

# THE CHANGING MEANINGS OF POLITICAL TERMS AND THEIR REFLECTION IN DICTIONARIES

---

ANDREJS VEISBERGS

University of Latvia, Latvia

**Abstract.** When observing media texts, one cannot help but notice that some political terms are used with a meaning widely different from that offered by mainstream middle-size dictionaries, which generally stick to the initial, sometimes etymological senses. Corpora analysis confirms the shift in senses and divergence of use. The aim of this paper is to analyse the meaning and use of two terms ubiquitous in the public sphere: *fascist/fascism* and *liberal/liberalism*, their original meanings, and subsequent changes in meaning and use. Though the limited space available for defining terms in a general explanatory dictionary makes it extremely difficult to reflect all ideological tinges and meanings, where a frequently used political term seems to have developed stable, different, even opposite meanings, this should be reflected by introducing ideological polysemy in dictionary definitions.

**Keywords:** ideological terms, political terminology, semantics, ideological polysemy, lexicography

## INTRODUCTION

Many political and ideological terms have always had differing connotations according to the user's political stance, so it is hard to deduce what is meant without knowing the mindset of the speaker. However, with frequent slanted use, the denotational meaning may also be 'coloured'. It may shift, and the term may actually develop a different meaning while not losing the original one. This becomes a case of polysemy. The growing difference in the meanings creates a problem for lexicographers, whose task it is to observe language development, describe it and record the meanings in use. Ideological polysemy can be suggested as a solution for dictionaries. The paper will compare dictionary definitions of the two terms with their use in media.

Definitions of the terms will be sought in several middle-size mainstream English and American online dictionaries and several printed desktop dictionaries (both dictionaries for native speakers and foreign learners). References to

*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1st and 2nd editions, will also be used, though a thorough diachronic study of the early use of the terms falls outside the scope of this paper. It should be noted that most dictionaries tend to choose *fascism* as the main entry, with *fascist* usually referring to *fascism*, while *liberalism* is frequently given as a derivative under the main entry of *liberal*.

Several corpora are used to look at the meanings, among them the most prominent one: the web-based newspaper and magazine corpus *News on the Web* (NOW), with 18.4 billion words. Since the number of occurrences of the terms under scrutiny runs into tens of thousands and the meanings are often vague, it is not possible to draw straightforward or statistical data about the senses and their distribution. However, one can draw certain conclusions, namely, that the connotational and denotational meanings of these terms in use are far from the straightforward traditional senses provided in dictionary definitions.

The issue is naturally affected by the scope, size and specialisation of a dictionary. A general explanatory dictionary definition tends towards concision; an encyclopaedic dictionary or a specialised dictionary of political terms may afford much more scope to the definition or the clarifications; thus, there is a cline in the style of definitions (Geeraerts, 2003: 89).

## IDEOLOGY AND POLITICS

At the end of the last century, Fukujama (1992) wrote of the end of history, which could by default also spell the end of ideology since the market economy (capitalism) seemed to be the only viable alternative for the diverse countries of the world. However, it is only for the postmodernists that history and ideology have come to an end, not for traditionalists, nationalists, fundamentalists, greens, antivaxxers, nativists, televangelists, Putinists and anti-Putinists, Europhiles and Eurosceptics, and, in a broader sense, for all people who possess strong political views and can compare them with others.

Today, with Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Islamic fundamentalism, the new authoritarianism, the woke movement, battles over political correctness and covid controversies, we can hardly speak of the end of history or ideologies. Moreover, ideologies have multiplied and become more hardline, aggressive, intolerant and divisive, and they have merged with various conspiracy theories to carry away millions of people since covid. And while the Communist experiment with collective property seems to have died, new trends connected with goods and merchandise are on the rise. Ideology scholar Hawkes (2003: 2) speaks of commodity fetishism and defines ideology as a 'systematic false consciousness' (ibid.: 7). Thus, 'there is no single and simple definition of ideology' (Pinnavaia, 2022: 142), but we can assume that an ideology is a set of systematic beliefs, assumptions and claims serving some social function that are expressed in linguistic form. Ideologies generally carry some common ground, common sense; they are 'shared' (van Dijk, 1995: 245), 'community-based' and 'commonsensical' (Verschueren, 2012: 10-12). Ideology

is associated with underlying patterns of meaning, frames of interpretation, world views, or forms of everyday thinking and explanation. And ‘individuals assume that they share this meaning with other individuals’ (ibid.: 11). Like paradigms in philosophy that are ‘based on taken-for-granted-premises’, the commonsense nature of ideologies is rarely questioned. Ideology may be highly immune to experience; thus, reality may be very different from any individual’s perception of it. When it comes to the use of language with regard to ideologies, ‘the public sphere is an arena with never-ending struggles over meaning’ (Verschueren, 2012: xi), for example, identification with a political party affects how individuals interpret the labels *liberal* and *conservative* (Conover and Feldman, 1981).

