

At first glance, you might think dictionaries and their makers would make a dry, scholarly topic. When I got this assignment, I already knew that wasn't true. Still I have been astonished at the steady core of passion for words and language I've found. The tales make clear that core has developed amid all the foibles that go with human endeavor, particularly when right and wrong and values and competition and profit are all tied up together. Originally I thought I'd attempt a sequential history of dictionaries, possibly across several languages. Now that I have absorbed that there exist at least 15,000 dictionaries in English alone, I've narrowed the scope to English and opted for a birds' eye view, hoping to identify and follow some important issues.

Certain decisions arise as any dictionary is developed:

- What is the target audience? Originally this was assumed to be scholars, the only literate persons in that time. As literacy has grown, possible targets have multiplied. Lawyers? Engineers? School children? Criminals? Women came late to this list.
- Which words will be included? Will ordinary words be assumed to be common knowledge, or will they be listed too? Early on, "hard word" dictionaries were usual, and there was a fuss when simple words were first included. There seems to always be a fuss when *the dictionary* changes. We rely on it to be right, after all. Will obsolete words be included? Slang? Obscenity?
- What purpose does this dictionary serve?
 - Is it for preservation of the past? Keeping languages "alive" keeps old, classic documents accessible. We still know Homer because scholars know Attic Greek and continue to provide translations into living languages. Introducing students

to Shakespeare requires more and more explanation and translation as the language continues to evolve.

- Is it for translation? Early “English” dictionaries were for accessing English and another language, first Latin/English, later English/Latin. Many, many bilingual dictionaries preceded the first purely English version.
- Is it for education? What kind? For whom?
- Is it for “fixing” the language, standardizing and maintaining the status quo? Or does it aim to initiate change?
- All these purposes and many more, including profit, have been served by dictionaries.
- Knowing what words we want to include, what will be in the entry for each word? We expect definitions, which can vary hugely in quality and objectivity. We are also used to seeing pronunciation, parts of speech, sources and etymology or derivation, citations and examples of the word in use, synonyms and antonyms -- all elements subject to choice and bias.
- Then, how will all these words be organized? We now assume alphabetical order, but that didn’t arrive until after 1066 and didn’t become established until the 16th and 17th centuries. Some in the beginning years were actually titled *ABeCedariums*. Even once alphabetical, the sorting could be by the initial letter only: A, B, C without division into aa, ab, ac, and alphabetical order was far from perfect. As late as 1604 Robert Cawdrey produced the first purely English dictionary -- (get this title...) -- the *Table Alphabetical of hard usual English words ... the interpretation thereof by plain English words*,

gathered for the benefit and help of Ladies, Gentlewomen or any other unskillful persons. Whereby they may more easily and better understand many hard English words, which they shall heare or read in the Scriptures, Sermons or elsewhere, and also be made able to use the same aptly themselves." - Cawdry warned his "gentle readers" thus: "If thou be desirous rightly and readily to understand and to profit by this Table, and such like, then thou must learn the alphabet, to wit, the order of the letters as they stand, perfectly without booke, and where every letter standeth." His dictionary held about 2500 headwords, very imperfectly alphabetized, targeted to the expanding middle class in general and of course to women, who were not yet formally educated.

Many early efforts were organized by theme: John of Garland's work aimed "to help the young scholar amass a vocabulary of necessary words." Starting with the parts of the human body, he moved on to trades and manufacturers, to the house of a citizen and its furniture, to the author's own wardrobe, to an ecclesiastical library, to the occupations and employments peculiar to women, to a fisherman and a list of fish, to a fowler and wild fowls, and to plants, herbs and fruits. Other dictionaries sorted by parts of speech, nouns from verbs.

One thing to keep in mind about dictionary-making is that it is a process of accretion: each dictionary maker builds on the work of his predecessors to create his own work, and then in turn is absorbed in the dictionaries that follow. Each author starts with one or more existing word lists and adds more. Along the way someone had to be the first to include synonyms or pronunciation or quotations. Given the nature of lexicography -- dictionary making -- it is surprising there have not been more accusations of plagiarism. One review of *The New*

Universal English Dictionary which appeared a few months after Samuel Johnson's did note that it "owes its principal merit largely to Johnson's involuntary contribution." Perhaps makers realized too well the dangers of casting the first stone. They might well boast of their offering more words and more definitions and more information than those who came before them, but they seem to have restrained themselves from commenting on those who followed. Frederic Dolezal in 1986 suggested we look at the long list of English dictionary makers as sequential editors of one ongoing book.

