The first time I compiled The Cambridge Encyclopedia, I found myself in Edinburgh, at the famous publishing house of W & R Chambers. Chambers and Cambridge University Press at the time were engaged in a joint venture to publish a new series of reference books. In the event, Chambers disengaged from this venture, and the book was published by Cambridge. But, as I say, at the outset it was a joint project, so I was in Edinburgh, talking to Jack, the Chambers production manager, a dour Scot who was only happy when he was gloomy. I remember, when we were in the middle of the project he would ring me up and ask how things were going. 'Very well, Jack', I would say', to which he would reply 'I dinna like the sound of that'.

This was the first time I had edited a general encyclopedia. By contrast, Chambers was famous for many editions of encyclopedias. The first edition of Chambers's Encyclopaedia was published in 1859. And Edinburgh had had a long tradition of encyclopedia publishing before that. The Society of Gentlemen in Edinburgh published their 'Dictionary of Arts and Sciences' when Samuel Johnson was 59, in 1768; that book is better known by its main title, Encyclopaedia Britannica. People tend to forget that that huge American encyclopedia has Scottish origins - but if you look carefully, you will see a Scottish thistle on the cover of every volume.

So, aware of this long tradition, I asked Jack whether he had any advice. He pulled down a mock-up of the proposed encyclopedia from his shelf - the same size and weight as my eventual book would be, but with all the pages totally blank. He opened it at page one and told me, 'Ye start at the top there and write small!' There were 1500 pages to go.

Johnson would have approved, for he had no alternative but to start at the top and write small - or, at least, in the case of his Dictionary, to get his amanuenses to write small. No computers then. Indeed, there were hardly any computers when I began my own compilation. This was 1986. Word processors were everywhere, but personal computers were hardly known. The World Wide Web had not been invented. Only a few academics were using e-mail. We got our very first computer during that project; it had a memory of 25 KB. When we used that up, we had to send the computer back to the manufacturers to have an extra disc put into it. On the way back, somebody dropped the computer, at Crewe station! We lost three months' work. In terms of reliability, I sometimes think, we would all do better with quill pens.

My main work is encyclopedia editing. I have sometimes compiled dictionaries, and sometimes edited them, but encyclopedias are my 'thing'. However, there is no critical difference. Dictionaries are about words and their meanings and encyclopedias are about knowledge - of people, places, and things - but there is considerable overlap. Many encyclopedias contain a great deal of information about the meanings of words. And many dictionaries, especially in the American tradition, contain encyclopedic information. Johnson's Dictionary certainly did. He was a tremendous observer, and his observations include far more than what is strictly linguistic. Although he distances himself in his Preface from proper names, he is very much an encyclopedist by temperament, and the Dictionary contains a great deal of real-world information. 'I have determined', he says in his Plan for the Dictionary, 'to consult the best writers for explanations real as well as verbal', and some of his quotations are indeed extensive, especially in the domain of science. We find a 750-word explanation for comet, for example, and a 400-word one on ammoniac; he lists 84 species at pear, 27 at plant, and 34 at vine. There are several straightforward encyclopedic entries, such as Doomsday-book.

So the task facing Johnson was exactly the same as the one facing me, and I felt very much at one with Johnson as I worked my way through his Dictionary for the anthology I edited this year, for the Penguin Classics series, in celebration of the 250th anniversary. The first thing you have to do, if you are a lexicographer or encyclopedist, is ignore the size of the project. 'A large work is difficult because it is large', Johnson remarked in his Preface. But if you let size put you off, you are no lexicographer. The day you start thinking: I have completed 277 entries and I have 48,326 to go, that is the day you had better find another job, otherwise you would go mad.

Dictionary and encyclopedia writing is a bit like climbing a mountain. You see the summit, and it often does not look very far away. So you start climbing, but then you see before you a valley and a ridge. The summit still does not look very far away. You traverse that ridge and see before you - another valley and another ridge. The summit is as far away, it seems, as when you started. And so it continues.
The intrepid mountaineer is not disturbed by such intervening challenges. Nor is the
intrepid lexicographer.

Let me tell you about the valleys and ridges in lexicography. Most compilers begin
at the beginning, with letter A, quite a substantial letter in terms of number of entries.
That is the first ridge. After getting through A, all compilers feel a real sense of
achievement - exhalation even, for B is a valley of a letter, done in next to no
time. Then you encounter letter C, a monster of a ridge. Many an amateur
lexicographer has given up in the middle of C, with its interminable lists of words
beginning with COM and CON. By the time you have reached the end of C, you are
actually a fifth of the way through your dictionary. Many people have suggested that
Johnson gave too much space to the opening letters, in his Dictionary. Well, his letter
C ends at p.477 (out of 2261 pages in the first edition - 21%). Compare the New
Oxford Dictionary of English (1998), which has its letter C ending at p.460 (out of
2152 - 21%) or the Longman Dictionary of the English Language (1984), which has
its letter C ending at p.366 (out of 1760 - 21%). If there is a bias, it is one shared by
dictionaries.

