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FROM DESCRIPTION TO PRESCRIPTION AND BACK AGAIN: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MONOLINGUAL ENGLISH DICTIONARY

Abstract: This paper explores the development of monolingual English dictionaries from their earliest origins through to modern corpus-based learners' dictionaries, considering the changes in their approaches and methods and the basic nature of their relationship with the language they document. It has been adapted from Chapter 2 of Barnbrook (1995).

1 The nature of monolingual dictionaries

Modern English monolingual dictionaries, especially learners' dictionaries, describe the meanings of their headwords, often together with other information. This paper examines their development and considers the major changes that have taken place in their functions. The overall aims of lexicographers seem to alter during the process of dictionary development from an attempt to describe certain aspects of English, through overtly prescriptive programmes for maintenance and reform of the language, back to a descriptive account of general use of English. This last approach is seen most clearly within dictionaries produced for learners of English.

Within a monolingual dictionary language is used reflexively, to describe itself, and it is important to understand the main complications arising from this fact. Lyons (1977, vol.1, pp.5–6) describes the standard philosophical distinction between reflexive use of language and other possible uses, which assigns technical meanings to the terms 'use' and 'mention' to indicate respectively non-reflexive and reflexive use. He also describes the main problems that can arise for linguists in following this distinction without a clear understanding of what is implied by it, which arise from the fact that

philosophers have found it difficult to distinguish the terms formally. Despite these reservations, the concept provides a useful basis for examining the development of the conventions of monolingual dictionaries.

Piotrowski (1989, pp.73–74) suggests two other ways of considering the meaning of lexical items: 'entity: concept, notion, prototype, stereotype, or fact of culture' and 'activity: skill, knowledge of how to use a word'. These terms seem to parallel the 'use-mention' distinction, and are also useful in exploring changes in the nature of dictionaries.

Earlier monolingual English dictionaries generally 'mention' the word which is being defined rather than 'using' it, and so give information about its meaning primarily as an 'entity' rather than an 'activity'. Any separate examples of usage that they give actually 'use' the word (in the technical philosophical sense), and so give information about its meaning as an 'activity'. As we will see, this distinction is linked with the conflict between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to lexicography.

2 The Origins of Dictionaries

Béjoint (1994, p.92), considering the earliest origins of dictionaries, suggests that they 'are probably much older than is generally said.' He argues convincingly that all societies with writing systems, and at least some of those without, have produced dictionaries of some kind, though not necessarily all for the same reasons. These do not always convey meanings in the same way as a conventional modern dictionary.

As an example within English culture it may be worth considering the contents of some of the 'listing' nursery rhymes such as 'The House that Jack Built', or 'The Twelve Days of Christmas'. It is at least possible that the relationships between the items on the list constitute devices for acquiring linguistic information. At the very least these songs give catalogues of lexically related groups of words. In the case of 'The House that Jack Built' the song also includes primitive defining strategies, best illustrated in the last verse:

> This is the farmer sowing his corn,
>
> That kept the cock that crowed in the morn,
>
> That waked the priest all shaven and shorn,

That married the man all tattered and torn,

That kissed the maiden all forlorn,

That milked the cow with the crumpled horn,

That tossed the dog,

That worried the cat,

That killed the rat,

That ate the malt

That lay in the house that Jack built.

<div align="center">(Opie & Opie, 1951, pp.229–231)</div>

Every line of the cumulative verses of the rhyme, usually accompanied by appropriate illustrations on its first occurrence in printed editions, sets out some of the typical characteristics of the item introduced in the previous line as an integral part of the narrative. Consider the explanation given in *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (Sinclair, 1987) for sense 1.1 of 'cat':

A **cat** is a small furry animal with a tail, whiskers, and sharp claws that kills smaller animals such as mice and birds.

<div align="center">(*CCELD* p.214)</div>

The line relating to 'cat' in the rhyme:

That killed the rat

has significant echoes in this definition. Each line is almost a form of definition, and the cumulative nature of many of these catalogue rhymes in recitation could make them especially suitable for teaching the lexical, syntactic and even semantic properties of the words in their texts. Opie & Opie (1951) suggest that other similar accumulative rhymes, such as 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' (pp.119–122) and 'The Wide-mouth waddling Frog' (pp.181–183) would be played as forfeit games, with individuals responsible for each verse and paying forfeits for mistakes. The full title of a version of this latter rhyme, quoted by Opie & Opie from *The Top Book of All*, published around 1760, is 'The Play of the Wide-mouth waddling Frog, to amuse the mind, and exercise the Memory', an explicit statement of a pedagogic role concealed in the fun.

