Dictionary Dressings
[author's final draft]

Barbara Brownie

Introduction

Femke De Vries' *Dictionary Dressings* responds to dictionary definitions of garments with a collection of images that adhere to definitions found in the free online Van Dale dictionary, but that defy commonly held understandings of the nature of each garment. With these images, De Vries exposes the value of apparent limitations of Van Dale's definitions. The definitions are shown to be vague, misleading, and to follow a formula that does not allow for acknowledgement of historical, contextual, or stylistic concerns.

For the fashion industry, that is so concerned with the connotations of a garment, constructed in relation to histories and cultures, these definitions seem to deny some of the most fundamental characteristics of fashion. Garments are presented as functional objects, without reference to the characteristics that make them 'fashion'. These definitions could force designers to engage with alternative approaches to a garment, and, while designing, to 'step outside of fashion', or to see beyond the cultural baggage that overloads terms used within the fashion industry (Vries, 2016).

Ultimately, fashion is a form of communication. It involves making 'symbolic statements' to those around us (Miller et al., 1993, p. 143). These Van Dale definitions typically define a garment according to its position on the body ('on the hand', 'around the neck', 'upper body', 'lower body'), identify one significant physical attribute ('knitted', 'small', 'delicate', 'without sleeves'), and, though less typically, reference the time or location at which it is worn ('outdoors', 'indoors', 'night'). Each of these parts of the definition relates to descriptive or functional characteristics. Without reference to cultural connotations, Van Dale's definitions cannot be used to distinguish items of costume from items of fashion.

Van Dale's definition of 'uniform' exemplifies this problem. 'Uniform' is defined by Van Dale simply as 'identical clothing'. Ignoring for a moment that uniform varies with important visual signifiers of rank, this definition is effective at describing the visual characteristics of uniform, and at stressing the importance of any single uniform's place among many others. Where this definition falls short is its failure to acknowledge the significance or purpose of a uniform, as identifying the roles and responsibilities of the wearer. Nor does it acknowledge the vital distinction between the modality of fashion and the fixity of uniform that is so important to scholars of costume and fashion (Barnard, 1996, p. 12).

These online Van Dale definitions are problematized further by limitations of Dutch language, or more specifically, the Dutch homonyms that Van Dale has elected to use. In Dutch, the term 'dragen' may equally mean 'to wear' or 'to carry', and 'van' may mean 'for' or 'of'. As they are so heavily dependent on these homonyms, these definitions invite readers to consider the possibility of garments that are not worn, as convention would dictate, but rather having a variety of other kinds of relationship with the body. Focusing in particular on these homonyms, De Vries' image archive features a variety of interactions between body and garment or object, in which the body is behind or inside the article in question, without it being 'worn' in the conventional sense.

Dictionary definitions

The lexicographer considers a garment as an article of *clothing*, rather than of *fashion*. As clothing, an article may be defined according to its physical characteristics and practical functions. By contrast, the designer has typically chosen to study and produce 'fashion'. Since the emergence of fashion theory as a field of enquiry, theorists have explicitly excluded physical function from discussion, arguing that we should not look at the properties of clothing to find a definition of fashion. For eminent fashion theorist Herbert Blumer (1969, p. 286), fashion is not driven by 'utilitarian or rational considerations'; its 'merit or value' cannot be sought in an 'objective test'. Whether a garment can be classified as fixed costume or modish fashion is not dependent on its physical characteristics, but on its social use. Therefore, fashion is a social issue that lies beyond the practical features of garments.

When a student of design chooses to study 'fashion', as opposed to 'clothes', or to classify him- or herself as a 'fashion designer' as opposed to a 'dressmaker' or perhaps, 'garment maker', (s)he has, from the offset, made the decision to be principally concerned with matters of style, and the location of garments within a 'fashion system' (Barthes, 1985). The fashion designers concerns, therefore, diverge from those of the lexicographer, each understanding and defining a garment according to a different system. Vries (2015) has written previously about the extent to which the fashion industry is so heavily dependent on ornament, in its many forms, both visual and metaphorical. She describes as 'value-ornament' the practices of the fashion industry that make a garment desirable (p. 6). These practices, which include branding and promotional activities, prompt conspicuous consumption by enhancing a garment's value as cultural capital (p. 29). Fashion design concerns itself with these practices that build upon the practical purpose of a garment, the extent that basic function is commonly taken for granted. It is therefore ornamentation, not technical production, that is the role of the fashion designer (p. 11).

