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Why do large historical dictionaries give so much pleasure to their owners and users?

Abstract

Daunting or repulsive as some of their users find them, large historical dictionaries have also given their owners and users real pleasure. Drawing on evidence from early users of the *Oxford English Dictionary* by way of example, this paper sets out to examine this pleasure. It discusses simple pride in ownership, highly selective use, patriotic interest in the dictionary as a monument to the history of the English-speaking nations, the simple readerly pleasure of browsing in it, and the more sophisticated experience of intertextual and interactive readings. A brief discussion of the possible electronic future of the dictionary concludes by pointing out the non-trivial relationship between the pleasure which has been derived from it and its physical form as a set of books.

Keywords: Oxford English Dictionary, sociology of dictionary use, historical lexicography, pleasure.

Large dictionaries, according to a review printed in the *New Statesman* around 1910,

“are something more than works of reference ... a large dictionary is first-class reading. Murray’s [the *Oxford English Dictionary*] would be as good a companion on a desert island as a man could hope for, as, apart from the history of the words, the quotations are endlessly entertaining in themselves. It is like having all the birthday books and literary calendars ever written rolled into one” (quoted Oxford University Press 1915:16).

This statement was surely meant to be a striking one. Dictionaries are hardly expected to be entertaining. The work that goes into the making of large historical dictionaries is quite different from that which goes into imaginative texts. It is so sustained and demanding as to be fitly described as heroic, and the lexicographers themselves have been pointing this out since the sixteenth century (Considine 1998). Their readers have, however, often been daunted or repelled by its results. When Becky Sharp leaves Miss Pinkerton’s academy for young ladies in the first chapter of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, her final action is to throw a presentation copy of Johnson’s *Dictionary* out of the window of her carriage. What book could a young person of spirit more appropriately throw out of a window than a large dictionary?

Becky Sharp saw Johnson’s *Dictionary* as a symbol of oppressive and hateful erudition. A number of sixteenth-century lexicographers saw their dictionaries as sites of heroic activity. The *New Statesman*’s reviewer saw the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a delightful and inexhaustible resource. These diverse responses are all part of what may be called the social history of dictionaries: the history, not of the networks of research, affiliation, and plagiarism which determine their textual content, but of their lives in the hands of readers. If dictionaries were invariably used for the exclusive purposes of encoding and decoding verbal utterances, then their social history would be a field of rather limited interest. But they are not; and trying to develop as clear a sense as possible of the ways in which readers have responded, and do

respond, to them is surely an exercise of some practical use to lexicographers, as well as being an underexplored aspect of intellectual history.

In this paper, I should like to examine one class of response to one class of dictionary, by discussing the kinds of pleasure which the owners and users of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and of earlier large dictionaries such as Johnson's have experienced, from the *New Statesman's* companionable delight to Becky Sharp's old teachers' fussy reverence. My argument will focus on *OED* because I know its history better than the histories of, for instance, the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* or the *Ordbok över Svenska Språket*. I hope, however, that what I say about it will turn out to have a broader relevance.

In the title of my paper, I refer to the *owners* of large dictionaries, as well as to their *users*. There is a difference, of course. More than twenty years after the completion of his *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, Henri Estienne recalled with pride that for two months the emperor Maximilian II had shown his presentation copy off to visitors as "the finest present he had ever received" (Estienne 1594:sig. *3v). By the end of the two months, the emperor's interest had evidently run out. King George V of England appears likewise to have regarded his set of the *Oxford English Dictionary* simply as a very suitable ornament for the library at Windsor Castle. For some dictionary owners, then, the value of the book is largely symbolic. The owner of a handsome edition of Plato may be asked whether she or he has actually read it; but nobody can be blamed for not *reading* a dictionary. Becky Sharp was given her copy of Johnson's dictionary because its donors were immensely proud of a visit which the great lexicographer had once paid them: the unopened dictionary may give pleasure because of its association with a particularly learned editor. It may also do so simply because dictionaries are thought of as learned books. It is for the latter reason that dictionaries are issued ornamented with thumb-indexes (which add to their price); the device is strictly useful only to persons who are unfamiliar with the arrangement of the Roman alphabet, but it gives satisfaction to many purchasers because it makes their dictionary visibly different from any other book, visibly a work of scholarship.

