



Lexicography, or the Gentle Art of Making Mistakes

by Giovanni lamartino

1. INTRODUCTION¹

A dictionary is

A.1.a. A book which explains or translates, usually in alphabetical order, the words of a language or languages (or of a particular category of vocabulary), giving for each word its typical spelling, an explanation of its meaning or meanings, and often other information, such as pronunciation, etymology, synonyms, equivalents in other languages, and illustrative examples.

This definition – last updated in November 2010 – is from the online third edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, undoubtedly the most authoritative work on the English language. According to the OED definition, a dictionary is a book which explains (if a monolingual dictionary) or translates (if a bilingual or multilingual one) the words of one or two or more languages, or of a particular category of vocabulary (for example, dictionaries of place-names, or chemistry or mythology); a book that will

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provide dictionary-users, for each entry-word, with a whole range of linguistic and metalinguistic data.

In other words, dictionaries are packed full of information, as the very layout of a dictionary page will show: small print, narrow page margins, blank spaces kept to a minimum. Definitely, when we buy a dictionary, we get quantity. As to quality, the *communis opinio* has it that dictionaries are the true repositories of all the words in a language; they are the guardians of the sacred truths of the languages; they are what we refer to when we do not want to make mistakes, when we are unsure about usage in another or even our own language, and so on and so forth. In short, dictionaries are authoritative and objective, they are perfect!²

Perfection, however, is not in this world, and lexicography is no exception. Paradoxically enough, this was very clear to the English lexicographer who greatly contributed – both directly and indirectly – to the idea of the dictionary as the perfect reference work, and the lexicographer as God or, at least, as linguistic legislator. I mean, of course, Samuel Johnson,³ who in the Preface to his *A Dictionary of the English Language* of 1755, wrote that

to pursue perfection [in lexicography], was, like the first inhabitants of Arcadia, to chase the sun, which, when they had reached the hill where he seemed to rest, was still beheld at the same distance from them. (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 101)

Perfection, then, is not to be expected in dictionaries. And what about lexicographers? One will immediately think of the often-repeated Johnsonian definition of the word *lexicographer* as

LEXICOGRAPHER. [...] A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words. [...]

² This is a myth that has long been exploded among metalexicographers. Rosamund Moon argued that “Dictionaries only succeed because of an act of faith on the part of their users, and that act of faith is dependent on those users believing their dictionaries both authoritative and beyond subjectivity” (Moon 1989: 59). A passage from Rey (1977: 88) was translated into English by Henry Béjoint as follows: “All lexicographers, who are the mouthpieces of a social class, the instruments of an ideology, no doubt believe that they objectively represent a set of forms. But there is no objectivity, no picture so accurate as to eliminate the model”. Béjoint himself had introduced this passage by stating that “Objectivity in dictionaries is impossible – it is one of the unreachable ideals of lexicography – and it is unreasonable to expect lexicographers to be objective” (2010: 216). On ideology in dictionaries, see among others Buzon (1979), D’Oria (1988), Beaujot (1989), Benson (2001), and Mackintosh (2006).

³ Apart from Johnson’s texts on English and lexicography edited and commented in Kolb and DeMaria (2005), criticism on the *Dictionary* includes Sledd and Kolb (1955), DeMaria (1986a and 1986b), Nagashima (1988), Reddick (1996 and 2005), Lynch and McDermott (2005), Iamartino and DeMaria (2006); very interesting, though meant for a wider readership, Hitchings (2005) and Mugglestone (2015). A well-organized general introduction to Samuel Johnson’s life and works is Lynch (2012).



– certainly, a tongue-in-cheek, ironical definition⁴ – but one should also remember the initial lines of Johnson’s Preface:

It is the fate of those who toil at the lower employments of life, to be rather driven by the fear of evil, than attracted by the prospect of good; to be exposed to censure, without hope of praise; to be disgraced by miscarriage, or punished for neglect, where success would have been without applause, and diligence without reward.

Among these unhappy mortals is the writer of dictionaries; whom mankind have considered, not as the pupil, but the slave of science, the pioneer of literature, doomed only to remove rubbish and clear obstructions from the paths through which Learning and Genius press forward to conquest and glory, without bestowing a smile on the humble drudge that facilitates their progress. Every other authour may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach, and even this negative recompense has been yet granted to very few. (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 73)

“The lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach” – which means that, if he does a good job, this is simply what is expected of him; if he does not, his mistakes will be harshly criticized. If we now move from the first to the very last paragraph of the Preface, we will notice that Johnson is ready to claim victory as much as to acknowledge defeat, to balance success and failure, and he does so by striking a movingly personal, yet solemn note:

In this work, when it shall be found that much is omitted, let it be not forgotten that much likewise is performed; and though no book was ever spared out of tenderness to the authour, and the world is little solicitous to know whence proceeded the faults of that which it condemns; yet it may gratify curiosity to inform it, that the *English Dictionary* was written with little assistance of the learned, and without any patronage of the great; not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academick bowers, but amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow; [...] I may surely be contented without the praise of perfection, which, if I could obtain, in this gloom of solitude, what would it avail me? I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please, have sunk into the grave, and success and miscarriage are empty sounds: I therefore dismiss it with frigid tranquillity, having little to fear or hope from censure or from praise. (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 111-113)

⁴ The lexicographer as a harmless drudge may be what *others* thought of a dictionary-maker, as Johnson himself makes clear in the very first paragraph of *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (1747): “I knew, that the work in which I engaged *is generally considered* as drudgery for the blind, as the proper toil of artless industry, a task that requires neither the light of learning, nor the activity of genius, but may be successfully performed without any greater quality than that of bearing burthens with dull patience, and beating the truck of the alphabet with sluggish resolution.” (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 25-26; emphasis mine).



Censure and praise, nevertheless, came. Generally speaking, whereas most praise was vague and perfunctory, usually and simply complimenting Johnson on his marvellous achievement, unfavourable critics often led frontal attacks, magnifying the work's defects and focussing on specific weaknesses (see Noyes 1954-55 and Boulton 1971). Among them, many sesquipedalian un-English words, awkwardly-phrased definitions and, most famously, idiosyncratic biased definitions.

To the first group belong *abligurition*, *amatorculist*, *bibacious*, *brontology*, *cynanthropy* and dozens of similar ones:

ABLIGURITION. *n.s.* [*abliguritio*, Lat.] A prodigal spending on meat and drink. *Dict.*

AMATORCULIST. *n.s.* [*amatorculus*, Lat.] A little insignificant lover; a pretender to affection. *Dict.*

BIBACIOUS. *adj.* [*bibax*, Lat.] Much addicted to drinking. *D.*

BRONTOLOGY. *n.s.* [*βροντη* and *λογια*] A dissertation upon thunder. *Dict.*

CYNANTHROPY. *n.s.* [*κυων κυνος*, and *ανθρωπος*] A species of madness in which men have the qualities of dogs.

The abbreviations *D.* or *Dict.* – according to de Vries (1994), there are 1,144 of them in the whole dictionary – indicate that Johnson did not lift these words from texts but from previous dictionaries. According to the OED, *abligurition* and *amatorculist*, both obsolete words nowadays, were copied by Johnson from Bailey's dictionaries, and have never been used in real texts; *bibacious* and *brontology*, though first attested in Bullokar's and Bailey's dictionaries respectively, have at least one nineteenth-century quotation; *cynanthropy* has a late sixteenth-century and a mid-nineteenth-century quotation, and also the definition from Blount's (1656) *Glossographia*: "CYNANTHROPIE, a frenzy which makes a man haunt unfrequented places, with a conceit, that he is turned into a dog". However, the OED fails to mention that Blount added the abbreviation *Cotg.* to his definition, which was actually copied verbatim from Randle Cotgrave's French-English Dictionary of 1611. Although it is not labelled by Johnson as such, *cynanthropy* is a real dictionary-word.

To the second group belong *cough* and *network*:

COUGH. *n.s.* [*kuch*, Dutch.] A convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity. It is pronounced *coff*. [...]

TO COUGH. *v.n.* [*kuchen*, Dutch.] To have the lungs convulsed; to make a noise in endeavouring to evacuate the peccant matter from the lungs. [...]

NETWORK. *n.s.* [*net* and *work*.] Any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections. [...]

