

## 6 The *Oxford English Dictionary* and Its Historical Principles

On 6 June 1928 the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon. Stanley Baldwin, at a banquet in the Goldsmiths' Hall to celebrate the completion of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, proposed the health of the editors and staff of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. His central point was put in question-and-answer form:

What was the genesis of this great work? It was this: it was the desire to record and to safeguard and to establish for all time the manifold riches of the English tongue.

In the same month the Delegates of the Oxford University Press, in the customary manner of the time, issued a statement about the nature of the book they had just published:

It is perhaps less generally appreciated that what makes the Dictionary unique is its historical method; it is a Dictionary not of our English, but of all English: the English of Chaucer, of the Bible, and of Shakespeare is unfolded in it with the same wealth of illustration as is devoted to the most modern authors.<sup>1</sup>

Both statements have the forcefulness, but also the weaknesses, of a manifesto.

Apparently Edward Elgar once said, 'the people yearn for things that can stir them'. I believe this to be profoundly true, and I believe too that, in the right hands, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a work that can satisfy this yearning.

In 1972, on the day in which Volume 1 (A–G) of the *Supplement to the OED* was published, Miss Marghanita Laski prophetically declared:

The *OED* is still – just – a working tool that is deservedly a world-famous glory of English culture. Soon now it will be a magnificent fossil.<sup>2</sup>

What is the true nature of this great work set in train by Archbishop Trench and brought into being by James Augustus Henry Murray and his colleagues and associates? Is it – should it be – simply a record of the language? Has its presence in any way safeguarded the language? Has it established the manifold riches of the English tongue? Is it now a magnificent fossil?

I cannot hope in a short space to answer these questions. But the questions themselves point the way towards the nature of this book, which is, without doubt, the greatest dictionary of modern times, and the most influential.

Before James Murray set to work in the 1870s English lexicography had been marked by the publication of numerous pleasing works of undoubted usefulness but of unpleasing insufficiency. From Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall of English Wordes* in 1604 to Charles Richardson's *A New Dictionary of the English Language* in 1836–7 English vocabulary was presented in handsome volumes of various sizes, with greater prominence given to 'hard' words than to 'easy' ones, and with fluctuating and often meagre attention given to matters now seen to be of central importance. The least satisfactory dictionary of the period was, not surprisingly, the first, Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall*. But the name of its compiler, Robert Cawdrey, the Rutland schoolmaster, will stand for ever in reference books as a pioneer figure, his fame secure, as the first Englishman to place English words in alphabetical order, with explanatory definitions, usually just near-synonyms, written in the same language. In the decade in which William Shakespeare was writing the most brilliant plays of all time, English lexicography was moving and stumbling on infant legs, tentative and directionless, and with no power to illuminate or assist anyone but foreigners, and, it would appear, ladies from whom the more demanding aspects of education had been withheld.

The slow expansion of the art of lexicography has been set down in various places, and in particular by Sir James Murray himself in his Romanes lecture *The Evolution of English Lexicography* (1900), and by the American scholars Starnes and Noyes in their book *The English*

*Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson* (1946). It need not be repeated here except to characterize it as a period when, step by step, the essential ingredients of a satisfactory dictionary were gradually identified and then brought into being. These ingredients have turned out to be:

- (a) Head words, or lemmata, placed for the most part in strict alphabetical order.
- (b) Pronunciation(s) in some agreed system, normally now a version of the IPA.
- (c) The etymology or derivation of each word, that is, taking back the current shape or spelling of each word to its earliest form in English, and the establishment of its cognates in other Germanic languages, or, if it is a loan-word, of its form in the borrowed-from language.
- (d) A definition or definitions of each word and of each meaning of words that have more than one, with a structured lineal plan of the meanings, set out either in chronological order, or in logical order, or in a combination of both.
- (e) Illustration of the definitions by quotations which support and confirm the definitions while adding contextual dimensions of their own. The illustrative quotations also have the secondary function of demonstrating to discriminating users that senses of words are never totally isolable or exclusive, but are conveniently arranged segments drawn from a merged and continuous chain of meanings and applications.
- (f) An array of labels of convenience – *archaic*, *dialectal*, *slang*, *temporary*, and so on – as reinforcing agents and helpful signposts.

