

SEMASIOLOGY IN LEXICOGRAPHY: PRINCIPLES OF MEANING REPRESENTATION IN DICTIONARIES

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Abstract: This article explores the role of semasiology — the study of word meaning — in the theory and practice of lexicography. While lexicography traditionally focuses on the collection, definition, and arrangement of lexical units, semasiology provides the conceptual framework for understanding how meanings are structured, distinguished, and related within a dictionary entry. The article discusses key semasiological phenomena such as polysemy, homonymy, synonymy, and semantic change, and demonstrates how each affects the lexicographer's decisions. Special attention is given to the treatment of polysemous words, the ordering of senses, and the use of definitions, examples, and labels. The article argues that a systematic semasiological approach significantly improves dictionary quality and user orientation.

Keywords: semasiology, lexicography, polysemy, dictionary entry, sense ordering, semantic definition, homonymy

Introduction

Lexicography, the art and science of dictionary-making, is often seen as a practical discipline. However, every dictionary entry that defines a word implicitly relies on semasiology — the branch of linguistics concerned with the meaning of linguistic units. Semasiology asks: What does a word mean? How are its different meanings related? How do meanings change over time? Lexicography must answer these questions in a concrete, user-friendly form.

Without a solid semasiological foundation, dictionaries risk being inconsistent, confusing, or misleading. This article aims to bridge the gap between theoretical semantics and practical lexicography by outlining the key semasiological principles that guide the writing of modern dictionaries.

Theoretical Framework: Semasiology and Its Relevance to Lexicography

Semasiology (from Greek *sēmasiā* ‘meaning’ + *logos* ‘study’) focuses on the relationship between a word form and its meanings. In contrast to onomasiology, which starts from a concept and asks which words express it, semasiology starts from the word and asks what it means.

For the lexicographer, semasiology provides answers to four essential questions:

1. How many meanings does a word have? (polysemy vs. homonymy)
2. Which meaning is central or primary? (sense ordering)

3. How are meanings related? (metaphor, metonymy, specialization, generalization)

4. How should meanings be distinguished and described? (defining strategies)

These questions are not merely theoretical; they directly affect how a dictionary entry is structured.

Key Semasiological Phenomena in Lexicographic Practice

Polysemy and Homonymy

One of the most important distinctions in semasiology is between polysemy (one word with multiple related meanings) and homonymy (two or more unrelated words sharing the same form).

- Polysemy: e.g., English head (body part, leader, top of something, foam on beer).

- Homonymy: e.g., bank (financial institution) vs. bank (river side).

In lexicography, this distinction determines whether meanings are grouped under one entry (polysemy) or split into separate entries (homonymy). A purely semantic criterion is used: if native speakers intuitively feel the meanings are connected, it is polysemy; if not, homonymy.

Sense Ordering: Which Meaning Comes First?

A major lexicographic challenge is the ordering of senses. Semasiology offers several competing principles:

Principle	Description	Example (English)	run
Historical	Oldest meaning first	run (flow of water, OE)	
Frequency	Most common meaning first	run (move quickly on foot)	
Logical	From concrete to abstract	head (body part → leader)	
Prototypical	Most typical meaning first	run (fast movement)	

Modern learner's dictionaries typically prioritize frequency and prototypicality, while historical dictionaries (e.g., OED) prefer the historical order.

Defining Meaning: Semasiological Precision

A good definition must capture the semantic features of a word. Semasiology distinguishes between:

- Denotation (core referential meaning)
- Connotation (emotional or cultural associations)
- Sense relations (hyponymy, synonymy, antonymy)

For example, defining woman denotatively as “adult human female” is neutral, but including “often nurturing” would add connotation — which may or may not be appropriate depending on dictionary type.

Semantic Change and Historical Lexicography

Semasiology also studies how meanings change over time through:

- Specialization: e.g., meat (any food → animal flesh)
- Generalization: e.g., holiday (holy day → any day off)
- Metaphor: e.g., mouse (animal → computer device)
- Metonymy: e.g., White House (building → U.S. administration)

Historical dictionaries record these shifts, while synchronic dictionaries reflect current usage.

Case Study: Representing Polysemy in a Dictionary Entry

Let us take the word head as a practical example. A semasiologically informed dictionary entry might look like this:

head /hed/ noun

1 [C] the part of the body containing the brain, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth: She nodded her head.

2 [C] the mind or mental ability: A good head for figures. (metaphor)

3 [C] the leader or person in charge: The head of the company. (metonymy)

4 [C] the top or front of something: The head of the mountain. (metaphor)

5 [C] a single animal in a herd: 50 head of cattle. (specialization)

Each sense is numbered, labeled for countability, illustrated with an example, and the semantic relation is indicated in parentheses. This structure is directly derived from semasiological analysis.

Discussion: Challenges and Solutions

Despite its importance, applying semasiology to lexicography faces practical difficulties:

Challenge Semasiological Solution

Distinguishing polysemy from homonymy Etymology + native speaker intuition

Determining sense boundaries Use of substitution and entailment tests

Ordering many senses Frequency data from corpora

Writing clear definitions Define by genus and differentiae (class + distinguishing features)

Corpus linguistics has greatly improved empirical grounding. For example, frequency lists from the British National Corpus or COCA now guide sense ordering

in major learner's dictionaries (e.g., Collins COBUILD, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary).

Conclusion

Semasiology is not an abstract luxury for lexicographers; it is an indispensable toolkit. From deciding whether to split a homonym, to ordering senses, to writing definitions that capture denotation and avoid misleading connotations, semasiological principles shape every aspect of a dictionary entry. Future advances in computational lexicography and natural language processing will require even deeper integration of semasiological models, particularly for word sense disambiguation and semantic networks like WordNet.

For lexicographers, the key takeaway is this: a good dictionary is a visible application of good semasiology.

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