

# Crypto-bilinguals

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A. P. Cowie, editor

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF  
ENGLISH LEXICOGRAPHY  
Volume One: General-purpose Dictionaries  
Volume Two: Specialized Dictionaries  
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“There is properly no history; only biography”, said Emerson, in an essay on “History”. And this book might just as well have been called “The Oxford History of English Lexicographers”. But if this name conjures up an image of dry, dusty donkey work, fuelled perhaps by Samuel Johnson’s characterization of dictionary-writers as “harmless drudges” and reinforced by early pictures of compilers with long beards standing by piles of paper, then think again. The story of English dictionaries is not only a history of headwords, definitions, etymologies, pronunciations and new editions; it is also a history of (to take some of the words that turn up in these pages) polemic, nepotism, envy, arrogance and punitive damages. There have been at least two “dictionary wars” between rival companies. And dictionary writing can lead compilers into uncharted and dangerous worlds. Witness the Milners, who in the 1970s researched a book on the slang and cant of the British underworld by posing as an erotic dancer and her pimp.

We tend to take dictionaries for granted, and don’t reflect on how the compilers obtain their data. Nor do we often get a chance to look behind the closed doors to see the scholarly debates (rows) that take place over whether certain words and senses should be included – especially sensitive words to do with sex or race. By focusing on the people who do this work, the *Oxford History of English Lexicography* (OHEL) illustrates the fascination, sense of achievement, challenge and frustration involved in high-quality lexicography. It can take six months to complete an entry on a complex word such as “do”. Frustration? When James Murray took up his post as editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) in 1879, one of the first things he did was try to establish the whereabouts of the material that had already been compiled (one and three quarter tons of it). Where were the slips on the PA- section of the alphabet, which a note said had been “part done”? It took a year to track down the brother of the man who had been writing them. He was found in Ireland, where he had been using the material to light his fires.

A. P. Cowie must have had similar moments in editing the two volumes of this impressive work. He has performed a great labour of lexicographical love. A lexicographer of no mean repute, he has organized a team of thirty-five lexicographers to write about several hundred others who have written about their work as well as performing it. This is meta-meta-meta-lexicography. And the result is informative, illuminating, fascinating, and – in one respect – frustrating.

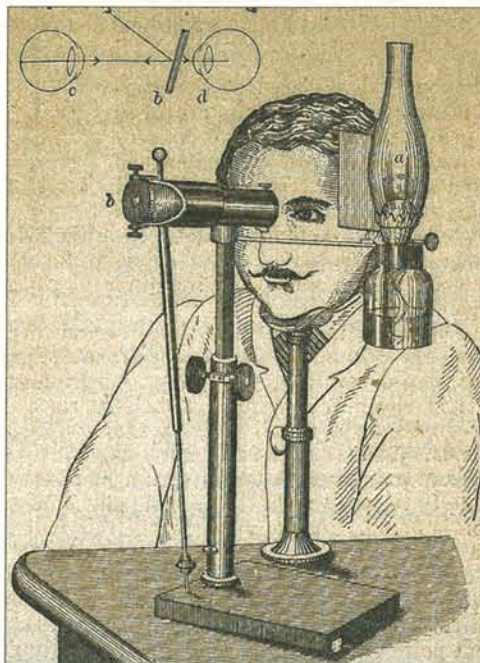
The field is divided into two. Volume One deals with general purpose dictionaries – the sort of everyday dictionary kept on the shelf for looking up words and meanings. Volume Two deals with specialized dictionaries, designed to meet a particular interest. It is a sensible distinction, which produces remarkably little duplication. Both volumes have a chronological structure. This might seem the obvious choice for “history”, but, in fact, there are many ways in which a topical volume might be organized. In the field of scien-

tific and technical dictionaries, topics such as chemistry, botany and physics could be presented in virtually any order. But a historical perspective makes it possible to see the way dictionaries reflected (and sometimes stimulated) the advances made in scientific knowledge.

Volume One is divided into two main parts. Part One takes up the first third of the book, beginning with the earliest glossaries in Old and Middle English. Three chapters show the way English bilingual dictionaries developed in the Renaissance, and then changed their character as Latin declined, national languages grew in importance, and English emerged as an international language. The chapters are organized language by language (dictionaries of English–French, English–German, etc; for some unexplained reason, English–Russian is given a separate chapter). Why did bilingual dictionaries come first? As Werner Hülsen succinctly puts it: “It is the aim of dictionaries to explain the various properties of a language to those who do not know them”. There is a natural development from bilingual dictionaries to dictionaries of “hard words” (Hülsen calls them “crypto-bilingual”), and eventually to comprehensive monolingual dictionaries.

