Dictionaries: Notions and Expectations

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with popular perceptions in Britain about dictionaries. Its main focus is on ways in which these perceptions can be gauged: surveys of and comments by individuals; corpus data; and evidence drawn from the media. There are implications with respect to issues of ideology and lexicography, and also with respect to perceptions about the lexicon.

1 Introduction

Britain has no single national council or academy with an official brief to monitor and advise on its language, nor does it have a national dictionary. However, there is no shortage of evidence of the special place which dictionaries have in people's minds in Britain, and of the authority which is uncritically credited to them. In this paper, I will look at some of this evidence, to see what kinds of thing it suggests about attitudes towards dictionaries, and how this in turn relates to broader discussions of ideological aspects of dictionaries, and attitudes towards the lexicon.

2 What People Say about Dictionaries

2.1 Dictionaries and Needs

An article in the *Guardian* of 11 September 2000 reported on a survey undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree foundation in Britain: this sought to monitor deprivation in Britain, and estimated on the basis of samples that four million children were being brought up in circumstances where they lacked at least one 'necessity', and two million lacked two or more 'necessities'. The researchers' starting-point was apparently a list compiled by the office for national statistics, which had identified items that parents thought essential for their children.

The majority of items identified as essential are uncontroversial: beds or bedding for everyone in the family (95% considered this item necessary, 1% could not afford them), damp-free home (93% and 6% respectively), prescribed medicines (90% and 1%), fresh fruit and vegetables daily (86% and 4%), and so on. The most curious item in the published list is 'dictionary', which 53% considered 'necessary' and 5% could not afford: it rated as a 'necessity' above cars, dressing-gowns, newspapers, evenings out, VCRs, and Internet access. It is unclear how or why dictionaries came to be included in the original list, and they seem to be of a very different order from other kinds of high-scoring item, which mainly relate to food, clothing, health, housing, and to a lesser degree social activities. Does this

represent educational priorities? an idea that people – parents – think that dictionaries are useful? 47% disagreed, but still the majority view was that dictionaries are 'necessary'.

Reinforcing this are statistics given by Ilson [1985, 1]:

> In Britain, ... over 90% of households possess at least one [dictionary], making the dictionary far more popular than cookery books (about 70%) and indeed significantly more widespread than the Bible (which was to be found in 80% of households in England in 1983, according to the Bible Society).

Current statistics in Britain or England might now reveal different percentages, but it is unlikely that the relative proportions of Bible and dictionary would be very different.

2.2 Dictionaries and Expectations

Dictionaries may be 'necessary', but what do people expect to find in them? In a small, informal survey, groups of undergraduate and postgraduate university students were given short texts, drawn from written materials published in October 2001: see the appendix for the first two texts. They were asked to ring any 'words' – alphanumeric strings – or phrases in the texts which they would not expect to find in a large (monolingual) English dictionary: they were asked to assume that the dictionaries had just been published, so discounting any time-lag between new coinages and publication. This was only a pilot study, and a more considered test would have used different protocols, but there were, nevertheless, some interesting findings.

34 students responded and most of the items which they ringed fell into one of three categories:

- proper nouns, such as people, places, organizations, products, and so on: *Sophie Dahl, Twin Towers, Lainey Keogh, Guerlain Issima Midnight Secret*
- compound words: *Islamophobia, show-stopper, blemish-free*
- numbers and alphanumeric strings: *2m, 11*

Are the expectations of these students borne out by published dictionaries? And do these items show up in corpus evidence, which at least partly reflects the kinds of language that they experience? **Table 1** below gives those items that were consistently ringed, and indicates which are listed in three recent large British monolingual dictionaries: *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* [C21D 1999]; *Collins English Dictionary* [CED 2000]; and *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* [NODE 1998]. The table also gives the numbers of tokens for these items in the Bank of English [BoE] corpus, which contained 418 million words at the time of consultation, and its texts predated the destruction of the World Trade Center in September 2001.[1]

item	no. of reports	C21D	CED	NODE	tokens in BofE
Text A					
Guerlain	19	—	—	—	380
(Mary) Robinson	14	—	√	√	311
Mick Jagger	14	—	√	√	1348
Sophie Dahl	13	—	—	—	66
Twin Towers	20	—	—	—	47
WTC	23	—	—	—	5
(World Trade Center)	(−)	—	—	√	(594)
Text B					
anti-Arab	17	—	—	—	63
blemish-free	16	—	—	—	39
Cupid's bow (pout)	17	—	—	√	19
Islamophobia	25	—	—	—	9
la-la (lashes)	32	—	—	—	0
roll(-)back	15	—	—	√	145
show(-)stopper	16	√	√	√	173
va-va-voom (curves)	32	—	—	—	12

Table 1: Intuitions and Actuality

It suggests a reasonable degree of accuracy of expectation in terms of the coverage of compounds, except for *show-stopper*. Corpus data suggests that *roll-back* is now well-established in British English, and merits inclusion: recurrent formations such as *blemish-free* and *anti-Arab* can be considered compositional, and so may not. There was less certainty about the coverage of real-world items, but this is not surprising since the practice of including encyclopedic information in the main text of a dictionary is still not fully established in Britain.

