



## Johnson's Dictionary 250 years on

David Crystal

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 - exhilaration 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 all lexicographers.

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 *tripe*, 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 doddle. 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



words using UN- - *unshout*, *uncurse*, *unsex*... over 300 of them, in fact? Johnson deals with UN- words really well. He devotes 66 pages to them.

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.findout.tv](http://www.findout.tv), 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, if it is 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 these days than at any other time in the past century. 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 totally unfair. Even if you have never studied the *Dictionary*, as such, you will probably have encountered some of its definitions, because they have entered most popular books of quotations. He is the most quoted figure after Shakespeare. So most people are aware that he defined lexicographers as harmless drudges, and that he was apparently rude about excisemen and the Scots. A few months ago, the *Independent* published a double-page spread celebrating the anniversary - all praise to them for that - but the myths abound in it.

Take, for example, the view that Johnson's definitions were eccentric. This is what the newspaper article authors say: 'Though generally admired, Johnson's idiosyncratic definitions were criticised'. Well yes, there are a number of definitions which have achieved a certain degree of notoriety due to the personal opinions they express. There is nothing new about this: Boswell was the first to point them out. Characterizing them as instances of 'capricious and humorous indulgence', he lists *Tory*, *Whig*, *pension*, *oats*, *excise*, 'and a few more' - by which he means such entries as *lexicographer*, *patron*, *leader* (sense 4), *reformation* and *reformer*, *aleconner*, *palmistry*, and *stockjobber*. As a characteristic of Johnson's lexicography, though, their fame far exceeds their significance. Although there are judgemental nuances scattered throughout the book, in my view there are *less than twenty* really idiosyncratic definitions in the whole work - out of 42,773 entries (in the first edition) and 140, 871 definitions. The most famous definition of all - *oats* defined as 'grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people' - was almost certainly one of those in-jokes that lexicographers love to bury in their



books. It would have been no more than a friendly dig at his amanuenses, five of whom, as Boswell points out, were from Scotland, and whose influence is reflected in dozens of allusions to Scottish English throughout the *Dictionary*. A similar sympathy pervades his famous definition of *lexicographer*. I have never met one of these individuals who did not delight in the characterization of their profession as 'harmless drudgery'.

Then take the supposed 'difficulty' of his definitions. That newspaper article said, of his definition of *network*: 'One of today's most fashionable buzzwords famously confounded Johnson when he attempted a definition: "Anything reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections".' And people are often presented with his definition of *cough* as another instance: 'A convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity'. Here too the role such definitions play in the *Dictionary* has been exaggerated, for there are only a couple of dozen of them. And here, as in so many other ways, Johnson anticipated his critics:

sometimes easier words are changed into harder, as *burial* into *sempulture* or *interment*, *drier* into *desiccative*, *dryness* into *siccidity* 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 *reti-*; *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*



An errand; any thing committed to another to be told to a third.

His definitions are often elegant, such as this one of *history*:

A narration of events and facts delivered with dignity

They can also be humorous, such as his cheeky alliteration in *heresiarch*:

A leader in heresy; the head of a herd of hereticks.

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, orrery, shaw*), occasional observations about other English dialects (*amper, atter, haver, onset*), and above all usages from Scottish English (*mow, scamblor, sponk*), which are common enough to suggest that his amanuenses were being used for far more than their copy-writing skills.

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 *armisonous, fopdoodle, merrythought, and pandiculation*. Anyone who encounters *merrythought*, 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, tut*). The latter never attract the attention of the journalist. Nor do his inclusion of social locutions (*howd'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 be given spaces (*welldone, wellmet, whitewine*). Words ending in *-c* were routinely spelled *-ck* (*acrostick, antick, comick*): 'The English never use *c* at the end of a word' says the opening entry at letter *K*. That rule died out quite soon after. The choice between final *-l* and *-ll* was still in flux: *downfal* but *pitfall*, *petrol* but *comptroll*. So was the choice between *-or* and *-our*: *confessor* and *inheritor* alongside *oratour* and *possessour*. Johnson often comments on the variation. And for those who have been influenced by *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, it is worth noting that Johnson spelled the plural of words ending in *-o* with an apostrophe *s*. *Potato's* was normal, in those days. Eat your heart out, Lynne Truss.



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.



OATS. *n. f.* [Aren, Saxon.] A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people. It is of the grafs leaved tribe; the flowers have no petals, and are disposed in a loose panicle: the grain is eatable. The meal makes tolerable good bread. *Miller.*  
The *oats* have eaten the horses. *Shakespeare.*  
It is bare mechanism, no otherwise produced than the turning of a wild *oatbeard*, by the infinnuation of the particles of moifture. *Locke.*  
For your lean cattle, fodder them with barley straw first, and the *oat* straw last. *Mortimer's Husbandry.*  
His horse's allowance of *oats* and beans, was greater than the journey required. *Swift.*

Definition of oats from the first edition of the Dictionary, published in 1755.