

Slovenian Lexicographers at Work¹

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Abstract

This paper reports part 1 of findings from a grant project between Slovenia and the U.S. that set out to understand the context and content of modern Slovenian lexicography. Interviews were conducted with six Slovenian lexicographers and one terminographer working on different projects within several institutions (the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts; the University of Ljubljana; and Trojina, Institute for Applied Slovenian Studies). The grant's aim was to discern the philosophical underpinnings, most noteworthy accomplishments, and main projects of Slovenian dictionary work. The focus was on those aspects of lexicographic work that have the greatest significance for the general educated public rather than areas (such as dialectology, etymology, etc.) that might attract primarily language specialists.

The interview script consisted of thirteen narrative questions, designed to allow interviewees to reflect on their daily practice and their underlying vision of what lexicography or terminography is. This paper focuses on a single interview question that captured the interviewees' views on drudgery in lexicography, and on the social/ethical role of the lexicographer.

Keywords: harmless drudge, drudgery, interview, lexicographer, objectivity

1 Introduction

While dictionaries are created and delivered in similar ways internationally, to the best of our knowledge there have been no in-depth studies of any country's or culture's lexicographic philosophy or practices based upon an analysis of interviews with lexicographers. The present work thus aims to provide a glimpse of the world views of Slovenian lexicographers; it reports the first set of findings from a grant project between Slovenia and the U.S.

Although the Slovenian language has a relatively small number of speakers, there is a significant Slovenian lexicographic tradition; this history, like that of many other traditions (cf. Béjoint 2016; Farina and Durman 2009; Fontenelle 2016) began with needs arising from contact between languages and cultures. Since the 1970s but particularly in the new century, there has been a stream of scholarly work putting forward the underlying philosophy of what general Slovenian lexicography should be (Gantar 2015; Gliha Komac et al. 2015; Gorjanc et al. 2015; Gorjanc et al. 2017; Ledinek et al. 2015; Snoj 2004; Srebnik 2015; Žagar Karer 2011). We build upon this work here via interviews with prominent practitioners.

Around the globe, there are some lexicographers who are familiar with others' work through conference attendance and scholarly publications. On the other hand, many dictionary makers labor alone without a deep awareness of what others in the field are doing, even when similar dictionaries are being created in other countries. Working on a dictionary is by its nature solitary: Despite the availability of 21st-century technological tools, to some extent not so much has changed since 1755, when

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Samuel Johnson defined the word *lexicographer* as a “harmless drudge”. The present paper strives to broaden the knowledge base of world lexicography by discussing views obtained through interviews with seven distinguished Slovenian lexicographers. A later article will concentrate on Slovenian lexicographic practice as addressed by our seven interviewees.

2 Aims of the Study

Through intensive interviews with lexicographic and terminographic specialists, this study set out to address the following research questions:

- A. What is the philosophical and intellectual framework governing the work of Slovenian lexicographers?
- B. What are the main areas of concern and common significant problems that inform the work of Slovenian lexicographers?
- C. What do the lexicographers consider both the main strengths and weaknesses of their current efforts in dictionary creation? What would they most like to change about their practice?
- D. What are the differences among our interviewees in their conception of what lexicography is all about?

The present article addresses mostly A, with some elements of D: What do the lexicographers think about before they even sit down to work; what are their reflections on the most important underlying ideas that drive how they perform their duties. (Later publications are planned to address B and C.)

3 The Selection of Interview Subjects

In order to select whom to invite for interviews, we first considered how lexicographic work is organized in Slovenia. Within the Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts there is the Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language, which specializes in the following areas: lexicology, etymology, onomastics, dialectology, terminology, and historical dictionaries. In addition to work within the Academy of Sciences, there are ongoing lexicographic projects in a variety of units at the University of Ljubljana and the University of Maribor, as well projects led by Trojina, Institute for Applied Slovenian Studies, usually in cooperation with other units.