Very few dictionaries have all six features. And the only dictionary which has aimed to present them all for all English-speaking areas is the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Sir James Murray and his colleagues established a model for all time. Whenever I have cause to examine the competing models, the great historical dictionaries of Germany, Sweden, Holland, and France, the only countries so far to have embarked on and completed or nearly completed multi-volume dictionaries of this kind, the superiority of Murray's techniques and of the layout of his page is clear. By one practical test or another the *OED* emerges as the most ambitious and the most successful treatment of a national language ever undertaken.

I should like to place emphasis on the value of the *OED* as a permanent record of the central vocabulary of the language from the

Anglo-Saxon period until the present day. Its limitations are well known and are often tiresomely and sometimes unfairly set down by scholars unaccustomed to the historical method of lexicography, or unpersuaded of its virtues. For example, the *OED* excluded some well-defined areas of vocabulary, among them Anglo-Saxon words that were not attested after 1150 – words like *dædfruma*, 'doer of deeds', *dæitu*, 'gentleness', and *dwildman*, 'heretic'. This particular exclusion left perhaps three-quarters of all surviving Old English words unrecorded in the dictionary. The shortcomings of the *OED* record for words of particular periods and from particular regions are also well known. For example, the vocabulary of the Middle English period, 1066 to about 1475, is being recorded in a much more ambitious way in the *Middle English Dictionary*, edited by H. Kurath, S. Kuhn, and later scholars at Ann Arbor. Similarly the distinctive elements of the vernacular English preserved in Scottish records from about 1475 until the present day turn out to be much more extensive than one could judge from the pages of the *OED*. *The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* and the *Scottish National Dictionary*, the latter already completed and the former with A–O completed and P begun, bear witness to the relative incompleteness of the *OED*. It has also been demonstrated, especially by Jürgen Schäfer in his *Documentation in the OED* (Oxford, 1980), that the works of some authors, for example Shakespeare, were more thoroughly excerpted by the contributors (quotation-gatherers) than the works of some others, for example, Thomas Nashe. All this is true. But it remains the case that the compilation of the *OED* made it possible for everyone to have before them the historical shape and configuration of the language, both its core and myriads of specialized peripheral components, from the eighth century AD to the present day.

Theodora Bynon<sup>3</sup> remarks that 'the speakers for whom a particular language serves as a means of communication are in general quite unaware of its historical dimension'. In broad terms this is inevitably true and always has been true. But those who are interested in the vocabulary of a particular period are now immeasurably better informed than they were before the *OED* and its supplementary volumes were prepared. Blurred beliefs and assumptions about the past meanings and history of words can now be corrected or qualified by reference to the disciplined and informative pages of the Dictionary. You may remember the 1950s, and you would probably be able to recall the main events

of that decade if given a little time to do so. Without the supplementary volumes to the *OED* it would be harder for you to recall or verify the date of first use of particular expressions. It was a decade marked by a new quest for personal freedom from authority and a casting aside of authority. The *beat generation* emerged (1952), *do-it-yourself* (1952), *angry young man* (1956), *consenting adult* (1957), *the pill* (1957), and *beatnik* (1958). The same search for freedom of expression was observable in the arts with the emergence of *action painting* and *abstract expressionism* in 1952 and *pop art* in 1957; also in music with the arrival of *rock and roll* in 1954, shortened to *rock* by 1957.

Space travel became a reality when the first sputnik was propelled into space in 1957. It was the period in which words like *blast-off* (1951), *countdown* (1953), *aerospace* (1958), *moon-shot* (1958), and *cosmonaut* (1959) entered the language and became as familiar as the language of the 1939–45 war had been. New inventions made their mark: the *adventure playground* (1953), *Ernie* (1956), the *geodesic dome* (1959) of Buckminster Fuller, *hovercraft* (1959), and *shrink-wrapping* (1959).

Computers began to make a significant impact: *hardware* is first recorded in 1953 – though curiously *software* has not been found before 1960 – and *data processing* in 1954.

It was the decade when we began to link up with Europe; thus *Eurovision* (1951), *Common Market* (1954), and *EEC* (1958). And it was the beginning of nuclear brinkmanship and of widespread opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The first record of the following words underlines these events: *Nato* (1950), *anti-missile missile* (1956), *brinkmanship* (1956), *Aldermaston marcher* (1958), *CND* (1958), *overkill* (1958), and *nuke* (1959).

*Transformational grammar* made its appearance, one of the most striking and the most short-lived grammatical schools in history, though a strong rearguard of scholars is still trying to work out why, actually and diagrammatically, 'John is eager to please' is different from 'John is easy to please', and whether 'Will they ever learn?' can be disambiguated from 'Will they never learn?'

