

A History of English Dictionaries: An Appraisal

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Abstract: *The dictionary is a very studious indication of human perseverance. It has commenced to be flourished since education was institutionalized. In the modern world almost all languages have more than one dictionary. It aids us to find meaning and other particular information within a few seconds. As a result it has turned out to be an indispensable part of every erudite individual in everyday life. Even, if we come across towards the antiquity, we can discover its sway over humanity. The Paper contains an analysis of chronological development of English dictionaries.*

Key words: *Dictionary, flourished, indispensable part, ancient civilization*

1. Introduction

Though incredible it is true that little is known about the chronological milieu of dictionaries. There is little apparent evidence about the first dictionary of the globe. Even no reliable website is existing on the internet. Some opinions are found in this regard. The first known dictionary was originated in the City of Elba (now Syria) about 2003 BC and it comprised Sumerian to Akkadian languages.[1] According to a view the first dictionary was penned by the Greeks. While others opine that *A Short Akkadian Word List* is the earliest dictionary of the planet, which was inscribed in the ancient Mesopotamia (now Iraq). It survived till 7th century BC. After it the Greeks had developed dictionary in a large scale. [2] There is a rationale why dictionaries had not developed in the ancient civilization. We discern that the dictionary is a sign of intellectual learning. Education was highly institutionalized in modern times; so it has evolved in the modern world also.

The first Chinese dictionary titled *The Shuowen Jiezi* was published in the 3rd century BC.[3] It is also the first surviving monolingual dictionary of the world. *The Aamarakosa*, the first dictionary of the Sanskrit language, was written by *Amara Sinha* in 4th century CE. This dictionary was written down in verse and it listed more than 9 thousand lexis. [4]The first Japanese dictionary was *Niina*.

Bangla Academy, a government-financed institution of Bangladesh, conducts research activities for the development of the Bangla language. Such an academy is also seen in France named *French Academy*. These organizations are assisted by the government. But the British government had never patronized such activities. As a result English dictionaries had always been published and edited by enthusiastic individuals. [5]

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2. Objective

The objective of this write up is to provide populace with authentic information on the origin and development of English dictionaries in contrast to other dictionaries of some foremost languages. The piece also confers the pedagogical necessity of lexicons especially for learning a lingo like English.

3. Methodology

As there is little printed literature on this subject, the information depicted in the paper has been chiefly taken from diverse sources of the internet. Both primary and secondary sources have been consulted to develop the existing literature. Some comprehensive dictionaries containing such related information have also been conferred with. After an analysis of the accessible information some recommendations on the compilation of dictionaries have been made.

4. Historical Background of English Dictionaries

The first English dictionary, most people deem, was penned by Samuel Johnson in 1755. Its name was *The Dictionary of the English Language*. The dictionary is not now available at local market and libraries but it is preserved in the British Museum. [6]

The dictionary is a grand asset for the British Civilization. Samuel Johnson compiled the dictionary only in 9 years, which forty members of the French academy took more than forty years.[7] Although the dictionary contained some discrepancies (uphill /downhill),it is still a great asset to the English language. Albeit most people believe Johnson to be the first lexicographer of the English language, the information is not true. Robert Cowdrey's *A Table Alphabetical* published in 1604 was the real first English dictionary [8]

The book contained only 2543 entries in its first edition. [9] Cowdrey later incorporated more words totaling 3200 in its latest edition. Although it was a small book, it pioneered the history of English dictionaries. The first comprehensive English dictionary '**Thomas Blount's *Glossographia***,' was published in 1656. [10] One fascinating point is that the titles of both these dictionaries were written in Latin because Latin was a very ubiquitous and prevailing language in Europe in the Middle Ages. Besides the *Table Alphabetical*, some other minor books serving the purpose of dictionaries had also been written much earlier.

According to ESTC (English Short Title Catalogue), some 663 English books titled dictionary were published before 1755.[11] Again Robin Alston's monumental bibliography says that Johnson's dictionary was the twenty first general monolingual English dictionaries. [12] More astounding report is that if one goes to many dozens of books and articles in Johnsonian bibliographies under Johnson's dictionary, then one unearths that none of them identify it the first. [13]

The above discussion clarifies us that Samuel Johnson was not the first lexicographer of the English language.

Hence an account of early English Dictionaries is given below.

