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**The presentation of so-called imaginary creatures  
in monolingual English dictionaries**

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Tampereen yliopisto  
Kieli- ja käännöstieteiden laitos  
Englantilainen filologia

Maija Viitanen **The presentation of so-called imaginary creatures in monolingual English dictionaries**

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Työn tarkoituksena on tutkia miten yliluonnolliset oliot esitetään yksikielisissä sanakirjoissa: Ilmaistaanko teoksissa olioiden yliluonnollinen olemus? Miten yliluonnollinen elementti esitetään? Lähtöoletuksena oli, että olioiden olemus ilmaistaan sanan käyttöaluetta kuvaavalla etiketillä.

Koska sanakirjat kuvaavat sanastoa, on kappaleessa 2 selvitetty sanaston kuvaamista, leksikografiaa ja sanakirjojen tyyppejä. Kappale 3 kuvaa perinteistä sanakirjaa, sen tekemistä ja rakennetta. Varsinainen tutkimus on kappaleessa 4.

Tutkimuksen otos on pieni, vain kaksikymmentä satunnaisesti valittua substantiivina ja viisi sanakirjaa. Yliluonnollisia olioita kuvaavat attribuutit viittasivat eniten myytteihin, legendoihin ja kansanperinteeseen – näiden osuus oli yhteensä 52 %. Mielikuvituksen osuus oli 16 % ja tarinoiden 14 %. Muiden käytettyjen attribuuttien joukossa oli myös joitakin paikkoja, sillä tietyt oliot ovat kiinteästi yhteydessä määrättyihin paikkoihin, kuten zombit kuuluvat Länsi-Intian ja voodoooperinteen yhteyteen.

Yllättäen oliot eivät saaneetkaan määreekseen käyttöalueen kertovaa etikettiä, vaan niiden luonne ilmaistiin määritelmään sisältyvällä selityksellä. Sanakirja-artikkeleissa oli etikettejä vain 7 %:ssa tapauksista kun taas selitysten osuus oli 36 % ja erilaisien yliluonnollisuutta kuvaavien adjektiivien osuus 32 %. Passiivi lievensi olioiden olemassaolon varmuutta 14 %:ssa tapauksista. 9 % määritelmistä käytti vain synonyymejä.

Vaikka käsitteet ja niiden määritellyt merkitykset vaihtelevat jonkin verran eri sanakirjoissa, voidaan todeta, että tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellut sanakirjat kuvaavat yliluonnolliset oliot määritelmässään asiallisesti epätodellisiksi, niillä on vain myyttinen olemassaolon mahdollisuus.

## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to study monolingual dictionaries and how they deal with so-called imaginary beings. Dictionaries are not, of course, the only source of determining a word's meaning. Textbooks, law books, newspapers, etc. give words meanings and define them. In this paper, however, I study dictionaries only. The dictionaries studied are common monolingual dictionaries such as *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* or *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary*. I study nouns since they usually have a meaning that is somewhat solid and needs no complementary elements to express the concept.

The belief in "supernatural" phenomena was once upon a time a logical attempt to understand the world. The very first approaches to supernatural date from the beginning of the mankind. People did not understand all the natural phenomena and therefore created the idea of the supernatural. That explained the sunrise, life and death, etc. People served different spirits, or gods, who were everywhere. In the same category of supernatural phenomena fall the so-called imaginary beings or mythical creatures. On one hand, there is uncertainty whether these supernatural phenomena exist but on the other hand, there is no proof that these phenomena do not exist; this needs careful phrasing in dictionary definitions. The dilemma leads to questions such as the following: Are the headwords explained as facts or is there some doubt of their existence? Are they dubbed with some sort of usage label? What kind of label? How is the 'imagination' or 'supernatural' expressed in the dictionary entries? What are the means to describe the 'supernatural'?

In order to study dictionaries and how they describe words I define ways to describe a vocabulary in chapter 2. I study 'dictionary' in chapter 3. Then I

introduce the dictionaries I used in this study<sup>1</sup> in chapter 4 as well as the words studied. Furthermore, I study how some dictionaries present imaginary beings – whether they use different labels or other linguistic methods to express the supernatural nature of the word in question. In chapter 5 I summarise the results of my study.

## 2 Description of vocabulary

In this chapter I discuss the description of vocabulary as a science, namely lexicography, and shortly summarise some of the main works in the history of dictionaries. I also look into the typology of dictionaries even though I later study only one type of dictionaries. In addition, I also briefly discuss the dictionary user, the person making use of the end product of lexicographers' efforts.

### 2.1 Lexicography

A *language* is a means to communicate, to exchange information. Usually a language has speakers to whom the language is mother tongue. It has its own rules. A *lexicon* consists of all the words of a language and it can be considered as a collective inheritance of a community. Martín Mingorance (1990, 228) notes that the words of a language constitute “the *Weltanschauung* of the cultural community” thus the language being an integral part of the culture. Words are not simple to define as such since the worldview of a culture and of a language is embedded in their essence

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviations used of dictionaries in this paper:  
*COBUILD* = *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary*  
*COD* = *The Concise Oxford dictionary of Current English*  
*Longman* = *Longman Dictionary of the English Language*  
*OALD* = *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*  
*Penguin* = *The New Penguin English Dictionary*

but the international standard *Principles and methods of terminology (ISO 704:1987, 15)* defines a *word* as “the smallest entity in a language which can convey a specific meaning by itself and which is capable of existing as a separate unit in a sentence” noting that “when it is in written form (orthographic word) the word is marked off by spaces or punctuation marks before and after” – this terminological approach applies to lexicography too since they are two rather similar disciplines. Also Pearson (1998, 67) notes that there are principles in both disciplines which could be useful in lexicographical work.

A language that has users lives all the time. Some of its words die out, some change their meanings, some words spring up. Shakespeare used approximately 23 000 words. The average language user can cope with a smaller vocabulary. Besides, human communication is very often considered to be spoken language even though the nonverbal communication such as gestures is said to carry ca. 75-90% of the message (Pease 1985, 10). There is a message, the sender of the message and the receiver of the message, and all kinds of interference which may have an effect on the message. The meaning of a word becomes ‘reality’ in the situation in which the word is used. According to af Trampe (1990, 14) language is a learned convention which means that the language user has learned the words and situations and the meanings and the ways to use the language. There always is an individual part of interpretation to add up the meaning to a person.

The words of a language are described in dictionaries. Schaefer (1987, 10) argues that dictionaries undoubtedly belong to the group of books sold frequently although they do not appear in any best-seller lists. *Lexicography* is either the art of making dictionaries or, in a broader sense, a science of studying dictionaries in general. Lexicography is a rather new discipline and there even is some doubt

whether it is a discipline at all since its theoretical basis is not very solid. There is no universal theory of lexicography and the earlier practice consists mainly of the personal choices (or guesses) of a lexicographer. Sometimes the lexicographers have not been able to explain their process of making a dictionary. Lexicography has a practical orientation and linguistic theories in general are not so suitable in the lexicographical use and therefore their transfer to the new discipline has been rather slow. One reason for that is the fact that the lexicographical work takes time and there has been no point changing the basis in the middle of the work (Zgusta 1970, 22).

Today, lexicographers realise the significance of the theoretical basis of their work and they even describe the principles and the process of dictionary making in the end product. The main point is the realisation of the need of research. The theoretical development is an ongoing process in order to improve the quality of dictionaries (Drosdowski 1977, 142) and some day to achieve a proper theory of lexicology.

According to Herbert Ernst Wiegand, a pioneer in the fields of terminology and lexicology, here after Hausmann (1985, 371), there are some main principles of lexicography such as the description of the language, the studying of the language and the practical part of making a dictionary and the work organisation. The language has to be studied and described in order to be defined word by word in a dictionary. In studying the language lexicography may overlap with many other linguistic disciplines from lexicology and grammar to pragmatics and semantics. The aim of the study usually is to produce a dictionary or a theory to support dictionary making.

The purpose of a dictionary is generally considered to be one of explaining the meanings of words. The first western dictionaries were bilingual and often attempts to explain religious vocabulary. Rey (1990, 48) emphasises the didactic intention for glossaries or dictionaries to educate the learned further in Greek and Latin. When national languages began claiming their place in the 15<sup>th</sup> century dictionaries turned to monolinguality and norm forming (Rey 1990, 48; cf. Zgusta 8f.). Different national languages needed rules and standardisation so that they would become understandable throughout the nation in question, yet today's linguistics argues that there are no absolute given rules of the language but the use of the language is the norm of the common language (Felber 1984, 15) and therefore the normative function of dictionaries as well as grammars is turning into a descriptive one.

There have been attempts to list words and their meanings as long as there has been a written language. The oldest known dictionary was found in Syria in 1975. It consists of clay tables which present about 3000 words in Sumeric and Eblaitic with phonetic information (Schaefer 1987, 5). The oldest word lists are thousands of years old. Dictionaries were made because people tried to define the meaning of the words of their own language in another language so that they could understand the meaning of the words easier (Zgusta 1970, 7f.). For example dialectal or sacral words often needed clarification.