Items which were ringed by only a few students could have been expected to feature in dictionaries, and in most cases, expectations were again borne out: that is, these words are indeed found in dictionaries. However, *untameable* was listed without definition in C21D and CED; the metaphorical phrase *cross a line* was decodable only from C21D; and no dictionary covered the metaphorical use of *porcelain* in *porcelain visage*. *Untameable/untamable* occurred 20 times in the Bank of English; *cross a line* occurred 52 times; and *porcelain* was used metaphorically in this way 39 times.

There are further findings which could be discussed. But in general, the students' perceptions of what items were to be found in a dictionary showed consensus and are not particularly out of line with those of the lexicographers who compile the dictionaries. The extent to which these students regarded the 'non-dictionary' items that they ringed as real items in the lexicon is, of course, another question.

2.3 The OED

In relation to this last point, the *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] is often acknowledged as the instrument by means of which words are sanctioned as real words, part of the English lexicon: that is, words are only real words when they are accepted and treated by OED lexicographers and are put into the OED. Accordingly, anyone responsible for coining a word or popularizing an expression effectively graduates when the OED considers it for inclusion. For example, reference to this was made by two, quite separate, writers who were interviewed in the course of a single British TV programme concerning television comedy, broadcast in late 2001: John Cleese talked of how *Monty Python's Flying Circus* gave rise to *Pythonesque*, now included in the OED; and the writers of a British Asian comedy show talked of how they were responsible for the popularization of the expression *kiss my chuddies* and now, they thought, on the verge of inclusion. In the same way, the tabloid *The Sun* has claimed responsibility for the expression *white van man*, reporting on what OED staff said about it. There are many other cases. The OED itself includes citations at *plain sewing* by and about W.H. Auden, referring to his discussion of a particular non-literal meaning of that expression and its being recorded in the OED.

3 What a Corpus Says about what People Say about Dictionaries

Corpus evidence can be used in other ways to investigate perceptions of dictionaries. In the British English component of the Bank of English (307 million words at the time of consultation), the lemma *dictionary* had an average frequency of 10.4 per million words. It had especially high frequencies in the subcorpus of spoken interaction (inflated by recordings of lexicographers talking about their work), and in *New Scientist*, and especially low in tabloid newspapers and the scripted/semi-scripted transcriptions of the BBC World Service. The most significant lexical collocates of the singular form *dictionary/Dictionary*, as assessed by T-score, were *English, Oxford, Collins, Chambers, new/New, definition, word/words, Concise, defines*, and so on. This reflects the appearance of *dictionary* in two contexts: the titles of actual dictionaries under discussion, and the use of dictionaries to provide information about a word or concept which is under discussion.

3.1 Identified Dictionaries

With respect to the first of these contexts, the relative prominence and salience of three principal publishers of L1 dictionaries in Britain may be quantifiable from the Bank of English: the following took into account only the 193 million words of recent media output. *Chambers* co-occurred with *dictionary* 68 times; *Collins* co-occurred 60 times; and *Oxford* co-occurred 228 times. Three-quarters of the occurrences of *Chambers* as collocate occurred in the broadsheet newspaper *The Independent*. The commonest sources for *Collins* as collocate were the tabloids *The Sun/News of the World* (which, like HarperCollins, are part of the News International group), and the broadsheet *The Guardian*. *Oxford*, the strongest collocate, occurred most frequently in *The Independent* and *The Guardian* – in both cases, more frequently than did *Chambers/Collins* – and in *New Scientist*: it occurred 3.5 times as often as *Chambers/Collins* as a collocate in *The Times*, another News International newspaper. This prominence of *Oxford* was further reinforced by the statistics for *OED*: 141 tokens, with strongest representation in *The Independent* and *New Scientist*.[2]
This may seem entirely trivial and incidental. However, it may indicate public perceptions in relation to brandwidth: the extent to which dictionary brand names are known, and known as carrying authority. This is not trivial at all.

