



Lexicographic Study of the Tract *Definitions* by Obayd Zākāni

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Available online at: www.isca.in

Received 10th March 2013, revised 22nd April 2013, accepted 19th May 2013

Abstract

Introducing Obayd Zākāni and the tract of Definitions, the paper attempts to make a lexicographic typology of the work. The tract, being an innovative parody of dictionaries of its time in Islamic world, depicts vices of sociopolitical life of Iran after Mongol invasion at the end of the 13th century. It is studied on the lexicographic base, classifying it as a quasi-dictionary, analyzing its lexicographic features such as headwords, internal structure, synonyms, and definition formulae. The paper terminates with a discussion of the appended sections, identifying the author of The Definitions of Mullā Do Piyāzeh as Mullā Do Piyāzeh of Delhi, a court wit of Akbar (1556-1605) the Mongol emperor of India. The authors of less important appendices are still unknown. While there are many extracts from Zākāni's Definitions throughout the paper showing its significance, excerpts from Mullā Do Piyāzeh's definitions seemed necessary to include.

Keywords: Lexicographic typology, quasi-dictionary, definition, parody, Obayd Zākāni.

Introduction

Definitions is a tract by Obayd Zākāni, perhaps the most remarkable parodist and satirical writer of Persian literature, known as *Amlah al-Sho'arā*, the most witty poet. This satirical work is a quasi-dictionary, depicting vices of socio-political life in Iran after Mongol invasion at the end of 13th century. It is an innovative parodical work, introduced for the first time in Persian as well as in Arabic, Turkish and other languages of Islamic world. Even one of Zākāni's successful followers, Mullā Do Piyāzeh of Delhi, precedes his Western counterparts. After giving a short biography of Obayd Zākāni, the tract of *Definitions* is introduced followed by a lexicographic discussion of its nature and features. The tract has appended sections which are studied here.

The life of Zākāni

Of Obayd Zākāni's life little is known. He was born about 1310 in Zākān, a village near Qazwin. Being one of the notabilities of 14th century, he was a man of talent and learning and a great poet. His education was in Shiraz. After acquiring every art of his day, he returned to Qazwin and was appointed to judgeship. He was of a noble family, but the social situation left him penniless. Many poems and treatises were written by him. Seeing knowledge is not welcomed by kings and courtiers, he resorted to the path of impudence in the hope that he may obtain access to the king's most inanimate society. 'Then he began recklessly to utter the most shameless sayings and the most unseemly and extravagant jests, whereby he obtained innumerable gifts and presents' The following proverbial lines are epitome of his turn from learning and seriousness to ribaldry, in Browne's translation¹. i. Keep clear of learning, Sir, if so you may, ii. Lest you should lose your pittance for the day, iii. Play the buffoon and learn the fiddler's skill: iv. On great

and small you then may work your will! v. He suffered much from penury and debt and died about 772/1371. vi. Zākāni's satirical works considered immoral and anti-religious up to the early 20th century, not worthy to be read, copied and published. Even they were first published in Istanbul along with French translation by M. Ferté in 1885 apparently induced by an Iranian intellectual lived in exile in Turkey, Mirzā Habib Isfahāni.

The Tract of Definitions

The tract of *Ta'rifāt (Definitions)* is one of the prose works of Obayd Zākāni, in ten chapters, hitherto called *Dah Fasl (Ten Chapters/Sections)*. In literature on Zākāni, short descriptions are devoted to it²⁻⁵. There is no exhaustive study carried out on the tract. Halabi, who annotated all Zākāni's satirical works, only briefly discussed *Definitions* in his works. *Definitions* is an innovative tract with no prototype in Persian literature, and as far as I know, it supersedes the European genre. *Tin Trumpet* by Horace Smith (1849) and *The Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914?) are the Western works in this genre.

There have been many imitations of this innovation of Obayd Zākāni in Persian literature realm, none of them equal to it, let alone rival it, including Abu Ishāgh At'ameh, Nizām ul-Din Mahmud Ghāri Yazdi, Ahmad At'ameh, Khizri Estarābādi At'ameh, Hakim Surābādi, Rashid Abbāsi Javāher and Ne'mat Khān Āli. *Encyclopedia of the Fifth Column* by Seyd-Ebrāhim Nabavi, a reformist journalist and writer, is a modern successful imitation of Zākāni: it is of social and political value, like its prototype.