Since political activity is principally linguistic (Condren, 2017), this leads to massive manipulations of meanings by politicians and media, partly overlapping with a process that is now called weaponisation of language, which challenges the fundamental legal aspects of free speech (Stahl, 2016). The weaponisation of language today ‘relies on a constellation of tactics that include: censorship, propaganda, disinformation, and mundane discourse’ (Pascale, 2019: 910). Partisan hostility, the polarisation of views and network propaganda (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018) wreak havoc with word meanings. Even the terminology of propaganda and disinformation itself is subject to this unclarity, as pointed out by Caroline Jack (2017: 13) in her ‘Lexicon of Lies’ — ‘ideal types, abstract generalized models’ do not seem to work well. Occasionally, the term *logicide* is used to describe these insidious processes that can kill the everyday meaning of words, destroy the integrity of public information and deepen divisions.

## RUSSIA AND THE NEW IDEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

A new level of language weaponisation has been reached in Putin’s Russia, where the state media is actively engaged in pushing the Russian propaganda narrative, assisted by fake news campaigns, trolls, hybrid war, and regular and extended disinformation campaigns employing hate speech. It is well known that with consistent exposure over time, propaganda becomes a language that thinks for you (Klemperer, 2013).

Russia’s information warfare comprises both traditional and new digital media (Lupion, 2018). This involves both coining new terms (*ukrofashisti* [Ukrainian fascists], *zhidobanderovci* [Jewish banderites], *ukronazisti* [Ukrainian Nazis], *banderofashisti* [bandero-fascists], *narkogeinacisti* [narco-gay-Nazis], *evrofashisti* [eurofascists], *liberasti* [liberal pederasts], *Fashington* [Fascist Washington], *gomoseki* [homosexuals], *pindossi* [Americans, the origin of ‘pindo’ is uncertain], *Pindostan* [USA], *anti-Russia* [Ukraine], *Sorosites*, *vimirati* [dying emirates]), but also using old political memes with a changed meaning (*antifascists*, *junta*, *liberals*, *SS men*, *gays*, *homosexuals*, *terrorists*, *Anglo-Saxons*, *paedophiles*, *foreign agents*, *degenerates*, *parallel import*, *provocation*). Thus, in Russian political parlance, the term *liberal* is totally debased on a par with *fascist*. *Fascist* is a catch-all word, applied to anyone

with views different from the Russian regime's, for example, people protesting against war or even just questioning the need for it (a truly Orwellian paradigm: war is peace). *Antifascist* in Russian parlance is anyone supporting Russia's interests (including those attacking sovereign states), not to be confused with *antifa*.

This has a Soviet prehistory, as pointed out by Timothy Snyder:

Stalin's flexibility about fascism is the key to understanding Russia today. Under Stalin, fascism was first indifferent, then it was bad, then it was fine until—when Germany invaded the Soviet Union—it was bad again. But no one ever defined what it meant. It was a box into which anything could be put. Communists were purged as fascists in show trials. During the Cold War, the Americans and the British became the fascists. And 'anti-fascism' did not prevent Stalin from targeting Jews in his last purge, nor his successors from conflating Israel with Nazi Germany. [...] Calling others fascists while being a fascist is the essential Putinist practice. Jason Stanley, an American philosopher, calls it 'undermining propaganda', I have called it 'schizofascism'. The Ukrainians have the most elegant formulation. They call it 'ruscism'. (Snyder, 2022)

This brings us to the issue of meaning, where it lies, and why and how it is liable to change.

## MEANING—A PHILOSOPHICAL SIDESTEP

Bertrand Russell proposed that every individual perceives things differently; accordingly, we ascribe different meanings to words and talk of different things: 'a man's percepts are private to himself: what I see, no one else sees; what I hear, no one else hears; what I touch, no one else touches; and so on' (Russell, 1957: 562). As a consequence, 'when one person uses a word, he does not mean by it the same thing as another person means by it' (Russell, 1956: 195). These can be called private meanings (van Haften, 1995); we all have them. But then, how can we communicate successfully? In a way, reacting to Russell's ideas, Wittgenstein (1986)—who in the beginning talked of the logical meaning aspects—later responded by criticising the strong individualistic and subjectivist tendencies of Russell's empiricism. He emphasised the social nature of meaning, the agreement on meaning: '[People] agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life' (Wittgenstein, 1986: #241). 'If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements' (Wittgenstein, 1986: #242).

Wittgenstein insists that the meaning of the word is its use; it hinges on its usefulness in context, not its ideal referent outside all possible contexts (definition). It depends on the conventional social discourse within which it is employed. Meaning depends on a background of common behaviour as well as shared practices

and context. Apart from *definition*, Wittgenstein also introduces *judgement*; that is, people might agree on a definition but have different evaluation of the phenomenon, for example, on free sex, gender change, political correctness, freedom of speech or forms of government.

This falls in line with the linguistic ideas of Saussure, who pointed out the arbitrariness of the sign, the fact that meaning is not inherent in the sign; meaning is almost always the result of conventions, and in addition, the individual can impose a meaning not fully shared by the community. Furthermore, meanings change, and the synchronic point of view of the speaker's community overrides the diachronic since it is the only reality for a normal language user (Saussure, 1959: 141).