Early spelling books use similar techniques to distinguish between words which can easily be confused with each other: they place their subject words in a suitable context to provide the necessary information. The following consecutive groups of words are taken

from R. Browne's *English School Reform'd* (1700, pp.68–69), which is arranged in approximate alphabetical order:

> Pair of Shooes.
> Pare your Nails.
> Pear, a sort of Fruit.
> Peer of a Realm.
>
> Plot not against the King.
> Plod, or Walk.
>
> Pray to God.
> Prey, or Covet.
>
> Queen of England.
> Quean, a Harlot.
>
> Roof of a House.
> Rough, or Course.
> Ruff for the Neck.

A similar technique is used in Cocker (1696) to differentiate between 'Words which bear the like Sound, and Pronunciation, yet are of different Signification and Spelling, and are apt to cause mistakes in Writing' (p.100). The entries under 'L' show the general range of techniques used:

> *Lick* honey if you *like* it.
> *Lock* the door; *Look* for good *Luck*.
> *Lanch* the ship; *Lance* the Wound.
> *Leash* of hounds; *Lease* of a House.
> *Less* than another; *Lest* you suffer for it.
> Learn this *Lesson*, not to *Lessen* or despise any.
> *Listen*, and you may hear ye *Listed* Souldier.
> Look to the *Lamb*, for he is *Lame*.
> *Loud* the Oxe *Lowed*.

Lowr and frown; *Lower* than before; *Lour*, a *French* Palace.

Lot in *Sodom*; *Loth* and unwilling; *Loath* and abhor.

Louse bites, *Loose* and unty; *Lose* nothing.

Lice and Fleas; *Lies* are often reported.

Liturgy, or Common-prayer: *Lethargy* sleeping.

Line for a Jack: A *Loyn* of Veal.

League of Peace: *Leg* of the body.

Lattice of a window: The Maid *Lettice* fetcht some *Lettuce*

(Cocker, 1696, p.103)

In most of the examples from both Browne and Cocker the setting of the words in some form of typical context establishes the method of treatment of them as 'use' rather than 'mention', so that the knowledge being presented relates to the word as 'activity', not only as 'entity'. In some cases given above (e.g. 'Pear', 'Plod', 'Prey', 'Quean' and 'Rough' from Browne, 'Lour' and 'Liturgy' from Cocker) brief definitions or equivalents are given, so that 'use' and 'mention', 'entity' and 'activity' are mixed. One other important element is exhibited by the set of examples from Browne, two of which, 'Plot' and 'Pray', act partly as moral exhortations rather than neutral linguistic statements. The inclusion of this moral element is an explicit feature of many of the later dictionaries, most notably and self-consciously Johnson's.

3 English Dictionaries before Johnson

Histories of monolingual English dictionaries normally begin towards the end of the 16th century, and Cawdrey's *A table alphabeticall*, produced in 1604, is usually cited as the first fully recognisable specimen. This work is dealt with in detail in the next section. Glosses and bilingual dictionaries certainly existed before that date, together with spelling books and language manuals which contain some of the information normally associated with monolingual dictionaries.

As an example, Edmund Coote's *The English Schoole-maister* contains a twenty page vocabulary list in alphabetical order, in which most of the words are given a brief gloss. He describes this as:

a true Table conteining and teaching the true writing and understanding of any hard english word, borrowed from the Greeke, Latine, or French, and how to know the one from the other, with the interpretation thereof by a plaine English word

(Coote, 1596, introductory note 12)

This extract shows its main features:

Garboile **hurly burly**

garner. corne chamber

gem **precious stone**

gentilitie)

generositie) **gentrie**

gentile **a heathen**

generation **offspring**

gender

genealogie g.**generation**

genitor **father**

gesture

gives fetters

ginger

gourd *k* **plant**

(Coote, 1596, p.84)

A detailed key to the conventions adopted is given in his introduction to the table: Roman letters are used for 'words taken from the Latine or other learned languages', italics for those from French, and 'those with the English letter, are meerly English, or from some other vulgar tongue.' The 'English letter' or black letter is shown above as bold type. Further annotations are 'g.' for Greek and 'k' for 'a kind of' (Coote, 1596, pp.73–75)

The alphabetic arrangement of Cawdrey's work is lacking in most of the other earlier works, but the concept of a list of words arranged with their equivalents is established very early. The most important feature of Cawdrey's book is that it is purely a list of words and definitions and specifically monolingual. However, like its ancestors

the glosses, it deals exclusively with the words which are likely to be difficult to understand.

3.1 Hard Word Dictionaries

The title page of the first edition of Cawdrey's book echoes Coote's introductory note:

> A table alphabeticall, conteyning and teaching the true writing and understanding of hard usuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c.
>
> With the interpretation thereof by *plaine English words, gathered for the benefit & helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons.*
>
> Whereby they may the more easilie and better understand many hard English wordes, which they shall heare or read in Scriptures, Sermons, or elswhere, and also be made able to use the same aptly themselves.
>
> *Legere, et non intelligere, neglegere est.*
>
> As good not to read, as not to understand

This is a very explicit description of the purposes and the method of the work. It is interesting to note that it is aimed at a very specific market, the word 'unskilfull' presumably describing their lack of knowledge of classical languages, although in practice it seems likely that its full readership would extend beyond the exclusively female examples given. It is also intended both for interpretation and production. In the traditions of the time, much of its contents were, of course, taken from existing works. Starnes and Noyes (1991, p.13) draw attention to his extensive use of Coote (1596) both for general inspiration and for substantial portions of the word-list, definitions and surrounding text. They also stress the information that he incorporated from elsewhere, especially Thomas' Latin-English Dictionary of 1588. The tradition of near-plagiarism as a means of creating new dictionaries is established at the outset.