When large historical dictionaries are opened, they may give certain limited kinds of pleasure. Seeing taboo words in print gives the readers who search them out the thrill of transgression or the similar thrill of reprehension. This has certainly been a practice since the eighteenth century: Samuel Johnson remarked that the ladies who had commended his omission of certain improper lexical items must have been looking for them (Clifford 1979:142). The expurgations which affected early nineteenth-century American dictionaries were presumably intended to thwart deliberate reference to taboo words as well as to guard against accidental stumbling upon them (Perrin 1970:164f). Undergraduates today are still entertained by the contrast between the prestige of a major dictionary, the sobriety of its defining language, and the taboo words recorded in it. The thrill of reprehension is likewise enjoyed by those readers who search out definitions which appear to defame an ethnic or religious group, or to make contentious political assertions, and then write demanding redress from, or threatening, the lexicographers whom they think responsible (Morton 1994:237f). A variety of this particular game is the combing of dictionaries in order to compile lists of "terms which may be used or taken offensively," which are then circulated in order to act as negative guides to usage. The Social Actions Office at Hickam Air Force Base in the United States, for instance, produced a list of about a hundred such terms, excerpted from *Webster's Third International Dictionary* (Woodford 1994). Curiously, these include e.g. *Campbellite* and *Canuck* as well as more predictable items such as *Chinaman* and *Coon*. (The list has subsequently been circulated

electronically as an instance of well-intentioned folly. I am obliged to my student Mr. Mike Roszko for drawing it to my attention.) An appendix noting which words have been marked as taboo or potentially offensive would give great satisfaction to the readers of any desk dictionary. The players of word games operate on a similar level of selectivity: while *OED* was still in progress, according to an interview with R. W. Chapman of the Oxford University Press, “when the crossword craze was at its height many library authorities had to lock the book up, it was becoming so soiled” (Sunday Times 1928).

A different kind of selectivity takes place in the activity of browsing in a dictionary. A very common experience reported by owners of *OED* is that of looking up one entry, and becoming interested in another adjacent to it or cross-referenced from it. Rose Macaulay put it well:

“Having heaved one of the somewhat ponderous volumes of this mighty work from its shelf (this is one of the ways in which I keep in good athletic training) I continue to read in it at random, since it would be waste to heave it back at once. I need not expatiate on the inexhaustible pleasure to be extracted from the perusal of this dictionary, from the tasting of this various feast of language, etymology, and elegant extracts from all the periods of English literature” (Macaulay 1935:318).

The scope of a large wordlist is exhilarating: there is a particular pleasure to be gained from seeing how the world can be divided up by language. For this reason, many dictionaries have included thoroughly pointless entries such as those for the names of certain groups of living things: an *exaltation* of skylarks and the like. These forms, which originate in the linguistic exuberance of the late Middle Ages, are almost exclusively “dictionary words”, but they do persist in dictionaries, and have even been gathered in a recent popular dictionary of their own. The extent to which entries of limited practical utility should be retained in the lexicographical tradition as a source of pleasure to readers is an interesting one. The spirit of play in which rare-word entries are often enjoyed has been expressed in a popular British television programme, *Call My Bluff*, in which contestants are asked to differentiate between true and spurious definitions of a series of very rare words.

An analogous case is that of etymological information, which is also not particularly useful, but much enjoyed by readers (Considine 1996:370). In a course taught at one university in Ontario, undergraduates are encouraged to use the *American Heritage Dictionary*'s appendix of reconstructed Proto-Indo-European forms to arrive at far-fetched connections between apparently unrelated words: this is a game as trivial as the making of genealogical connections between unlikely persons, but it is important to see that dictionaries are used as bases for this sort of activity. The provision of hyperlinked cross-references in the etymologies of machine-readable dictionaries will presumably facilitate etymological surfing of this sort even more readily than the *AHD* appendix.

The “elegant extracts” which Rose Macaulay enjoyed in *OED* were a worry to its greatest editor, James Murray, who wrote to an adviser of his fear “that we cannot dream of giving to the book this *literary* interest of being a readable collection of pithy sentences or elegant extracts, without abandoning altogether our distinctive character” (quoted Murray 1977:207). He was dealing with just the same problem as Samuel Johnson, who had had to omit many extracts of which he was fond, “remarkable facts ... striking exhortations ... beautiful descriptions”, from his *Dictionary*, retaining some “which may relieve the labour of verbal