## MEANING CHANGE

More than 20 years ago, Veisbergs (2002) looked at the dictionary definitions of political terms, in particular at the superordinate concept (*genus proximus*) and concluded that there was a huge and unwelcome variation between the superordinate terms when dealing with -isms (view, belief, doctrine, ideology, movement, theory, practice, etc.). The situation has not changed much since then. Several reasons are possible for this, from the difficulty of agreeing on the right term to the fact that different entries are written by different people and there has not been sufficient editorial supervision.

What, however, seems to have changed is that some political notions have over time developed a great diversity of *differentia specifica*, on which there was more or less agreement in the past (at least in lexicography). Naturally, as societies change (and today the change is very rapid and often global), an ideology cannot survive if it is static (Finlayson, 2013: 199). Many political concepts do indeed change; they cannot be immutable. 'The meaning of political terms can shift with time, becoming broader or narrower or changing entirely' (Jarvis, 2014: 136); politics is a 'curious mixture of continuity, change, and repetition' (Robertson, 2004: VII).

Also, however, 'the study of (political) language has moved away from the normative aspiration for precision to emphasizing ambiguity and indeterminacy as its inherent attributes' (Freeden, 2013: 120). Recognising that the user's view to a large extent determines his understanding of the concept and term is a general postmodernist tendency. Since political terms are frequently used in rhetorical argumentation and emotional context, this leads to 'diverse meanings assigned to the same political terms' (Freeden, 2013: 120), and we can hardly speak of a universal understanding of these terms any more. For political terms, the perceptions of meaning can be widely different and might be viewed within the framework of Fillmore's (1977a, b) semantic frames or scenes and frames semantics, where the frame is an idealisation of a coherent societal or individual perception or experience. Thus, the meaning of lexemes is construed against a broader background of knowledge and interrelated concepts.

## FASCISM AND FASCISTS

Discussions about the concept of *fascism* go back around 100 years (Griffin, 1995), when the term appeared in 1915 and Mussolini seized power in Italy in 1922. Perhaps the greatest expert on the understanding and interpretation of fascism, Griffiths (2000: 1) has concluded that fascism is probably the most misused and over-used word of our times. While most researchers agree on the historical meaning of fascism, namely Italian fascism and similar movements in many countries among which Nazism stands out, there is little agreement about its main features in more generalised usage. Is it left-wing or right-wing? Is it individualistic or a mass movement? Is it reactionary (backward-looking) or modernist (forward-looking)? (Davies and Lynch, 2002; Gottfried, 2016). However, there is a general feeling that it is the diametrical opposite of liberalism (see further, *liberal fascist*).

The terms *fascism* and *fascist* are applied to virtually any movement or idea that the speaker does not like. It is a pejorative word without any specific meaning, an insult for branding opponents. Historically, it was a term that various left-wing movements used to denigrate other left-wingers. In 1928, the Communist International labelled social democrats *social fascists* while the social democrats themselves accused the communists of becoming *fascist* under Stalin in light of their alliance with Hitler. “The international investigation into the Katyn massacre was described as “fascist libel” and the Warsaw Uprising as “illegal and organised by fascists” [...] After the Second World War, Communist China and the USSR began calling each other fascist states’ (Gregor, 2009: 9). In the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, the term *fascist* was applied to dissidents, and *anti-fascism* served to legitimise the ruling regimes. During the Barricades in Riga, Latvia (January 1991, after the unilateral declaration of independence from the Soviet Union), the Communist Party of the USSR declared fascism reborn in Latvia. Ever since the Euromaidan (power change in Ukraine), Russia has frequently described the Ukrainian government as *fascist*, ironically combining it with sinister Jewish influence as well as gay and LGBTI propaganda.

To the new Western left, the traditional Western society (Christian values, capitalism, traditional family and national identity) is fascist. The American right wing frequently uses it as an insult, implying that fascism is left-wing, socialist and liberal.

Besides, the word can be used in an apolitical sense for anything we do not like, mainly on the basis that it is perceived to be powerful and aggressive. This meaning is reflected in some English dictionaries.

The fact that the term has become a pejorative, an insult, was noted by the English writer and anti-fascist George Orwell as long ago as 1944 in his essay *What is Fascism?*:

It will be seen that, as used, the word ‘Fascism’ is almost entirely meaningless. I have heard it applied to farmers, shopkeepers, Social Credit, corporal punishment, fox-hunting, bull-fighting, the 1922

Committee, the 1941 Committee, Kipling, Gandhi, Chiang Kai-Shek, homosexuality, Priestley's broadcasts, Youth Hostels, astrology, women, dogs and I do not know what else. [...] By 'Fascism' they mean, roughly speaking, something cruel, unscrupulous, arrogant, obscurantist, anti-liberal and anti-working-class. Except for the relatively small number of Fascist sympathisers, almost any English person would accept 'bully' as a synonym for 'Fascist'. [...] All one can do for the moment is to use the word with a certain amount of circumspection and not, as is usually done, degrade it to the level of a swearword. (Orwell, 2001: 321-324)

