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SAMUEL JOHNSON – A ‘HARMLESS DRUDGE’ AND HIS DICTIONARY

Abstract

Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* was first published in 1755. This monumental work, often simply referred to as 'the Dictionary', appeared in numerous editions, abridgments and adaptations, serving as a standard of English for more than a hundred and fifty years to be superseded only by *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many scholarly and popular works have been written about *the Dictionary*. This paper adds to them by attempting a brief survey of the social and intellectual climate in Britain in the first half of the 18th century – the time of the codification of the English language – and of Johnson's work on the Dictionary.

Key words: Samuel Johnson, the English language, lexicography, lexicographer, dictionary, codification

*“Dictionaries are like watches: the worst is better than none,
and the best cannot be expected to go quite true.”*

(Johnson, Letter to Fransesco Sastres, 21 August 1784)

Today there are numerous monolingual English dictionaries based on larger or smaller language corpora that, thanks to electronic devices, can be constantly updated. Most of the dictionaries that are used today are, in fact, distant relatives or perhaps great-grandchildren of one such reference

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book that once upon a time was simply called *the Dictionary*. This text is a story of *A Dictionary of the English Language* compiled by Samuel Johnson, and the story takes us on a journey back to the 18th century – to the time of the codification of the English language.

In the late 17th and the early 18th centuries there was a widely felt need for the stability of the language and for canons of correctness. Many learned people publicly expressed their wish to see English regulated, ascertained and fixed so that their children and grandchildren could not only be proud of their mother tongue but could also read the works of authors who had lived long before them.

Since the establishment of the academies in other European countries, first in Italy in 1542 and 1572, and then in France in 1635, there had been proposals that England, and later Britain, should have a similar institution. Some of the advocates of an academy were John Dryden, Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison and Jonathan Swift. However, there were also opponents of that idea, one of them being Samuel Johnson who thought that an academy could not serve as a language authority, explaining that: “We live in an age in which it is a kind of public sport to refuse all respect that cannot be enforced. The edicts of an English academy would, probably, be read by many, only that they might be sure to disobey them. The present manners of our nation would deride authority” (Johnson 1800: 108-109).

In the continuing absence of a corresponding academy for Britain at the early eighteenth century, some people who saw English as imperfect, corrupted and abused, hoped that their language could be greatly improved if there was a really good dictionary that would serve as a standard of usage. The Italians had a national dictionary, published in 1612. It had taken their Academy 20 years to prepare it. The French got their dictionary in 1694, their Academy of forty scholars had spent 55 years preparing it, and another 18 years (1700-1718) revising it.

It is true that at the time English dictionaries were available, for example, Henry Cockeram’s *English Dictionarie: or, An Interpreter of Hard English Words* (1623), Edward Phillips’s *The New World of English Words* (1658), John Kersey’s *A New English Dictionary* (1702) and Nathaniel Bailey’s *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721). However, the intellectual public in Britain really wanted a magisterial dictionary that would serve as a standard of good usage, a comprehensive dictionary that would be similar to those compiled by the two great continental academies.

A group of London book-sellers approached Samuel Johnson and then contracted him in June of 1746 to produce a dictionary in three years. In the same year he wrote an outline for his *Dictionary*.

At the time Johnson was 35 years old. He was born in September of 1709 in Lichfield, a place near Birmingham in England. As a baby he suffered from an infection which affected both his sight and hearing. He is said to have been deaf in the left ear and almost blind in the left eye. His father was a bookseller in Lichfield, so at a young age Johnson had the opportunity to read a lot, and indeed he was a voracious reader. In 1728 he studied at Oxford, but lack of money forced him to leave thirteen months later. In 1737 he went to London where he accepted various writing jobs. He also intended to produce an edition of Shakespeare's works. When his plans failed, he decided to compile a dictionary and so when he was approached by a group of book-sellers, he decided to undertake the task. It was agreed that he would be paid 1575 pounds, and all expenses would come out of this sum. "His advance was one of the largest of the eighteenth century until that time" (Korshin 2005: 18).