searches, and intersperse with verdure and flowers the dusty deserts of barren philology” (quoted Reddick 1996:34). Both dictionaries turned out to be very readable, although some of *OED*’s quotations are indeed brief, and a few are brief enough to distort the sense of the word being exemplified, or to illustrate it inadequately. Johnson and Murray both had to deal with the problem of the physical bulk of their dictionaries, and here Macaulay’s remarks are instructively double-edged. She acknowledges the difficulty of manhandling the volumes of *OED* (which has been addressed: the volumes of the second edition are less massive than those of the first), but the manhandling is at the same time part of the pleasure of reading the dictionary. Developments in the media for the electronic storage of dictionary texts should liberate the makers of historical dictionaries from the need to truncate their quotations. If an author spends a paragraph or a page reflecting on the sense of a word, her or his entire discussion could presumably be quoted in, or hyperlinked to, the entry. But will practices of recreational reading develop which will make browsing in a machine-readable dictionary as pleasant a leisure activity as browsing in a printed dictionary was for Macaulay? This is a question which I have already begged in my assumption that etymologies might pleasurably be compared by means of hyperlinked cross-references, and I shall return to it.

Johnson’s *Dictionary* has always been read for its definitions as well as for its quotations. Those of the *Oxford English Dictionary* have tended to be less exuberant, although their qualities of gravity and precision have been appreciated by the discerning, such as the medievalist J. R. R. Tolkien, himself formerly a lexicographer, who wrote in a story of his in which a blunderbuss is used that

“Some may well ask what a blunderbuss was. Indeed, this very question, it is said, was put to the Four Wise Clerks of Oxenford, and after thought they replied: ‘A blunderbuss is a short gun with a large bore firing many balls or slugs, and capable of doing execution within a limited range without exact aim. (Now superseded in civilised countries by other firearms)’” (Tolkien 1975:16).

Tolkien described that definition in a letter to Naomi Mitchison as “so very Murraysque” (Tolkien 1981:133), which was fair; more recently similar definitions, such as that for *April-fool*, “one who is sent on a bootless errand, or otherwise sportively imposed upon,” have been noted by staff revising the dictionary, and seen as illustrating “a thorny problem for *OED* revision: whether to supplement or to delete text which captured the flavour of a word’s meaning to readers a century ago” (*OED News* 1995). How often is it possible to write a definition with the aim of pleasing the reader? Are discursive definitions, in which fine points of meaning and usage, or encyclopaedic information such as Murray’s “Now superseded ...,” are handled at length, enjoyed by readers? When Johnson saw himself as having been “a poet doomed at last to wake a lexicographer”, how wide a difference should he have seen between the two occupations? Tolkien’s own very philological, and very discursive, fictions come to mind.

These examples of the pleasure taken in wordlists, illustrative quotations, etymologies, and defining text illustrate the general point that dictionary users see large historical dictionaries as cornucopian. This is just the point which my opening quotation was making: *OED* is felt to be endless, a treasury of everything, “a first introductory key to every kind of human knowledge” according to an early reviewer (quoted Oxford University Press 1888). At this point it may be noted that smaller dictionaries may try to achieve a similarly cornucopian effect by providing encyclopaedic information. Anthony Burgess remarked in a favourable

review of two volumes of the *Enciclopedia Einaudi* that “If I need quick information about a famous person (profession, nationality, life span) or a country ... where can I look these days but in the *American Heritage Dictionary*?” (Burgess 1986:224). A specimen page of the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (not yet published as I write in April 1998; it is due for release in June) has 26 encyclopaedic entries and 23 lexical entries (Oxford University Press 1998). This is partly a trick of alphabetization, since the entries are in the range *kai–kamz*, in which exotic geographical terms are disproportionately represented; but the page was presumably chosen for publicity purposes just for that reason. The advantage of its readiness to provide encyclopaedic information can be seen at a glance: if *Kamloops trout* is to have an entry, it is helpful to know – and the dictionary makes it clear in a separate entry – where Kamloops is, and to know that it is situated at a junction of watercourses. In a larger-scale work, the fairly common word *Kalashnikov*, the name of a kind of gun, could surely be accompanied by a prosopographical entry for M. T. Kalashnikov, and perhaps by enough encyclopaedic information to explain why the gun is so widely used, why writers who do not appear to be experts in weaponry identify it so readily, when it was first developed, and so on. The distinction between lexical and encyclopaedic information is not easy to sustain: perhaps the makers of dictionaries should fully accept that their readers do really want them to be “a first introductory key to every kind of human knowledge”.