Research into the dictionaries and encyclopaedias of the first half of the eighteenth century has shown that the word *network*, though present in the language since the 1590s (OED, s.v. NETWORK), is apparently unrecorded in the dictionaries preceding Johnson's. As to *cough* and *to cough*, the starting point is Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* of 1728:



COUGH, in Medicine, &c. See TUSSIS.

TUSSIS, in Medicine, a *Cough*; a Disease affecting the Lungs, occasioned by a sharp serous Humour, vellicating the Fibrous Coat thereof, and urging it to a Discharge by Spitting, &c. See LUNGS.

When the Humor is so subtile, that the Lungs cannot lay hold of it, to throw it off; or when the Humor is so thick that it will not give Way, it is said to be a *dry Cough*.

Dry Coughs are the most dangerous. --- *Hippocrates* says, the Cough ceases, if the Testicles swell. See COUGH.

Nathan Bailey included the entry *cough* in the wordlist of his two dictionaries: the *Dictionarium Britannicum* has "TO COUGH [*kuchen, Du.*] to make a noise by reason of the obstruction of the lungs." and "A COUGH, a disease, an obstruction of the lungs." (Bailey 1730), with its second edition (1736) adding the sentence "A dry COUGH is the Trumpeter of Death; the *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, in its sixteenth edition contemporary with Johnson's compilation (Bailey 1755), reads:

TO COUGH [*Keuchen, to make Noise in one's breathing, Teut. Kuchen, L.S.*] to make such a Noise as is occasioned by the Obstruction of the Lungs.

A COUGH, a certain Noise made by Persons troubled by an Obstruction of the Lungs.

Johnson seems to have lifted the easiest phrase of his verbal definition ("to make a noise") from Bailey, while the typical Johnsonian ring of his wording partly derives from Chambers (serosity, vellicated), and partly is Johnson's own (convulsion, evacuate, peccant).

Typically Johnsonian, not so much for their polysyllabic Latinate words but for their caustic wit, are his well-known often-repeated biased definitions:

COMPLIMENT. *n.s.* [*compliment, Fr.*] An act, or expression of civility, usually understood to include some hypocrisy, and to mean less that it declares. [...]

EXCISE. *n.s.* [*accijs, Dutch; excisum, Latin.*] 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. [...]

OATS. *n.s.* [...] A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people. [...]

PATRON. *n.s.* [*patron, Fr. patronus, Latin.*] 1. One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery. [...]

PENSION. *n.s.* [*pension, Fr.*] An allowance made to any one without an equivalent. In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country. [...]



Arguably, such strongly opinionated or malicious definitions should be considered as lexicographically flawed, as mistakes, and would never find room in a modern dictionary. Yet, in his *Life of Johnson*, James Boswell wrote:

His introducing his own opinions, and even prejudices, under general definitions of words, while at the same time the original meaning of the words is not explained, as his *Tory, Whig, Pension, Oats, Excise*, and a few more, cannot be fully defended, and must be placed to the account of capricious and humorous indulgence. (Chapman 1980: 211-212)

Although Boswell was not ready to wholeheartedly subscribe to such definitions, he did not utterly condemn them either; they were not fully acceptable perhaps, but they might be considered witty, amusing or even thought-provoking, rather than wrong. To generalize from this remark: each century in a given speech community and culture has its own idea of what is right and proper and what is not; and this is true of dictionary definitions as well.

These debatable definitions apart, Samuel Johnson did make at least one glaring mistake, when he described the first sense of the word *pastern* as follows:

PASTERN. *n.s.* [*pasturon*, French.]

1. The knee of a horse. [...]

2. The legs of a human creature in contempt. [...]

Properly, in fact, the word *pastern* denotes the part of a horse's foot between the fetlock and the hoof. And when a lady asked Johnson how he came to get *pastern* wrong, Johnson candidly replied (if we are to believe Boswell): "Ignorance, Madam, pure ignorance" (Chapman 1980: 211).⁵

This anecdote may provide an apt conclusion for the introductory section of my paper in which, by referring to the most famous and celebrated of English dictionary-makers, I have tried to show that lexicographers are no gods, that they are people like everyone else and that, despite all their efforts and merits, they do make mistakes, both as members of their speech community and as human beings. Hence, dictionaries can hardly be perfect. As Phil Benson (2001: 4-5) put it,

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 form and structures of the dictionary could be anything other than they are.

⁵ Before commenting on *pastern*, Boswell wrote: "A few of his definitions must be admitted to be erroneous. Thus, Windward and Leeward, though directly of opposite meaning, are defined identically the same way" (Chapman 1980: 211). In order to be fair to Johnson, it is to be added that PASTERN was given a correct definition in Johnson's revised fourth edition: "1. That part of the leg of a horse between the joint next the foot and the hoof." (Johnson 1777: s.v. PASTERN).



In reality, the form and structures and content of any dictionary are the result of the tension between tradition and the individual talent, to borrow T.S. Eliot's expression. That is why my title refers to lexicography as a gentle art,⁶ a learned noble form of craftsmanship that, alas, does sometimes make an error – in Johnson's (1755) words, a "Mistake; involuntary deviation from truth", or a blunder "A gross or shameful mistake", and perhaps may even fall headlong into a pit of linguistic confusion and lexicographical despair,⁷ as the next sections of my paper will show.

2. THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF LEXICOGRAPHY: A GLANCE BACKWARDS

2.1 *Dictionaries and Meaning*

As everybody knows, the main aim of a dictionary is to provide word definitions, if a monolingual one, or translation equivalents, if a bilingual one. This distinction⁸ in aim has a considerable impact on lexicographical methodology and may imply different difficulty levels – hence, a stronger or more remote possibility to make mistakes. For instance, one may argue whether it is more difficult to define a *chair* as "a piece of furniture for one person to sit on, with a back, a seat and four legs" or to establish a semantic equivalence between English *chair* and Italian *sedia*. If the definition may not be fully satisfying (the 'easy' word *chair* is defined by means of the more difficult word *furniture*, and definitely not all chairs have four legs), *chair* has other meanings as well – "the position of being in charge of a meeting or committee; the person who holds this position"; "the position of being in charge of department in a university"; "the electric chair" (Hornby 2015: s.v. CHAIR) – that are not to be found in Italian *sedia*. Here I have been referring to the linguistic concept of anisomorphism in languages, i.e.

⁶ Indeed, my title alludes to Eric Partridge's (1963) memoir, where the human element in lexicography is often highlighted. Moreover, by defining lexicography as an art I refer to it as a process and a product, rather than a theory, in line with Piotrowski (2013: 309): "Lexicography produces dictionaries, not theories, while metalexicography does not produce dictionaries but general statements about them. Accordingly, metalexicography can be a science, while lexicography is not".

⁷ These phrases echo the title of the conference *Errors, Blunders and Other Pitfalls* (held in Venice, 19-20 November 2014), when a preliminary version of this paper was read.

⁸ Admittedly, the distinction between mono- and bilingual dictionaries, and their relation to meaning on the one side and equivalence on the other side, are much more subtle and dubious than this. As argued by Manley, Jacobsen and Pedersen, "Dictionaries, monolingual and bilingual, are packs of lies: white lies, perhaps, but lies nevertheless. Monolingual dictionaries set out to convey the impression that words have 'meanings', rather than certain capacities to enter into meaningful contexts; bilingual dictionaries, that words have 'equivalents' in other languages, rather than certain relations of partial equivalence, further complicated by the range of linguistic and extralinguistic contexts into which the words and their equivalents may enter. These meanings and equivalents are conventionally, institutionally, and ultimately ideologically determined by the traditions and practices of 'lexicography'..." (1988: 281).