Zākāni in his *Definitions* has mocked the general dictionaries of his time, giving satiric definitions and synonyms of 292 general words and expressions. "Obayd in this tract has employed most daringly his satiric talent with assertiveness and lashed with

words the mean spirit and dastardliness that unfortunately has lasted since his time"⁶. He has criticized customs and wicked behaviors of important classes of the society of his time and expressed presumptuously social situation in the reign of Mongol invaders as well as the period following them. The most bold, stingy criticisms are made against the social norms of the day in the form of satire and sarcasm. In *Definitions*, he casts 'derision, sarcasm and criticism in a graceful manner. The points claimed by Obayd against some social classes, come true even today about those classes, though the titles of some posts may have undergone changes'⁷.

Definitions is made up of an introduction, ten chapters and a short epilogue. In his introduction, Zākāni, after giving thanks and praise to God, poses his aim of writing the tract; he then makes known its audience. The epilogue is not independent; it is even annexed with the conjunction *va* (and) to the last definitions of chapter 10—'rewarded: his [pander's] venture'. He contents himself to 'this short tract was terminated with the word *mashkur* (rewarded). I seek God's forgiveness for what carried out by my pen.' Asking for God's forgiveness and thanks and praise to God in the opening and concluding parts of the tract preclude any taint of his anti-religious attitudes adduced against Zākāni.

The apparent audience of the tract are i. his children ii. his 'beloved ones'. Seemingly by 'the beloved ones', he refers to a special group, unknown to us. Zākāni by writing *Definitions* aims at social moral guidance and refinement hoping the readers can fathom social problems and deplorable situation of the time as well as enjoy the form of satire in the tract. As he says, 'I have authored this short tract and hope the readers enjoy greatly studying this work'⁸. There is no sign of the date of writing *Definitions* in the literature consulted by the present writer. Sani' with no evidence, gives the date 750/1349⁹. The article was published for the first time in the distinguished literary journal *Vahid*; however the literary distinction of the journal cannot logically apply to the contents of all articles published there. Zākāni in the beginning of the tract *Hundred Councils* (*Sad Pand*) mentions the date 750/1349(1346/1967:51), but there is not any evidence for the date of writing *Definitions*⁸.

Definitions is a short tract in ten chapters with 292 headwords, 53 synonyms of headwords, and 260 pieces of semantic information (including definitions and synonyms). It is worth mentioning that placing synonyms at headword positions is a characteristic of *Definitions*, an unprecedented feature of Zākāni's work, not seen in the imitated works after him such as *The Definitions of Mullā Do Piyāzeh*, and works by unknown authors appended to *Definitions* of Zākāni.

Can *Definitions* be called a dictionary or a thesaurus?
Pourjavādi labels *Definitions* as 'a purely satirical dictionary' and Dabir-Siyāghi (1368/1989:479-81) as a quasi-dictionary. Based on the nature of the tract, *Definitions* is here studied on a lexicographic base¹⁰. In order to examine *Definitions* on the

lexicographic base, it is first necessary to give a definition of dictionary, measure it against this definition and determine whether it can be called a dictionary. 'A dictionary is a [reference] book containing a selection of words of a language usually arranged alphabetically, with information on their meaning, pronunciation, spelling, etc, in the same language or in another one'¹¹. He does not refer to the semantic arrangement, while in a thesaurus words are grouped 'within semantic domain'¹². Zākāni in this tract gives the definitions or synonyms of Persian words; it is therefore a dictionary. On the other hand, the information given for headwords is neither linguistic nor encyclopedic; nevertheless 'the content is in satire, derision and sarcasm and it takes the form of criticism wherein the definition of words are in humor and jest'¹³ and 'Obayd pitilessly lashes with his criticism all social classes'¹⁴. *Definitions* cannot therefore be called a dictionary proper. While information in a dictionary is presented in two ways: on alphabetical and on thematic basis, for example in pictorial dictionaries; in thesauruses it is ordered on the basis of semantic relations. In *Definitions*, the information is arranged in ten chapters, each devoting to a subject or a group of people. Furthermore, the tract has not an alphabetical order. Regarding its semantic order, *Definitions* could not have been arranged alphabetically. It should be noted that there is somewhat an internal semantic subdivisions in the chapters. In the first chapter (On the world and what is therein), for instance, the entries on knowledge and men of science are grouped with no alphabetical order and have been illustrated in table 1.