There were all kinds of word lists, nomenclatures and glosses over the time but from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards the actual dictionaries as we understand them today, with structural form and general language, burst into existence. The first "modern" dictionary was the *Dictionnaire l'Academie francaise*, which was published in 1694. It had the structure of a modern dictionary with headwords,



definitions, synonyms and examples (Zgusta 1970, 10). Like modern dictionaries it presented common contemporary language. The *Dictionnaire l'Academie francaise* can be considered as a model which other lexicographers more or less followed.

The first English dictionary is said to be Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall conteyning and teaching the true writing and understanding of hard usuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French &c.* of 1604 (Landau 1989, 35). Its originality and style may be argued but it was a milestone in English lexicography. Another milestone, Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* in 1755 was published after seven years of collecting source material and studying the contexts in which words were used. It contained words and definitions enriched with illustrative quotations. Johnson's methods became the usual practice in lexicography although he himself was more practical than theoretical compiler. The dictionary led, almost a hundred years later, to the publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is a typical example of today's dictionaries (Pearson 1999, 74).

*Deutsches Wörterbuch* by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm is also one of the great works in the history of lexicography. It presents words, their meaning, usage, etymology very thoroughly. The basic principles, which had scientific basis, can be seen in the modern dictionaries too. Today's dictionaries are, however, less gigantic since the sheer amount of work that went to the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* was enormous. The first band was published in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the last band almost a hundred years later.

One can easily recognise an old dictionary by its structure and functional properties since the similarities with modern works are remarkable. Some things have changed, of course. Today's dictionaries are simply handy sources of information whereas the Grimm brothers and other lexicographers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

believed that people would read dictionaries regularly so as to enlighten the whole household (Hatherall 1997, 46).

## **2.2 Dictionary user**

Hardly anyone reads dictionaries regularly just for fun these days. The dictionary user is “the known unknown” in lexicography. The reader is a problem in lexicography, since the dictionaries should accommodate to his needs as well as possible, but there is no average dictionary user. His age and language skills, not to mention the mother tongue and cultural background may vary greatly, yet the using of a dictionary sets some demands to the reader. Basically the reader knows that when he finds the right word he will find the information he seeks and that is all the theory he knows.

We tend to forget that using most dictionaries, old and new, is rather like the skill, say, of swimming or riding a bike once one has mastered it, it appears almost contemptuously easy (Krebs 1988, 55).

According to Ilson (1984, 85) the dictionary is a social artifact and the reader has learned to know it without realising it. Some people think like Drosdowski (1977, 143) that the subconscious learning of dictionaries is not enough but the art of using dictionaries should be taught at schools. Evidently some sort of orientation is desirable since the readers can be surprisingly ignorant of the facts beneath the dictionary’s surface; Svensén (1987, 16) maintains that only every tenth reader has read through the user’s manual in the dictionary. Some dictionary users are convinced that if they cannot find a word in a dictionary it cannot be used or it does not exist (Drosdowski 1977, 106f.).

Not only should the reader accommodate to the dictionary but the dictionary should accommodate to the reader's needs. Since the dictionary user may read the dictionary in his mother tongue or in a foreign language and search for information about a word's meaning or pronunciation or grammatical functions it is clear that all kinds of dictionaries are needed.

### **2.3 Typology of dictionaries**

The vocabulary of a language is typically described in a dictionary. There are all kinds of dictionaries to satisfy the needs of a dictionary user, be it information on orthography or the meaning of a phrase. Different dictionaries can concentrate on historical or contemporary language or describing or defining vocabulary and so on. There are dictionaries in one, two or many languages. There are dictionaries of different special languages from slang to science. There are dictionaries for children, foreign language learners, students and so on. Usually the dictionary aims to present words and their meanings so that the main concept of every headword becomes clear.

Häkkinen (1987, 16) reminds that all books, dictionaries too, deal with written language, which is secondary compared with the spoken language. Dictionaries usually deal with written language since the spoken language is hard to document and define accurately. Landau (1989, 97) emphasises also the difficulty of representing the spoken language understandably.

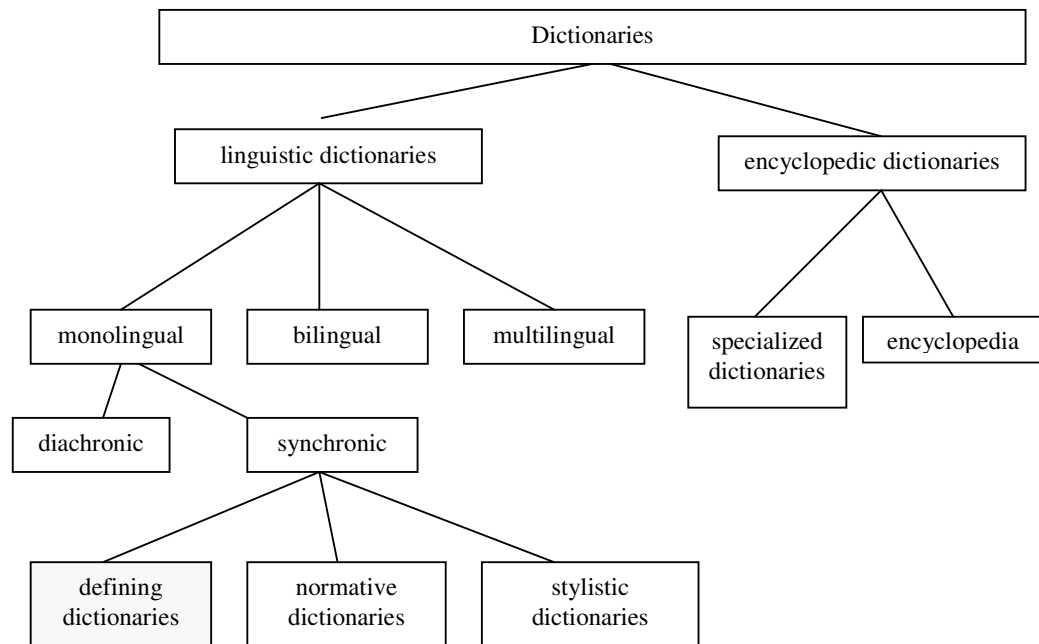
A dictionary is, in general, a book which alphabetically lists words of a language and explains their meaning either in the same or in another language. According to Hausmann (1985, 369) a dictionary is a collection of lexical entities, mostly words, which are presented through different media to a dictionary user with special information and the material is organised so that the access to the information

is as easy as possible. This definition would cover both books and CDs and other applications. However, dictionary is usually referred to as a book regardless of its recent approach to multimedia and its new concept as a reference work.

**dictionary** *1* a reference book containing words and usu phrases, usu alphabetically arranged, together with information about them; *esp.* their forms, pronunciation, and meanings *2* a reference book giving for words or phrases of one language equivalents in another language *2* a reference book that lists alphabetically terms or names, e.g. related to a specific subject or sphere of activity along with information about them: *a biographical dictionary; a dictionary of philosophy*  
(Penguin 2000)

*Penguin's* definition of a *dictionary* refers to a book form and divides the concept in two categorical meanings: *1* linguistic and *2* encyclopedic dictionaries. A similar division can be seen in Figure 1 (below) where dictionaries are divided in subdivisions. Linguistic dictionaries can include some encyclopedic information since there is a world view embedded in the language itself and the concept the word is connected to is understood in connection to the world. Encyclopedic dictionaries can be either special dictionaries or encyclopedias. They inform the user of experiences in the real world (Svensén 1987, 3; cf. Hausmann 1985, 370; Drosdowski 1997, 124ff.; Cruse 1988, 78). Wiegand (1977, 56) underlines the point that linguistic dictionaries are meant to convey information about the linguistic expression the reader is looking for. Linguistic dictionaries are divided into mono-, bi-, and multilingual dictionaries according to the number of languages used. These groupings can be divided further, monolingual dictionaries, for example, into diachronic (historical) and synchronic (current time) dictionaries. Synchronic dictionaries can describe the words according to their meaning, normative use or style.

**Figure 1** A typology of dictionaries after Kühn (1994, 7 and 8 combined)



Multilingual dictionaries usually give the equivalents of a word in many languages without any further information except in a case of a special dictionary – technical fields of use, for example, may be labelled in a technical vocabulary. The equivalents in different languages rarely are completely identical in meaning but only partially equivalent.

Bilingual dictionaries also present equivalent words and in some cases explain culture specific expressions. Bilingual dictionaries can be made for understanding a foreign language when they are so-called passive dictionaries or they can be so-called active dictionaries for producing another language. Monolingual dictionaries would thus be “medial” dictionaries, I think, since they suit both understanding and producing a language, or that is what their makers and users hope. Bilingual dictionaries only give the approximate equivalent words in another language without further explanations and the meaning of the word is, according to Pearson (1998, 70),

assumed to be familiar to the user or the user is supposed to consult monolingual dictionaries which hardly happens. A hasty use of bilingual dictionaries can lead to misunderstandings more readily than the use monolingual dictionaries.