A mismatch between a pair of languages due to their semantic, grammatical and cultural differences. This leads to a relative absence of direct, one-to-one translation equivalents. (Hartmann and James 1998: 6)

Anisomorphism is a major problem for bilingual dictionary-makers, and very often the reason behind quite a few lexicographical mistakes, especially as bilingual dictionaries

should offer not explanatory paraphrases or definitions, but real lexical units of the target language which, when inserted into the context, produce a smooth translation. (Zgusta 1984:147)

Monolingual lexicography has another problem to try to cope with, as a passage in Johnson's Preface makes clear:

That part of my work on which I expect malignity most frequently to fasten, is the *Explanation*; in which I cannot hope to satisfy those, who are perhaps not inclined to be pleased, since I have not always been able to satisfy myself. To interpret a language by itself is very difficult; many words cannot be explained by synonymes, because the idea signified by them has not more than one appellation; nor by paraphrase, because simple ideas cannot be described. When the nature of things is unknown, or the notion unsettled and indefinite, and various in various minds, the words by which such notions are conveyed, or such things denoted, will be ambiguous and perplexed. And such is the fate of hapless lexicography, that not only darkness, but light, impedes and distresses it; things may be not only too little, but too much known, to be happily illustrated. To explain, requires the use of terms less abstruse than that which is to be explained, and such terms cannot always be found; for as nothing can be proved but by supposing something intuitively known, and evident without proof, so nothing can be defined but by the use of words too plain to admit a definition. (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 88-89)

Explaining, Johnson writes, means making difficult things easy to understand; hence, explaining easy words is more complicated, and liable to error, than explaining difficult ones, as my example of *chair vs furniture* has highlighted. Samuel Johnson's (1755) definition of the word CHAIR:

1. A moveable seat. [...]
2. A seat of justice, or of authority. [...]
3. A vehicle born by men; a sedan. [...]

shows, on the one hand, that the basic problems of dictionary-making have always been (and are always) there; on the other, that even the most common, everyday words – perhaps, especially the most common, everyday words – represent the peculiar features of a given epoch and culture. This is the reason why, before I move on to the next section of my paper and exemplify the most common mistakes in dictionaries and dictionary-making, I will briefly refer to the history of English



lexicography, in order to show how the succeeding generations of lexicographers and dictionary-users tackled the problem of mistakes in dictionaries and came to terms with it.

2.2 Insights into Early Dictionaries

Historically speaking, in Britain as much as elsewhere, bilingual and multilingual dictionaries precede monolingual ones (see Stein 1985); and quite obviously so, since favouring comprehension between speakers of different languages is a more basic need than analysing the meaning and properties of a word. Lexical anisomorphism was not a real problem in early modern lexicography, since lexical coverage was limited, and borrowing words was an easy solution. As far as early English monolingual lexicography⁹ is concerned, seventeenth-century dictionaries – from Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall* of 1604 onwards – were hard-word dictionaries, that is to say they did not aim at covering the whole of English lexis but only “hard vsuall English words”, as Cawdrey's title-page goes, mainly borrowed from ancient classical languages. Hence, it was possible to explain them by using more common English words. Only at the beginning of the eighteenth century, did a growing tendency to compile general purpose dictionaries, theoretically including the whole English lexical store, start to make life more difficult for lexicographers.

What were the dictionary-makers' and dictionary-users' reactions to errors, blunders and other pitfalls in English dictionaries? By referring to the history of lexicography, five different phenomena can be shortlisted. Firstly, dictionaries were often re-edited and republished, thus enabling the original compiler or subsequent lexicographers to correct mistakes and enlarge editions: arguably, the most impressive instance of this in English lexicography is Nathan Bailey's *An Universal, Etymological English Dictionary*, first published in 1721, which had reached its twenty-eighth edition by 1800. It should not be forgotten, however, that a revised edition might include new mistakes as well as removing existing ones.¹⁰ Moreover, if one is to believe Samuel Johnson, a new edition (by the original lexicographer – as his fourth edition of 1773 – or a different one) will not be exempt from errors anyway.¹¹

⁹ Books on the history of English lexicography include Starnes and Noyes (1991), Hayashi (1978), Béjoint (1994 and 2010), and Cowie (2009: I, 15-128); a short, though valuable introduction is Osselton (1990). Among the many relevant collections of essays see Osselton (1995), Considine and Iamartino (2007), Considine (2010), and Adams (2010). For a wider, European perspective, Considine (2008).

¹⁰ This is particularly true of typos, but not only: Bailey's (1721) first edition correctly lists the entries “FALCONET, [*Falconneau, F.*] a small Piece of Cannon.” and “FALCONRY, [*Fauconnerie, F.*] the Art of managing Hawks and other Birds of Prey.” but the second, 1724 edition gives FALCONET the definition of FALCONRY.

¹¹ Since in the *Advertisement to this Edition* Johnson tackles the problem of mistakes in dictionaries with impressive clarity of vision, its full quotation may perhaps be excused: “Many are the works of human industry, which to begin and finish are hardly granted to the same man. He that undertakes to compile a Dictionary, undertakes that, which, if it comprehends the full extent of his



Secondly, a dictionary might be largely revised so as to become, or at least be advertised as, a new dictionary: a case in point is a bilingual English-Italian dictionary first published in London by Ferdinando Altieri in 1726-27; apparently after Altieri's death, an edition of his dictionary "corrected and improved by Evangelist Palermo, Teacher of the Italian Tongue" was published in London forty-three years later (Altieri 1749); and this was the basis of what came to be known as Giuseppe Baretti's English-Italian dictionary of 1760.

This latter work may exemplify another very common feature of early dictionary-making, i.e. the strong tendency to level the harshest criticism to previous lexicographers and their alleged mistakes. In fact, the Preface to Baretti's English-Italian volume includes the following paragraphs:

The dictionary of Altieri was hitherto the largest and least contemptible work of this kind. The man certainly went a good way farther than his predecessors Florio and Torriano; yet many of his definitions awakened often my risibility. Those *aquatick birds*, called HALCYONS by the poets, he converted into so many *fishes*. The CAMEL was in his opinion the *largest of quadrupeds*, and the SNAIL he ranked among the *insects*. The COCHINEAL he called a *berry*, and the INDIGO a *stone*. The ONYX and the CALCIDONIUS with him were not *gems*, but *kinds of alabaster*, and the LEAVES were *excrements of trees*. He thought that ORB meant a *hollow sphere*, and made *the ninth heaven perform its course in four and twenty hours from east to west*.

These and many other tokens of the ignorance of an author whose labours were the ground-work of mine, I would have passed over in silence, as he does not appear to have aimed at any reputation but that of an indefatigable compiler, had he not often provoked my indignation by his love of obscene words and phrases, of which he collected a large number, as well as of scurrilous sayings and senseless proverbs in depreciation of the female sex.

But if in many places his ridiculous diligence gave me much cause for blots, in many more he left me room for additions; so that I can honestly assure the reader that my dictionary contains above ten thousand words or significations of words not to be found in his, in spite of his pompous and false declarations, that the Italian part of his performance contained *many hundred more words than the Vocabulary of the Academicians Della Crusca*.

design, he knows himself unable to perform. Yet his labours, though deficient, may be useful, and with the hope of this inferiour praise, he must incite his activity, and solace his weariness.

Perfection is unattainable, but nearer and nearer approaches may be made; and finding my Dictionary about to be reprinted, I have endeavoured, by a revisal, to make it less reprehensible. I will not deny that I found many parts requiring emendation, and many more capable of improvement. Many faults I have corrected, some superfluities I have taken away, and some deficiencies I have supplied. I have methodised some parts that were disordered, and illuminated some that were obscure. Yet the changes or additions bear a very small proportion to the whole. The critick will now have less to object, but the student who has bought any of the former copies, needs not repent; he will not, without nice collation, perceive how they differ, and usefulness seldom depends upon little things.

For negligence or deficiencie, I have perhaps not need of more apology than the nature of the work will furnish; I have left that inaccurate which never was made exact, and that imperfect which never was completed." (Johnson 1777: n.p.; see also Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 373-375).



These considerations, and my having retranslated a large number of his phrases, rectified endless accents that he had misplaced in the Italian, accented all the English, and expunged numberless superfluities, made me resolve to prefix my name instead of his to this edition. (Baretti 1760: I, 3-4)

Giuseppe Baretti, then, is ready to criticize both lexicographical mistakes (among others, wrong word-stress marks and inadequate translation equivalents) and socio-cultural ones (taboo words or insults for women); as a consequence, he feels himself entitled to replace Altieri's name on the title-page with his own.¹²

Baretti was honest enough to state what he had done, while a much more common procedure in dictionary-making was (and still is) plagiarism. Sidney Landau (1985: 35) even stated that "The history of English lexicography usually consists of a recital of successive and often successful acts of piracy".¹³ Undoubtedly, lexicographers tend to copy their predecessors' work, and this is my fourth point here because plagiarism almost always implies copying another lexicographer's mistakes as well, and often perpetuating them in succeeding dictionaries. The black sheep of English lexicographical plagiarism or piracy is, perhaps undeservedly (see Considine 2015), Edward Phillips, the compiler of *The New World of English Words* (1658), whose dictionary immediately followed Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* of 1656. Phillips did not simply make extensive use of Blount's entries, but also discredited the work of Blount in his Advertisement, apparently to conceal his indebtedness. In 1673, when Blount came to think that Phillips has also ransacked his new law dictionary, he published *A World of Errors Discovered in the New World of Words, or General English Dictionary, and in Nomothetes, or The Interpreter of Law Words and Terms*, "in which he exposed Phillips' wholesale thefts, showing that the pilferer had copied even the errors of the *Glossographia*" (Starnes and Noyes 1991: 51).¹⁴

¹² The distinction here between lexicographical and sociocultural mistakes in dictionaries will be used to organize and comment on data in the final section of this paper. On Baretti's revision of Altieri's dictionary see Iamartino (1990); a general presentation of English and Italian bilingual lexicography is found in O'Connor (1990).