Table-1
Entries on knowledge and men of science

| | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| al-nāmōrād, the frustrated | the seekers of knowledge |
| al-modarres, professor, teacher | Their [knowledge seekers'] chief |
| al-mo'id, lecturer | the remorseful/wistful |
| al-mafluk, the miserable | [the true] jurisprudent |
| zarf al-hermān, the vessel of frustration | his inkwell |
| al-maksur, broken | his pen |
| al-marhun, mortgaged | his books |
| al-mobattar, tattered and torn | his appearance |
| al-cherken, filthy | his filing box |
| omm al-nowm, somnolen | this study |
| dār al-ta'til, the House of Recess | school |
| al-kharāb va al-bā'er, dejected and infertile | his [men of science's] life |

This subdivision helps readers 'getting straight the related definitions and picturing clearly each class and guild in his mind'¹⁰. A thesaurus may have internal alphabetic order, that is, minor and subsidiary concepts can be arranged alphabetically. There is no alphabetical order of any sort in *Definitions*. Pourjavādi calls *Definitions* a dictionary, while Dabir-Siyāghi designates it a quasi-dictionary¹⁵. Antidictionary and

contradictory are its related terms. The concept of 'contrast' in suffixes anti- and contra- averts the present writer from using these two terms. The present writer tends to label it a quasi-dictionary, merging with a thesaurus¹⁶.

Lexicographic features of Definitions

Dictionaries present different pieces of information such as parts of speech, spelling variants, pronunciation, etymology, etc. Only semantic information in the form of definitions and synonyms are given in *Definitions*. A definition is an explanation of the meaning and use of the word being defined (*definiendum*). In classical formula, definitions are analyzed into a *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*. The formula, called analytical/logical definitions, has been used in Persian lexicography. Lexical items with the same interchangeable meanings are called synonyms. Zākāni gives the definitions as well as synonyms of his headwords¹⁷. (Persian classic dictionaries were synonym-based.) He could not give only synonyms, for he aimed at presenting 'new definitions' of conventionalized words and concepts. Synonyms fall short in expressing what he desired; so in some cases there was no choice but defining. These synonyms and definitions have been shown in table 2.

Table-2

Synonyms and Definitions based on lexicographic features

| Synonyms | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| ghoul (monster) | procurer |
| the atrocious | caretaker |
| termagant/hellcat | mother-in-law(wife's mother) |
| enemies in home | children |
| the last straw/additional problem | mother-in-law (wife's mother) |
| Definitions | |
| bachelor, single | one that laughs in the face of world |
| Zu al-Gharneyn, the two-horned | one that has two wives |
| star-cross | the father who is ensured by having daughters |
| auricular masculine | the husband who obeys attentively his wife |
| misfortunatea | young man that has an old wife |
| love | the occupation of the unemployed |
| swindled | penniless lover |
| ill-starred | One who cannot make both ends meet |

As Halabi well states 'Obayd does not deal with academic definitions of dictionaries or with all-inclusive, comprehensive definitions of logicians, but presents the definitions of words and concepts in a way that they are crystallized in the body and

soul of his and his contemporary knowledgeable men. He consequently employs pungent derision, sarcasm and ridicule. Any one, well-aware of the social situation of that time will readily accept the fact that Zākāni's definitions are more efficient and realistic than formal and pedantic ones². There is a principle in lexicography which says the part of speech of the *difiendum* and *definiens* should be the same. Zākāni has not followed the principle he cannot do this because of what he intended to say or since his work is not a dictionary proper. Some instances for Zākāni's violation of academic definitions of dictionaries have been illustrated in table 3.

Table-3

Zākāni's violation of academic definitions of dictionaries

| | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| miserable and inauspicious | their [the gentry's] attendants |
| unjust | religious endowment trustee |
| lying | astrologer |
| free and relaxed | drunkard |
| crippled | hangover |

Zākāni sometimes gives satiric synonyms or definitions for general words and sometimes furnishes his metaphoric words and expressions as a *difiendum* and then mentions their instances. Zākāni's satiric synonyms and metaphorical words have been shown in table 4.

