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LEXICAL DEFINITION: ITS SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Understanding the notion of definition is a central issue in such scientific disciplines as Philosophy, Semantics, and Lexicography. The paper considers different types of definitions focusing on lexical definition, which is the main component of a dictionary entry. An attempt is made to designate lexical definition and stipulative definition as subcategories of word-thing definition.

Key words: *nominal definition, word-thing definition, lexical definition, stipulative definition, truth value*

Definition is the main component of a dictionary entry. It can be long or short, accompanied by an example or an image. What kind of definition is presented in dictionaries? Many lexicographers would claim it is lexical definition.

To have a comprehensive idea of lexical definition it is necessary to designate its place in the hierarchy of different types of definition. In its wider sense definition is not confined to a single field of science, but rather represents the product of the cognitive ability of an individual to define things, concepts, and words. The ancient tradition of defining definition mostly revolves around the following two main types – real and nominal. The former as proposed by Plato and Aristotle is the only true and universal definition of things, which is not conditioned by the word usage; the latter is the description of the word meaning, i.e. the definition of words /see Gyurjyan, 2016/.

This differentiation is also adopted by Richard Robinson. In his book *Definition* he first of all draws a distinction between the *purpose* of definition (what it is trying to do) and the *method* of definition (how it is achieved). Then, according to the purpose of definition, Robinson distinguishes between *real definition* and *nominal definition* /Robinson, 1968: 15-16/.

Real definition, as defined by Robinson, is *thing-thing definition* /ibid.: 16-18/, i.e. the 'essence' of the thing is defined through another thing. Although one uses words to define a real definition, "thing-thing definition is never inside the sphere of symbols at all" /ibid.: 20/. Not being related to either words or symbols, real definition is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Nominal definition is subdivided into *word-word definition* and *word-thing definition*. In contrast with thing-thing definition, these two types of nominal definition wholly or partially deal with words and verbal symbols. According to

Robinson, word-word definition reveals the meaning of a word or symbol by relating one word to another. Word-thing definition, on the other hand, reveals the meaning of the word by relating it to a certain thing /ibid.: 17/. Thus, if the the English word 'book' is chosen to convey the meaning of German 'Buch', the hearer/ reader who does not have a prior knowledge of either of the words will deal with word-word definition. Whereas, if the actual thing, in this case a book, is pointed to and the hearer/ reader is familiar with the object defined, we deal with word-thing definition. So, as Robinson /1968: 17/ states, "word-thing definition is correlating a word to a thing" which is known to the hearer/ reader. In fact, drawing one's attention to a thing is not always possible by physically pointing to it, because *a thing* can be either something material or abstract. Designating both types of things very often requires verbal means, which does not necessarily mean that this kind of definition is word-word definition. As long as the hearer/ reader is familiar with the thing and/or the words used to describe that thing, we deal with word-thing definition.

Taking into account the main purpose of definition, i.e. defining, describing, and explaining the meaning of a word or symbol, word-word definition becomes ineffective as it does not convey the meaning of the word being defined because the hearer/ reader lacks the knowledge of both of the components of word-word definition.

Hence, our primary concern here is word-thing definition and, in particular, its subcategories – *lexical definition* and *stipulative definition*. As stated by Robinson, word-thing definition aims at "*reporting* or *establishing* [emphasis mine] the meaning of a symbol" /Robinson, 1968: 21/. In this respect, the use of the verb *report* infers the historically accepted meaning of a word or symbol (lexical definition); and the use of the verb *establish* implies that the meaning is assigned to a word or symbol deliberately (stipulative definition).

1. *Lexical definition*

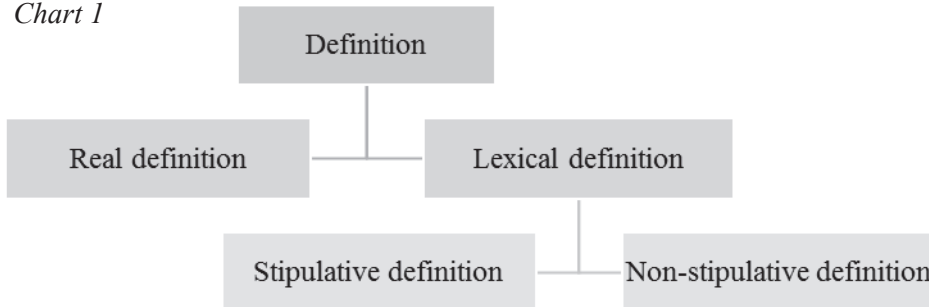To make the above-mentioned statements clearer, let us consider the following three definitions of lexical definition:

(1a) "Lexical, or dictionary, definitions are reports of common usage (or usages)." /Swartz, 1997/

(1b) "A lexical definition is used to report the meaning that a word already has in a language." /Hurley, 2014: 98/

(1c) "Lexical definition is that sort of word-thing definition in which we are explaining the actual way in which some actual word has been used by some actual persons." /Robinson, 1968: 35/

As we can see, the first two definitions have something in common – they contain the noun *report* (1a) and the verb *report* (1b), proving that Robinson's approach to the lexical definition as a subcategory of word-thing definition is valid.

In Hurley's interpretation lexical, i.e. non-stipulative, definition is opposed to the stipulative one. This statement is argued by Harris and Hutton. They believe that the word *lexical* is so broad that it can refer to stipulative definition as well /see Harris, Hutton, 2007: 21/. We have no objection to this part of their claim and we will discuss it later in this paper in more detail.
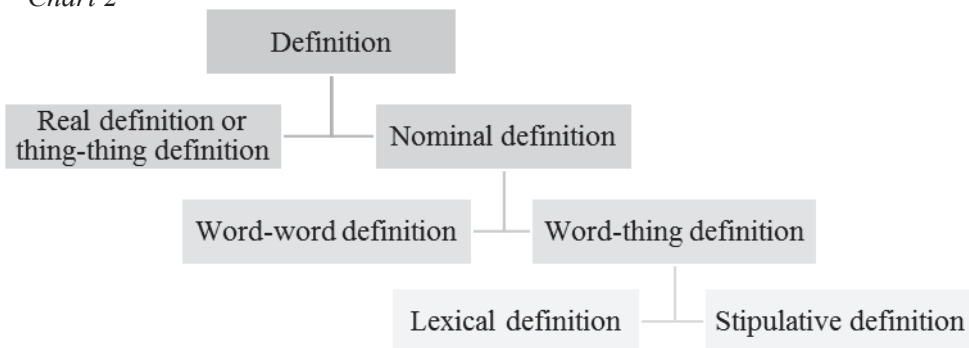
In Harris and Hutton's interpretation lexical definition is identical to nominal definition discussed above. So, they use the term *lexical definition* in contrast with *real definition*, and distinguish two subcategories of the former, namely stipulative and non-stipulative. *Chart 1* below illustrates their classification:

Chart 1

```
                    Definition
                        |
      ┌─────────────────┴─────────────────┐
Real definition                    Lexical definition
                                           |
                        ┌──────────────────┴──────────────────┐
                 Stipulative definition            Non-stipulative definition
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Let us compare the classification given above with the one put forward by Richard Robinson and presented in *Chart 2* /Robinson, 1968: 19/:

Chart 2

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                         Definition
                             |
      ┌──────────────────────┴──────────────────┐
Real definition or                      Nominal definition
thing-thing definition                          |
                           ┌────────────────────┴────────────────────┐
                    Word-word definition                   Word-thing definition
                                                                     |
                                                ┌────────────────────┴────────────────────┐
                                         Lexical definition                  Stipulative definition
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As we can see, the classification suggested by Harris and Hutton lacks two subcategories of nominal, or in their terminology, lexical definition (word-word definition and word-thing definition) which are distinguished by Robinson. In our opinion, Harris and Hutton's approach can lead to misconception for the following reasons: (1) nominal and lexical definitions cannot be considered one type of definition and termed as *lexical* – word-word definition is not actually lexical; (2) the distinction between word-word definition and word-thing definition is necessary to designate lexical definition as a subcategory of the latter. That is why we believe that the distinction made by Robinson is more plausible and reliable.

As for the description of lexical definition (1c) (see above, p. 4) offered by Richard Robinson it is important to note that there are at least three key components that differ it from definitions (1a) and (1b).

Firstly, the use of Present Perfect Tense in definition (1c) demonstrates the historical aspect of lexical definition as this tense reflects the result of previous usage of a word which is still true. As Robinson states, lexical definition "refers to real past" /Robinson, 1968: 35/, that is to say, the period of time close to the present when a word conveys a definite meaning and is supposed to pertain that meaning at least for some period of time following the publication of the dictionary. Thus, we can conclude that a lexical definition is valid as long as it is viewed within a certain period this or that meaning has been assigned to the thing being defined. While studying older dictionaries a diachronic approach to this issue should be preserved as the definitions they comprise cover the meaning that was true at that period of time and might not be true at present. One should also bear in mind that a dictionary is not a compilation of 'axioms' but living words that undergo certain changes of meaning through time.

Secondly, Robinson distinguishes "three persons involved in lexical definition" /Robinson, 1968: 35/ – that of a *definer* who defines the word, a *recipient/ reader* who apprehends the defined word, and all the *users*, people whose collective usage of a specific meaning of a word is conveyed. Hence, this interpretation gives us a three dimensional image of definition from the perspective of three persons. The first two definitions (1a), (1b) do not express the *definer* and *users* explicitly, whereas (1a) does.

And finally, Robinson points out "the actual way the word has been used by some actual person", thus stressing the significance of how and by whom the word is used. In our opinion, this part of the lexical definition might bring us a step closer to the idea that lexical definition is to convey pragmatic information as well.

As for the lexicographic character of lexical definition, although both Hurley and Robinson mention it in their papers, Swartz's definition (1a) is the only one in the list above which comprises the idea that lexical definition is the same as dictionary definition[1].

Lexical definition acquires another characteristic feature. Being regarded as "a historical assertion" /Robinson, 1968: 39/, it is viewed as a statement which can be either true or false. All the three researchers claim that this kind of definition is to have a truth value, that is to say, it can be true or false depending on the accuracy of the report of common usage /Hurley, 2014: 98; Robinson, 1968: 39; Swartz, 1997/.

In order to ensure the aforementioned accuracy and avoid ambiguity, most reputable dictionaries offer more than one definition for a single word-meaning, as well as verbal and visual illustrations to affirm the word-usage.

Let us compare two dictionary entries of the adjective 'bright' given below. As we can see, *American Heritage Dictionary* provides three subdefinitions

(A1 - a, b, c) to express the same meaning of 'shining', while *Collins English Dictionary* gives only one (B1). The number of definitions in these entries also differs. *Collins English Dictionary* assigns three additional meanings to the word 'bright'(B7, B9, B10).

A. bright (brīt)
adj. **bright·er**, **bright·est**
   1. a. Emitting or reflecting light readily or in large amounts; shining.
      b. Comparatively high on the scale of brightness: *bright red.*
      c. Full of light or illumination: *a bright sunny day; a stage bright with spotlights.*
   2. Characterizing a dyestuff that produces a highly saturated color; brilliant.
   3. Glorious; splendid: *one of the bright stars of stage and screen*; *a bright moment in history.*
   4. Full of promise and hope; auspicious: *had a bright future in publishing.*
   5. Happy; cheerful: *bright faces.*
   6. Quick to learn or understand; intelligent.
   7. High and clear: *the bright sound of the trumpet section.*

(American Heritage Dictionary, 2011)

B. bright (braɪt)
adj
   1. emitting or reflecting much light; shining
   2. (Colours) (of colours) intense or vivid
