

**Juan C. Sager (Selector and Editor).** *Essays on Definition*. Introduction by Alain Rey. 2000, viii + 254 pp. ISBN 90 272 2327 0 (Eur.), 1 55619 773 X (US). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

This publication is volume 4 in John Benjamins' series *Terminology and Lexicography Research and Practice*. It contains a "Preface" and an introductory essay "Defining Definition" (pp. 1-4) by Alain Rey. This is followed by a collection of texts, selected and edited by Juan Sager, which examine various aspects of definition from the point of view of philosophy.

The essays span the period from Plato and Aristotle to the 19th century, covering the major Western philosophical traditions. Besides essays of Plato and Aristotle, essays of Isidoro de Seville, Blaise Pascal, Benedict de Spinoza, John Locke, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, George Berkeley, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and Heinrich Rickert have also been included.

Although all included texts are classified as "essays", there is some variety in the form in which the authors present their views on definition: besides the essay, there are also genres such as the Platonic dialogue, letters (cf. the extracts from the correspondence of Leibniz to colleagues), and even a full monograph by Heinrich Riekert. There is also considerable variety in the length of the essays and the amount of space allocated to the different authors. Some of the texts constitute no more than a few lines, others are full-length essays. Besides the well-known essays of Aristotle on defining and definitions, most space has been allocated to a text in fact unknown to me, namely, a monograph of Heinrich Riekert "The Theory of Definitions" (pp. 191-254).

The main aim of this series of John Benjamins is to provide in-depth studies and background information pertaining to lexicography and terminology. It follows that this volume is aimed at specialists or advanced students in the field, and more specifically at those with the necessary background in philosophy to be able to access the texts and link and integrate the philosophical issues under discussion with current theoretical approaches to definition in lexicography and terminology.

This approach by the editor and publisher is corroborated by the fact that the selected texts are not provided with any introductory remarks or annotations giving data on the author's general views on defining and definitions, the topics of the essays, and/or how these topics under discussion link up with "modern" lexicographic or terminological definition theory.

The selected texts indeed make for very interesting reading, precisely because they remind us once again of exactly how reductionistic current theoretical views of definitions are in nature once you isolate them from the philosophic traditions from which they have emerged. This reductionism is, of course, brought about by the practical goals of lexicography and terminology (compiling dictionaries and terminologies). These pragmatic goals have, however, lead us through a process in which we have inevitably delimited our theoretical constructs and framed them in such a way that they reflect little of

the critical issues underlying them — issues which have plagued philosophers for ages (e.g. the nature of knowledge and knowledge acquisition). In a number of these essays we are actually reminded of the fact that we have reduced some of these complex issues to simple dichotomies (e.g. encyclopaedic vs. linguistic definitions) or complex phenomena to neat taxonomies (e.g. a neat list of definition types).

Besides the more well-known texts, as, for example, the work of Aristotle (cf. pp. 25-89), John Stuart Mill (pp. 174-190), and Kant (pp. 163-171), there are also a number of lesser known texts, which really need the attention of lexicographers and terminologists. I would like to focus on three of these which have been translated by Sager.

The first is Isidoro of Seville's typology of definition types (pp. 91-94) which has been extracted from a book by Marius Victori. The author lists fifteen definition types, gives their Greek and Latin names, illustrates each with an example and succinctly explains what the characteristic defining technique of the definition type is. Most of the well-known definition types found in handbooks of lexicography are in the list, but a number of lesser known and/or used ones also appear. For example, the definition *eodem et de altero* ("from one and the other") is explained as follows: "when one asks what difference there is between a king and a tyrant, and by means of the difference one is defined as well as the other, saying: 'The king is moderate and good-tempered the tyrant is godless and cruel' " (p. 92). The poetic "ring" of this definition type is characteristic of some of the other lesser known definition types listed, but characteristic of defining techniques in genres other than the dictionary.