Since we were concentrating on aspects of lexicography that affect the general educated public rather than linguists/scholars, we sought interviewees who work on synchronic topics, and who concentrate more on the standard language and terminology (rather than on areas such as dialectology, etymology, etc.). Only seven persons could be interviewed due to constraints of time. Therefore, this study should be considered a sampling of views prevailing within the modern Slovenian lexicographic tradition.

4 Our interview subjects

Our seven interviewees were not anonymous participants. Due to their positions and influence in the field, their reflections are quoted and cited here so that these ideas might advance lexicography worldwide. The interviewees had the option at all times to provide information “off the record”. What follows is a brief introduction to the interviewees and their areas of expertise:

Apolonija Gantar is a researcher at the University of Ljubljana. She works on collocations, a new grammar of Slovenian, and non-standard Internet Slovenian.

Nataša Jakop, of the Fran Ramovš Institute, is in charge of phraseology for the third edition of *The Dictionary of Standard Slovenian*.

Iztok Kosem, affiliated with Trojina, the Institute for Applied Slovenian Studies and the University of Ljubljana, has worked on projects including a Hungarian–Slovenian dictionary, collocations, and a new grammar of Slovenian.

Nina Ledinek, the Head of the Lexicological Section of the Fran Ramovš Institute, coordinates work on *The Dictionary of Standard Slovenian* and also worked on the FRAN online dictionary portal.

Jerica Snoj worked on the first edition of *The Dictionary of Standard Slovenian (Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika 1970–1991)*, and today works on the third edition. Past projects include *Slovenian Orthography* (Toporišič et al. 2001) and the *Dictionary of Slovenian Synonyms* (Snoj et al. 2016).

Anita Srebnik teaches Dutch at the University of Ljubljana and authored the *Slovenian–Dutch European Dictionary* (2006) and the *Dutch–Slovenian Dictionary* (2007) intended for Slovenian learners of Dutch.

Mojca Žagar Karer is the Head of the Terminological Section of the Fran Ramovš Institute. Her projects include the *Dictionary of Theater Terms* (Sušec Michieli et al. 2007), the *Dictionary of Automated Control Systems and Robotics* (Karba et al 2014), and an ongoing dictionary of legal terminology.

5 The Interview Script

The interview script (see Appendix) consisted of thirteen narrative questions, designed to allow the interviewees to reflect on their daily practice as well as their underlying vision of what lexicography or terminography is.

The first two interview questions as well as Script Questions 7 through 9 provided us with personal background information as well as information about the lexicographers' daily work, projects, and accomplishments; Script Questions 4 through 6 treated the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings to their work. Since the study was conducted within the framework of a bilateral project between Slovenia and the U.S. (see Acknowledgements), we asked directly in Script Question 6 about any U.S. sources, theories, or practices that may have influenced the Slovenian lexicographers' work. Script Questions 10 through 12 dealt with the problems and constraints the lexicographers commonly face as they strive to deliver high-quality products to dictionary users. Finally, Script Question 13 asked them to help us by recommending different ways in which international cooperation could take place, and how it might improve lexicographic practice everywhere.

Script Questions 3a and 3b proved to be the most important in advancing our understanding of the interviewees' underlying ideas about lexicography. The interviewee responses to these two questions are our main focus here:

3. The famous English lexicographer, Samuel Johnson, defined the word *lexicographer* as follows, in 1755: “a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words”.
 - a. We would like to know, first: What elements of your own work do you consider “drudgery”, hard, menial, or monotonous work?
 - b. Second, do you think the lexicographer is “harmless”? Does he or she play an invisible, unnoticed social role, or the opposite? How are lexicographers significant to the society of which they are a part?

6 Script Question 3a: Lexicography as Drudgery?

Our interview question (3a) on drudgery was intended to encourage interviewees to speak about the more unpleasant or undesirable aspects of their work. We assumed the interviewees would still, in this era of advanced technologies, consider some aspects of lexicographic work to be drudgery, but that they would expand upon both the positive and negative aspects of their work. Among our seven interviewees, we received one “no” and four “yes” responses to the notion that modern lexicographic work has drudgery in it. Two interviewees gave a qualified (“yes, but ...”) answer that focused less on the existence of drudgery and more on ways of mitigating the amount of drudgery in lexicographic work.