The pleasure proposed by the *New Statesman* for the reader on his desert island was a solitary one: other readers delighted in *OED* as a monument to the language, a treasure for, in one bizarre formulation, “the whole English-speaking race” (quoted Oxford University Press 1915: 16). Journals from the *Asiatic Review* to the *Basler Nachrichten* agreed respectively that it was “not so much a Dictionary as a History of English speech and thought from its infancy to the present day”, and “weniger ein Wörterbuch als eine Geschichte der englischen Sprache und englischen Denkens von ihrer Kindheit bis auf unsere Tage” (quoted Oxford University Press 1928a: 25; quoted Oxford University Press 1933). It therefore inevitably appealed to conservatives, such as the one who wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement* that:

“Those who respect the purity of the language, who try to honour and understand its traditions and its idioms, who feel doubtful whether even so supple an instrument as English can bear without grave deterioration the incessant strain put on it by modern democracy, will rejoice that the Dictionary has come into being when it has and as it has” (quoted Oxford University Press 1933).

So strong was their sense of the dictionary as a national monument that its publishers boasted in a pamphlet of 1928: “Though it is printed on the best linen-rag paper, the copies in some public libraries have been worn away by the fingers of readers, as the pavements of ancient cathedrals have been worn by the feet of pilgrims” (Oxford University Press 1928b). The imagery of cathedrals and pilgrimage recurs. One of the editors of *OED*, Charles Onions, was described in that year as appearing to have “come triumphantly to the end of a long pilgrimage” (*Sunday Times* 1928). Another, William Craigie, reflected five years later that the dictionary was like an “edifice”, evidently a church or cathedral, on which he had “endeavoured ... to build the spire, and even to put on the weathercock” (Oxford University Press 1934:24). The sheer size of the dictionary provided early twentieth-century users with the emotional pleasure of patriotic reflections, which might be purely political or quasi-religious, as well as with the readerly pleasure of endless browsing.

Solitary readerly pleasure is naturally less likely to find public expression than patriotic excitement. But it is still evident in the early reviews of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The *Athenaeum* remarked around 1901 that “those who have no collection of books will find the *New English Dictionary* an excellent substitute” — again, just like the *New Statesman*'s castaway reader (quoted Oxford University Press 1902). Purchasers of the original fascicles of the dictionary had a particularly strong sense of it as a collection rather than a unitary work. As each fascicle was received it could be read independently, with some care: prefatory notes guided readers to particularly interesting entries, and the relative brevity of each fascicle encouraged, if not sequential reading, then at least a kind of intensive browsing. In the words of the *Spectator*, “it is nothing less than a liberal education to have it delivered every three months at your door” (quoted Oxford University Press 1902). Popular reference works had been published in parts often enough (the *Penny Cyclopaedia* is an example), but they did not offer the reader such a *liberal* education, and their contents were not as excitingly varied. The novelist Arnold Bennett summed up the distinctive pleasure of buying a dictionary in fascicles with particular vigour: “I have been buying it in parts for nearly forty years and am still buying it. The longest sensational serial ever written!” (Oxford University Press 1928:25).

Hans Aarsleff has called the fascicles a distinctive kind of learned journal, and indeed, they have the cooperative nature and the diversity within unity of the Enlightenment journal, together with the breadth of appeal which Bayle summed up in the proud claim that “we aren't writing exclusively for savants, we are very pleased that people who aren't scholars can find here something to amuse them” (quoted Popkin 1991:211). Readers would correspond with the editor, offering help and guidance, and would read the results of their contributions in the growing dictionary. It was a genuinely interactive text. Even after its publication in volumes, its readers recorded their experience of browsing — that is to say, of short, often intense and intertextual, reading experiences — by annotating their copies. Rose Macaulay's essay on “Improving the Dictionary” in *Personal Pleasures* certainly speaks for others:

“On a blank page at the beginning of the Supplementary Volume of my Dictionary, I record emendations, corrections, additions, earlier uses of words, as I come on them in reading ... here were sailors, travellers and philosophers chattering of sea turtles from the fifteen-sixties on, and the Dictionary will not have them before the sixteen-fifties ... If there is any drawback to this pure pleasure of doing good to a dictionary, I have not yet found it” (Macaulay 1935: 269).

Her set of *OED* was destroyed in the bombing of London five years after she wrote so gleefully about it, and although her friend Victor Gollancz gave her another, in the familiar and well-loved red quarter-leather binding, her annotations were all lost. Other annotated sets have found their way to the Oxford English Dictionary offices and are being used in its revision.

