descriptive lexicography.

Modern lexicography developed rapidly in the 20th and 21st centuries with the help of computers and digital technology. Today, online dictionaries and language databases allow lexicographers to analyze real language usage quickly and accurately. Digital dictionaries are now widely used around the world and continue to evolve with advances in technology.[2]

In conclusion, the history of lexicography shows the continuous human effort to preserve, explain, and standardize language. Dictionaries remain important tools for education, communication, and cultural development.

The term dictionary is derived from the Medieval Latin word *Dictionarium*, which itself originated from the Latin term *dictio*, meaning “word,” “expression,” or “mode of speaking.” In the historical development of linguistic terminology, several synonymous expressions have been employed for the concept of a dictionary, among which the term *lexicon* occupies a significant place. The word *lexicon* stems from the Greek term *lexikon* (λεξικόν), which originally referred to a collection or list of words accompanied by their meanings, particularly in ancient languages. Classical examples include the *Greek–English Lexicon* and similar compilations prepared for Latin, Syriac, Arabic, and Hebrew languages.[3]



The scientific and practical activity concerned with the compilation of dictionaries and lexicons is known as lexicography. Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek words *lexis* (“word” or “speech”) and *graphein* (“to write”). Thus, lexicography literally signifies “the writing or compilation of words.” A person engaged in this discipline is called a lexicographer. Lexicography encompasses the principles, methods, and techniques used in collecting, selecting, arranging, defining, and interpreting lexical units within a language. It is not merely a technical activity, but also an interdisciplinary field closely connected with linguistics, semantics, philology, translation studies, and cultural history.[4]

Closely related to lexicography is the branch of linguistics known as lexicology. While lexicography primarily focuses on the practical creation and organization of dictionaries, lexicology investigates the theoretical aspects of vocabulary, including the origin, historical development, semantic structure, pronunciation, stylistic usage, and morphological formation of words. Therefore, lexicology provides the theoretical foundation upon which lexicographical practice is built.

In linguistic scholarship, a lexicon generally denotes the total vocabulary of a language or a specialized dictionary devoted to a particular linguistic tradition. Historically, the term has been widely applied to dictionaries of classical and ancient languages such as Greek, Latin, Syriac, Arabic, and Hebrew. Over time, however, the concept has expanded to include modern linguistic databases, terminological dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, encyclopedic dictionaries, and digital lexical resources. Consequently, lexicography today represents not only the art of dictionary compilation but also an important scientific discipline that preserves linguistic heritage, standardizes language usage, and facilitates intercultural communication and knowledge transmission. Lexicographic practice is grounded in systematic scientific methodologies that are generally classified into two principal approaches: descriptive lexicography and prescriptive lexicography. These approaches represent distinct perspectives on the documentation and regulation of language usage.[5]



Descriptive lexicography aims to record language as it is actually used by speakers and writers in real communicative contexts. This approach emphasizes objective observation of linguistic phenomena without imposing judgments regarding correctness or acceptability. Descriptive dictionaries therefore include standard, colloquial, regional, dialectal, archaic, and even non-standard forms of language, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of vocabulary. Modern descriptive lexicography relies heavily on empirical linguistic evidence derived from authentic language data and corpus analysis.[6]

In contrast, prescriptive lexicography seeks to establish norms and standards for correct language usage according to grammatical, stylistic, and cultural conventions. Prescriptive dictionaries often provide guidance concerning spelling, pronunciation, grammar, and appropriate word choice. Historically, this approach played a crucial role in language standardization, educational systems, and the codification of national languages. While descriptive lexicography reflects linguistic reality, prescriptive lexicography attempts to regulate and refine linguistic practice within a speech community.

The compilation of a dictionary is a highly complex and methodologically rigorous process that requires careful linguistic analysis and systematic organization. Lexicographers generally follow several interrelated stages during dictionary preparation, among which corpus collection constitutes one of the most fundamental and indispensable steps.

1. Corpus Collection

Corpus collection refers to the process of gathering a large, balanced, and representative body of linguistic data that serves as the empirical foundation for lexicographic research. A corpus is a systematically organized database of authentic language samples derived from diverse written and spoken sources such as books, newspapers, academic texts, literary works, broadcasts, interviews, online media, and everyday conversations. The primary objective of corpus collection is to provide



lexicographers with reliable evidence regarding the actual usage, frequency, contextual meanings, collocations, grammatical behavior, and stylistic functions of words and expressions in real-life communication.[7]

In modern lexicography, corpus-based research has become an essential methodological tool because it enables dictionary compilers to analyze language scientifically rather than relying solely on intuition or subjective judgment. Through corpus analysis, lexicographers can identify semantic changes, emerging vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, neologisms, regional variations, and patterns of language evolution. Furthermore, corpora contribute significantly to ensuring the accuracy, authenticity, and contemporary relevance of dictionary entries. As a result, corpus collection is regarded as one of the foundational pillars of contemporary lexicographic theory and practice.

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