The second is Heinrich Rickert's "The Theory of Definitions", which has been translated from the German, and of which the third edition of the monograph from 1929 has been included (pp. 199-249). This essay (including the extracts from the three prefaces) is really a remarkable piece of writing in which a number of philosophical issues concerning definitions — of which some feature in the other essays — come under critical scrutiny. Some of the topics discussed include the origin and original meaning of definition, word-explanation and definition, the purpose of definition, the inadequacies of existing theories; definitions in law, the natural sciences and mathematics; the inadequacy of the existing theories of the concept; the concepts of genus and essence in the empirical sciences; and nominal and real definitions — essential reading matter for terminologists, and, for its broader implications, also for lexicographers. A summary of the author's points of view will, however, not do justice to the eloquence of the phrasing, formulation, argumentation and structure of this study.

The third essay is the thought-provoking one by Blaise Pascal, "The Art of Persuasion" (pp. 108-117). This essay is particularly interesting as it is one of the few in which definitions are linked to the rhetorical tradition. The rules for logical persuasion and definition are presented in this essay within a general theory of persuasion. Pascal describes the latter as follows: "The art of persua-

sion is necessarily related to the way in which we agree to what is presented to us and to the nature of the things we are expected to believe" (p. 108). Before presenting his way to logical reason, Pascal goes to some length in explaining for what nature of things it is appropriate to use the logical method. These exclude, for example, divine truths. This is made clear in a paragraph in which he explains how man accepts divine truths in contrast to the acceptance of profane things.

The author argues that divine truths stand above nature and that we come to know them through our hearts, not our minds. That is why the saints exhort us to love divine things in order to come to know them. For natural things, however, God has reversed this order: to know (secular) things we must know them with our minds first. However, people have corrupted this order and have only come to believe things that they have come to love: "we believe almost nothing except that which pleases us" (p. 109). Although Pascal argues that little passes through our minds, he nevertheless accepts that the mind and the heart are like two doors by which these thoughts can enter our soul, and that each of these two doors have their own principles and stimuli for actions (p. 109).

Pascal has all kinds of ideas about persuasion through the heart (Aristotele's *pathos*), but the major aim of the essay is to show how definitions are to be used in logical arguments (Aristotele's *logos*) to persuade people (i.e. through the door of the mind). In essence this boils down to what Pascal outlines as "methodologically perfect proofs", which consist of three essential parts: define the terms you use with clear definitions, propose evident principles or axioms for proving the matter at hand, and, in demonstrations, always substitute the definitions for the defined concept (cf. p. 111) — simple rules that still lie at the heart of rational argumentation. This finally leads to a set of rules that will secure complete definitions, namely, (a) do not define perfectly well-known terms; (b) do not use somewhat obscure or ambiguous terms without defining them; and (c) when defining terms, use only well-known words or already explained words (cf. p. 112).

This essay illustrates precisely how complex issues of defining and definitions — despite such simple rules — can in fact become. They take on added complexity once they are seen against their larger functions (persuasion) within a certain discourse context (rational argumentation), and if they are linked to specific assumptions about knowledge acquisition and persuasion (the role of cognition versus emotion). These issues are, furthermore, tied in with assumptions about a moralistic (corrupt human nature) and a religious universe.

The introductory essay by Alain Rey, "Defining Definition", does not, as one would have initially suspected, provide the reader with an overarching framework within which the ensuing philosophical discussions can be systematically and coherently integrated and used as basis to link the topics under discussion in the essays to current theoretical approaches to definition in lexicography and terminology.

Rey's main argument in his essay is that it would be impossible to do so, given the enormous variety of definitions of the term *definition*, the various definition types, and the variety of functions for which they are utilized in the different disciplines. In some cases, it would in fact lead to confusion and bad descriptive practice (cf. his references to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, p. 7) if the different, often incompatible, viewpoints and traditions that have evolved in the various sciences (as diverse as, for example, lexicography, terminology, logic, philosophy, law and religion) are not respected.

Rey, therefore, aptly remarks that a "summarising study of definition, like Richard Robinson's well-known manual (1950) (*Definitions*, PHS), is an impossible undertaking because it can only list and try to relate incompatible points of view" (p. 8). The only cogent kind of description one can actually come up with, is, as Rey argues, a discipline-specific theory of definition.

Although the essays presented in this volume, present a philosophical view, they do by no means present a cogent view. Exactly this makes them challenging reading.

Piet H. Swanepoel  
Department of Afrikaans and Theory of Literature  
University of South Africa (UNISA)  
Pretoria  
Republic of South Africa  
(*swaneph@unisa.ac.za*)