   3. full of promise: *a bright future.*
   4. full of animation; cheerful: *a bright face.*
   5. informal quick witted or clever: *a bright child.*
   6. magnificent; glorious: *a bright victory.*
   7. polished; glistening: *a bright finish.*
   8. (of the voice) distinct and clear
   9. (of a liquid) translucent and clear: *a circle of bright water.*
   10. **bright and early** very early in the morning

(Collins English Dictionary, 2014)

The examination of the above-mentioned dictionary entries lets us assume that the larger the dictionary entry is, the more accurate it is[2]. Being given a variety of definitions a user is able to make a better choice of the word-meaning and to use the word in its most appropriate sense.

We should bear in mind that language tends to change in the course of time – some new words are assigned to new things and concepts, some words acquire a new meaning, others cease to exist at all. So dictionary definitions are 'true to life' as long as they are up-to-date.

2. Stipulative definition

The word *stipulative* speaks for itself: it means something deliberate and arbitrary. This kind of definition is designated by many philosophers, logicians, and lexicographers. However, their ideas about stipulative definition do not always coincide. Discussing different interpretations we seek to find answers to the following questions: What is the place of stipulative definition in the hierarchy of definitions? Can it be classified as a dictionary definition?

Let us consider the following definitions of stipulative definition:

(2a) "Stipulative definitions stipulate, or specify, how a term is to be used. Sometimes stipulative definitions are used to introduce wholly new terms, othertimes to restrict (or narrow) a meaning in a particular context." /Swartz, 1997/

(2b) "A stipulative definition assigns a meaning to a word for the first time. This may involve either coining a new word or giving a new meaning to an old word." /Hurley, 2014: 97/

(2c) "By 'stipulative' word-thing definition, then, I mean the explicit and selfconscious setting up of the meaning-relation between some word and some object, the act of assigning an object to a name (or name to an object), not the act of recording an already existing assignment." /Robinson, 1968: 59/

All the three definitions state that here a randomly chosen meaning is assigned to a word/thing by either coining a new term or ascribing a new meaning to an old one.

Neither Swartz, nor Hurley relate stipulative definition anyhow to dictionary definition. Robinson, on the other hand, claims that dictionary compilers might be giving stipulative definition if they regard themselves legislators rather than historians and say "how words ought to be used rather than how they are used" /Robinson, 1968: 59/. We can infer from Robinson's statement that both lexical and stipulative definitions are plausible in a dictionary context.

We are prone to think that stipulative definition and lexical definition are not tantamount to each other, the former is rather a preceding stage of the latter. Consider the words 'to google', 'to unfriend', and 'to unfollow'. Back in late 1990s two people, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, decided to register their domain as google.com. Later in 2000 the verb 'to google' was used to denote searching something on the Google search engine /http://www.etymonline.com/. A question arises: Is this an example of a stipulative definition or a lexical definition?

Likewise the verb 'to unfriend' ('to remove (a person) from the list of one's friends on a social networking website' /Collins English Dictionary, 2014/) was put to standard usage only in 2007 /http://www.etymonline.com/. And the verb 'to unfollow' ('to cease to track a person or a group on a social networking site' /Collins English Dictionary, 2014/) is not even found in etymological dictionaries

we have consulted. One might argue that the definitions of these verbs appeared in dictionaries after their usage has been tested by the users, i.e. their meaning was *reported* and *not assigned*. However, it should be noted that the users started using these words in this specific sense after someone had assigned them to some definite actions. Thus, we believe that definitions of words, that have been assigned 'deliberate' meanings, used to be stipulative until they came to be recorded in dictionaries, thereafter becoming lexical.

NOTES

1. In *Definitions, Dictionaries, and Meanings* Swartz describes the following seven kinds of definitions – stipulative, lexical, precising, theoretical, operational, recursive, and persuasive, noting that this list might be incomplete /Swartz, 1997/. It is important to mention that out of these seven kinds of definition Swartz relates to dictionary definitions only the lexical one.
2. Robinson displays a similar attitude towards lexical definition. He claims that "A lexical definition could nearly always be truer by being longer"/Robinson, 1968: 56/. Perhaps he followed the same principle while designating what lexical definition is. As we can notice his wording is much longer than those suggested by Hurley and Swartz.

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S. ԳՅՈՒՐՋՅԱՆ – *Բառային սահմանման ընդգրկումը և դերը.* **–** Սահմանում հասկացությունն առանցքային տեղ է գրավում փիլիսոփայության, իմաստաբանության և բառարանագրության մեջ: Լինելով բառահոդվածի հիմնական բաղադրիչ՝ բառային սահմանումը բառարանագրության կարևորագույն մասն է: Սույն հոդվածի շրջանակներում փորձ է արվում ուսումնասիրել «բառային» և «պայմանական» սահմանումների առանձնահատկությունները:

Բանալի բառեր. անվանական սահմանում, բառ-առարկա սահմանում, բառային սահմանում, պայմանական սահմանում, ճշմարտացիության արժեք

Т. ГЮРДЖЯН – *Лексическое определение: его роль и значимость.* **–** Осмысление понятия *определение* занимает ключевое место в таких научных дисциплинах, как философия, семантика и лексикография. Лексическое определение как основной компонент словарной статьи является неотъемлемой частью лексикографии. В рамках данного исследования рассматриваются лексическое и условное определения как подкатегории определения «слово-вещь».

Ключевые слова: номинальное определение, определение «слово-вещь», лексическое определение, условное определение, истинностное значение