

Dictionary Use and Historical Text Research. A Fourteenth-Century Middle Dutch Play of Winter and Summer as a Test-Case ('een abel spel vanden winter ende vanden somer').

Dirk Kinable

Instituut voor Nederlandse Lexicologie, Matthias de Vrieshof 2, 2311 BZ Leiden. The Netherlands

dirk.kinable@inl.nl

I.

Digitisation has profoundly changed the concept of dictionaries. It goes without saying that this development also makes the context of dictionary use a focal point, as it provides the necessary feedback for reflection on the tools and search options to be developed. In this short paper we will turn our attention to historical dictionaries. As the most comprehensive type of academic dictionaries (Merkin 1983:123), they have their typical categories of users as well. Whereas user needs are often expressed in general terms only, we will probe more deeply into the use to which these dictionaries can be put when a hypothesis in the field of literary history is to be evaluated. More specifically, we will focus on a fourteenth-century, Middle Dutch 'abel spel' ('seemly play') staging Winter and Summer as personifications who vie for superiority (ed. Brinkman 1999).

II.

Spies (1990) points out a structural correspondence in the play of Winter and Summer, assuming it is modelled on the basic pattern of Latin disputation, as practised at medieval universities in the form of the *quaestio disputata*. The format of the latter consists of the formulation of a question, arguments posited for and against it by disputants acting as respondents and opponens, and the consecutive judgement and refutation by a master. Similarly, the play announces the theme in a prologue, develops the discussion part between the protagonists and their helpers, and ends with the final and independent judgment of the goddess Venus. Additionally, she reproves the quarrellers and assigns to each his role, thereby also refuting their arguments though not verbatim (Spies 1990:144).

III.

The following section will describe how an online dictionary system may support some major research strategies to evaluate the hypothesis above. The outlined strategies now still mainly rely on separate search actions but the emerging picture reflects the advanced approach we are gradually moving to in terms of the comprehensive possibilities of a dictionary portal.

In the text referred to the author repeatedly designates the verbal activity in his play as 'parlement' in the obsolete conversational sense of 'discussion, debate'. In the online dictionaries of Middle Dutch, the *Middelnederlands Woordenboek* and the *Vroeg Middelnederlands Woordenboek*, this entry has a preceding etymological section which, as in

most historical dictionaries, remains limited to related forms in cognate languages without any clues to the environment of discourse.

A helpful but only basic facility is provided by the combination of a retrieval box which allows search actions in the present-day spelling, i.e. without prior knowledge of the historical word forms, and a suggestion list, which puts the user on the track of relevant headwords like *disputacie*, *disputering*, *disputatioen* and the verb *disputeren*. However, one has to know at least the stem of the search term in advance and the results remain fragmented according to the attempted searches. Imposing a lexical network would present far more exhaustive results. In this respect, indeed, a complementary horizontal extension of the introductory lexical information is conceivable not only with hypernyms, synonyms and hyponyms, but, also with so-called related terms as in thesauri, and, more advanced, with concepts on the level of word senses. Furthermore, through the etymological part of search results such as *disputacie* and the verb *disputeren*, the network can be easily extended in a way that leads directly to the heart of our subject, viz. the Latin words *disputatio* and *disputare*. The transition to a fully-fledged online system should therefore not only supply networks of entries of individual dictionaries, but also interconnect historical dictionaries across different languages. A forte of dictionaries is indeed their ability to offer a lexical frame of reference providing insight into the domains comprising a culture and for the Middle Ages as well as for the Renaissance this included the world of Latin literacy. For the sake of brevity, we will focus here on three relevant word senses of the verb *disputare* against which to test the verbal activity of the characters in our play.

Considering the length and detailedness of the article, a display system which at first only shows the structure of the article with the definitional parts, as is provided in the aforementioned Middle Dutch dictionaries, would greatly add to a convenient arrangement. As to the highly polysemous verb the leading and mainly classical and early Christian *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, figuring in the *Dictionary Inventory* of our portal, distinguishes between three meanings where mutual communication prevails:

1. de re ambigua colloqui, colloquio aliquid excutere 'to have a conversation on an uncertain or an unclear matter' (B,2,d)
2. dialectica arte disserere 'to discuss in a dialectical way' (B,2,e)
3. litigare, disceptare 'to argue, to debate' (B,2,f)

Specifications about the periods covered in the network are indispensable. The online *Theaurus Linguae Latinae* provides detailed information on the first page of its website: it covers the classical period up to 600 A.D. Regarding our research case the continuation of these word senses in the medieval period is confirmed by the *Mittellateinisches Wörterbuch*, specifying the 6th century till 1280 as its time range on the website of the Bavarian Academy.