Table-4

Zākāni's satiric synonyms and metaphorical words

| Satiric synonyms | |
|---|--|
| scholar | one who is unable to earn his living |
| erudite | poverty-stricken |
| closefisted | moneyed |
| amortized | the property of religious endowment |
| judge one | who is jinxed and put under a curse by anyone |
| judge assistant | one who believes in nothing |
| the proxy of judge | one who renders the truth into untruth |
| Metaphorical words | |
| Wolf | [Mongol] corpsman |
| Jackal | the head state-treasurer |
| he whose beard is worthy of to be farted on | the served who no one pays attention to his just words |
| the earthquake of the doomsday | the time when Mongols arrive a place |
| trick | preaching [of the Sheikh's] about world |
| nonsensical | their [gentry's] words |
| Satan | his [Sheikh's] adherents |

The author sometimes regards a definition or synonyms as instances of more than one concept or group of people and places them in headword positions, giving one *definiens* for them. Presenting more different synonyms for a *difiendum* is

common in Persian lexicography; the way Zākāni arranges his information is however new. It should be noted that these items are of two types: (A) synonyms proper, for example *Al-Idrār va al-marsum va al-ma'ishat*, chapter 1, all denoting allowance and pension; (B) groups of word regarded by Zākāni as signifying one concept which have been shown in table 5.

Table-5
Zākāni's way of signifying one concept

| | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| miserliness, avarice, meanness and envy | the dispositions of the gentry |
| repentance and pennilessness | the result of marriage |
| pander and sour-faced | father-in-law(wife's father) |

All chapters of *Definitions*, except the tenth one, have synonyms at the place of headwords. In modern Persian lexicography, imitated from the European, an entry is arranged independently, separated from other entries: headwords are distinguished by bold and/or larger faces, followed by the information given for them. In traditional Persian (and Arabic) lexicography all entries came uninterruptedly without paragraphing. Headwords were rubricated in some manuscripts. The same is true for the manuscripts of *Definitions*. Zākāni has presented his *Definitions* as a parody of his contemporary dictionaries and lexicography; he then deems necessary to add Arabic definite article *al-* to Persian, Arabic, Turkish and Mongol words as an emphasizing device to highlight his parody. The work is still a parody of dictionaries without using Arabic definite article; however, by doing this Zākāni tries to show that his work is a 'real dictionary'. 'Using Arabic *al-* in the beginning of even Persian words is considered a kind of satire. He attempts to represent his witticism as a serious, grim work, depicting his work as a "scholarly" tract in the time when Arabic was still the scientific language in Iran' ¹⁰. However, a few headwords are without Arabic *al-* at the beginning. They are illustrated in table 6.

Table-6
Headwords without Arabic *al*

| | | | |
|-------------------------|------------|---------------------------|---|
| amud fetneh | al- | the pillar of disturbance | their [Mongols'] flag |
| ghowm-e meyshum, | | sinister folk | his [judge's] kinfolk |
| cheshm-e ghāzi, | | judge's eye | a vessel never to be filled |
| kākā, | | old born-slave | old pederast |
| mokh hemār, | al- | ass brain | the meal prepared by women exclusively for their husbands |

It seems that Zākāni was not very careful on how to classify information in each chapter, satisfying himself only with a general classification. For example, *generous: penniless* and *closefisted: moneyed* intervene with entries on scholars and men of science; in the section about judges and justice, he defines

teachers as imbecile and fool. The cases of inconsistency are rare: words and their definitions are limited to specific topics in each chapter. Mixing seriousness with witticism and satire is a feature of Zākāni's works. The tract begins with humorless and serious topics and after five entries, it turns to satire. These entries are the only humorless section of *Definitions* which has been shown in table 7.

Table-7

Zākāni's entries as the only humorless section of *Definitions*

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| the world | the place wherein no creature can enjoy peace |
| the wise man | one who does not concern himself with the world |
| the perfect man | one who is not affected by grief or gladness |
| the liberal man | one who has no designs upon wealth and status |
| the magnanimous | one who is benevolent to people |

Zākāni combines satire and seriousness in *Hundred Councils* too ². He inaugurates with counsels as 'O dear friend, make the most of life', 'Do not defer until tomorrow the pleasure of today'; then he continues with ironical and ribald statement such as 'So far as you are able, refrain speaking the truth', 'Do not believe the words of pious and learned men, lest you go astray and fall into Hell' and 'Despite not ribaldry, nor regard satirists with the eye of scorn' ¹.

Conclusion

Definitions by Obayd Zākāni is a succinct tract worthy of literary, linguistic and social research. As Halabi says, 'Zākāni, apart from being a distinguished poet and satirist, is one of the greatest socio-political thinkers. He is especially perspicacious in psychological, social and political developments of his time, possessing deep insight.' Comparisons of *Definitions* with its imitations as well as European equivalents will shed light on its significance and the innovation of Zākāni. It can further unveil parts of literary, social and political scene of Iran after Mongol invasion.

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