Gottfried reasserts this more than 80 years later: 'the term fascist has a specific historical meaning and should not be hurled at anyone who holds what are now unpopular opinions' (Gottfried, 2016: 3). A glance at corpus data today, however, shows that the situation has not changed, for example, NOW with 18.4 billion words offers 42,666 samples of *fascist* use. Though it is impossible to survey the meanings of all samples, one can see regular adjacent items: Biden, Trump, Haley, Cheney, Modi, etc. One can reckon that only about a quarter of use refers to the primary meaning of *fascist*. In the Latvian corpus (LVK), *fascist* is often bound to Russia, no doubt reflecting the geopolitical realities. The situation is even more pronounced in the reader's comments and chats.

The word appeared in *The OED Supplement* in 1933 (OEDS, 1933: 358), naturally only in its Italian fascism sense. A *Supplement* 40 years later refers *fascism* to *fascist* and defines the latter in four senses:

original Italian fascists; members of similar organisations in other countries; persons of Fascist sympathies or convictions; (loosely) a person of right-wing authoritarian views. (SOED, 1972: 1036)

*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd edition did not change it (The OED, 1989a: 742). *Webster's Third* provides several senses for *fascism*:

- (1) the principles of the Fascisti; the movement or governmental regime embodying their principles;
- (2) a) any programme for setting up a centralized autocratic national regime with severely nationalistic policies, exercising regimentation of industry, commerce, and finance, rigid censorship, and forcible suppression of opposition;
- b) any tendency toward or actual exercise of severe autocratic or dictatorial control (as over others within an organization). (WTNIDEL, 1993: 825)

Standard desktop dictionaries today often offer one generalised sense definition of *fascism* with varying keywords: *right-wing*, *nationalistic*, *dictatorial*, *extreme*, *militant* and *totalitarian*; sometimes other attributes are used: *anticommunist*, *racist*, *opposed to liberalism*. The *Cambridge Dictionary*, for example, defines fascism as follows:

a political system based on a very powerful leader, state control, and being extremely proud of country and race, and in which political opposition is not allowed. (Online 1)

The *Longman Dictionary* entry is identical to the printed variant (Longman, 2014: 653):

a right-wing political system in which people's lives are completely controlled by the state and no political opposition is allowed. (Online 2)

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and its printed version, apart from the general meaning, introduce a second definition:

- (1) an extreme right-wing political system or attitude that is in favour of strong central government, aggressively promoting your own country or race above others, and that does not allow any opposition;
- (2) (disapproving) extreme views or practices that try to make other people think and behave in the same way. (Online 3; Oxford, 2022: 567)

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, which is mainly aimed at native speakers, proposes a shorter one-sense lemma with an added historical reference to Mussolini:

an authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government. (COED, 2011: 517)

A larger printed desktop *Oxford Dictionary of English* proposes two meanings (unchanged from the 2nd edition [ODE, 2003: 627]):

- (1) an authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government and social organization;
- (2) (in general use) extreme, right-wing, authoritarian or intolerant views or practices. (ODE, 2010: 635)

*Merriam-Webster* introduces a reference to Italian fascism in the general sense and also has the 'prescriptively prejudicial' meaning:

- (1) a political philosophy, movement, or regime (such as that of the Fascisti) that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition;
- (2) a tendency toward or actual exercise of strong autocratic or dictatorial control. (Online 4)

*Collins English Dictionary* offers three senses, blending the political ones in the first sense while splitting the 'excessively prejudicial' one:

- (1) any ideology or movement inspired by Italian Fascism, such as German National Socialism; any right-wing nationalist ideology or movement with an authoritarian and hierarchical structure that is fundamentally opposed to democracy and liberalism;



- (2) any ideology, movement, programme, tendency, etc. that may be characterized as excessively prescriptive or authoritarian;
- (3) prejudice in relation to the subject specified. (Online 5)

Thus, one can distinguish three to four senses in the term *fascism/fascist*. In specialised dictionaries and encyclopaedias, the generalised sense of *fascism* is often treated in a great variety of ways, testifying to the ongoing discussion about such keywords as *populism*, *unity*, *classless*, *opportunistic*, and *modernist* (Robertson, 2004).

## LIBERALS AND LIBERALISM

Today, there are perhaps hundreds of types of liberalism as political strands of thought: *classical liberalism*, *agonistic liberalism*, *conservative liberalism*, *constitutional liberalism*, *cultural liberalism*, *democratic liberalism*, *green liberalism*, *muscular liberalism*, *national liberalism*, *neoclassical liberalism*, *neo-liberalism*, *ordoliberalism*, *secular liberalism*, *social liberalism*, *technoliberalism*, a. o.