He wrote his *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, published in August of 1747,¹ and addressed it to Lord Chesterfield whose patronage he hoped to attract. Lord Chesterfield is still believed by many to have failed to produce financial backing, giving Johnson a miserly sum of £10.²

In his *Plan* Johnson (1746: 3-20) elaborated the methods and techniques he would use in compiling the dictionary, bearing in mind that "The chief intent of it is to preserve the purity, and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom" (Johnson 1746: 6). **In the course of his work on the Dictionary** he realised he would not be able to carry out everything he had proposed to do, and his perception of his role as a lexicographer changed. Nevertheless, the *Plan* is a "masterful analysis" and a "remarkable document" of lexicographic tasks and activities. "For someone who had never before compiled a dictionary, Johnson's grasp of lexicographic problems he would be confronted with is extraordinary" (Landau 1989: 48). Some of the problems he envisaged have not been solved by modern lexicography to this day.

In order to work on *the Dictionary*, Johnson hired six copyists or amanuenses to help him. They worked in the garret of the house in 17 Gough Square in London, which is now a museum open to the public.

¹ The manuscript in Johnson's hand was dated April 30, 1746.

² For a different account see Korshin (2005: 24-25).

Johnson is thought to have consulted a copy of a 1736 revised edition of Nathaniel Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, but he also wanted to read a wide range of scientific and technical texts, as well as a large number of books by distinguished men of letters, that would serve as a source of illustrative quotations.

He selected a 'golden age' to provide a corpus of his work. In his opinion, this was the period that ran from the later sixteenth century (from the time of Sir Philip Sidney) until the English Restoration of 1660. Shakespeare, Milton and Dryden alone account for a third of all quotations (McArthur 1992: 549), although he also used quotations from the works of over 500 other authors (Crystal 2005: xix). Obviously, he wanted to omit his contemporaries so as not to be "misled by partiality" (Johnson 1773: 145).

Thus Johnson would pore over numerous works from great English authors, underlining and marking what he thought would be useful, and citing the word's first letter in the margin. If he did not like the original sentence, or if a phrase did not convey the exact meaning he needed, he did not hesitate to alter it. Then he would pass the book to one of his six assistants. They would copy out the quotations onto slips of paper. They would underline the word that was to be illustrated, mark the slip with a large letter for the initial of the word, and file it. When all the slips were collected, Johnson began to write his definitions.

Along with all other activities that followed, it was a very hard job to do even according to the standards of this electronic age. No wonder it could not be finished in three years. Anne McDermott, a senior lecturer in English at the University of Birmingham, "believes it was the quotations that triggered the collapse: they were full of verbs, which the older dictionaries ignored. When Johnson tried to tackle the verbs, he came up with 133 meanings, and 363 quotations, for 'to take' alone" (*Guardian* 3 Aug 2006).

According to the results of her research, Johnson completely abandoned work on *the Dictionary* when he realised he would miss his deadline. It took the publishers years to realise what had happened. He resumed the work only when the publishers threatened they would break into his house and take the manuscript which they hoped was almost finished. "Although this time he could afford only two assistants, they raced through the work and finished in two-and-a-half years" (*Ibid*).

The Dictionary was finally completed when it appeared in 1755 in two large folio volumes.³ It was 2,312 pages long including the preliminaries, namely the famous Preface, a short History of the English Language and an outline Grammar (51 pages). It contained 140,871 definitions for 42,773 entries. According to Crystal (2005: xvii), definitions are “the dictionary’s primary strength, and its chief claim to fame”. Johnson’s biographer Boswel also thought that definitions were entitled to the highest praise:

The definitions have always appeared to me such astonishing proof of acuteness of intellect and precision of language, as indicate of genius of the highest rank. This it is which marks the superior excellence of Johnson’s Dictionary over others equally or even more voluminous, and must have made it a work of much greater mental labour than mere Lexicons...

(Boswel and Croker 1833:126)

Indeed, Johnson defines words and shades of meanings with logic, clarity and elegance. For example, he defines ‘grace’ as “beautiful with dignity” and the verb ‘to enchant’ as “to subdue by charms and spells”.

Some of Johnson’s definitions are frequently quoted as expressions of either his sense of humour or of his personal views and attitudes. His description of ‘oats’ as “A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people” is probably one of the best known. There are opinions that Johnson was prejudiced against the Scottish people, but as five of his copyists were Scots, would it be right to suppose that he wanted to offend them?

