

Oxford English Dictionary on historical principles

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), published by the Oxford University Press (OUP), is a comprehensive dictionary of the English language. As of 30 November 2005, the Oxford English Dictionary contained about 301,100 main entries. Supplementing each entry headword, there are 157,000 bold-type combinations and derivatives; 169,000 italicized-bold phrases and combinations; 616,500 word-forms in total, including 137,000 pronunciations; 249,300 etymologies; 577,000 cross-references; and 2,412,400 usage quotations. The dictionary's latest, complete print edition (Second Edition, 1989) was printed in 20 volumes, comprising 291,500 entries in 21,730 pages.

The OED's official policy attempted to record a word's most-known usages and variants in all varieties of English past and present, world-wide. According to the 1933 Preface:

The aim of this Dictionary is to present in alphabetical series the words that have formed the English vocabulary from the time of the earliest records [ca. AD740] down to the present day, with all the relevant facts concerning their form, sense-history, pronunciation, and etymology. It embraces not only the standard language of literature and conversation, whether current at the moment, or obsolete, or archaic, but also the main technical vocabulary, and a large measure of dialectal usage and slang.

1. History

Origins

At first, the dictionary was unconnected to Oxford University; it originally was a Philological Society project conceived in London by **Richard Trench, Herbert Coleridge, and Frederick Furnivall**, who were dissatisfied with the current English dictionaries. **In June of 1857**, they formed an "**Unregistered Words Committee**" to search for unlisted and undefined words lacking in current dictionaries. In November, Trench's report was not a list of unregistered words; instead, it was the study *On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries*, which identified seven distinct shortcomings in contemporary dictionaries:

- * **Incomplete coverage of obsolete words**
- * **Inconsistent coverage of families of related words**
- * **Incorrect dates for earliest use of words**
- * **History of obsolete senses of words often omitted**
- * **Inadequate distinction among synonyms**

* **Insufficient use of good illustrative quotations**

* **Space wasted on inappropriate or redundant content**

Trench suggested that a new, truly comprehensive dictionary was needed. Volunteer readers (800 readers) would copy to quotation slips passages illustrating actual word usages, then post them to the dictionary editor. In 1858, the Society agreed to the project in principle, with the title "**A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles**" (NED).

The first editors

Trench played the key role in the project's first months, but his ecclesiastical career meant that he could not give the dictionary project the time required, easily ten years; he withdrew, and **Herbert Coleridge** became the first editor. On 12 May 1860, Coleridge's dictionary plan was published, and research started. His house was the first editorial office. He arrayed 100,000 quotation slips in a 54-pigeon-hole grid. In April 1861, the group published the first sample pages; later that month, the thirty-one-year old Coleridge died of tuberculosis.

Furnivall then became editor; he was enthusiastic and knowledgeable, yet temperamentally ill-suited for the work. Recruited assistants handled two tons of quotation slips and other materials. Furnivall understood the need for an efficient excerpting system, and instituted several prefatory projects. In 1864, he founded the Early English Text Society, and in 1865, he founded the Chaucer Society for preparing general benefit editions of immediate value to the dictionary project. The compilation lasted 21 years.

In the 1870s, Furnivall unsuccessfully recruited both Henry Sweet and Henry Nicol to succeed him. He then approached **James Murray**, who accepted the post of editor. Murray's effort and association with the dictionary led the Oxford English Dictionary to be dubbed Murray's Dictionary.

The Oxford editors

1879, after two years' negotiating by Sweet, Furnivall, and Murray, the OUP (Oxford University Press) agreed to publish the dictionary and to pay the editor, Murray, who was also the president of the Philological Society. The dictionary was to be published as interval fascicles, with the final form in four 6,400-page volumes. They hoped to finish the project in ten years.

Murray started the project, ably tackling its true scale. He chose to work in a corrugated iron outbuilding, the "Scriptorium," which was lined with wooden planks, book shelves, and 1,029 pigeon-holes for the quotation slips. Murray now tracked and regathered Furnivall's collection of

quotation slips, finding them inadequate. Readers had tended to concentrate on rare, interesting words rather than common usages: for instance, there were ten times more quotations for abusion than for abuse. He appealed for readers in newspapers distributed to bookshops and libraries; readers were specifically asked to report "as many quotations as you can for ordinary words" and for words that were "rare, obsolete, old-fashioned, new, peculiar or used in a peculiar way." Murray had American philologist and liberal-arts-college professor Francis March manage the collection in North America; 1,000 daily quotation slips arrived to the Scriptorium, and by 1882, there were already 3,500,000 quotations.

The first Dictionary fascicle was published on 1 February 1884 — twenty-three years after Coleridge's sample pages. The full title was **A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles**, founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by The Philological Society.

1896 Henry Bradley, Murray's assistant, hired by him in 1884, who worked independently in the British Museum, London, became another editor of the Dictionary and moved to work at Oxford University.

