

LEXICOGRAPHY — WORKING WITH WORDS

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This monograph on lexicography concerns itself with the vocabulary of the English language, which has, at the present time, a stock of well over a million words. It is the richest language on earth and has become the everyday speech of more than three hundred million people.

There are more dictionaries of the English language than there are dictionaries of any other tongue. Monolingual dictionaries vary from those which, theoretically, list every word that is used in the language, to specialized dictionaries which are concerned with the vocabulary associated with particular disciplines such as a dictionary of architectural terms or one of musical terms. There are dictionaries today which cover almost every branch of human knowledge.

Here we are concerned with comprehensive dictionaries - the dictionaries which, purportedly, record all the words in use at a given time, which define the words and exemplify how each word is used. These would be the ideal dictionaries which, in practice, will never be published. Even the latest edition of a dictionary

will not include *all* the new words in current use. There is no such thing as an 'instant' dictionary. Dictionaries take time to compile or update, and, in the meantime, the vocabulary of the language has grown as a result of new words being created to keep pace with new ideas, new technology, and new fashions. It is a world in a state of constant change, and language changes along with all else.

A dictionary defines a dictionary in several ways, depending on the function it is intended to fulfil. So a dictionary can be a book to which one refers for the meaning of a word, the words being listed in alphabetical order. Giving the meanings of words is the dictionary's main purpose, and finding the word for which one requires the meaning is a straightforward procedure - if one knows how the word is spelled. If the word is printed or written (and has been spelled correctly) it is easy enough to find in a dictionary and the meaning (or more often meanings) is correspondingly easy to elicit. But if it is a spoken word that one wants to know the meaning of, some problems arise. The word may be a homophone - one of two (or more) words, pronounced alike, but differing in meaning or spelling or both, such as *course* and *coarse*, or *read* and *reed*, or *morning* and *mourning*. Single speech sounds can be homophones although represented by different phonograms, such as the fricative consonant [f] which can be written 'ph'. If a person hears another person use the word *phantom*, with which word he is unfamiliar, and wishes to check the word in a dictionary, how does he know that it is spelled 'phantom' and not 'fantom'? The semantic equivalent of spectre or apparition, in Afrikaans, is 'fantom'. Afrikaans spelling is phonetic, unlike English spelling which is etymological - it depends on the source of the words and the changes which have taken place in their form and meaning during their history. Most modern dictionaries give not only the meaning of words but also their origins and development. Take the verb 'listen' as an example. It started out as *hlysnan* in Old English, is related to Old High German *lūstrēn*, and corresponds to Middle High German *lūsenen*. It took several centuries to evolve into its present form. It was used in its modern guise by John Milton (1608-1674), the English poet, in the line "At which I ceas't, and listen'd them a while".

The vocabulary of the old English language was augmented by successive invasions of Scandinavian tribes - the Danes and Vikings - who spoke dialects of the Germanic language of which the early English people (the Angles, Saxons, and, more likely, Frisians rather than Jutes) also spoke variants. The assimilation of new words was facilitated by the relatedness of the dialects.

Long before these Germanic tribes attacked the native Britons - the original Celtic inhabitants - and established themselves in various parts of the country, the Romans had invaded, colonized, and, with the withdrawal of the garrison troops in 383 A.D., finally deserted the island. Julius Caesar started the ball rolling with his unsuccessful invasion in 55 B.C. and, with a larger force, conquered Britain the following year. But he did not remain, and until 43 A.D., when Claudius invaded Britain and defeated the Celtic Queen Boadicea, the country was free from Roman overlordship. It then became part of the Empire.

Despite the three hundred and forty years of Roman occupation and the introduction of Latin as a spoken language, the inroads which Latin made into the native Celtic were not great. Agricola, during his governorship (78-85 A.D.), encouraged the learning of Latin. The people of the towns, both the upper and lower classes, became Romanized in language and in their mode of living. One would have expected a substantial incorporation of Latin words into Celtic and from Celtic into the Germanic dialects spoken by the Saxon invaders, who brought with them a few Latin words as a consequence of the Roman presence near the Saxon homelands on the Continent. Except for place names and a small number of words taken over by the Celts, the Romans left a poor linguistic heritage. The influence of Celtic on Anglo-Saxon was negligible.