The defining method adopted by Cawdrey is stated on the title page as using 'plaine English words'. In the examples given below similar conventions are used to those in the extracts from Coote (1596) given in section 3 above: the black letter printing is shown in bold type, (g) after a word means that it is derived from Greek, § before it means that it is from French, and (k) means 'a kind of'. Cawdrey's spelling has been preserved, but no attempt has been

made to show the use of the long form of s or the special character for a doubled o.

    abdicate, **put away, refuse, or forsake.**

    aggrauate, **make more grieuous, and more heauie:**

    agilitie, **nimblenes, or quicknes.**

    alacritie, **cheerefulnes, liuelines**

    apologie, **defence, or excuse by speech.**

    auburne (k) **colour**

    §barke, **small ship**

    capitall, **deadly, or great, or woorthy of shame, and punishment:**

    celebrate, **holy, make famous, to publish, to commend, to keepe solemnlie**

    circumspect, **heedie, quicke of sight, wise, and dooing matters advisedly.**

    delectation, **delight, or pleasure**

    diminution, **lessening**

    effect, **a thing done, or to bring to passe**

    §enhaunce, **to lift up, or make greater:**

    expert, **skilfull**

    fabricate, **make, fashion**

    foraine, **strange, of another country**

    gargarise, **to wash the mouth, and throate within, by stirring some liquor up and down in the mouth**

    genius, **the angell that waits on man, be it a good or euill angell**

    glee, **mirth, gladnes**

    hononimie, **when diuers things are signified by one word**

    idiot, (g) **unlearned, a foole**

    implacable, **that cannot be pleased or pacified.**

    iudaisme, **worshipping one God without Christ.**

    laborious, **painfull, full of labour**

    magistrate, **governour**

§malecontent, **discontented**

nauigable, **where ships may safely passe, or that may be sailed upon.**

notifie, **to make knowne, or to giue warning of.**

odious, **hatefull, disdainfull**

omit, **let passe, ouerslip.**

palinodie, **a recanting or unsaying of anything**

passeouer, **one of the Jewes feasts, in remembrance of Gods passing ouer them, when he slewe so many of the Egiptians**

persecute, **trouble, afflict, or pursue after.**

pomegarnet, or pomegranet, (k) **fruite**

preposterous, **disorder, froward, topsiteruie, setting the cart before the horse, as we use to say**

racha, **fie, a note of extreame anger signified by the gesture of the person that speaketh it, to him that he speaketh to**

represent, **expresse, beare shew of a thing**

scurrilitie, **saucie, scoffing**

sympathie,(g) **fellowelike feeling.**

transferre, **conceiue ouer**

transparent, **that which may bee seene through**

truculent, **cruell, or terrible in countenance**

veneriall,) **fleshly, or lecherous,**

venerous,) **giuen to lecherie**

§vpbraid, **rise in ones stomach, cast in ones teeth:**

Even in this relatively small sample (50 words) we can see certain characteristics of Cawdrey's defining style. Some words, such as 'barke', 'diminution', 'expert', 'magistrate' and 'malecontent', are given one-word synonyms. Others, such as 'aggrauate' and 'gargarise', are defined by simple phrases which are almost capable of replacing the single word in its normal contexts. Some, notably 'hononimie', 'nauigable' and 'palinodie', have more complex definitions, which would be much more difficult to use as straight substitutes. Some words, such as 'passeouer' and 'iudaisme' are

plainly encyclopaedic entries. Many words, such as 'abdicate', 'capitall', 'celebrate' and 'effect' have several senses, which are given as an unannotated list. In the case of two words in the sample, 'veneriall' and 'venerous', their similarity of meaning is such that they effectively share a dictionary entry.

In considering these examples it must be remembered that this form of definition is still effectively a type of gloss, a list purely of words thought unfamiliar enough to the projected user of the dictionary to warrant inclusion, replaced by the most appropriate 'plaine English' word. No examples of usage are given, no guidance is given on selection of meaning where more than one sense is possible. There is a sense, therefore, in which the description of this dictionary and its immediate successors as 'monolingual English dictionaries' is inappropriate. Their purpose is to gloss words from a particular subset of English lexis, the new words derived from other languages, using words chosen from the mainstream of commonly used English lexis. Cawdrey in his prefatory address 'To the Reader' warns against the possible division of English:

> Therefore, either wee must make a difference of English, & say, some is learned English, & othersome is rude English, or the one is Court talke, the other is Country-speech, or els we must of necessitie banish all affected Rhetorique, and vse altogether one manner of language.