This lexical reference frame enables us to investigate the respective senses in some more detail (Kinable 2008), which could be highly facilitated by online options as described below.

The first word sense refers to communication about a complex matter or knowledge-requiring subject, which can apparently be ordered on a scale. It ranges from mere sequences of questions and answers, often distributed over the roles of a student and master, to dialogues which have developed into full discussions, where divergent opinions and arguments are presented that may cause a change of mind. To obtain such a general overview, one may rely on the material and bibliographic references offered in the example selection of the entries *disputare* and *disputatio*. However, an online version provides its users with much extra support if it links between these headwords to the corresponding word forms in a corpus stemming from digitally accessible text-editions. In this way access far beyond the abbreviated citation forms is created to a much broader, culturally informative sentence context in a most time-saving way.

The second sense leads to the domain of academic discussion based on the principles of dialectics and covers the type of disputational activity our literary hypothesis assumes a relationship with. The implementation of a meta-comment option as suggested by Mederake (2015: 15) would be most valuable here. It would for instance help to detail the information of the dictionary definitions by adding bibliographic references to word studies related to Latin academic disputation (Weijers 2002, Teeuwen 2003) or even preferably provide direct access by linking with their pdf-files. In brief, additional information gathered from these sources reveals a common exploration of an academic subject or a common training based on the rules of logic, and in particular syllogistic argumentation. Here again a lexical network may put the dictionary user on the track of related terms such as the Latin noun *dialectica*. Informative classical and medieval instances¹ clearly relate dialectics to the subject field of general theses, whereas rhetoric is concerned with questions related to specific 'circumstantiae' and treating of particular persons, places, times, actions or objects. Another definitional distinction is that in dialectical discourse the opponent and assessor coincide, whereas rhetorical discourse needs both an opponent and a separate judging authority.

Finally, the third sense refers to verbal activity where antagonism prevails. The incompatibility of views between the interlocutors has correctly led both the aforementioned Latin dictionaries to discern a separate word sense. It can be specified as 'arguing and replying to demonstrate the correctness of one's own view to the detriment of the position of the opposite party; to engage in a controversy; to debate'. There is some evidence that such a debate could be based on the dialectical principles of argumentation in an intellectual environment, in which case it is less easy to distinguish from the previous word sense but semantically still separate from it. This orientating comment could easily be included in the formerly mentioned meta-comment option. Also a linked corpus would again broaden the perspective by providing instances of *disputare* and *disputatio* which refer to debates following rhetorical principles, as in medieval texts related to school debate.

IV.

¹ Vincentius Bellovacensis (ed. 1624) , Speculum doctrinale, 2, kol.281.

Particularly in multi-disciplinary research cases as the present one, an online dictionary system supporting the previous search strategies, would prove useful. It would bring to the fore the dividing lines in disputational activity as well as the importance of the underlying dialectical, viz. rhetorical ways of reasoning.

Applying this knowledge to the play of Winter and Summer, one finds that its dispute does not correlate with the verbal activity described in the first word sense. Instead of a search for insight into a knowledge-requiring matter our disputants primarily aim at establishing their superiority and only in the verdict by the goddess Venus at the end a didactic stance is taken.

As to the relationship with the concept of the second word sense, the argumentation is rhetorical rather than dialectical. Lines of reasoning based on rules of logic are absent and the question of superiority is discussed in terms of concrete situations and personal interests or *circumstantiae*. Nor are the disputants, being personifications and types, capable of objective evaluation of the mutual argumentation, as is due in dialectical discourse. These inferences based on lexicographic descriptions are also supported by other rhetorical relationships which a literary scholar may draw from his own field of expertise.

In the light of the evidence gathered, the initial literary hypothesis associating the text with the second word sense, is no longer tenable. Also the structural resemblance between the dialectical disputation and our stage play proves too general an analogy, the presence of an independent judging authority being at least as inherent in rhetorical discussion types as in those of a dialectical cast. Our dictionary-based reference frame more specifically shows the rhetorical verbal activity to be of the 'litigare, disceptare'-type.

In the introduction we confined our subject to the context of use of historical dictionaries. The research strategies demonstrated confirm the primary importance of links to other dictionaries, links to a corpus and suggestions for further browsing, all of which are features figuring in the survey of expectations and demands of dictionary users by Müller-Spitzer (2014:149). However, her diagram ranks them as those rated lowest, whereas clarity and reliability get the highest score. Whether this difference derives from the assumption that knowledge-oriented reference works like historical dictionaries meet these requirements a priori, remains to be investigated. It nevertheless justifies further investigation into users of historical dictionaries as a distinctive group.

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