The Romans imported into Britain their own Graeco-Roman pantheon, and locals inducted into the legions in Britain and other provinces of the Roman Empire quite happily accepted the Roman State gods and goddesses - Jupiter, Mars, Minerva, Apollo, Hercules, and so on. At the same time they continued to worship their own native deities. Religious beliefs and superstitions in Britain during the Roman occupation are associated with the ve-

neration of four main types of divinities - pre-Roman indigenous Celtic, Roman Celtic imported by the soldiers in the army of occupation, Graeco-Roman, and Eastern cults taken up liberally in Rome and disseminated throughout the Empire. Among the Eastern cults was Christianity, which made little appeal as a faith, the most popular being Mithraism, the worship of the ancient Zoroastrian Sun God of Persia.

Subsequent attempts to Christianize Britain by Irish monks made no conspicuous impact. It was not until Pope Gregory I sent Augustine to Britain in 597 on a ruthless proselytizing mission to make new converts to Christianity and replace the earlier form of the Christian faith, which had hobnobbed so genially with Celtic paganism, that his missionaries made any headway and there was an infusion of words into Old English connected with the church and its monastic functions, such as teaching and pharmaceuticals.

Finally, in the eleventh century, the Norman conquest of England superimposed French on English and led to the assimilation of many French words and borrowings from Latin (and through Latin from Greek) to which French gave the introduction.

As examples of French intrusions into English we can take two words used in the previous paragraph - 'invasion' and 'conquest'. Both come from Old French, the former derived from Late Latin *invasio*, from the past participle of the Latin verb *invadere*, and the latter via Old French from Late Latin *conquestus*, from Latin *conquisitus*, past participle of *conquiro*.

The dictionary's prime function, then, is to indicate what words mean; and to find a word in a dictionary for which one seeks a meaning depends on the searcher's knowledge of English spelling and his awareness of the fact that the spelling is not phonetic - not how the word is pronounced - but based on its derivation.

Lexicography had small beginnings in England and can be dated from roughly the middle of the fifteenth century. Lexicographers do not 'make' words; they make lists of words already in use, arranging the words in some or other order, usually alphabetical, and give an explanation of what each word means. Modern dic-

tionaries go well beyond this and give an abundance of additional information such as pronunciation, etymology, the part of speech to which a word belongs, an indication of the way in which a word is divided into syllables, regular and irregular inflexions to indicate changes in grammatical function such as tense, voice, mood, person, gender, number or case, and so on.

The compilation of word-books started as a means to aid learning. King Alfred The Great (849-899) deplored the decline in learning which was evident in his time, and in 871, on his accession to the throne of Wessex, wrote:

So completely had learning declined in England that there were very few on this side of the Humber who could understand their missals in English or even translate a single letter from Latin into English

When nearing forty years of age he set out to learn Latin so as to make generally available translations of the basic materials of education into English. He formed a team of the best scholars in England and on the Continent, and together they set about compiling, translating, editing and composing the basic texts. Copies of the new works which Alfred's team produced were sent to each diocese and the bishops were directed to re-educate themselves and train their clergy, and, in turn, the clergy had to educate the laity. The purpose was to give the sons of all freemen the chance to become literate. Those showing sufficient promise for training as clerics were given further education in Latin.

After Alfred's death and before little more than half his educational scheme had been accomplished, English scholarship made some advance but not as completely as Alfred had planned.

The creation and distribution of documents constituting the essentials of education ensured that the following generation knew how to read and write English, or, rather, a standard variety of English referred to as Alfredian West Saxon.

So matters rested until the coming of the Normans.

The social consequences of William's invasion were paralleled by linguistic consequences. The English nobility were degraded and replaced by French-speaking Norman barons, the new landed class, and the native ecclesiastical establishments were taken over by Norman clergy. The commonalty became the repressed and oppressed masses. The new Norman rulers, the new Norman nobility and the new Norman clergy all spoke Norman French. Since the teaching function was in the hands of the clerics the mediums of instruction were French and Latin.

