

The Maximum Effectiveness of Finding the Lexical Definition through Obscurity and Circularity

Nurvita Wijayanti
Universitas Bangka Belitung
English Department

Abstract

This paper shows the two problems namely circularity and obscurity relating to dictionary definition and its solutions. The two problems are mostly attached in the definition from both online and written dictionary of Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. The topic is chosen since it contains the daily problem encountered when consulting the dictionary. The data are collected by showing the words that have circularity and obscurity each of them are twenty words. Next, the data is analyzed through the high frequency of words that contains both problems. The solutions are also offered for both the word-seekers and the lexicographers to get the better definition in the future. Facing the problem of circularity, it is better to the word-seekers to collect the information from the words and combine them into good information. The obscurity can be solved into two ways namely controlled defining vocabulary and full-sentence definition. Lastly, the writer suggest to the next researchers to gain more data and solution to get the better revision.

1. Introduction

Defining a word is not as easy as it seems. The lexicographers seem working hard to achieve the best definition they can gain so that the word-definition seekers will be easy to access the meaning of the word without any further question or explanation since the definition itself is good. However, the lexicographers are in their progress in making the best definition. Dictionaries are inevitably

We might say that the whole point of setting up a theory of semantics is to provide a 'definition' of meaning --- that is, a systemic account of the nature of meaning. To demand a definition of meaning before we started discussing the subject would simply be to insist on treating certain other concepts, e.g. stimulus and response, as in some sense more basic and more important. A physicist does not have to define notions like 'time', 'heat', 'colour', 'atom', before he starts investigating their properties. Rather, definitions, if they

ethnocentric, their authors being limited by their own experience of the world and their beliefs about it (Adamska; p.332). It can be said that even the familiar words that are used in a daily conversation can be so hard to define. Therefore, the kind of bias will emerge from the issue in defining the words.

What exactly is a meaning? This is not a question that bothers Leech unduly:

are needed, emerge from the study itself (p.4).

It is like that Leech tries to define what the meanings are not. He gives an example of the word 'apple' that is not the sum total of the true statements that 'apple' can made about. Moreover, Bloomfield (1955:39) has the idea that the meaning of a referring expression is the 'scientific' definition and it is stated as follows:

We can define the meaning of speech-form accurately when this meaning has to do with some matter of which we possess scientific knowledge. We can define the names of minerals, for example, in terms of chemistry and mineralogy, as when we say that the ordinary meaning of the English word 'salt' is 'sodium chloride (NaCl)', and we can define the names of plants and animals by means of technical terms like 'love' or 'hate', which concern situations that have not been accurately classified, and these latter are in the great majority.

The above quotation concludes that 'the statement of meaning is therefore the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state'. It is also illustrated by Bloomfield from when someone asks about what is the proper definition for 'salt'. If the answer is that 'salt' is 'sodium chloride', then it means nothing with whether or not one can use the word to communicate successfully with other speaker in English, in this case outside the scientific world.

In addition, Leech calls Bloomfield's research leads to an infinite regression saying that 'salt' means 'sodium chloride' is to invite another question about the meaning of 'sodium chloride'. The answer will consist of words, each of which will in turn require definition of further words, and so on.

There are two main possible problems that happen in defining the meaning of the words; circularity and obscurity. The lexicographers are trying hard to avoid these two problems, however, it is kind of burden for them

that some of the words actually still contain of these two problems. Circularity occurs when a lexical item is defined by itself like in A equals to B, while B equals to C and C equals to A. For the word-seekers, it seems confusing as they have to refer to one word to another word and it goes back to the first explanation. While obscurity, according to Dr Johnson, occurs when the explanation requires the use of terms less difficult to understand than that which is to be explained (Johnson: 1755). It means that the word-seekers will search for another word for the better explanation and go back to the referring word.

This paper aims to get the data from the Longman Contemporary English Dictionary both via online and written. The online dictionary was used as it contains more than 4000 words and it is not only about British pronunciation but also American. Moreover, the writer uses online dictionary because the words are always up-to-date. While the written dictionary is used to show the way how to use the symbol and other characteristics. Moreover, from the written dictionary, it can be found that the small capital letters show that they are not in the defining vocabulary. This paper presents about the circularity and obscurity problem and to find out how these words though containing of these two main problems actually have the maximum effectiveness since the lexicographers have been working hard to form the definition. It means the word-seekers should wisely and smartly gain the maximum understanding of the

definitions. Therefore, there is a question about how effective the use of the definition based on circularity and obscurity is.

