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Abstract. The study of metalanguage in linguistics has shifted from largely theoretical to more practical questions. In trying to achieve a more precise, universal and objective way of defining the meanings of lexical units, compilers of many dictionaries have started to work out ‘defining vocabularies’. These are characterized by such features as a relatively short and closed list of elements, and the capability of expressing the various shades of meanings of all the lexical units in a language. Systems of ‘defining vocabulary’ actually represent empirically devised metalanguages which possess certain features of the natural languages from which they have been created, but at the same time differ from those natural languages, because they describe an already existing linguistic system. The paper deals with (1) the predictive relevance of formal characteristics, singled out at different linguistic levels, for choosing words for the metalanguage and (2) a comparison of the relationship between the characteristics in a metalanguage and in the natural language from which that metalanguage was derived. The study is based on the verbal systems of the English language and the defining vocabulary in the Macmillan English Dictionary (2002). Correlation analysis (the coefficients of Cole for alternative characteristics and Jaccard) is used in the study.

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