The sole terminographer among our interviewees was the only person to answer an unequivocal “no” to the idea of lexicographic drudgery. This is not surprising, given that the work approach of terminography is radically distinct from that of other realms of lexicography. The terminographer’s work, in the words of Mojca Žagar Karer, is much more “dynamic” and is highly interactive. She does not find any of her tasks to be monotonous because she is constantly engaged with experts from different fields. It is the experts who labor over the definitions which have to be precise from the perspective of their field; Dr. Žagar Karer and other terminographers then edit them. Terminographers do not work alone, in “peace and quiet”, but instead are constantly coordinating terminological work or checking fine points in the definitions completed by others. If the terminological work at hand is bilingual or multilingual, Dr. Žagar Karer would most likely need to consult with several different experts to reach a general consensus about the most appropriate way for Slovenian to convey a concept from the terminology of another language.

Among those four who provided an emphatic “yes” to our drudgery question were Nataša Jakop and Jerica Snoj. They said that *all* lexicographic work and *all* phases of dictionary making are drudgery. Nina Ledinek and Anita Srebnik used the word “monotonous” to describe many aspects of such work. Dr. Snoj noted the repetitive nature of the work; each task must be performed thousands of times, for as many words as are being investigated; Dr. Jakop pointed out that monotony can lead to waning concentration, a single moment of which can lead to an error. Dr. Ledinek emphasized how difficult it is to analyze a word with numerous concordance lines in a corpus and multiple meanings. She noted how extremely difficult it is to be consistent, systematic, and coherent when treating grammatical patterns and collocates. Such answers appear to support Ladislav Zgusta’s prediction of more than four decades ago: “The lexicographer has been called a harmless drudge by Dr. Johnson, and he will not advance to a harmless electrician” (1971: 357).

According to Dr. Ledinek, it is also challenging to describe what is the standard language and what is the norm, or to try to describe similar things in a unified way. Finally, Dr. Srebnik, who, of these four interviewees is the only one who compiled her dictionary independently (i.e. not under the auspices of an institute), contributed one not-strictly-lexicographic aspect of her work as additional drudgery: fundraising. Dr. Srebnik stressed that Slovenia needs much better financial support for bilingual lexicographic work.

Our two qualified (“yes, but ...”) answers came from lexicographers who acknowledge that many aspects of lexicographic work are drudgery, but whose remarks focused more on how to lessen the amount of this. Apolonija Gantar works on semantic description and discrimination of senses; she acknowledges that this is challenging but not menial work—what is monotonous is the transfer of such work into a database. She noted that the dictionary is no longer a book; users now expect much more than they did from the print dictionaries of the past. Web-based dictionaries can include lengthy semantic descriptions, grammar, examples, exercises, etymology, phraseology, and other types of information. This is logical: The space limitations of print dictionaries did not allow for all of these

possibilities. Dr. Gantar is interested in the roles that automatization and crowd-sourcing play now and can play in the future in reducing the amount of drudgery in lexicography.

Over the past five years Iztok Kosem has also had as his focus how to get drudgery out of lexicographic work. He works on identifying the menial and routine tasks of lexicography in order to reduce them. He mentioned GDEX, “Good Dictionary Examples” (Sketch Engine | GDEX n.d.), an electronic tool that takes all available corpus examples and ranks their suitability for a specific meaning or sense according to predetermined criteria, thus significantly reducing drudgery and saving time. Dr. Kosem considers that the advent of GDEX is a big step forward in lexicographic work; as corpora have grown to a billion or more words, the problem of too many examples has become ever greater.