Although he defined ‘pension’ as “An allowance made to any one without an equivalent”, which “in England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country”, he eventually agreed to accept an annual pension awarded to him by the new monarch George III in 1762, which improved his circumstances.

He obviously had Lord Chesterfield’s unrealised financial support in mind when he defined a ‘patron’ as “One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery”.

One of the words he selected for *the Dictionary* was the name of the street where he used to work hard. “GRUBSTREET. The name of a street in

³ The first seventy sheets were printed in 1750.

London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems; whence any mean production is called grubstreet.”

His personal experience was also interwoven in the definition of the word ‘lexicographer’ – “A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words”.

He offered us a glimpse of his pragmatic attitude towards his mother tongue when he described the ‘sonnet’ as a form “not very suitable to the English language” (“SONNET. A short poem consisting of fourteen lines, of which the rhymes are adjusted by a particular rule. It is not very suitable to the English language, and has not been used by any man of eminence since Milton.”).

Johnson offended the Commission of Excise⁴ because he defined ‘excise’ as “a hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but WRETCHES hired by those to whom excise is paid”.

At times the definitions are too short and inadequate, for example, when he defines ‘sonata’ merely as “a tune” due to his alleged indifference to music. Since nobody is perfect, sometimes Johnson made mistakes, as when he defined the word ‘pastern’ as the knee of a horse when it is, in fact, the part of a horse’s foot between the fetlock and hoof. This error was not corrected for eighteen years. According to Boswell, when asked by a lady why he had defined pastern as the knee of a horse, Johnson replied frankly: “Ignorance, Madam, pure ignorance” (Boswell and Croker 1833: 279).

In the 1830s Thomas Macaulay coined a word ‘Johnsonese’ which has often been used pejoratively for Johnson’s elevated style and his preference for Latinate vocabulary. An oft-quoted example of this style is his definition of ‘network’ as “Any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections”. In actual fact, “Latinate vocabulary is not typical of this work” (McArthur 1992 :549).

The peculiarity of *the Dictionary* is that it had no entries for the letter “X” as Johnson claimed that it began no word in the English language. “In fact there are over thirty words recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as having occurred in English before Johnson’s time, several of which were in use in his century” (Crystal 2005: xvii).

⁴ See Boswell and Croker (1833: 280-281).

In the first edition there are over 113,000 quotations from various literary sources as well as from scientific, medical, legal and theological works. These numerous quotations that illustrate the meaning and usage of words are considered to have been Johnson's main innovation.

Nothing remotely comparable had been done before, and it made his dictionary into a superior prototype of the internet – a bulging lucky-dip of wisdom, anecdote, humour, legend and fact. Nobody but Johnson could have done it, because nobody had read so much. (*The Sunday Times*, 27 March 2005)

In the Preface to *the Dictionary*, Johnson admitted the impossibility of fixing the language forever, but he still hoped that the changes could be slowed down so that English could be preserved for future generations. Thus he made a plea by saying that: "Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot be ultimately defeated: tongues like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language" (Johnson 1773: 151). Johnson's view that languages are born, and that they degenerate and die like people was characteristic of that time, and so was the tendency to link language and nation.

The Dictionary soon went into a second edition that appeared in 165 weekly sections, and an abridged octavo version was also published. For the fourth edition, which became available in 1773, Johnson revised the text substantially. He corrected errors, made some deletions and added a further 3,000 illustrative quotations from technical literature and other works. *The Dictionary* went into several more editions during Johnson's lifetime both in folio and abridged versions and new editions continued to be published well into the nineteenth century. It served as an authority on the language and as a standard of English and remained so until the advent of the *Oxford English Dictionary* at the beginning of the 20th century.

Shortly before the first edition of *the Dictionary* was published, Johnson had received an honorary master's degree from Oxford University in 1755. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by Dublin University in 1765 and another doctorate by Oxford University in 1775, and is often simply referred to as Dr Johnson.