(Cawdrey, 1604, p.2 of 'To the Reader')

The *Table Alphabeticall* is, of course, a tool designed to help promote the unity of the language under these difficult circumstances. It is simply a description of the new lexis, uninfluenced by the considerations of lexical purity which split linguistic commentators around this period. The general approach used by Cawdrey remained the norm until dictionaries begin to deal with the more general vocabulary of English in the early eighteenth century.

The style of definition used by Cawdrey is, however, by no means confined to the 17th century. Many of its features have been preserved in at least the smaller monolingual dictionaries being published now. Using *The Oxford Popular Dictionary*, a typical pocket-sized general purpose dictionary published in 1993, as an example, it is interesting to compare some modern definitions with Cawdrey's. Obviously, this is only possible where the word is dealt

with in both dictionaries, and where both the word and the sense have survived relatively unchanged. From the first few entries in the sample of headwords from Cawdrey we find:

> **abdicate** *v.i.* renounce a throne or right etc. **abdication** *n.*
>
> **aggravate** *v.t.* make worse; (*colloq.*) annoy. **aggravation** *n.*
>
> **agile** *a.* nimble, quick-moving. **agilely** *adv.*, **agility** *n.*
>
> **alacrity** *n* eager readiness.
>
> **apology** *n.* statement of regret for having done wrong or hurt; explanation of one's beliefs; poor specimen.
>
> **celebrate** *v.t./i.* mark or honour with festivities; engage in festivities; officiate at (a religious ceremony). **celebration** *n*
>
> **circumspect** *a.* cautious and watchful, wary. **circumspection** *n.*
>
> **delectation** *n.* enjoyment
>
> **diminution** *n.* decrease

There is certainly a little more syntactic information, but the overall amount of detail given and the concept of what constitutes the definition of meaning is almost identical.

The general dictionary model set up by Cawdrey and his predecessors, and indeed their complete entries, continued to be used well into the 17th century: Bullokar's *The English Expositor* (1616), Cockeram's *The English Dictionarie* (1623), Blount's *Glossographia* (1656), Phillips' *The New World of English Words* (1658) and Coles' *An English Dictionary* (1676) all deal with 'hard' or 'difficult' words. There does seem to be a trend towards greater verbosity in the definitions, perhaps in the pursuit of greater precision or a greater usefulness. Starnes & Noyes (1991, p.23) give a comparison of Cawdrey and Bullokar which shows a general tendency to add words to the definitions, often making them less terse and cryptic in the process. As an example, consider Bullokar's definition of 'aggravate' in comparison to Cawdrey's given above:

> To make any thing in words more grievous, heavier or worse than it is.

The extra elements in this definition restrict the operation of the word to 'anything in words' and add the concept 'to make worse'. This may not in practice be any more accurate, precise or helpful than Cawdrey's original: what is important is that this tendency to give

more information, especially on restrictions of operation of meanings, continues as the hard word dictionary develops. Alongside the increase in size of entries there is also a steady increase in the total numbers of words included, from around 3,000 in Cawdrey to 25,000 in Coles, who also includes dialect words, but no pretence is made to cover the more usual words of the language. Most modern monolingual dictionaries are more comprehensive, and J.K.'s *A New English Dictionary* (1702), which covers about 28,000 words, is one of the first to attempt this development.

3.2 Comprehensive Dictionaries

The title page of *A New English Dictionary* (K[ersey], 1702) explicitly draws attention to the extent of its departure from the hard words tradition:

> A New English Dictionary: Or, a Compleat Collection Of the Most Proper and Significant Words, Commonly used in the Language; With a Short and Clear Exposition of Difficult Words and Terms of Art.
>
> The whole digested into Alphabetical Order; and chiefly designed for the benefit of Young Scholars, Tradesmen, Artificers, and the Female Sex, who would learn to spell truely; being so fitted to every Capacity, that it may be a continual help to all that want an Instructor'

Starnes & Noyes (1991, p.71) refer to the fusion attempted in J.K.'s work between the spelling and grammar books, with their lists of ordinary words, usually without definition, and the dictionary, with its treatment only of hard words. The improvement of spelling is the main declared aim of this dictionary, and even the brief summary on the title page makes clear the difference between the treatment of hard words, which are given a 'Short and Clear Exposition', and the 'Compleat Collection Of the Most Proper and Significant Words, Commonly used in the Language'. The common words in the dictionary are often simply listed, as in a spelling book, although attempts are made to put them in a useful and informative context, as with these examples taken from the first two pages:

> A-board, as *a-board a Ship*
>
> Above, as *above an Hour*
>
> About, as *about Noon*

A-broach, as *a vessel a-broach*

To sit abrood *upon eggs, as a bird does*

To accustom, *himself to a thing*

A-cross, as *arms folded a-cross*

An Adamant-*stone*

Addle, as, *an addle egg*

These entries 'use' the words, dealing with them as 'activities'. They actually look remarkably like ancestors of the Cobuild explanatory style, especially in their use of a different typeface to highlight the headword within surrounding text, and·their insertion of it into something like normal English phrases.