After C, the next few letters positively whizz along. D, E, F, G, H are all baby letters,
by comparison. I, J, and K are so short they lull you into a false sense of security.
You think you are getting somewhere. But at L you realise that you are still not yet
half way through. You find L and M surprisingly dense. N and O are another valley.
And then you hit P, which stands for 'pain', a ridge of quite some size, thanks mainly
to all the prefixes - such as PRE, PRO, and POST... - which add muscle to that letter.
When you eventually reach the top of P, you deal with tiny Q in no time - 'for this relief
much thanks'. And that refreshes you to deal with R in a business-like way. Only
eight letters to go. You start thinking of having a social life again. There will be time
to talk to your wife and children. Then the disaster, the highest ridge of all, totally
obscuring the summit: S. It takes up 275 pages in Johnson's Dictionary, 12 per cent
of the whole. Why is it such a long letter? The reason lies in the sound system of the
English language. A syllable in English typically consists of a vowel preceded and
followed by one or more consonants. Before the vowel you can have one consonant,
as in ripe, two consonants, as in stripe, and three, as in stripe. Almost all the 3-
consonant sequences in English begin with S. It seems to take a lifetime to traverse S.

Is there life after S? If you survive S you can survive anything. T (although a serious
letter in its own right) feels like a dodder. You have stopped twitching by the beginning
of U. However, you start twitching again in the middle of U, because you encounter
all the words beginning with UN-. This is one of the most productive prefixes in the
whole of the language. Do you remember the way Shakespeare coins dozens of

And then it is downhill all the way. There are more words beginning with W than you
might think, but X, Y and Z are over in no time. In Johnson's case, X is an eyeblink.
X, he says, 'begins no word in the English language'. He was wrong, but even today,
dealing with the whole of X is only a few days work.

And so we reach Z for zygote, and the job is over? But of course it isn't, for the
process of revision begins again. It is like the semi-proverbial painting of the Forth
Bridge. Johnson in his lifetime carried out four revisions, the fourth edition making so
many changes that it is a significantly different book. In traditional print publishing,
every lexicographer knows, to adapt the words of Paul Valéry about poetry, 'A
dictionary is never finished, only abandoned.' The publisher's deadline looms, and
when the final proof is sent off to press, there is nothing more you can do, except
anticipate the moment (it is usually the very next day) when you see the need to
change something, in your supposedly completed work.

The Internet has changed all that, of course. An online dictionary is always open to
revision. In the website of the Encyclopedia I edit, www.findouttv, we update the
entries every day. All printed encyclopedias and dictionaries are inevitably three to six
months behind the times, by the time they are published. Not so, a website,
looking properly managed.

So how is Johnson's Dictionary faring, in the age of the Internet, 250 years on? It has
of course benefited enormously by being made available electronically. The
Cambridge University Press CD, containing the first and fourth editions in
transcription and in original manuscript, has been of inestimable benefit to anyone
wanting to search the Dictionary. That is the amazing strength of the Internet. It does
not, as some people thought, replace books; rather, it enables you to search books
in ways that were inconceivable before. We are, as a consequence, at the beginning
of a new era of research into Johnson's Dictionary, as we are into Shakespeare and
any other author whose texts attract detailed attention. For example, if you want to
find out how many words Johnson considered to be 'vulgar', you can now do so in a
few seconds; or - to take a different kind of example - how many times is the name
Lichfield mentioned in the Dictionary? (Just four, in the entries on lich, minster, rifle,
and shaw). Now that is a conversation-stopper at a dinner-table, if ever there was
one: 'Do you know how many times the name of Lichfield appears in Johnson's
Dictionary?"
Perhaps, as a result of the Internet, *Johnson's Dictionary* is attracting more interest than ever before. It is, I suppose, partly the way an anniversary focuses the mind, so that we have had this year Henry Hitching's excellent narrative account of the Dictionary as 'the book that defined the world' as well as an anthology by Jack Lynch. The request to produce an anthology for Penguin Classics had the same motivation - surprisingly, no edition of the Dictionary had ever been published in that very wide-ranging series. I was glad to receive the invitation. All lexicographers should read Johnson from cover to cover at least once in their lifetime. I had read huge chunks of it, over the years, but never the whole thing. Now I had to, and it took me three months (I stopped to eat and drink, and the like, you will appreciate, which is why it took so long). The first edition has 2261 pages - that meant an average of 25 pages a day.