More commonly, circularity only shows itself after a little research, often coming to light when one seeks out the definitions of obscure terms in a definition. It sometimes takes several steps before the circle closes: A is defined via B, B via C, then C via A. Or there may be large webs of interconnections between the multiple senses of the words involved (Goddard: 29-30). Adamska also says that there are two kinds of circularity namely direct and indirect that the latter is also called internal circle and it occurs when a lexical item is defined by itself (Adamska: 234). Circularity becomes a serious problem when the word-seekers do not understand one or two definitions and they have to find the other definitions but end up with the same word that should be defined in the first place. It is quite annoying for them as they mostly have to find the word as soon as possible. Moreover, it can be stated that circularity will have an effect in the less effective time for the word-seekers to search the words. That circularity must be avoided, the writer could not agree more. However, it is already stated in the dictionary and that the lexicographers, once again, have been working hard to finish their business in making accurate definitions. There is an effective way to understand the definition better through the circularity.

Another problem presenting in the defining word is obscurity. That any explanation

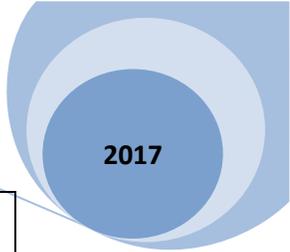
of a word-meaning worth its salt must be framed in terms of simpler, more easily understood words. If not, it is an obscure definition. As Aristotle put it (*Topica*: 6.4.141^a25): ‘we make things known by taking not any random terms, but such as are prior and more intelligible...a man who does not define through terms of kind has not defined at all.’ Two further types of obscure definition are unusual phrases and scientific definitions. Aside from the obscure wording, scientific definitions can be faulted as containing information which is not part of ordinary linguistic competence and which is not shared by every member of the speech community (Goddard: 28). Conversely, they omit information which is part of the everyday concept, e.g. that people need to breathe *air* to live and that *water* is drinkable. Above all, obscure definitions are futile. Commenting of this aspect of obscure definition, there is a good illustration from Leibniz below:

I will illustrate this by simile. Suppose I offer you one hundred crowns, to be received from Titus; but then Titus sends you to Caius, and then Caius to Maevius. If you are perpetually sent on in this way, you will never be said to have received anything (Goddard: 28).

At last, Adamska in his paper about dictionary definition and presenting the problems and solutions says that obscurity is a serious problem whose dangers tend to be exaggerated in the metalexigraphic literature (Adamska: 325).

2. Discussion

The data are collected from online and written dictionary of Longman Dictionary of



Contemporary English. Twenty words are chosen as the examples of the circularity problem and twenty words are also chosen for the obscurity problem. Based on the collecting data via those dictionaries, there are some results that are shown in the tables and analysis. The first result is shown by table 1.1 about the circularity problem and how the problem solved. The second is what is shown in table 1.2 about the obscurity problem and there are two solutions regarding to this problem.

1.1 Circularity

Circularity is the problem when one definition includes in the other definitions that is being looked for. This problem seems easy to solve but it will become a complicated one when the targeted word and the defined one are not explaining each other and it is not familiar word. In other words there may be large webs of interconnections between the multiple senses of the words involved (Goddard: 29-30). The table shows that there are twenty words as the data collection and each of the word contains the following words that are suspected as being circularity. The analysis shows the frequency of the words from the highest to the least.

Table 1.1

No	Word	Words Containing Circularity	Quantity
1	Feeling	emotion, hate, anger	3

2	Pleasure	enjoyment, satisfaction	2
3	enormous	size, huge	2
4	Machin	equipment, tool	2
5	opinion	judgement, advice	2
6	Quality	good, standard	2
7	Bang	Hit	1
8	Brave	Courage	1
9	exist	Alive	1
10	Feature	Part	1
11	formal	Official	1
12	Illness	Disease	1

13	Information	Detail	1
14	Job	Work	1
15	Law	Rule	1
16	obligation	Duty	1
17	Organization	Club	1
18	Problem	Difficulty	1
19	Purpose	Intend	1
20	Quantity	Amount	1

The table presents the result of the distribution of the data concerning circularity problem. The word *feeling* has the most frequency of having the circularity problem because it has three words that are included in the definitions namely *emotion*, *hate* and *anger*. It means that everytime the word-seekers want to search for the word *feeling*, these three words

are in the part of the definition. Then, if they search for those three words' definitions, they still find the word *feeling* in those two words' definitions. The word *pleasure* contains the two following words namely *enjoyment* and *satisfaction*. The word *pleasure* has definition as *the feeling of happiness, enjoyment, or satisfaction that you get from an experience*. It can be seen that it has two following words. *Enjoyment is the feeling of pleasure you get from having or doing something, or something you enjoy doing* and it has the word *pleasure* in the definition. The same thing happens in the definition of the word *satisfaction* that is *a feeling of happiness or pleasure because you have achieved something or got what you wanted* that it contains the word *pleasure*. The uniqueness happens between the word *pleasure* and *satisfaction* where they share the same word *happiness*. The circularity, then, occurs in the words *feeling* and *pleasure* as the representation of having higher frequency in circularity problem.