While our subjects had diverse views on exactly how much drudgery is involved in dictionary work, there was consensus that they still find their work extremely rewarding. Jerica Snoj commented that in the course of his or her work the lexicographer reaches insights into the language that no one else has, and it is these that help one to endure in such tasks. As Dr. Snoj stated: “It is a gift for all your suffering, but you must be serious in your work to get this satisfaction; otherwise, you can’t reach this stage of insight and there will be only suffering! You must invest a lot to reach this satisfaction.”

7 Script Question 3b: Harmless or Harmful?

Question 3b was intended to address the public anonymity of the lexicographer and their potential to do harm; our interviewees gave extensive thought to whether the lexicographer has the potential to be *harmful*, and were very concerned with what for them was the essential nature of their role in society. Their focus on lexicographic ethics was one of the most interesting findings in our study.

Immediately we discovered a variety of opinions concerning the relationship of objectivity in lexicography to harm. In Apolonija Gantar’s previous employment at the Fran Ramovš Institute, she worked in its consulting service for the public. Even when Dr. Gantar was not fully satisfied with an answer she provided, the users believed her due to their perception of her status. While Dr. Gantar considers that “people have to take responsibility for their own language and take part in the [lexicographic] decisions,” most “people don’t want gray areas: they want a straightforward answer” as to whether something is “correct” or “incorrect”.

Interviewee Nina Ledinek noted that people often consult the dictionary to see what is “right”. While the users want a dictionary that guides them, lexicographers cannot move away from objective description. Moving toward prescription risks failing to depict how most people actually talk and write, which would result in dictionaries of no use and with no credibility or authority.

Iztok Kosem saw lexicographers not as harmless but as individuals whose responsibility to the user can be abused. The lexicographer is a mediator between the complexity of language and the final explanation in the dictionary. This mediating role can be quite influential: If a word does not appear in the dictionary, users might believe that it does not exist or might be suspicious of it. They might also be suspicious of the dictionary if it omits a word they like. From Dr. Kosem’s perspective, lexicographers have a duty *not* to be prescriptive. It is the description that really matters, finding the relevant information (evidence) for the users and delivering it quickly.

Nataša Jakop was also an advocate for a descriptive approach. As an individual, the lexicographer is invisible and harmless, but in order to avoid becoming harmful, the lexicographer must consider the linguistic material as objectively as possible. If lexicographers cannot do this and insert their own beliefs or [prescriptive] views, especially without looking at the linguistic material, then they would become harmful.

Apolonija Gantar noted that while there is no single objective interpretation of what a language is, nevertheless the lexicographer must still strive toward objectivity. A well-developed initial plan and conceptualization of the dictionary to be compiled can contribute to the objectivity of the final work. On the other hand, a too-rigid adherence to an initial plan could be harmful, if some specific set of objective data indicates later that you need to do things differently. Dr. Gantar's comment shows that the goals of objectivity and descriptive accuracy, despite the lexicographers' best intentions, can be quite elusive.

While Nina Ledinek considered that lexicographers are not visible, she emphasized that they must be socially responsible and sensitive to the different groups in society. However, Dr. Ledinek maintained that the *Dictionary of Standard Slovenian* does and should have a normative value; she notes that the language has connected Slovenians throughout their history. Dr. Ledinek's comments bring home the descriptive challenge posed by a language like Slovenian, with only about two million speakers; while objectivity is still very much in the focus of Slovenian lexicographers, they also must consider the role of their language very differently than would any lexicographer of English.

Anita Srebnik noted that other languages bring the outside world to Slovenia and allow Slovenians to communicate when they cross any border. Slovenia is small and thus it cannot live without exchange, and an asset of its people is the ability to learn other languages well. Her comments bring to light the important relationship of Slovenian to other languages, as depicted in its bilingual dictionaries. In the case of a (relatively) small language such as Slovenian, bilingual lexicography takes on a special significance: It encompasses not just equivalence in two languages, but also differences of connotation and culture. Dr. Srebnik stated that it is deplorable that the public regards only some dictionaries as conveyers of the norm, the authorities on the language. For the Slovenian media, this authority only accrues to the work of the Academy of Sciences. In Dr. Srebnik's opinion, it is thus the media that causes harm because it limits the focus to a small number of lexicographers and lexicographic projects; in particular, she faults the lack of status and authority for bilingual lexicography.