At the end of the task, I remember stepping back and thinking two things. First, a tremendous feeling of admiration at Johnson's achievement. And second, an equally strong feeling of dissatisfaction at the superficial way in which Johnson's Dictionary has been treated by the popular press. A mythology has grown up around it, and it is sometimes easier words are changed into harder, as burial into sepulture or interment, drier into desiccative, dryness into siccity or aridity, fit into paroxysm; for the easiest word, whatever it be, can never be translated into one more easy. But easiness and difficulty are merely relative...

Yes indeed. To modern eyes, such definitions do often seem lexically abstruse, but they have to be seen in the context of the time, which was a period when 'hard words' were much more routine than today. There had already been several dictionaries of 'hard words', dating from Robert Cawdrey's in 1604. Johnson's definitions would have been challenging, but not obscure, to his contemporaries. And the frequency with which some of the hard words were used makes them more palatable, even to the modern reader: *reticulated* is one of several words in the Dictionary beginning with re-; *interstice* turns up in a number of entries (dense, imporous, mesh, net), both in definitions and quotations, and also has an entry of its own. We must not assume that the 18th-century sense of lexical difficulty is the same as ours today.

In fact the definitions are the Dictionary's primary strength, and its chief claim to fame. Anyone can get a sense of the problem by trying to formulate for themselves appropriate definitions for such words as *effect*, *nature*, *relation*, and *sign*, and comparing their attempt with Johnson's entries. The plural, 'definitions', is important: most words in a language have more than one sense. Some have dozens. Abstract words pose particular problems, but all words require definitions that are clear, succinct, well-sequenced, and contrastive (with words of related meaning), and Johnson's achievement can be seen on virtually any page. For clarity and succinctness, take *message*.
The choice between Johnson often comments on the variation. And for those who have been possessour.

Johnson; at the other we find colloquial interjections be given spaces spelled in -ck (acrostick, an tick, comick): influenced by the distance that English spelling had to travel before it reached the present-day standard (fewel, raindeer, villany).

To a modern reader, a great deal of the interest of the Dictionary contains a great deal of information about social and stylistic variation - observations about eighteenth-century usage, and especially the words which continue to fascinate wordsmiths because of their different semantic perspective: - words like amisonous, topdoodle, merrymouth, and pandiculation. Anyone who encounters merrymouth, for example, is unlikely to think of a wishbone in exactly the same way thereafter. The stylistic range of the Dictionary is in fact very wide. At one extreme we find highly formal words of classical origin (adumbrate, prognostication, sagacity) - these are often mentioned in accounts of Johnson; at the other we find colloquial interjections (ay, foh, hist, look, right, tush, tuh). The latter never attract the attention of the journalist. Nor do his inclusion of social locations (how'd'ye), terms of address (servant), and gender differences ('women's words', such as frightfully and horrid).

Similarly, the Dictionary contains a great deal of information about social and stylistic variation - observations about eighteenth-century usage, and especially the words which continue to fascinate wordsmiths because of their different semantic perspective: - words like amisonous, topdoodle, merrymouth, and pandiculation. Anyone who encounters merrymouth, for example, is unlikely to think of a wishbone in exactly the same way thereafter. The stylistic range of the Dictionary is in fact very wide. At one extreme we find highly formal words of classical origin (adumbrate, prognostication, sagacity) - these are often mentioned in accounts of Johnson; at the other we find colloquial interjections (ay, foh, hist, look, right, tush, tuh). The latter never attract the attention of the journalist. Nor do his inclusion of social locations (how'd'ye), terms of address (servant), and gender differences ('women's words', such as frightfully and horrid).

To a modern reader, a great deal of the interest of the Dictionary is the way it shows the distance that English spelling had to travel before it reached the present-day standard (fewel, raindeer, villany). Some words were printed solid which today would still be normal, in those days. Eat your heart out, Lynne Truss.

The mythology about Johnson has had all the press attention, and hidden some of the properties of the Dictionary which deserve much more widespread recognition. For instance, the entries which contain information about regional dialects are often ignored, but they are an important innovation. There are not many of them, but they fall into three main types: words from Lichfield and Staffordshire (gnarled, goldfinch, moreland, orray, shaw), occasional observations about other English dialects (amper, atter, haver, onset), and above all usages from Scottish English (mow, scambler, sponk), which are common enough to suggest that his amanuenses were being used for far more than their copy-writing skills.