“Improving the dictionary” without marking up a whole set has given satisfaction to thousands of its readers since the first edition was completed. The periodical *Notes and Queries* has been particularly hospitable to lists of emendations. Others have gone, and continue to go, direct to the dictionary offices, sent in batches by long-term major contributors such as Sir Edward Playfair and the late Marghanita Laski, and singly by readers who have noticed one particular point of use or etymology. The editors have taken to the practice, used extensively by Sir James Murray, of sending out lists of words for which more

evidence is needed: for instance, readers are at the time of writing being asked for examples of *asteroid field* from before 1980, of *fell off (the back of) a lorry/truck*, a British idiom supposedly used by persons selling stolen goods, from before 1973, and of *ti(p)pitiwitchet*, an American name for the Venus fly-trap, from between 1763 and 1940 (*OED News* 1998). These requests have recently been made online as well as in hard copy. The potential for interactivity provided by the online exchange of information is evident. Improving the dictionary, by e-mail as well as by post, is a pleasure experienced by its readers across the world.

That potential, though, takes the account of the pleasures of the dictionary a long way from the material satisfaction of owning a big, handsome, learned book, or of receiving four well-printed fascicles a year. That is a non-trivial point. There is an element of pride, which more serious readers than the Emperor Maximilian II have enjoyed, in owning a dictionary in book form. To return to Rose Macaulay, this is from her letter thanking Victor Gollancz for the replacement dictionary:

“My darling dictionary again, in the same vestage and habit as I have always known ... I think it is the most generous act of friendship I ever knew ... The O[xford] D[ictionary] was my Bible, my staff, my entertainer, my help in work and my recreation in leisure — nothing else serves. ... My new flat already looks lovely in my mind’s eye, its shelves abloom with those dark red vol[ume]s” (quoted Smith 1972: 158).

Macaulay was not generally an effusive correspondent: her affection for the dictionary in its familiar “vintage and habit” was evidently fervent. When we think about *le plaisir du texte*, we need to remember the pleasures of the material book.

The pleasures of this particular book were extended much more widely than before in 1971, when the first edition of *OED* was issued in a micrographic edition, with four pages of the original reproduced in small but legible print on one page. This edition became available very cheaply through book clubs. At last a reader such as an undergraduate without private means could own the dictionary. The four-volume supplement edited by R. W. Burchfield was also released in the same format, but did not circulate so widely. Perhaps Oxford University Press made a false move when it replaced the two bulky volumes plus supplement of this edition with a slimmer and much less legible single volume, which reproduced nine pages of the second edition of *OED* on a single page. The decision to do that seems not to take into account the sort of recreational reading of the dictionary in which Macaulay and Bennett engaged for much of their lives; nor, *a fortiori*, would a decision to release any future edition of *OED* exclusively in machine-readable form, as is being done with an increasing number of major reference works.

This is a genuine problem. On the one hand, some of the kinds of pleasure which have in the past been enjoyed by readers of large historical dictionaries in print form might all the more readily be enjoyed by readers of similar dictionaries on screen. Machine-readable texts can be hugely comucopian. They can usually be browsed very conveniently from cross-reference to cross-reference. Attempts are clearly being made to develop their suitability for recreational use, and my own sense is that my students at the University of Alberta are becoming steadily more inclined to enjoy on-screen reading every year, and even perhaps every month. On the other hand, there has historically seemed to be a non-trivial relationship between the pleasure given by a large historical dictionary and its physical form as a book (or set of books). It is as

a book that it is capable of being owned and admired as Arnold Bennett and the reviewer in the *New Statesman* and even King George V admired it; it is as a book that it can most readily be read recreationally; it is as a book that it can most readily be read intertextually with other books. This argument can, I think, be distinguished from the sentimental aversion to computers which is commonly expressed by conservative bibliophiles: *OED* in machine-readable form is a superb research tool, but the dictionary does have other important functions besides those of a research tool.

Rose Macaulay's references to *OED* are reminders of its symbolic value as a physical object, a set of books, and also of the readiness with which it can be read for pleasure. These elements can never be untangled in discussions of the social history of books: their owners nearly always value them, with varying emphases, as symbolic objects and as sources of recreational pleasure. Neither element should be discounted by lexicographers as they discuss the future of historical dictionaries such as *OED*; they might even, as a heuristic device, keep Macaulay in mind as an example of one of their ideal readers.

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Note: A number of the Oxford University Press pamphlets cited below are conveniently collected in a scrapbook, apparently the work of Falconer Madan, which is now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, at the pressmark 30254 c. 2.

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