Monolingual dictionaries paraphrase the meaning of the word in the same language through synonyms or synonymic expressions. The information is useful only when the reader has the necessary language skills to find the headword and to understand the message. Monolingual dictionaries are often meant for readers whose native language is the one of the dictionary. In such a dictionary there often is information of etymology and enlightening examples of the use of the word.

### **3 A dictionary**

A lexicographer's dilemma is that on one hand a dictionary should provide plenty of information and on the other hand this information should be easy for the reader to understand, in addition this information should be provided in a line or two. In this chapter my purpose is to describe the structure of a traditional dictionary and summarise the making of a dictionary.

#### **3.1 The making of a dictionary**

The choosing of type of the dictionary is an important decision which dictates the principles to the following process of dictionary making. What kind of a dictionary is wanted? Monolingual? Bilingual? What is the target group? Children? Adults? Foreign language learners? What kind of information is needed? Pronunciation? Etymology? Meaning? What kind of language – past or contemporary, regional or universal, slang or common language, etc.? Do we want

alphabetical word order or not? What will be the size? After deciding the myriad of questions regarding the type of the dictionary there is the process of making a dictionary. The process actually begins with funding and lexicographers and an idea of the desired dictionary followed by defining working principles, collecting material and forming it to the form of a dictionary. The process ends with publishing and selling the end product.

It is not easy to compose a dictionary. Because the theoretical basis is inadequate (or non-existent as some say) it is important to plan and document the creation process of new projects. According to sound scientific principles a process must be able to be repeated in order to prove that the result is reliable. Regarding older dictionaries there is not always clarity of the principles beneath the making, which is no wonder since in the old “procedure” of dictionary making the methods and principles varied according to the results that were needed – sometimes the lexicographers themselves did not know how exactly their dictionaries were compiled (Krebs 1988, 52). It would help the end result if all the articles were compiled using same methods. Contemporary linguistics contributes the development of the theoretical lexicography by researching the processes of dictionary making and reviewing the end products.

The material is collected from sources varying from literature and newspapers to lyrics and TV commercials, often excerpts from previous reference works are used too. In the computerised era the processing is far easier than it used to be. Computer based corpus materials give access to huge amounts of source data, not to mention the actual processing. British National Corpus, which is used by *COD* and *OALD*, contains over 100 million words. According to Kilgarriff (1997, 150) *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary*’s “frequency lists are based on the 200 million word

‘Bank of English’” although he notes that the other dictionaries may use more homogenic sources. So not only the quantity but also the quality of material is important.

Forming the dictionary entries follows the principles agreed on beforehand. Often each word type requires principles of its own. Then the entries are edited into a form of a dictionary and finally published. The process is time consuming and pioneering works are always taking more time. Today the use of computers makes the whole process much easier and swifter than in the old days when everything was done manually.

There are other methods to make a dictionary besides the above sketched traditional one. Mel’cuk’s explanatory combinatorial dictionary may be accurate to a point but it would be an enormous effort to make a dictionary out of it or read the result (Pearson 1998, 76-81). Since Mel’cuk’s idea of a dictionary is “a system of lexical relations where all of the relations of any one entry to any other entry in the lexicon must be specified, thereby creating a network” (Pearson 1998, 77) and the dictionary entry is categorised in a myriad of slots containing specific information on linguistic and grammatical aspects, one could probably describe the method as a thoroughly cross-referenced dictionary that needs approximately a compact five-dimensional existence before becoming user friendly in larger scale than few entries.

The *COBUILD* method is a rather unique one and it has gained lot of attention since it is a new and different way of compiling a dictionary. The *COBUILD* focuses on the dictionary user. *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* is written as prose and it is meant to be read as prose. Examples play a major role in the book and are from real life when possible (*COBUILD*, xv-xvi). There is an extra column in the dictionary that provides information of grammar and semantic relationships and



underlines these features in relationship to the actual definitions and other information, for example grammatical constructions such as subject - verb - object or two objects are shown in the column. The dictionary even has a user friendly visual image, being seemingly more spacious than traditional “fill the pages with tiny font” –dictionaries because one of the innovations in *COBUILD* is to present each headword on a new line instead of having continuous text which brings clarity to the pages.

### **3.2 The structure of a traditional dictionary**

The **macrostructure** of a dictionary is the order in which the entries stand in a dictionary. The most usual one is the alphabetical order either letter by letter or word by word. Some phrases, for example, may cause problems because choosing their placing under one headword is not always easy nor is the alphabeticalisation. There have been layouts with simple macrostructure and double macrostructure where words form “nests” not always following the alphabetical order. If we take the suffix *macro-* for example, a simple macrostructure would list every term with the *macro-* as a new entry whereas a double macrostructure would nest them all after one headword *macro-*. Hartmann (1999, 7) states that the condensed layout of the information on the dictionary page should be improved to a more user-friendly approach and I believe this may become reality in the new formats of dictionary such as CDs where the space on a page is not so expensive as in books although the new generation of printed dictionaries have given the layout more space, *COBUILD*, for example has the spacious extra column to lighten the pages. So the traditional dictionary will probably change in the future.

The **microstructure** of a dictionary is the structure of a single entry, or article. It contains all the parts of the article and their internal relations. The parts are usually marked with different graphical means, e.g. the headwords are mostly in bold and examples in italics, semicolons are much used in separating the parts as well as Arabic and Roman numbers. Homonymic expressions have articles of their own whereas polysemic expressions are often given as submeanings. Similar headwords as well as submeanings are commonly numbered or otherwise marked so that the differences become clear. Of course, there are some dictionaries which have only very selected information, some, for example, have no definitions but only information about pronunciation or etymology.

It is not easy to define the **headword**. According to *Penguin* a headword is “a word or term placed at the beginning of a chapter, an encyclopedia or dictionary entry, etc.” A headword can be a word, a phrase, even a proverb, an acronym, an abbreviation, or it can be a part of a word such as an affix or suffix. There are even some signs as @ as headwords. Not every headword gets an article in a dictionary. Compounds where the meaning is the sum of its parts are left out in order to save space. Opaque phrases, on the other hand, must be explained. As Seuren (1988, 174) argues “a tennis elbow is not like a tennis racket, and the difference is not reducible to that between an elbow and racket”.

It saves place if the word building components (for transparent compounds) are given entries of their own so that they can be referred to when necessary. However, Drosdowski (1977, 119f.) reminds that not every reader has the language skills and the knowledge to superimpose the pieces unto the language, especially the nuances can easily be lost. Examples and further explanations are needed on “easy” words too. Different idioms as well as verb forms and other remarkable variations in

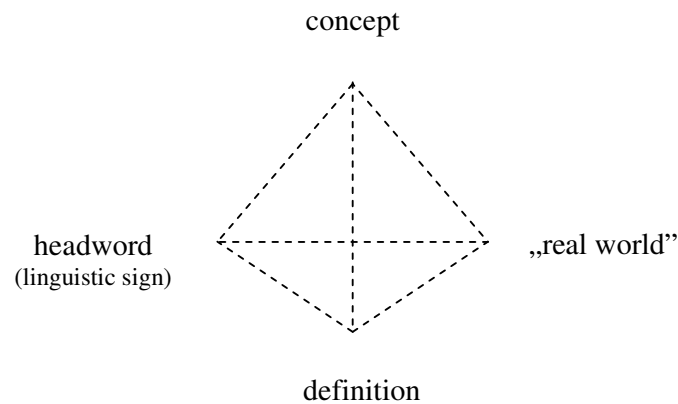
a word's appearance usually lead to a headword that refers to the "main" entry. Also synonyms often refer to the main meaning. Drosdowski (1977, 130) accepts such reference too as a means to save space.

The headword is often followed by information of its alternative spelling or of the plural form(s). Information of the **word class** is of importance too, since especially the English language can provide similar forms both adjectives, nouns, and verbs.

**Pronunciation** is usually given right after the headword. International Phonetic Alphabet would be ideal in this kind of use but monolingual dictionaries favour giving the information in some kind of "typical language" code. The trouble is that every English dictionary seems to be using a method of its own which must be checked and re-checked in the user's manual (cf. Svensén 1987, 51ff.).

A **definition** is the verbal description of the headword, an analysis of its meaning "permitting its differentiation from other concepts within a system of concepts" (*ISO 704: 1987(E)*, 15). Figure 2 expands the traditional semantic triangle of linguistic *sign – concept – world* to a tetraed with *definition* in one corner. There is a connecting relation between each of the corners. The definition explains the concept of the headword and possibly clarifies its meaning and use by providing examples referring to the 'real world'. The definition draws lines not only to the headword but also to the norms of its use and to its relations to other concepts (cf. Haarala 1981, 43). Hanks (1990, 35) states that lexicographers do not study the way how words react to each other but how the words reflect the world.

