

Preface

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Essays on Definition

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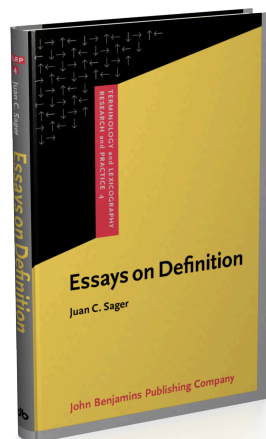
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Preface

Definition occupies a central place in all sciences and is a fundamental tool in logic, philosophy of ideas and semantics; each of these areas view the activity of defining from a different angle. In everyday communication, the result of this activity, represented in the various forms of definition considered appropriate for their objective, is also essential for establishing relationships between things and ideas and their names for which purpose they are collected in glossaries, dictionaries and other reference tools. Given these various viewpoints on what is involved in defining and the wide range of uses of definitions, there is, understandably, a great diversity of interpretations of what is meant by defining and its product, the definition. There is, thus, no general agreement about what a definition is, what knowledge it represents and conveys and what quality criteria it must satisfy.

Defining and definitions play an essential role in terminology and lexicography because they are the conventional means for establishing the meaning of lexical items, or, expressed differently, for connecting the concept with the word or term that represents it. This crucial role, which lies at the root of language as a symbolic system, is, however, viewed very differently by lexicographers and terminologists. To judge by the many treatises on the subject, not only are there different methods of defining and different resulting types of definition, but even the limited objectives of lexicographical and terminological definitions themselves seem far from clear. It would therefore appear to be useful to step back from the specific concerns of lexicography and terminology and consider the nature and functions of defining and definitions in those sciences which have discussed this topic for the last two millennia.

The present collection of essays on definitions from Plato and Aristotle to modern times, assembles interesting, sometimes less widely known and, perhaps, unexpected texts. They examine the subject from the point of view of philosophy, which is essential for a theory of terminology seeking to establish the relationship between concepts and terms. These essays deal mainly with theoretical

issues but they also consider the practice of defining and therefore serve as background to all manner of studies in terminology. In addition they form a useful complement to the better known discussions of definitions in lexicography.

Acknowledgements

“The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God” Section I, First reflection (2:70 and 2:71) Translated by David Walford, is reprinted from: Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy*, 1755–1770, by kind permission of Cambridge University Press.

The following texts have been translated by J.C. Sager: **Isidoro of Seville** *Etymologiae*, **Leibniz** *Letter to Antoine Arnauld & New Essay on Understanding*, **Pascal** *The Spirit of Geometry & The Art of Persuasion*, **Rey** *Defining ‘Definition’*, **Rickert** *The Theory of Definitions*.