

The Oxford English Dictionary: Defining Moments

Elizabeth Ann Tutbill

Abstract

This paper reviews important events in the making of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). I trace the development of the OED from its conceptual stage to its current stage. By revisiting the controversies and uncertain moments that the OED project went through and by sketching the portraits of some of the key individuals involved in the project, I wish to highlight the fact that the OED itself is embedded in its social and historical context.

Many have strived to find words to express themselves. Others have forsaken love, life, and kinship to clarify what words mean. The making of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) is a tale of humanity striving to hold meaning for expression as defined by the masses. It is a powerful example of what lengths generations of English speakers would sacrifice to hold themselves true to their words, so that we in the present can find words to express ourselves.

In 1884, the Clarendon Press at the University of Oxford published seven thousand words in a serial magazine beginning with the letter *Aa* in what was entitled *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles; Founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by the Philological Society*. Later, in 1928 the 125th serialized dictionary was published. In 1993, the entire collection of twelve volumes of a dictionary of the English language, now renamed *The Oxford English Dictionary*, was published. It represents the work of generations of editors that have contributed to the masterpiece for over a century.

The OED was first proposed by members of the Philological Society at Oxford University, then finally organized and published by James A. H. Murry

among other great men (Willinsky, 1994, p. 3). To note some perspectives on beginning contributions to the work, in 1858 through 1887, Richard Trench sought to create *A New English Dictionary* as a resource for standardized English. Trench's aspirations began with the Roman Catholic Church. In his time, there was a great controversy between religion and new scientific findings. Trench was a recognized Archbishop and, for that reason, he wanted to create a platform for words as a moral guide. This platform started with a resolution headed by Trench within the Philological Society that passed in 1857. He led the committee to document unregistered words in English as a moral guide inscribed in God's word. The other men who worked on the project with him were Herbert Coleridge and Fredrick Furnivall (Willinsky, 1994, pp. 14-15).

They chose to model their definitions after a pamphlet entitled *An Apology Made to Satisfy, If It May Be, William Tindale*, published in 1535 by George Joye. In this pamphlet, Joye cited information systematically as he provided a critical analysis of William Tindale's controversial translation of the New Testament from Hebrew and Greek into English.¹ Joye's pamphlet was important for the OED

because in it he introduced the practice of citing the source of information (Willinsky, 1994). Being a translator himself, Joye's critical analysis of Tindale's work includes citations of words' meanings in the context of where and when they were used. This practice of citation, commonly used today in scholarly works, was new and even controversial at the time. The originators of the *OED*, however, followed Joye's insight and built upon his method for defining words, which is to base words' meanings on the context of actual usage, and to provide citations of the words' sources.

In 1868, James A. H. Murry, the most infamous creator of the *OED*, was introduced to the Philological Society. He was not as sober as the men who were members of the society; instead, he was said to be a rather humorous and jovial individual. Fredrick Furnivall, acting president at the time and an authority in the society through 1910, had a very powerful influence over Murry. They worked together on *A New English Dictionary* which was to become the *OED* (Murry, 1977, p. 87).

In April 1876, Murry was surprised by a suggestion that he join the effort for *A New English Dictionary*. Alexander Macmillan, then president, called a meeting with Murry regarding what Murry's potential contributions of lexicography to the project. Noah Webster's dictionary, published in the United States, was internationally acclaimed at the time, and it was explained to Murry that the Philological Society wanted something like it, but bigger and better. The Society was interested in Murry's contribution because they had seen his work on dialects and felt that he was up to the task (Murry, 1977, p. 135).

In addition, the Society recognized the importance of translation. Richard Trench had great interest in the *Greek-English Lexicon*, a bilingual text that explored the history of words beginning with their origins and the changes that were made to them over time (Murry, 1977, p. 135). Had the Society not understood the importance of translation, perhaps people today would not hold the finished masterpiece in such high esteem. Students and educators in the twenty-first century may take for granted that words are articulated by a standard. In the time of the founding fathers² of the *OED*, words were open to interpretation by educated men, which usually meant the upper class. It is probable that documented words were not defined by the majority of people that used them prior to the insight of Murry and his colleagues.