The Anglo-Saxon language was relegated to obscurity, but it did not die. Within two centuries it was French that died. In the early fourteenth century attempts were being made by scholars to preserve the use of French in the churches and at the universities. There was a decree, in 1325, that conversation at Oxford be in either French or Latin, and in 1332, by act of Parliament, French be taught to the children of the upper classes. But it was all in vain. By the mid-century English was being taught in the schools. Latin remained the language of instruction at the universities; French and Latin left their imprint on legal terminology in Britain. *Mandamus, habeas corpus, certiorari, subpoena, affidavit, onus probandi, in rem, lis pendens* will all be found in a modern, comprehensive dictionary, as will also *coroner* (from fourteenth century Anglo-French *corouner*, the official in charge of the pleas of the Crown, from Old French *corone*, meaning crown). Other words in legal parlance (and the word 'parlance' itself comes from Old French, from *parler*, to talk) are *oyer* and *terminer*, formerly a commission issued to judges to try cases on assize. It only became obsolete with the abolition of assizes and the establishment of crown courts in 1972. The term is Anglo-Norman (fifteenth century) and comes from *oyer*, to hear, and *terminer*, to judge. 'Slander' is thirteenth century Anglo-French, from Old French *escandle*, so is 'libel', and so are 'assault' (Old French *asaut*) and 'battery' (Old French *batterie*, a beating).

Sir Thomas Elyot (1490?-1546), to whom reference will be made later in his role of lexicographer, was also an educationist, and his treatise *The Boke Named the Governour* dealt with the manner in which the ruling class should be educated. This was the first book on education to be written in English and not Latin. In it he

deplores the low level to which education had sunk:

Lorde God, howe many good and clene wittes of children,
be nowe a dayes perished by ignorant schole maisters.

Perhaps the low standard of teaching and the fact that the profession was wretchedly paid (as it still is) are not unrelated. Roger Ascham (1515-1568), tutor and secretary to Queen Elizabeth I, and author of *The Scholemaster*, a treatise on education, complained that the English governing classes were more interested in having their horses trained than their children.

It is pitie, that commonlie more care is had, yea and that emonges verie wise men, to finde out rather a cunningg man for their horses than a cunningg man for their children. They say nay [not neigh!] in worde, but they do so in deede. For, to the one they will gladlie give a stipend of 200 Crounes by year, and loth to offer to the other 200 shillings.

By the time Shakespeare (1564-1616) had reached school-going age - about the time he attained his fifth birthday - he would have been subjected to a system of education which had been heavily influenced by the renaissance of learning with tremendous weight being given to Latin. The study of Latin grammar was intensive and thereafter the pupils would progress to the study of classical and neoclassical literature. Their command of language would be improved by rendering Latin texts in English and translating the texts back into Latin. In the General Introduction to the Oxford Shakespeare (*William Shakespeare - The Complete Works*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) the editors, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, write:

After Shakespeare died, Ben Jonson accused him of knowing 'small Latin and less Greek'; but Jonson [who had been educated at Westminster School and, for a while, at Cambridge] took pride in his classical knowledge: a boy educated at an Elizabethan grammar school would be more thoroughly trained in classical rhetoric and Roman (not Greek) literature than most present-day holders of a university degree in classics.

Besides being familiar with the officially approved textbook of the time, William Lily's *Short Introduction to Grammar*, Shakespeare may have made use of what were, or are regarded as the prototypes of the dictionary. They were nothing more, really, than bilingual wordbooks intended as an aid for schoolboys struggling with Latin.

In 1440, a Dominican monk, Galfridus Grammaticus, made a list of English words with an explanation of what they meant in Latin. This *Promptorium Parvulorum* (children's storeroom) had some 12 000 entries, which were not alphabetically arranged but divided into two groups, nouns and other forms being listed under 'nomina' and verbs under 'verba'. Rather later (c.1483) came the *Catholicon Anglicum* which had about 8 000 entries, arranged as a single alphabetical list and which gave numerous synonyms and tried to give the meaning and usage of terms which were thought to be synonymous. These can hardly be described as dictionaries. The term 'lexicon' applies more particularly to a dictionary which has reference to an ancient language, or to a list of terms relating to a particular subject. The earliest Latin-English lexicon, the *Ortus Vocabulorum*, was printed in 1500 and comprised some 27 000 entries. Several English-Latin and Latin-English lexicons put in an appearance during the 16th century, all intended to assist students. If there is a tendency to think that didactic books addressed to tyros is an essentially modern phenomenon, it is enlightening that John Withals, in 1553, entitled his lexicon *Shorte Dictionarie for Younge Begynners*. Although he called his work a 'dictionary', Withals did not follow lexical order but arranged his entries according to topics. In his Prologue he states:

I have resorted to the most famous and ancient Authors, out of the whiche, as out of cleare fountaines, I have drawn as diligently as I coulde the proper names of things conteyned under one kynde, and disposed them in suche order, that a very childe beyng able to read, may with little labour perfiteley imprinte them in memory.