3.2 Unidentified Dictionaries

But dictionaries in the Bank of English are often not identified. The same subcorpora of recent print media contained 229 tokens of *the dictionary*. Some refer anaphorically to a specific dictionary already mentioned, but many do not. This homophoric use of the definite article is commented on by Leech [1981, 205] in relation to the issue of dictionary authoritativeness:

> The dictionary comes to be looked on as a legislative organ, to which one turns for a standard of "good" as opposed to "bad" usage. This attitude is indeed encouraged by the phrase "the dictionary" with its misleading similarity to "the Bible".

Ilson also addresses this point [1985, 1], after reporting the statistics given in 2.1 above:

> Its [sc. the dictionary's] significance is shown by the fact that − like the Bible − its authority is invoked, rightly or wrongly, to settle disputes, and by the fact that, quite spontaneously, I wrote "the dictionary" and the "Bible" (rather than "dictionaries" and "Bibles") but "cookery books" (rather than "the cookery book").

The citation of a named dictionary in support of an argument implies partisanship, but the citation of an unnamed dictionary is misleading and strictly does not substantiate anything. It is this kind of unnamed dictionary in this kind of discoursal context which Moon refers to as 'the UAD: the Unidentified Authorizing Dictionary' [1989, 63].

3.3 'Dictionary': Collocates and Structures

Collocates for the form *dictionary/Dictionary* were listed above. A specific search for *the dictionary* threw up little more in terms of significant collocates, which included, inevitably, the lemmas *define, definition, word*. More interesting are the syntagmatic frames in which *(the) dictionary* recurs. One such frame is *according to the dictionary*. This phraseology is typically used as a preface to a statement of fact or opinion, as in

> DROUGHT is a 'want of rain or water' according to the dictionary. Since 1945 the demand for water has risen by one per cent a year. Everyone in Britain uses an average of 31 gallons of water a day.

> Victoria described her husband [sc. the footballer David Beckham] as: 'expressionate'... According to the, er, dictionary an 'expressionate' is 'A stout length of sawn timber... or plank'. Honest.

with the second example also functioning as a joke.

Another common frame with similar discoursal functions is *the dictionary VERB*, often in clause-initial position, as in

> Confidence is one component of a good emotional state. The dictionary defines it as 'assured expectation'.

Definitions of health, safety and welfare. The dictionary defines 'welfare' as 'well-being', so health and safety are strictly aspects of employee welfare...

Flirting is supposed to be without commitment, the dictionary says so. It's also enjoyable and guaranteed to add spice to every gathering.

with the third example using the definition to preempt any objections to flirting as a mode of behaviour.

Verbs filling the slot in this frame are typically simple present and realized by *defines, says, tells, describes, assures, agrees*, and so on: that is, a speech act verb. The illocutionary force is not quite as marked as with the corresponding frame *the Bible VERB – says, speaks, tells, proclaims, teaches, affirms, warns, predicts*, and so on – but it is nevertheless present. In both, the subject of the verb is metonymic: in the case of *the Bible*, we understand the metonym as representing the Biblical author or God, depending on our theological viewpoints. However, in the case of *(the) dictionary*, it is less clear what the metonym represents. At a surface level, it seems to represent the lexicographers, their collective view, or the authority that their collective view is supposed to have. Yet this is a kind of projection or displacement, as *dictionary* in fact represents the writer or speaker of the text. In Hallidayan terms, it is a grammatical metaphor rather than a metonym: the surface verbal process has a book or its authors as subject/sayer, but the deep verbal process is mental, with the writer or speaker of the text as subject/senser [Halliday 1994, 106ff & 342ff]. Thus in examples such as those cited above, the writer/speaker sanctions his or her opinion by appealing to a dictionary, whether real or imaginary, and establishing, falsely and fallaciously, an air of objectivity.

4 What the Media Do with Dictionaries

Corpora provide massed evidence for the ways in which key words such as *dictionary* are used in the media. Actual texts provide further evidence. References to dictionaries, identified or unidentified, realize the same discourse functions as those mentioned above: providing a hook or reinforcement for an opinion, and an often specious air of authoritativeness, as if they are religious quotations. The following examples from *The Guardian* are typical of other newspapers too:

Mesh Computers could not have named itself more aptly. "Trap or snare" is one definition given by the Oxford English Dictionary, an interpretation familiar to the numbers of you are enmeshed in the company's customer care strategies. [*The Guardian* 29 September 2001: in a consumer advice feature]

Terrorism, according to the dictionary, is 'the unlawful use or threatened used of force or violence by a person or organised group against people or property with the intention of intimidating or coercing societies or governments, often for ideological or political reasons'. But this definition does little to convey the pain caused by the hundreds of killings that have been committed in the name of politics or religion. [*The Guardian* 18 September 2001: in a teachers' resource feature]