The great men that knew Murry, such as Alexander Macmillan and Fredrick Furnivall, felt that Murry would be a major contributor to exploring this approach of documenting words because of his outgoing persona and interest in communication. As the work became more involved, controversies developed over who should take credit and from where funding should be derived. When asked, there was a point where Murry hesitated to take on the responsibility of editor because he felt that the work belonged to the Philological Society, and no matter what happened, any publisher would publish it for England (Murry, 1977, pp. 143-145).

After two years of hesitation, Murry took over the project in 1879 by signing a contract with the Oxford University Press. Originally, he predicted that he should contract for ten years to complete the

work. Forty-nine years later, Murry finished his contract with few remaining co-workers, including Henry Bradley, Charles Onions and William Craigie (Mugglestone, 2005, p. 2).

In the beginning, Trench and his colleagues had created a system for documenting definitions that involved outsourcing volunteer scholars from various backgrounds to create definitions. These contributors were called 'delegates' and were asked to explore published books to collect data for given words. Each delegate submitted paper 'slips' with broad hand-written definitions. Trench's original volunteers were numbered at 76.

When Murry inherited the project, he began his task with roughly 2.5 million 'slips' submitted by delegates during and after Trench's reign. Murry organized a system of pigeonholes, first thought of by Henry Coleridge when he was an active member in the Philological Society. The pigeonhole idea was expanded to Murry's Scriptorium. At first, it served to organize all of the previous contributions. Ultimately, Murry felt that many of the definitions were not of good quality, so he only used one-sixth of the original 'slips' (Mugglestone, 2005, pp. 14-15).

According to Mugglestone (2005), Murry wrote an irate letter to Furnivall stating that the Philological Society's existing materials were a, "...mass of utter confusion." Murry then redefined the effort and appealed to the academic community for contributions (p. 15). By 1881, over 800 new delegates had answered Murry's appeal. He requested that they be more specific with their documentation and include sentences to define strange and unfamiliar words such as idioms (p. 18).

Murry had the burden of overseeing the project as a whole while continuing to manage the resources for it. What eventually happened with the new delegates is that they started to form opinions about how their input should be organized. While the project continued to gain momentum, two volumes were planned to be added to the original four. At the same time, a challenge to the editor of the *OED* was that the majority of the delegates began to form opinions about what should be in the dictionary. They started to try to create the dictionary instead of taking the role of contributors to the work. Murry was put in a position where he had to defend the importance of all words for the project, including, for example, newspaper quotations, deemed unworthy by some delegates. In addition, he often had to remind the delegates that language is continually reconstructed as it grows (Mugglestone, 2005).

Frustration with all parties involved became fully escalated in the 1890s. The situation was described as a crisis. Eventually, Murry had to take a stand. At that point, he demanded respect and took a strong stance as peacemaker in the battles over due credit for individual 'slips' and funding. It was stated at that time that the *OED* could not demonstrate the exact meaning of everything (Mugglestone, 2005, p. 35).

Murry may have had the realization that he carried a larger burden than the logistics of the *OED*. It is possible that the men leading the project, especially Murry, felt that they had to make a statement about the growing assumption that they were all knowing authorities on English from the past, present, and future. Perhaps this was an emotional issue for delegates as well.

What makes the *OED* unique to other dictionaries is that it includes cited entries from great authors such as William Shakespeare and John Milton. For example, compared to Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* that was written in the same period as the *OED*, there are thousands more entries in the *OED*. For some words, there were so many sources that the *OED* appointed specific delegates to focus solely on definitions from texts such as Shakespearean plays or the Bible (Willinsky, 1994, pp. 57-58).

According to Willinsky (1994), the delegates were steadily gathering resources from all of the written work they could find. Many authors, from various genres, were cited. The whim of a writer and his or her prose helped and hindered the gallant effort to include as much of the English language as possible. Murry referred to the effort as a scientific spirit that guided the *OED* through all of the literary nuances that are found in published texts (pp. 57-58).

