Ethnocentrism and the English Dictionary

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Abbreviations and dictionary names

The names of dictionaries published in the twentieth century are followed by an abbreviation and are listed under their abbreviations in the bibliography. These abbreviations are also used after the first appearance of the dictionary in the text. A number following an abbreviated dictionary name indicates the edition number. For example, *OED2* refers to the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In the course of writing this book I discovered that dictionary abbreviations can also be a matter of ethnocentrism. For example, the *Dictionary of American English* is typically *DAE*, while the *Australian National Dictionary* is typically *AusND*. I have chosen to use abbreviations for the names of regions that clearly distinguish those with the same initial letter: *American* is *Am*, *Australian* is *Aus* and *African* is *Af*.

Dictionaries published before 1900 are normally referred to by the names of their compilers. I have followed this practice and listed them accordingly in a separate section of the bibliography.

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Introduction

According to recent estimates, between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people, almost a quarter of the population of the world, can be counted as fluent or competent in the English language (Crystal, 1997). Whether as a first, second or foreign language, English plays a role in almost every urbanised region of the world. These are the bare facts of English as an international language, beneath which lie important issues of debate ranging across the various disciplines associated with the study of English. For some, the globalisation of English is in essence a continuation of Anglo-American imperialism within the cultural sphere; the English language is the Trojan horse of imperialism in the post-imperialist world. For others, English as an international language is a post-imperialist phenomenon *sui generis*, which promises to undermine the cultural authority of the old linguistic centres as the cultural products of new varieties of English come to enrich the language as a whole. A third position in the debate accepts the globalisation of English as a fact of the modern world and focuses on the need to reconceptualise and revise the ways in which we represent and study the English language for the post-imperialist world.

Certainly, few scholars of the English language would now agree with the irredentist position advanced by British politician Enoch Powell in 1988:

> Others may speak and read English – more or less – but it is our language not theirs. It was made in England by the English and it remains our distinctive property, however widely it is used or learned.[1]

Many, perhaps the majority, would prefer to align themselves with the position advanced by McArthur in the preface to his *Oxford Companion to the English Language:*

> English is the possession of every individual and every community that in any way uses it, regardless of what any other individual or community may think about it.
>
> (McArthur, 1992: xvii)

A problem remains, however. Both the English language as we know it and the disciplines associated with its study are historical products of an age in which Powell's position was the norm. We may declare that English is the universal property of all of its users, but the ways in which we represent it within our disciplines may, nevertheless, be constrained by assumptions and practices that lead us to act as if it remained the property of its traditional linguistic centres.

This book is concerned with a field of practice that has possibly been less subject to critique in the light of the globalisation of English than any other. Dictionaries are, in many respects, among the most taken-for-granted linguistic artefacts of the English-speaking world. Almost every literate English speaker owns one and consults it from time to time. For the learner of English, a good dictionary is almost a necessity. But because dictionaries are so eminently and transparently useful, we seem reluctant to criticise them except in regard to their usefulness. Yet the history of English lexicography is, in many respects, more closely intertwined with the history of English as a language of empire than that of any other field within the study of English. The practice of making English dictionaries for English-speaking and non-English-speaking readers stretches back 400 years and pre-dates the rise of English as an independent object of academic study by several hundred years. Two of the greatest landmarks in the history of the dictionary, Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* and Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, were in their time widely regarded as monuments to their respective national versions of the language. The greatest landmark of all, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), which was more or less explicitly a project of British imperialism concerned with the consolidation of English as the dominant language of the world, continues to set the standard for the modern English dictionary. And by the end of the twentieth century English lexicography has become an international industry with a structure that bears a remarkable similarity to the structure of the English-speaking empires in their heyday.

