

## THE CONCEPT OF 'DICTIONARY USAGE'

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This article appears in a Festschrift dedicated to a renowned scholar who, among many other things, has distinguished himself by editing a number of proceedings from the Copenhagen International Symposia on Lexicography. In order to honour such a person, it is appropriate to take up a discussion on lexicography that was initiated twenty years ago in another Festschrift and immediately contested at a symposium in Essen, Germany.

The topic is a fundamental question for lexicographic theory and practice: the concept of dictionary usage. In a Festschrift for Siegfried Grosse (1984), the German scholar Wolfgang Mentrup contributed an article entitled "Dictionary Usage Situations – Language Use Situations" [Wörterbuchbenutzungssituationen – Sprachbenutzungssituationen], which offered a thought-provoking critique of some reflections on the concept of dictionary usage by his fellow countryman, Herbert Ernst Wiegand. Wiegand was apparently not amused by Mentrup's criticism and his harsh and personal response was published the following year in the proceedings of the 'Essen Symposium on Grammar in Dictionaries'.

The discussion is highly relevant. Since 1977, Wiegand has developed a comprehensive theory of lexicography. One of the cornerstones is the concept of dictionary usage which has recently been criticised and rejected by Bergenholtz and Tarp (2002; 2003). Mentrup was the first to put his finger on the Achilles' heel of Wiegand's theory but, sadly, his comments never had an impact on subsequent lexicographical debates, perhaps because of Wiegand's angry reply or because Mentrup withdrew from the debate. Wang (2001), for example, writes that "in spite of Mentrup's critique", she considers "Wiegand's types of dictionary usage situations to be meaning-

ful because they lay the foundations for such a research" (Wang 2001: 71. Our translation). This is, surely, a weak argument if the criticism is justified.

### **Mentrup's critique**

Mentrup's starting point is found in Wiegand's definition of a "dictionary usage situation". This definition was put forward in a lecture (Wiegand 1982) and can be traced in some of Wiegand's other publications of the period, e.g. Wiegand 1977a; 1977b. It has only been changed slightly in Wiegand's recent works (e.g. 1998: 825). In order to show that Mentrup was familiar with Wiegand's thinking and in order to present the chronology, we here present the debate by means of Mentrup's articles. In his article, Mentrup (1984) cited Wiegand as follows:

"A dictionary usage situation occurs when a person with a specific question resorts to a dictionary in order to get an answer to his question. Dictionary usage situations can be assigned to types. The systematic knowledge of such types is important for the foundation of a pragmatically based theory of lexicography." (Our translation)

[Eine Wörterbuchbenutzungssituation liegt vor, wenn eine Person mit einer bestimmten Frage zu einem Wörterbuchexemplar greift, um eine Antwort auf seine Frage zu finden. Wörterbuchbenutzungssituationen lassen sich zu Typen ordnen. Die systematische Kenntnis solcher Typen ist wichtig für die Grundlegung einer pragmatisch fundierten Theorie der Lexikographie.] (Quoted from Mentrup 1984: 143)

The quotation illustrates how dictionary usage situations are crucial to Wiegand's lexicographical theory. Mentrup turns his attention to Wiegand's definition of dictionary articles as "contra-conflictive texts" that help the user to avoid "word-related disruptions" in text understanding "prophylactically" or, when they occur, to "overcome" them (Wiegand

1977a). Mentrup goes on to show that Wiegand's typology of dictionary usage situations can be subdivided into situations that occur a) "due to an actual communication conflict" and b) "irrespective of an actual communication conflict" (144). The former, i.e. the "actual communication conflict", can be related to either "text reading" or "text production" (144) and both can be subdivided into various types (146), e.g. communication conflicts related to text production:

- as regards semantics
- as regards grammar
- as regards phonetics/accent
- as regards orthography
- as regards hyphenation
- as regards etymology
- as regards pragmatics

It is interesting that Mentrup does not doubt that these categories constitute real problems in terms of communication conflicts related to text reading or text production. We shall return to this issue below.