Ornament, and value-adding industry practices, assure the consumer that every garment is unique. The brand, marketing activities, visual ornament and other stylistic features, mark the garment apart from those that were produced during previous seasons, or by other designers. One of the most important things to acknowledge about dictionary definitions of this kind is that they do not intend to describe a specific, unique object. Words, other than proper nouns, do not 'simply mirror objects in an external world' (Chandler, 2007, p. 60). Rather, they represent a type or category of object. Peircian semiotics is helpful in understanding this distinction. In any particular use, a term might refer to a particular object: in Peircian terms, the referent. When asked to identify an item of clothing, one might describe it as a 'blouse' (*'bloes'*) with one particular referent in mind. This referent has a set of physical properties that are unique to one particular blouse. It may be a blue blouse with pearl buttons and an asymmetrical seam. These features are distinct to the particular referent but none of them cause the garment to fall outside of the general category of 'blouse'. The term 'blouse' more broadly describes a class of clothes which contains not only this blouse but also many others, each with different qualities.

Unlike a referent, 'a type has no physical properties'. It has conceptual properties, some of which 'coincide with…the referent's physical properties' (Groupe μ, 1995, p. 31). These conceptual properties are the defining characteristics that lead a certain garment to be classified using a particular term, not the characteristics that define any one particular garment or that set it apart from others in its category. It is

important to read these dictionary definitions, therefore, not as descriptions of objects but of concepts, which may be made concrete in a variety of ways.

The need to define a 'type' rather than a referent may account for why Van Dale's definitions do not mention style. By necessity, these definitions are broad. They must encompass a variety of similarly categorized garments of a variety of styles and colours. The noun that identifies a garment tends not to be grounded in such a narrow historical period as the adjectives that may accompany it. While certain types of garment may connote historicality ('corset', for example), those garment types that are still in common use are rarely described with a noun that is grounded in any particular fashion era or season. Instead, it is the adjectives that set one style apart from another, and that distinguish, for example, the 'hobble skirt' of the 1910s from the 'mini skirt' of the 1960s.

In fashion, this distinction between referent and type is further complicated by the reproduction of virtually identical objects. When a text identifies a garment by a particular designer, that text typically intends to refer not to an individual item, but to a series of similar items produced on the same production line, following the same pattern and cut from the same cloth. Thus, the term 'blouse' might be used not to refer to an individual garment, nor to the broader type that includes all blouses, but to something in between: a particular design of blouse, of which many have been produced.

Dictionary definitions still owe much to Aristotelian logic, adhering to a common formula of genus and difference (Parry and Hacker, 1991, p. 103). They first identify a category to which an article belongs, and then go on to differentiate that article from others in the same category. For example, a garment might first be identified as belonging to the category of 'clothes', and then secondly, differentiated from other items that may also be defined as clothing. Van Dale's definitions adhere closely to the 'genus and difference' method, and as a result can feel formulaic. For example, *'broek'/*'trousers' are defined as a 'piece of clothing to cover lower body and legs', where 'clothing' is the genus, and the artifact is differentiated from other clothing through reference to an area of the body.

This formula is problematic in its flexibility. There are no agreed-upon rules as to how one might identify the genus of an article. One might 'look for the nearest genus that can be expressed simply', but there is always the risk that this genus is too broad to sufficiently exclude similar objects (p. 104). Van Dale's definitions demonstrate this problem, being inconsistent in their identification of genus. Most categorize garments as pieces of 'clothing' (*'broek'/*'trousers'*, 'kous'/*'stocking', *'rok'/*'skirt'). However, some definitions begin with a narrower genus - a sub-category of clothing – and as a result are dependent on definitions of other garments. Readers must first understand one definition before being able to understand another (Masse et al., 2008, p. 1). 'Onderbroek'/'underpants', for example, are defined as 'pants that are worn/carried under another pair of pants', so that the reader is required to understand the definition of 'pants', before (s)he can understand definition of 'underpants'. Other garments are categorized in non-clothing genus, and are therefore associated with non-clothing items. 'Bustehouder'/'bra' is classed not as 'clothing', but as 'support'.

The limitations of these dictionary definitions do not mean that they are unfit for purpose, but that the purpose of the dictionary is not to provide specialist language. The dictionary is intended for a general, not specialist audience. As guides to academic writing tell us, dictionary definitions have no place in specialist discourse, not least because they are presented without context. Specialist discourse in any field, including fashion, is distinguished by its narrow remit, concentrating on very

particular contexts. Specialists and 'scholars use terms in ways that elude dictionary definitions', writes Giltrow et al. (2014) favoring more complex and specialist understandings that are in common use by members of their own disciplinary community. Similarly, when fashion designers communicate to others in their field, including dressmakers, and arguably, consumers, they rightly expect a more specialist vocabulary, resulting from long-term immersion in a specialist environment. Compared to more specialist analyses, a dictionary definition has 'limited authority when compared with definitions that appear within their appropriate context' (Barnes, 2005, p. 73).