None of this is to say that the modern English dictionary is the Trojan horse of a latter-day linguistic imperialism or that modern English lexicographers harbour imperialistic designs beneath their overtly internationalist aims. But it must also be acknowledged that lexicographers frequently underplay the possible ideological implications of the historical development of the dictionary. In a paper that is largely critical of the adequacy of British learner's dictionaries to overseas markets, for example, the British lexicographer Janet Whitcut argues:

> Although it purports to describe a world language, any dictionary of English must in practice deal chiefly with the English of its own place of origin. This is only reasonable, and is obvious at all stages of the dictionary entry: in headword selection; probably in pronunciation; in the choice and differentiation of senses; and, most strikingly, in the use of examples.
>
> (Whitcut, 1995: 253)

There are three possible objections to the argument that the dictionary's focus on the language of its place of origin is 'reasonable'. The first of these objections is that the reasonableness of the assumption must be set in the context of the fact that the vast majority of English dictionaries continue to be produced either in Britain and the United States or under the direction of British and US publishers. Moreover, economic obstacles to the successful independent production of dictionaries elsewhere in the world are such that few local publishers are prepared to risk the investment that the publication of a large competitive dictionary requires. In countries such as Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore and South Africa, a local dictionary would not only have to contend with the relatively small size of the market, it would also need to compete against the products of its British and American rivals. Dictionaries dealing primarily with the English of Britain and the United States exercise, in effect, a stranglehold over the world market for the English dictionary.

The second objection is that British and US dictionaries do not, in practice, *openly* deal primarily with the language of Britain and the United States. On the contrary, the versions of the language that they present to their readers are often assumed to be 'comprehensive' or 'international'. When sold at home, the British or US dictionary is simply 'the dictionary'. When sold overseas, although its users may well be aware of its geographical origins, the assumption is that they are getting an international version of the language, not simply a version of the language as it is used in Britain or the United States. Some of the more recent British dictionaries, in a rhetorical move designed to accommodate the view that a dictionary should be local to the country in which it is sold, even imply that they are local products when their contents are, in fact, substantially or entirely identical to those of editions sold at home. The successful marketing of a British or US dictionary overseas may also rely on the collusion of local users with an ideological assumption that British or US versions of English as an international language are the 'authorised' versions. Oxford University Press (OUP) dictionaries, for example, can only benefit from the popular and widespread assumption overseas that 'good English' is 'Oxford English'. Certainly, international publicity material for OUP dictionaries does little to challenge this assumption, and indeed goes some way towards fostering it by emphasising the Oxford tradition of dictionary-making.

The third, and perhaps the most important, objection is that any assumption concerning the reasonableness of existing practices within English lexicography implies that the English dictionary is a natural, rather than historically-specific, form for conveying information about a language to its users. Whitcut, it should be noted, in common with many other lexicographers, acknowledges that English dictionaries are ethnocentric works, but she also suggests that they are necessarily so. The current form of the dictionary is separated from the historical processes through which it has developed and emerged such that the scope of legitimate critique is restricted to what is possible within the current form. However, as Henri Béjoint observes,

> Lexicography has obviously entered a phase of self-examination: we have begun to wonder why the dictionaries that we have inherited from previous generations are what they are, and whether they are adapted to our times.... The time seems to have come when those traditions should be questioned.
>
> (Béjoint, 1994: 2–3)

Asking fundamental questions about why dictionaries 'are as they are' necessarily involves asking questions about the historical contingency of the dictionary as a form for the representation of information about the English language. It also involves asking whether forms and practices that emerged in periods when an ethnocentric view of the language was the norm are adequate to a period in which such a view is subject to critique.

In view of the often explicit internationalist orientation of the current generation of English dictionaries, the contention argued in this book that dictionaries are ethnocentric stands in need of clarification. The substance of the contention is not that dictionaries exhibit racism or prejudice against particular ethnic groups, although there is some evidence that dictionaries are occasionally ethnocentric in this sense of the word. Rather, the argument is that the English dictionary is a historically specific form of discourse embedded within broader discourses that represent knowledge of the world in terms of metaphors of centre and periphery. In this sense, ethnocentrism implies a set of structures that position one's own culture as a centre for the production and distribution of knowledge of other cultures, which are to various degrees peripheral to it. Ethnocentrism in the dictionary is thus not simply a question of the content of the statements that the dictionary makes about the English language. It is equally a question of the structures that make those statements possible. Because the dictionary is a book about language, however, the discourse of the dictionary involves a particular interaction between content and structure.