Mentrup proceeds to discuss a systematisation of situations in which people use a monolingual dictionary. His discussion is based on fourteen questions formulated by Wiegand (1977a, 1977b) and he calls his systematisation "w-questions" (from German: *wer, wann, wo, warum, wie, wozu*, etc.):

- who (academics, foreigners, etc.)
- when or in which situation (questions about language and objects, knowledge, etc.)
- where (at school, during studies, at work, in the library, etc. )
- why (because there is a word-related disruption of understanding)
- how (how frequent, how systematic, with assistance)

- which monolingual dictionary
- to do what (to avoid or solve a communication conflict)
- with what effect

(Mentrup 1984: 149)

It goes without saying that the very nature of these questions – and the corresponding ones posed by Wiegand himself – is crucial to an understanding of what is meant by the term “dictionary usage situation” as defined by Wiegand. Mentrup quotes Wiegand, who emphasises the need to develop a “sociology of the dictionary user” because “we know too little about who ... becomes a dictionary user and in what situation.” (Wiegand 1977b: 61). However, no such sociology exists – nor did it exist at the time. According to Mentrup, Wiegand (1977b) therefore states that there is a “remarkable research gap” due to the fact:

“that there is no empirically based sociology of the dictionary user. However, only such a sociology may constitute a reliable basis for the typology of communicative acting situations in which monolingual dictionaries are used.” (Our translation)

[daß es keine empirisch fundierte Soziologie des Wörterbuchbenutzers gibt. Allein eine solche aber bildet eine verlässliche Basis für die Typologie von kommunikativen Handlungssituationen, in denen einsprachige Wörterbücher benutzt werden.] (Quoted from Mentrup 1984: 150)

Mentrup then concludes that the above questions are not based on an empirically based typology of dictionary usage situations, but on:

“the systematic selection of classes of information that can be found in dictionaries. It is assumed that the 'dictionary usage situations systematically correlate with dictionary entries' (Wiegand 1982: 41).” (Our translation)

[die systematische Sichtung der Klassen von Informationen, die in Wörterbüchern zu finden sind. Es ist ein Ansatz, der 'WbBS' systematisch mit Wörterbucheinträgen korreliert' (Wiegand 1982:41).] (Mentrup 1984:151)

Mentrup's conclusion concerning the nature of dictionary usage situations described by Wiegand is therefore:

"The classes of information given in existing dictionaries can be arranged according to the notion of the language system that the practical lexicographer implements in his dictionary or which the theoretical lexicographer deduces from it or supplies himself. This means that the typology of dictionary usage situations presented by Wiegand is an *aposteriori* systematisation and a language-system-related construct and therefore falls short of its intention ... falling short because the deduced phenomena are in effect not dictionary usage situations, but classes of dictionary information; the questions are not authentic but derived." (Our translation)

[Die in vorhandenen Wörterbüchern angebotenen Informationsklassen lassen sich nach der Vorstellung vom Sprachsystem ordnen, die der praktische Lexikograph in seinem Wörterbuch realisiert oder der theoretische Lexikograph daraus abgeleitet hat oder von sich aus mitbringt. Das heißt, daß die von Wiegand vorgelegte Typologie der WbBS ein rekonstruierend-systematisches und Sprachsystem-bezogenes, dabei aber zielverfehlendes Konstrukt ist ... zielverfehlend deshalb, weil die erschlossenen Phänomene eben keine Wörterbuchbenutzungssituationen, sondern Wörterbuchinformationsklassen sind; es handelt sich nicht um authentische Fragen, sondern um abgeleitete.] (Mentrup 1984: 151)

Mentrup quotes Wiegand once more to support this conclusion:

"A typology of usage situations ... can be proposed for most classes of lexicographic information." (Our translation)

[Zu den meisten lexikographischen Informationsklassen ... läßt sich eine Typologie von Benutzungssituationen entwerfen.] (Wiegand 1981a: 231)

Mentrup notes that the method permits the registration and classification of existing classes of information in already published dictionaries, but that it cannot be used to anticipate classes not yet represented in dictionaries, let alone anticipate what potential users may expect from a dictionary, notably so because many know little about dictionaries. Accordingly, Mentrup concludes that Wiegand's dictionary usage situations are a fiction since they have nothing in common with real-life dictionary usage.