¹³ Such a sweeping statement may be toned down by William Frawley's words when he argues that "A dictionary is an intertext in the discursive space called 'lexicography.' There is no such thing as an autonomous dictionary. Because lexicography is a discursive practice, every dictionary calls up its relation to every other dictionary." (Frawley 1985: 14).

¹⁴ In his address To the Reader, Blount writes: "All Writers may modestly claim the benefit of *Humanum est Errare*; but certainly our Author has transgressed the bounds of that Indulgence. For, I did not read half his Book to pick up these, with many more Exceptions. What then would a more knowing Reader discover, that should seriously peruse the whole? *Miseriam Authoris ignorantiam*" (Blount 1673: n.p.). *A World of Errors* consists of a list of one hundred entries from Phillips' dictionary, with Blount's criticism of the errors, some of them depending on Phillips' unhappy plagiarism, as the following examples show:

CALCEDON, *A word used by Lapidaries, being a certain Forbe-vein in a Ruby or Sapphire* — This was an *Errata* of the Printer in the first Edition of *Glossographia*, whence our Author misunderstandingly borrowed it; it should be *Fowle-vein*, for there is no such word as *Forbe*.

EX PARTE LATIS, *A Writ that lieth* — This is an *Errata* in *Cowels Interpreter*, whence our Author took it, right or wrong, it matters not: It should be *Ex parte talis*.



A fifth and final kind of reaction to mistakes in dictionaries may be found on the part of dictionary-users themselves, who could contribute to improve the dictionary they had bought and had been using by adding notes and emendations to it. This could happen because in early modern Europe users often read their dictionary from cover to cover.¹⁵ A good instance of an annotated dictionary is provided by Samuel Johnson's masterpiece. A British Library copy (shelfmark: L.R.416.k.4) displays the manuscript notes Samuel Dyer, a friend of Johnson's, and Edmund Burke, the British statesman, had written in their copy of Johnson's dictionary: 90 (out of 237) notes by Dyer aim at correcting or adding to Johnson's etymologies, 85 consist of whole entries or further acceptations of existing entry-words, 43 revise Johnson's definitions; much more cursory is Burke's examination of the dictionary, he being mainly interested in labelling words "not in use" (see lamartino 1995). Another well-known user and an annotator of Johnson's dictionary was Edmond Malone, the Shakespearian scholar, who added some three thousand notes to a three-volume copy of the fifth edition (published in 1775), the last one that in his view had been correctly printed (now British Library C.45). Malone's notes were meant to improve or correct Johnson's spellings, etymologies, or definitions, add more pertinent quotations etc. Fig.1 here below provides an example: *candlewaster* is defined by Johnson (1755: s.v. CANDLEWASTER) as "One that consumes candles; a spendthrift"; Malone corrects the lexicography by writing: "Perhaps rather a drunkard; one who passes the night in drinking & thus consumes candles".¹⁶

MISSALE (Lat.), *A Breviary or Mass-Book*. This Error he borrowed out of *Cotgraves Dictionary*.
The Books are of very different kinds.

Apart from the dispute between Blount and Phillips, another telling example is provided by William Kenrick who, after heavily criticizing Johnson for his edition of Shakespeare, felt free, "with respect to the etymology, explanation of words, and illustration of idiom and phraseology", to systematically plagiarize "the celebrated dictionary of the learned Dr. Johnson" (Kenrick 1773: viii), the former lexicographer's wrong definition of *pastern* included. Johnson's *Dictionary* had already been systematically made use of and copied from by Joseph Nicol Scott, who edited a revised edition of Bailey's *A New Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, published serially in 1755; still, possibly put on alert by the early criticism levelled at Johnson's masterpiece, Scott did not repeat the mistake: "PASTERNE [*pasturon, paturon*, Fr. of a horse] 1. Is the lower part of the leg, between the feet-lock, or pastern joint, and the coronet. 2. The legs of a human creature; in contempt. [...] 3. A shackle for a horse." (Bailey-Scott 1755: s.v. PASTERNE).

¹⁵ For example, we know that the poet Browning read Johnson's dictionary like a book, and enjoyed both definitions and quotations.

¹⁶ A preliminary, unpublished version of my research on Malone's annotated copy was read at the Fifth International Conference on Historical Lexicography and Lexicology, held in Oxford on 16-18 June 2010 (lamartino 2010a). A complete edition of Malone's addenda and corrigenda is in preparation. Striking examples of annotated early modern English books are found in Brown and Considine (2010 and 2012).

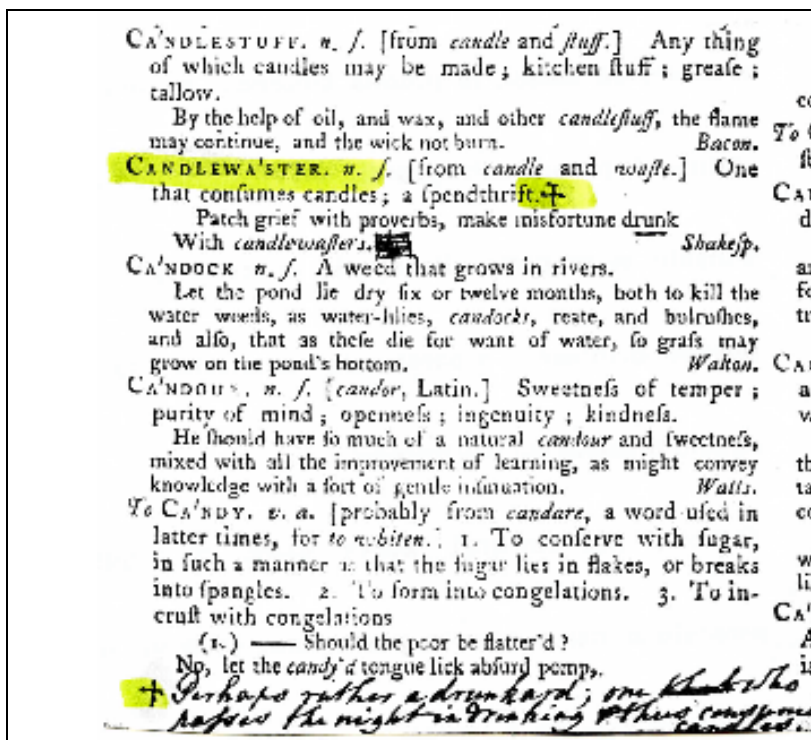


Fig. 1 – Johnson’s definition of CANDLEWASTER and Malone’s annotation

To sum up: revised editions, new dictionaries, criticism of previous dictionaries, plagiarism, and dictionary-users’ emendations were – and, at least partly, still are – the strategies by which mistakes could be removed from dictionaries (but, alas, also added to them). In what follows I will provide more specific examples in order to explain the whys and wherefores of mistakes in dictionaries. I will still focus on early English lexicography for two different, yet interrelated reasons: on the one hand, early modern dictionaries were more liable to include mistakes, as the historical evolution of and the methodological development in the art and craft of lexicography has led to their gradual improvement; on the other hand, distance in time and cultural setting makes it easier to spot differences and peculiar features, and also to critically reanalyse what one tends to take for granted in present-day dictionary-making.

3. THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES OF MISTAKES IN DICTIONARIES

This section will not deal with trivial mistakes that dictionaries may share with any other kind of books: typos, misplaced pages, or lack of consistency in the use of characters or page layout.¹⁷ Instead, more relevant mistakes will be discussed on,

¹⁷ These and similar mistakes are sometimes found in early modern English dictionaries. An extreme example of formal messiness in lexicography is *The Ladies Dictionary* of 1694, whose plural authorship may account for the repetitions of entries (some words being treated twice or even three



which can be methodologically divided into two main groups – lexicographical mistakes and socio-cultural mistakes.

3.1 Lexicographical Mistakes

Lexicographical mistakes are mainly related to definitions: not only patently wrong definitions such as Johnson's *pastern*, but also definitions that do not strike the right balance between fullness and shortness, clarity and concision, preciseness and elegance.¹⁸ To this group belong vague definitions, and instances of what metalexigraphy identifies as circularity, ghost words, and non-insertable equivalents.

Vague definitions are ubiquitous in early modern European lexicography. Just to take one single example, in the first edition of the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* (1612), the very simple gloss "animal noto" is used to define such diverse animals as *asino*, *capra*, *cerbio* (for *cervo*), *elefante* / *liofante*, *istrice*, *pecora*, *porco*, *talpa*, *topo*, and *volpe*, whereas "animal notissimo" defines *cammello*, *leone* / *lione*, and *orso*. By simply referring these zoonyms to their hypernym, the Florentine lexicographers largely abdicated responsibility for providing explanations and relied on the dictionary-users' extralinguistic knowledge, which is certainly a mistake.¹⁹

In order to check whether early English lexicography fared better, the definitions of two domestic animals, CAT and DOG, and two exotic ones, CAMEL and ELEPHANT, were excerpted from the best general-purpose English dictionary of the first half of the eighteenth century, John Kersey's *A New English Dictionary* (1702) and *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum* (1708), and Nathan Bailey's *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721; supplementary volume, 1727):

Kersey (1702):

- A CAMEL, a beast.

times), wrong alphabetization etc: see Considine and Browne's (2010) introduction to their facsimile edition of this otherwise interesting compilation.

¹⁸ The features of a perfect dictionary definition have always interested lexicographers. Among the illustrative examples for the use of the word *contest*, Johnson (1755: s.v. *CONTEST* n.s.) quotes John Locke: "A definition is the only way whereby the meaning of words can be known, without leaving room for *contest* about it".

¹⁹ To be fair, the definitions of other zoonyms in the *Crusca* dictionary included a detail or two ("CANE: Animal noto, e domestico dell'huomo."; "CAVALLO: Animal notissimo, e di gran generosità."; "LEPRE / LIEVRE: Animal noto paurosissimo, e velocissimo al corso."; "TIGRE: Animal noto, per crudeltà, e fierezza.") or even more than that ("ERMELLINO: animal noto bianchissimo, e pulitissimo, delle pelli de' quali si fanno pellicce. Gli scrittori della natura degli animali, lo dicono in Lat. *mustela alba*."; "GATTA: Animal noto, il qual si tien nelle case, per la particolar nimicizia, ch'egli ha co' topi, acciocchè gli uccida."; "LEOPARDO: Animal nel corso velocissimo, e simile al tigre, di colore leonino, indanaiato di nero."; "LONTRA: Animal rapace, e vive di pesci, di grandezza simile alla gatta, di color volpino, e si ripara pe' laghi."). Among the very many publications on the *Crusca* dictionary see the recent Tomasin (2013).



- A CAT. [entry-word with no definition]²⁰
- A DOG, a beast.
- An ELEPHANT, a beast.

Kersey (1708):

- CAMEL, (G.) a Beast of Burden, common in the Eastern Countries.
- CAT, a well-known Creature.
- DOG, a well known Creature; also an Andiron.
- ELEPHANT, the biggest, strongest, most intelligent of all Four-footed Beasts.

Bailey (1721):

- CAMEL, [*Camelus*, L. Καμελος, Gr.] a Beast of Burthen, common in the Eastern Countries.
- CAT, [*Katz*, Teut. *Chat*, F. of *Catus*, L.] a Creature well known.
- A DOG, [*Doc*, Sax. *Dogge*, Du. *Dock*, Teut.] a Mongrel or Mastive, a Creature well known: Also an Andiron.
- ELEPHANT, [*Elephas*, L. of ελεφας, Gr.] the biggest, strongest, and most intelligent of all four-footed Beasts. F.

Bailey (1727):

- CAMEL [*Hieroglyphically*] was us'd to intimate filial Reverence, because it has that Respect for its Parents, that it refuses Copulation with them: It is also used to signify a rich Man and a good Subject, that submits to the Command of his Superior, being an Animal very strong, laborious and docile.
- CATS, Naturalists have made this Observation, that Cats see best as the Sun approaches, and that their Eyesight decay, as it goes down in the Evening. With the antient *Aegyptians*, a Cat was the hieroglyphick of the Moon, and on that account Cats were so highly honoured among them as to receive their Sacrifices and Devotions, and had stately Temples erected in their Honour.
- A DOG with a Diadem on his Head, [*Hieroglyphically*] represented a Law-giver and a diligent Prince; because the Nature of a Dog teacheth us Watchfulness, Diligence and Care in our Employments, Obedience and Love to our Superiors, and Faithfulness to our Trust. A Man with a Dog's Head is the Representation of an impudent Fellow.
A Dog [*Hieroglyphically*] with the *Egyptians*, having his Tail lifted up signified Victory and Courage; and on the contrary holding his Tail between his Legs signified Flight and Fear.
A Dog held in a Slip is the Emblem of a Soldier; the Slip denoting the Oath and Obligation Soldiers are under to obey.
DOGS are the most tame, familiar, loving and grateful to their Masters of all irrational Creatures, and have all the good Qualities that belong to a Servant,

²⁰ This may be a mistake on the compiler's or the printer's part. In earlier, seventeenth-century English dictionaries, entry-words may sometimes have no following definitions, as words are often taken from spelling books and their orthography is the main reason why they are included in dictionaries.



as Fidelity, Affection, and Obedience; and therefore the antient *Romans* represented their *Lares* or Household Gods by Dogs.

- An ELEPHANT was [by the *Antients*] made an Emblem of a King, because they were of Opinion, that he could not bow his Knee, and also because his long Teeth, being accounted his Horns, betokened Sovereignty and Dominion. An ELEPHANT [*Hieroglyphically*] by the *Egyptians*, was also used to denote a wealthy Man, who can live of himself without being beholding to his Neighbours.

The entries quoted show that Kersey had great difficulty in drafting a lexicographical definition of these animals; Bailey, who lifted his definition of *elephant* from Kersey, fared only a little better, as his entries from the second volume of 1727 are as a matter of fact encyclopaedic (rather than lexicographical) in character.²¹ Not unlike them, Johnson (1755) provided long encyclopedic definitions of CAMEL and ELEPHANT, while CAT and DOG were acceptably defined as follows:

CAT. *n.s.* [*katz*, Teuton. *chat*, Fr.] A domestick animal that catches mice, commonly reckoned by naturalists the lowest order of the leonine species. [...]

DOG. *n.s.* [*dogghe*, Dutch.] 1. A domestick animal remarkably various in his species; comprising the mastiff, the spaniel, the bulldog, the greyhound, the hound, the terrier, the cur, with many others. The larger sort are used as a guard; the less for sports. [...]

Johnson, then, defines CAT by means of an easy, familiar description followed by a hint at a scientific taxonomy; DOG, instead, is mainly defined by referring to some of the word's hyponyms, a common practice in dictionary-making. Still, at least a few among Johnson's (1755) definitions can also be criticized as too vague:²²

SHOE. *n.s.* plural *shoes*, anciently *shoon*. [*sceo*, *scoe*, Saxon; *schoe*, Dutch.] The cover of the foot. [...]

SOCK. *n.s.* [*soccus*, Latin; *socc*, Saxon; *socke*, Dutch.] 1. Something put between the foot and shoe. [...]

Johnson can also be found guilty of another serious mistake in dictionary-making, i.e. circularity in definitions. A circular definition is

²¹ It may be interesting to notice how Bailey's (1721) unsatisfactorily vague definition of CAT was changed for the better in the following edition of his dictionary: what was "a Creature well known" in 1721 became "a domestick Creature well known" (4th edn, 1728), then "a domestick Creature which kills Mice" (5th edn., 1731), and "a Domestick Beast which kills Mice and Rats, &." (9th edn., 1740). This phrasing got merged with Johnson's definition when Scott revised Bailey's dictionary in 1755: "a domestic creature that kills mice, which naturalists commonly reckon the lowest order of the leonine species". See footnote 15 above and Johnson's definition of CAT here below. On lexical vs encyclopedic information in dictionaries see Bauer (2005).

