

# Thinking about Dictionaries

*Have you ever thought much about your dictionary? Most of you must own or have easy access to a dictionary of English, but have you ever bothered to think carefully about its good and bad points? David Crystal discusses some of the things to look for when buying a dictionary.*

I ONCE ASKED a hundred university students what qualities they would expect a good dictionary to have, assuming they were trying to make up their minds which one to buy. None of them had any ideas, apart from hoping that it wouldn't be too expensive and wouldn't be too heavy. It really is quite remarkable how people who would go to great lengths to read up all available critical data before choosing a new suit or a new record will nevertheless walk blithely into a bookshop and pick up a dictionary from the shelves without any other thought than price, size and possibly colour.

Of course, the main reason why people tend not to think critically about dictionaries is that they assume, quite falsely, that there is nothing to criticize. They take the view that a dictionary is a kind of linguistic god, an authorized version of the vocabulary of their language, which is above criticism. A dictionary (and, incidentally, a grammar book) is for them a manual of correctness, a summary of the rules to be followed for those who wish to use the language properly.

Now, this doctrine of "lexicographical infallibility" (one might call it) goes back quite a long way. As far as the English language is concerned, it was

particularly dominant in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when grammarians and lexicographers felt it was their duty to lay down hard and fast rules of correct usage, to keep the language clean and pure by dictating how it ought to be used. Now, one of the things which modern linguistics has done for us is to show quite clearly that grammars and dictionaries should not be "prescriptive," as the term is. There is a perfectly sound reason for this. If you are a lexicographer—a dictionary-writer—then what you are trying to do is to give people information about the words of the language—what they mean, how they are spelt, how they are pronounced, and so on. But how do you decide upon these matters? It can't be simply up to you, the lexicographer. If you wrote a dictionary with the words spelt according to your own personal feelings or gave words the senses you felt they ought to have, everyone would laugh at you, and you would certainly never sell your dictionary. No, in writing a dictionary, you would first look around you, at the way in which the educated users of the language manipulate their word-stock, and you would try to summarize this.

In any case, no one person could ever write a dictionary on his own because no one knows the whole of his language: even the most well-educated speaker of English is aware of no more than about a third of the total vocabulary (some 200,000 words in all, possibly). In other words, the first task for the lexicographer is to find out from reputable sources—newspapers, magazines, radio discussions, and the like—how people actually do

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use words. His dictionary, then, is an empirically-based description of what people in fact say and write. He is not being prescriptive, but descriptive.

One implication of this approach is that no dictionary could be a *complete* record of all the words in current use. It just isn't possible. The main reason for this is of course the fact of language change. By the time a dictionary leaves the filing cabinets of the editor who compiled it, and arrives in the bookshop, a period of at least two years has elapsed, during which time a considerable number of new words have arrived in the language, and a further number have become archaic. English vocabulary changes very rapidly indeed, and every dictionary is consequently either a little or a lot behind the times.

But it is not just a question of language change, the time factor causing a problem; there is also the question of geographical variation. The number of English-speaking peoples in the world has been rapidly increasing for many years now, and all the signs indicate that this progress will continue. Gradually, more and more areas are developing their own linguistic personality, becoming dialects on a mammoth scale, developing their own norms of pronunciation, their own regional literatures, and, of course, their own vocabularies. American and British English are the two most familiar major dialects of the language, I suppose; but we should not forget that, in terms of vocabulary at least, there are many other dialects with just as many national idiosyncracies—Indian English, West African, Australian, South African, Canadian, the English of the Philippines, and of Malaysia, and many more. A good dictionary of English should tell us about their regional distinctiveness too. Now, when I talk of regional vocabulary in these areas, I mean, of course, the standard vocabulary, that of the kind of thing exemplified by the difference between British English "pavement" and American "sidewalk." The American coming to Britain has to learn to use "pavement," if he hopes to "speak the same language" as educated Englishmen, and the same principle holds for Englishmen going to America. A dictionary of the English language—if it lives up to its title, literally, of *all* the English language—should incorporate all items of this kind between its covers. I estimate that at the moment, for all the major international English dialects, there are about six thousand of them. And, of course, this figure is steadily increasing. The point I want to emphasize, though, is that few dictionaries have a policy of incorporating as many of these words as possible—which is indeed a pity, as the more marked the difference between these international dialects become, the more important it gets to provide reference materials. The need, as usual, is for more empirical research; and here again, the science of linguistics is going to be highly relevant. Meanwhile, the extent to which a dictionary provides you with a reasonable coverage of the vocabulary of the English-speaking peoples as a whole, and

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doesn't just restrict itself to British or American usage, is a major factor to bear in mind when assessing its overall value.

