

INTRODUCTION

THE first edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* was commissioned in 1906 and published in June 1911, the month of King George V's coronation and a few weeks after the launching of the *Titanic*. It was edited by the brothers Henry and George Fowler from their cottage in the Channel Islands, and drew on the work that had been done for the great historical account of English, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which after twenty-five years had reached letter R. But the *Concise* was not simply an abridgement: it was a completely different kind of dictionary, one that sought primarily to cover the language of its own time.

Dictionary compilers, more than the average person, have to be aware of the linguistic climate of their time. If their dictionary is to sell, it must meet a need, and that need will be partly defined not only by the way their intended readers use language but also by the way they think about it. To see why the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* developed its distinctive character, accordingly, we need to appreciate the context in which the Fowlers were working. What linguistic issues were fascinating and bothering people in 1911?

I do not know a better source of information about British sociolinguistic history than the pages of *Punch* magazine, and Mr Punch and his associates have a great deal to say about language in the two volumes (140 and 141) that appeared in 1911. Every issue draws attention to the distinction between standard and non-standard English, in both articles and cartoons. This was a theme which had steadily grown in prominence in Victorian England, with the language of both ends of the class spectrum satirized. There are dozens of cartoon captions presenting stereotypical regional dialects and accents, especially those of London, Ireland, and Scotland. In the issue of 1 February we see a cockney spiv holding a card advertising a new product: 'Improve Your Position, Pronouncing Dictionary, 20,000 words, One Penny'. The caption reads: 'Ere y'are, Gents, now's yer chawnce, the grite pronouncin' dicshunry'. At the other extreme, in the issue of 19 July we find a cartoon headed 'Gems of Language', showing Ethel and Di just returned from a hockey match:

Ethel: Well, Gran, we've had a topping game. The other side were bally rotten at the start, but they bucked up no end, and we had a bit of a job to lay 'em out.

Di: Oh, I don't know. I thought they were the most piffling crew of footlers I'd ever struck. We were simply all over 'em, and had 'em in the cart in no time.

That issue was a retrospective, marking *Punch's* seventieth year, and it reviewed the major events of previous decades. Developments in upper-class slang were evidently one of the major features of the 1870s:

In 1871 we first find the adjective 'awful' entering upon an existence which it has not yet quitted, in spite of many successful rivals; in 1874 'quite' joined it as an indispensable part of smart speech; in 1876 the right people were expressing their thanks in the phrase, 'Ta, awfully ta' while at the end of the period, in 1880, 'utter' and 'too too' began their brief but hectic reign.

And interest in the way in which the 'right people' spoke was just as strong in the early 1900s.

The coronation in June 1911 prompted *Punch* to explore another dimension of public linguistic concern: the rise of Americanisms. This is something which had bothered Henry Alford, in *A Plea for the Queen's English*, half a century before (p.6):

Look ... at the process of deterioration which our Queen's English has undergone at the hands of the Americans. Look at those phrases which so amuse us in their speech and books; at their reckless exaggeration, and contempt for congruity.

The issue of 31 May 1911 began a series called *Cocktail Colloquies, or, English as She is Going to be Spoke at the Coronation*. Noting 'the thousands of Americans who are preparing to be in London for the Coronation', the writer observes that 'the argot of Broadway and Market Street will be heard in the land, from the drawing-rooms of Mayfair to the *purlicious* of the Mile End Road', and reports 'its effect on a receptive London' in a hypothetical dialogue between Lady Arabelle Tinterne and the Countess of Glastonbury. Lady Arabella's opening remarks illustrate the way Mr Punch sees things going forward:

Why, Mandy Glastonbury, if you ain't a sight for sore eyes! Set you right down there and take your bonnet off! 'Twernt only last night I was sayin' to Lord Hanko, 'Hank, I says, it seems a coon's age since Mandy and Gus was around.' And Hank said he reckoned as

you all had gotten so chesty since Gus got the title you was figurin' to shake a couple of back numbers like us.

And the dialogue continues with a host of Americanisms such as *joshing*, *spiel*, and *gabfest*. Two further pieces illustrate the influence of American English in all walks of life—on members of the Guards Club (7 June) and even on street costermongers (14 June), one of whom is told to move on by a policeman:

Ain't I 'urryin', yer big stiff? Think you've got a lead-pipe cinch,
don't yer, blockin' the sidewalk with yer feet and wavin' yer mitt to
the swells in the rubber-neck wagons?