The less frequent of circularity is shown in the words *bang*, *brave* and *exist* as the representative of the less frequency. The word *bang* has one following word namely *hit* that is included in the word *bang*, as the word *bang* is defined as *to hit something in a way that makes a loud noise* and the word *hit* is *to move a part of your body quickly against something accidentally, causing pain [= bang]*. It is interesting since the word in the bracket looks like showing the information as the synonym of

the word or the word that has the same meaning as the targeted word. In this case, the word *bang* has special treatment though as a part of circularity problem, it has clear definition of the word *hit*. The other ones are the word *brave* that has a definition as *dealing with danger, pain, or difficult situations with courage and confidence*. The words *danger*, *pain* and *difficult* have the clear definition that means that the word *brave* is not included in their definitions. However, the word *courage* is an exceptional. It contains the word *brave* in the definition as in *the quality of being brave when you are in danger, in pain, in a difficult situation etc.* It means that if the word-seekers want to know what is the definition of the word *courage* they will definitely find back the word *brave*. The last example is the word *exist* that is defined as *to stay alive, especially in a difficult situation when you do not have enough money, food*. The next question is when the word-seekers demand to look for the definition of the word *alive* then it shows that the definition of *alive* is *continuing to exist*. It makes no sense when somehow the word-seekers really do not know the meaning of *exist* and *alive* respectively.

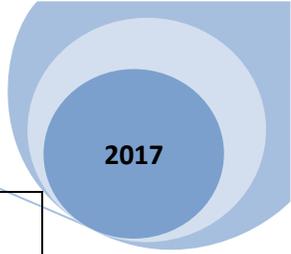
The problem of circularity happens as it states earlier that circularity becomes a serious problem when the word-seekers do not understand one or two definitions and they have to find the other definitions but end up with the same word that should be defined in the first place.

1.1.1 Solution

It goes without saying that circularity (especially direct) should be avoided whenever possible – and it certainly would have been possible in the two examples just quoted. Even so, it is suggested that, while unacceptable to the logician, for the average dictionary user a vicious circle is less of a problem than is commonly assumed (Adamska: 234). For instance the circularity definition is both interpretable and informative. The word-seekers still can learn something from the definition of the others. It does not mean that the word-seekers allow the circularity as the common problem, but it shows that the circularity, however circularity as far as the age of dictionary, it still can be easy to follow.

It can be seen in the word *obligation* has the meaning as *a moral or legal duty to do something* and when the word-seekers search for the word *duty*, they gain the information from the definition of *duty* that contains the same meaning as *obligation*. It is very informative since the meaning of *duty* is *something that you have to do because it is morally or legally right [= obligation]*. The word in the bracket shows that the word inside is the same as the word *duty* and at least the word-seekers can gain the new knowledge through it.

Another solution is gained from the word *opinion* that is defined as *judgement or advice from a professional person about something*. When, as a coincidence, the word-seekers also search for the word *judgement*, and



then they will find that the definition of *judgement* contains the word *opinion*. Looking from the bright sight, the definition of the word *judgement* at least has the new information as *an opinion that you form, especially after thinking carefully about something*. From the definition, they can get the information from the clause *especially after thinking carefully about something*.

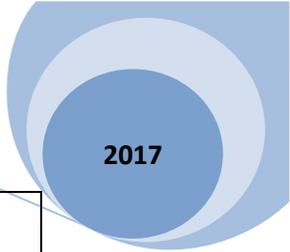
1.2 Obscurity

The next problem that is presented in this paper is the problem of obscurity. Unlike circularity, obscurity has more complicated issue in the defining word that it may contain one or more unfamiliar words. This data analysis and result are shown in table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2

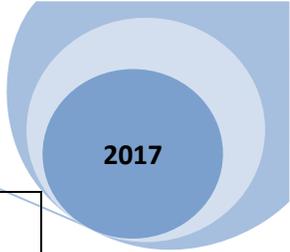
No	Words	Definition	Demanding More Definition	Quantity
1	Gender	the system in some languages of marking words such as nouns, adjectives, and PRONOUNS as being MASCULINE	pronoun, masculine, feminine, neuter	4