Mentrup explicitly rejects an approach that takes dictionary usage situations as the starting point for lexicographical theory. Instead, he suggests that the theoretical work should start one step prior to this:

"I believe that you should not start with the intangible dictionary usage situations but – as it were one level below – with language-related disruptions in language use situations." (Our translation)

[Ich meine, man sollte nicht von den nicht greifbaren Benutzungssituationen ausgehen, sondern – sozusagen eine Stufe tiefer – von sprachbedingten Störungen in Sprachbenutzungssituationen.] (Mentrup 1984: 160)

In some of the "language use situations" mentioned by Mentrup, a "language problem situation" may emerge. Such a "language problem" can be solved in various ways, for instance by consulting a dictionary, an act that generates a "dictionary usage situation". Accordingly, Mentrup suggests that Wiegand's "dictionary usage situation" should be replaced by the "language problem situation" as the point of departure for lexicographical research and theory. In many ways this methodological approach anticipates the modern theory of lexicographical functions (see Bergenholtz and Tarp 2002, 2003).

**Wiegand's reply**

Totalling sixteen pages, Wiegand's response to Mentrup's article is prompt, rather aggressive, and very detailed (Wiegand 1985). Mentrup's arguments are criticised in an unusually harsh way:

"(1) Quote as much as possible from your opponent's texts because in this way you give the impression, firstly, that you know his text well and, secondly, that it is your opponent himself who is arguing. (2) Select quotations that exclusively serve the purpose of your own argument. (3) Trim the quotation so that it serves the purpose of your own argument. (4) Arrange the selected quotations so that the arrangement exclusively serves the purpose of your argument. (5) Use quotations from other authors that you treat according to (2)-(4) so that they exclusively serve the purpose of your own argument. (6) Be obliging, praise your opponent and criticise yourself in unimportant respects because this is one way of giving the impression that you are a modest critic for whom, in a rational discourse, only the subject matter and the progress of the scientific debate is important. Mentrup's text shows that its author has embraced maxims (1)-(4)." (Our translation)

[(1) Zitiere möglichst viel aus den Texten Deines Argumentationsgegners, denn dadurch erweckst Du erstens den Eindruck, daß Du dessen Text gut kennst und zweitens den, daß Dein Argumentationsgegner selbst argumentiert. (2) Wähle die Zitate so aus, daß die Auswahl ausschließlich Deinen Argumentationszielen dient. (3) Lege die inneren und äußeren Zitatschnitte so, daß dies ausschließlich Deinen Argumentationszielen dient. (4) Ordne die ausgewählten Zitate so, daß die Anordnung ausschließlich Deinen Argumentationszielen dient. (5) Bringe Zitate von anderen Autoren, die Du nach (2)-(4) behandelst, so daß sie ausschließlich Deinen Argumentationszielen dienen. (6) Sei im Ton verbindlich, lobe den Argumentationsgegner und tadele Dich selbst in Nebensächlichkeiten, denn u.a. dadurch wirst du den Eindruck erwecken, als seiest Du ein bescheidener Kritiker, dem es in einem rationalen Diskurs um nichts als um die Sache und den Fortschritt der wissenschaftlichen Diskussion geht. Mentrups Text zeigt, daß sein Autor die Maximen (1) bis (4) verinnerlicht hat.] (Wiegand 1985:25)

One gets the impression that Mentrup's critique hit a nerve with Wiegand, which is surprising as one would expect a renowned scholar like Wiegand, to be used to critical comments. And even more so because Wiegand sometimes uses the same argumentation strategy as Mentrup, e.g. in Wiegand (2001).

