

## **FROM CONTENT TO EXPRESSION: A CROSS-REFERENCE DICTIONARY**

**José Marcelino POERSCH**

*Pontifical Catholic University,  
Porto Alegre, Brazil.  
poerschjm@music.pucrs.br*

**Summary :** Writers very often get embarrassed when they do not know or when they forget the exact word to match a given situation. On one hand, the vocabulary stored in one's memory does not correspond to the complete lexicon of the language. On the other hand, the passive vocabulary is larger than the active one. When the exact word is missing, the writer has to use circumlocutions that can interfere with the accuracy and intelligibility of the text. Existing dictionaries usually start from a given word to meet its meaning, its correct spelling, or a good synonym. Consequently, it is the lexical item that is the starting point. Based on the semantic theories of lexical grouping and on the theories of processing and retrieving lexical items in mind, this study aims to bring cues of how to organize such a dictionary. The idea of organizing a dictionary in which the user finds the words organized according to their relations, either paradigmatic or syntagmatic, will certainly represent an expressive progress to the lexicographical universe.

**Keywords :** dictionary ; lexical grouping ; semiology ; synapsis

Lack of lexical knowledge as well as deficiencies in lexical memory are limiting factors that cause inconveniences to writers producing texts; therefore we aim at creating a dictionary in reverse, i.e., a dictionary which allows the reader to find the adequate expression for a given content by starting from this content and doing successive remissions. The lack of a lexical item at the moment it is to be used hinders the communication process, specially if it is in a piece of writing. The speaker/writer knows exactly what he means; this is evidenced by the

fact that he can go around it with words leading the listener/reader to provide him with the exact word to fill in the gap in the text. It is often the case in linguistic communication, in varied ways and amounts, for the speaker/writer to be faced with embarrassing situations in which the right word cannot be made available at the right moment. We know exactly what we want to say; the correct way to express this meaning, however, is the problem. There are two explanations for the lack of a word to express a given content. On the one hand, the word is unknown, it has never been learned. The lack of lexical knowledge is explained by the fact that the vocabulary that is stored in the human mind (available vocabulary) does not correspond to the totality of the existing lexicon of a language and also by the fact that the amount of active vocabulary is remarkably smaller than passive vocabulary. The vocabulary that is stored in the mind of every user of the language constitutes a portion of the total lexicon of the language which is, the sum up of the partial lexicons of each speaker. No dictionary, regardless of how complete it is, holds all of the lexicon of a language. On the other hand, there is the problem of forgetting, and this is related to memory: lexical storing and retrieving. For different reasons the word, once learned, cannot be retrieved when it is necessary. A more detailed explanation derives from the double structure of the verbal sign: the linguistic sign and the semiotic sign. The linguistic one is a mental sign; it is created in the mind of the speakers of the language by bringing together a concept and a sound representation. Each mental sign is related to a physical one in a triadic relationship (the semiotic sign; in communication, this sign corresponds to conveying sounds or letters, to contact among speakers,. It has to do with "something that not only is taken in by the senses but also brings anything else to mind". While the former translates the latter, i.e., it makes a sound sequence correspond to a referent, the latter is responsible for the contact established by the communication partners because it is produced and perceived by the senses. The problem of not knowing or forgetting lies in the fact that under certain circumstances a given content does not spark its corresponding sound representation which is the mental representation of the semiotic sign, i.e., its sound or graphic expression. Forgetting, in this sense, means not finding the link between expression and content. Some possibilities of emergency solutions for the problem in question have been pointed out. The use of circumlocutions and synonyms usually affects adequacy and accuracy; resorting to other partners may prove inconvenient or impracticable. Another solution might be using a dictionary; the use of conventional dictionaries, however, should also be overlooked because they usually start from the very word they provide the meaning for. Dictionaries are of paramount importance in the current world, and this has led several lexicographers to search better ways of organizing them as well as of making them more and more useful and practical. Since the mid 1800's several attempts have been made to change from the mechanical method of grouping words following alphabetical order to a classification according to the concepts words express. The cornerstone for this change was laid by the English P. M. Roget with Roget's International Thesaurus. After this one, other important productions were made in order to improve dictionaries and make them more useful and complete. Among the currently existing dictionaries, apart from the conventional ones which go from word to meaning, there are those which help text producers in situations of lexical memory gaps or lack of knowledge. Morphological dictionaries present words originated from the same root or radical; analogic dictionaries present words that share semantic features; dictionaries of related words present words that are evoked from other ones. The "Thesaurus" attempts to bring the last two together without explaining meaning, however. A dictionary of collocations has recently been launched (Benson et al., 1986). A comprehensive review of lexicographic production has not revealed any dictionary, specially in Portuguese, which is useful enough to solve the problems posed

by memory gaps or lack of knowledge. The importance of the present project is thus enhanced: to produce a dictionary that helps the user of the language, by means of successive remissions, to find the right word for a given content.

Careful observation of linguistic production shows that often speakers/writers encounter embarrassing situations: the word that clearly expresses the concept to be conveyed in a message is not available. It has been reiterated that the customary use of circumlocution, paraphrasing and synonyms in such cases jeopardizes the clarity and accuracy of the discourse. The anatomy of the problem not only spots its immediate cause in the lack of lexical knowledge or in the forgetting of the lexical item ( in both cases, in relation to the mind ( but also points towards valuable, efficient, and prompt solutions. At the lexicographic level, the lexical structure shows that the different lexical items are interrelated in various ways, both in syntagmatic and in paradigmatic aspects. At the semiologic level, the study of the word is related to the verbal sign which is made up of a physical constituent ( the semiological sign ( and a mental constituent ( the linguistic sign. In the acquisition of the sign, the concept and its expression are not always apprehended simultaneously. At the cognitive level, explanations are provided about the way the lexical items are processed in the mind, i.e., how they are stored and retrieved. Storing is achieved through neuron networks where the items are interconnected as they attach themselves to specific neurons which are, in their turn, interconnected by means of synapses. The more consistent the synapsis, due to simultaneous occurrence of two items, the stronger the connection and the easier and faster its retrieval. The crucial point of the problem lies exactly in the connection established between a concept and a sound representation. The problem is that, for a given concept, the corresponding sound representation is not automatically available. Considering the aspects of the relationships the words of a language have among themselves and the networks of connections in which words are stored in the memory, as well as the double structure of the linguistic sign, the existence of a remissive dictionary which is based on these multiple lexical connections may allow the user of the language to find the correct expression for a given content in cases of memory gaps or lack of knowledge.