5. Early English Dictionaries: [14]

Minor Dictionaries

Year	Author /Editor	Dictionary	Size /Type
1552	Richard Huloet	<i>Abecedarium Anglo-Latinum</i>	English-Latin-(Fr.)
1582	Richard Mulcaster	<i>Elementarie</i>	8,000 words
1588	Thomas Thomas	<i>Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae</i>	Latin-English
1598	John Florio	<i>A Worlde of Words</i>	Italian-English

Major Dictionaries

1604	Robert Cawdrey	<i>A Table Alphabeticall</i>	2,500 words
1616	John Bullokar	<i>An English Expositor</i>	ca. 5,000 words
1623	Henry Cockeram	<i>The English Dictionarie (or An Interpreter of Hard English Words)</i>	3 parts
1656	Thomas Blount	<i>Glossographia (or A Dictionary Interpreting all such Hard Words ... as are now used in our refined English Tongue)</i>	
1658	Edward Phillips	<i>The New World of English Words</i>	(specialists)
1673	Thomas Blount	<i>A World of Errors Discovered in the New World of Words</i>	
1676	Elisha Coles	<i>An English Dictionary</i>	25,000 words

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Noah Webster (1758-1843), First American Lexicographer, was believed to have expertise in 26 languages. He was a patriot and argued that American English was as standard as British English. His Suggestions like center/theater were welcomed albeit his suggestion like bilt, groop was discarded. The first American dictionary was published in 1806 in the titled *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*. [15] Later many American dictionaries were compiled.

Some noted ones are *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, *Webster's New World Dictionary*, *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary*, *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, and the latest dictionary *Merriam Webster's Advanced Learner Dictionary*. But the first expanded and fully comprehensive dictionary was *An American Dictionary of the English Language*.

The Oxford English Dictionary came into being in 1884. In its first edition, the dictionary was divided into 13 volumes while the second edition covers 20 volumes. It aimed to contain all the lexis used in the English language since 1150 focusing on all shifting meanings, spellings, earliest record appearance, and at least one citation from each century of its existence.[16]

The dictionary took more than forty years and it contained 21,730 densely printed pages comprising 291,500 entries. [17]The chief editor, *James Murray*, worked ceaselessly for 36 years until his death in 1915.He was then working on the letter D (undertaker). After his death his assistants accomplished the final work in 1928. In 1933 the first edition of OED (Oxford English Dictionary) was published. The dictionary in its first edition contained the following information.
Total entries-615000
Total words-60000000
Quotations-2412000[18]

Later, this monumental dictionary was abridged into two volumes and named as *the Shorter Oxford Dictionary*. And finally all the volumes are united in a single volume naming *The Compact Oxford Dictionary*.

During the first half of the 20th century, *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* was the most pivotal dictionary containing a lot of words with meaning. In this time *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (though not pocket at all in size) and *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* that covered grammatical references and example sentences where possible were largely used for pedagogical purposes.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary edited by Fowler was not only largely used by the general people but also followed by later lexicographers. Even, this dictionary became the basis of many established dictionaries of later times including *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*.

The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English edited by A S Hornby was the world's first pedagogical dictionary. It was published from Japan in 1942.The dictionary surpassed the records of all the previous dictionaries because it was considered the most helpful dictionary for foreign students of

English. The dictionary showed almost all words in example sentences. The key features of the dictionary were:

- i. Easy meaning
- ii. Example sentences
- iii. Prepositional hints
- iv. Grammar
- v. Pronunciation
- vi. Reference to formal and informal
- vii. Use of pictures

As a result the dictionary was the best seller at that time. Later in 1962 The *Oxford University Press* took the responsibility of its publication. Since then it has been published as *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. The immense popularity of the work has brought many others to publish dictionaries. Some of them are *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, *Collins Cobuild Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, *Webster's Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, and *Macmillan Dictionary*. Even till now *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* is the best-seller of the world. Many dictionaries are trying to surpass one another but this dictionary is holding the top position. In the new edition (8th edition, 2010) the dictionary covers much more things than its previous editions.

The key features of this new edition are:

- i. Inclusion of more words (cheater, informer, and informant)
- ii. Inclusion of technical words (face book)
- iii. Hints on composition writing (Oxford Writing Tutor)
- iv. Extensive use of collocations
- v. Some word origins (Achilles hill, Pandora's Box, White Elephant)
- vi. Differences among synonyms
- vii. Showing incorrect usages (He explained me the matter)
- viii. Giving synonyms and antonyms
- ix. Idiomatic and phrasal verbs
- x. All contents of its previous editions

6. The First English to Bengali Dictionary

Even till today most of us are not well informed about the first English Bengali Dictionary. It was perhaps *Anglo-Bengali Dictionary* edited by Charu Chandra Guh and published by Bengale Academy (1916-1919).[19] It is of great surprise that the first edition of such a valuable book was in extinction. The second English to Bengali dictionary was perhaps *Students' Favourite Dictionary* by Ausho Tosho Dev, popularly known as A.T.Dev. The dictionary was published in 1920s. This dictionary was an asset to people learning English in this sub-continent especially to the native speakers of Bengali. The dictionary contains many words with meaning. The book features the following:

- i. A lot of words
- ii. Pronunciation

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- iii. Meaning
- iv. Use of pictures
- v. Synonyms
- vi. List of pro verbs.

It was so popular at that time that many other natives in this region were encouraged to write dictionaries. Sangsad was the third English to Bengali dictionary. Later Bangla Academy English to Bengali dictionary was published, which was a turning point in the field of *English to Bengali dictionaries*. The dictionary tried to follow *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* and in many cases it became successful. The dictionary is a milestone for Bengalese learning English.