Jonathon Green's invaluable Dictionary of Slang defines the word "shafted" as "treated unfairly, in serious trouble, from the verb shaft "to have sexual intercourse with a woman". It was consequently hilarious when, in the catchphrase to his new ITV1 quiz show, Robert

Kilroy-Silk said "Let's play **Shafted**". [*The Guardian* 6 November 2001: opening of a TV review]

with the third of these continuing ironically. Dictionary-like authority is also conveyed through the use of authentic or pseudo-definitions. For example, the tabloid *Mirror* includes a Monday supplement 'Mirror mania' which reports the weekend's football matches: under its masthead is the line

mania: *noun* mental derangement marked by great excitement and (*freq.*) craze; passion (*for*).

Such examples can be related to other discussion of lexis and usage in, particularly, the broadsheet newspapers. This includes disquisitions and advice on the correct uses of words from both staff and readers, often supported by the citation of definitions from the newspaper's 'house' dictionary, sometimes involving corrections of errors in previous issues. See Cameron [1995, 47-50] for discussion of the use of dictionaries in relation to standardization and house styles. It also includes features on words themselves: rare and curious words, with their meanings or alleged origins; neologisms and new or interesting meanings, with exploration of their sociopolitical or sociocultural significance; and words which seem to be discussed simply because they annoy the columnist, or to provide the columnist with something to say. Recent examples of these include discussions of respectively *spitting image* and *spanking new*; *disasterabilia*, *daisy-cutter*, *diogenes syndrome*, *allegedly*, and the prefix *post-*; and *deconstruct* and *covert*. This lay lexicography is unsystematic: in general, it is prescriptivist and normative, though sometimes it is ironic and intended to titillate; it is occasionally more descriptivist and considered, especially when dealing with new words or shifting meanings, and at times it is simply logophiliac.

5 Implications

To summarize: a lot of people in Britain are reported as judging dictionaries 'necessary' possessions; there seems to be some consensus, admittedly amongst a narrow group, concerning what dictionaries cover; and the OED more than any other dictionary is seen as the gatekeeper of (British) English, responsible for the admission of words to the lexicon. What brands of dictionary are talked about, and where and how, can be inferred from corpus evidence, as can ways in which people mention dictionaries in order to support arguments. This can also be seen from media texts, and to some extent the media takes on a role of policing the language, not just its own language, as well as using dictionaries or pseudo-dictionaries in the course of putting across its opinions. Although I did not specifically set out to examine attitudes to the lexicon – only dictionaries representing the lexicon – it became clear that this is a further line to follow.

Dictionaries are esteemed, and important not just as providers of information about the lexicon, but also rhetorically and discoursally. Dictionary skills feature on the national school curriculum in Britain, mainly from the point of view of referencing mechanisms, but there is little evidence of any recommendations for a critical approach. All dictionaries are fallible and perpetuate or create ideologies. The scant acknowledgement of this that I found is, I suggest, worrying in light of the high status that is accorded to dictionaries and their metalinguistic uses in text.

Endnotes

1. Corpus data is drawn from the Bank of English corpus created by COBUILD at the University of Birmingham.
2. I have not taken into account cases where dictionaries are named inaccurately or inexactly ('The Collins/Oxford Dictionary says...'): these could be classified with 'unidentified' dictionaries.

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Appendix: texts

A "The events of September 11 undoubtedly constituted acts of terrorism, but they also crossed a line," she announced two weeks later, after visiting the Twin Towers disaster site. "We thought it was important to mark the crossing of a line." However, true to her reputation as an untameable, independent voice, the main thrust of [Mary] Robinson's approach since the WTC attack has been to decry any possible roll-back of civil liberties, [to] warn of "Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiment", but most of all to attempt to avert a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. "There is a desperate situation - perhaps up to 2m Afghan civilians desperately need food," she told Irish state radio last week. [*The Guardian, Saturday Review*, 20 October 2001, p 6]

B Sophie Dahl has been a show-stopper since the day she stepped on to the Lainey Keogh catwalk four years ago and, as Mick Jagger knows, her Cupid's bow pout, la-la lashes and va-va-voom curves are enough to make a grown man weep. Her porcelain visage needs lots of pampering to keep it blemish-free - Laura Mercier Tinted Moisturizer SPF15 keeps UV rays at bay, and she makes regular trips to skincare guru Bharti Vyas for facial treatments. We caught up with Sophie backstage at the runway shows for a peep in her make-up bag and asked for the secret of her luminous complexion. "Guerlain Issima Midnight Secret is amazing," she gushed. "It gives you wonderful rosy cheeks in the morning." [*Heat*, 6-12 October 2001, p 64]