²² Some of Johnson's mistakes in what follows are commented on in Hitchings (2005: 172-179).



A definition in which the key term or terms used are defined by the words which they serve to explain. (Hartmann and James 1998: 20)

Compare for examples Johnson's (1755) definitions of COMMERCE and INTERCOURSE: the former is defined as intercourse and exchange, the latter as commerce and exchange:

COMMERCE. *n.s.* [*commercium*, Latin. It was anciently accented on the last syllable.] Intercourse; exchange of one thing for another; interchange of any thing; trade; traffick. [...]

INTERCOURSE. *n.s.* [*entrecours*, French.] 1. Commerce; exchange. [...] 2. Communication [...]

Although Johnson may be absent-minded enough to do even worse – a *defluxion* is a defluxion –

DEFLUXION. *n.s.* [*defluxio*, Latin] A defluxion; a flowing down of humours.²³

what is probably the best example of circularity in lexicography is found elsewhere, in the unknown dictionary used by the very young leading character of Frank McCourt's novel *Angela's Ashes*:

I have to look in the dictionary to find out what a virgin is. [...] The dictionary says, Virgin, woman (usually a young woman) who is and remains in a state of inviolate chastity. Now I have to look up inviolate and chastity and all I can find here is that inviolate means not violated and chastity means chaste and that means pure from unlawful sexual intercourse. Now I have to look up intercourse and that leads to intromission [...]. I don't know what that means and I'm too weary going from one word to another in this heavy dictionary [...] and all because the people who wrote the dictionary don't want the likes of me to know anything. (Mccourt 1996: 333)

Circularity apart, this literary quotation alludes to the relationship between lexicographers and dictionary-users, and at the impact of ideology on lexicography, which may bring about socio-cultural mistakes in dictionaries, as will be shown in the next section.²⁴

Another lexicographical mistake (in fact, a real blunder!) we sometimes find in dictionaries is the introduction of so-called ghost words. These are the result of a mistake – often a spelling mistake in the manuscript handed over to the printer, or a

²³ Unlike PASTERNAK (see above footnote 5 and context), Johnson did not revise this definition in his 1777 edition.

²⁴ I quoted the same passage and commented on it when dealing with the relationship between lexicography and censorship in lamartino (2014: 174-175).



typo – that comes to be included in a dictionary and is later taken for granted and copied verbatim by successive generations of lexicographers. One such example is *abacoc* or *abacot*, which are actually mistranscriptions of *bycoket*, a French loanword attested between the mid-fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries, defined by the OED as “A kind of cap or head-dress (peaked before and behind): (a) as a military head-dress, a casque; (b) as an ornamental cap or head-dress, worn by men and women” (OED, s.v. BYCOKET). According to the illustrative examples in the OED, the wrong spelling – variously found in texts between the mid-sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries – first found its way into the 1696 edition of Phillip’s *New World of Words*, and become ABACOT in its 1706 edition. Here is how it spread in later dictionaries:

Phillips (1696): ABACOC, the Regal Cap of Maintenance of the Kings of *England* adorn’d with two Crowns.

Phillips (1706): ABACOT, a Royal Cap of State made in the shape of two Crowns, and anciently us’d by the Kings of *England*.

Anon. (1707): ABACOT, a Royal Cap of State, wrought up in the shape of two Crowns, and anciently used by the Kings of *England*.

Kersey (1708): ABACOT, a Royal Cap of State, like a double Crown, anciently worn by the Kings of *England*.

Bailey (1721): ABACOT, a Cap of State, made like a double Crown, worn anciently by the Kings of *England*.

Dyche & Pardon (1735): ABACOT (S.) The royal Cap of State formerly wore by the Kings of *England* in the Shape of two Crowns.

Bailey-Scott (1755): ABACOT [*Incert. Etym.*] a royal cap of state made in the shape of two crowns, antiently worn by the kings of England.

Although Samuel Johnson did not make this mistake (there is no such entry in his *Dictionary*), he was guilty of an even grosser blunder. While reading the antiquarian William Camden’s *Remains Concerning Britain* (1605) hunting for words and suitable quotations, Johnson happened to misread the word *soupe* as *foupe* – the long <s> being very similar to an <f> – so that the ghost word *to foupe* was created and duly given an entry in his dictionary:

To FOUPE. *v.a.* To drive with sudden impetuosity. A word out of use.

We pronounce, by the confession of strangers, as smoothly and moderately as any of the northern nations, who *foupe* their words out of the throat with fat and full spirits. *Camden*.

Soupe itself was a peculiar spelling of *swoop*, whose now obsolete meaning was “to utter forcibly” (OED, s.v. SWOOP, v., 2.b). Whatever the reason for the misunderstanding, so undisputed was Johnson’s authority and so widespread the tendency to plagiarize previous dictionaries that the ghost word lived on in some later compilations:



Bailey-Scott (1755): To FOUPE, *verb act.* To drive with sudden impetuosity; a word now obsolete. The northern nations, who *foupe* their words out of the throat with fat and full spirits. *Camden.*

Ash (1775): FOUPE (*v.t. obsolete*) To drive with sudden impetuosity. *Camden.*

Wrong or vague definitions, circularity and ghost words may all be serious flaws in monolingual dictionaries. The most glaring mistake in bilingual lexicography, however, is to provide non-insertable equivalents of the entry-words, rather than “real lexical units of the target language” (Zgusta 1984: 147; see section 2.1 above). Two examples from the early history of English bilingual lexicography may be quoted and commented on:

Elyot (1538): AUCTOR, he that begynneth any act, or is the first causer or procurer of any thyng.

Elyot (1542): AUTHOR, the fyrst inuentour or maker of a thing. also a reporter of newes, also a ruler or tutor. also he that dothe sell or delyuer a thyng on warrantise. Also he whom a man foloweth in doynge of any thyng.

Elyot (1545): AUTHOR, the fyrst inuentour or maker of a thing. also a reporter of newes. also a ruler or tutor. also he that dothe sell or delyuer a thyng on warrantise. also he whome a man foloweth in doynge of any thyng.

Elyot (1548): AUCTOR, oris. or auctrix, he or she that augmenteth or increaseth. AUTHOR, oris, the fyrst inuentour or maker of a thyng. also a reporter of newes, A ruler or tutour. He that selleth or delyuereth a thyng on warrantise. And that person, whom a man foloweth in dooyng of any thyng.

Altieri (1726-27): A YEOMAN, s. [a countryman, or freeholder, who has lands of his own, and lives upon good husbandry] un contadino ricco, che vive del suo. The yeomen of the guards [a sort of foot guards] guardie a piedi, che sono alla corte del Re d’Inghilterra, come gli Svizzeri nella corte del Papa, e altri Principi in Italia.

The former entries are from one of the earliest English-Latin compilations: *The Dictionary of Syr Thomas Eliot Knyght* of 1538 and its later, revised edition published as *Bibliotheca Eliotae* in 1542 (further editions, 1545, 1548). Elyot is here more interested in detailing the meanings (first and foremost, in the entries AUCTOR / AUCTOR, the etymological meaning) of the Latin word than in providing the English equivalent *author*, a French loanword of Latin origin that had been in the language since the late middle ages (OED, s.v. AUTHOR).²⁵ More understandably, Altieri can but provide an explanatory gloss in his bilingual English-Italian dictionary of 1726-27 because there is really no Italian equivalent for the English entry-word and related expression.

Yeoman, in fact, is one of the so-called culture-bound words,²⁶ whose only possible real equivalent in a foreign language is a borrowing: the Italian for English *kilt*

²⁵ On Elyot’s dictionary and lexicographical techniques, see Stein (2014).

²⁶ “In the vocabulary of every language there are considerable numbers of lexical units that are language and culture-specific – for example, the vocabulary of religious observance, art, science,



is *kilt*, and no insertable equivalents for *yeoman*, *muffin* or *runcible spoon* will be found in an English-Italian dictionary until these words are adopted in the Italian language. The current solutions to the problem of these (and similar) culture-bound words in present-day Italian bilingual lexicography are hardly satisfactory, all the more so as today's lexicographers – unlike their early modern predecessors – do not consider themselves entitled to borrow foreign words or create neologisms (see lamartino 2006: 122-125).