This unbridled mixing of dialects was well beyond the bounds of possibility, but the fact that *Punch* felt able to include such a series of articles suggests there was a real awareness of American English in British society. In its issue of 8 March the magazine even included a poetic review of the latest Webster dictionary, pointing out that it had omitted several everyday British expressions:

Yet Time has changed a lot, omniscient Sir,
Some things that to our vulgar vision lie plain
Had never had occasion to occur
Within your knowledge—sample I, the Biplane;
In those far days they simply ran to kites.
The local WILBUR WRIGHTS.

The biograph, the motor-bus, the ski,
The tube, the tubal lift, the fleet Marconi,
Were still undreamed in your philosophy,
Contemporaneous with the tyrant BONEY;
And yet on these our daily souls are fed -
On these, and Standard Bread.

(The *Daily Mail* had published a manifesto in January 1911, signed by prominent members of the medical establishment, condemning the chemical treatment of bread to make it appear white, and campaigning—ultimately with great success—for a bread made of uniform standard quality.) The Fowlers' dictionary included all of these items apart from *motor-bus* (though it has *motor-car*) and *Marconi* (though it has *marconigram*).

The satirical focus on regional variation, slang, and everyday speech of course had its academic antecedents. The Early English Text Society was founded in 1864. The English Dialect Society began publishing its regional volumes in 1873. The International Phonetic Association was formed in 1886 and presented its first phonetic alphabet two years later. The Philological Society (established in 1858, the year Henry Fowler was born) began its first major project—what would become the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary*—in 1879, and Joseph Wright published his six-volume *English Dialect Dictionary* between 1898 and 1905.

The first decade of the twentieth century was in many ways a linguistic turning point. The language world of the previous century had been intellectually dominated by Indo-European philology, but this was about to change. In 1910, for example, Joseph Wright published his *Grammar of the Gothic Language*, one of dozens of such works from the period providing meticulous detail on the Indo-European languages of the past. In the same year Franz Boas published his illustrative sketch of *Chinook*, showing the new interest in modern languages outside the Indo-European family, and Ferdinand de Saussure presented his third course of lectures on general linguistics—part of a series which would eventually be published by his students in 1916, after his death, and which laid the foundations of modern linguistics. A descriptive ethos was growing, which was influencing lexicographers as well as phoneticians and grammarians.

Change was also on the horizon in relation to the prescriptive tradition which had governed language teaching in schools for 150 years. Reports being made to the Board of Education were increasingly critical of the time being wasted on what was perceived to be an outmoded and irrelevant English grammar. Grammar had not been compulsory in British primary schools since 1890, and secondary schools were doing little more than recycling old material, some of which dated from the 1700s. A decade later, the 1921 Newbolt Report on the teaching of English went so far as to say that uncertainty about the facts of usage made it 'impossible to teach English grammar in the schools'. And a Board of Education report a couple of years later reaffirmed the situation, saying that it is 'impossible at the present juncture to teach English grammar in the schools for the simple reason that no-one knows exactly what it is'.

The Fowlers were thus writing at a time when the prescriptive approach to language was beginning to lose its dominance—and, as a consequence, attracting fresh levels of support from the literary elite. Their *King's English*,

with its aim of inculcating 'positive literary virtues' and eradicating 'negative virtues', especially those encountered in newspapers (Preface), had been widely acclaimed. Published in 1906, its second edition (1908) had three reprintings by 1911. Both Henry and Frank are listed as members of the Society for Pure English, founded in 1913, whose opening Tract (publication delayed until 1919 because of the war) spoke out strongly in favour of preserving traditional values:

The ideal of the Society is that our language in its future development should be controlled by the forces and processes which have formed it in the past ... The Society, therefore, will place itself in opposition to certain tendencies of modern taste; which taste it hopes gradually to modify and improve.

What is initially surprising, then, is to encounter in the *Concise* a dictionary that is so modern, descriptive, and inclusive in character. One wonders what the members of the SPE felt when they encountered the 'general tendency to the colloquial' in the illustrative examples, or what they would have made of the Fowlers' 'test of currency' that led them 'to diverge in the opposite direction from the practice usual in dictionaries of this size; if we give fewer scientific and technical terms, we admit colloquial, facetious, slang, and vulgar expressions with freedom, merely attaching a cautionary label.'

