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We take dictionaries so much for granted today that it is difficult to imagine a time when this invaluable reference tool was not available. The ultimate authority on the language, the **Oxford English Dictionary**, was only published in 1928, having taken more than fifty years of work to complete. The word 'dictionary' itself was first used in 1538, and then only to describe a book offering the English equivalents of Latin words. During the seventeenth century there were

several efforts by lexicographers to produce lists of words and explanations of their meanings, but none made a serious attempt to provide an authoritative record of the language and its usage until the mid-eighteenth century and the advent of Dr Samuel Johnson.

During the eighteenth century (the Age of Enlightenment) there was a general feeling among the leading thinkers of the day, men like Pope, Dryden, Addison and Swift, that rules should be laid down to fix the language and keep it pure. Across the channel in France, much the same feeling prevailed: the Academie Francaise was formed in 1634 with the aim of establishing rules for the language and preventing its contamination by undesirable elements. In 1694, the autocratic Forty Immortals produced **Le Dictionnaire de L'Academie Francaise**, after fifty-five years of work. These worthy gentlemen laid down immutable rules of grammar and spelling, decreeing what was and what was not correct and acceptable usage. Similarly, in Italy, the Accademia della Crusca in Florence had, since 1582, been tasked with preserving linguistic purity, a good few centuries before the Italians were able to call themselves a unified nation.

Johnson, whom Smollett later called 'that great Cham of Literature', arrived in London in his early thirties, having moved there from Lichfield, where his father was a bookseller. A schoolmaster turned journalist, he became a parliamentary sketch-writer for the **Gentleman's Magazine**. He soon earned a reputation as a great conversationalist and wit, but was continually strapped for cash. Long interested in the language, he had ideas of producing a dictionary, which he saw as a way of earning a wider reputation. When, in 1746, a group of London booksellers offered him fifteen hundred guineas to produce a new dictionary, he jumped at the offer.

Initially, his thinking was very much in agreement with the prevailing ideas. He set out to produce 'a dictionary by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed and its attainment facilitated: by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained and its duration lengthened.' He soon came to realise, however, that a language is a living, evolving entity, and cannot be fixed. In the preface to his famous work, he writes: '...the lexicographer [may] be derided who...shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay...' His dictionary, therefore, aimed to describe, rather than prescribe, 'not to form, but to register' the language.

In 1747, he set to work, taking rooms off Fleet Street (today a museum), and hired six scribes. He decided that the best way to go about the task was to read and record the usage of words as found in literature: his team was to browse through the mountain of existing works in English and copy onto slips of paper sentences illustrating his chosen words. In doing this, he foreshadowed the method used by the compilers of the **Oxford English Dictionary** some one hundred years later. Daunted by the magnitude of the task, however, he modified his ideas, and decided to confine himself to writings published after 1536 and the death of Sir Philip Sidney.

He managed to list and define forty three thousand words by 1750, and spent the next four years editing and choosing the 118 000 illustrative quotations amassed by his assistants. In April 1755 the work was completed and published: *A Dictionary of the English Language, in which the Words are deduced from their originals; and illustrated in their different significations, by examples from the best writers to which are prefixed a history of the Language and an English grammar, by Samuel Johnson, M.A. in Two Volumes.*

Although it was hailed as a triumph, the work had its faults, and of course, it had its critics. Many of these detractors were motivated by envy, but there are also some valid criticisms of the work. His arch rival across the Atlantic, Noah Webster, compiler of the **American Dictionary of the English Language**, wrote: 'I am inclined to believe that Johnson's authority has multiplied instead of reducing the number of corruptions in the English language.'

It is true that some of his definitions, as Webster pointed out, are extraordinarily complicated, and tend to obscure, rather than illuminate the meaning, as in 'cough: a convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity', and 'dross: the recement or disputation of metals'.

The Dictionary was by no means comprehensive. He had deliberately chosen to exclude certain terms: words relating to proper names, such as *Benedictine* and *Mahometan*, foreign words, those ending in -ing, obsolete words, and what he called 'cant' - that is, terms relating to various professions, such as law and medicine, and 'many terms of art and manufacture'.

No rude words or obscenities were included (although apparently *fart* was not regarded as a rude word). Later, when tackled on this omission by a fashionable society lady, he is said to have replied, rather caustically: 'Madam, I hope I have not daubed my fingers. I find, however, that you have been looking for them.'

The work is highly idiosyncratic, reflecting the eccentricities, prejudices and political leanings of its compiler. Many of these make entertaining reading today, even though we cannot take them seriously. One wonders, for example, what his scribes (five of them Scottish) thought of the definition of *oats* as 'a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people'. *Whigs* are simply dismissed as 'the name of a faction', while a *Tory* is 'one who adheres to the ancient constitution of the state, and the apostological hierarchy of the Church of England'. *Excise* is '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'. Apparently this definition so offended the Commissioners of Excise that they tried, unsuccessfully, to sue him for defamation.

He is disarmingly frank in admitting his ignorance: '*etch* is a country word of which I know not the meaning', *parsnep* simply 'a plant', while *pastern* is 'the knee of a horse'. A *pastern* is, in fact, closer to being the ankle of a horse, being, according to the **Oxford English Dictionary**, 'that part of a horse's foot between the fetlock and the hoof'. When asked how he could be so wrong in his definition, he replied, 'Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance.'

He is endearingly self-deprecating, as in his definition of a *lexicographer* as 'a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original and detailing the significance of words', *Grub Street* as 'the name of a street in Moorfields in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries and temporary poems'. *Dull* is defined as 'not exhilarating, not delightful: as, to make dictionaries is dull work'.

He also managed to get his revenge on his would-be patron, Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth Earl of Chesterfield. A man of considerable power and influence, he was a lord-lieutenant of Ireland, and

friend of Pope, Swift and Voltaire. When, in 1746, Johnson agreed to take on the project, he had hoped to enlist this prominent figure as a patron, whose imprimatur would confer inestimable prestige on the work. Chesterfield promised the imprimatur, but declined the patronage, contributing a niggardly ten pounds towards the project. He was there to claim credit for its subsequent success, however. In the Dictionary, *Patron* is defined as 'a wretch who supports with indolence, and is paid with flattery'.

Johnson's Dictionary proved to be an international triumph. The president of the Italian Accademia declared it 'a noble work' and 'a perpetual monument of fame to the author, an honour to his own country in particular, and a general benefit to the Republic of Letters throughout all Europe'. In France, he was described as 'an academy'. Voltaire even proposed that the French model a new dictionary on Johnson's. In contrast to **Le Dictionnaire de L'Academie Francaise**, which had taken forty men fifty five years to complete, Johnson's had been completed in seven years with the assistance of only six men. On this basis,

Johnson concluded, three Englishmen were worth a hundred Frenchmen.

During his lifetime, Johnson's Dictionary ran into four editions, and remained the standard work for more than a century. In the opening chapter of Thackeray's novel, **Vanity Fair**, set in the early nineteenth century, the 'Great Lexicographer' is referred to in tones of awe and reverence by the formidable eponymous headmistress of Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies. Becky Sharp's audacious and dramatic act of defiance in flinging her copy of 'the Dictionary' from the coach window as it drives off, causes the timid Miss Jemima almost to faint with terror. Such was the respect still accorded this dictionary fifty years after its publication. It held this position, in fact, until the **Oxford English Dictionary** began appearing in instalments from 1884. This monumental work was finally completed in 1928, more than seventy years after it was first conceived. Its creation is another fascinating story, which I will deal with in a later column.