Withals was not the first to describe his word-book as a dictionary. In 1538 appeared *The Dictionary of Syr Thomas Elyot*.

Elyot had ordered his dictionary entries on etymological principles. He gives the basic morpheme (which has meaning grammatically and/or lexically) and its derivatives. Thomas Cooper's *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae* (1565) follows the same principle but he modified it by giving alphabetical cross-references. Ultimately the alphabetical ordering of dictionary entries prevailed, and it is, of course, the practice followed in the compilation of present-day dictionaries.

The dictionaries of the 16th century were bilingual, starting with Latin-English and English-Latin. Combinations of other languages, such as French and Italian with English followed, but all these early dictionaries dealt with 'hard' words only. The first monolingual dictionary of English was compiled by Robert Cawdrey in 1604, but was again confined to what were considered to be 'hard usuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French etc. 'as exemplified by the title which Cawdrey gave to his book - *Table Alphabeticall of Hard Words*. Cawdrey's dictionary was followed by John Bullokar's *An English Expositor* in 1616 (the year of Shakespeare's death) and, successively, by Henry Cockeram's *The English Dictionarie* (1623) and Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* in 1656.

Edward Phillips, a nephew of John Milton, described his *New World of English Words* (1658) as 'containing the interpretation of such hard words as are derived from other languages', and the 'hard words' tradition was continued by Elisha Coles in his *An English Dictionary* (1676), which was criticized by 'J.K.', a later lexicographer (disputedly identified as John Kersey) who anticipated the emphasis which was about to be put on greater comprehensiveness in dictionaries by the incorporation of common words. J.K., in his *A New English Dictionary*, published in 1702, in the Preface, expressed resentment that the dictionaries which had so far appeared, and, in particular Coles's dictionary, did not give the vocabulary of English as it then existed, but listed hundreds of words 'which are scarce ever us'd by any ancient or modern writer ...'. J.K. claimed for his dictionary that it was 'intended only to explain such English Words as are genuine and used by Persons of clear Judgment and good Style' and that his dictionary was 'a Collection of all the most proper and significant

English Words, that are now commonly us'd either in Speech , or in the familiar way of Writing Letters, &c.; omitting at the same time, such as are obsolete, barbarous, foreign or peculiar'.

J.K.'s successor in what Samuel Johnson described as the 'dull work' of making dictionaries was Nathaniel Bailey whose *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721) was the first to include all English words, or as many as he could collect (estimated by Starnes and Noyes, in their *The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson (1604-1755)*, to be about 40 000 words). Bailey claimed that his dictionary comprehended '... The Derivations of the Generality of Words in the English Tongue, either Antient or Modern, from the Antient British, Saxon, Danish, Norman and Modern French, Teutonic, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew Languages, each in their proper Characters'. English early gave evidence of its penchant for incorporating foreign words in its vocabulary, a tendency which was strengthened by the Norman invasion, which led to the ready acceptance of French words into the vocabulary of English, and which eased the assimilation of words from other foreign languages.

The claim that Nathaniel Bailey made for his popular *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, that it contained '... the Generality of Words in the English Tongue ...' was repeated in his *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730), which he described as a 'more Compleat Universal Etymological English Dictionary than any Extant', which had 8 000 additional words. It was this dictionary upon which Samuel Johnson based his own dictionary.

Between 1755, when Johnson's famous *Dictionary of the English Language* was published, and 1736, when the second edition of Bailey's *Dictionarium Britannicum* appeared, and in the Preface of which he stated that he had 'with great Application endeavoured to enrich ... with all the words that I could find in the Reading of a very large number of Authors ...', Benjamin Martin produced his *Lingua Britannica Reformata* (1749). Martin exercised a degree of selection in regard to the words he incorporated in his dictionary, including words in reputable usage and omitting 'useless and obsolete Words'. Johnson followed the same principle.

It is thought of Johnson that he rode in on the backs of his lexicographical predecessors - that he owed an excessive debt to the work of the earlier dictionary makers. This is not the case. He followed the same principle as Bailey by collecting words encountered 'in the reading of a very large number of authors', but Johnson's method was inductive. This is a principle of reasoning to a conclusion about all the members of a class from the examination of some members of the class. He did not start, as Boswell thought, by making a master list of words culled from other, earlier dictionaries, afterwards preparing illustrative quotations taken from his readings in English literature, and then adding the definitions. To have gone about the compilation this way would have taken up Johnson's whole life, not merely the three years which he allowed himself for the task. The task, in the end, took him nearly three times longer than he had estimated. The dictionary was started in 1747. The last sheet was delivered to the publishers in July 1754.

