

Some linguistic remarks on the definition of "museum"

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To *define* is to meet to all the obstacles related to the world of meaning covered by all the social sciences and, specifically in the language sciences, through lexicology/lexicography (in a relationship analogous to that of museology/museography), semantics and pragmatics.

Any definition is problematic because it confronts its authors with a *metalanguage*, i.e. a language, the object itself of which may be the language (when defining the word "museum")¹ but also to a lexicographical *metalanguage* with its lexicon ("type", "kind", "manner", "quality", etc.), its abbreviated symbols and its typographical characters: this is the world of traditional dictionaries. Corpus linguistics has brought about major change: it would be necessary to work on the occurrences of "museum" in a large corpus and compare the results with the definitions of museum already identified.

Gender and specific difference

The metalanguage is also likely to be defined. In the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of Museum is "A **building** in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited". In the 2007 definition, the "museum" is an "**institution**", therefore a type, a kind of institution². This refers us to the definitions of "**institutions**" (hence the addition of a qualification: "permanent"). "Institution" thus seems to be a hypernym or a generic term for a museum, in the same way that "seat" is for "chair", "armchair" etc. and that "furniture" is for "chair", "armchair", "table", "cupboard". In the proposed new definition: museums are "democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces", we see gains and losses. "Space" retains space, that of the building, but adds vagueness and indeterminacy, and loses the "institutional" dimension. Above all, the qualifiers are problematic and in turn need to be defined: "inclusive" and "polyphonic". If the aim of a definition is simplicity or eventual consensus, if the aim is to avoid misunderstandings, we are faced with a real problem. The lexicographical question of *specific difference* arises: the genre gives a first approach, then we add the specific difference. In the dictionary *Litttré*, *man* is defined as « *animal raisonnable* », as a "reasonable animal". What is the difference between a museum and a cultural centre or a space for artistic encounters for example? And are the two adjectives central, necessary, defining senses? Let us note that the museum could also be defined as a "means", an "instrument", a "function"...

A good lexicological analysis should take into account what the field of derivation tells us and to which genres of discourse these words belong: "museum" has a lot of derivatives in the scholarly field with *museal*, *museality*, *museology*, *museography* and one finds *museification* in ordinary

¹ What I would call the "realistic" approach, as opposed to the "nominalist" approach, is to work on the "word museum which includes all open collections...". This reversal of perspective is important since it is pointed out that certain establishments considered as museums do not have this name and that others which are called "museums" are not considered as such. Whence this well-known expression: what is "museum" the name of?

² Not all institutions are museums, even if all museums are institutions. Otherwise we would have to conclude that institutions have exhausted their activity or modernity potential and that it is the *connotation* of "aged" or "outdated" from "museum" that is being used! Is there a political will to eliminate "institution" from the new definition?

discourse. It should also take into account the synonymic field to “mark out” the meaning of “museum”: heritage, gallery, collection... As well as connoted equivalents: museum, temple or forum?

From words to discourses and contexts

If we go from the world of the word to the world of discourse in which the word “museum” is used, connotations arise, beyond the semic nucleus; the problem with nouns is that it is harder to subject them to syntagmatic analysis than for adjectives or verbs, that is to say to an examination of combinations. Essentially, “museum” in the position of subject, object or adjective remains “museum”. This means that the frame of reference, the denotation of the word, will prevail especially among specialists even if the uses of “museum” in ordinary discourse are numerous and have variable connotations³. Beyond lexicological analysis, current discourse and discourse about museology needs to be analysed in order to see how the meaning of “museum” is constructed.

There are discourses and there are contexts: who is making the definition of “museum”, for what use and which audience? A principal difference exists between the current definition made by the generalist lexicographer and that intended for museologists. If we ask the average Joe, the average Jane, the difference between *river* and *tributary*, they will highlight the semantic trait “size”. The geographer may take this trait into account but, for him, the relevant trait will be the mouth point: the river flows into the sea and the tributary into another stream. The semantic field of seats, mentioned above, is obviously not the same for the ordinary speaker and the specialist antique dealer or “designer”, who will be able to find the relevant features to differentiate a couch, sofa or chaise longue.

The question of diachrony: a definition for present, past and future

When the real or its perception change, when frames of thought are transformed, denominations and definitions can change: for example, the metro which in principle has the “underground” seme; when it is not underground, we add “aerial”, an adjective, and we do not invent another word. When the metro comes out of inner Paris, here we change the word, it becomes the RER (*Réseau Express Régional*, the Regional Express Network)... Even if the definition cannot contain everything, it must remain open and cannot exclude what currently exists. At the same time, it needs to be prospective in order to cover museums of the 21st century. The new definition refers to “museums”, the previous one refers to “the museum”. Does plurality mean that we renounce the uniqueness of the definition, its “universal” character? Any definition in “comprehension” supposes that one lists the attributes of the object (this is where we have to agree) because we cannot imagine definitions in extension of the type “Museum” describes the Louvre, MOMA or Guggenheim like “red” describes the colour of fire, of blood... There was, however, a list of institutions or establishments falling within the definitional framework of the museum.

But, if we list the objects instead of the properties of the objects, we will end up, at best, with a typology of museums or recourse to “prototype semantics”, that is to say the search for the best example of the category. It is clear that the prototype of bird would be more sparrow than ostrich or penguin. In the representations of museums, what would be the prototype? Doing this would

³ Randomly, I quote “the museum of horrors”, “a museum piece”, “his apartment is a real museum”, “New York is not a city-museum”. Its ordinary uses retain the semes of collection, rarity, precious but with often negative connotations: the city-museum poses a problem, it connotes passivity, even embalming, far from active modernity. See the formal air of the museum guards: there is a play by Thomas Bernhard (*Old Masters*).

probably be risky and ultimately unproductive because you would eventually have to explain using the statement of properties why the prototype is the Louvre rather than the Hermitage or the McCord Museum on indigenous peoples in Montreal...

Obviously, the question of whether to introduce new semes into the definition arises: for example, the seme "research". But too many new semes in the Kyoto definition risk killing the definition itself. To which we add a plea of principle for relative neutrality of the definition, even if we know that in this matter, as in others, the question of *values* is involved. This definition contains a generous litany of values: "human dignity, social justice, global equality, planetary wellbeing". Certainly, all the semes constituting the old or new definition are open to discussion. While the explicit disappearance of the "open to the public" seme constitutes a problem because it made it possible to differentiate museums from private collections, the consensus on the "non-profit" seme could be a difficulty, "profit" denoting money and greed. In my personal opinion as an ordinary citizen, it would be better if a museum not only did not run a loss but was also profitable.

Clearly, the new version of the proposed text does not seem to me to fall into the genre of a lexicographic definition. By its length, by the use of polysemic and ambiguous terms, by the refusal of a form of minimal neutrality, the text seems to me to belong more to the genre "Manifesto", like the statement of a humanitarian association or NGO.

The fact remains that beyond the truth, or rather the relevance, of this or that definition, the defining activity that professionals and museum specialists are engaged in allows us to question all the major questions that structure the field. I will briefly add that the question of translation should be kept in mind, and I give a tiny illustration of it with the word « *délectation* », "delight", in the 2007 definition. This word means "pleasure that one enjoys, delight". In the English version, I found "enjoyment", which is less strange in English than « *délectation* », "delight", in French...