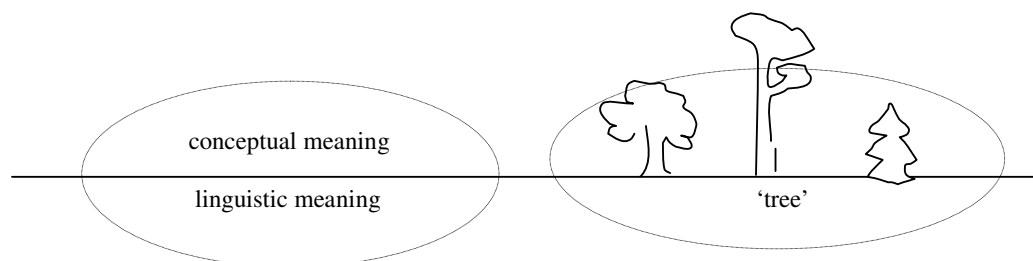
**Figure 2** Definition (cf. Sanastotyön käsikirja 1989, 24f.)



The lexicographer strives to give as accurate and fitting definitions as possible but it is the reader's job to understand what the definition says (Vilppula 1987, 8). Defining a word meaning is not always unproblematic. It can be very difficult to analyse “ordinary” words– what is the essence of the concept and how to put it in a few words – whereas technical terms can often be defined rather easily – a *rose* may be a rose but one *cc* definitely is one cc.

Although reference works are divided in encyclopedic and linguistic dictionaries this division does not apply to definitions. The reader must have some experience of the real world so that he can adapt the new information to the framework of the reader's worldview (cf. Figure 3 below).

**Figure 3** A linguistic sign gets different conceptual meanings depending on the language user



So the definitions contain both linguistic and encyclopedic information. In principle the linguistic information is predominant but in practice the encyclopedic information is an inseparable part of the dictionary definition as Rey (1990, 53) states:

In lexicography, the distinction between linguistically relevant features and descriptive features is usually blurred. The former cannot consist just of minimum features, since dictionary definitions are often linked to cultural knowledge of the world. The latter are implied in the description of cultural contents.

The encyclopedic part can be implicit in the definition but there is not one part without the other. One must not forget that it is always the experience of the individual person which connects the defined concept to the reality – a tree becomes reality in the image of ‘birch’, ‘pine, or ‘spruce’ in the language user’s head as Figure 3 suggests.

It is the explanation of the meaning and it’s reliability that the reader values most, underlines Vilppula (1987, 4). The reader is very often interested in the meaning of a word. Equally important to the reader is the knowledge of how the word is used.

The typical way of categorising the meanings is to sort them out starting with the most usual or important one, which comes first in the dictionary. Today, computers are an excellent help sorting the frequencies and listing the excerpts so that the lexicographers can find out the right order for the definitions. However, the reliability of word counts “for all but the few thousand most frequent words” is problematic since the results are “highly unstable” says Kilgarriff (1997, 150). Techniques are yet to be developed further. Other variables for arranging the definitions are for example logical or historical principles.

The meaning can be explained in different ways depending on the type of the headword, since different kinds of words require different kinds of defining methods. There can be a definition, a definition with examples, examples without a definition, depending on the dictionary. Basically, the defining methods apply for a word class (Svensén 1987, 106ff.; cf. Hausmann 1985, 375). Sometimes a headword may require individual treatment, of course.

An idea long favoured in lexicography is substitutability. It means that the word defined ought to be substitutable for its definition (Landau 1989, 132ff.). Some definition types, such as context definition, differ from this principle.

The meaning of a headword can be given as a definition, a paraphrase, a synonym, or a combination of these. Exemplary sentences or paraphrased examples can illustrate the meaning too. Rundell (1998, 334) assumes that “probably the most visible way in which dictionaries have changed under the impact of corpus data is the arrival of the corpus-derived dictionary example.” The examples as such can be authentic or composed just for the occasion in order to save space or to underline some grammatical aspect. There are other reasons, too, to use “artificial” sentences as Cowie (1989, 58) testifies: “Whereas naturally occurring sentences often only reveal their full meaning by reference to some wider context, the dictionary example cannot usually afford to look outside itself for complete elucidation.”

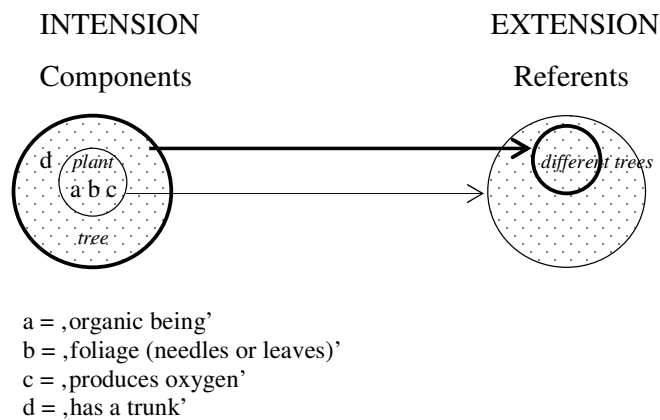
There are many different ways of categorising definitions. Syntagmatic criteria classify the definitions after the words such as prepositions or verbs that the headword is connected to. Paradigmatic criteria concentrate on the different meanings and their contexts. Nakamoto (1998, 205) divides definitions into ‘referent based definitions’ which “define the definiendum from the perspective of the entity they refer” and ‘anthropocentric definitions’ which “are written from the perspective

of a person” – there can be some “hybrid” definitions as well. A referent based definition would be a description of a *dictionary* as ‘a book that is consulted by people who want to know the meaning of a word’ whereas an anthropocentric definition would describe a *dictionary* as a ‘book that you consult when you want to know the meaning of a word’. Anthropocentric definitions seem to be getting popular in different kinds of learners’ dictionaries which are one of the latest trends in lexicography.

A nominal definition aims at describing both the meaning of the word and the function the word has in the language system. A typical nominal definition is a synonym.

Another type of definition describes the concept either intensionally, when all the typical characteristics of the concept are given, or extensionally, when the concept is defined by giving all the objects belonging to the meaning, determining its extension. As Figure 4 shows the broader the intension of a concept, the narrower is its extension and vice versa. An intensional definition describes first the concept in general (*genus proximus*) and then in particular (*differentia specifica*) defining the meaning of the concept as succinct as possible. Biology traditionally uses this type of (Linnaean) defining, e.g. *Fragaria vesca*, *Felix domesticus*. An extensional definition may be easier to understand but it is not as durable as an intensional definition since whenever a new object pops into existence the definition must be modified. In order to form definitions that are easy to understand there are some definition hybrids and other types of definitions. In a contextual definition the meaning basically gains an explanation via an example of usage. According to *ISO/R 1087-1968(E)* (12) in a contextual definition “the term to be defined is shown in a sentence the whole meaning of which is known or may be guessed.”

**Figure 4** Intension – Extension after Stedje (1996, 27).



A definition should not contain the word being defined or any of its derivations in order to avoid circularity. A headword should not be defined through another headword or its definition unless they truly are synonyms. A maddening example of experiencing circular definitions (and bad defining practice) can be found in *The Penguin All English Dictionary* (1969) where a *peck* is 'one fourth of a bushel', a *bushel* 'a measure of capacity containing eight gallons', a *gallon* 'English measure of capacity, dry or liquid, equal to four quarts', a *quart* is then 'quarter of a gallon, two pints' and a *pint* 'a measure of liquid capacity, an eighth of a gallon'. (By the way, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a *peck* is approximately 9 litres.)

When defining the meanings one must remember to remain as correct as possible since a dictionary ought to be neutral both in presentation and opinions. Taboos and sensitive words do come up in dictionaries and their presentation should not upset anyone.

A point of caution is also the language used in definitions. The ideal is that the reader does not need to look up the words of the definition itself (cf. e.g. Neubauer 1984). The most recent English dictionaries have special defining



vocabularies where they list all the words used in the definitions. There are, however, differing opinions of the practicality of defining vocabularies. There are always cases where the “simple” words are not adequate in describing the meaning of a concept. And how big should the defining vocabulary be? 1000 or 3000 words? Pearson (1998, 88) proposes that the lexicographers should at least use as simple language as possible and confirm that all the words used in defining are themselves defined in the dictionary.

*COBUILD* is designed for language learners and uses a novel approach to dictionary production. The language is simple and human based. *COBUILD*'s introduction of second person *you* in the definitions has increased the use of anthropocentric definitions and *you* in other English as foreign language dictionaries too, even though sometimes the definitions may turn out to be rather unnatural, as Nakamoto (1998, 209) argues. Pearson (1998, 85) finds *COBUILD*'s definitions excellent since they both “convey the meaning” and “demonstrate usage in the definition” and do not demand extra space for additional information. One could ask if Pearson does not count the extra informational column as extra space.

A dictionary can have **illustrations** although it is not common. (Picture dictionaries are a special case.) When illustrations are used they visualise the meaning of a linguistic entity and enhance the insight of the reader, states Svensén (1987, 161). An illustration is also a kind of pictorial definition. It is necessary, of course, to attribute each picture with an explanatory text so that the meaning becomes absolutely clear.

