

# Interview with John Ayto, Lexicographer

I admit it, I love words. Consequently, I have always been fascinated by dictionaries and have a certain reverence for lexicographers—those who compile them. Among the many dictionaries on my shelves, the *Dictionary of Word Origins* is an old favorite. It contains the histories of more than 8,000 words in the English language: just my cup of tea. The author of this book is the British lexicographer John Ayto, who graciously agreed to be interviewed for this column.

After earning a degree and doing research on medieval English at Durham University, Ayto joined the Longman publishing house in 1974 to work on the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, a ground-breaking dictionary for foreign learners of English. He later became managing editor of their dictionary department, working on native-speaker dictionaries. He left in the mid-1980s to become a freelance lexicographer, and subsequently produced the *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins*, *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Euphemisms*, *Oxford Dictionary of Slang*, *Oxford Dictionary of Rhyming Slang*, and *20th Century Words*, among others. He also edited the 17th edition of *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*. He has taught courses in lexicography at Surrey University, written a column on words in the *Observer* newspaper, and appeared from time to time on radio and television, talking (of course) about words.

**I'd like to begin by asking whether your family background played any part in your decision to become a lexicographer. I ask because Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), perhaps the most famous British lexicographer (do you agree?), was the son of a bookseller, which very likely influenced the *Dictionary of the English Language* he wrote and published in 1755. Did you have any similar influences?**

I certainly don't come from a long line of lexicographers! No, my father's skills, for example, lay more in the areas of science and technology than in the arts. But my parents did encourage me in the habit



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of reading, which was a decisive first step. And, yes, I certainly agree about Dr. Johnson. I'm sure that if you asked the average Brit to name a lexicographer, you would mostly be met with a blank stare, but the few who did reply would say Johnson.

**What originally sparked your interest in lexicography as a specific field? Or was it more of a gradual process, one thing leading to another? How did you come to specialize in lexicography?**

Studying English at school, I found my interest being drawn to the medieval period (Chaucer et al.), as much for the fascination of the language as for the quality of the writing. I went on to earn a degree in medieval English, and then for my postgraduate work, I edited a Middle English text, which involved producing a glossary. Up to that point I hadn't remotely thought of lexicography as a possible career, but then I happened to see an ad in a journal for people to work

on a new dictionary project. I thought it might be a good fit for my skills, applied, got the job, and the rest is history.

**Where and when did lexicography, the specific field, begin? Is there much to see from that period, much surviving material? What is the earliest dictionary ever found? How similar was it to contemporary dictionaries?**

There's evidence of Akkadian/Sumerian wordlists from the third millennium BC, and interlinear glosses in medieval manuscripts are clear precursors of modern dictionaries. But it wasn't really until the introduction of printing that dictionaries as we recognize them today came on the scene. The earliest ones were bilingual (Sir Thomas Eliot's Latin-English dictionary of 1538, for example). The first monolingual English dictionary is generally accepted as being Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall* (1604). But, following the model of the earlier bilingual dictionaries, this was what is known as a "hard-word dictionary"—it only included words that the compiler thought his readers might not know the meaning of. It wasn't until the late 17th century that the trend toward including all the words in the language became established, a trend that was confirmed by the triumphant success of Johnson's 1755 dictionary. We live with the consequences today, in dictionaries that contain much redundant information about things we already know (such as the meaning of *chair*).

**You have said that words are the servants of events. Could you flesh that idea out a little for us?**

The idea of words as servants of events applies most obviously to names for things. Entities that never existed before are coming into being constantly, and we have to have some label with which to refer to them. That may in some cases be determined by some official body (as in scientific nomenclature), but more often it involves a gradual process of trial and error. See, for example, the various attempts to find a name for television until *television* eventually came out on top.

Lexical change in more abstract areas is far harder to link to changes in human society. Why, for instance, in recent years (in British English, at any rate), have people begun to use *convince* to mean *persuade*? These are matters of trends rather than events.