It was the age of the word *psychedelic* and of drug-induced new experiences, of *Ms* written or said when the marital status of a woman was unknown, of *U* and *non-U*, and of C. P. Snow's famous *two cultures*. It was also the decade of the National Dairy Council's advertising slogan *Drink a pinta milka day*, and of the arrival of the word *privatiza-*

*tion*. The Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin introduced the concept of *illocutionary acts*.

The *OED* puts all this vocabulary into focus in such a way that future generations will have a permanent record of the linguistic innovations of the 1950s. The same is broadly true of every decade since the Middle Ages.

Theodora Bynon<sup>4</sup> said that we need the luxury of 'four or five centuries' of time to pass before it is possible to make a 'systematic study of [linguistic] change'. In some respects this is true. The abandonment of the complex arrangements called 'grammatical gender', for example, seems to have happened in some unmappable manner between the eighth century and the twelfth. The gradual loss of this feature is clear, but the detailed way in which it happened is probably no longer ascertainable. Other long-drawn-out changes, like the gradual disuse of the Old English perfective prefix *ge-*, and the displacement of *-inde/-ande/-ende* by *-ing* as the regular marker of the present participle, were similarly spread out, it would seem, over a very long period of time. Lexical change is usually more easily observable. Let me illustrate this briefly from the *OED*.

I have already mentioned some of the new words of the 1950s in terms of the historical events of that decade. By focusing on a particular letter of the alphabet some further observations can be made. Approximately ninety new expressions of the 1950s are listed in the letter O of Volume 3 (1982) of the *Supplement to the OED*. The largest group, not surprisingly, consists of technical terms from the sciences – *obruchevite* (Min.), *oligomer* (Chem.), *opioid* (Pharm.), *optoelectronics*, *orocline* (Geol.), *orphan virus* (Path.), and so on – and these, of course, lie outside the central and familiar core of the language. Computers brought the expressions *off-line* and *on-line*, terms now much more familiar than those in the previous group. Several common prefixes continued to generate new words during the decade: *off-beam*, *off-Broadway*, *off-campus*; *outpunch* and *outscore* (verbs); *overheat*, v. (of the economy), and *overkill*. Numerous general expressions made their way into the language: *Oedipus effect* (K. R. Popper), *old boy network*, *open heart surgery*, *organization man* (W. H. Whyte), *origami* (paperfolding), *Orwellian*, *outgoing*, adj. (extrovertish), *over-prescribe*, v., and *over-specify*, v. Each of these words is presented with full credentials and the whole apparatus of historical scholarship in this volume.

People who lived 200 years ago, that is, in the 1780s, had no such advantage. It would have been impossible for them to ascertain, except with all the imperfections and betrayals of memory, what words had come into the language in the 1750s. What, then, is the picture? With the aid of the *OED*, what can we determine to be the new words of the 1750s? In a quick experimental search I found approximately fifty new items of this decade listed under the letter O. Scientific words, somewhat to my surprise, again formed the largest group – e.g. *oblong* (Bot. and Ent.), *octahedral*, adj., *octandria* (Bot.) and derivatives, *oporice* (Pharm.), *orthoceratite* (Zool.), *oryctography* (Palaeontology), and *osculatory* (Math.). The prefixes *out-*, and *over-*, then as in the 1950s, produced a scattering of new formations: *outfort*, v., *out-lung*, v., *outpost*, *outpouring*, and *outsettler*; *over-delicacy* and *overstrain*, sb. *Off-* was apparently unproductive. The most noteworthy of the new words of the decade were *obsolescent* (which of us could have guessed when it came into use?), *obstruent*, adj., *obversely*, adv., *octopus*, *oddity*, *odds and ends*, and *optimism*. Curiously, two of the items first recorded from the 1750s are cited first from Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755). These are *obtension*, 'the action of obtending (alleging)', and *obstruent* used as an adjective ('obstructing'), both of them left by Johnson without a contextual example. And, even more curiously, Johnson used the word *obsolescent* in his entry for *hereout* but did not list it in its correct alphabetical place, a further illustration of the kind of irritating minor inconsistency that marred this great dictionary.

So far I have placed emphasis on the value of the *OED* as a permanent record of the language, a record not significantly diminished by the discoveries by scholars of unrecorded words, earlier examples, and the like. For most purposes the huge monument stands as a sufficiently complete record of the language of our predecessors. It is nevertheless no use pretending that it has an uncriticizable evenness of design and of execution from beginning to end.