*Liberals* and *liberalism* receive more versatile treatment than *fascism* in dictionaries, partly because *liberalism* has a longer prehistory than *fascism*. While Johnson's dictionary (Johnson, 1755) had no political sense for *liberals* as yet, it describes its predecessors, *whigs*, with the noxious term *faction*. This was better than an early explanation for *whig* in *Littleton's English-Latin Dictionary* (Littleton, 1703: 338): *Homo fanaticus, factiosus*.

Also, the early use of *liberal* was considered somewhat 'un-English, akin to continental *revolutionaries*' (The OED, 1933: 238), but later stabilised as a designation for the freedom-seeking and anti-state stance.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd edition (The OED, 1989b: 882) defines the political meaning of *liberalism* as the holding of liberal opinions. *Liberal* as an adjective is defined as 'favourable to constitutional changes and legal or administrative reforms tending in the direction of freedom or democracy; opposed to Conservative'; *liberal* as a noun repeats the 1st edition history of the term in British politics.

*Webster's Third*, among other meanings of *liberalism*, provides the following definitions:

- (1) a movement in modern Protestantism emphasizing intellectual liberty and the spiritual and ethical content of Christianity;
- (2) a theory in economics emphasizing individual freedom from restraint and usually based on free competition, the self-regulating market, and the gold standard;
- (3) a political philosophy based on belief in progress, the essential goodness of the human race, and the autonomy of the individual and standing for tolerance and freedom for the individual from arbitrary authority in all spheres of life esp. by the protection of political and civil liberties and for government under law with the consent of the governed. (WTNIDEL, 1993: 1303)

*Merriam-Webster* today has slightly expanded sense 2 and considerably changed the reference to the government's role in sense 3, which is in stark contrast to the old meaning:

*specifically*: such a philosophy that considers government as a crucial instrument for amelioration of social inequities (such as those involving race, gender, or class). (Online 10)

Both online and printed middle-size dictionaries tend to attempt to merge the old liberalism with its focus on individualism and the new socially oriented one, albeit not very successfully. Thus, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*, likewise the printed book, offers three political meanings for *liberal*:

- (1) willing to understand and respect other people's ideas, opinions, and feelings;
- (2) supporting or allowing gradual political and social changes, opposite to conservative;
- (3) allowing people or organizations a lot of political or economic freedom. (Online 6; LDCE, 2014: 1050)

*Collins Cobuild* provides the following for *liberalism*:

- (1) is a belief in gradual social progress by changing laws, rather than by revolution.
- (2) is the belief that people should have a lot of political and individual freedom.

Synonyms: progressivism, radicalism, humanitarianism, libertarianism (Online 7)

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (OALDCE, 2022: 903) emphasises the new strand in the definition of *liberal*: 'a person who supports political, social and religious change'. Its online version adds 'and the more equal sharing of wealth' (Online 8).

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (COED, 2011: 821) offers a slightly different lemma: '(in a political context) favouring individual liberty, free trade, and moderate political and social reform'. Interestingly, there is a reference to the 1st edition that defined the term as 'favourable to democratic reforms and abolition of privileges'. The same basic definition is available in the larger printed *Oxford Dictionary of English* (ODE, 2010: 1029), unchanged from the previous edition (ODE, 2003: 1009).

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines *liberalism* in two divergent senses:

- (1) an attitude of respecting and allowing many different types of beliefs or behaviour;
- (2) the political belief that there should be free trade, that people should be allowed more personal freedom, and that changes in society should be made gradually. (Online 9)

*Merriam-Webster*, among other meanings of *liberalism*, has the following (it is worth noting the reference to the government's role, which is in stark contrast to the old meaning):

- (1) a movement in modern Protestantism emphasizing intellectual liberty and the spiritual and ethical content of Christianity;
- (2) a theory in economics emphasizing individual freedom from restraint and usually based on free competition, the self-regulating market, and the gold standard;
- (3) a political philosophy based on belief in progress, the essential goodness of the human race, and the autonomy of the individual and standing for the protection of political and civil liberties; *specifically*: such a philosophy that considers government as a crucial instrument for amelioration of social inequities (such as those involving race, gender, or class). (Online 10)

Liberals themselves seem to consider the following to be the core liberal values: individualism, rationalism, freedom, responsibility, justice and tolerance (Teehankee, 2005).

Larger or specialised dictionaries and encyclopaedias can give more space and more explanation; thus, the *Oxford Reference Dictionary* attempts to introduce differing views on *liberalism* into the lemma:

A political ideology centred upon the individual, thought of as possessing rights against the government, including rights of due process under the law, equality of respect, freedom of expression and action, and freedom from religious and ideological constraint. Liberalism is attacked from the left as the ideology of free markets, with no defence against the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few, and as lacking any analysis of the social and political nature of persons. It is attacked from the right as insufficiently sensitive to the value of settled institutions and customs, or to the need for social structure and constraint in providing the matrix for individual freedom. (Online 11)

This shows that there are certainly two strands of liberalism, often contradictory in their basic outlook. This divide is prominent between British and American English, in a way making the term *liberalism* an intra-language false friend (Kırşakmene, 2023: 70). This new division is best reflected in Wikipedia:

In Europe and Latin America, liberalism means a moderate form of classical liberalism and includes both conservative liberalism (centre-right liberalism) and social liberalism (centre-left liberalism). In North America, liberalism almost exclusively refers to social liberalism. (Online 12)

However, NOW corpus (NOW) provide a plethora of quite different uses and meanings, illustrated by such phrases as *communist liberals*, *radical liberals*, *liberal fundamentalists*, *aggressive liberalism*, and numerous cases of *liberal fascists/fascism*, which diverge from whatever any dictionaries or political scientists offer. The blending of *liberalism* and *fascism*, theoretically incompatible, is quite surprising and confusing. When there is a lack of clarity and agreement on meanings, communication may become totally cut off from reality, as was noted by Arendt (2006: 288) with regard to totalitarian discourse: ‘Such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts together’.

## THE LEXICOGRAPHER’S QUANDARY

The lexicographer is supposed to bring in clarity by observing the field (the descriptive approach) and stating what words mean, thus, to some extent, adopting a prescriptive stance (lexicography is now primarily descriptive, but once the definitions are decided upon, there is a prescriptive element to them). However, if people give a term differing meanings, connotations and judgements, often even opposite ones, what are dictionaries to do? With political terms, the juxtaposition of meanings is often black and white, but a dictionary cannot state that black is often also white. A more or less typical definition of *black* would be: of the very darkest colour owing to the absence of or complete absorption of light; the opposite of white. A similar traditional opposition could be the dichotomy *fascist* and *liberal*.

Ideological terms from time to time attract the attention of lexicography scholars (Carstens, 1994; Čermák, 2014; Moon, 2014; Pinnavaia, 2022), usually with a focus on learners’ dictionaries and the debatable issue of neutrality. Moon (1989: 77) states that ‘there is no such thing as a politically neutral definition’. Bejoint (2000: 131) states clearly: ‘for words used to refer to social or political values or systems objective definitions are simply impossible’.

Dictionaries today, while generally following descriptive principles, are also subject to certain political correctness considerations (Müller-Spitzer, 2022). The bias of politically correct trends is as ideological as earlier bias against colonial peoples, the lower classes, menial workers, women, people with deviations, etc. Definitions ‘are excluders as well as includers of meaning’ (Freeden, 2013: 120). ‘Ideology becomes part of the meaning of lexical items but is also compounded into mental structures—which may be different for different ideological groups’ (Veisbergs, 2005: 538). ‘Dictionaries, monolingual and bilingual, are packs of lies: white lies, perhaps, but lies nevertheless. Monolingual dictionaries set out to convey the impression that words have “meanings”, rather than certain capacities to enter into meaningful contexts’ (Manley et al., 1988: 281).

No dictionary is likely to be able to cover the whole range of perceptions, but this seems to underscore why there should be an attempt at ‘neutrality of description’ (Dieckman, 1989: 838) and at avoiding value judgement. As in other domains of lexicography, we can strive for perfection, but shortcomings, subjectivity and even errors will always be there.

## IDEOLOGICAL POLYSEMY

Some political terms today seem to have very divergent and even entirely opposing meanings, and this could be viewed in the framework of polysemy. Polysemy may take untraditional forms, for example, it is common in terminology where ambiguity is unwelcome (L'Homme, 2020: 415). Then there are the Janus words, which have opposite meanings without controversy (*appropriation, fast, scan, sanction, oversight, handicap, bad*); for example,

### *appropriation*

- (1) acquisition/taking; *dishonest appropriation of property*;
- (2) allocation/giving; *big appropriations for projects*;

### *sanction*

- (1) a penalty for disobeying a law or rule;
- (2) an official permission or approval for an action.

Our specific brand of polysemy could be called ideological polysemy (Dieckmann, 1975, 1989). It is a fact that some terms have developed widely different meanings, and that in turn brings about the question of whether to add extra meanings in dictionaries or not. The option must certainly be considered, for example,

### *Liberal*

- (1) Someone who believes people should have a lot of political, economic and individual freedom to decide how to behave and think, and the government's role should be minimal;
- (2) Someone who believes in the need of social change, a strong state and government involvement in furthering social equality.

Perhaps for some of the blatantly subjective terms one should introduce new emotionally charged connotational meanings: thus, for *fascism*—*any ideology of anyone whom I strongly dislike*; for *liberalism*—*an ideology viewed by many as allowing the rich and clever to disregard others*.

## CONCLUSIONS

Language corpora show that many ideological and political terms that used to have well delineated meanings are today used with differing denotational and connotational meanings. 'Diverse meanings are assigned to the same political terms' (Freeden, 2013: 120) with no universal understanding any more. Moreover, there is a change in the forms of rhetorical delivery and argumentation (Finlayson, 2012). Meanings evolve over time; forms do not necessarily do so, and lexicography has to reflect these changes, both the general ambiguity and the sprouting of new

denotational and connotational meanings. Ideological polysemy can partly solve the quandary. In the case of *fascism*, dictionaries have taken the first steps in this direction; *liberalism* and many other political terms could follow suit. This should, of course, be matched with dictionary size: the more specialised and encyclopaedic the dictionary, the more information on varying senses should be provided.