OUP and its management started harassing Murray and Bradley with the business concerns of containing costs and speedy production to where the project's collapse seemed likely. Newspapers reported the harassment, and public opinion backed the editors. Gell, the director of OUP was fired, and the University reversed his cost policies. If the editors felt that the Dictionary would have to grow larger, it would; it was an important work, and worth the time and money to properly finish it. Neither Murray nor Bradley lived to see it. Murray died in 1915, having been responsible for words starting with A-D, H-K, O-P and T, nearly half the finished dictionary; Bradley died in 1923, having completed E-G, L-M, S-Sh, St and W-We. By then two additional editors were promoted from assistant work to independent work, continuing without much trouble. William Craigie and C. T. Onions, who, starting in 1914, compiled the remaining ranges, Su-Sz, Wh-Wo and X-Z.

The Dictionary was published in fascicles, 125 altogether. The 125th and last fascicle, covering words from Wise to the end of W, was published on April 19, 1928, and the full Dictionary in bound volumes followed immediately.

In 1895, the title Oxford English Dictionary (OED) was first used. It then appeared only on the outer covers of the fascicles; the original title was still the official one and was used everywhere else.

By 1980s it was clear that the full text of the Dictionary would now need to be computerized. Achieving this would require retyping it once, but thereafter it would always be accessible for computer searching — as well as for whatever new editions of the dictionary might be desired, starting with an integration of the supplementary volumes and the main text. Preparation for this process began in 1983, and editorial work started the following year. So the New Oxford English Dictionary (NOED) project began. More than 120 keyboarders started keying in over 350,000,000 characters, their work checked by 55 proof-readers in England.

By 1989 the NOED (New Oxford English Dictionary) project had achieved its primary goals, and the editors, working online, had successfully combined the original text, the supplement, and a small amount of newer material, into a single unified dictionary. The word "new" was dropped from the name, and the Second Edition of the OED, or the OED2, was published. The OED2 was printed in 20 volumes.

When the print version of the second edition was published in 1989, the response was enthusiastic. The author Anthony Burgess declared it "the greatest publishing event of the century," as quoted by Dan Fisher of the Los Angeles Times (March 25, 1989). TIME dubbed the book "a scholarly Everest," and Richard Boston, writing for the London Guardian (March 24, 1989), called it "one of the wonders of the world."

Electronic Version

Once the text of the dictionary was digitized and online, it was also available to be published on CD-ROM. The text of the First Edition was made available in 1988. Afterward, three versions of the second edition were issued.

On March 14, 2000, the Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED Online) became available to subscribers. The online database contains the entire OED2 and is updated quarterly with revisions that will be included in the OED3. The online edition is the most up-to-date version of the dictionary available.

2. The OED

The OED was a historical dictionary, sometimes referred to as a philological dictionary. It was historical in three ways: the wordlist covered a huge period: the OED aimed at listing "words now in use, or known to have been in use since the middle of the twelfth century. No dictionary of English had covered such a period before: Johnson only went from 1586 to 1660.

The OED arranged information in chronological order whenever possible.

The third manifestation of the historical perspective was in the provision of etymological information. This was given in a special paragraph at the beginning of each entry, and it was the most detailed ever published for English.

The OED was a descriptive dictionary. The corpus contained non-fiction, technical and scientific sources, even popular newspapers and magazines.

The OED was an exhaustive dictionary, at least the most comprehensive dictionary of English ever produced. It was also exhaustive and thorough in its distinction of the meanings of polysemous words.

The OED was a literary dictionary. As we have seen, other lexicographers had sought evidence and a linguistic model in literature before, but the OED carried the practice to unprecedented dimensions.

The OED was illustrated by quotations for every sense of every word. Quotations were collected from 5000 sources covering 7 centuries. The most often quoted writers are: Shakespeare (32886 times), Walter Scott (15499 times), Wycliffe (11971), Milton (11967), Chaucer (11000), Dickens (7500), etc.

The OED was a language dictionary, a dictionary of words, not of things. A dictionary, as Murray said, is not an encyclopedia, and the primary aim of a dictionary is to illustrate the word and not tell us about the thing.

The OED was a scholarly dictionary. It was in touch with the latest developments in linguistics. The OED has been the object of many articles, reviews, and books, probably more than any dictionary in the world. The OED with its comprehensiveness and scholarly contents, is an extraordinary dictionary. Its entries were wonderfully learned and enjoyable. But it was designed more for the learned than for a wide public. It had something to teach everybody, but it was more likely to be used by the elite. It carried to unprecedented heights the concept of the dictionary as a record of the literary language. It was modern in its interest in linguistics, in its exhaustiveness, in its systematic use of quotations, its historical ordering of meanings and quotations, its descriptivism and its scientific approach to lexicography. It was also modern in the way it was generated, by pooling the knowledge of thousands of learned readers, and produced, by a large team of lexicographers, marking the end of the period when dictionaries were written by single

authors. And it was unequalled in its systematic exploration of a body of written sources covering several centuries.

The OED was extremely influential, especially in Britain but also in other language communities. It was a model for many lexicographers, a monument for the public and a supreme reference for writers.