The terminographer Mojca Žagar Karer had a very different take on the whole notion of objectivity. For Dr. Žagar Karer, it is clear: Lexicography is more subjective and therefore might not be harmless. Because lexicographers write definitions and analyze meaning themselves, they are subjective. Terminographers, in her view, must be objective because they must be credible for the subject field and society. They are trying to create quality language resources which are useful for translators, language editors, and others. It is interesting that Dr. Žagar Karer saw the processes of analyzing meaning and defining as subjective endeavors. While her perception is understandable, we must point out that the field of terminography cannot escape the danger of subjectivity. In terminography, definitions are written by field specialists with the terminographer playing the role of arbitrator and consensus builder. Field specialists, just like general lexicographers, must guard against a lack of objectivity as they try to define words. It is possible that, given their lack of lexicographic experience, some field specialists do inadvertently bring their personal beliefs, perceptions, and prescriptive ideas to definition-writing, what for them is a relatively new endeavor. If two field specialists were to disagree about which of two terms is the best to designate a concept, then certainly we would have two persons striving toward objectivity of description who come up with different results. It is then that the terminographer/editor can ensure a more objective final consensus.

Jerica Snoj stressed that lexicographers are very important for society. Their dictionaries bring the description of language to users, thereby helping them express their thoughts in an appropriate way. When a new dictionary appears, a new insight into the language is opened up. Dr. Snoj considered that a dictionary has a very important role in exploring the possibilities of a language, while Nataša Jakop cited the significant role such works in the preservation of cultural heritage. Dr. Jakop's point is of special significance for the lexicography of any language with a relatively small number of speakers: Preservation is crucial for such languages.

Whether visible or invisible, whether harmless, and whether a drudge, the lexicographer is *the* source of insight into a given language. The responsibility to provide these insights to users in the most ethical way possible is something that all of our interviewees agree on.

8 Conclusions

The insights of our interviewees are significant for the development of lexicographic theory broadly construed. Our interviewees accepted some implications of Samuel Johnson's humorous "harmless drudge" designation, while they categorically rejected others. They certainly acknowledged that some aspects of their work can be tedious. While their strong commitment allowed them to accept drudgery as part of the picture, the interviewees were aware that repetitive work can cause the lexicographer's attention to wane and mistakes to be introduced. Because of the potential deleterious effects of monotony, some of the interviewees are actively working toward the development of new technologies to replace the hard, repetitive, and routine lexicographic work that is still done by people.

However, rather than focusing on the tedium or anonymity of their work, our interviewees were more concerned about the lack of public understanding of their job. This lack of understanding can contribute to an overestimation of the lexicographer's authority, which in turn could lead to the disengagement of the public from interest in the Slovenian language. If it is only lexicographers who know the language, then there is nothing left for the educated language user to think about or do except follow the "advice" of the dictionary. Conversely, as the bilingual lexicographer in the group of interviewees pointed out, a lack of public awareness can undermine the valuing of dictionary work by the media or society at large, to the detriment of the production of sorely-needed bilingual and monolingual dictionaries.

The Slovenian interviewees examined in this work would reject outright the idea that the dictionary writer is *a priori* "harmless"; they perceived many possibilities for harm and were thus motivated to avoid it. It is the ethical responsibility of the lexicographer to the dictionary user that is the most important factor in preventing such harm. If a lexicographer were to ignore or misrepresent language facts as found in a corpus or other lexicographic source and veer away from linguistic description, this imposition of personal bias would be socially harmful.