The headword can also have different **labels** indicating the use of the word. The main types of labels are status labels, regional labels, and subject labels. Status labels mark the temporal use of the word, in practice the notion whether the word is

e.g. archaic or obsolete, or the stylistic use, whether the word is e.g. slang or substandard. Regional labels indicate the geographical region where the word is used, such as British or American English. Subject labels mark the special field where the word is used, e.g. mythology or mathematics. A label can be replaced with an introductory phrase such as ‘in mythology’ within the definition itself (Landau 1989, 181) also *COD* (xix) notes that labels are not used when the subject is clearly indicated in the definition itself.

#### **4 The analytical part**

In this chapter I study how some so-called imaginary creatures are presented in five English dictionaries. First I give a short introduction of the dictionaries used and the words studied. Then I compare the dictionaries and their ways of presenting ‘supernaturality’.

##### **4.1 The dictionaries studied**

The dictionaries studied in this paper are general monolingual dictionaries. *The New Penguin English Dictionary*, for example, is, according to the cover, a “superbly versatile dictionary that encompasses the huge range of the language and offers clear guidance to its many complexities” and the preface emphasises that the work is “a guide to the living language of today and its roots in the past”. All the works present themselves by using similar phrases underlining the quality of the dictionary, but they do not always give very much actual information about the dictionaries or their making.

The dictionaries inform the reader that their source material is “very best”. They compile the dictionary with the help of computers, statistical evaluation, and different corpuses such as Longman database and British National Corpus which has, according to *COD*, over 100 000 000 words of text.

The one-volume dictionaries studied in this paper are quite similar in size. Unfortunately none of them gives the amount of headwords in the book which leads the reader only to guess. *Longman* has nearly 250 000 definitions which would suggest approximately 150 000 – 200 000 headwords if other languages are comparable in this area. The headword count may be lower too.

*Longman* presents some tables amidst the entries such as Numbers or Chemical elements. *COD* and *OALD* have appendices at the end of the book and the subjects vary from Irregular Verbs and Family Relationships (*OALD*) to Countries of the World and Word Games Supplement (*COD*). *Penguin* and *COBUILD* do not have any extra appendices.

The old dictionary making method of re-working and updating old existing dictionaries seems to be still valued. The information of the copyright of *The New Penguin English Dictionary* would indicate that this dictionary is either formed from earlier dictionaries’ source material or just some kind of renewed edition. The copyright to the original material belongs to Merriam-Webster Inc. and Longman Group Ltd. 1986 whereas the copyright to revisions, updating and new material belong to Penguin Books, 2000. However, the preface reports of “bringing together the skills of Britain’s foremost lexicographers and the insights of pre-eminent specialists” so probably the lexicographers used the same source material as earlier dictionaries and formed a new product. The dictionary editors of *Longman Dictionary of the English Language* have had access to linguistic data of Merriam-

Webster Inc., a file over 100 000 000 citations, and, of course, the Longman database, which has been a source for other dictionaries as well. The foreword (ix) compares the dictionary with other works from the same source: “Reversing the biological process of germination, we now have the birth of the parent book of which the earlier dictionaries are the offspring.”

Two of the dictionaries studied are learner’s dictionaries. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* originates from the 1940’s when A.S. Hornby created a new kind of dictionary for language learners. It was monolingual and meant to help language production. It has sold over 30 million copies and it is a model for others to follow<sup>2</sup>. There still are some innovations: the fifth edition of OALD has a definition vocabulary of 3500 words. There are also illustrations. *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* presents a new concept of learners’ dictionary as mentioned above and if the reader first familiarises himself with the new format *COBUILD* can be very useful.

#### 4.2 The words studied

Imaginary creatures are part of humanity - there have always been ideas about strange animals and spirits and the stories of faraway lands populated with the most unusual inhabitants, as we can see e.g. in the ancient Greek stories. Myths tell us about centaurs and nymphs<sup>3</sup>. In his *Metamorphoses* Ovid tells the story about a greedy king who changed into a wolf – more precisely a werewolf. Dictionaries have clear ideas of how to treat these things and provide the information quite similarly, although their descriptions of the actual concept sometimes vary confusingly – for

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.oup.com/elt/global/products/oald/about\\_OALD/hornby](http://www.oup.com/elt/global/products/oald/about_OALD/hornby) 2.3.2005 12.00.

<sup>3</sup> Dictionaries usually label them with *Greek / Classical Mythology*.

example, a bogeyman can be a person (*COD*) or a spirit (*COBUILD*) or both (*LONGMAN*) as Table 1 shows.

**Table 1** An example of the variety of definitions in dictionaries: how is the ‘supernaturality’ of bogey and bogeyman described in dictionaries? (The “ordinary” meanings are not mentioned.)

	<i>COD</i>	<i>Longman</i>	<i>COBUILD</i>	<i>OALD</i>	<i>Penguin</i>
bogey	1 an evil or mischievous spirit; a devil	1 a spectre, ghost	(nothing supernatural in the explanation of <i>bogey 1</i> )	(a) (also <b>bogeyman...</b> ) an imaginary evil spirit (used to frighten children)	2 a spectre, a ghost
bogeyman	a person (real or imaginary) causing fear or difficulty.	a terrifying person or thing; <i>esp</i> a monstrous imaginary figure used to threaten children	2 A <b>bogey</b> or <b>bogeyman</b> is an imaginary evil spirit. Some parents tell their children that the bogeyman will catch them if they behave badly.	[ <i>bogey</i> ]	a monstrous figure invented to threaten children with, so as to frighten them into obedience

The imaginary creatures studied closer in this paper have been selected at random from the books by the best-selling fantasy author Terry Pratchett, mainly in *Guards! Guards!* and *Lords and Ladies*. I picked twenty so-called imaginary beings that crop up every now and then in the popular culture, in books, comics, and films. The sample is listed in Table 2 (below). The chosen creatures are of common folklore and can be found in dictionaries with their basic essence defined on a few lines. The cultural connotations of imaginary beings are usually left to other sources of information. A *dragon*, for example, can be a negative occurrence in the Western world whereas in the East a *dragon* is considered a positive character. The popular culture connotations would probably need another, encyclopedic, volume to the dictionary.

**Table 2** The mythical creatures studied in this paper

banshee	dwarf	gnome	phoenix	vampire
bogeyman	elf	golem	pixie	werewolf
dragon	fairy	gryphon	troll	wyvern
dryad	ghoul	imp	unicorn	zombie

Naturally, the supernatural creatures have different characteristics according to the user of the concept but the main characteristics remain pretty much the same. In Pratchett's Discworld<sup>®</sup>, for example, the city watch employs dwarfs and trolls as well as gnomes and werewolves. And since golems are made of clay they are a logical choice for a voluntary fire brigade.

### 4.3 The discussion

I wanted to study how different dictionaries treat the 'imaginary' or 'supernatural' aspect of the creatures. The task was to study the dictionaries: Was there a headword for the studied creature? Was there a label attached to the headword? Was there a definition? If there was a definition for the headword, was there anything imaginary or supernatural in it? How was the concept treated? Was there a truth value to be seen in the definitions? Was there expressed even doubt of the existence of imaginary beings or were they given as existing beasts? The proposition was that the probable way of presenting the 'not true' concepts would be labelling. Labels such as 'mythology' or 'fairy tales' would be a clear indication of the imaginary nature of the samples. The use of conditional in the definitions also would implicate the irreality of the defined concept as well as different statements insinuating or emphasising the imaginary, or make-believe, aspect. Definitions could be alleviated through introductory phrases, too. Labels, however, seem to be a reasonable choice.

### 4.3.1 An overview of the study

The arbitrary selection of headwords was successful since the studied dictionaries presented most of the words. Only three headwords were missing in two dictionaries as Table 3 shows. A surprise is that of the 94 entries only 12 were labelled. So the main way of noting ‘imaginary’ (82% of the sample) is not through labelling but through definitions with the help of different alleviating means.

**Table 3** The presentation of imaginary beings in dictionaries

DICTIONARY	COD				OALD				COBUILD				Longman				Penguin			
	l	d	-	∅	l	d	-	∅	l	d	-	∅	l	d	-	∅	l	d	-	∅
HEADWORD																				
banshee		x			x					x				x				x		
bogeyman		x				x				x				x				x		
dragon		x				x				x				x				x		
dryad	x							x				x			x			x		
dwarf		x			x					x				x				x		
elf		x				x				x				x				x		
fairy		x				x				x				x				x		
ghoul		x			x					x				x				x		
gnome		x			x					x				x				x		
golem		x						x				x			x			x		
gryphon		x				x				x				x				x		
imp		x				x				x				x				x		
phoenix		x			x					x				x				x		
pixie		x			x					x				x				x		
troll		x			x					x				x				x		
unicorn		x			x					x				x				x		
vampire		x				x				x				x				x		
werewolf		x			x					x				x				x		
wyvern	x							x				x			x			x		
zombie		x			x					x				x				x		

l = label; d = definition; - = nothing imaginary; ∅ = no headword, no entry

An interesting fact is that all the headwords’ definitions included some ‘supernatural’ element. In my earlier similar study of German dictionaries some supernatural creatures had undergone a change of meaning and their dictionary definitions conveyed no ‘imaginary’ meanings.