Among the thousands of English dictionaries that have been produced, we'll focus on three that are preeminent:

- Samuel Johnson 1755 in England
- Noah Webster 1828 in the US
- The Oxford English Dictionary first fully published in England in 1928

Johnson and Webster were the last and greatest of the individual dictionary-makers, examples of the lexicographer as personality and would-be cultural legislator. Johnson and Webster spoke from on high as the arbiters of linguistic standards and moral values. Indeed, dictionary-making has often been treated, especially by the makers, as a priestly task of revealing truth as though by ordering the words, they might order the world.

Johnson said in his preface to *The Dictionary of the English Language*: "When I first engaged in this work, I resolved to leave neither words nor things unexamined, and pleased myself with a prospect of the hours which I should revel away in feasts of literature, the obscure recesses of northern learning, which I should enter and ransack, the treasures with which I expected every search ... to reward my labor, and the triumph with which I should

display my acquisitions to mankind ... But these were the dreams of a poet doomed at last to wake a lexicographer ... Our language is yet living, and variable by the caprice of everyone who speaks it ... and parts of it can be no more ascertained in a dictionary than a grove, in the agitation of a storm, can be accurately delineated from its picture in the water.”

Johnson spent nine years with a few assistants before final publication, which was held up to await his Oxford degree for the title page. 40,000 headwords organized *A Dictionary of the English Language: in which the words are deduced from their originals and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers. To which are prefixed a History of the Language and a Grammar. By Samuel Johnson, A.M.*

Johnson, aiming to maintain the social system as well as the language, was accused of bias. Defining British political parties he wrote “Tory: one who adheres to the ancient constitution of the state and the apostolic hierarchy of the Church of England” as opposed to “Whig: a faction.” Where would you guess he belonged? Nonetheless, his work was widely credited for taking English from a set of unimportant dialects spoken by a small group of islanders on the fringe of civilization, to a great world language. Johnson broadened the use of citations and quotations, though he never did hesitate to correct or rewrite the ones that didn’t suit him.

Though Johnson’s 1755 dictionary was not imported here until 1818, Webster was all too aware of Johnson’s work and determined to document the American language. The concept of an American language had grown and developed from the time of the revolution, spurred by distance from the source, the influx of immigrants with their many tongues and the

support of such leaders as John Adams. The same issues that had arisen in England, for and against standardizing or fixing the language, arose here. The lack of American literary resources was strongly felt. Noah Webster is credited with nurturing, developing and documenting the American language.

Born 1758 in Connecticut and raised in a strict, fundamentalist home, Webster attended the local school where the only textbooks were the Psalter, the New Testament and Dilworth's Spelling Book. In 1774 he entered Yale, graduating in 1778 and returning home to a time of deep recession; he turned to teaching and found the available materials woefully inadequate. He produced a book of grammar, readings and spelling: his spelling book became the best-selling nonfiction work in the country, rivaling only the Bible. Sadly, he had sold the rights to what by the mid 1840's sold 30,000,000 copies.

In 1810, Webster announced his new dictionary project's major aims:

- To comprehend all the legitimate words in the English language with perspicuous and discriminating definitions;
- To contract the size of the work within the smallest compass consistent with the comprehensiveness of the design by reducing the price considerably below that of Johnson's work, to render it more accessible to men of small property;
- To exhibit the true orthography and pronunciation of words;
- To deduce words from their primitive roots. This part of the work will be new and will offer results singularly novel and interesting.

He was certainly right about the novel and interesting part. Even his fans knew that Webster's etymology was ludicrous: he believed from his strict reading of the Bible that there had been one language from which all others emerged, that before the dispersion, that is before Noah and the Ark, the whole earth was of one language and one speech. Completing writing for the letters *A* and *B*, Webster himself realized his lack of expertise in understanding derivations and actually suspended other work on his dictionary for 10 years to study. He attempted to lay out the relations of words possessing the same consonants from some twenty languages, apparently attempting to trace contemporary language back to that common beginning. He was determined to force derivations from Biblical sources. He had not heard of Anglo-Saxon, nor did he have any idea of the length of time over which the language had evolved. His *American Dictionary of the English Language* was dedicated to God.

