

Lexicography and Kata

When Samuel Johnson was composing what later became known as “THE dictionary”, he thought he could “fix” (in the sense of “keep unchanged”) the English of his day. Soon thereafter he admitted that it was impetuous to assume that any mere dictionary could stop the growth and variation of the language, which at present count (at least by some estimations) has over half a million words. A few estimations are more conservative (350,000 words), but those that include specialized terms like “myronurastheia” and “encyphalomyolopathy” put the number up to 4 million!

Imagine if we were to make a lexicon of all the known kata, a much less daunting task than Johnson & Co. faced. How would we decide which forms would be admitted and which ignored? Should we count Okinawan weaponry forms, kenjutsu, iaijutsu, and judo kata, or just karate kata? Do Korean Hyungs count, or are their forms not really kata because they are not from Okinawan roots (well, except indirectly), or because their traditions are shorter, having been created in the late twentieth century (rather than the late nineteenth or early twentieth century), or because they do not use the word “kata”? What about Chinese fist-sets? They are not called “kata” but many are much older than the *Pinan/Heian* series, which are generally accepted without question. After all, Uechi’s *Konchin* was created a little after 1960 and is now universally considered a part of a “traditional” style. What makes a style’s kata traditional, anyway? Should we include the kata of relatively newly minted styles like Shorinji-ryu karate like *Sankaku-tobi* and *Happiken*, or kata that Mas Oyama developed for Kyokushinkai like *Garyu*? And what about Indonesian djuru? Or Filipino Kali patterns?

And which versions of plainly acceptable kata would we include? There are eleven “traditional” versions of Bassai. How would we determine which variations of which versions are “legitimate”? I have visited several dojo in which the name of the kata and perhaps two or three sequences from the kata were recognizable but everything else seemed either fanciful or misunderstood in transmission. Is your dojo’s variation valid and does it differ enough from my dojo’s variation to warrant a separate entry or even a textual note?

In my book *Cracking the Kata Code*, I was audacious enough to list sixty-eight “traditional” kata with alternative names, but I did not include family-style kata like *Pachu* and *Anan* from Ryuei-ryu or village kata like *Kitamura-no-sempurai*. In my monthly training, I perform about 80 non-weaponed forms. Although he was a supposedly strict Shotokan stylist, Masatoshi Nakayama was reported to have learned 103 forms before his death.

And finally (sure, as if there is a “finally”), should our Lexicon of Kata be descriptive or prescriptive? Modern lexicographers see their task as recording from year to year, decade to decade, and era to era, the way people use the language, but the average person who refers to the dictionary uses it to determine the normative. When you don’t know the “correct” definition or spelling, you refer to your

handy Funk and Wagnall, Merriam-Webster, Random House, American Heritage, Macmillan, Collins, or Oxford English Dictionary (the OED).

And that reminds me, once you have determined a simple listing of kata, wouldn't it be wise to emulate the monumental task taken up by the London Philological Society, and detail the historical root of each kata? After all, with much fewer than 350,000 entries, a kata etymological dictionary should be a piece of cake.

By the way, having taken up the task of an etymological dictionary of the English language in 1879, the editors had reached "ant" by 1884. So much for "fixing" in place a fluid language. Care to try it with, let's say, just the piddily little 103 karate kata on Nakayama's Sensei's personal list?