Table 3 would suggest that *Longman* and *Penguin* are rather similar, “definitions only” dictionaries, especially when their source data comes from the same pool. There are, however, some differences as Table 4 shows, that although alike the definitions are not completely identical. *COD* favours definitions in describing ‘supernatural’. *COBUILD* relies on definitions too but that is due to its nature and the unique approach to defining. *OALD* shows a greater variety of labels and definitions.

**Table 4** Types of the presentation of imaginary beings in dictionaries \*

DICTIONARY	<i>COD</i>				<i>OALD</i>				<i>COBUILD</i>				<i>Longman</i>				<i>Penguin</i>			
	l	a	i	p	l	a	i	p	l	a	i	p	l	a	i	p	l	a	i	p
HEADWORD																				
banshee			x		x			x			x				x				x	
bogeyman			x		b	o	g	y		x				x					x	
dragon		x				x					x			x					x	
dryad	x				/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/			x				x	
dwarf		x			x					x	x			x	x				x	x
elf		x						x			x								x	
fairy		x		x		x				x					x				x	
ghoul			x		x					x		x			x				x	
gnome		x		x	x					x	x				x				x	
golem			x		/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/			x				x	
gryphon		x				x	x				x			x					x	
imp	s	y	n	o	n	y	m	s			x		s	y	n	o	n	y	m	s
phoenix		x			x			x		x	x			x	x				x	x
pixie	s	y	n	o	x					x			s	y	n	o			x	
troll			x		x	x					x				x				x	
unicorn		x			x	x				x	x			x					x	
vampire				x				x			x	x				x				x
werewolf		x			x						x		r	e	a	l				x
wyvern	x				/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/		x					x	
zombie				x	x			x			x	x			x	x			x	x

l = label; a = adjective; i = introductory phrase; p = passive voice

\*<sup>1</sup> *OALD* and *COBUILD* have no entries for *dryad*, *golem* and *wyvern*

*imp* has only synonyms as definitions except in *COBUILD*

*pixie* has only synonyms as definitions in *COD* and *Longman*

*OALD* refers *bogeyman* to *bogey*

*Longman* presents *werewolf* as real

The ways to express ‘imagination’ or ‘supernatural’ were, besides the few labels, the use of attributive adjectives, introductory phrases and other verbal means so as to alleviate the expression. It seems to me that the dictionary makers feel



obliged to use some kind of “*Abtönung*”, “alleviating”, in this area of discourse and soften the declarative forms. Obviously the users of learner’s dictionaries are thought to be needing this kind of information to explain that imaginary creatures are not real. Surprisingly enough few headwords seemed to be defined as if they really existed, for example *banshee* (*OALD*) or *werewolf* (*Longman*).

### 4.3.2 The presentation of imaginary beings

A logical way to study imaginary beings is to compare them in groups of more or less similar creatures. I begin the study with humanoid beings, spirits and “children of the night” with their associates, finally followed by some “traditional” supernatural creatures.

#### 4.3.2.1 Spirits

A *dryad* is a nymph of woods in classical mythology. Only *COD* gives the nymph a label *mythology* and describes her “inhabiting a tree”. *COBUILD* and *OALD* do not have an entry for the concept at all. *Longman* and *Penguin* use the introductory phrase ‘in Greek mythology’ in their definitions.

Common denominators to all definitions of *elves* seem to be being a fairy, the small size, and mischievousness. *COD* defines elves as mythological beings whereas *COBUILD* mentions fairy stories. *OALD* uses passive voice describing an *elf* as “a small fairy that is said to play tricks on people” insinuating the unreal nature of the concept.

A *fairy* is not described as an *elf*, however, but as a small imaginary being with human form and magical powers. There are no labels for the *fairy* but the

descriptions are alleviated with different verbal means to indicate the irreality. *COD* uses the wording “a small imaginary being of human form, believed to possess magical powers”. So ‘it is believed’ but not necessarily true that imaginary beings have magical powers. *OALD* relies on the term ‘imaginary’ and so does *COBUILD* whereas *Penguin* calls a *fairy* a “mythical being”. *COBUILD* adds wings to the portrait of a fairy. *Longman* attributes the fairy to ‘legend and folklore’ hinting to stories and tradition.

An *imp* seems to have two species. *COBUILD*’s description of an *imp* implies a rather harmless creature: ”In fairy stories, an imp is a small, magical creature that often causes trouble in a playful way.” The other dictionaries have another opinion: an *imp* is a small demon. A demon would have more sinister connotations than *COBUILD*’s definition although *COD* calls an *imp*2 “a small mischievous devil or sprite”. *Longman* follows the line describing an *imp* as “a small devil or demon”. The two species, fairy story and demonic types, could both be mischievous but without further information the conclusion is incomplete.

A *pixie* is basically a fairy. *Longman* suggests a cheerful or mischievous one. *OALD* gives a usage label “esp in children’s stories” and portrays the *pixie* with pointed ears and pointed hat. *Penguin* adds “small human” to the description and mentions folklore instead of stories. *COBUILD* agrees on the portrait of ”an imaginary little creature like a fairy”.

The humanoid imaginary spirits gained rather similar descriptions in the dictionaries studied. Only the *imp* caused some differences of opinion but basically the main characteristics of the imaginary beings were agreed on. These spirits were mostly small, mischievous, imaginary beings that had human form and magical powers.

#### 4.3.2.2 Children of the night

There are more morbid humanoid beings defined in the dictionaries, “children of the night” and associated creatures. *COBUILD* and *OALD* do not have entries for a *golem*, a concept, I have to admit, that is probably not a very common one. The *golem* has not been given any labels as one might expect but introductory phrases – “Hebrew folklore” in *Longman* and *Penguin*, “Jewish legend” in *OAD*. *Longman* and *Penguin* agree on a clay figure “supernaturally endowed with life” although *Longman* suggests an alternative wooden figure. *COD* is suspicious and supposes that a *golem* is “a clay figure supposedly brought to life”.

A *bogeyman* has a variety of manifestations ranging from a person or thing to a spirit. *COD* defines it as “a person (real or imaginary) causing fear or difficulty” and *Longman* “a terrifying person or thing. They both state that a *bogeyman* can be real but a ‘real’ *bogeyman* must be a figure of speech. *OALD* refers *bogeyman* to a synonymous headword *bogey*, either a partial synonym or an alternative spelling. The definition of the *bogey* (*a*) is in accordance to *Longman*, *COBUILD*, and *Penguin* versions of a bogeyman: “a monstrous figure invented to threaten children with, so as to frighten them into obedience” (*Penguin*). In *bogeyman* the manifestation is also not of importance but the function of a *bogeyman* as a means to make children behave is essential.

The *werewolf* is an interesting case. *COD* defines it as a mythical being. *OALD* has the label ‘in stories’ and refers to a *wolf* in case the reader is not familiar with the word. *COBUILD* lists folklore, horror stories, and films as the areas of werewolf’s appearance. *Penguin* also mentions the phrase ‘in folklore’ and defines

the *werewolf* quite accurately as “a person who periodically transforms into a wolf or is capable of assuming a wolf’s form at will”.

*Longman*, which gives a perfect definition for the creature, gives, however, no labels, no introductory phrases, no restrictions, for the entry *werewolf* and the cross reference to the synonym *lycanthrope* is partially circumreferential: “1 a person displaying lycanthropy 2 a werewolf” - *lycanthropy*’s second meaning has the reservations for the case that it were not true: “the changing of a human being into a wolf, that is held to be possible by witchcraft or magic and is often thought to be associated with the occurrence of the full moon”. In my opinion this example shows clearly the use of the passive + *to*-infinitive (of an insinuating verb) construction which is apparent as a double alleviation of the truth value of the creature in question so that the definition does not claim anything untrue. The fact that the information is to be found under the third headword is unfortunate since a dictionary is a rather quickly used reference book and looking for further information under a third headword – be it similar to the second one – is time consuming. The information seeking is hardly made tedious on purpose although the lexicographers may have interpreted the *werewolf* to be an ‘everyday word’ whereas the foreign term *lycanthropy* would need more careful treatment.

A *banshee* is, according to *COD*’s laconic statement “a female spirit whose wailing warns of a death in a house”. *COD* does not alleviate the statement at all, in the definition itself it only gives the region, Ireland and Scotland, where *banshees* wail. *Longman* and *Penguin* define the *banshee* as a ‘spirit in Gaelic folklore’ so the concept of a wailing spirit is clearly regional. *COBUILD* introduces the *banshee* as a ‘spirit in Irish folklore’ without any other means of mildening the concept. *OALD* labels the *banshee* as ‘especially Irish’ and phrases “is thought by some to warn of

death” so there are indefinite *some* who *think* there is a warning in this female spirit’s cry but they do not doubt the existence of the *banshee*. It is only if the reader checks the meaning of a spirit when the “supernatural being” is mentioned but *OALD* describes a *spirit 2* as “a soul without a body” and examples the “magical creature” *spirit 3* with a *fairy* and an *elf*. There seems to be some inconsistency.