The advice to steer clear of dictionary definitions, because they lack specialist understanding, may have deprived designers of an alternative perspective on their work. Interdisciplinary collaborations within art and design have been shown to yield innovation. By uniting 'different modes of discourse, and understanding of what is regarded as significant', interdisciplinary collaboration prompts practitioners to consider new possibilities (Ernshaw at al., 2013, p. 2). For fashion designers, engagement with non-fashion perspectives and definitions can encourage them to 'step outside of fashion' (Vries, 2016).

'Starting from Zero'

The *Dictionary Dressings* projects reveals that dictionary definitions are not redundant in a fashion design environment, where more specialist language is favored. On the contrary, like anything that problematizes received wisdom, inadequate definitions have the potential to drive practice forwards in new, unexpected and interesting directions. Just as constraints inspire innovation (Rosso, 2014, p. 552), limited definitions have the potential to provoke designers to challenge preconceived notions.

The Saphir-Whorf theory of linguistic relativity posits that our understanding of the world is shaped by the language that we use to describe it. Benjamin Lee Whorf wrote in 1956 (p. 214) that 'no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation'. We are given a language with which to describe our world and the artifacts it contains, and must reduce the definition of any object, however unfamiliar, to familiar terms. When tasked with describing any garment, no matter how elaborate or unconventional, we must describe it in terms that already exist in the vocabulary of our audience. Thus, it is likely that our audience's understanding of that garment will be reduced to an approximation of one that is already familiar, even when its design diverges from convention.

For designers, possibilities are constrained by the language of a design brief or client. A client may, for example, request a 'gown'. In doing so, the brief requires that the designer creates a garment that adheres to the commonly agreed-upon definition of 'gown'. Linguistic determinism, argues Andy Dong (2009, p. 80), reduces the 'conceptualization capacity' of designers. If, as theories of linguistic determinism suggest, 'the presence of linguistic categories creates cognitive categories' (Carroll, 2008, p. 401), it is difficult to imagine garments that do not conform to any pre-existing definition. Terms for common garments, such as 'blouse', 'trousers' or 'coat' evoke preconceived ideas about the form and function of each.

Designers have recognised the restrictive conditions created by existing categories of garment, and have addressed in in two ways: first, by introducing new terminology when existing terminology is inadequate; or second, by consciously defying existing

definitions. New terminology has arisen where there is a need to differentiate new kinds of garments from those that already exist. This need arises from a need to make a garment distinct, but equally enables comparisons and similarities to existing garments. Thus, they offer the promise of originality, combined with the reassurance of familiarity. The neologism 'jeggings' – a blend of 'jeans' and 'leggings' – expresses both familiarity and difference. It provides the reassurance of two familiar and much-loved items, combined with the promise of something new and unique.

High fashion designers are less restrained by the need to commercialise their showpieces, and so an opportunity arises to evade common definitions by producing garments for which no term currently exists. Japanese designer and founder of Comme des Garçons, Rei Kawakubo (2008), has made a conscious decision to design without adhering to received definitions of any particular kind of garment. She aims to 'design clothes that have never existed', beginning with no assumptions about the form that each garment will take, and refuses to categorise her works according to form or function. 'I decided to start from zero', she tells *The New York Times*, 'from nothing, to things that have not been done before'. This method enabled Kawakubo to become one of the most innovate fashion designers of the late twentieth century. The New York-based Fashion Institute of Technology museum describes Kawakubo's work as 'indefinable'. This indefinability is praised as innovation, and is largely a consequence of working outside of the confines of pre-existing terms and ideas about the nature of clothes.

As specialists in their field, these designers are not constrained by dictionary definitions, but rather by more common understanding of the nature of any particular kind of garment. As Femke de Vries' *Dictionary Dressings* project demonstrates, dictionary definitions are not the same as the commonly accepted understanding of a garment. Our understanding of fashion terms does not typically originate from dictionary definitions, but rather from everyday observation and experience . Indeed, the sight of a particular kind of garment may be more commonly experienced than the word that is used to define it. We are likely more familiar with the image and concept of a garment than the definition offered by a dictionary. Immersion in a world of clothes-wearing people and popular fashion publications exposes most of us to a wide variety of garments, and the experience of shopping or discussing those garments exposes us to related terminology. It is particularly the case in the age of internet shopping that one must be able to describe a garment in agreed-upon terms. Garments must be catalogued, sorted into recognised categories, and must be associated with familiar keywords or search terms.

An opportunity therefore arises in Van Dale's limited dictionary definitions. Where they are at odds with popular understanding of terminology, designers may use these definitions to provoke reassessment of their preconceived notions about the nature of a garment. Where they are unhelpfully broad, these definitions are also provocative, challenging designers to reconsider their assumptions about a named garment. This, in turn, invites designers to move beyond accepted notions, to discard the definitions that they may take for granted, and to design in new, innovative ways.

