

Notes on the Lexical Definitions of “Quality”

*Georgeta Rață*¹⁾

*Ioan Petroman*¹⁾

*Cornelia Petroman*¹⁾

1) U.S.A.M.V.B. Timișoara,
România

Abstract: *The common element of the business definitions of “quality” is that the quality of a product / service refers to the perception of the degree to which the product / service meets the customer's expectations. “Quality” has no specific meaning (as is the case with most language dictionary general definitions of the term) unless related to a specific function and/or object. In business, for instance, “quality” is a perceptual (it involves human perception), conditional (it can be applied only if there is strict and consistent adherence to measurable and verifiable standards that satisfy specific customer or user requirements), objective (it measures and verifies aspects of things or phenomena expressed in numbers or quantities) and somewhat subjective (it measures and verifies aspects of things or phenomena that cannot be expressed in numbers or quantities) attribute.*

Keywords: *Quality, Definition, Business*

1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike other fields of knowledge, **quality** in **business** has a pragmatic interpretation as the superiority of something. Thus, manufacturers / producers may need to measure the **conformance quality** (the degree to which the product / service was produced correctly), while consumers may need to focus on the **specification quality** of the product / service.

As expected, the definitions of “quality” supplied by the different (English language) dictionaries vary from the point of view of their degree of subjectivity, but it is in the field of business that this term is perceptual, conditional, objective, and subjective at the same time.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

We have analysed and compared the definitions of “quality” supplied by some

of the most used (English language) dictionaries.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the point of view of their structure, each of these definitions has (as expected) the same *definiendum* (**quality**) and one or more *definiens* (sing. *definiens*) (a word defining a *sense* or *meaning*, or a cluster of words defining one or more *senses* or *meanings*).

Some of these definitions of the term **quality** are **dictionary / lexical definitions** (i.e., meanings of the term **quality** in common usage), some are **precising definitions** (definitions extending the dictionary / lexical definition of the term **quality** for a specific purpose by including additional criteria that narrow down the set of things meeting the definition). To note that the latter are **descriptive** (i.e., they report actual usage within speakers of English and changes

with changing usage of the term).

3.1. ENGLISH LANGUAGE DICTIONARIES

English language dictionaries supply meanings of the term **quality** in both *common usage* and *specific purpose usage*.

Thus, in *common usage*, **quality** has the following meanings:

- "1. a distinguishing characteristic, property, or attribute; 2. the basic character or nature of something; 4. degree or standard of excellence, especially a high standard" [3];

- "1. standard, standing, class, condition, value, rank, grade, merit, classification, calibre; 2. excellence, status, merit, position, value, worth, distinction, virtue, superiority, calibre, eminence, pre-eminence; 3. characteristic, feature, attribute, point, side, mark, property, aspect, streak, trait, facet, quirk, peculiarity, idiosyncrasy; nature, character, constitution, make, sort, kind, worth, description, essence" [4];

- "of good social position" [6];

- "1. an essential or distinctive characteristic, property, or attribute; 2. character or nature, as belonging to or distinguishing a thing; 3. character, with respect to fineness, or grade of excellence; 4. high grade; superiority; excellence; 6. native excellence or superiority; an accomplishment or attainment" [7];

- "1. a. peculiar and essential character **b:** an inherent feature **c:** CAPACITY, ROLE 2. a. degree of excellence **b:** superiority in kind 4. a. a distinguishing attribute" [9];

- "1. a. An inherent or distinguishing characteristic, a property. 2. Essential character; nature. 3. a. Superiority of kind. b. Degree or grade of excellence" [12];

- "1. an essential and distinguishing attribute of something or someone; 2. a degree or grade of excellence or worth; 3. a characteristic property that defines the apparent individual nature of something"

[14].

It is interesting to note that the term **quality** is defined by the following *definiencia*:

- aspect, attribute, character, characteristic, facet, feature, idiosyncrasy, mark, peculiarity, point, property, quirk, side, streak, and trait;

- character, constitution, description, essence, kind, make, nature, sort, and worth;

- calibre, class, classification, condition, degree (of excellence / worth), excellence, grade (of excellence / worth), (high) grade, merit, rank, standard (of excellence / worth), standing, superiority, and value.

