

A Glossary of Records Terminology: Scope and Definitions

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MORE than two centuries ago Samuel Johnson, the famous lexicographer, complained that among the unhappy mortals "exposed to censure, without hope of praise" is the writer of dictionaries. It is the fate of such a mortal, Johnson contended, to be considered by mankind "not as the pupil, but the slave of science, the pioneer of literature, doomed only to remove rubbish and clear obstructions from the paths through which Learning and Genius press forward to conquest and glory, without bestowing a smile on the humble drudge that facilitates their progress."¹ The fate of a compiler of a glossary may be somewhat similarly unhappy, since he is in fact a writer of a partial dictionary designed to serve the interests of a special group.

The possibly inglorious work of a glossarist can be invaluable to a professional group. Over the years members of such a group develop principles, policies, and procedures based upon their steadily varying experience and broadening research. This development is made through the efforts of many men and organizations in widely separated places. It involves the testing of new ideas and methods and their dissemination in publications and conferences. It tends to create new terms in an attempt to find a concise and readily understood medium to express its increasing complexity. Under these circumstances the resultant vocabulary of the professional group is often highly localized and largely unfixed and uncrystallized. Different persons may use the same term to express different ideas or different terms to express the same ideas. Usages may vary widely in different parts of the country and from country to country. Moreover, in a new profession distinctive elements may not be recognized or may lack appropriate terminology. The result, therefore, is often confusion in the use of terms, which produces confusion in planning and execution of work. Elimination of such confusion may well rest importantly upon the compilation of a suitable glossary for the profession.

In the task of complication several considerations are vital. To begin with, there should be a determination of the scope of the glossary based upon the needs of the group or groups for whom it is intended. The groups could be national and international. Several years ago the emi-

The author, Editor of the Society since 1968, read this paper on Oct. 8, 1969, at a discussion session on terminology during the 33d annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Madison, Wis.

¹ E. L. McAdam, Jr., and George Milne, eds., *Johnson's Dictionary, A Modern Selection*, p. 3 (New York, 1963).

ment British archivist, Sir Hilary Jenkinson, called attention to the need for both national and international dictionaries of archival terminology. At the same time, however, he noted a number of linguistic difficulties that would seem to defy efforts to produce a useful "International Dictionary of Archive Terminology."² A dictionary compiled to meet national needs, on the other hand, seemed to Sir Hilary to be feasible and highly desirable.

The question of scope, however, remains even in planning for a glossary along national lines. The Committee on Terminology of the Society of American Archivists, for example, must decide whether its proposed glossary is intended to serve equally the needs of archivists, records managers, and manuscript curators—the principal professional groups of the Society with varying as well as similar interests. If the needs of all are to receive equal attention, the range of terms will extend far beyond the limits of the most useful existing glossaries for archival, current records, and manuscripts personnel. The range presumably will have to cover terms likely to be encountered by these groups in appraising, accessioning, arranging, describing, servicing, rehabilitating, reproducing, and disposing of major groups of records and manuscripts. These terms are drawn from the language of diverse fields—communications, historiography, bibliography, public administration, business management, literature, chemistry, engineering, photography, printing, and others.

Closely related to the question of scope in subject matter is the problem of deciding the inclusion or exclusion of particular terms. This problem centers mainly on whether the glossary should include terms frequently encountered in professional work whose dictionary definition may suffice for most professional purposes and terms that are likely to be encountered and used only by very specialized groups in the profession. In the first category, for example, might fall the following terms: *abstract*, *acknowledgement*, *film*, *flow chart*, *humidity*, *manifest*, *research*, *shelf*, and *visa*. In the second instance there might be the following terms: *apograph*, *dactylography*, *overlay*, *plasticization*, *situation map*, and *tensile strength*.

At the same time there is need for recognition and possible inclusion of many terms used with very different meanings in situations other than records work. For example, it is probably desirable to show that *disposition* is not a matter of temperament, a document *truck* need not be a highway conveyance, a *file break* is not a cessation of records work for a coffee session, *honeycombing* is not nestling up to the supervisor, a *relative index* is not a finding aid for kinsfolk, and a *dummy* is not an imbecilic colleague.