Take, for example, Van Dale's definition of *'trui'/*'sweater', a 'knitted piece of clothing for the upper body'. While a commonly understood concept of 'sweater' might assume the presence of sleeves, a neck hole, side seams, solid front and back, these characteristics are not found in Van Dale's definition. This definition therefore permits greater freedom and creativity. Once given permission to free ourselves of the assumption that a sweater must possess certain common characteristics, designers are liberated to produce something different. That is, when asked to design a 'sweater', they may produce anything that conforms to van Dale's definition,

without adhering to common conceptions. For Van Dale, a sweater may have any number of sleeves and holes (if any at all) and seams may be located anywhere. There is freedom to defy expectations.

Conclusion

Dictionary definitions are unadorned with the adjectives that the fashion industry uses to distinguish its output. Dictionary definitions reveal that, while those within the fashion industry look to more specialist texts to understand their field, laymen's or lexicographers' understanding of a garment is not ornamented by connections to culture, history or style. While the language of the fashion industry helps us to understand the relationship between garments, contexts, and style, dictionary definitions free designers from the historical or cultural contexts that are so important in the connotative meaning of any garment.

De Vries' *Dictionary Dressings* illustrates that Van Dale dictionary definitions are limited in their engagement with the culture of fashion, but that this limitation is liberating for designers. De Vries' project has demonstrated that limited dictionary definitions can provoke creative responses. The *Dictionary Dressings* image archive functions as a challenge to common preconceptions about the nature of garments. Freed from common preconceptions, we can imagine new interpretations of garments, and new clothing functions for non-clothing objects.

The Saphir-Whorf hypothesis describes a state in which language affects the way we perceive the world around us, and the artifacts that exist within it. Language and thought influence each other. If language limits or otherwise shapes fashion designer's ideas, then their vocabulary, and the accepted definitions of terminology in their field, will affect the creativity of their output. Challenges to accepted definitions of fashion terms, such as the images presented in *Dictionary Dressings*, can provoke critical engagement with categories of garments, leading to innovation.

References

Barnard, Malcolm (1996), *Fashion as Communication,* London: Routledge.

Barnbrook, Geoffrey (2012), 'A Sense of belonging: Possessiveness in dictionary definitions', *International Journal of Lexography,* vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 2-22.

Barnes, Rob (2005), *Successful Study for Degrees*, 3rd edition, London: Routledge.

Barthes, Roland (1985 [1967]), *The Fashion System,* trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard, London: Jonathan Cape.

Blumer, Herbert (1969) 'Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection', *Sociological Quarterly* 10 (3), pp. 275-291.

Carroll, David W. (2008), *Psychology of Language,* 5th edition, Belmont, CA: Thompson Wadsworth. p. 401.

Chandler, Daniel (2007), *Semiotics: The Basics,* 2nd edition, London: Routledge.

Dong, Andy (2009), *The Language of Design,* London: Springer.

Ernshaw, R. A., Liggett, S. and Heald, K. (2013), 'Interdisciplinary Collaboration Methodologies in Art, Design and Media', paper presented at The Fifth International Conference on Internet Technologies and Applications (ITA 2013), September 10-13, Wrexham, UK. Wrexham, Glyndwr University.

Giltrow, Janet, Gooding, Richard, Burgiyne, Daniel, and Sawatsky, Marlene (2014), *Academic Writing: An Introduction,* 3rd edition, New York: Broadview.

Groupe µ (1995), 'Iconism', in Sebeok, Thomas a., and Umiker-Sebeok, Jean (eds), *Advances In Semiotics: The Semiotic Web, 1992-93*, New York: Walter de Gruter, pp. 21-46.

Kawakubo, Rei (2008) 'ReFusing Fashion: Rei Kawakubo', partial reproduction of interview in *The New York Times*, 1982, http://www.mocadetroit.org/exhibitions/comme.html

Parry, William Thomas, and Hacker, Edward A. (1991), *Aristotelian Logic,* New York: State University of New York Press.

Rosso, Brent D. (2014), 'Creativity and Constraints: Exploring the Role of Constraints in the Creative Processes of Research and Development Teams', *Organization Studies,* vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 551-585.

Masse, A. B., Chicoisne, G., Gargouri, Y., Harnad, S., Picard, O. and Marcotte, O. (2008), 'How Is Meaning Grounded in Dictionary Definitions?' paper presented at *TextGraphs-3 Workshop* at the *22nd International Conference on Computational Linguistics*, Coling, Manchester, 18-22 August.

McKeown, Margaret G. (1991), 'Learning Word Meanings from Definitions: Problems and Potential', in Schwanenflugel, Paula J. (ed.), *The Psychology of Word Meanings*, Hiillsdale, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum, pp. 137-156.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee (1956), *Language, Thought and Reality,* Boston, MA: MIT Press.

Vries, Femke de (2015), *Fashioning Value: Undressing Ornament,* Eindhoven, NL: Onomatopee*.*

Vries, Femke de (2016), personal correspondence with the author.