**When you were at Longman publishers in 1974, you worked on their dictionary for foreign learners of English. Please tell us something about what a project like that involves. How is it structured? How does it address the specific needs of any particular language?**

The two key requirements of foreign learners we sought to address in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* were: understandability of definition, and grammatical information. Previous dictionaries in this market had used vocabulary in their definitions that was way beyond the competence level of their target users. By studying relevant teaching materials and consulting experts in the field, we developed a vocabulary list of about 2,000 words, with which users could be expected to be familiar, and which we used for writing all the definitions in the dictionary. We also recognized that foreign learners needed to know not just what words mean, but how they behave grammatically. A system of coding for verb grammar had been pioneered by A. S. Hornby in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, but we developed this much further, applying it to other word classes and expanding its range of application. Subsequent experience suggests this was not the best path to follow. Codes (usually combinations of letters and numbers) tend to put people off. They respond better to actual examples incorporating the grammatical feature in question, and that's what modern English Language Teaching (ELT) dictionaries generally use.

**Did the same criteria apply when you worked on dictionaries for native speakers?**

On the whole you assume that native speakers are familiar with the grammar of their language, so (apart from the traditional word-class labels, which have become part of the lexicographic furniture) little needs to be said about it.

But there may be contentious points on which it can be helpful to offer guidance (for example, can *data* be used with a singular verb?). I think/hope our work on ELT dictionaries made us more aware of the need to avoid obscure or obfuscatory vocabulary when writing definitions for native speakers.

**Do you do the research and write the definitions yourself, or is it a team effort?**

This very much differs from dictionary to dictionary, and from publisher to publisher. On the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, I believe lexicographers are expected to research and write every aspect of a dictionary entry themselves, while on other dictionary projects I've been involved in, specialist editors have been employed to write scientific and technical entries, to prepare and produce all the information given on pronunciations, and so on.

**You've also worked on dictionaries of euphemisms and rhyming slang.**

**How does one go about compiling a specific dictionary of, say, rhyming slang? Please describe your process.**

When setting out to produce a specialist dictionary, much depends on whether one already exists. If not, and you're starting from scratch, you need to assemble for yourself a corpus of material that's likely to contain the vocabulary you need and work through it to put together your wordlist in consultation with experts in the field. That works for particular subjects (say, the terminology of the gas industry), but with more nebulous concepts (such as dysphemisms) you probably need to start young and gradually pick up potential entries as you pass through life. Fortunately, these days most subjects have been covered before, and as there's no sense in trying to reinvent the wheel, it's best to concentrate on researching new developments in the field and on devising better ways of presenting your information than anyone has thought of before.

**In your *Dictionary of Word Origins* you say that the average English-speaker knows around 50,000 words, as compared to the half million listed in the *Oxford English***

***Dictionary*. That was in 1990. Are those figures still accurate? Can you expand a little on your definition of "average"?**

As far as I'm aware that figure hasn't been overturned by any subsequent research, and I still believe it to be broadly true. By "average" I mean someone who has had a standard education up to at least age 16.

**You also say that words are a mirror of their time, and your book, *20th Century Words* places "escalator" in the 1900s, "hologram" in the 1940s, and "road rage" in the 1980s. How do you make those determinations? What references do you use as a basis for your decisions? Who or what generates statistics of that sort?**

All the datings I used in *20th Century Words* were taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. That basically meant the second edition, and the datings in that had all been established using the traditional methods of lexicographic data gathering: extensive, exhaustive reading programs resulting in written or printed citations on pieces of paper. The caveat always given is that the earliest date shown is the earliest hitherto found in the written record, and doesn't necessarily represent the first use of the word. From the mid-1990s computerized databases have played an increasingly central role in lexicographic data gathering, which has enabled a vastly larger amount of text to be searched and resulted in many, many antedatings.