After the scope of a glossary has been decided, consideration of using

² Sir Hilary Jenkinson, "The Problems of Nomenclature in Archives," *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 1:233 (April 1959).

information in existing glossaries and other authoritative literature becomes an important matter. For the project envisaged by the Committee on Terminology there are five noteworthy compilations offering invaluable information collected from many authoritative sources. In the order of their preparation these works are (1) *Glossary of Records Terminology*, compiled by Paul Lewinson in draft form and issued by the National Archives and Records Service in 1956, (2) *Glossary of Archival and Records Administration Terms Applicable to the Work of the Departmental Records Branch* (of the Adjutant General's Office), compiled by Ken Munden and issued by the Adjutant General's Office in 1957 as one of its several publications dealing with "Standing Operating Procedures" in records administration, (3) *Lexicon of Archive Terminology*, compiled in 1964 by a committee of the International Council on Archives, (4) "A Glossary of American Historical and Literary Manuscript Terms," compiled by Edwin A. Thompson in 1965 in typescript form, and (5) *Glossary for Records Management*, issued by the National Archives and Records Service in 1966. In contemplating new material for inclusion in the proposed glossary several sources warrant examination. Important among these are books on principles and techniques in archives, manuscripts, and records administration published during the past decade; articles on these subjects in recent issues of the *American Archivist* and other journals; and recent dictionaries for special subject areas.

The most crucial consideration in lexicography is the matter of definition. One approach to this question is prescriptive and authoritarian like the position Lewis Carroll attributed to Humpty Dumpty. In a famous conversation with Alice this celebrated character pontificated: "When I use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." Then Alice replied, you will remember: "The question is . . . whether you *can* make words mean so many different things." Humpty Dumpty then declared: "The question is . . . which is to be master—that's all."³ An authoritarian approach toward dictionary and glossary definitions has often been welcomed by those who expect terminology to be handled *à la* Emily Post. Such persons expect to be taught not the prevailing definitions but rather the "proper" ones. An opposite view is that a dictionary, whether general or special in character, should be descriptive and reportorial. With this approach the compilation becomes the medium for recording definitions brought by accepted common usage. This role of a dictionary has been exemplified significantly in recent revisions of Webster's *International Dictionary* and has come to be regarded as the most useful function of lexicographic work. Accordingly, the proposed glossary seems likely to be most useful, if its definitions conform with meanings evolved in basic archival literature and in the policies and practices of leading archival institutions.

³ Roger L. Green, ed., *The Works of Lewis Carroll*, p. 174 (Feltham, Eng., 1968).

Other aspects of definition also merit attention. There is the question of how much repetition is desirable in defining a term. Aristotle contended that a minor rule in logic requires that a definition must not contain the name of the concept to be defined. From this idea teachers of composition often warn students that a definition should not contain a root or derivative of a word being defined. Such advice is usually sound but does not need to be followed in every case. For example, *nonrecord materials* may well be defined as materials not included within the definition of the word *records*, if, of course, the word *records* is suitably defined elsewhere in the glossary.

There is also the problem of avoiding bias in making a definition. In a famous example Samuel Johnson deliberately displayed bias when defining an *excise tax*. This term he defined as "a hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but by wretches hired by those to whom the Excise is paid." Not quite as bad perhaps, but bad enough would be this definition of the term *screening*: the annoying and backward practice of searching through files to remove a few papers at the insistence of an old-fashioned archivist.

In summary, I should say that the compilation of a glossary of records terminology would seem to require planning and execution of work in terms of the following factors: (1) geographical and professional scope, (2) inclusion or exclusion of particular general and technical terms, (3) use of existing authoritative sources, and (4) desirable characteristics of definition. These views hopefully focus on this idea: The great task in compiling a glossary is to remove barriers to an accurate exchange of thought among persons of mutual interests. If this can be accomplished by us in the Society, we will have made the three important uses of words as described by Thomas Hobbes in his great essay, *Of Man*, namely, "first, to register what we find to be the cause of anything, present or past . . . secondly, to show to others that knowledge which we have attained . . . [and] thirdly, to make known to others our wills and purposes, that we may have the mutual help of one another."⁴



⁴ Cited from *The Harvard Classics*, 34:336 (New York, 1910).