A *vampire* is a typical creature of popular culture these days but only *COBUILD* mentions legends and horror stories. According to *Longman, Penguin, COD*, and *OALD* a *vampire 1* is a dead person or the body of one. *COBUILD* implies the ‘dead’ part too. All the definitions of a *vampire* share the same feature: a vampire is *supposed* or *believed to* come from the grave and suck the blood of sleeping people. The passive voice alleviates the truth value of a statement of a reanimated corpse. *OALD* is even more careful and expresses the potential existence of vampires with the formula “is believed by some” just as *COBUILD* is double careful with legends and a passive voice “are said to come out of graves at night” which may be due to the dictionaries’ status as learner’s books and learners often are young. Of course, besides the supernatural meaning one must not forget the *vampire*’s everyday meaning as an ‘exploiter’ which most of the dictionaries mention.

A *ghoul* is an evil spirit. According to *COD* and *Longman*, *ghouls* appear in Arabic folklore, whereas *OALD* uses the label “in stories”. *COBUILD* mentions nothing more specific than ‘imaginary evil spirit’. *COD*, however, says that *ghouls(3)* pray on travellers in Arabic folklore, the rest of the dictionaries know that the (legendary Arabic) *ghouls* rob graves and feed on dead bodies. *COBUILD* formulates the extension of the definition *ghoul 1* as follows: “Ghouls are said to steal bodies from graves and eat them.” The alleviating passive voice strikes again. Both *COD* and *Penguin* give a *ghoul* a second meaning describing *ghoul 2* simply as

“an evil spirit or a ghost” (*Penguin*). This second meaning could be an overlap between the Oriental legends and “a person who enjoys the macabre” (*Longman*).

A *zombie* is “a will-less and speechless human in the W[est] Indies who is capable of automatic movement only and who is held, esp in Haitian voodooism, to have died and been reanimated” (*Longman, zombie 1*). Besides *Longman* also *Penguin* mentions West Indies and Haitian voodooism in the definition. *OALD*’s label “in certain African and Caribbean religions” expands the region to another continent whereas *COBUILD*’s introductory phrase “in horror stories and some religions” adds popular culture to the cultural background which expands from horror movies to Donald Duck stories. Surprisingly *COD* does not refine the laconic definition “a corpse said to be revived by witchcraft” relying only the passive voice. The alienating passive is used in all the definitions of a *zombie* but *Longman* and *Penguin*’s definitions would suggest that there are humans in the West Indies “capable of automatic movement only” what they are *held* to be is then speculation. A *zombie* seems to have found its place in informal language (just like the *vampire*) as an ‘apathetic person’ or, according to *Penguin*, someone “resembling the walking dead”.

Perhaps the macabre humanoids are described through some kind of taboo of fear or death because the passive voice is so frequent in the definitions. The dictionary makers do not seem to dare to use a bolder approach and bluntly use an active statement without an additional clause in the definitions that restrict the headword.

### 4.3.2.3 Humanoid beings

All the dictionaries studied are unanimous that *trolls* are creatures of a myth. The myth is either Scandinavian (*COD*, *COBUILD*, *OALD*), Germanic (*Longman*), or both (*Penguin*). A *troll* can be a giant or a dwarf, and *trolls* often live in caves – these characteristics are described in *COD*, *Longman* and *Penguin*; *OALD* adds the character: small trolls are “friendly and full of tricks” and the big ones are “evil”. In addition, *Penguin*, *OALD*, and *COBUILD* describe trolls as ugly. *COBUILD*'s *trolls*, however, differ from the others “They live in caves or mountains and steal children”. This variety is also a threat to naughty children comparable to a *bogeyman*, perhaps?

A *dwarf* is a small imaginary humanoid being. *COD* defines only “a small mythological being” without mentioning the shape, whereas the other dictionaries agree on a small “manlike” being, who, according to *Longman* and *Penguin*, is ugly too. *OALD*, *COD*, and *COBUILD* provide dwarfs with magical powers, *Penguin* either with magical powers or with skills of a craftsman; *Longman* with craftsmanship. *COD* calls a *dwarf* as “mythological”, *Longman* “legendary” and connects *dwarfs* with Norse and Germanic mythology. *Penguin*'s introductory phrase “in mythology and folklore” continues this line of thought but *COBUILD*'s “in children's stories” takes us to the nursery where *OALD*'s label “in fairy stories” is.

A *gnome* is a dwarf or a dwarfish creature, “similar to a small human being” (*OALD*) who guards precious underground things, treasures, or ores (*Longman*), maintain *COD*, *OALD*, *Longman* and *Penguin*. *OALD* gives the *gnome* a label “in stories”, *Longman* and *Penguin* mention ‘folklore’ whereas *COD* only describes a “legendary” being *supposed* to guard treasures. *COBUILD* tells the reader that *gnomes* appear “in children's stories”. *COD* gives the *gnome* a synonym *goblin* which would imply ‘mischievousness’ which the other dictionaries do not mention.

The dwarfish look seems to be enough for *Penguin*, *COD* and *OALD* but *Longman* especially mentions “an ageless and often deformed dwarf” and we remember that *Longman’s dwarfs* are “often ugly” too. *Gnomes* have no special clothing. *COBUILD’s* gnomes must be a different species then since: “In children’s stories, a gnome is an imaginary creature that is like a tiny old man with a beard and a pointed hat. In Britain people sometimes have small statues of gnomes in their garden.”

There are also dwarfish humanoid beings which if not specifically restricted in usage to a certain area or attributes probably are interchangeable to a limit. A proper conclusion would require more samples. An interesting point is, however, that in popular culture *dwarfs* often have beards but not in dictionaries, *gnomes* are beardless too, excepting *COBUILD’s* garden gnomes.

#### 4.3.2.4 Fabulous animals

A *dragon* in general is a big fire-breathing lizard. It has no labels but introductory phrases in the dictionaries. *OALD* describes a *dragon* as “imaginary”, *Penguin*, *Longman*, and *COD* “mythical”. *COBUILD* tells the reader that *dragons* are encountered “in stories and legends”. All the dictionaries are unanimous that in appearance a *dragon* is basically a big lizard with wings and claws that is able to breathe out fire. *Longman* and *Penguin* add a crested head to the portrait.

According to *Longman* and *Penguin*, a *wyvern* is “usu[ally] represented” as a “two-legged winged creature” resembling a dragon. *Penguin* describes *wyvern’s* tail “long” and *COD* “barbed”. *COBUILD* and *OALD* have no entries for the *wyvern*. *COD* labels *wyvern* with ‘heraldry’ whereas *Longman* and *Penguin* introduce it as “a mythical and heraldic animal”. Although a *wyvern* has only one label in *COD* it is a



‘dragon’ for *COD* and therefore ‘a mythical monster’ since the *dragon* is. The concept of *wyvern* is not a usual one in general language and it exists in two different special areas although the appearance of the creature would be the same in both ‘heraldry’ and ‘mythology’. The *wyvern* would, however, seem to be more available in heraldry than in mythology or fantasy.

A *gryphon* or *griffin* is a mythical monster half an eagle half a lion although the proportions vary a bit: *COD*, *OALD*, and *COBUILD* seem to think that gryphon’s head and wings are of an eagle whereas the body is of a lion. *Longman* and *Penguin* state that the breast of the creature is of an eagle too. The definitions describe a *gryphon* as “a fabulous creature” (*COD*), “an imaginary creature in stories” (*OALD*) and “a mythical animal” (*Longman* and *Penguin*). *COBUILD* uses the introductory phrase “in mythology”.

A *phoenix* is a mythical bird, which *Longman*, *COD* and *OALD* place in the “Arabian desert”. Neither *Penguin* nor *COBUILD* mention any special place for the bird. *COD*, *Longman*, and *Penguin* call the phoenix “a mythical bird”, for *COBUILD* it is an “imaginary” one. *OALD* labels the *phoenix* with “in stories”. There is a general consensus that a phoenix lives 500 years, burns itself, and is born again from its ashes. *COD* claims that there is “only one of its kind”. *Longman* and *COBUILD* formulate their information “according to one account” (*Longman*) or “according to ancient myths” (*COBUILD*). Of the mythical animals the *phoenix* is the only one in whose definitions a passive voice is used. *OALD* and *Penguin* note that the bird is *said* or *believed* to live hundreds of years.

Just like the *wyvern*, the *unicorn* is both a mythical and heraldic animal. A unicorn is described as “mythical” (*Longman* and *Penguin*) “fabulous” (*COD*), and “imaginary” animal (*COBUILD* and *OALD*). *OALD* adds the label “in myths”.

*COBUILD* and *OALD* state that it is a horse with a horn on its forehead, *Longman* adds a lion's tail.

The lion's tail, however, would seem to belong to the heraldic animal according to *COD* and *Penguin*, the two dictionaries that mention the heraldic dimension. *COD*'s heraldic representation *Ib* of the *unicorn* tells the reader about a twisted horn, a deer's feet and a goat's beard. *Penguin* does not mention the goat's beard but draws the distinction of the two subspecies on the horn: the *mythical unicorn*'s horn is a straight one and the *heraldic unicorn* has a spiral horn. Therefore the *unicorn* needs subject labels or introductory phrases because the mythical and the heraldic animals seem to be very different in appearance.