In a paper elsewhere (*The Incorporated Linguist*, 1984: see p. 20 above), I dwelt a little on the inclusiveness of the *OED*, and in particular on the inclusion there of the whole vocabulary of medieval works like the *Peterborough Chronicle*, the *Ancrene Wisse*, the *Ormulum*, and the *Ayenbite of Inmyt*. It is clear that James Murray and his colleagues aimed at total inclusiveness when they dealt with the vocabulary of routine medieval works of this kind. They also attempted a concordancing of

the works of early writers like Chaucer, Malory, and Spenser. Any omissions were attributable to the frailty of the word collectors, not to deliberate design.

There were no exclusion zones, no censorings, no blindfoldings, except for the absence of two famous four-letter (sexual) words. Dr Murray, his colleagues, and his contributors had dredged up the whole of the accessible vocabulary of English (two words apart) and had done their best to record them systematically in the *OED*. (*Op. cit.*, p. 116)

From the time when this circumstance became clear to me I embarked on a similarly ambitious programme for the inclusion of the vocabulary of our greatest modern writers in the *Supplement to the OED*, among them T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Evelyn Waugh, W. H. Auden, and even Dylan Thomas and James Joyce (except for most of *Finnegans Wake*). This seems not to have been understood by one or two of the reviewers, those with little taste for *hapax legomena*, nonce words, and other inventions.

In the pursuit of my main aim I had to delve a little into the language of the second half of the nineteenth century as well as that of the twentieth. The language of Thackeray, Swinburne, Henry James, and others had been too uncomfortably close in time for Murray and his colleagues to take it fully into account.

I can best illustrate my own attitude towards literary English, and its preciosities, in the following manner. I have been as much concerned to record the unparalleled intransitive use of the verb *unleave* ('to lose or shed leaves') in G. M. Hopkins's line:

Margaret, are you grieving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving<sup>5</sup>

as Murray was to record Milton's unparalleled use of the word *unlibidinous*:

But in those hearts  
Love unlibidinous reign'd<sup>6</sup>

or Langland's unparalleled use of *unleese*, 'to unfasten':

Seriauntz . . . nauzt for loue of owre lorde vnlese here lippes  
onis<sup>7</sup>

I want to end by making a different point from one of mere inclusion or exclusion. The beliefs and expectations of one generation seldom exactly coincide with those of another, but elements of the beliefs of one age spill over to the next. Jon Stallworthy elaborates this point of view in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* (1984):

While America was forging a new society in the fires of the Civil War, Britain was making one of those cautious adjustments to the old society by which she had avoided civil strife for three hundred years. Thomas Arnold, as headmaster of Rugby from 1827 to 1842, had revitalized the public school system . . . The ethos of these schools was essentially chivalric . . . Each school was dominated by its chapel, which suited the philistine respectability of the devout bourgeois, and the curriculum was dominated by Latin, and to a lesser extent, Greek. In 1884 [i.e. the year of the publication of the first fascicle of the *OED*] there were twenty-eight classics masters at Eton, six mathematics masters, one historian, no modern language teachers, and no scientists. (pp. xxiii–xxiv)

It was in this Victorian climate that the *OED* was prepared. The four-letter words could not be admitted because of the 'philistine respectability of the devout bourgeois'. The terminology of the sciences was admitted only if it could be presented in a manner intelligible to the educated layman. Some 'cautious adjustments' to Murray's policy were needed, and they have been made.

Jon Stallworthy points out that the public-school poets of the early years of this century went to war 'conditioned by their years of immersion in the works of Caesar, Virgil, Horace, and Homer'. This classical training is reflected in their poetry: 'in the poems of 1914 and the first half of 1915, there are countless references to sword and legion, not a few to chariot and oriflamme, but almost none to gun and platoon' (p. xxvii). There were exceptions, of course, including Wilfred Owen.

In the supplementary volumes to the *OED* I had little choice but to adopt Murray's main principles. He was, as it were, my Homer and my Virgil. Nouns are nouns (or rather substantives) in the *Supplement* as

they were in the *OED* – they are never described as count nouns or mass nouns, and there are no plurals described as zero plurals. The way in which such words operate is made plain, of course, but in a Murrayan manner, both by him and by me. And so it is with all the other main conventions, including the Pronunciation Key. On the other hand Murray's thinking has not been left entirely unreconstructed. For example, the treatment of scientific terms and of the terminology of the old English-speaking dominions and colonies has been magnified in the *Supplement* beyond anything that Murray and his colleagues would have judged reasonable. And there are numerous other changes, including the superficially 'simple' task of abandoning the obligatory capital that Murray used for the initial letter of every headword.