The compilation of modern dictionaries involves the activities of many specialists for long periods of time backed up by advanced technology in both printing and electronic word processing. Johnson's dictionary was the effort of one man, and his achievement was prodigious.

As a preliminary step to the compilation of his dictionary, Johnson embarked on an extensive and intensive reading programme. The books he used were those he had himself collected - and a considerable collection it was - and those books he was able to borrow from friends. He read with the greatest care 'all such English writers as were most correct in their language'. Johnson then marked every passage which he judged to be worth quoting and underlined the key word in the passage. The marked passages were then given to clerks to copy. He had two criteria in mind when choosing a quotable passage: the suitability of the passage to bring out clearly the meaning of the key word, and, secondly, the extent to which the passage was an example of excellence in language or thought content. The clerks copied the quotations on to slips of paper and these were then pasted into large notebooks (there were eighty of them) in lexical order according to the key word. Ge-

nerally before he stuck the key word into the notebooks. Johnson provided its etymology and defined its meaning. His definitions have seldom been equalled and have been used as models by successive generations of lexicographers.

Lexicographers had long been expected to make collections of refined words, words suitable for literary use, and to give the words their appropriate meanings. They were expected, also, to be arbiters of correct usage. This was in line with the idea that it was necessary to 'fix' a language, as one would fix a photographic film or print, within the limits dictated by the literary taste of the time, and the belief, then held, that language had reached such a degree of perfection that no further improvement was needed, nor, indeed, possible. The thought that language could be purified and standardized was generally accepted by both the *Accademia della Crusca*, whose purpose was to remove blemishes from Italian and give it literary elegance, and the *Académie Française*, which sought to do the same for French. These institutions had compiled dictionaries which were intended to stabilize the languages and prevent any linguistic adulteration.

The same idea that a language should be 'frozen' when it reached an optimum point of development, and then lexically preserved, occurred to men of letters in Britain, among them Addison, Swift and Pope. As there was nothing in Britain equivalent to the *Accademia della Crusca* or the *Académie Française*, it was necessary for the fixation of English to be achieved by lexicographic authority. Someone had to assume this task, and because his erudition commanded wide respect among the literati, Samuel Johnson was chosen. If Johnson ever entertained the idea that the advance of a language could be halted at a point when it had attained such perfection that further progress was hardly possible, then he did not do so for very long, but his dictionary was regarded as the supreme authority. Johnson, as a lexicographer, recognized the impermanence of words and that a changing language was an ever-present problem, and if seven years were spent compiling a dictionary, that dictionary, when published, was seven years behind the times. 'Speech', he remarked, 'was not formed by an analogy sent from heaven ... but was produced by necessity and enlarged by accident, and is therefore composed of dissimilar

parts, thrown together by negligence, by affectation, by learning, or by ignorance’.

Between Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and Noah Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language*, lexicography made no significant advance, but some attention was given to orthoepy. Some attention had been given to orthoepy previously. Richard Mulcaster in his *Elementarie* (1582) and William Bullokar in his *Booke at Large for the Amendment of Orthographie for English Speech* (1581) had both set out proposals for the reform of the spelling of the time, and had to concern themselves, inevitably, with the phonological aspects of that variety of English spoken in London. But these, and subsequent orthoepists, were lacking in a knowledge of phonetics, and the signs and symbols they used to distinguish various sounds or the variants of single sounds given to single letters were excessively cumbersome. The dictionary of today indicates how words are pronounced. The note on pronunciation in *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* (Second Edition, 1986) reads:

Pronunciations of words in this dictionary represent those that are common in educated British English speech; local pronunciation is shown for regional terms that are largely confined to the region in question. They are transcribed in the International Phonetic Alphabet. ... The pronunciation is normally given in parentheses immediately after the head-word.

In the latter half of the 18th century there appeared two orthoepic dictionaries - Thomas Sheridan’s *General Dictionary of the English Language* (1780), and John Walker’s *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791). Both sought to regulate pronunciation, and, in Sheridan’s words, to establish ‘a plain and permanent Standard of Pronunciation’ and restrain phonological change.