**You've written a great deal about the emergence of new words in the English language. Please share your thoughts on the process involved in the creation of neologisms. Are they predominantly slang, or is it the other way around?**

As I mentioned earlier, many neologisms are born of necessity: a new word is needed for a new thing. But there doesn't have to be that impetus. Human beings love novelty, and creating new words seems to be a favorite way of achieving that. The great majority of neologisms are based on existing words, by combining them in compounds, adding prefixes or suffixes, abbreviating, etc. The percentage of completely new things (that is, words taken from other languages, or created

from nothing) is comparatively tiny. I don't know of any reliable statistics on the proportion of slang in neologisms, but my impression is that it's not that high.

**Where has slang been coming from in the last hundred years? So-called “bad words” are often an outright repudiation of cultural traditions and codes of behavior. But those standards shift, so that the target is religion for one age, bodily functions for another. In that sense, what influences contribute to the origins of slang?**

The areas of human activity that attract slang are thrown into fairly sharp relief in my *Oxford Dictionary of Slang* (1998), which is arranged thematically rather than alphabetically. Not surprisingly, words relating to bodily parts and functions, sex and sexual orientation, ethnic and national groups, crime, alcohol and drugs, money, unpleasantness, foolishness, plus imprecations and opprobrious epithets, make up a far higher proportion of the total than they would in a general dictionary. For the most part, I think these categories have been fairly constant over the centuries in their tendency toward colloquial vocabulary. The sort of attitude shifts you refer to seem to me to be more reflected in the euphemisms they engender and the taboos they impose.

**Acronyms, you tell us, have been the 20th century's great new contribution to English word formation. Please tell us about that process. What's behind it?**

The impulse to abbreviate written words is probably as old as writing itself (medieval manuscripts, for example, are full of abbreviations), but acronyms do seem to be a genuinely new way of doing it that emerged in the 20th century. You simply take the first letters of a string of words and join them together to make a new word. Technically, what distinguishes them from initialisms, such as NBC, which are just spoken as separate letters, is that they are said as an individual word (e.g., NATO). The real explosion in usage took place during the second world war, and I suspect that a major impetus behind it was the proliferation of organizations with multi-word titles at that time.

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**What does this say about our society?**

As Zhou Enlai famously remarked when asked about the effects of the French Revolution, it's too early to say. But I suspect that, along with more recent developments such as text-speak and emojis, human beings are no less impatient than we have ever been when it comes to getting our thoughts down on paper (or screen), and we're ingenious at working out ways to do it as fast as possible.

**The digital age has returned us to a form of communication by symbols—emojis or emoticons, numbers, acronyms, and abbreviations—that's here to stay.**

**How does lexicography address this phenomenon? What precedents are there that might help? How do dictionaries react?**

Items that consist of letters, such as abbreviations, aren't really a problem, and terms that contain a numeral tend to be alphabetized according to the way the number is spelled (so, for example, MI5 would come before MI6 because *f* comes before *s*). Things like emoticons that have no letters to anchor them are clearly more of a problem for alphabetical dictionaries (though not so much for thematic thesauruses). I guess a separate table at the back of the dictionary would probably be the answer.

**In the mid-1980s you left your employment in the publishing field and became a freelance lexicographer. Freelance translators and interpreters would be interested to hear anything you have to say about that transition. What skills and experience must one have to take the leap**

**and become a freelancer in your field? Who does one work for? Do agents play a role?**

Setting aside fairly obvious things such as being good at what you do, having a reputation for reliability, etc., I'd say that what helped me most in making the transition to freelance work was the contacts I'd built up in the field during my 10 years of employment in publishing. It takes some nerve to make the initial leap, but it's important not to allow oneself to be discouraged if lots of jobs don't fall into one's lap straightaway. As far as agents go, I took the view from the outset that I probably knew more about the dictionary publishing scene than any literary agent was likely to, so I ploughed my own furrow. I don't know if the same would apply to translators.

**You taught courses on lexicography at Surrey University. Please give us an overview of those courses and their objectives. Do you still teach?**

The courses I taught were specifically aimed at students doing a postgraduate course for translators, and their aim was to give students a comprehensive grounding in the theory and practice of lexicography: the history of lexicography, the typology of dictionaries, the techniques of lexicographers, the collection and evaluation of evidence, and so on. I no longer teach.