The much larger Part Two begins with these dictionaries of “hard words”, which appeared in the early seventeenth century, and traces their evolution into the encyclopedic dictionaries of the later part of the century – a period when dictionaries became folio size to grace the libraries of gentry. The eighteenth century saw the first “universal” dictionaries, which aimed to include all words (not just the “hard” ones). The stage was set for the first modern English dictionary, Dr Johnson’s – modern because it introduced a policy of describing words and their meanings with reference to the realities of usage. Excellent chapters by Sidney Landau, Lynda Mugglestone and Charlotte Brewer take us respectively through the later developments in American dictionaries, the arrival of the OED, and the supplements which followed. There are chapters on regional, Scots, Caribbean, period (e.g. Old English, Middle English) and electronic dictionaries.

Volume Two, dealing with specialized dictionaries, has a much wider remit – also dealt with in two sections. Part One takes up two-thirds of the book – unsurprisingly so, since it covers dictionaries of synonyms, scientific dictionaries, dictionaries of place names and personal names, pronouncing dictionaries, and dictionaries of idioms, quotations, etymology, dialect, slang and cant. Each heading opens up a world. Even an apparently straightforward notion, such as a



The “auto-ophthalmoscope”; from *The Practical Dictionary of Mechanics* by Edward H. Knight, c1877

“dictionary of quotations”, turns out to be a diverse and contentious domain, as Elizabeth Knowles well demonstrates. The second part of Volume Two examines dictionaries specialized according to users and uses. There are chapters on usage dictionaries (Fowler, Partridge et al), American college dictionaries, the earliest dictionaries for those learning English as a foreign language, and electronic dictionaries, as well as separate chapters on two of the milestones in learner dictionaries – the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE) and the COBUILD (Collins Birmingham University International Language Database) dictionaries.

All dictionaries have two dimensions: coverage and treatment. How good is the coverage of the field of OHEL? The aim is global, in relation to English, and very well reflects what has been going on in the UK, the United States, Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the Caribbean. However, no reference is made to the proliferation of dictionary projects in other parts of the English-speaking world, such as Singapore and Nigeria, especially those dealing with local pidgins and creoles, or mixed varieties such as Singlish. There is also a curious restriction in the coverage of nomenclatures. The first collections of technical terms were “renaissance” in character, and routinely called by such names as a “Dictionary of Arts and Sciences”. Harris’s *Lexicon Technicum* of 1705 included painting, sculpture, grammar, poetry, and other humanities alongside the sciences. But the chapter which here explores this domain confines itself to scientific and technical dictionaries. Admittedly, it is a large field – Michael Hoare estimates 2,000 dictionaries in the British Library Science section – but that is no reason for omitting any coverage of the other areas. The omission evidently struck the general editor too, for Hoare tells us in a footnote that, “at the editor’s request”, he included a more cursory treatment of two of these topics:

music and law. But why only these? They are said to be of “exceptional interest”, yet they do not seem to be any more exceptional than, say, religion or literature, which also have large nomenclatures.

It is important to note areas not covered, because it would be easy to think a work of this size was comprehensive. The OHEL is certainly more comprehensive than anything else around, and I can’t see how the coverage of Volume One could be much improved, but Volume Two is patchy. It has nothing on children’s dictionaries, for instance, a very important domain. Catchphrases and proverbs are mentioned only in passing. Quotations as a whole are well covered, but thematically restricted collections, such as biblical, scientific, or Shakespearean quotations, are not. Similarly, no reference is made to the small-scale local dialect dictionaries compiled by knowledgeable local enthusiasts and on sale in tourist spots, or the humorous dialect books (such as the Strine series on Australian English), whose aims raise interesting socio-linguistic issues.

Another weakness that struck me was the way certain publishing houses have been given short shrift. Hardly any mention is made of the distinctive mainstream Chambers dictionaries, for instance, whose role in popular use has been significant (not least among Scrabble-players). Nor does Penguin get much of a look-in. Aside from its role in making a huge number of thematic dictionaries available to a mass-market readership, it has produced some interesting products, such as the *Penguin Wordmaster Dictionary*; and its series of English bilingual dictionaries was innovative in its attempt to establish a common strategy among the different language editors. Also, apart from LDOCE, the creative publications from Longman, such as Tom McArthur’s *Lexicon* and the *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, are left in the wings. It is odd. Longman is hardly a newcomer to lexicography; after all, the firm did publish Johnson.

The OHEL could have been more up to date. Given the expertise of the contributors, all of whom know a great deal about what is “going on” in lexicography, it is a pity that no reference is made to the latest editions and forthcoming innovations. The book reads as if it went to press in 2006. Examples of recent innovations include the fifth edition of LDOCE, published in 2009, which makes novel use of collocation and thesaurus panels; and the amazing OED historical thesaurus, due out later this year, might have been noted, given that the project has been on the stocks since the 1960s.

Turning now to treatment: a nice feature is the way most contributors provide a succinct introduction to their field before they go on to discuss the dictionaries in particular. Hans Sauer’s exposition of glossary nomenclature and Patrick Hanks’s account of personal naming practices are both excellent. Cowie has done a good job of ensuring that the chapters run on well, with only the barest minimum of overlap – not an easy task, especially across two volumes with different orientations. The writing is clear, the organization of chapters helpful, and the references usefully divided into “dictionaries” and “other”. I would have liked to see more reproductions of dictionary extracts or pages. Volume One has eight illustrations, in just three chapters. Volume Two

is somewhat better, with thirty-three. But this is a book which cries out for illustrations, to avoid the lengthy verbal descriptions of lay-out.