The instance of culture-bound words may provide an apt conclusion to this brief survey of possible lexicographical mistakes, in that it shows that these may not necessarily be the result of a dictionary-maker's carelessness or ignorance; rather, they may depend on the (at least partly) elusive nature of language itself, which can sometimes defy analysis (in monolingual lexicography) and comparison (in bilingual lexicography). However, mistakes in dictionary-making may also result from a limited or biased world-view, on the part of the lexicographer, the speech community he belongs to, or both. Such socio-cultural mistakes will be dealt with in the final section of this paper.

3.2 Socio-cultural Mistakes

If lexicographical mistakes can easily be detected by referring to the general principles and established procedures of dictionary-making (hence, less and less common in dictionaries from the recent past or published nowadays), socio-cultural mistakes in dictionaries are more difficult to pin down, and less liable to be detected, in contemporary dictionaries as well. As a matter of fact, there is often a fuzzy line between what is socially and culturally acceptable and what is not, and the ideological context of each succeeding generation of dictionary-makers and dictionary-users may blur the vision and the picture. That is the reason why it is much easier to find evidence of socio-cultural mistakes in dictionaries of the past and/or foreign cultures than in present-day dictionaries of one's own language and socio-cultural background.

The most obvious category of cultural mistakes in dictionaries is when definitions or translation equivalents are inadequate because the lexicographers simply do not know what they are writing about, that is to say they (as individuals or members of their society) are ignorant of the extra-linguistic reality they want to lexicographically describe. For example, it took time for English lexicographers to gather information about chameleons, and come to know that they do not feed on air:

Elyot (1538): CHAMELEON, ONTIS, a lyttell beaste, hauynge his skynne spotted lyke to a lybard, whych chaungeth into dyuers colours, according to the thynge that he seeth. They be ingendred in Inde, and is of the quantitie and figure of a lysard, but that his legges be lenger, and goeth vpryght, and hath a

handicrafts and politics. In these cases the lexicographer must seek solutions that meet the needs of the user as far as possible by providing brief, precise encyclopaedic explanations and suggestions for translation" (Kromann, Rüber and Rosbach 1991: 2718).



snoute lyke a swyne, a long tayle, and small at the ende, his eyen be neuer closed, he doth neuer eate or drynke, but is nourished onely by ayre. Chameleon is also an herbe.

Bullokar (1616): CHAMELEON. A little beast like a Lizard, hauing a rough scaly skin, straight legs, sharpe clawes, a slow pace like a Torteyes, and a long wreathed taile: Hee changeth himselfe quickly into any colour that he sitteth vpon, excepte white & red: wherefore men that are inconstant and fickle, are sometime called Chameleons. This beast (as is saide) is nourished onely with aire.

Cockeram (1623): CHAMELION, the least of all beasts, which breeds egges or spawne, it changeth itselfe into any colour that it sits on, except white & red: therefore inconstant men are sometimes called Chamelions; it is said it onely liues by the aire.

Phillips (1658): CAMELION, a beast like a Lizard, that turneth himself into all colours, and lives by the aire.

Coles (1677): CAMELION, a beast like a Lizard, that lives by the air, and often changes colour.

Kersey (1702): A CAMELEON, a beast like a Lizard, that often changes colour; and is said to live by the air.

Kersey (1708): CAMELEON, a Creature like a Lizard, that frequents the Rocks; it lives on Flies.

Bailey (1721): CAMELEON, [*Chamaeleon*, L. f *χαμαιλεων*, Gr.] a Creature like a Lizzard, frequenting the Rocks, living on the Air, or Flies, which will turn himself into all Colours but Red and White. F.

Bailey (1727): CAMELEON [of *χαμαιλεων* of *χαιμαι* on the Ground, and *λεων* a Lion] a little Creature resembling a Lizard; but that the Head of it is bigger and broader, it is a Quadrupede, having on each Foot 3 Toes, and a long Tail, by which it will fasten itself upon Trees, as well as by its Feet. It frequents the Rocks, lives upon Flies, Gnats, &c. and lays Eggs; the common Colour of it is a whitish gray; but if it be exposed to the Sun, or set upon other Colours, some Parts of the Skin change their Colour after a pleasant Manner.

Johnson (1755): CHAMELEON. *n.s.* [*χαμαιλεων*]

The *chameleon* has four feet, and on each foot three claws. Its tail is long; with this, as well as with its feet, it fastens itself to the branches of trees. Its tail is flat, its nose long, and made in an obtuse point; its back is sharp, its skin plaited, and jagged like a saw from the neck to the last joint of the tail, and upon its head it has something like a comb; like a fish, it has no neck. Some have asserted, that it lives only upon air; but it has been observed to feed on flies, caught with its tongue, which is about ten inches long, and three thick; made of white flesh, round, but flat at the end; or hollow and open, resembling an elephant's trunk. It also shrinks, and grows longer. This animal is said to assume the colour of those things to which it is applied; but our modern observers assure us, that its natural colour, when at rest and in the shade, is a bluish grey; though some are yellow, and others green, but both of a smaller kind. When it is exposed to the sun, the grey changes into a darker grey, inclining to a dun colour, and its parts, which



have least of the light upon them, are changed into spots of different colours. The grain of its skin, when the light doth not shine upon it, is like cloth mixed with many colours. Sometimes when it is handled, it seems to be speckled with dark spots, inclining to green. If it be put upon a black hat, it appears to be of a violet colour; and sometimes if it be wrapped up in linen, when it is taken off, it is white; but it changes colour only in some parts of the body

Calmet.

A *chameleon* is a creature about the bigness of an ordinary lizard; his head unproportionably big, and his eyes great; he moveth his head without writhing of his neck, which is inflexible, as a hog doth; his back crooked, his skin spotted with little tumours, less eminent nearer the belly; his tail slender and long; on each foot he hath five fingers, three on the outside, and two on the inside; his tongue of a marvellous length in respect of his body, and hollow at the end, which he will launch out to prey upon flies; of colour green, and of a dusky yellow, brighter and whiter towards the belly; yet spotted with blue, white, and red.

Bacon's Natural History, N° 360.

I can add colours ev'n to the *chameleon*;

Change shapes with Proteus, for advantage.

Shakesp. Hen. VI.

One part devours the other, and leaves not so much as a mouthful of that popular air, which the *chameleons* gasp after.

Decay of Piety.

The thin *chameleon*, fed with air, receives

The colour of the thing to which he cleaves.

Dryden.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century definitions may be more or less encyclopaedic in character, but most of them state that chameleons live on air. Bullokar and Cockeram raise doubts – chameleons are *said* to live on air; still, what looks like a modern scientific view is found side by side with a metaphorical application reminding in a way of medieval bestiaries.²⁷ As to early eighteenth-century dictionaries, it is true that Kersey also seems to discredit pseudo-scientific knowledge (1702) and then categorically affirms (1708) that chameleons live on flies, but Bailey still leaves the question hanging in his earlier dictionary (1721), although he is very specific in his later, more encyclopaedic volume (1727). As to Johnson, he does not define the word *chameleon* himself but relies on two similar scientific descriptions; interestingly, however, his literary quotations allude to the exotic animal's best known features: its ability to change colour and its supposed feeding on air.

Cultural flaws may also be found in dictionaries when lexicographers provide their readers with manifestly unfair definitions on purpose, as evidenced by Samuel Johnson's biased definitions (see the entries COMPLIMENT etc. in section 1 above).

²⁷ Such metaphorical application gave birth to the verb *to chameleonize* that, according to the OED, is only used once in Nashe's *Lenten Stuffe* and only found in Cockeram's and Blount's dictionaries. As a matter of fact, Cockeram (1623) has the entry "CAMELIONIZE. To change into many colours.", while Blount (1656) actually has two: "CAMELIONIZE, to live by the Aire, or in the fire, or change colour, as the *Camelion* is said to do" and "CAMELIONIZE, to live by the air, as the *Chameleon* is said to do, or to change colour, as that beast doth, who can turn himself into all colours, saving white and red". This verb is also listed, in Coles's own typical way, in his dictionary of 1677: "CAMELIONIZE, to play the / CAMELION, a beast like a Lizard...".