The critical reception of *the Dictionary* was mostly positive.⁵ Its publication "was lauded as a national as well as a linguistic triumph"

⁵ See Sledd and Kolb (1955).

and Johnson was praised for beating “fourty French” (Mugglestone 1995 :27). Nevertheless, there were also very negative reviews and comments, and some of his contemporaries and later lexicographers even demonised him. Noah Webster, for example, had a very ambivalent attitude towards Johnson’s work. On the one hand, he admired his achievement, but wishing to surpass it, he was also very critical of it. This ambivalence can be detected from one of many Webster’s commentaries:

Johnson’s writings had in Philology, the effect that Newton’s discoveries has in Mathematics, to interrupt for a time the progress of this branch of learning; for when a man has pushed his researches so far beyond his contemporaries, that all men despair of proceeding beyond him, they will naturally consider his principles and decisions as the limit of perfection on that particular subject, and repose their opinions on his authority, without examining into their validity. (quoted in Sledd and Kolb 1955 :1)

Unlike Webster, Philip Gove, editor-in-chief of *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* was a great admirer of Johnson’s work, especially of the illustrative quotations which he saw “as a key to understanding Johnson’s mind, as well as an important development in dictionary making” (Morton 1994 :18).

In spite of all its possible imperfections and deficiencies, Johnson’s *Dictionary* enjoyed unique authority among successive generations in the matter of word choice and word meaning. “Its influence was especially profound among authors. As a young man Robert Browning read both its folio volumes in their entirety in order to ‘qualify’ himself for the career as an author” (Hitchings 2006 :5). In 1880 a Bill was actually thrown out of Parliament because a word in it was not in “the Dictionary” (Whitehall 1963: 6).

The achievement of the *Dictionary* made Johnson a national icon. Thomas Carlyle (1840: 215-216) mentions him as a hero and explains:

Had Johnson left nothing but his *Dictionary*, one might have traced there a great intellect, a genuine man. Looking at its clearness of definition, its general solidity, honesty, insight and successful method, it may be called the best of all Dictionaries. There is in it a kind of architectural nobleness; it stands there like a great solid square-built edifice, finished, symmetrically complete: you judge that a true builder did it.

Johnson was also famous during his lifetime as an important literary figure, and a number of biographies were published shortly after his death. The most famous and the most detailed biography was written by his friend James Boswell in 1791. Johnson is also said to be the second most-quoted person in English after Shakespeare. In English-speaking countries the latter part of the 18th century is often called the Age of Johnson.

The first edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* remained indebted to Johnson's work, particularly to his illustrative quotations. James Murray, the first editor of the OED, placed a copy of Johnson's *Dictionary* in his Scriptorium and kept it open for immediate reference. Although *the Dictionary* was superseded by the OED at the beginning of the 20th century, it has never been forgotten by lexicographers, linguists, and language enthusiasts.

In the 250 years since it first appeared on April 1755, Johnson's work has appeared in at least 52 editions, 13 adaptations, 120 abridgments, 309 miniature versions, 7 printed facsimile editions, 4 sets of selections, and 2 CD ROMs. It has been the subject of more than 350 published works, including at least 28 books and a book-length bibliography ... the number of passing references in general books about Johnson, English literature, the English language, or dictionaries generally is probably beyond the power of anyone to count. (Lynch and McDermott 2005: 1-2)

Volumes have been written on *the Dictionary*, but research on it has not yet been completed. Some scholars believe that much has to be done to unpack the myths surrounding Johnson's work, and to reveal the truth about the genius of this lexicographic giant.

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САМЈУЕЛ ЏОНСОН – „БЕЗАЗЛЕНИ ПРЕГАЛАЦ“
И ЊЕГОВ РЕЧНИК

Сажетак

Речник енглеског језика Самјуела Џонсона први пут је објављен 1755. Ово монументално дело које се често помињало само као „Речник“, доживело је бројна целокупна, скраћена и прерађена издања. *Речник* је служио као стандард енглеског језика више од 150 година да би почетком двадесетог века ту улогу преузео *Оксфордски речник енглеског језика*. Џонсонов *Речник* је тема многих научних и популарних дела. Циљ овог рада је да укратко прикаже друштвену и интелектуалну климу у Британији током прве половине осамнаестог века. То је доба кодификације енглеског језика и Џонсоновог рада на *Речнику*.

Кључне речи: Самјуел Џонсон, енглески језик, лексикографија, лексикограф, речник, кодификација