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The Architect in the Archive: Reimagining Human Agency in Meta-Lexicography

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Abstract: Moving beyond the historical and limiting binary of the dictionary-maker as either a romanticized "author" or a detached "compiler," this paper introduces a specialized synonymic string, ranging from codifier and chronicler to linguistic arbiter, grounded in the meta-lexicographic tradition. Drawing on the theoretical dialectic between Roland Barthes' radical textuality and Michel Foucault's "author-function," we analyse how the human dictionary-maker navigates the tension between recording collective speech and enforcing linguistic standards. Furthermore, we examine the methodological value of self-reflective authorial essays as a tool for unmasking this creative agency, a methodology pioneered internationally by Ilan Stavans. Ultimately, this article pays homage to the lexicographers represented in this special issue across a diverse typological spectrum (encyclopaedic, monolingual, bilingual, multilingual, general, and specialized) not merely as cataloguers of vocabulary, but as active architects of meaning. In an era dominated by instantaneous, ephemeral digital searches, we conclude by defending the resilient physical architecture of the printed dictionary, and the enduring human intelligence that makes it possible**.**

Keywords: meta-lexicography, authorship, compiler, architect of meaning, dictionary typology, Barthes, Foucault

1. Introduction: Beyond the "Harmless Drudge"

Imagine opening a dictionary at two in the morning, searching for the exact word that will make a sentence finally right. You find it. You close the book. And you think nothing of the human being who put it there.

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That invisibility is not accidental. For centuries, lexicography has cultivated a humility complex, famously encapsulated by Samuel Johnson in the preface to his monumental A Dictionary of the English Language (1755, cited in Ratcliffe 2018, s.v. "Samuel Johnson"). In the dictionary itself, Johnson defined the lexicographer with characteristic self-deprecation as: "A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original and detailing the signification of words."

The definition stuck. And it stuck because it was convenient. If the dictionary-maker is merely a drudge, a passive aggregator who cleans, sorts, and alphabetizes what language has already produced, then the dictionary itself acquires a pleasant aura of objectivity. It reflects the world. It does not make it. The person behind it disappears, and what remains is the reassuring fiction of a neutral, authoritative record.

The term traditionally applied to dictionary-makers, *compiler*, has long been contested within meta-lexicography itself. Hartmann and James (1998, 28) note that the term obscures the substantial editorial judgment involved in every stage of dictionary production, from the principled selection of headwords to the formulation of definitions and the choice of illustrative examples. Landau (2001) goes further, arguing that lexicography is simultaneously an art and a craft. Such a formulation explicitly resists the reduction of dictionary-making to passive aggregation. And Zgusta (1971), one of the founding figures of modern meta-lexicography, articulated the fundamental tension between descriptive and prescriptive impulses that lies at the heart of every lexicographic decision. Behind every entry, there is a human being who made a choice. And behind every choice, there is a mind at work.

When dictionary-makers are invited to reflect on their own published works, as the contributors to this volume have been, the curtain lifts. What emerges is not the image of the harmless drudge but of something far more interesting: a person who spent years deciding which words deserved to exist on the page, which equivalences across languages were defensible and which were merely convenient, which definitions were honest, and which were ideologically freighted. A person who built something. An architect.

This article serves as both a theoretical exploration of that identity and a tribute to the creators gathered in this special issue. Throughout the existence of the Department of Communication and Foreign Languages at what is now the Faculty of Communication Sciences, celebrating its fifteenth year at Politehnica University of Timișoara, around thirty dictionaries have been authored. We argue that across all dictionary types, whether general, encyclopaedic, or highly specialized, the human maker operates as an *architect of meaning*, constructing the cognitive frameworks through which society understands reality.

2. The Synonymic String: Mapping Lexicographical Agency

To understand who the dictionary-maker is, and thus belongs to the "small, but intriguing category of lexicographers", as Gouws formulated (2012), we must expand our vocabulary beyond the traditional author vs. compiler dichotomy. The human agent

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occupies various fluid nodes along a lexicographical synonymic string, depending on their methodological goals and the type of dictionary they are producing (Figure 1).