Centre–periphery metaphors are characteristic of the production and dissemination of Western knowledge in the fields of geography, natural science and social science and the processes of abstraction, classification and hierachisation on which they are typically based. One of the aims of this book is to demonstrate how the structures of the dictionary function as vehicle for the representation of the English language as an object with a clearly defined regional centre and periphery. But at the same time, there is a recognition that the dictionary incorporates other discourses such that centre–periphery views of the geographical, natural and social world are inextricably bound up with the centre–periphery view of the language. The modern dictionary is, in this sense, not simply a book about words, but also a book about the world viewed through the particular window of the word. Ethnocentrism in the dictionary thus becomes a question both of the representation of the language and of the representation of the world as it is inscribed within the structured version of the language that the dictionary presents to the user.

Dictionaries are surrounded by myths of 'objectivity' and 'authority'. Dictionaries objectify language and, in the process, objectify themselves, such that it

becomes difficult for us to conceive of how the forms and structures of the dictionary could be anything other than they are. In particular, we are faced with a dominant paradigm for the practice of lexicography as a descriptive procedure for the identification and presentation of the 'facts' about a language. Investigation of ethnocentrism in the English dictionary therefore calls for procedures of deconstruction at three levels, which correspond to the three major sections of this book. The first section deals with the structures of the English dictionary at the theoretical level. It explores relationships between theories of the dictionary and theories of language and proposes that we view dictionaries in terms of semiotics and discourse, as representations of language rather than as descriptions of language 'as it is'. It also explores in detail the ways in which the structures of the dictionary function as vehicles for the representation of language and knowledge in centre–periphery terms. The second section approaches the English dictionary from a historical perspective and outlines how the structures of the modern dictionary have evolved from the seventeenth century to the present day. The third section presents a detailed empirical analysis of the treatment of China in the second edition of the *OED*, published in 1989. This analysis aims to explore the ways in which ethnocentrism operates through the interaction of structure and content within one of the most influential dictionaries in the English-speaking world.

Green (1996: 29) observes that there are probably more than 15,000 English dictionaries currently on the market. This study is, therefore, necessarily limited in its focus. First, it deals almost exclusively with the monolingual general English dictionary. In the modern age, the monolingual dictionary is perhaps the canonical form of the dictionary, but in historical terms it is a recent development. The first monolingual dictionaries of English were compiled in the early seventeenth century, a late beginning if we agree with Green that lexicography has a history of more than 4,000 years. The monolingual dictionary may also only be the canonical form for the native speaker of English. In spite of the success of the monolingual learner's dictionary, it is likely that the majority of non-native speakers of English rely on bilingual or 'bilingualised' versions of monolingual dictionaries, which are not treated in any depth in this study. The notion of the 'general' dictionary is theoretically vague, but in this study it refers to dictionaries that aim to cover either the language as a whole or a representative sample of it. This distinguishes the general dictionary from the specialist dictionary, which is explicitly limited to a specialised field, but it should not be taken to imply that the general dictionary is not selective. Perhaps a better way of defining the general dictionary would be as one that aims to cover, to varying degrees of depth, the common words of the language. In this sense, the learner's dictionary is just as much a general dictionary as the standard desk dictionary. Similarly, the *OED* is, in spite of its size and historical specialism, considered a general dictionary for the purposes of this study.

A note may also be added on the choice of the treatment of China in the *OED* as a subject for detailed empirical investigation, which might at first seem to be an arbitrary, even ethnocentric, choice. The *OED* was conceived and

compiled during the heyday of British imperialism. Although the second edition of the dictionary, used for this study, was published in 1989 and was considerably revised, a substantial proportion of the contents of the first edition remain. The *OED* is, therefore, a relatively easy target for an analysis of ethnocentrism in the English dictionary. Moreover, in view of both the circumstances of its compilation and its sheer size, the *OED* can hardly be considered representative of the English dictionary in general, either in Britain or the United States. Nevertheless, the *OED* retains a special importance within modern lexicography. It continues to be highly regarded by lexicographers, who often see it as an exemplar of the modern descriptive method. Beyond the field of lexicography also, the *OED* continues to set the standard for the English dictionary. Simon Winchester's assessment of the contemporary relevance of the *OED*, for example, is by no means unusual:

> The book remains in all senses a truly monumental work – and with very little serious argument is still regarded as a paragon, the most definitive of all guides to the language that, for good and ill, has become the lingua franca of the civilized modern world.
>
> (Winchester, 1998: 25)