These dictionaries reinforced the idea that what appeared in dictionaries was ‘gospel’ - in its literal Old English meaning of godspell: god = good, and spell = message - something that was not controvertible.

Thomas Sheridan (the father of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the dramatist) and John Walker were both actors and elocutionists. The pronunciation which they gave to English words would be affected by their calling and tend towards the exaggeration or artificiality required by performance on the stage. Walker's acceptance as an expert was reinforced by the fact that he had added notes on pronunciation to Johnson's dictionary.

There is a strange link between these orthoepists and America which was soon to produce a monumental dictionary of its own. Sheridan and Walker were both followed in the United States, Walker's influence being the greater, and his insistence on full vowel sounds and secondary stresses on ordinarily unaccented syllables resulted in the American pronunciation of some words being at variance with the pronunciation of the same words in British English, such as 'secretary' and 'laboratory'.

Between the publication of Johnson's dictionary in 1755 and his death in 1784, the American War of Independence was fought, but not ended, the quarrel between the United States and Britain dragging on until 1818, and a decade later, despite the objections of some English-speakers to the 'torrent of barbarous phraseology from America, threatening to destroy the purity of the English language', the American brand of English came into its own with the publication of Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* (his attempt at spelling reform, which became less and less radical as time went on) but which, nevertheless, resulted in a goodly number of the differences in American and English spelling. The fact that there are differences complicates the search for meanings depending on whether one is using an American English or a British English dictionary. For instance, the word which names the branch of philosophy concerned with the study of such concepts as beauty, taste, etc., is 'aesthetics' in a British English dictionary and 'esthetics' in an American English dictionary. Similarly, the word in English which means the reduction of energy by exertion is the verb 'to tire', and the same verb has the same meaning and the same spelling in an American dictionary of the English language. But there are other meanings of 'tire', one of them, in America, signifying 'a solid air-filled covering for a wheel, typically of rubber or some similarly elastic synthetic material,

fitted around the wheel's rim to absorb shock and provide traction.' This definition is as perfect and as apt as anything which Johnson produced, but the meaning in a British English dictionary is attributed to the word 'tyre'.

Webster's lexicographical achievement of the first magnitude was his two-volume quarto *American Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1828. It had been preceded by *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* in 1806, which, with his spelling book, had given expression to his views on spelling reform, but his ideas were rather fanciful and his etymological knowledge questionable. He, nonetheless, had a considerable influence and his obsession with orthographic simplification and standardization remained with him to the end.

Webster's great dictionary carried on the authoritarian tradition that had started with Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*. It was the last of the solo efforts to produce a dictionary, and the fact that the *American Dictionary of the English Language* is the work of one man - the labour of twenty years - puts it on a level of achievement as high, if not higher than that attained by Johnson. The number of entries in Webster's dictionary exceeded those in Johnson's by an estimated 12 000. The vocabulary consisted of 70 000 words.

Webster's dictionary was popular on both sides of the Atlantic. Twenty-five hundred copies of the first edition were offered for sale in the United States, and an English edition of three thousand were offered in London at the same time.

After the death of Noah Webster (in 1843) a new edition of the dictionary appeared in 1847 with the collaboration of William G. Webster, Noah's son, and under the editorship of his son-in-law, Professor Chauncey A. Goodrich of Yale University. A general revision, which became popularly known as the 'Unabridged', appeared in 1864. The etymologies were modified, and the vocabulary was increased to an aggregate of 114 000 words. In 1890 appeared another complete and radical revision of the entire dictionary. Its title, *Webster's International Dictionary* emphasized that the work of Noah Webster and his successors had gained recogni-

tion as a standard authority throughout the English-speaking world.

To these two great revisions of the dictionary (the 'Unabridged' and the 'International') was added a third in 1909 - the 'New International'. There were second (1934) and third (1961) editions of the *New International Dictionary*. The role of the dictionary as the authority on what was acceptable language was filled by the second edition for nearly thirty years. The general attitude was that dictionaries were prescriptive, and ought to be. What other guide was available?