Analytical literary contributions from poetry prompted the *OED* writers to create the first recorded attempts at sociolinguistic definitions for meanings. Previous attempts at dictionaries, including the most recent work at the time; Johnson's *Dictionary*, were based on works by reputable authors that were thought to be authorities on English. In comparison, the *OED* was an innovative attempt at acknowledging the Christian-based and academic writings in addition to including how all classes of people communicated in their daily lives (Willinsky, 1994). For example, works by Oscar Wilde were not taken seriously by some critics but were thought to be valuable by the writers of the *OED*.

Willinsky (1994) looked at this issue more closely when he sought to analyze words taken from William Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* for the *OED*. Willinsky isolated some entries including *annoy*, *bold*, *crave*, and *smack*. He found that the challenge for the editors of the *OED* was to look at verse and definition, and then reason how they would apply them to the reader's sense of how the words are defined. There were anywhere from 30 to 50 'bundles' of paper slips for each word submitted. From there, the editors had the responsibility of ranking how important or valid the delegate's interpretation was. They also had to determine the validity of the author that the delegates cited. According to the research, Murry was never happy about omitting anything the delegates found; however, the sheer volume of it all forced him to do so (pp. 76-77).

Among the examples Willinsky noted, *smack* has several entries.

Smack, sh. 2

A sharp noise or sound made by separating the lips quickly, esp. in kissing, and in tasting or anticipating food or liquor.

1570 LEVINS *Manip.* 5 Ye smacke of a kisse, suaium.
1956 SHAKES. *Tam.* Shrew III. Ii. 180 Hee... kist her lips with such a clamous smacke, that at the parring all the Church did eccho (*Oxford English Dictionary* as cited by Willinsky, 1994, pp. 79-80).

Some other interesting excerpts dated back to the 1300s and continued through the 1800s. Definitions are cited in Old English from 1340 where a sentence from *Ayenb.* 93 defined *smack* as "to perceive by the sense of taste or to experience" and

“to suspect.” In addition, *Image Hypocr.* 1550, 1, 48 is quoted; “We... Must sey that white is blacke, Or ells they say we smacke, And smell we wote not what.” Finally, *smack* continued for several pages, more cites included entries from 1591, 1648, and 1827 (Simpson, 1989, Vol. XV). These examples taken from the *OED* prove John Willinsky’s point and speak to how intricate this task was for the editors of the *OED*.

James Murry strived to find delegates that had time and literary backgrounds to fulfill the demanding requirements the editors asked of them. Having sought as much input as possible, the network for the *OED* continued to grow to the furthest corners of the literary world in England. Murry’s outreach found qualified delegates that may not have otherwise been considered appropriate. An example is Dr. William Minor.

Originally, Dr. William Minor was one of the least well-known delegates of the *OED* contributors. Dr. Minor had made hundreds of contributions, all very accurate and well written, yet no one knew who he was. Minor was obviously educated, but there was no sign of him in well-known academic circles. James Murry took it upon himself to visit Dr. Minor out of curiosity. When Murry arrived at Dr. Minor’s address, he introduced himself to the man who answered the door with a bow. The man at the door paused and told Murry that he was, in fact, Dr. Minor’s physician and that Dr. Minor was a patient at the mental institution Murry was gracious enough to visit (Winchester, 1998, *xi-xii*). Over the years, Murry and Minor established a friendly relationship, a relationship that turned out to be invaluable for the *OED*.

Because Dr. Minor had more free time than most delegates did, he created a backlog of words he felt would be beneficial to the project. He was, despite being mentally ill, a wealthy man with access to as many books as he desired. This made him invaluable compared to other delegates who read related literature and wrote ‘slips’ as they found words to cite for given letters. Dr. Minor had a surplus of words because he constantly read and documented words he thought might be appropriate for the project. When the editors came upon a word they could not find entries for, they contacted Dr. Minor and he was able to send them the information that they needed post-haste (Winchester, 1994, pp. 142-143).

As both Minor and Murry aged, their decline had a significant impact on the *OED*. Dr. Minor was originally from the United States and had committed murder (which was a consequence of his mental disorder) in England. He was incarcerated in England until his brother appealed to the British government to release him to a hospital in the US. Winston Churchill, who would later become very famous, intervened and they allowed the transfer on his behalf. The *OED* was half completed when Minor was shipped back to the United States. By then, Minor was heralded as one of the *OED*’s greatest contributors. James Murry and his wife saw Dr. Minor off when he boarded the ship to leave England. It is written that both men had tears in their eyes when they said farewell, which is significant considering social norms in the era they knew each other in (Winchester, 1994, pp. 198-191).