After some years the largest book titled *Everyman English Bengali Dictionary* was published from Kolkata which gives information on pedagogical purposes. Besides these dictionaries, there are some other dictionaries often compiled by unemployed educated people. They often confuse us with wrong meanings.

7. What should be kept in Mind during Compiling a Dictionary?

Most dictionaries, though contain a rich vocabulary, are not helpful for general readers. For example, *The Chambers Dictionary* (previously published as *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*) contains many words and perhaps is the largest single-volume-monolingual dictionary of English. It also records many archaic words (such as help, holp, holpen). But this dictionary gives only meaning, pronunciation, and word history. An ordinary user of any language does not need word history. He /she needs the various meanings, shifting meanings, collocations, example sentences, and other practical information of that particular word. As a result this dictionary is not useful to general people. Some other such dictionaries are *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary*, *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, *Collins Cobuild Unabridged Dictionary*, *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, *Chambers Family Dictionary*, *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*, *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. But these dictionaries have some good sides. For example if a reader needs the adjective form of *Lexicography*, h/she will find no help from Advanced Learner Dictionaries like *Oxford*, *Longman*, and *Cambridge*. In Such cases the *Chambers Dictionary* can help a lot giving two hints (lexicographic/lexicographical)

Some dictionaries are written for scholars, writers, journalists, and other professionals while some others are for students and ordinary folk. But this tendency should as far as be possible be ignored because a dictionary is a book used by all people, from children to scholars. So a good dictionary should have the capability to be helpful to all people regardless of their professions or ages.

8. Findings and discussion

- i. The dictionary should be bilingual in a country where English is the second or foreign language because dictionaries are more used by foreigners than by the natives.

- ii. A good dictionary should be as comprehensive as possible. So it should contain all the words of Oxford, Longman, and Cambridge dictionaries.
- iii. Some comparatively new but largely used technical words such as Facebook, femdom, fetish should be included.
- iv. Some largely used slang words (such as dick, boob, piss,) should be included.
- v. It will contain some other necessary words (such as discussant, informant, profoundness, proctorial, proctorship, proctor (to mean a person responsible for law and order in the university) that are missing in *Oxford, Longman, Cambridge* and all English to Bengali dictionaries.
- vi. Some words or phrases have mythological references (for example Achilles hill, odyssey), a dictionary should contain those references.
- vii. There will be usage notes on grammatical matters, which no English Bengali dictionary contains.
- viii. Subtle differences of meanings between words will be given. English Bengali dictionaries are highly missing it.
- ix. Uses of all words will be shown in example sentences. It is to be noted that no English Bengali dictionary does that. Bangla Academy and Everyman tried to do that but they have not become successful.
- x. Prepositional uses of each word will be given. In this case among English Bengali dictionaries only Bangla Academy contains it a little. All other dictionaries are missing it.
- xi. Synonyms and antonyms of every word will be given. Only A.T. DEV and Sangsad give that.
- xii. Collocations which all Bangla dictionaries are missing will be provided.
- xiii. Definitions of technical terms other than meanings will be provided.
- xiv. All plural forms, comparatives, superlatives, pasts and past participles will be provided.

If a lexicographer can combine all the features mentioned above, he/she can fulfill all the needs of both general folk and scholars. Many dictionaries are not dictionaries at all in consideration of our thinking of a dictionary. They only contain such words as are mainly used by a special section of students/society/scholars. Some examples of such dictionaries are *NTC'S Dictionary of Literary Terms, Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, A Dictionary of Politics, Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, Oxford Dictionary of Business.*

These dictionaries are called special dictionaries because they include such words that are used only in a special subject. For example the word *Simile* is not

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used in any discipline other than *Literature*. The word *Simile* is also found in ordinary dictionaries. But the difference is that ordinary dictionaries give only meaning hardly understandable to its user. But a special dictionary of literary terms (such as *A Glossary of Literary Terms* by M.H. Abrams) contains a lot of information, examples, and explanations so that the user can easily understand.

Some dictionaries contain only synonyms and antonyms. They are called synonym-antonym dictionaries or thesaurus.

Sometimes many good dictionaries also miss very common words. For example the word *discussant* is a very common word used by media men and scholars. But this word is missing in many world famous dictionaries such as Oxford, Longman, and Cambridge. Again some unimportant words (such as *buxom*) are found in these dictionaries.

9. Conclusion

The above discussion indicates that a dictionary is one of the most important needs of an educated individual. Although the dictionary is not any creation invented by a particular author, the compiler still deserves congratulation because the editor or the developer of the dictionary is to suffer tremendous hardship during the compilation. A good dictionary must be edited by men of extra-ordinary genius and that is why the development of dictionaries has not been possible overnight. Many scholars have been developing dictionaries since its beginning. Different government and non-government organizations should come forward in the compilation of dictionaries because it helps every educated individual of a country from children to grown-up men.

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