Most of the examples of definitions given in Starnes & Noyes (1991, p. 74) from the revised 1713 edition of J.K.'s *New English Dictionary* are more genuinely definitions, rather than slightly random examples of usage, and the comparison shown there between the earlier and the later edition entries indicates that this is a conscious change of policy. These changes bring them even closer to the Cobuild style:

A *Gad*, a measure of 9 or 10 feet, a small bar of steel.

The *Gaffle* or Steel of a cross-bow.

A *Gag*, a stopple to hinder one from crying out.

A *Gage*, a rod to measure casks with.

To *Gage* or *Gauge*, to measure with a gage.

To *Gaggle*, to cry like a goose.

A *Gallop*, the swiftest pace of a horse.

Only the lack of a connective 'is' or 'means' prevents most of these definitions from reading almost exactly like the simplest forms of Cobuild explanations, for example:

A **gag** is a stopple to hinder one from crying out.

To **gaggle** means to cry like a goose.

Slightly more rearrangement of the definition of 'gaffle' would produce:

The **gaffle** of a cross-bow is its steel.

While this exercise may seem a little contrived, it seems important to point out that the principles used in this very early inclusive dictionary may have more in common with those applied in the

Cobuild range than either approach has with the dictionaries produced during the 18th, 19th and earlier 20th centuries. At this stage of development the lexicographer's aim seems still to be mainly descriptive.

Some hard word dictionaries were still produced in the early 18th century, such as *Cocker's English Dictionary*, largely based on Coles' 1676 work and other earlier dictionaries, but the trend was now generally towards inclusiveness. Bailey's *Dictionarium Britannicum*, 1730, covers about 48,000 words and gives guidance on stress and details of etymology as well as definitions and examples of usage. This is not the first dictionary to include etymology: Blount provides details of either the original word adapted into English, or, where the word has been adopted without modification, of the source language; even Coote's brief table shows language of origin, as described in section 3 above. It forms the sole subject of some earlier dictionaries: the *Etymologicon Linguae Anglicanae* (1671) deals exclusively with the etymology of English words, and purely etymological dictionaries continue to be produced up to the present day (e.g. Onions, 1966). The degree of importance attached to etymology as a source of information about headwords is, however, greatly increased from Bailey's time onwards, and it needs to be considered in some detail.

3.3 The role of etymology in monolingual English dictionaries

Etymology has a complex and sometimes doubtful relationship with the description of meaning in monolingual dictionaries. It has in the past been given great prominence in general purpose monolingual dictionaries, but seems to be given less importance in modern dictionaries that do not concern themselves specifically with historical descriptions. None of the modern learner's dictionaries comments on the etymology of its headwords, presumably because it is not regarded as useful information for learners of the language. Its main danger, of course, is that it can be seen as providing a 'correct' prescriptive meaning, in a way which does not even need to rely on the lexicographer's intuition.

The origin of the word 'etymology' itself reflects this problem: the Greek word 'etumoç' simply means 'true', and in many cases the original meaning of the source of a word has been considered to be the only possible true meaning of that word. Presumably this is because it can be considered as its first meaning, departures from

which are regarded as a form of linguistic decay. The concept of a fixed, 'real' meaning of a word, central to any prescriptive form of lexicography, means that semantic changes are seen as regrettable departures from an authoritative standard. Such an attitude ignores the whole process of language change, and especially the fact that almost all borrowings into English from other languages shift their meanings significantly as they enter the language, and continue to develop steadily thereafter. It also conveniently ignores the difficulty of establishing a definitive and fixed meaning for the actual or supposed roots of the word in the source language. In practice, even the details of semantic development within English are generally agreed to be clouded in obscurity in most cases.

Despite these significant problems, during the 18th and 19th centuries etymology was seriously treated as a major source of absolute meaning, and the idea is not entirely dead even now. Perhaps its apparent certainty and relative ease of determination, both in practice likely to be spurious, are somehow seen as compensating for its lack of any necessary practical connection with the likely range of current usages. This separation from usage moves the defining method firmly towards 'mention' and away from 'use': the etymology of a word is an aspect of its status as an 'entity' rather than an 'activity'. To see how far this influence affected the nature of dictionary definitions, we need to consider the next major stage in the development of the monolingual English dictionary: Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, first published in 1755.