In *specific purpose usage*, **quality** has the following meanings:

- "3. a trait or feature of personality; 5. (*formerly*) high social status or the distinction associated with it; 6. (*Music*, other) musical tone colour; timbre; 7. (*Logic*) the characteristic of a proposition that is dependent on whether it is affirmative or negative; 8. (*Phonetics*) the distinctive character of a vowel, determined by the configuration of the mouth, tongue, etc., when it is articulated and distinguished from the pitch and stress with which it is uttered; 9. (*modifier*) having or showing excellence or superiority" [3];

- "5. a personality or character trait; 8. good or high social position; 9. the superiority or distinction associated with high social position; 10. (*Acoustics*) the texture of a tone, dependent on its overtone content, that distinguishes it from others of the same pitch and loudness; 11. (*Phonetics*) the tonal colour, or timbre, that characterizes a particular vowel sound. 12. (*Logic*) the character of a proposition as affirmative or negative; 13. (*Thermodynamics*) the proportion or percentage of vapour in a mixture of liquid and vapour, as wet steam; 14. social status or position; 15. a person of high social position" [7];

- “3. a. social status b. ARISTOCRACY
 4. b *archaic*: an acquired skill: ACCOMPLISHMENT, 5. the character in a logical proposition of being affirmative or negative 6. vividness of hue
 7. a. TIMBRE b. the identifying character of a vowel sound determined chiefly by the resonance of the vocal chambers in uttering it 8. the attribute of an elementary sensation that makes it fundamentally unlike any other sensation” [9];

- “1. b. A personal trait, especially a character trait. 4. a. High social position. b. Those in a high social position. 5. *Music*. Timbre, as determined by harmonics. 6. *Linguistics*. The character of a vowel sound determined by the size and shape of the oral cavity and the amount of resonance with which the sound is produced. 7. *Logic*. The positive or negative character of a proposition” [12];

- “4. (*music*) the distinctive property of a complex sound (a voice or noise or musical sound); 5. high social status” [14].

Here again, it is interesting to note that the term **quality** is defined for *specific purposes*, as follows:

- acoustics [7];
- linguistics (phonetics) [3, 7, 9, 12];
- logic [3, 7, 9, 12];
- music [3, 12, 14];
- philosophy [3];
- psychology [3, 7, 12];
- sociology [3, 6, 7, 9, 12, 14];
- thermodynamics [7].

3.2. SPECIALISED DICTIONARIES

Specialised dictionaries supply only *specific purpose usage* definitions of the term **quality**:

- “measure of conformance of a product or service to certain specifications or standards” [1];

- “1. *General*: Measure of excellence or state of being free from defects, deficiencies, and significant variations. 2. *Manufacturing*: Strict and consistent

adherence to measurable and verifiable standards to achieve uniformity of output that satisfies specific customer or user requirements. 3. *Objective*: Measurable and verifiable aspect of a thing or phenomenon, expressed in numbers or quantities, such as lightness or heaviness, thickness or thinness, softness or hardness. 4. *Subjective*: Attribute, characteristic, or property of a thing or phenomenon that can be observed and interpreted, and may be approximated (quantified) but cannot be measured, such as beauty, feel, flavour, taste” [2];

- “(*in reference to the voice*) the acoustic characteristics of vowels resulting from their overtone structure or the relative intensities of their frequency component” [5];

- “The quality of something can be determined by comparing a set of inherent characteristics with a set of requirements. If those inherent characteristics meet all requirements, high or excellent quality is achieved. If those characteristics do not meet all requirements, a low or poor level of quality is achieved. Quality is, therefore, a question of degree. As a result, the central quality question is: How well does this set of inherent characteristics comply with this set of requirements? In short, the quality of something depends on a set of inherent characteristics and a set of requirements and how well the former complies with the latter. According to this definition, quality is a relative concept. By linking quality to requirements, ISO 9000 argues that the quality of something cannot be established in a vacuum. Quality is always relative to a set of requirements” [8];

- “1. a special, distinctive, or essential character as a. a character, position, or role assumed b. the character of an estate as determined by the manner in which it is to be held or enjoyed 2. degree of excellence” [10];

- “a special or distinguishing attribute

as a. timbre; b. the attribute of an elementary sensation that makes it fundamentally unlike any other sensation c. the character of an X-ray beam that determines its penetrating power and is dependent upon its wavelength distribution” [11];

- “the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs” [13];

- “purity of contents, care in presentation and finish of a product” [15].

To note that the term **quality** is defined by specialised dictionaries belonging to a wide range of fields:

- accounting [1];
- business [2];
- computing [13];
- dentistry [5];
- law [10];
- medicine [11];
- quality management [8];
- veterinary medicine [15].