		LINE, FEMINE or NEUTER		
2	Benzene	a colourless liquid obtained from petroleum and coal tar, used in making plastics and many chemical products	Petroleum coal tar	2
3	Cortisone	a HORMONE that is used especially in the treatment of diseases such as ARTHRITIS	hormone, arthritis	2
4	gastric flu	an illness that makes you VOMIT and gives you	vomit, diarrhoea	2



		DIARRH OEA		
5	Gemi ni	the third sign of the ZODIAK , represent ed by TWINS and believed to affect the character and life of people born between May 21 and June 21	zodiac, twins	2
6	Horse	a piece of sports equipmen t in a GYMNA SIUM used for jumping over; VAULTI NG HORSE	gymnas ium, vaultin g horse	2
7	lock keepe	someone whose job is to	lock, canal	2

	r	open and close the gates of a LOCK or a CANAL		
8	Pewt er	a grey metal made by mixing LEAD and TIN	lead, tin	2
9	Peyot e	a drug ade from a Mexican CACTUS , which makes people imagine that strange things are happenin g to them, MESCA LIN	cactus, mescali n	2
10	Alkal i	a chemical substance that react with acids to form a salt and	pH	



		has a pH of more than seven		
11	Bayonet	a long, sharp knife that is fastened onto the end of a RIFLE and used as a weapon in battle	rifle	1
12	corn meal	flour made from MAIZE	Maize	1
13	five star general	a GENERAL who commands an army	General	1
14	hemp	a type of plant that is used to make rope and sometimes to produce the drug CANNA	Annabis	1

		BIS		
15	hopper	a large FUNNEL	Funnel	1
16	Hospital	a large building where old people or ORPHANS live and are looked after by an official organization	orphan	1
17	jet propulsion	the use a JET ENGINE for power	jet engine	1
18	Matzo	a type of a flat bread eaten especially by Jewish people during PASSOVER	passover	1

19	neptune	the PLANET t eighth in order from the sun	Planet	1
20	orang utan /orang utan	a large APE with long arms and long orange hair	Ape	1

The frequency of obscurity is shown in the above table that the word *gender* has, so far, the highest frequency of having the obscurity problem. The reason is that this word contains four unfamiliar words as it is written in the small capital letters. It is stated in the written dictionary that words that are not in the defining vocabulary are shown in small capital letters (Summers). However, those small capital letters are not always the problem for some people, but at least they are the representative of the unfamiliar words and the word *gender* represents the case as it is defined *as the system in some languages of marking words such as nouns, adjectives, and PRONOUNS as being MASCULINE, FEMININE or NEUTER*. In this definition, it can be found that there are four small capital words namely *pronouns, masculine, feminine* and *neuter*. The obscurity happens when the people do not recognize the four words on the list and as a consequence they

have to search to find the words painstakingly and time-consuming matter.

Beside the matter of small capital letters, there are also the words that are not in the small capital letters but still suspected as unfamiliar. It is shown in the word *benzene* as the next higher frequency as the data result. *Benzene is a colourless liquid obtained from petroleum and coal tar, used in making plastics and many chemical products* and though it does not contain small capital letters it has two words that need to be defined clearly as it contains the scientific terminology. The words that need further explanation are the words *petroleum* and *coal tar* that if the word-seekers demand the further definition they should be defined as *oil that is obtained from below the surface of the Earth and is used to make PETROL, PARAFFIN and various chemical substances and a thick black sticky liquid made by heating coal without air, from which many drugs and chemical products are made*. Based on those two words' definition, even the word *petroleum* contains the obscurity through the words *petrol* and *paraffin*, and it also can be a part of the circularity problem from the connection of *petroleum* and *petrol*. On the other hands, fortunately, the word *coal tar* contains clear information.

The writer mostly takes examples in the more scientific words like in *cortisone, gastric flu, and alkali* that have each own obscurity as it is shown in the table. Each of the definition might contain the same problem as the word *benzene*. However, it is not only about scientific

word that contains too scientific word but also the daily-used ordinary such as *hospital* and *horse*. Even the word *hospital* has the word that is not defined as a part of the definition because it is shown in the small capital letters. It can be said that *hospital* has obscurity matter as it defines as *a large building where old people or ORPHAN live and are looked after by an official organization* and it contains the word *orphan* as indescribable word for the word *hospital*. Or, the word *horse* is also a good example when it defines as *a piece of sports equipment in a GYMNASIUM used for jumping over; VAULTING HORSE* and it does not contain the word *horse* as an animal at all. The word-seeker must search, at least, the word *vaulting horse* to get the definition clearer. This *vaulting horse*, surprisingly, has a meaning as *a large wooden box used for jumping over in GYMNASTICS* that still has the small capital letters in it.