## REFERENCES

- Arendt, H. (2006) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Bejoint, H. (2000) *Modern Lexicography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Benkler, Y., Faris, R. and Roberts, H. (2018) *Network Propaganda: manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carstens, A. (1994) The treatment of ideological polysemy in monolingual Afrikaans dictionary. *Euralex 94: Proceedings: Papers submitted to the 6th EURALEX International Congress on Lexicography in Amsterdam* (pp. 56-66). Amsterdam: EURALEX.
- Condren, C. (2017) *Political Vocabularies: word change and the nature of politics*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.
- Conover, P. J. and Feldman, S. (1981) The origins and meaning of liberal/conservative self-identifications. *American Journal of Political Science*, 25 (4): 617-645.
- Čermák, F. (2014) Totalitarian dictionary of Czech. In A. Abel, C. Vettori and N. Ralli (eds.) *Proceedings of the XVI EURALEX International Congress: the user in focus* (pp. 137-144). Bolzano/Bozen: Institute for Specialised Communication and Multilingualism.
- Davies, P. and Lynch, D. (2002) *The Routledge Companion to Fascism and Far Right*. London: Routledge.
- Dieckmann, W. (1975) *Sprache in der Politik: Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen Sprache* [Language in Politics: semantics and pragmatics of political language], 2nd ed. Heidelberg: C. Winter Universitätsverlag.
- Dieckmann, W. (1989) Die Beschreibung der politischen Lexik im allgemeinen einsprachigen Wörterbuch [Political Vocabulary in the General Monolingual Dictionary]. *Wörterbücher, Dictionaries, Dictionnaires*, Vol.1 (pp. 835-842). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Fillmore, C. (1977a) Topics in lexical semantics. In R. W. Cole (ed.) *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (pp. 76-138). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Fillmore, C. (1977b) Scenes-and-frames semantics. In A. Zambolli (ed.) *Linguistic Structures Processing* (pp. 55-82). Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company.
- Finlayson, A. (2012) Rhetoric and the political theory of ideologies. *Political Studies*, 60: 571-567.
- Finlayson, A. (2013) Ideology and political rhetoric. In M. Freeden, L. T. Sargent and M. Sears (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (pp. 197-213). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freeden, M. (2013) The morphological analysis of ideology. In M. Freeden, L. T. Sargent and M. Sears (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (pp. 115-137). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fukujama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

- Geeraerts, D. (2003) Meaning and definition. In P. van Sterkenburg (ed.) *A Practical Guide to Lexicography* (pp. 83-93). Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Gottfried, P. (2016) *Fascism: the career of a concept*. Northern Illinois University Press.
- Gregor, J. A. (2009) *Marxism, Fascism and Totalitarianism: chapters in the intellectual history of radicalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Griffin, R. (1995) *Fascism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Griffiths, R. (2000) *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Fascism*. London: Gerald Duckworth.
- Hawkes, D. (2003) *Ideology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Jack, C. (2017) *Lexicon of Lies: terms for problematic information*. New York, NY: Data & Society Research Institute.
- Jarvis, S. E. (2014) Political messages and partisanship. In K. Kenski and K. H. Jamieson (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (pp. 133-146). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klemperer, V. (2013) *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI Lingua Tertii Imperii: a philologist's notebook*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Ķiršākmene, E. (2023) False friends in interpreting: the case of English, French and Latvian. *Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture*, 13: 69-83.
- L'Homme, M.-C. (2020) Revisiting polysemy in terminology. In Z. Gavriilidou, M. Mitsiaki and A. Flaitouras (eds.) *EURALEX XIX Proceedings*, Vol. 1 (pp. 415-424). Alexandroupolis Democritus University of Thrace.
- Lupion, M. (2018) The gray war of our time: information warfare and the Kremlin's weaponization of Russian-language digital mews. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 31 (3): 329-353.
- Manley, J., Jacobsen, J. R. and Pedersen, V. H. (1988) Telling lies efficiently: terminology and the microstructure in the bilingual dictionary. In K. Hyldgaard-Jensen and A. Zettersten (eds.) *Symposium on Lexicography III* (pp. 281-302). Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Moon, R. (1989) Objective or objectionable?: ideological aspects of dictionaries. *ELR Journal*, 3: 59-91.
- Moon, R. (2014) Meanings, ideologies, and learner's dictionaries. In A. Abel, C. Vettori and N. Ralli (eds.) *Proceedings of the XVI EURALEX International Congress: the user in focus* (pp. 85-105). Bolzano/Bozen: Institute for Specialised Communication and Multilingualism.
- Müller-Spitzer, C. and Rüdiger, J. A. (2022) The influence of the corpus on the representation of gender stereotypes in the dictionary: a case-study of corpus-based dictionaries of German. In A. Klosa-Kückelhaus, S. Engelberg, C. Möhrs and P. Storjohann (eds.) *Proceedings of the XX EURALEX International Congress* (pp. 129-141). Mannheim: IDS Verlag.
- Orwell, G. (2001) *Orwell and Politics*. London: Penguin Books.
- Pascale, C.-M. (2019) The weaponization of language: discourses of rising right-wing authoritarianism. *Current Sociology Review*, 67 (6): 898-917.
- Pinnavaia, L. (2022) Identifying ideological strategies in the making of monolingual English language learner's dictionaries. In A. Klosa-Kückelhaus, S. Engelberg, C. Möhrs and P. Storjohann (eds.) *Proceedings of the XX EURALEX International Congress* (pp. 142-154). Mannheim: IDS Verlag.
- Robertson, D. (2004) *The Routledge Dictionary of Politics*, 3rd. ed. London and New York: Routledge.
- Russell, B. (1956) The philosophy of logical atomism. In R. C. Marsh (ed.) *Logic and Knowledge: essays 1901-1950* (pp. 177-281). London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