An analysis of Johnson's use of quotations - over 113,000 in the first edition (including some duplications), and a further 3,000 in the fourth - would take a talk in itself. Though his approach has several continental forerunners, this is the first English dictionary to use quotations in such an integrated and extensive way (only a few specialist dictionaries had used examples previously), and its influence on later lexicography was unparalleled - both in following his practice as well as reacting against it. Shakespeare, Dryden, Addison, and Bacon provide over a third of the quotations, but there are over 500 authors used in all. It has often been pointed out that his selection was only partly based on linguistic considerations. Many quotes are there because they represent a moral point of view in which he strongly believed - such as the frequent quotations from conservative Anglican theologians and the absence of quotations from the freethinking Thomas Hobbes. Many illustrations are also there for educational reasons, as I have already mentioned, providing encyclopedic information and informing readers about the current state of knowledge: see his mini-essay on electricity, for example. This is a big difference with later lexicographic uses of quotation (such as in the Oxford English Dictionary), where the illustration is chosen to show the historical evolution of a word rather than its encyclopedic status or literary excellence.

The concept of an anthology is routine with reference to such genres as poetry and the short story - but it is unusual, to say the least, in relation to a dictionary. For a dictionary is a tool, compiled to solve a problem of the moment - to check a spelling, a pronunciation, a meaning, a point of usage. It is not there for browsing. Who, apart from lexicographers suffering from withdrawal symptoms, would ever want to read for pleasure a selection of entries from - a dictionary? For such an exercise to succeed, the source work would have to be of very special historical significance, and its compiler a person whose literary or linguistic standing was sufficiently pre-eminent to demand respect, and sufficiently idiosyncratic to evoke curiosity. There would probably also need to be a special occasion.

All these criteria are satisfied in the case of Johnson's Dictionary. It was written at a critical time in English linguistic history, at the very beginning of a period which would introduce prescriptive principles into English language study, and when the demand for a standard language was at its strongest. It was written - as Boswell claims in the final sentence of his biography - by a man 'whose talents, acquirements, and virtues, were so extraordinary, that the more his character is considered, the more he will be regarded by the present age, and by posterity, with admiration and reverence' - a judgement with which few would quarrel. Who else, after all, has been given the sobriquet of a genre in the way that 'Dictionary Johnson' was? And the first edition of the Dictionary was published in 1755 - thus motivating those who believe in the significance of round numbers to treat 2005 as a year of special memorial consequence.
Presidential Address

Notwithstanding the various European models on which Johnson drew, his Dictionary contains an unprecedented amount of innovation in lexicographical method. The sociolinguistic impact of his work on English dictionary-making was immense, reaching across the Atlantic (where his Dictionary became the standard reference for over 50 years), and extending into the end of the 19th century, when James Murray’s ‘New’ English dictionary bowed respectfully in the direction of Johnson. Johnson’s contribution to lexicography continues to be assessed and revised, as more information becomes known about his working methods, but his place in the history of this subject remains unchallenged, and he will continue to be a focus of study as lexicography itself develops as an academic subject. His book cries out for anthologising.

So, how does one anthologise a lexicographer? I believe, in the same way that one would a poet. The editor has to look for works (entries, in the lexicographer’s case) that are acknowledged to be the writer’s best, or which illustrate special features of style, or points of biographical interest, such as upbringing, milieu, beliefs - or, indeed, eccentricities. There will be a concern to be genuinely representative of the oeuvre as a whole. Some works (entries) might be chosen because they illustrate a stage in the author’s career, or a particular stage in literary - or, in this case, linguistic - history. And some will be there because, quite simply, the editor likes them.

Background information about the writer’s intentions will also be useful: just as the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads was invaluable in informing our thinking about Wordsworth and Coleridge, so I included in my anthology Johnson’s Plan and Preface, as well as the relevant parts of Boswell’s biography.

I must admit I was in two minds, when Penguin asked me to edit this anthology. I knew that there were others in preparation. Why reinvent the wheel? But the attraction proved too great. I thought people might find my own selection, with its emphasis on words of particularly linguistic interest, fresh and interesting, and I felt the need to provide a corrective to popular views on Johnson, as I have already suggested. And, of course, I had the support of Johnson himself. You will remember that, in Chapter 20 of Boswell’s Life, we find Boswell reporting Johnson in this way: ‘By collecting those [words] of your country, you will do a useful thing towards the history of the language.’ He bade me also go on with collections which I was making upon the antiquities of Scotland. ‘Make a large book - a folio.’

BOSWELL: But of what use will it be, sir?

JOHNSON: Never mind the use; do it.

So I did.