1.1.2 Solution

There are two ways to minimize the obscurity problem namely controlled defining vocabulary and full-sentence definition. It is recommended by Adamska in his paper entitled *Dictionary Definitions: Problems and Solutions*.

In order to minimize the danger of obscure definition, the lexicographer can stick firmly to a controlled defining vocabulary (DV), i.e. not go beyond an agreed upon list of words admissible in the definition. The underlying assumption is that the words included in such a list will be familiar to the target user of the

dictionary. For example is in the word *sand*, however it is not stated as the data as the dictionary has revised it.

sand a substance consisting very small pieces of rocks and minerals that forms beaches and deserts (LDOCE)

The above explanation is much clearer as it contains the illustration of the beaches and deserts. Therefore the word-seekers can imagine the thing being discussed.

Full-sentence definition is applied relating to the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* and how this dictionary strives to make the definition friendlier to the word-seekers. The examples are in the words *wise* and *dream*:

wise Someone who is wise is able to use their experience and knowledge in order to make sensible or reasonable decisions or judgements.

dream When you dream, you see imaginary pictures and events in your mind while you are asleep. (COBUILD)

The words above shows the power of the full-sentence that they can be better if they use the targeted word being participated in the definition but using the scenes like in *someone who is wise is able to use their experience and knowledge in order to make sensible or reasonable decisions or judgements*. In the definition, the word *wise* is mentioned twice but it does help because the next sentence makes it clear.

The full-sentence definition is also shown in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary*

English like in the same word *wise* as it is defined as *wise decisions and actions are sensible and based on good judgment*. It supports the *COBUILD* innovation in making a better definition by using full-sentence definition.

3. Conclusion

The lexicographers are the people behind the definition-making that should be understood how hard they make the decision from one revision into another revision. Therefore, as the word-seekers it is better to get up-to-date dictionary to get better revision.

There are two main problems that are faced by the lexicographers namely circularity and obscurity. Both of these problems are the serious ones since circularity concerns with the circle definition that somehow tiring and obscurity relates to the unfamiliar word contained as a part of the definition. The examples of circularity are in the words *feeling* in which its definition contains the words *emotion*, *hate* and *anger* that each of the word tiringly contains the same targeted word *feeling*. The problem in obscurity is shown in the word *gender* where the word-seekers want to find clear definition, instead they have to face the unfamiliar words like *pronoun*, *masculine*, *feminine* and *neuter*.

Fortunately, these two problems have the solutions. It is from Adamska's suggestion to the lexicographers and *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* that presents the

solution. The circularity problem is resolved by collecting the new information and combining them into a good knowledge that represents the definition of the word. While in obscurity problem, there are two solutions offer especially for the lexicographers namely controlled defining vocabulary and full-sentence definition.

Last but not least, the writer suggests for the further researchers who should find more data to gain the better result in the data analysis and also to represent the problem in circularity and obscurity thoroughly.

References:

- Adamska-Sałaciak A. (2010). Why we need bilingual learners' dictionaries. – Kernerman I., Bogaards P. (eds.) *English learners' dictionaries at the DSNA 2009*. Tel Aviv: 121–137.
- Adamska-Salaciak A. (2012). Dictionary Definitions: Problems and Solutions. *Studia Linguistica Universitatis Jagellonicae Cracoviensis 129 supplementum*, 323-339.
- Harlow. Goddard, Cliff. (1998). *Semantic Analysis: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford Textbook in Linguistics. Oxford University Press.
- Johnson S.1755. A dictionary of the English language. London. [www.johnsonsdictionary online.com].
- Kreidler, Charles W. (1998). *Introducing English Semantics*. London: Routledge. Pp. 289-290.
- Leech, Geoffrey. (1981). *Semantics: The Study of Meaning*. Penguin Books.
- LDOCE4 = Summers D. (ed.) (2003). Longman dictionary of contemporary English. [4thedition].

LDOCE = Summers D. (2015). Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Online.

Love, N. (1983). Translational semantics: A discussion of the second edition of Geoffrey Leech's *Semantics: The Study of Meaning*. Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Stellenbosch Pap. Linguist., Vol.11, 115-136. doi:10.5774/11-0-106