Under the influence of the new and fast-developing science of linguistics there was a shift of emphasis from what constituted proper speech (largely literary) to the language as it was used by the commonalty. Dr Philip Gove, who was head of the large team of specialists who compiled the dictionary known as Webster III, believed that everything hinged on usage. Mario Pei, a noted authority on the English language, in his book *The Story of the English Language* (p.364) writes that 'His (Dr Gove's) guiding principle was that if a word, or a word-combination, is in use, no matter in what layer of society, the fact should be recorded in a comprehensive dictionary'. What might be termed vulgarisms had, in fact, crept into the dictionaries, but earlier dictionaries carefully distinguished words which were not in genteel or polite usage and labelled them 'slang', 'dialect' or 'vulgar', 'substandard' or 'colloquial'. The rumbustious monosyllabic words which nowadays spatter the pages of novels and are used without abashment on stage, screen and TV to the pretended horror of puritanical and prurient-minded persons found no place in any but the most recent dictionaries. Although now commonplace, such words are still categorized as 'taboo', or 'offensive slang', or 'taboo slang', or 'derogatory slang'. Their robust Germanic origins are glossed over, and although the words were good enough for Shakespeare, some of the coarser ones have been given Latin sobriquets.

It was not, however, anything very startling that brought the wrath of the purists and the puritanical down on the heads of the Webster III compilers. The only four-letter word complained of was 'ain't' and there were objections to the inclusion of phrases

such as 'ants in one's pants'. The bowels of the reviewers and critics were in an uproar. 'Webster III has thrust upon us a dismaying assortment of the questionable, the perverse, the unworthy and the downright outrageous', thundered one incensed reviewer.

The criticisms levelled at the editors of Webster III demonstrate that although lexicographers today aim at recording the language in its entirety and seek, like the linguists, only to describe and not prescribe, like the grammarians, the common idea is that lexicographers must indicate what they regard as acceptable usage and that they must lay down what is correct and proscribe what is not. This may seem to be a return to authoritarianism but it is a role into which dictionary makers and their editors are being thrust. Dictionary users want dictionaries to sanction usage and the editors to exercise value judgments. Mitford Mathews in his introduction to Webster's *New World Dictionary of the American Language* remarks:

In modern dictionaries, information about the level of usage of words is supplied. The appearance of a word such as 'ain't' in a dictionary is not an indication that it has advanced in dignity, or that it is now to be used in formal, dignified speech or writing. Dictionaries explain that the usage labels ... are meant to describe, not authorize, such use as they denote.

The view that dictionaries should not be selective but record all the words of a language in current and previous use was put forward vigorously in a paper entitled 'Some Deficiencies in Existing English Dictionaries' which Dean (later Archbishop) Trench read to the Philological Society in 1857. 'A dictionary', said the Dean, 'according to that idea of it which seems to me alone capable of being logically maintained, is an inventory of the language; much more, but this primarily It is no task of the maker of it to select the good words of the language The business which he has undertaken is to collect and arrange words, whether good or bad, whether they commend themselves to his judgment or otherwise. He is an historian ... not a critic'.

The emphasis which Trench put on the history of words - their

origins and development - was given expression in the compilation of the greatest of all dictionaries - the *New English Dictionary*, on historical principles, founded mainly on the materials collected by the Philological Society. The suggestion made by Trench when he addressed the Philological Society in 1857, was that an effort should be made, under the direction of the Society, to take the vocabularies of existing dictionaries and add the historical information which they lacked or had in only a rudimentary form.

This monumental work got off to a slow and wavering start. The main effort, to begin with, was put into the collection of quotations from the written documents of the English language from the late Middle Ages onwards. All words that were obsolete at that date were omitted, but the histories of words that were in use before and after the middle of the 12th century are given in their entirety.

In 1878 the expense of printing and publishing the proposed dictionary was assumed by the delegates of the Oxford University Press and Dr (subsequently Sir) J.A.H. Murray became editor. The services of hundreds of readers throughout the world were enlisted. Three more editors, backed by a big staff of experts and specialists, were engaged in the compilation of *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (also known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*). The three distinguished scholars who joined Sir James Murray as editors were Dr H. Bradley, Sir William A. Craigie and Dr C.T. Onions.

From its inception in 1858, with Herbert Coleridge and, after him, F.J. Furnivall as its original editors, the dictionary took 70 years to compile. The first 20 years were spent collecting material. The ten-volume edition which appeared in 1928 gives the history of each word since the late Middle Ages, the immediate etymology of the word, a comprehensive definition, and dated quotations from literary works through the centuries to illustrate gradations in meaning. These quotations provide the evidence on which the definitions are inductively founded.

A later edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* comprises thirteen volumes, defines 414 825 words, illustrated by nearly two

million quotations. A supplementary volume appeared in 1933. There have been subsequent supplements and a number of abridgements, including the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* and the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*.

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