4 Johnson

Lexicographers before Johnson usually make definite claims for the contents of their works once they are published: Johnson is probably the first to state in advance and in detail, in *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (Johnson, 1747), what he thought his dictionary should set out to do, and how he intended to achieve it. The *Plan* is addressed to the Earl of Chesterfield, and is plainly intended to obtain patronage from him. Despite this, Johnson's statement of his aims and projected methodology provides an extremely valuable insight into the attitudes to lexicography of one of its most influential practitioners. Although, as we shall see, he did not succeed in carrying out all of his objectives, his stated

intentions, generally without the detailed descriptions of the problems that he foresaw in achieving them, have probably had more influence on the aims and approach of later monolingual English dictionaries than the actual dictionary that he eventually published.

4.1 The *Plan*

The Plan of A Dictionary of the English Language (Johnson, 1747) states quite explicitly what Johnson wants his dictionary to do, and the reasons for the choices that he intends to make. It covers, in some detail, the principles which he intends to apply to:

> the selection of the word-list
>
> the choice of an appropriate standard spelling
>
> the contents of each dictionary entry; and
>
> the use of illustrative quotations and the basis of their selection.

The value of this to an investigation of the development of monolingual English dictionaries lies in its contribution to our understanding of what lexicographers have thought they were doing when they produced dictionaries.

For a hard word list, which is effectively the same exercise as the provision of a gloss for foreign words, there is little need to consider in detail either the objectives or the method adopted to achieve it. Hard words need to be explained in as much detail as the user needs in simple words, words which the user should already know and understand. For a comprehensive monolingual dictionary the whole purpose of the exercise is much more elusive. Among other questions the lexicographer needs to consider the reasons for including common words, and to devise a method for dealing with them so that their meanings and usage become clearer. The nature of the dictionary's users and the demands that they will make on it are obviously crucial elements in its design, but these factors are by no means straightforward or easy to determine.

Johnson has a definite aim, laid out in the *Plan*. His dictionary is to be the means of fixing the characteristics of a language whose instability caused serious writers embarrassment and reduced its effectiveness as a means of communication. He equates linguistic instability with moral and cultural weakness, and intends to deal with them both by the same process. His dictionary is to be unequivocally prescriptive: even those elements which are not direct comments on

the language, the illustrative quotations, are to be selected for their moral uplift as well as for their appropriateness to the perceived correct usage of a word.

4.2 The *Dictionary*

The Preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language* (Johnson, 1773) shows that, in practice, he did not find the exercise quite so straightforward:

> When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity and affectation.'

(Johnson, 1773, p.xi)

Despite this retraction, the fundamental notion of the dictionary as a prescriptive and authoritative source of the standard spelling, the correct meaning and even the inherent validity of a word as a piece of English vocabulary seems firmly entrenched in this dictionary and many of its successors, including those being published today. Johnson himself goes on to make a case for an attempt at prescription:

> It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure. Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot be ultimately defeated: tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language.'

(Johnson, 1773, p.xii)

If his dictionary cannot be wholly prescriptive, it will at least exercise as much linguistic conservatism as it can to slow the changes that it cannot wholly prevent.

This attitude means that current usages may not coincide with those that lexicographers wish to fix and preserve in their dictionaries. In Johnson's *Dictionary*, the quotations, examples of the

'use' of the words, are chosen to illustrate meanings that he has already selected for the words: they are attestations of authority for that meaning, but do not necessarily form the basis for it. The primary source of meaning is Johnson himself, relying on his own superior grasp of the language and embodying it in the dictionary as part of his 'struggles for our language'.

This equation of the meaning of a word with the lexicographer's own actual or idealised usage exposes a major problem of lexicography. Even the lexicographer who relies on etymology for meaning is using an outside source whose authority, doubtful though its validity might be, has at times been generally agreed. The lexicographer who acts not as discoverer of meaning, but as the source of it, risks more than mere inaccuracy. Inaccurate dictionaries may not directly affect the ways in which native speakers use their mainstream vocabulary, but they are capable of misleading language learners, including even the native speaker in search of the meanings of more obscure words.

4.3 Johnson's definition strategies

The sample of definition texts below, taken from the fourth edition of Johnson's *Dictionary*, shows his main definition strategies. It has been stripped of the other elements of the dictionary text - etymology, illustrative quotations, authorial comment etc.

> FICKLE. 1. Changeable; unconstant; irresolute; wavering; unsteady; mutable; changeful; without steady adherence.
>
> 2. Not fixed; subject to vicissitude.
>
> FICKLENESS. Inconstancy; uncertainty; unsteadiness.
>
> FICKLY. Without certainty or stability.
>
> FICO. An act of contempt done with the fingers, expressing a fig for you.
>
> FICTILE. Moulded into form; manufactured by the potter.
>
> FICTION. 1. The act of feigning or inventing.
>
> 2. The thing feigned or invented.
>
> 3. A falsehood; a lye.
>
> FICTIOUS. Fictitious; imaginary; invented.
>
> FICTITIOUS. 1. Counterfeit; false; not genuine.
>
> 2. Feigned; imaginary.