The fabulous animals are defined as "mythical creatures" in different introductory phrases. Especially the description of different body parts of these animals seems to be important in dictionaries – maybe because some creatures are hybrids.

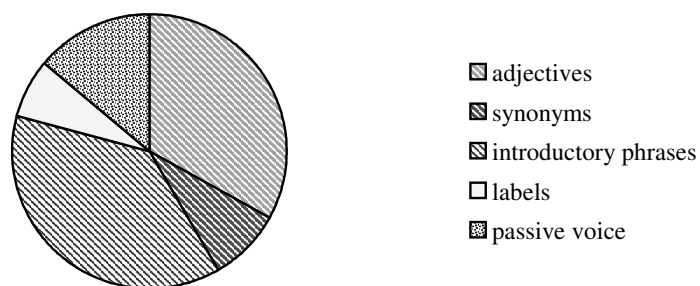
### **4.3.3 The categorisation of imaginary beings**

After studying how some so-called imaginary beings are presented in dictionaries I study further how they are presented with usage labels, introductory phrases or other means expressing their 'imaginary' quality. What is the most common definer of the imaginary beings? Is it true that usage labels really are the mostly used solution to express the supernatural elements of the creatures studied? What are the means of presenting the 'imaginary'?

When looking at the different ways of treating the imaginary beings in dictionaries only ca 7% of the headwords were labelled. The most usual way of describing the concept's belonging to the area of 'imaginary' or 'supernatural' was

different introductory phrases ca 36%. Adjectives were also favoured in 32% of the cases. Passive voice coloured 14% of the definitions, mostly the “morbid humanoids” such as vampires and werewolves. 9% of the definitions sported synonyms, mostly fairies. Then there were some diverse cases of alleviation such as “supposedly”. If we classify adjectives such as *imaginary* or *mythical* to introductory phrases as well as the synonyms, they cover more than three quarters of the definitions. This would imply that introductory phrases are approximately ten times more common than labels what comes to imaginary beings.

**Figure 4** The presentation of the ‘imaginary’ in definitions (proportionary approach)



The use of labels varies from dictionary to dictionary. *COD* uses subject labels only when the definition itself does not clearly point out the field in question. In my sample, I have found only one subject label in *COD*, “heraldry” in *wyvern*, and one “bracketed information indicating restricted subject area(s)” (*COD*, xiv), associating *trolls* with Scandinavian folklore. *Longman* uses italics in its labels and has none in my sample but uses introductory phrases instead. *COBUILD* has only geographical and stylistic labels, otherwise it gives “information about context and usage”, mostly in the form of introductory phrases such as ‘in stories’, which are to

be found in the majority of my sample as well. *Penguin* does not use labels for imaginary beings either. *OALD* gives its labelling in brackets and it is the dictionary that uses status labels in this study.

The use of the passive voice alienates the statement in the definition. It may be just for omitting closer explanations but also distancing the truth value of the definition to a grey area – or “twilight zone” with the concepts. Passive voice and insinuating verbs like “is said” or “believed” underline the uncertainty of the existence of supernatural of creatures. The macabre vocabulary is described with the help of passive voice as if it were inappropriate to use active verb forms<sup>4</sup>.

The definitions often include synonyms as description of a concept. Usually the synonym is accompanied with other types of explanations such as introductory phrases or adjectives. There are, however, few cases where a synonym is the only definition the headword concept is given. In this paper’s sample there are six such cases: Only *COBUILD* defines an *imp*, other dictionaries just call it a small demon or devil. *Longman* and *COD* define *pixie* as an elf or a fairy (so do other dictionaries but they have some further description to add). The synonym definitions as such have no imaginary element if the reader does not know the synonym’s meaning. Perhaps the use of synonyms only in *imps* and *pixies* suggests that they are supposedly familiar characters from nursery tales so that further elaboration is not needed, if not, the reader is to grasp the meaning out of thin air?

Introductory phrases covered more than one third of the cases defining the imaginary aspect in this sample. Typical phrases are “in folklore”, and “in story” or “in stories”. They are perhaps more indefinite than actual usage labels but handy in

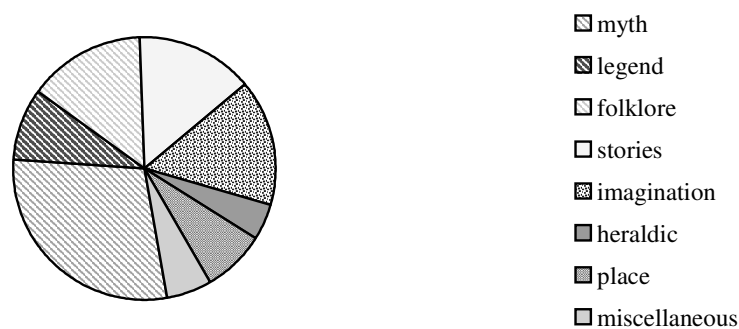
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<sup>4</sup> When it comes to verbs, *COD* is most economical with them and has omitted them whenever possible. *COBUILD*, the learner’s dictionary, carefully presents only complete sentences in the definitions. *Longman* and *OALD* as well as *Penguin* leave finite verb forms out whenever convenient, especially the forms of *be* are scarce.

some cases, for example *COBUILD* attaches the definition of *phoenix* with the phrase “according to one account” and *vampire* appears “in legends and horror stories”.

The topic of the adjectives is heavily on the mythology. The most common adjectives are *mythical* and *imaginary* and the range reaches to *fabulous* and *legendary*. Also *heraldic* animals come up three times. Adjectives appeared in almost one third of the definitions in the form of adjective attributes. Perhaps they are easy and space economic additions to a definition.

**Figure 5** The ratio of different attributes of the imaginary beings



When looking closer how the imaginary beings were defined in Figure 5 we find that the most common attribute is *myth* or *mythology* (29%), with *legend* (9%) and *folklore* (14%) the coverage is more than a half. *Imagination* (16%) has a similar share as *folklore* and *stories* (14%). The different introductory phrases often refer to a certain kind of folklore or mythology. Also in adjectives the most common ones were *mythical* and *imaginary*. Interestingly, some imaginary beings seem to be attached to a certain place since there are a few definitions (8%) where *place* is important, like *zombies* and West Indies. *Heraldic* indications were few (4%) – they go together with *miscellaneous* attributes (6%).

In my similar study of German dictionaries a different sample produced rather different results: I found the most used attributes to be of fairy tales (44%), folklore or superstition (30%), and mythology (20%) the rest being miscellaneous. The English dictionaries don't mention superstition as such, only passing remarks such as "believed" or "supposedly" may be interpreted superstitious beliefs.

## 5 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to survey monolingual dictionaries and how they deal with so-called imaginary beings. The study included five dictionaries and twenty concepts. The working hypothesis was that the imaginary beings are shown to be 'not true' or 'supernatural' with the help of different labels. It was to be expected that some dictionaries would not have entries to all the creatures or the definition of the headword would not contain any "imaginary" elements. The imaginary beings would be described through labelling and definitions.

In today's politically correct world the dictionaries, or their makers, carefully express themselves in such a way that there is the possibility of the supernatural but no certainty about it. They avoid declarative statements when possible and use insinuating verbs and introductory phrases restricting the meaning of the definition (in context), and when these means are not apparent in the definition itself they appear in another definition that defines it further, just like *Longman's* definition of *werewolf* continues under the headword *lycanthropy*, which leaves the dictionary makers on the safe side considering any person possibly offended by the unholy existence of supernatural elements.

Even though the concepts and their meanings vary more or less from dictionary to dictionary, all the five dictionaries studied in this paper give information about the potential existence of imaginary beings, expressed in the form of introductory phrases, passive voice, status labels, or other means within the definition itself, but the most common definer is the introductory phrase which covers more than one third of the cases whereas the labelling is only applied in 7% of the sample.

In the sample the fairies and such spirits are attributed with mischievousness and magical powers but especially with their imaginary quality as is mentioned in the various introductory phrases in their definitions. The definitions of the “children of the night” are marked with the frequent use of the passive voice whereas the other groups of imaginary beings are explained with the help of active voice – we can suppose that these dark creatures are said to be less true. The humanoid beings are presented quite equally belonging to stories or folklore. The appearance of fabulous animals seems to be important, especially the parts that come from different animals.

The attributes given to imaginary beings refer to mythology or folklore in more than a half of the cases. References to stories or imagination crop up more often than in one case of eight. The weight of traditional mythology and storytelling is to be seen in the dictionaries. Superstition, however, is not a common reference in the descriptions of imaginary beings. Perhaps a study of a larger sample would give us more extensive results especially regarding to the proportion of the supernatural and myth.

The result of this study is also that monolingual dictionaries usually present imaginary beings as mythological creatures with the help of introductory phrases and different adjectives.

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