As the years past, Murry became worried about whether or not he would see the completion of the *OED*. While

most of the elderly editors had started limiting their work on the *OED*, Murry continued with gusto. In 1912, he was 76. Six men that had worked closely with him on the project had died. Murry's private letters indicate that he had a lot of anxiety about seeing the project finished (Mugglestone, 2005, 190-191).

Murry, feeling pressed to finish, and exerting more energy in his attempts to complete his task, was continually slowed because the people he relied on to complete the work were dying. It was difficult to replace those that had passed. In 1914, Murry's long-time friend, Charles Onions, took over the lead editor position for the *OED*. Things had a more positive outlook with that change, but then World War I began. Younger men who were working on the *OED* had to enlist for the war effort (Mugglestone, 2005, pp. 192-193).

Eventually, there were few men and resources left to continue the project. At that time, some of the elderly men asked their daughters to volunteer to keep things going. This was a short-lived effort because Oxford University was then converted to a war hospital, and over time, the Press was used exclusively for the war effort (Mugglestone, 2005, pp. 196-198).

After the war, as the *OED* once again gained momentum, technology became a part of lexicography. In the early 1900s, Murry became convinced that technology would have a significant impact on the completion of the *OED*. However, he could not fathom what those changes would be (Mugglestone, 2005, p. 211).

Murry worked almost until his death, July 26, 1915. He strived to complete the letter *Tt* before he died, he left the uncompleted work very organized, and those that followed him were able to

finish it with more ease than the burden he had inherited (Murry, 1977, p. 317).

The final volume of the *OED* was published in 1928, almost 70 years from the start date of the Philological Society's commitment to *A New English Dictionary*. There was a supplement created in the time that technology had emerged. Craigie and Onions oversaw the editing process for it and the final whole work was published in 1933 (Murry, 1977, p. 312).

In 1972, four new volumes were published under guidance by R. W. Burchfield. It was to replace the 1933 supplement to bring the *OED* to present day. It is with great respect that the statement released to the news press in 1928 is still held as the most accurate summary of the work that was published in *Periodical*, xiii, 143 (19 Feb. 28) as a whole (as cited in Murry, 1977). It read:

The superiority of the Dictionary to all other English Dictionaries, in accuracy and completeness, is everywhere admitted. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is the supreme authority, and with a rival. It is perhaps less generally appreciated that what makes the Dictionary unique is its historical method; it is a Dictionary not of our English, but of all English: the English of Chaucer, of the Bible, and of Shakespeare is unfolded in it with the same wealth of illustration as is devoted to the most modern authors. When considered in this light, the fact that the first part of the Dictionary was published in 1884 is seen to be relatively unimportant; 44 years is a small

period in the life of a language.
(pp. 312-313)

According to Mugglestone (2005), even the second edition of the *OED* was not able to keep up with modern times. In the 1980s, John Simpson, acting editor, felt that the Internet was the future for the *OED*. Simpson claimed that with the Internet, the editors of the *OED* would have access to advisors from all over the world when lexicographical inquires and authority were called into question. To date, the *OED Online* is still a work in progress.

In conclusion, many great sacrifices and efforts were made to create a masterpiece that helps us, in the present, identify with our language, as it was and is spoken. Without the undertaking of such an effort, we would not have the kind of

documentation demonstrated in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Notes

¹ Tindale's translation was said to be false by the church, who, at the time, saw the conversion of the Bible into contemporary English was vulgar and unforgivable. Tindale was executed by English authorities in 1536. Later, his translation of the Bible made substantial contributions to the very well cited *King James Bible* and the translation itself is the source of some 2,000 citations in the *OED* (Willinsky, 1994).

² There were no women in any leadership positions in the *OED*, although thousands of women helped in the collection of word usage examples that made up the definitions and examples in the dictionary.

References

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