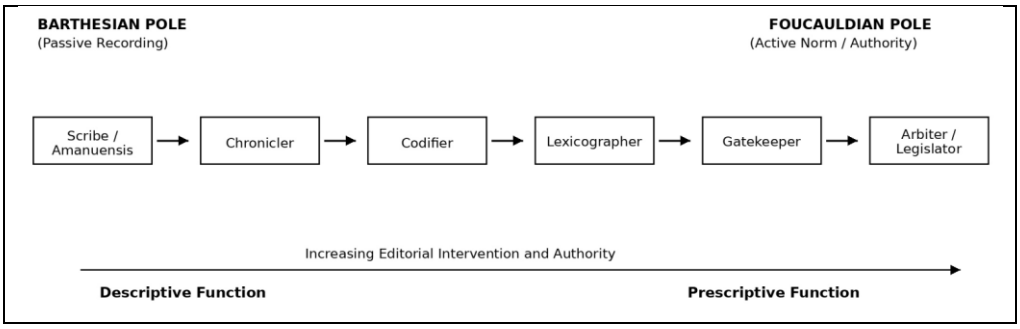

Fig. 1. Spectrum of lexicographical agency

This string is not necessarily a linear progression but a spectrum of postures that a single lexicographer may occupy simultaneously, or move between, across the duration of a single project. The *Codifier* and *Chronicler* represent the descriptive ideal: the human agent attempting to act as a neutral recorder of language as it is actually used. The *Gatekeeper* and *Arbiter* represent the unavoidable prescriptive reality: the human agent who must decide which words are standard, which are peripheral, and which are entirely excluded from the cultural record. Every dictionary-maker begins with the ambition of the Chronicler. Sooner or later, however, they discover that they cannot avoid becoming the Arbiter.

Hartmann and James (1998) distinguish usefully between the *compiler* (who gathers raw data), the *editor* (who selects, structures, and formulates), and the *author* (who exercises normative and creative judgment). What this special issue demonstrates is that the contemporary lexicographer routinely performs all three roles, sometimes within the same working session. The self-reflective essays gathered here are, among other things, accounts of that oscillation: the moments when the compiler's discipline gave way to the author's responsibility, and the intellectual and ethical weight of that transition.

3. The Theoretical Dialectic: From Barthes' Tapestry to Foucault's Framework

The dictionary is the ultimate ideological site for twentieth-century text theory, the literal intersection where Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault productively collide. And the collision is not accidental. The dictionary is the text that most clearly exposes the contradiction at the heart of all textual production: that meaning is always collective and always controlled.

3.1. The Barthesian View: The Dictionary as a "Tissue of Citations"

In his seminal 1967 essay "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes dismantled the romantic myth of the author as a solitary genius breathing singular meaning into a text.

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Instead, Barthes conceptualized the text as "a tissue of citations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture" (Barthes 1977, 146). He argued that the creator is not an Author-God but a mere *Scriptor* whose power consists entirely of mixing pre-existing writings.

A dictionary is the most literal, material execution of this theory in human intellectual history. The lexicographer does not invent the vocabulary; they inherit a pre-existing cultural fabric woven by millions of speakers across centuries. The dictionary page is quite literally the multi-dimensional space Barthes described: woven from the utterances of the community whose language it records. In a pure Barthesian sense, the lexicographer-as-compiler behaves as the ultimate *Scriptor*, dissolving individual identity into the collective currents of language, leaving the ultimate birth of meaning to the reader who consults the entry.

3.2. The Foucauldian Correction: The Institutional Weight of the Author-Function

If Barthes offers a liberating view of the dictionary as an open, collective tapestry, Foucault's 1969 response, "What is an Author?", provides the necessary institutional correction. Foucault argued that the author does not simply vanish into an egalitarian text. Instead, society constructs what he termed the *author-function* (*fonction-auteur*), a highly specialized ideological and legal mechanism used to classify, bound, and exert control over discourse (Foucault 1984, 107). The author-function gives a text its social weight, legitimacy, and disciplinary authority.

This theoretical transition reveals the fundamental paradox of the dictionary. While the internal mechanics of making a dictionary are perfectly Barthesian, a human Scriptor compiling an ongoing cultural tissue, the external societal reception of the dictionary is violently Foucauldian. Society refuses to view the dictionary as an anonymous, authorless archive. We do not appeal to a formless list of words; we appeal to *Webster's*, *Oxford*, or *Larousse*. The proper name of the human creator is instantly weaponized as an author-function: a cultural seal of approval, an institutional anchor used to police standard language, determine what is linguistically legitimate, and enforce socio-cultural boundaries.

The human lexicographer is thus trapped in this dialectic: they must act as a Barthesian compiler to gather the language, but they are reconstituted as a Foucauldian author to preside over it. The self-reflective essays in this volume are, among other things, accounts of living inside that trap, and of the intellectual resourcefulness required to navigate it.

4. The Methodological Value of Self-Reflective Essays

It is precisely because of this theoretical tension that this special issue introduces a distinctive methodological framework: authorial self-reflections paired with independent critical reviews.

Traditionally, academic journals treat the dictionary as a finished, static monument, reviewed entirely from the outside. The reviewer examines what is there;

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nobody asks what almost was not, what was sacrificed, what kept the compiler awake at three in the morning. By inviting the human makers to write self-reflective essays on their own published works, this issue pulls back the curtain on the hidden labour of the archive. The closest international precedent for this methodology is the volume edited by Stavans (2025), *Conversations on Dictionaries: The Universe in a Book*, in which lexicographers across twenty-one languages reflect on their own practice, revealing the intellectual and cultural choices that shape every reference work. Where Stavans proceeds through interview, this special issue proceeds through written self-reflection, a more formally demanding and analytically rigorous mode that places the full weight of articulation on the maker themselves.