To be sure, the imperialist origins and purposes of the dictionary are acknowledged, but it is as if this historical context should not be allowed to interfere with a true appreciation of the value of the scholarship contained within it. As Winchester again puts it:

> There is some occasional carping that the work reflects an elitist, male, British, Victorian tone. Yet even in the admission that, like so many achievements of the era, it did reflect a set of attitudes not wholly harmonic with those of prevalent at the end of the twentieth century, none seem to suggest that any other dictionary has ever come close, or will ever come close, to the achievement that it offers.
>
> (Winchester, 1998: 221)

Perhaps most important of all, however, is the fact that the *OED* is not only in the process of transforming itself into a dictionary for the twenty-first century through the proposed publication of the *New Oxford English Dictionary*, but has also taken upon itself a particular role in relation to the coverage of English as an international language, described by one of its current editors as one of the two major policy questions for the new dictionary (Weiner, 1986).

Within the *OED*, China is one of the best represented countries of the world in terms of mention in definitions and quotations. Indeed, China is mentioned more frequently than many countries in which English is used as a native or second language, reflecting the dictionary's special concern with the Orient. One of the arguments that I will seek to develop in this study is that ethnocentrism in the English language is not necessarily a question of neglect of peripheral

cultures or language varieties. On the contrary, ethnocentrism is often most apparent in the bringing of the periphery to light as a reflection of the knowledge of the centre. The *OED*'s extensive treatment of China, updated in the second edition along with other areas of interest, is particularly instructive in this respect. Although this treatment is not necessarily representative of the treatment of China and the world in other English dictionaries, it is nevertheless indicative of the mechanisms of ethnocentrism within the English dictionary in general and of the scope of the task that remains for lexicographers who aim at a truly internationalist lexicography.

1 Dictionaries and theories of language

The argument that English dictionaries are fundamentally ethnocentric rests on a view of the English dictionary as a representation of the English language organised in terms of metaphors of centre and periphery. The process of lexicographical representation, constrained by the rules and principles of lexicographical practice, leads not to the production of a direct reflection of the language 'as it is', but to the production of a version of the language, with definite form and shape. This version of the language both represents and conditions our conceptions of what the language is, what it is made of and the ways in which its component parts are related to each other.

The notion of the dictionary as representation implies a theory of the dictionary based upon theories of semiotics, ideology and discourse that will be outlined in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3. First, however, it has to be acknowledged that dictionary-makers themselves do not typically view lexicography as a process of representation. For most modern lexicographers, lexicography is first and foremost a process of description and the rules and principles of lexicographical practice constrain the lexicographer to 'accuracy' and 'objectivity'. Moreover, twentieth-century descriptivist lexicography defines itself as a response to the prescriptivist lexicography of earlier centuries. In contrast to the prescriptive lexicographer, who relies on intuition and arbitrary diktat, the descriptive lexicographer relies on evidence. In this sense, descriptivism is crucial to the self-image of modern lexicography as an endeavour in harmony with principles of scientific inquiry. We begin, therefore, by examining the nature of the assumptions on which descriptivist lexicography is based and their relationship to evolving theories of language.

The descriptivist paradigm

Descriptivism has been described by Moon (1989) as the dominant paradigm for lexicography in the twentieth century. According to the descriptive principle the dictionary should tell the reader what the language *is*, not what it *should be*. The descriptive principle is also, in a sense, a moral one since it constrains lexicographers to record the 'facts of the language' accurately and without bias and without unjustifiably allowing their own opinions to come to the surface of the

dictionary. It places the lexicographer above the interests of factions who might wish to use the dictionary as a site for linguistic or ideological dispute. At the same time it allows the lexicographer to submerge his or her own authority within the authority of the dictionary as an objective record of the language. Descriptivism also prescribes a set of procedures governing good practice, enshrined in manuals of lexicography (e.g., Zgusta, 1971; Landau, 1989), which define modern lexicography as a profession rather than an art.