One problem with a historically or thematically organized account of a subject is that critical issues which cut across times and topics can be missed. There should have been a final chapter, or maybe even a Volume Three, on questions of evaluation. Several issues come to mind. Inter-dictionary borrowing turns up at different times and places, and is always contentious: some contributors talk gently about one dictionary "drawing upon" another; others harangue about plagiarism. The question of sources is raised in several places: which sources, literary or otherwise, do lexicographers use to find their words and senses? The *OED*, for example, had an over-reliance on Shakespeare, and questions of elitism are still being raised. Women's writing has been seriously under-represented, as Charlotte Brewer points out. There are many such matters which deserve separate treatment. In particular, the question of electronic data in lexicography needs thorough discussion. As Sidney Landau says: "the Internet has radically altered the dictionary business in two fundamental ways: in the way research is done and in the way dictionaries are written". I agree. So why is there no separate chapter on this? "Radically altered" is serious. Landau has a brief but useful discussion of some of the problems – such as the loss of continuity and experience which fol-

lows the break-up of lexicographical teams – but it is tucked away at the end of his chapter. Other chapters raise e-issues too. The huge problems presented by the unsourced, undated character of Wiki-dictionary entries are given only the briefest of mentions here. Students are abandoning traditional dictionaries in huge numbers, and going online. What of their future? Admittedly, this is an Oxford "History", but the future needs management guidelines, and it is possible that some could have come from these pages.

The questions come tumbling in. What is the quality of e-data? Are dictionaries going to use it more? Already we have a spoken as well as a written dimension to the internet. How is this going to affect lexicographic method? Traditionally, dictionaries include usages only if they appear in written form. How does the internet affect this tradition? How do the greater storage facilities of the internet motivate the creation of a "super-dictionary", hinted at by Murray in his notion of a "pan-lexicon" of all varieties of English. (This was a favourite theme of Laurence Urdang, who organized several seminars on this topic a few decades ago.) The *OHEL* doesn't go into this, and its account of some recent trends, especially in relation to the links between applied linguistics and lexicography, is inadequate. Why did the Longman family become so linguistically sophisticated so early? It mentions that Randolph Quirk was a linguistic adviser, certainly, but doesn't go on to say that he was chair of an advisory panel

called Longlex (later Linglex), formed in the late 1970s, whose members included several leading linguists, such as Geoffrey Leech, John Wells, and myself, who met regularly to debate lexical issues and advise. Several innovations came directly out of those meetings. Also missing is any discussion of the influence on dictionary-making of theoretical lexicography, and of the academic societies which have grown up around the subject (such as Euralex).

There is a huge amount of information in these two volumes – if you can find it. This, I'm afraid, is the source of the frustration I mentioned earlier. The index to the *OHEL* badly lets us down. There are seventeen pages of index for 887 pages of text – less than 2 per cent. I wouldn't expect an index for a book of this scale to be less than 5 per cent. In particular, for a book focusing so much on people, I would expect to see a comprehensive index of every person mentioned. And hardly anyone is. I repeatedly found myself wondering, as I read, if someone was going to be mentioned – the Anglo-Saxonist William Barnes, for example, or Laurence Urdang. I looked them up in the index and didn't find them, and assumed not. Then, as I read on, I came across them.

I learnt my lesson. I did a couple of random samples, and found on each page only one out of the dozen or so names listed in the index. The story of the redoubtable Moore, Meech and Whitehall of Middle English Dictionary fame is told over a couple of pages, but none is in the index. If you wanted to check the

points I made earlier about the mention of publishers, you wouldn't be able to do so, as they aren't listed. Dictionary titles are only sporadically indexed. It is immensely frustrating. I wanted to check a point about the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, but I didn't make a note of the page where it was mentioned, and it is not in the index. I never knew there was another Samuel Johnson who wrote a schools dictionary in America in the late eighteenth century. I have just remembered that, and I'd like to check the exact date before including the fact in this review. But again, he isn't in the index and I'm not going to read the whole book again.

Why the publishers did not have a proper index is a real puzzle. It isn't as if they were short of space. The same seventeen-page index is printed twice, once in each volume. The redundant seventeen pages could have been far more usefully employed. Each volume has the preface reprinted too, as if the publishers couldn't decide whether they were dealing with one book or two. The *OHEL* is potentially invaluable, for its well-chosen team of specialists have brought together more historical points of detail than ever before. However, few people will read this book from beginning to end. Most, I suspect, will want to use it like an encyclopedia, looking things up as points occur to them, and wanting to trace ideas across chapters and volumes. But they can't do this without a proper index. Perhaps, like a good dictionary, we'll see an index supplement to this work one day.