Where Samuel Johnson was seen as a great wit despite being difficult, Noah Webster was variously described as "a charmless loner who criticized almost everything" and "...a severe, correct, humorless, religious, temperate man who was not easily liked, even by other severe, religious, temperate, humorless people."

Nonetheless, by publication Webster had, over 15 years, amassed 70,000 entries, all in his own hand. He described completing the task: "When I arrived at the last word, I was seized with a tremor that made it difficult to proceed. I, however, summoned up strength to finish the work and then, walking about the room, I soon recovered." Predicting in his preface that American English "will be spoken by more people than all the other dialects of the language,

and in 130 years, by more people than any other language on the globe”, Webster expressed his devotion to the American language with remarkable accuracy.

The first dictionary authored by a woman, *The Spelling Dictionary* by Susanna Rowson, appeared in 1807.

A word about publishing during the long period of individual authors: dictionary makers published small editions at a time, sometimes, if popular, many editions in a year. Competition was heavy, leading authors to attempt to distinguish their versions by boastful titles. Most early dictionary makers fit their dictionary work in around other occupations. The amounts that might be gained from an edition could be important in putting food on the table, but could be abused. Gervase Markham published so many editions of *Cheap and Good Husbandry* under a variety of titles that in 1617 the London booksellers forced him to sign an agreement that he would not write any more books on sick horses or cattle.

Between 1500 and 1640 British printers published about 20,000 items in English. Presumably printing increased throughout those years, but the average of 143 items each year is stunning in comparison to today. That number wouldn't do a single day now. These items helped promote the rising middle class, and the rising middle class wanted printed materials and wanted them in their own language.

Meanwhile, in England demand was building for a more modern and thorough dictionary. In 1857 Richard Trench delivered and published two lectures at King's College listing the deficiencies in existing dictionaries and setting out what he considered to be the ideal. This was an ideal many of his listeners would have found radical. “A Dictionary,” he wrote, “is an

inventory of the language It is no task of the maker of it to select the *good* words of a language... he is a historian of it, not a critic.” There was no reason, he maintained, why the goal of comprehensiveness should not be aimed at in an English dictionary—although the task was undoubtedly enormous. He wanted to see every alternative meaning of a word along with a wide range of synonyms, and he wanted literary citations to establish usage, dating and etymology.

In response to the popularity of the lectures and understanding that a new dictionary could no longer be compiled by a single author, the Philological Society formed the Unregistered Words Committee with three members: Trench, Frederick Furnivall and Herbert Coleridge, and resolved in 1858 to complete a new dictionary. In a fit of optimism and with no real understanding of the 70-year task ahead, the society deputized Coleridge and Furnivall to find and hire a suitable printer. Soon broad collection of materials began with an initial 76 volunteers enlisted to read widely. Coleridge died after only four years, but not before ordering a first block of 54 pigeonholes to organize a projected 100,000 quotations, submitted on individual slips of paper. Ultimately, the effort required 2500 pigeonholes.

Two men followed Coleridge: Frederick Furnivall, then James Murray. Furnivall was an eccentric, tempestuous, forceful, energetic man of broad interests and pursuits, a tireless founder of societies for good works, among them the Early English Text Society, the EETS. He actively encouraged others to broaden their interests as well. He encouraged Kenneth Grahame to take up writing on the side: the result was *The Wind in the Willows*, in which the character of the Water Rat represents Furnivall with his passion for boats, the river and proper English. “As

Mole, Badger, Rat and Toad drive the stoats and weasels from Toad Hall, an emotional Toad declares 'We learned 'em', Rat is quick to correct, 'We taught 'em.'"

Historian Edward Freeman responded to an invitation to join the EETS saying "Put Furnivall in an asylum and I will join... at once". Elisabeth Murray, wife to James, spoke of Furnivall: "No one worked harder than Furnivall to get the *New English Dictionary* started, no one did more to cause difficulties. His impetuosity, tactlessness and frequent downright rudeness, time and again imperiled the whole project, and yet it was his persistence which saved it." Furnivall dithered until Macmillan showed interest in publishing a new American dictionary, and Murray was hired as editor of what became the Oxford English Dictionary, the OED, in 1879. Furnivall continued reading and contributing citations – ultimately some 30,000 - until his death.