These reflections expose the exact moments where "compilation" broke down and "authorship" was demanded: the agonies of semantic framing, the subjective choices behind selecting illustrative examples, the political pressures of gatekeeping minority or technical vocabularies, the dilemmas of handling asymmetrical conceptual equivalence across languages. Moments, in other words, where the synonymic string described above became not a theoretical diagram but a lived professional dilemma.

When paired alongside independent critical reviews, a rich dialogue emerges. The reviews analyse each dictionary as a Foucauldian institutional text, examining its normative authority and cultural gatekeeping, while the authorial reflections expose it as a deeply human Barthesian struggle with the fluid chaos of language. This dual approach demystifies the dictionary, transforming it from an untouchable oracle into a transparent artifact of human ingenuity and, in doing so, makes the ingenuity visible for the first time.

5. The "Architect of Meaning" Across Diverse Typologies

The inadequacy of the label "compiler" becomes undeniable when we examine the diverse typological landscape celebrated in this special issue (Table 1). The human maker does not merely collect raw data; they design conceptual structures. The architectural metaphor is not decorative: it names something precise about what dictionary-makers actually do.

Dictionary Type	The Architectural Act of the Lexicographer
Encyclopedic & General	Maps the cosmos of human knowledge, dividing reality into structured, authoritative semantic boundaries.
Specialized	Blueprints the technical jargon of specific sciences and professions, creating navigable order from terminological complexity.
Bilingual & Multilingual	Engineers semantic bridges across asymmetrical cultural divides, building equivalences where natural alignment does not exist.

Table 1. The Architectural act of the lexicographer across dictionary typologies.

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5.1. The Multilingual Scaffolding

The role of the architect of meaning is most visible in bilingual and multilingual lexicography, which is strongly represented in this volume. Semantic systems across different languages do not mirror one another: they are culturally asymmetrical, shaped by different histories, institutions, and conceptual traditions (Zgusta 1984). A bilingual lexicographer cannot simply "compile" translations because ready-made equivalents often do not exist. Instead, they must calculate the structural load of meaning in both directions, designing custom definitions, glosses, and cultural contextualizations that allow a user in one language to genuinely access a concept rooted in another. They are engineering a cross-cultural framework, acting as the gatekeeper of how one linguistic community conceptualizes the reality of another.

Béjoint (2000) argues that this dimension of lexicographic work, the construction of equivalence across asymmetrical systems, is the most demanding and the least visible, precisely because the dictionary presents its solutions as natural and inevitable. The self-reflective essays in this volume make this invisible labour visible. They give names and faces to decisions that dictionaries are designed to conceal.

6. Conclusion: Anchors Against Digital Ephemerality

We live in an age where information arrives instantly and vanishes just as fast. The digital search engine has industrialized the ultimate form of compilation without authorship: an algorithm that aggregates without understanding, retrieves without contextualizing, and answers without knowing what it means to be wrong. The user gets a result in milliseconds and forgets it in minutes. There is no weight to any of it - literal or metaphorical.

Against this backdrop, the physical desk dictionary is a provocation. It sits on the shelf with a kind of stubbornness. It has mass. It has a spine with a name on it. When the reader opens it, they are not just receiving information but are entering a space that someone designed for them, page by page, entry by entry, definition by definition, over years of sustained intellectual labour. The alphabetical proximity of unrelated concepts, the careful selection of example sentences, the decision to include this word and not that one: all of it carries the trace of a human hand. And that trace is not incidental. It is the point.

In Appadurai's (2003) terms, the printed dictionary is an act of archival aspiration: not a tomb of completed knowledge but an anticipation of future inquiry, an invitation extended across time to readers the compiler will never meet. Each entry is a small wager on what will matter, a bet placed by a human mind on the future needs of human minds not yet formed. That wager is what distinguishes the architect from the algorithm.

The contributors to this special issue have made that wager repeatedly, across the published dictionaries spanning an extraordinary typological range. They have mapped technical domains and bridged linguistic worlds. They have spent years deciding which terms deserved to exist on a page. And then defended those decisions in print, which is among the more courageous things an intellectual can do. The essays

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and reviews gathered here are not merely academic documents; they are the record of a sustained commitment to the idea that language matters enough to be handled with care.

Samuel Johnson called himself a harmless drudge. He was, of course, nothing of the sort. Neither are the makers represented in this volume. They are the people who decided, quietly and without fanfare, that certain words and meanings were worth preserving, and who did the slow, painstaking work of preservation. They are the architects. This issue is their archive. And it is anything but harmless.

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