Johnson is notorious for these and similar definitions, but other early lexicographers could hardly resist the temptation of having their say, vent their spleen or simply have fun:

Elyot (1538): RISUS SARDONICUS, a lawghter without myrth, as of them that be madde or cruell, such as Irish men vse whan they be angry.

Florio (1611): MENAR MOGLIE, to marrie, to bring home a wife, to take a ceaseless trouble in hand.

Blount (1656): CATAPHRYGIANS, A Sect of damnable Hereticks that lived in the time of Pope *Soter*, and the Emperor *Commodus* about the year of Christ 181. They bore that name, because their Arch-leaders, *Montanus* and *Apelles* were of the Country *Phrygia*; they erred about Baptism, rejecting the form that Christ and his Apostles used, they baptized their dead, held two Marriages as bad as fornications, with other wicked Tenets.

Coles (1677): MACHIAVELIZE, the same as MACHIAVELIANIZE, to play the MACHIAVELIAN, -VILLIAN, he that practiseth or studieth MACHIAVELIANISM, State policy, the Doctrine of *Nicholas* MACHIAVEL, a famous Historian and Recorder of Florence, whose politicks have poison'd almost all *Europe*.

Johnson (1755): LEADER. *n.s.* [...] 4. One at the head of any party or faction: as the detestable Wharton was the *leader* of the whigs. [...]

Baretti (1760): TRADESFOLK, *s.* [people employed in trade] gente data al mercanteggiare; gente vile, canaglia sciocca al vil guadagno intenta.

Baretti (1760): WIDOWHUNTER, *s.* [one who courts widows for a jointure] uno che amoreggia vedove per la dote, un Irlandese.

These definitions (and dozens of similar ones in early lexicography) cannot be explained away as just the idiosyncratic manifestations of eccentric lexicographers, and simply condemned as a private individual's socio-cultural mistakes. Quite the reverse: the lexicographers, here, did most probably act as the spokespersons for their society, or at least some sections of it. The religious, political, ethnic, social or even gender-related criticism clearly implied in these definitions will strike modern readers as wrong in so far as they are politically incorrect, but the original readerships may have found them as an expression of the mainstream way of thinking, which favoured the established religion over sects, a conservative political attitude over reformism and *realpolitik*, upper classes over lower classes and – it goes without saying – men over women. To expand on this latter example: Florio's definition of MENAR MOGLIE in his earlier dictionary of 1598 simply read "to marrie or bring home a wife"; arguably, if the later definition of 1611 came to have a sting in the tail, it was because Florio wanted to



have fun but also, and more importantly, to establish some sort of relationship with his male readership. Although his dictionary was dedicated to the Queen, and although “Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other vnskilfull persons” (so ran the title-page of Cawdrey 1604) were the target readership of early dictionaries, these compilations flourished in a fairly closed socio-cultural system where lexicographers, (almost all) dictionary-users, and worldviews were male.

It would, of course, be a gross blunder to include a similar definition in a dictionary nowadays, since at least the feminist campaigns of the mid-twentieth century. Still, Rosamund Moon (1989) reports that in the *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* of 1952 the definition for NOOSE read: “a loop with running knot which ties the firmer the closer it is drawn: a snare or bond generally, esp. hanging or marriage”. Socio-cultural stereotypes die hard, as a much more recent example shows. The entry for PITY in the third new (!) edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* includes the following illustrative examples: “I like Charlie. Pity he had to marry that awful woman”, which perpetrates the age-old stereotype of the shrewish wife; and “‘Are you married?’ ‘No.’ ‘What a pity.’”, which may in theory refer to either a man or a woman, but has a Victorian ring to it that can hardly be accepted in a recent learner’s dictionary for the international market.

If early lexicographers might feel entitled to look down on women,²⁸ it would be a gross socio-cultural mistake on the part of their present-day colleagues to ideologically refer to a patriarchal model of the family and man-wife relations. And yet, lexicographers may also make a mistake by being overzealous for the role of women in society. *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* was an innovative dictionary of collocations when it was first published thirty years ago (Benson, Benson and Ilson 1986). The verb TO APPLY being exemplified in the *BBI* by “she applied to three universities”, this rightly reflects a typical feature of the Anglo-American system of higher education, which was in the mid-1980s largely accessible to young women; such examples as “she had enough acumen to see through the scheme” (s.v. ACUMEN) and “she performed an heroic act” (s.v. ACT) imply qualities shown by men and women alike, and are therefore also fully acceptable; in contrast, examples like “a commanding officer has complete authority over her personnel” (s.v. AUTHORITY) and “the pilot began her approach to the runway” (s.v. APPROACH) arguably reflect a sort of wishful thinking, in the 1980s as much as in the 2010s, since female commanding officers and pilots are hardly to be seen, no matter whether one likes this or not. As individual beings, the compilers of the *BBI* may well have been in favour of the equality of the sexes; but as lexicographers, they have arguably made a socio-cultural mistake if and when their illustrative examples are hardly credible.

It is now widely understood, and accepted, that dictionaries mirror the contemporary attitude to life and the world of the élite groups in a given speech community, their outlook and ideology; in other words, dictionaries are not to be seen as perfectly objective and absolutely authoritative representations of languages and

²⁸ See, for two different perspectives on the topic, lamartino (2010b) and lamartino (2013). More wide-ranging is Fleming (1993).



language usage, but lexicographers should strive to paint a realistic (rather than an ideal) picture of the world, as much as they aim to provide reliable linguistic data.²⁹

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a conclusion for my paper, I might repeat the question in Eliot's *Gerontion*: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" Can lexicographers be forgiven for the mistakes in their dictionaries? I think they should. Linguists – especially historical linguists – can hardly hope that there will ever be the perfect lexicographer compiling the perfect dictionary. Languages are not perfect, dictionaries as repositories of words cannot be either, as the above insights into the history of English lexicography have made clear. If speakers and dictionary-users wanted the perfect lexicographical and socio-cultural definition – to put it differently, the perfect equivalence between words and the world –, they should imitate the linguists in the Academy of Lagado (Book 3, Chapter 5 in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*):

An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such *things* as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on. And this invention would certainly have taken place, to the great ease as well as health of the subject, if the women in conjunction with the vulgar and illiterate had not threatened to raise a rebellion, unless they might be allowed the liberty to speak with their tongues, after the manner of their forefathers; such constant irreconcilable enemies to science are the common people. However, many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by *things*, which has only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in proportion to carry a greater bundle of *things* upon his back, unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him. I have often beheld two of those sages almost sinking under the weight of their packs, like pedlars among us; who when they met in the streets would lay down their loads, open their sacks, and hold conversation for an hour together; then put up their implements, help each other to resume their burdens, and take their leave.

But for short conversations a man may carry implements in his pockets and under his arms, enough to supply him, and in his house he cannot be at a loss; therefore the room where company meet who practise this art, is full of all *things* ready at hand, requisite to furnish matter for this kind of artificial converse. (Dixon and Chalke 1967: 230-231)

Since this solution is neither feasible nor satisfactory, the speakers of any speech community – be they "the women, in conjunction with the vulgar and illiterate" or

²⁹ A corollary to this statement is that the present-day tendency for lexicographers to be politically correct is as ideologically conditioned as the early modern lexicographers' disrespect for women, lower classes, or ethnic minorities.



“many of the most learned and wise” – should content themselves with their living language, and their useful though imperfect dictionaries. Nowadays, it is reassuring to know that dictionary-making is no longer an individual enterprise, and that teamwork is there to reduce the number of lexicographical mistakes and individual bias in dictionaries. Still, the search for perfection is a never-ending story, like chasing the sun in Arcadia.

A sentence from a 1784 letter by Johnson to an Italian friend is very often quoted in this context: “Dictionaries are like watches, the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true” (Lynch Piozzi 1788: II, 406). What is hardly ever mentioned is that Johnson’s motto must have been inspired to him by a couplet in Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* (ll. 9-10): “’Tis with our *Judgments* as our *Watches*, none / Go just *alike*, yet each believes his own” (Audra and Williams 1961: 239-240). Dictionaries are to be used for what they can teach users – they can teach a lot! – and despite all their inevitable shortcomings. Dictionaries may include errors and mistakes, or even gross blunders sometimes, and it is the lexicographers’ duty to compile more and more accurate and reliable dictionaries; it is up to dictionary-users and speakers to refer to them in order to avoid the pitfalls of sloppy, ineffective and misleading communication.

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