Descriptivism does not, however, define the dictionary as a form. Indeed, up until the mid-nineteenth century, dictionaries were, with few exceptions, compiled by individuals with interests and careers beyond the field of lexicography, who routinely inserted their own opinions about the meanings and value of words and the ideas to which they referred. In the late eighteenth century in particular, the authority of the English dictionary lay precisely in the authority of its compiler to tell the user how the language should be used. Descriptivism as a lexicographical principle first emerges in Archbishop Trench's (1857) address to the Philological Society, now taken to mark the origins of the *OED*, in which he proposed that the dictionary should be 'an inventory of the language' and the lexicographer 'an historian ... not a critic'. These succinct definitions of the dictionary and the lexicographer's role in its compilation would eventually come to stand for the ideal of descriptive lexicography. Simpson (1990: 1961), co-editor of the second edition of the *OED*, has described Trench's address as a 'manifesto for dictionary-makers' and Gates (1992: 268) has described the *OED* itself as 'a revolution in dictionary-making'. As a result of this revolution, Gates remarks, 'the editors of today's general monolingual dictionaries see their work as a compendium of facts about words, a scientific record of the language' (1992: 265).

The distinction between descriptivism and prescriptivism in lexicography, and the sharp break between the two phases implied in the idea that the *OED* was a revolution in dictionary-making, is misleading however. English dictionaries continue to prescribe both explicitly and implicitly. In his preface to *OEDS3* (1982), for example, editor Robert Burchfield informs the reader that, on occasion, '[I] found myself adding my own opinions about the acceptability of certain words or meanings in educated use'. As Zgusta (1989: 76) points out, many modern dictionaries prescribe indirectly by employing usage notes such as 'frequently rejected, particularly by teachers of English' and in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (*AmHDEL*, 1969), controversial matters of usage were settled by a panel of 100 writers and educators, whose opinions were reported in percentage form. The distinction between description and prescription is also one that tends to ignore the implications of the institutional authority that dictionaries often claim for themselves. For Taylor, descriptive statements of lexicographical meaning such as those given in the *OED* are not descriptions of facts, but rather statements of norms:

> To present normative statements of word meaning not as such, but rather as descriptions of some institutional state of affairs, amounts only to a deceptive

> way of attempting to enforce their normative authority: namely, by denying that their authority comes from any other source than a purported correspondence to the truth.
>
> (Taylor, 1990: 25)

Both descriptive and prescriptive lexicographers purport to tell the truth about the meanings of words (and in practice their definitions rarely differ either in content or form). The difference between the two lies mainly in the ways in which this truth is conceptualised as fact or norm.

Nevertheless the break between the prescriptive and descriptive dictionary is crucial to the self-image of the modern dictionary. The important distinction, however, lies not so much in whether the modern dictionary prescribes or not as in the basis on which it claims authority. As Sinclair, editor of *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (*CCELD*, 1987) (a dictionary that has claimed revolutionary status for itself in its use of corpus evidence), argues:

> Eventually, structural statement contains an element of what should be the case, which can contrast with what is the case. Prescriptive studies fall into disrepute only when they ignore or become detached from evidence.
>
> (Sinclair, 1991: 61)

The authority of the descriptive dictionary thus rests upon the lexicographer's examination and presentation of evidence. Descriptivism thus implies more than the abrogation of the lexicographer's right to prescribe. The *OED* was not simply the first descriptive dictionary, it was also the first to locate its enterprise within the discourse of science. The eighteenth-century prescriptive lexicographers, it could be argued, were equally concerned with the description of the language, but they shared a conception of language as an object of description that was particular to their time. More important than the shift from prescription to description was the shift implicit within the idea of the *OED* to a conception of language as object that could be subjected to scientific inquiry.

The conception of language underpinning descriptivist lexicography is illustrated in a definition of the dictionary, cited by Béjoint (1994: 9), from Zgusta's influential *Manual of Lexicography*:

> A dictionary is a systematically arranged list of socialized linguistic forms compiled from the speech-habits of a given speech-community and commented on by the author in such a way that the qualified reader understands the meaning ... of each separate form, and is informed of the relevant facts concerning the function of that form in the dictionary.
>
> (Zgusta, 1971: 17)

The definition is as much a definition of a language as it is a definition of the dictionary. A language consists, in the terms of this definition, of a set of 'socialized linguistic forms' common to a 'speech community'. It consists of