- Russell, B. (1957) Physics and perception. In P. Edwards and A. Pap (eds.) *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* (pp. 559-565). New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Saussure, F. de (1959) *Course in General Linguistics*. New York, NY: Philosophical Library.
- Snyder, T. (2022) We should say it: Russia is fascist. *The New York Times*, 19 May.
- Stahl, R. (2016) Weaponizing speech. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 102: 376-395.
- Stötzel, G. and Wengeler, M. (1995) *Kontroverse Begriffe: Geschichte des öffentlichen Sprachgebrauchs in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* [Controversial Terms: the history of public language in the German Federal Republic]. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Teehankee, J. C. (2005) *Liberalism: a primer*. Manila: National Institute for Policy Studies.
- Van Dijk, T. (1995) Discourse semantics and ideology. *Discourse & Society*, 6 (2): 243-289.
- Van Haaften, W. (1995) Wittgenstein and the significance of private meaning. In P. Smeyers and J. D. Marshall (eds.) *Philosophy and Education: accepting Wittgenstein's challenge*. Philosophy and Education, Vol. 6 (pp. 171-186). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Veisbergs, A. (2002) Defining political terms in lexicography: recent past and present. *The Tenth EURALEX International Congress*. Proceedings (pp. 657-667). Copenhagen: CST.
- Veisbergs, A. (2005) Ideology in dictionaries—definitions of political terms. In H. Gottlieb (ed.) et al. *Symposium on Lexicography XI* (pp. 537-547). Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Verschueren, J. (2012) *Ideology in Language Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1986) *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

## DICTIONARIES

- [COED] *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2011) 12th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, S. (1755) *A Dictionary of the English Language*. London: W. Strahan.
- Littleton, A. (1703) *Linguae Latinae Liber Dictionarius Quadripartitus*, 4th ed. London: Rawlins et al.
- [LDCE] *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2014) 6th ed. Harlow: Pearson.
- [OALDCE] *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (2022) 10th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [ODE, 2003] *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2003) 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [ODE, 2010] *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010) 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [The OED, 1933] *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1933) Vol. 6. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [OEDS] *The Oxford English Dictionary Supplement* (1933) Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [SOED] *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* (1972) Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [The OED, 1989a] *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989a) 2nd ed., Vol. 5. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [The OED, 1989b] *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989b) 2nd ed., Vol. 8. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [WTNIDEL] *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1993) Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.



## ONLINE SOURCES

- [Online 1] Available from FASCISM | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 2] Available from fascism | meaning of fascism in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English | LDOCE (ldoconline.com) [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 3] Available from fascism noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 4] Available from Fascism Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 5] Available from FASCISM definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary (collinsdictionary.com) [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 6] Available from liberal | meaning of liberal in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English | LDOCE (ldoconline.com) [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 7] Available from LIBERALISM definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary (collinsdictionary.com) [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 8] Available from liberal\_2 noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 9] Available from LIBERALISM | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 10] Available from Liberalism Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 11] Available from Search Results for liberalism - Oxford Reference [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [Online 12] Available from Liberalism - Wikipedia [Accessed on 30 October 2023].

## TOOLS

- [NOW] *News on the Web Corpus*. Available from [www.english-corpora.org](http://www.english-corpora.org). [Accessed on 30 October 2023].
- [LVK] *Līdzsvarotais mūsdienų latviešu valodas tekstu korpuss 2022* [The Balanced Corpus of Modern Latvian 2022]. Available from LVK2022 | [Korpuss.lv](http://Korpuss.lv) [Accessed on 30 October 2023].

**Andrejs Veisbergs** (Prof., Dr. Habil. Philol.) works at the University of Latvia. He is a Consultant of Oxford English Dictionaries and an accredited European Union interpreter. His research interests include lexicography, idioms, language contacts, translation and interpreting.

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6107-2348>

Email: [Andrejs.Veisbergs@lu.lv](mailto:Andrejs.Veisbergs@lu.lv)