3. Not real; not true; allegorical; made by prosopopoeia

FICTITIOUSLY. Falsely; counterfeitly.

The list of meanings given for 'fickle' sense 1 is of interest. Although they are all close in meaning to each other, they are not precisely synonyms. The user of the dictionary is being given a range of associated meanings, all recognisably within the same semantic area, with no indication of a method for differentiating between them. This method is widely used in the other definitions in the sample. Its effect is to give a series of roughly substitutable equivalents of the headword, leaving users to disambiguate from their own knowledge of normal contexts. A comparison with some modern dictionaries might be useful.

CCELD (p.529) gives two senses:

1. Someone who is **fickle** keeps changing their mind about what they like or want;

2. If a wind or the weather is **fickle**, it changes often and suddenly.

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Contemporary English* (*OALDCE*, Cowie (1989a)) has only one entry (p.450):

often changing; not constant

which echoes Johnson's list of undifferentiated meanings, although in the usage examples given for the word it includes:

a fickle person, lover etc., i.e. not faithful or loyal

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (*LDOCE*, Summers (1987)) manages to cover both the *CCELD* senses together in one definition (p.377):

likely to change suddenly and without reason, esp. in love or friendship

Hanks (1987, p.120) describes the tendency of Johnson and later lexicographers to construct lists of approximately substitutable terms as the 'multiple-bite' strategy. In terms of Johnson's avowed aims it may be a reasonable thing to do. Johnson is, after all, simply trying to describe the range of meanings over which a word's use is valid. For a modern learner's dictionary such a method seems unhelpful and uninformative, but the legacy of Johnson and his predecessors is obviously very powerful.

5 *The Oxford English Dictionary*

The Oxford English Dictionary is undoubtedly the most monumental of all the monolingual English dictionaries, although it is, in many ways, a mistake to think of it as being in the mainstream of the development process. Originally conceived by the Philological Society as a supplement to update the major existing dictionaries, such as Johnson's *Dictionary* and Richardson's *A New Dictionary of the English Language*, it became apparent very early in its development that a substantial work would be needed which would actually replace these other works. Trench (1857) laid down the basis for construction of such a dictionary, and a massive reading project was set in motion by the Society to collect data for it.

Under the chief editorship of James Murray until his death in 1915, *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, later *The Oxford English Dictionary*, was published between 1879 and 1928. A supplement was needed almost immediately, and was published in 1933. A further four volume supplement was produced by a completely new editorial team between 1957 and 1986, and a reset, reordered and enlarged Second Edition was published in 1989. A completely revised Third Edition is expected early next century.

The scale of the OED is prodigious and overwhelming, but it is still very much a 19th century dictionary. Although it represents a magnificent achievement for its time, it suffers from the inherent impossibility of the task that its compilers set themselves, at least at the time at which the original work was carried out. Given the full involvement of computer technology the problems involved in its production are likely to be far less intractable, though still by no means easy to overcome. The OED sets out to document the development of the entire vocabulary of English from the 12th century onwards, including as many obsolete and non-standard dialect terms as possible. It attempts to show the entire life cycle of each word sense, from its entry into English, including its ultimate discernible etymological origins in older forms of English and other languages, to either the 'present' day (often the mid-nineteenth century) or to the point at which it became obsolete. In addition to the definitions, past and present variants in spelling are shown and, where possible, dated quotations are given for every sense identified. Senses of the same word form are grouped together to give an

indication of the likely route taken by the word during its semantic development.

This is, then, the ultimate descriptive English dictionary. Whether it is strictly monolingual is another matter: English can hardly be regarded as one language from the 12th century to the present day, and the differences are greater than merely dialectal or varietal. Certainly, the *OED*'s special requirements impose on it a structure more complex than any other dictionary with more modest aims could ever need. The sample of definition texts from Johnson's *Dictionary* in section 4.3 above shows the over-formalisation of entries, often with unnecessary repetition of elements that apply to several forms of the same headword, which can beset dictionaries that try to do too much. The *OED* has no choice: the complexity of its entries is forced on it by the function it is trying to perform. Sweet (1899, p.141), in a discussion of the ideal dictionary for language teaching purposes, says of the *OED* that it 'is not, even from a purely scientific and theoretical point of view, a dictionary, but a series of dictionaries digested under one alphabet.'

The complexity of its structure is not entirely a bad thing. Although there are some inconsistencies inevitable in the construction of such a vast work entirely by manual means, this monument to nineteenth century perseverance performed amazingly well during its computerization. The section of the preliminary material to the Second Edition that deals with the History of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Murray et al., 1989, p.liii) describes the approach adopted to convert the dictionary text to a database:

> The structure devised by Sir James Murray and used by him and all his successors for writing Dictionary entries was so regular that it was possible to analyse them as if they were sentences of a language with a definite syntax and grammar.