Wiegand maintains his definition of a dictionary usage situation and claims that Mentrup is incapable of distinguishing between a dictionary usage situation and classes of information in dictionaries. He does so in a way that is not at all "obliging":

"A person who is incapable of distinguishing between an action that belongs to this definition [of a dictionary usage situation] or the description of such a situation and classes of dictionary information – like Mentrup ... – must learn to do so." (Our translation)

[Wer eine Handlungssituation, die unter diese Definition fällt, oder eine Beschreibung einer solchen von Wörterbuchinformationsklassen nicht unterscheiden kann oder will – wie es Mentrup ... – muß das eben noch lernen.] (Wiegand 1985: 30)

On the following pages, Wiegand breaks a butterfly on a wheel in that he proves that his "usage situations" are not "classes of information" which he alleges Mentrup has said. Wiegand puts forward various arguments to support this claim, first of all that he does not mean "dictionary usage situation" when he writes "dictionary usage situation", but "type of dictionary usage situation". On this basis, a typology of usage situations can be extracted from the type of data:

"Types of questions ... can, of course, be extracted from types of data, and for this very reason, this is a useful exercise because it shows that there are various types for questions to each type of data. A lexicographer (when he plans a dictionary or compiles a dictionary article) ... should not 'anticipate'

dictionary usage situations but “types of usage situations” ... and, of course, also types of questions, something that Mentrup has failed to see.” (Our translation)

[Typen von Fragen ... können natürlich aus den Datentypen gewonnen werden, und allein dies ist u.a. deswegen eine recht nützliche Übung, weil sich hier zeigt, daß es zu jedem Datentyp mehrere Fragetypen gibt. Nicht Wörterbuchbenutzungssituationen ... sollte der Lexikograph ‘antizipieren’ (wenn er ein Wörterbuch plant oder wenn er einen Wörterbuchartikel verfaßt) sondern “Typen von Benutzungssituationen” ... und damit natürlich auch Fragetypen, was Mentrup übersehen hat.] (Wiegand 1985: 31)

This argument is valid and convincing, but it is difficult to see what it has to do with Mentrup’s criticism. Nevertheless, Wiegand uses this argument, again, not to praise, but to criticise Mentrup in a way that, fortunately, is unusual in academic discussion:

“This should now be evident: Mentrup’s view that my dictionary usage situations are classes of information ... is unfounded; it is due to a superficial (or ‘literal’) reading and the confusion is rather embarrassing for the very reason that Mentrup does not distinguish between isolated phenomena and named classes of such types.” (Our translation)

[Damit dürfte klar sein: Mentrups Ansicht, meine Wörterbuchbenutzungssituationen seien Informationsklassen ... ist unbegründet; sie beruht auf oberflächlicher (oder ‘übergenuauer’) Lektüre, und die Verwechslung ist schon aus dem Grunde einigermaßen peinlich, weil Mentrup nicht zwischen einmaligen Gegebenheiten und benannten Klassen von solchen Typen unterscheidet.] (Wiegand 1985: 31)

Wiegand’s criticism is superficial, not to say embarrassing. It is normal and necessary in scholarly presentations that the context is taken for

granted and that terms are not spelled out every time they are used. Wiegand does so and even defends the practice when he continues:

“I have frequently spoken about dictionary usage situations when I had types in mind (the term dictionary usage situation types is terribly convoluted), about the user when I had the potential user in mind, etc. I thought that this was rather obvious from the context.” (Our translation)

[daß ich öfters von Wörterbuchbenutzungssituationen gesprochen habe, wenn ich die Typen gemeint habe (Wörterbuchbenutzungssituationstypen ist eben ein furchterregender Bandwurm), vom Benutzer, wenn ich den potentiellen Benutzer gemeint habe, etc. Ich dachte, das sei nach dem Kontext einigermaßen klar.] (Wiegand 1985: 34)

Wiegand feels free to use abbreviated forms but criticises others who do the same. Moreover, Wiegand admits that his **types** of dictionary usage situation are only partially based on empirical research (p. 30) and mainly “deduced” [erschlossen] from data **types** in existing dictionaries:

“And a typology of usage situations can, of course, be proposed for most lexicographic classes of information (these days I prefer to speak of data types).” (Our translation)

[Und natürlich läßt sich zu den meisten lexikographischen Informationsklassen (ich spreche inzwischen lieber von Datentypen) eine Typologie von Benutzungssituationen entwerfen.] (Wiegand 1985: 30)

Wiegand then convincingly shows that such a methodology is a precondition for creating a theoretical framework for future empirical research on dictionary usage situations, i.e. to make a pre-draft [Vor-Entwurf] and preliminary hypotheses for the empirical work. He also states that he considers his typology of usage situations to be exactly such a pre-draft (1985: 33).