The editors were evidently well aware that the people who would buy their dictionary were not the same as they used to be: the 'well-informed members of the modern newspaper-reading public'. That public was changing. A new popular genre of newspapers had appeared in the previous fifteen years: the *Daily Mail* in 1896, the *Daily Mirror* in 1903, the *Daily Sketch* in 1909, and the *Daily Herald* in 1911. Although still a long way from the tabloidese of the present day, these papers were certainly more colloquial in tone, as illustrated by these headlines in a *Daily Sketch* story (11 April 1914):

Cards as a cure for cursing
 Clergyman advocates 'patience' as a nerve soother
 A recreation for workhouse inmates
 Thin end of the wedge

If a dictionary was to be perceived as relevant, in 1911, it would have to reflect the greater informality of the age, and the Fowlers' use of 'cautionary labels' is one of the consequences.

The labels *slang* and *colloq(uial)* are a major feature of the *Concise*, as also are *facet(ious)* and *dial(ectal)*. Almost all of the colloquial expressions used by Ethel and Di are included, and labelled 'slang': *buck up, in the cart, lay out, rotten, strike*. *Footlers* and *piffing* aren't given as headwords, but *footle* and *piffle* are. *Topping* is found under *top*. The only word from their conversation that is missing is *bally*—surprisingly so, because they had dared to include *bloody* as an intensifying word, glossing it as 'confoundedly, very'. Three years later, Mrs Patrick Campbell would cause a sensation by uttering the word on the stage for the first time in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. The Fowlers were there first.

Also surprising, given the attitude of the time, is the number of American words included in the dictionary. Most of the regional expressions in the *Cocktail Colloquies* (*cinch, gotten, spiel* ...) are not there, but we do find (labelled U.S.) *coon* ('sly fellow'), *sidewalk*, and *swell*, as well as the idioms *back number* and *sight for sore eyes*, and there are over 200 other Americanisms in the dictionary (such as *back of*, the US use of *billion*, *brer* [=brother], *caboodle*, and [railway] *car*). Fifty years later, Philip Gove would cause another lexicographical sensation by including *ain't* in his *Third New Webster's International Dictionary*. Again, the Fowlers were there first. And their entry is illuminating, showing the way nineteenth-century usage was changing at the time: '*ain't, an't*, for *am not* is sometimes held vulgar; *ain't* for *is not, are not*, is wrong'. Only 'sometimes', note.

The *Concise* broke new ground in many ways. Several entries reflect the English of other parts of the world than Britain and the US, such as Australia (e.g. *billy, bush*). They anticipate the approach to vocabulary in modern dictionaries by making cross-references between words 'for the purpose of contrast, distinction, correlation, or the like' (e.g. *slander/libel, mortise/tenon*). In their attention to the 'common words' of the language and the use of illustrative sentences, they follow the tradition that began with Johnson and was continuing with the unabridged *OED*. However, they depart from Johnson in their selection methods: 'these sentences often are, but still more often are not, quotations from standard authors.' This individualistic approach can be seen at several places in the Preface, even to the extent of departing from their highly respected senior

colleagues: 'in the choice or rejection of alternative pronunciations the OED has always been consulted, but is not always followed.'

The *Concise* indeed shows that Henry and Frank Fowler were great individualists, introducing an innovative approach to lexicography which had parallels with some of the other creative linguistic thinkers of the late nineteenth century, such as Lewis Carroll (with his language games), the Dorset writer William Barnes (who in 1878 made his case for maintaining the Anglo-Saxon character of English in his *Outline of English Speech-Craft*), and Isaac Pitman (who in 1873 founded his Phonetic Institute in Bath, advocating the importance of shorthand and spelling reform—a cause later taken up by George Bernard Shaw). We thus might have expected *Punch* to have taken notice of the new publication, given that 'Mr Punch's Staff of Learned Clerks' had subjected *The King's English* to some light-hearted ridicule in its issue of 6 June 1906, but curiously there is no allusion made to the brothers in 1911, nor to the *Concise*. However, Mr Punch must have owned a copy, for in due course he alludes to it in a manner that suggests it had already become the established desk dictionary. In the issue of 5 November 1919, in a review of a novelist's latest work, we read:

I think she would do well to keep the Oxford abridged dictionary at her elbow and question her more ambitious adjectives.

It was advice which millions would eventually follow.