This regularity allowed the use of an automatic entry parser as part of the conversion process, and the results of that process now allow computer readable versions of the *OED* to be accessed in a wide variety of different ways, providing scope for fairly sophisticated computer analysis[1].

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[1] A brief example of the possibilities can be found in Barnbrook (1996, pp.163–165).

6 Learners' dictionaries

Dictionaries designed to help learners of a language obviously have very different objectives from those designed to act as reference books for native speakers, and their strategies would be expected to reflect these objectives. Despite their more limited scope and simplistic approach to definition, the original hard word dictionaries have significant elements in common with learner's dictionaries. It is also true to say that all of the dictionaries quoted so far, with the exception of the *OED*, regard themselves as having a pedagogic role. O'Kill (1990) points out that even Johnson's *Dictionary*, although 'implicitly addressed to a more sophisticated audience' was published in an abridged form and became 'a popular pedagogic tool for many years' (O'Kill, 1990, p.10). Nuccorini (1993) extends the teaching role to all dictionaries:

> Ogni opera di lessicografia ha un aspetto didactico. Nel consultare un dizionario si cerca prevalentemente qualcosa che non si sa o di cui non si è sicuri, ed è in questo senso, nel rispondere alle domande o alle incertezze di chi li consulta, che i dizionari insegnano sempre qualcosa, anche se questo qualcosa varia da lingua a lingua, da situazione a situazione, da epoca a epoca, e, sopratutto, da dizionario a dizionario.[2]

(Nuccorini, 1993, p.39)

This places every user of a dictionary in the role of a learner. The crucial question for the consideration of a given dictionary as descriptive or prescriptive must then depend on the nature of 'questo qualcosa', 'this something' which the dictionary provides as an answer to the user's questions. In the case of learners' dictionaries, changes in the nature of 'this something' can be traced to the end of the nineteenth century.

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[2] Every lexicographic exercise has a didactic aspect. In consulting a dictionary you most often seek something which you do not know or of which you are not sure, and it is in this sense, in answering the questions or the uncertainties of those who consult them, that dictionaries teach something, even if this something varies from language to language, from situation to situation, from age to age, and, above all, from dictionary to dictionary. (Author's translation)

McArthur (1989, pp.54–55) identifies a change in the approach to language teaching in Europe and the USA around 1880, mainly as a reaction to three perceived negative aspects of existing methods:

a) a dependence on the classical languages

b) a bias towards literary and textual study

c) the use of formal drills and artificial translation exercises

The leaders of this change, including Henry Sweet, Paul Passy, Otto Jespersen, Wilhelm Vietor and Maximilian Berlitz, developed a system of teaching by immersion in the target language which helped create the appropriate conditions for the development of the learners' dictionary as a separate specialised form.

Sweet (1899, pp.140–163) lays down the principles on which dictionaries ought to be constructed if they are to be useful for language learning. He deals with the scope of the dictionary, which 'should be distinctly defined and strictly limited' (p.141), the usefulness of separate pronouncing dictionaries (p.144), the need to avoid the superfluity of the contents of some dictionaries, which 'heap up useless material', usually in the form of obsolete words, rare and spurious coinages and encyclopaedic entries (pp.145–146), the need for conciseness to be taken 'as far as is consistent with clearness and convenience'. In the section dealing with meanings he states: 'The first business of a dictionary is to give the meanings of the words in plain, simple, unambiguous language.' (p.148). He also stresses the need for quotations (p.149) and grammatical information relating to the constructions in which words are used.

Modern learners' dictionaries seem to incorporate at least some of these principles. The principles themselves do not guarantee that dictionaries will approach the language descriptively rather than prescriptively, but their emphasis on details of usage of words establish a framework for dealing with them as 'activities' rather than simply 'entities', of 'using' them rather than simply 'mentioning' them, and this makes it more difficult for the lexicographer to impose characteristics on the language which it does not possess.

The ultimate effect on monolingual English learners' dictionaries of this return to the descriptive approach can be seen in their general reliance on corpora, large computer readable samples of real language use. This method of dictionary compilation, pioneered by Sinclair in the development of *CCELD* (see Sinclair (ed.), 1987), is

now also used by *OALDCE* and *LDOCE*, and while it does not absolutely impose a descriptive approach, it establishes the language itself as the starting-point rather than the linguistic prejudices of the lexicographer.

Summary

This brief exploration of some of the major stages in the development of monolingual English dictionaries has established the shift from description to prescription which took place within the 18th century. As the function of the dictionaries shifted to encompass the entire language, so their aims altered from modest explanations of newly-borrowed lexis to rather grander projects of language maintenance. The *OED*, with its emphasis on the history of lexis, provides the model for the ultimate descriptive dictionary, although one that necessarily lies outside the mainstream of dictionary development. Modern learners' dictionaries, building on the revolution in language teaching methods of the late 19th century and the availability of large computer corpora of the late 20th century, have restored a mainly descriptive approach to English lexicography.

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