When one reads Wiegand's response to Mentrup, one gets the impression that it is a quibble about words. Mentrup did not write that Wiegand's dictionary usage situations were classes of information. Mentrup merely said that the former are deduced from the latter. If Mentrup had been more precise and referred to types of usage situations and classes of information, or if Wiegand had deduced this from the context, then it would be difficult to tell the difference between the views of the two scholars on the issue. It would be appropriate for Wiegand not to dismiss Mentrup's criticism and instead address the central issue of his critique.

### **Comments**

Mentrup proposed that lexicographical research should not start with dictionary usage situations, but "as it were, one level below – with language-related disruptions in language use situations" (Mentrup 1984: 160). In his response (and elsewhere), Wiegand repeatedly acknowledges that his dictionary usage situations refer to language users with specific types of problems in specific types of situation, but he never draws the proper conclusions of this recognition of the problems "one level below". No matter what kind of argument he uses, his types of dictionary usage situations are mainly reconstructions of types of lexicographical data in existing dictionaries. If this were not so, it would be very difficult to understand how he can assign problems regarding etymology to communication conflicts in terms of text production. No one who wants to produce a German text and does not know how to say "horse" [Pferd] in German will be interested in knowing the word's etymology, at least not for text production purposes, although it might be to acquire knowledge which belongs to a totally different type of "user situation" according to our typology (Bergenholtz and Tarp 2003). Such a conclusion could be reached by deduction, i.e. without any empirical survey of social situations in

which there are problems that can be solved only by means of dictionaries.

As mentioned, Wiegand is not unaware of this. His distinction between dictionary usage situations triggered by an “actual communication conflict” and those arising “irrespective of such a conflict” could – especially if he had paid proper attention to Mentrup’s criticism – have led to concepts such as “communication-orientated” and “knowledge-orientated” user situations which are two fundamental elements in the modern theory of lexicographical functions. Wiegand preferred to create an arbitrary linguistic-philosophical division of the world into language and extra-linguistic matter, a division that is still an obstruction to an understanding of the real problems in processes that lead to dictionary usage situations (see Bergenholtz and Tarp 2003).

Wiegand sticks to his “dictionary usage situations” as the basis for empirical research on lexicography. In so doing, he is caught in a vicious circle: Some persons may never or only rarely use dictionaries, others may only look for the answers they expect to find in it, some questions may never be posed, and others again may be asked in the wrong way, etc. The real needs of users or potential users can never be established by this procedure. In some senses, you would once more and through a number of mediations have to do with a reconstruction of the lexicographic data incorporated in already existing dictionaries. If there is such a thing as bad dictionary culture - and indeed there is - this bad culture will inevitably be reflected in the results. If one only poses questions about dictionary usage, one will only get answers like those in the closed questions in the questionnaires of the commercial publishing houses. They produce dictionaries for commercial purposes and, therefore, they often conceive them so that users with a poor dictionary culture feel that the dictionaries meet their needs. This makes for inbreeding and inhibits innovation. This is the inevitable outcome of a practice that pays excessive attention to the

study of existing dictionaries and does not attempt to introduce new concepts and new dictionary cultures. It is, in other words, poor lexicography.

### Conclusions

Mentrup's criticism of Wiegand was thought-provoking. But the provocation had no effect. By means of his harsh and personal response, Wiegand cut short a discussion that could have saved his own theory and given lexicography a boost. Mentrup never resumed this particular lexicographical enquiry. Wiegand, on the other hand, went on developing his lexicographic theory on a basis which was never reconsidered. Today this lexicographical theory has therefore become a colossus on theoretical feet of clay.

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