In 1870 Murray had joined Mill Hill School as master, but by the time the first installment of the OED was published in 1884, he began to realize the ultimate size of the dictionary task and his need to focus on that alone. He would do so until the end of his life, and the final publication would come 13 years after that. Murray was a lifelong scholar, widely interested in education, languages, antiquities and natural science, energetic, a gardener and a bicyclist. Religion permeated Murray's life, providing justification for a life of dedicated work. He had not attended university, but his lifelong fascination with language and dialects fitted him well for the job. Connected through study with phoneticist Melville Bell, he taught the son Alexander Graham the rudiments of electricity: Bell referred to him as "the grandfather of the telephone".

Murray's first task was to collect all the material Furnivall had already dispersed to readers. Considerable research was required: work on the letter *H* was found in Florence, *Pa* turned up in an Irish stable, and packets came in with both a dead rat and a live mouse. Once again, an appeal went out for readers; once again, materials were dispersed to volunteers.

Interestingly, the OED continues today to seek volunteer assistance, especially in finding the earliest printed uses of words. The section of the *Oxford English Dictionary* website titled *Appeals* lists words they are working on, and readers are invited to submit comments. A scan suggests the commenters have read widely.

Having visited Furnivall's home, where every room sank beneath piles of dictionary, Murray had the Scriptorium built in his back yard: it was 30' x15', made of corrugated iron. He sat on a high stool surrounded by assistants and pigeonholes as the dictionary became "the largest single engine of research working anywhere in the world" at that time. It's hard now to imagine the tasks involved in collecting, organizing and making sense of hundreds of thousands of entries without a computer.

Support came from a wide circle of enthusiasts, including Murray's 11 children who earned their pocket money reading, sorting and filing. The young JRR Tolkien joined them along with many others over the years. James Platt Jr. eventually worked full-time for the dictionary: at his early death Murray mourned, "I know no one and cannot hope to find anyone ... to whom I can send any strange alien word and say 'What language can this belong to' with a very sure and well-founded expectation that in a day or two there will come an illuminating answer."

Another able volunteer reader was Dr. W. C. Minor, who contributed tens of thousands of quotations over many years. Some of you may know of Dr. Minor through the book *The*

Professor and the Madman, which documents Dr. Minor's life and friendship with Murray. In brief, Murray repeatedly invited Dr. Minor to visit the Scriptorium as he was making important contributions, but Minor always declined. Finally, Dr. Minor suggested that Murray could visit him. On the appointed day, Murray took a train to Crowthorne Station in Berkshire, where he found a liveried servant and a carriage awaiting him. At last they entered a long drive and arrived at what appeared to be an elegant home. Escorted into an office, Murray advanced to meet Minor, but the official standing there informed him he was the Governor of Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum and Dr. Minor, their longest resident. Minor was allowed two rooms and his books, where he performed his library work. Murray visited several more times and eventually helped Dr. Minor be released to his family and returned to America, though Minor continued to require confinement. He had discovered one of Murray's fliers seeking helpers in an order of books and contacted Murray to begin work. What was a great help to the *OED* may have been life-saving for Minor as well.

Murray broadened the word store, aiming for comprehensiveness: he did not attempt to impose his personal linguistic standards but included more common and some slang words, while still observing middle class taboos of the time. Murray broadened coverage of technical and scientific vocabulary. By 1900 Murray reluctantly accepted the need for assistant editors. Henry Bradley, first of the assistants, eventually succeeded Murray as editor.

The struggle to maintain financial viability throughout the long process was constant. At the beginning, no one guessed the immensity of the task. Murray's compensation was set in total at the beginning, assuming the task would be a matter of a few years, and it was not adjusted until late in the 1890s -- almost 20 years after he began.

When Murray died in 1915, he had received honors and honorary degrees and could rest assured he had fulfilled his earliest desire: to worship his God through the excellence of his work. He had led production of the first historical dictionary, documenting English words from first written use to current usage. He believed “The structure now reared will have to be added to, continued, and extended with time, but it will remain, it is believed, that great body of fact upon which all future work will be built.”

He was about right in his prediction. Of course, new dictionaries continue to be published and updated in many languages, but for English the OED is the gold standard. After the first printed edition in 1928 followed by regular supplements to 1986, the supplements were incorporated in the 80s, and the dictionary became available first in CD-ROM and now by subscription online. It is updated quarterly, reaching over 600,000 words. You can get a free 30-day trial to look at it online, and I’ve tried their word-a-day subscription. The hard part is finding ways to use the words.

