The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography. Oxford 2008. ch.: Introduction (cast)

1.2 What lexicographers do

Dictionaries are often perceived as authoritative records of how people 'ought to' use language, and they are regularly invoked for guidance on 'correct' usage. They are seen, in other words, as *prescriptive* texts. Lexicographers have for long been uncomfortable with this idea – at least from the time of James Murray, the founding editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* – and we see ourselves as working firmly within the tradition of *descriptive* lexicography. For us, a dictionary is a description of the vocabulary used by members of a speech community (for example, by 'speakers of English'). And the starting point for this description is evidence of what members of the speech community do when they communicate with one another. But between the raw linguistic data and the finished dictionary, a number of other factors come into play, as Figure 1.1 shows. Each box in the diagram represents an 'input' to the lexicographic process, and we deal with all these issues later in the book. Lexicographers need language technology to gain access to linguistic data; we need linguistic theory to help us analyse the data effectively and draw useful conclusions from it; and we have to understand the needs of our target audience if we are going to produce a language description that is accessible and relevant to the people who will use it.

[1] Inevitably there are exceptions: for example, deciding on what should be a headword – not an especially big problem for those of us working in European languages – is fraught with difficulty for lexicographers describing the languages of southern Africa.

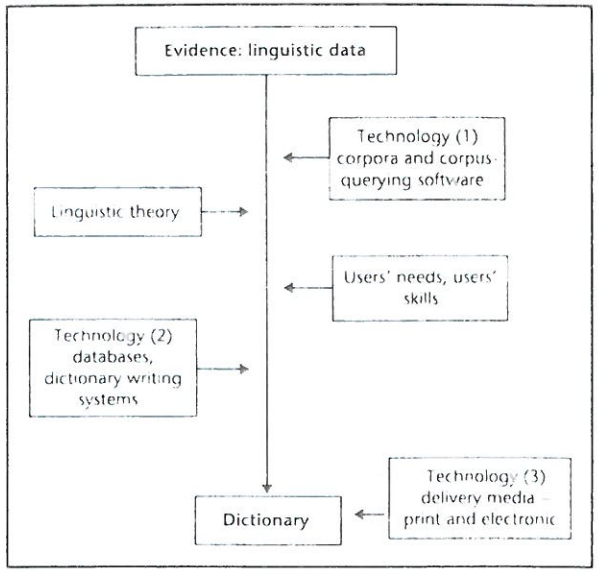

Fig 1.1 From data to dictionary

1.2.1 Lexicography and technology

Computers were first employed in the dictionary-making process in the 1960s, and in the intervening half-century the role of technology has become ever more central. In the twenty-first century, all good dictionaries take corpus data as their starting point, and the contemporary lexicographer (typically querying the corpus online and recording dictionary data in a structured database) depends on a number of technologies – most of them of recent origin. These include:

- personal computers with vast storage capacity, powerful processors, and fast internet links
- corpus data, processed using software tools developed in the Natural Language Processing community and accessed through dedicated querying programs
- software for inputting dictionary text, and databases that store and manage the text as it develops.

And once the dictionary has been compiled, technology offers a number of ways, and a number of media, for making it available to the end-user.

Improvements in hardware and infrastructure have been critical here, but the lexicographic community also owes a big debt to those computational linguists who have made our lives easier (and made the dictionaries we produce better) by applying their expertise to lexicographic tasks. In this context, Adam Kilgarriff, Pavel Rychlý, Antonio Zampolli, Roy Byrd, Ken Church, Ulrich Heid, Greg Grefenstette, and Thierry Fontenelle deserve special thanks.

1.2.2 Lexicography and theory

This is not a book about 'theoretical lexicography' – for the very good reason that we do not believe that such a thing exists. But that is not to say that we pay no attention to theoretical issues. Far from it. There is an enormous body of linguistic theory which has the potential to help lexicographers to do their jobs more effectively and with greater confidence. In the *OGPL* we refer to theoretical discussions whenever they illuminate the task in hand and help us to inject more 'system' into our work. People whose day job is writing dictionaries can't hope to remain fully abreast in every area, but fields of particular relevance to our work include lexical semantics, cognitive theory, pragmatics, and corpus linguistics. There is no question that lexicography has benefited hugely from the insights of scholars such as Charles Fillmore, Igor Mel'čuk, John Sinclair, Juri Apresjan, Alan Cruse, Eleanor Rosch, Beth Levin, Annie Zaenen, George Lakoff, and Douglas Biber (to name just a few). It's important to stress that these linguists don't (in general) address lexicographic issues directly. Their focus is language, not dictionaries, and they don't 'tell lexicographers what to do, or how to solve problems'. Rather, 'they show us different ways of looking at language, which we can take and adapt to our needs' (Atkins 1993: 29). Lexicographers have a great deal to learn from linguistic theory, and many of the recent improvements in dictionaries can be attributed to the intelligent application of theoretical ideas.

1.2.3 Lexicography and dictionary users

But making dictionaries 'is not a theoretical exercise to increase the sum of human knowledge but practical work to put together text that people can understand'. So says Sidney Landau (2001: 153), himself a distinguished lexicographer, whose classic volume, *Dictionaries: the Art and Craft of Lexicography*, is warmly recommended for anyone who wants to know what goes on in the production of a published dictionary. 'The value of a work', as Johnson says, 'must be estimated by its use', and the most important single piece of advice we can give to anyone embarking on a dictionary project is: know your user. The *OGPL* invokes this mantra in every chapter, and we make no apology for this. This doesn't imply a superficial concern with 'user-friendliness', but arises from our conviction that the content and design of every aspect of a dictionary must, centrally, take account of who the users will be and what they will use the dictionary for. Samuel Johnson (as is increasingly recognized) identified and grappled with almost all the problems that preoccupy lexicographers today.[2] But what is most impressive of all is his insistence that users' needs are paramount, and users' skills (or lack of them) must be taken into account. In a famous reflection on this theme, he says:

> It is not enough that a dictionary delights the critick, unless, at the same time, it instructs the learner; as it is to little purpose that an engine amuses the philosopher by the subtilty of its mechanism, if it requires so much knowledge in its application as to be of no advantage to the common workman.
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> (*The Plan of an English Dictionary*, 1747)

Crudely paraphrased, this tells us that no amount of theoretical rigour is worth a hill of beans if the average user of your dictionary can't understand the message you are trying to convey.