In this case, the definitions have both a *quantitative* and *qualitative approach*:

- **quantitative approach**:

- “*measure* of conformance of a product or service to certain specifications or standards” [1];
- 2. *Manufacturing*: Strict and consistent adherence to measurable and verifiable standards [...]. 3. *Objective*: Measurable and verifiable aspect of a thing or phenomenon, expressed in numbers or quantities [...]” [2];
- “a special or distinguishing attribute as a. timbre; b. the attribute of an elementary sensation that makes it fundamentally unlike any other sensation c. the character of an X-ray beam that determines its penetrating power and is dependent upon its wavelength distribution” [11];

- “the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs” [13];

- “purity of contents, care in presentation and finish of a product” [15].

- **qualitative approach**:

- “1. *General*. Measure of excellence or state of being free from defects, deficiencies, and significant variations. 4.

Subjective: Attribute, characteristic, or property of a thing or phenomenon that can be observed and interpreted, and may be approximated (quantified) but cannot be measured, such as beauty, feel, flavour, taste” [2];

- “The quality of something can be determined by comparing a set of inherent characteristics with a set of requirements. If those inherent characteristics meet all requirements, high or excellent quality is achieved. If those characteristics do not meet all requirements, a low or poor level of quality is achieved. Quality is, therefore, a question of degree. As a result, the central quality question is: How well does this set of inherent characteristics comply with this set of requirements? In short, the quality of something depends on a set of inherent characteristics and a set of requirements and how well the former complies with the latter.” [8];

- “1. a special, distinctive, or essential character as a. a character, position, or role assumed b. the character of an estate as determined by the manner in which it is to be held or enjoyed 2. degree of excellence” [10].

4. CONCLUSIONS

In **English language dictionaries**, the *definiendum* **quality** has an impressive number of *definiens* (38). It is also notable that these dictionaries retain not only *common usages*, but also *specific purpose usages* (acoustics, linguistics (phonetics), logic, music, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and thermodynamics) of the term **quality**.

Specialised dictionaries (accounting, business, computing, dentistry, law, medicine, quality management, and veterinary medicine) supply only *specific purpose usages* of the term **quality**, but in this case we wanted to see the type of

approach (determined by the type of *definiens*) – *quantitative* or *qualitative*. Surprisingly, though the approach in these specialised dictionaries is rather quantitative than qualitative, the business dictionary defines **quality** (maybe because of its high degree of subjectivity) both quantitatively (from the point of view of the manufacturing of the products and from an objective point of view) and qualitatively (in its general acception and from a subjective point of view). Maybe it is this degree of subjectivity that engendered the large number of definitions of the term **quality** by the numerous gurus of quality.

REFERENCES:

- [1] *Accounting Dictionary*. Online: <http://www.answers.com/topic/quality>
- [2] *BusinessDictionary.com*. Online: <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/quality.html>
- [3] *Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged 6th Edition 2003*. © William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd 1979, 1986 © HarperCollins Publishers 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003. Online: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/quality>
- [4] *Collins Thesaurus of the English Language– Complete and Unabridged 2nd Edition. 2002* © HarperCollins Publishers 1995, 2002. Online: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/quality>
- [5] *Dental Dictionary*. Online: <http://www.answers.com/topic/quality>
- [6] *Dictionary of Collective Nouns and Group Terms*. Copyright 2008 The Gale Group, Inc. All rights reserved. Online: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/quality>
- [7] *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/quality> (accessed: March 13, 2010).
- [8] *ISO 9000 2005. Plain English Quality Management Dictionary*, Online: <http://www.praxiom.com/iso-definition.htm#Quality>
- [9] *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. Retrieved March 13, 2010, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/quality>
- [10] *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law*. Merriam-Webster, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/quality> (accessed: March 13, 2010).
- [11] *Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/quality> (accessed: March 13, 2010).
- [12] *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition copyright ©2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Updated in 2009. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company. Online: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/quality>
- [13] *The Free On-line Dictionary of Computing*. Denis Howe. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/quality> (accessed: March 13, 2010).
- [14] *Thesaurus*, Based on WordNet 3.0, Farlex clipart collection. © 2003-2008 Princeton University, Farlex Inc. Online: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/quality>
- [15] *Veterinary Dictionary*. Online: <http://www.answers.com/topic/quality>