From the early *hard word* dictionaries targeted to a limited audience, the word lists used gradually evolved and focused. 18th and 19th century dictionaries reflected more and more words accepted into common language and then into vulgar uses. Early came *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew, in its several Tribes of Gypsies, Beggars, Thieves, Cheats, etc.* by B. E. Gent. The first such American effort was George Washington Matsell’s *Vocabulum* in 1859. Matsell had been New York City Chief of Police and was reputed to be involved in unsavory pursuits. Along the way he created his dictionary saying “Experience has taught me that any man engaged in police business cannot excel without understanding the

rogue's languages." Others including slang claimed to be providing information to allow citizens to protect themselves. The 20th century saw great leaps in slang lexicography as society changed: hard-boiled detective novels, followed by the pulp magazines of the 20s and 30, film, television, gangsta rap produced an ever-expanding and increasingly international slang vocabulary.

A standout among 20th century American slang dictionaries is *The Dictionary of American Underworld Lingo*, edited by Hyman E. Goldin, a prison chaplain, with 2 assistants, Frank O'Leary and Morris Lipsius, both serving lengthy terms, and consultants "Bad Bill", "Bubbles", "Chop-Chop", "Dippo", "Iggy", "Slim", "Stubs" and "the Colonel". Published 1950. Others began to distinguish regionalisms and colloquialisms, differences among cities, the underworld, show business, crime, teenagers.

As our world becomes more complex, specialized vocabularies develop in standard English as well. Medicine, the law, management, auto repair, plumbing, cooking -- all have their own terms and languages, what seem to us jargon if outside our specialties. A personal favorite remains *Maladicta: the international journal of verbal aggression*. Author Reinhold Aman was convicted in 1994 for sending abusive communications to his estranged wife and her lawyers. He claimed he was just using his professional expertise, and he served a year in a California prison.

The role and use of the dictionary has evolved over time: begun for scholars, the dictionary has become ubiquitous. Published in 1753, John Wesley's *Complete English Dictionary* furthered his goal of opening language and knowledge to those who lacked the

privileges of the elite. Over the years since, mass education has been seen as a panacea for inequality, and many newer versions have been successfully marketed to the mass audience. Where the *OED* serves one end of the spectrum with its comprehensiveness, most uses don't call for all that information.

The role of lexicographer has changed as well: dictionaries are now known more by publisher than by compiler. Where Johnson and Webster were personally revered, the work is become the focus. *The Dictionary* has become demystified as most new offerings target the mass or college market. Nonetheless, certain words and changes create controversy. Publication of Webster's Third International Dictionary in 1961 was vilified for including *nonstandard* or *substandard* or even *slang* words, most horribly *ain't*. The Toronto Globe and Mail claimed the dictionary's inclusion of *ain't* "will comfort the ignorant, confer approval upon the mediocre and subtly imply that proper English is the tool only of the snob", ending "in the caves, no doubt, a grunt will do." Raven McDonald later pointed out in the New York Times: "In 1961 there was far more newspaper concern, editorial and otherwise, with the *Merriam Webster Third New International Dictionary* than with American policy toward southeast Asia, and the good grey New York Times objected far more strenuously to the real or imagined defects of the *Third* than it did to Mr. Kennedy's taking what turned out to be irretrievable commitments to South Viet Nam." From the point of view of the makers of the *Third*, their "sin" was the decision to be descriptive of the language as it was, rather than prescriptive of what they thought it ought to be. *Third* editor Gove replied: "For us to attempt to prescribe the language would be like *Life* reporting the news as its editors would prefer it to happen."

English language scholar Tom McArthur summarizes: “These popular dictionaries were the lineal descendants not only of the monastery copyists of the so-called Dark Ages, but also of the printers and reformers who sought in the sixteenth century to give everyman’s conscience into his own keeping. Such publishing houses ... have offered their customers a kind of secular salvation through literacy and an awareness of the power of words and organized information. They were not as radical and incendiary as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but they played a comparable role in the transformation of society. Where Marx and Engels preached historical determinism and the last great revolution, these puritanical capitalists put in every bookstore better works of reference than had been available in the past to princes and prelates -- and at manageable prices. They were to the mind what piped water, cheap soap and good public transport were to the body.”

Chasing the Sun

Dictionary Makers and the Dictionaries They Made

Jonathon Green, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996