The serious discussion engaged in during this study by the seven Slovenian specialists should not leave the reader with the impression that for them lexicography is a grim and onerous business, quite the contrary. Certainly, as one interviewee put it, lexicography requires a tremendous persistence because, despite constantly improving facilities and research tools, there is still a lot of menial work. Most certainly, media portrayals and the society's general misapprehensions about what lexicography is complicate the already-challenging work of linguistic description. Nevertheless, the six Slovenian lexicographers and one terminographer spoke frequently about "satisfaction": The satisfaction of gaining real insight into the language, the satisfaction of meeting the language needs of users, and the satisfaction of helping them to engage more fully with a language that is such an important part of Slovenian identity. A future article will delve further into Slovenian lexicographic practices as addressed by our seven interviewees.

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Appendix

Interview script

Beginning of interview

We want to thank you very kindly for agreeing to work with us on this project. Our working title is: “Slovenian Lexicographers at Work”. Our goal is to add to the worldwide understanding of what lexicographic work is by focusing on work in this country. We consider that the practices in Slovenia should be known and will prove relevant to lexicographers everywhere.

As indicated by the statement you signed, your remarks are not anonymous; we would like to mention you by name and highlight your ideas in any resulting publications. But, on the other hand, if any specific remark you make is not one that you want attributed to you by name, just tell us that it is “off the record”. In that case, we would quote you or cite you generally, using language such as: “Some of our interviewees considered that”

Questions

1. First of all, can you tell us a little bit about yourself? Why were you attracted to the field of lexicography? How did you end up doing what you do today?
2. Can you describe your daily work as a lexicographer? What are the main activities that you do on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis? What aspects of your work do you like best?
3. The famous English lexicographer, Samuel Johnson, defined the word *lexicographer* as follows in 1755: “a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words”.
 - a. We would like to know, first: What elements of your own work do you consider “drudgery”: hard, menial, or monotonous work?
 - b. Second, do you think the lexicographer is “harmless”? Does he or she play an invisible, unnoticed social role, or the opposite? How are lexicographers significant to the society of which they are a part?
4. What is the philosophical and theoretical framework that governs your work? In other words, what is the “umbrella” of ideas under which you do everything that you do?

(Follow-up to Question 4, if needed: What are the “big” ideas that influence how you go about your habitual work as a lexicographer?)

5. Can you explain what are the two or three driving principles that govern your work as a lexicographer? How do you think about these principles as you engage in the minute tasks which lexicographers of necessity must perform?
6. The two previous questions tried to better understand the theoretical and philosophical basis for your lexicographic work. Now we wish to ask: Can you name any theories or practices used in other countries, including the U.S., that inform your own lexicographic work? Or, perhaps when you formulated the principles of your work you incorporated some ideas from abroad?
7. Related to the previous question, have you joined any lexicographic organizations such as the Dictionary Society of North America or EURALEX? Do your memberships of this type affect your work? How?
8. Can you describe two or three of the current projects that you are involved with? We are looking to describe, as completely as possible, what is going on today in Slovenian lexicography. We are also very interested in any future projects that are in the planning stages.
9. In recent years, what are the most noteworthy accomplishments in the work of you and your immediate colleagues?
10. It goes without saying that lexicographic work takes place in the real world and is subject to the usual constraints and challenges of any practical work. In particular, there are always budgetary constraints, but not only budgetary. We would like to know: How is your work challenged by a variety of circumstances; what are the challenges and constraints?
11. Can you name the major strengths of your work situation? What is a best practice for you and your colleagues (e.g., access to different information/sources, user-friendly dictionary-making software, cooperation with IT specialists and/or corpus linguists and/or experts from other fields, etc.)? What affects most positively the compilation of your dictionaries?
12. If you could change one thing about the circumstances of your lexicographic work, what would it be? If you could change one feature of the lexicographic philosophy / theory that underpins your work, what would it be?
13. Could you offer us some suggestions? How do you think the cooperation and exchange of ideas between Slovenian and American lexicographers can be encouraged? Do you consider that more cooperation would improve lexicographic work in Slovenia, the U.S., and beyond?