The unpublished archives of the *OED* show that Murray made extensive use of outside consultants – for opinions about the relationship of the Germanic analogues of English words, for example, he turned repeatedly to E. Sievers, A. S. Napier, J. Zupitza, F. Kluge, and others. Many letters from these scholars survive, as do others from Romance philologists like Paul Meyer. I have continued the tradition, but whereas Murray's replies tended to come from Tübingen, Jena, Leiden, Halle, and Berlin, mine have come more often from Tokyo, Washington, Leningrad, Dublin, and Beijing. Apart from Britain itself the centre of gravity for the study of English no longer lies in Germany and Holland but is to be found much farther afield.

Now the *OED* and the four volumes of the *Supplement* are about to be merged by an intricate operation of microcomputer keyboarding. The keyboarding will begin on 1 November 1984. The resulting electronic database, when it exists, will be capable of permanent updating and of boundless expansion. New expressions like *break-dancing* are being edited now for inclusion in the database as soon as it is ready. The Murrayan plan, a product of the 1870s, will be used as a template for this gigantic electronic structure of the future, making available to everyone the nature, origin, history, pronunciation, and meaning of an enormous range of English words, wherever they occur, and whenever they occurred. It is a noble plan, and it is a stroke of luck that the work of many scholars and men of letters of the last hundred years has provided a suitable foundation on which scholars of the future can build with their capacious computers.<sup>8</sup>

For James Murray the *OED* proved to be a life sentence. The letters

U to Z lay unedited when he died. I look like being more fortunate, as I am now working on the word *up*. I must confess that the journey has been a rough one – as it clearly was for my revered predecessor James Murray – and that it has always been discouraging to see the waves of new words lapping in behind as one dashed one's frame against the main flood.

## Notes

1. K. M. E. Murray, 1977, 313.
2. *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 October 1972, 1226.
3. Theodora Bynon, *Historical Linguistics*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 1.
4. Bynon, p. 6.
5. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Spring and Fall', 1–2.
6. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, V, 449.
7. William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, B-text, Prol., 213.
8. The preparation of this merged version of the *OED* and the four volumes of the *Supplement* was completed on schedule, and *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, was published on 30 March 1989.

## References

- Historical Introduction to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1933: an amalgamated summary of the prefaces to the fascicles published between 1884 and 1928.
- Murray, J. A. H. *The Evolution of English Lexicography*, Romanes Lecture, 1900.
- Murray, K. M. E. *Caught in the Web of Words: James A. H. Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1977.
- Timpson, George F. *Sir James A. H. Murray: a Self-portrait*, c. 1958.
- Burchfield, R. W. Prefaces to *A Supplement to the OED*, Vol. 1 (A–G), 1972; Vol. 2 (H–N), 1976; Vol. 3 (O–Scz), 1982.
- 'O.E.D.: a new Supplement', *Essays and Studies*, 1961, pp. 35–51.
- 'The treatment of controversial vocabulary in the *Oxford English Dictionary*', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1973, 1974, see p. 83 above.

# 7 The End of the Alphabet: Last Exit to Grammar

My preface to the final volume (1986) of *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* ends as follows:

With the completion of a task assigned to me in 1957, I now retire from the 'great theatre' of lexicography, and will devote myself in the years ahead to a reconsideration of English grammar.

In what follows I want to indicate why, as it happens, this is a propitious moment to make such a change. I shall also deal with some aspects of one fundamental topic in grammar – grammatical concord. Throughout I must emphasize that this, my first exploration of a grammatical topic, is bound to show evidence of uncertainty. The evidence I have been able to collect is inevitably far from complete, and, as a result, I must here remain at the edge of a great subject.

In his *Grammar of the English Language*<sup>1</sup> William Cobbett said that

In the immense field of . . . knowledge [connected with books], innumerable are the paths, and Grammar is the gate of entrance to them all.

The importance of grammar was obvious to him and is obvious to me. What is less than obvious is how one approaches it and how one masters it in a satisfactory manner.

As a lexicographer I am, of course, accustomed to the placing of words in alphabetical order in columns. The procedures involved in preparing large English dictionaries and smaller ones are very familiar to me, as are the hazards and frustrations. What I am much less accustomed to is the nature of the rules that govern the joining of words across the page. We can all, by instinct, construct sentences more or less