But distinct from the question of regional variation, there is the equally important question of social variation. The English language has many varieties, or styles, which reflect different social purposes and standards. The difference between scientific, religious and legal English, for example, is an extremely important feature of the language, and the most striking differences are, of course, in vocabulary. Similarly, there are major lexical differences between the various levels of formality which operate in English—colloquial words, slang words, words with pompous overtones, words with pejorative overtones, and so on. Now, learning to speak or write English means, as much as anything else, learning to master many of these stylistic variations, for they are all part of the notion of "educated English speech;" and a dictionary should clearly indicate when a word has a restricted usage of this kind.

But there are other problems in interpreting and assessing available dictionaries, which we, as dictionary-users, should be aware of. How clear and memorizable is the system for indicating pronunciation? How well does the dictionary present idioms as well as single words? What kind of information about the grammatical function of words does the dictionary provide? What is it like on etymologies? One question for lexicographical research which is particularly intriguing is to what extent does a dictionary (*can* a dictionary) provide us with information about the semantic structure of our language? Now, by "semantic structure" here I mean the way in which the words of a language are linked to each other by relationships of meaning—define each other, if you like. Some of these meaning-relations are perfectly familiar: we talk about words being synonyms (that is, having the same meaning), or antonyms (being opposite in meaning), for example. What is sometimes forgotten is that part of knowing how to use a word, part of knowing its meaning, is to know what its synonyms and antonyms are. For instance: when you say that someone is "single," you know simultaneously that he is "not married." "Single" means "not married," and vice versa. A dictionary, then, which is supposed to be telling us everything about the meaning of words, should provide us with information of this kind, and point out those words which are synonymous or antonymous in meaning. But this is by no means an easy task. On the one hand, the concepts of synonymy and antonymy are more complex than they at first appear. Have a look at the big *Webster Dictionary of Synonyms* and you will see what I mean. On the other hand, there is the alphabetic principle to contend with—the fact that words are traditionally listed in a dictionary of English from A to Z. This provides a convenient means of reference, but results in some quite arbitrary distortions. "Uncle,"

for example, is placed at one end of the dictionary, "aunt" at the other, and their basic similarity in meaning is rarely pointed out. It would be far more illuminating if these two words could be defined together, assuming a practical method of doing so could be devised, and some dictionaries (such as the *Webster* in English, or the *Petit Robert* in French) have tried to do just this. This may not be such a difficult task when one only considers such simple pairs of words as "uncle" and "aunt"; but when one thinks of larger complexes of very similar, but not identical words, such as "force," "compel" and "constrain," and how these might best be defined in a single place in the dictionary, then the difficulties become more obvious, and it becomes clear that the surface of the problem has hardly been scratched.

I think I have said enough to suggest that dictionaries are a long way from being the infallible voices they have sometimes been made out to be: there is a great deal which remains to be done before a complete description of English vocabulary is achieved.

In conclusion, let me just mention two

practical methods for getting a healthy critical awareness for yourself about dictionaries. One method is to make sure that you have read the editor's introduction to the dictionary you habitually use, or the introduction to one of the big dictionaries, for here you will find a discussion of the principles on which the dictionary was written, and some indication of its limitations. Secondly, I strongly recommend getting into the habit of looking up words in more than one dictionary. A very instructive exercise is to take two dictionaries of about the same size, and go through a few items, word by word, to see how close the definitions, and so on are. You will be staggered, as I was, at the remarkable extent of the differences, even between the biggest dictionaries. Using techniques such as this, it is not difficult to make yourself well aware of the main problems which hinder the development of lexicography at the present time. Only when we have begun to understand the problems can we set about trying to find some answer and come to make our dictionaries more like good servants, and less like bad masters.