**How has lexicography evolved? When you look at Dr. Johnson's dictionary, do you see a difference in scope or method compared to what you and your colleagues do today? Please tell us what you see. What has happened in two and a half centuries?**

Dr. Johnson based his dictionary on the best language of the best authors, and that remained essentially the default position of lexicographers for the next 200 years. They presented the English language in its shining Sunday best, with any embarrassing or vulgar bits tucked away behind the sofa. It followed from this that, even in the case of a historical dictionary of record like the *Oxford English Dictionary*, their stance was broadly prescriptive rather than descriptive. I think the biggest changes

over the past 50 years have been, partly from the influence of theoretical linguistics, that the emphasis is now more on description. Also, because computerized databases have brought about a quantum leap in the amount of evidence available to lexicographers, dictionaries now reflect more accurately the language as a whole, rather than just the literary tip of the iceberg.

**When a neologism is imported, are statistics kept on the country of origin? Are there dictionaries or lists of words arranged according to where they originated?**

I don't know of any specific register devoted to that subject, but it's the sort of information that would be fairly easy to access by doing a search of, say, the *Oxford English Dictionary* database. By looking in the etymology field one would be able to discover, for example, how many words of Italian origin had come into English in the 1950s.

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**How has the internet affected lexicography? Do online resources take market share from the traditional product? Is there a future for paper dictionaries?**

Online reference resources are clearly here to stay, whether as new products or as existing material transferred online. It's the obvious place for very large books. The third edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is very unlikely ever to appear on paper, and I can't imagine how much shelf space a printed version of Wikipedia would need. As far as smaller dictionaries are concerned, the jury still seems to be out. Hand-held devices that can access reference resources are widely available, but I continue to see shelves full of dictionaries in bookshops. Time will tell, but I suspect that in book format encyclopedias are a more endangered species than dictionaries.

**The lexicographer lives on, presumably, by switching to online reference works? How does that differ from the traditional product?**

As an originator of text, I think the online lexicographer's job remains fairly similar to that of her offline predecessor, except, as I said above, in the amount of evidence available to use. The most important differences lie in the possibility of giving users more differentiated and sophisticated ways of accessing the text. It's still comparatively early, but there are all sorts of potential ways in which the look-up procedure can be digitally streamlined (talking to the dictionary, for example; say a word you don't know how to spell and it'll find it for you). For all I know such a thing may already exist. Automated speech recognition is now apparently

95% reliable (though it doesn't seem that way when I try to communicate with a computer over the phone).

**Is lexicography an expanding field? Are there more new lexicographers every day? If so, what sustains or fuels that expansion?**

There certainly seem to be more amateur lexicographers around today, or perhaps it's just that the internet enables them to publish compilations that in previous decades would have remained forever in a desk drawer at home. As far as professional lexicography is concerned, I'm not so sure. Publishers certainly tend not to have in-house teams these days, preferring to rely on freelancers employed on a casual basis, and the demand for these will fluctuate according to the projects the publishers have on hand. My impression is that there aren't significantly more of us around than when I started out 40 years ago.

**What advice do you have for those who might be interested in a career in the field of lexicography?**

First, make a dispassionate assessment of your own aptitudes. To be a good lexicographer you need methodicalness and the stickability to see a long project (probably several years), with elements of repetitiousness, through to its finish. You also need a lively and inquiring imagination and a flair for writing. This is an unusual combination of attributes that any prospective employer will be trying to search out in an applicant. They won't be so interested to know you have "a love of words," although presumably if language didn't exert a fascination over you, you wouldn't want to be a lexicographer.

**John, thanks for taking the time to share your thoughts about this fascinating field! ○**



**Tony Beckwith** was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He moved to Texas in 1980 and currently lives in Austin,

Texas, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. Contact: [tony@tonybeckwith.com](mailto:tony@tonybeckwith.com).

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