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## So Much More Than a "Harmless Drudge": Samuel Johnson and his Dictionary

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# So Much More Than a ‘harmless drudge’: Samuel Johnson and his Dictionary

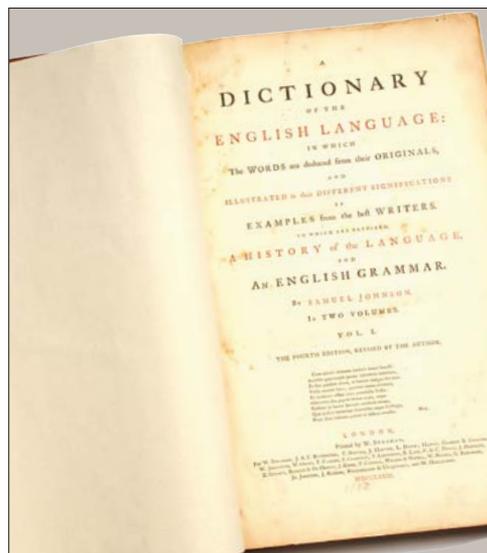
Joan S. Howland – Roger F. Noreen Professor of Law and Associate Dean for Information and Technology

*Lexicographer: A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.*

[FROM THE FIRST EDITION OF SAMUEL JOHNSON’S DICTIONARY - 1755]<sup>1</sup>

Since scribes translated the codes of conquered Akkadia to render these texts accessible to the victorious Sumerians,<sup>2</sup> lexicographers have been capturing the meaning of words at specific points in time, and facilitating the use of language to shape both history and society. Greek scholars working at the great library in Alexandria developed lexicons to aid their studies of the writings of Homer, and medieval monks created Latin glossaries to facilitate interpretation of Biblical scriptures.<sup>3</sup> Legal dictionaries and the lexicographers who created them have had a particular influence on the development of law in almost every jurisdiction, especially those stemming from the Common Law tradition. John Rastell, the brother-in-law of Sir Thomas More, published the first English dictionary of legal terms in ca. 1523, *Exposicions of [th]e Termys of [th]e Law of England*.

However, the development of a truly useful English dictionary was slow in coming. Robert Cawdrey published an abbreviated and ill-conceived work of merely twenty-five hundred words in 1604 under the title *A Table Alphabeticall of Hard Words*.<sup>4</sup> Several attempts at similar works over the next 150 years were equally unsatisfactory, leading philosopher David Hume to lament in 1741, “The Elegance and Propriety of Stile have been



very much neglected among [the British]. We have no Dictionary of our Language, and scarce a tolerable Grammar.”<sup>5</sup> Other scholars of the time, including Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, and John Dryden, expressed similar sentiments as they advocated for the preservation of and “regulation” of English.<sup>6</sup>

It was into this philological wasteland that Samuel Johnson wandered in the mid-seventeen hundreds as he accepted the challenge to forestall further mutation and decay of the English language. By the 1740s Samuel Johnson was a visible presence in London’s intellectual scene and had earned a modicum of respect for a smattering of published plays, poems, books, and articles. However, he is considered by some to be an odd choice for fate to select for this monumental task; “Blind in one eye, corpulent, incompletely educated, by all accounts coarse in manner, he was an obscure scribbler from an impoverished background when he was given a contract. . . to compile a dictionary in English.”<sup>7</sup>

Born in 1709 in Lichfield, England, Johnson, the son of a magistrate and bookseller, early in life developed both an attraction to the law and a devotion to language and literature. Although a voracious reader, devouring his father’s eclectic personal

A  
D I C T I O N A R Y  
O F T H E  
E N G L I S H L A N G U A G E :  
I N W H I C H  
The WORDS are deduced from their ORIGINALS,  
A N D  
ILLUSTRATED in their DIFFERENT SIGNIFICATIONS  
B Y  
E X A M P L E S from the best WRITERS.  
T O W H I C H A R E P R E F I X E D,  
A H I S T O R Y of the L A N G U A G E,  
A N D  
A N E N G L I S H G R A M M A R.

By SAMUEL JOHNSON.

I N T W O V O L U M E S.

V O L. I.

THE FOURTH EDITION, REVISED BY THE AUTHOR.

Cum tabulis animum censoris sumet honesti :  
Audebit quæcunque parum splendoris habebunt,  
Et sine pondere erunt, et honore indigna ferentur.  
Verba movere loco ; quamvis invita recedant,  
Et versentur adhuc intra penetralia Vestæ :  
Obscurata diu populo bonus eruet, atque  
Proferet in lucem speciosa vocabula rerum,  
Quæ prisca memorata Catonibus atque Cethegis,  
Nunc situs informis premit et deserta vetustas.      HOR.

L O N D O N,

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1773

library, Johnson's formal education was sporadic and, even when in the classroom, he was a less than diligent student. He attended Oxford for two years with lackluster results. A combination of factors, including a distinct lack of focus and a spiraling decline in his family's fortunes, led Johnson to withdraw in 1731 and move to London in search of both income and his destiny. For the next fifteen years he tried his hand at a variety of writing ventures and became a moderately successful poet, playwright, and essayist. Johnson's fortuitous marriage to a wealthy widow twenty years his senior, Elizabeth Porter, gave him both domestic happiness and the financial stability to focus on his literary pursuits.<sup>8</sup>

In 1746 Johnson was invited by a consortium of booksellers to take on the arduous task of compiling a dictionary of the English language in two folio volumes. Enthusiastically embracing this opportunity, Johnson articulated his goals for the work in a "scheme" entitled *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*.<sup>9</sup> As stated in *The Plan*, "the chief intent of [the Dictionary is] to preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of [our] English idiom."<sup>10</sup> Through his work on the *Dictionary* over the next eight years, he came to understand not only the complexities, inconsistencies, and ambiguities of English, but also to accept the inevitable evolution of the language. As opposed to the rigid pragmatism voiced in his original plan in 1747, Johnson wrote in the Preface to his dictionary upon its completion in 1755, ". . . we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clean the world at once from vanity, affectation."<sup>11</sup>

Although Johnson underestimated by over half the amount of time needed to compile his *Dictionary of the English Language*, the first edition published in 1755 contained an impressive 42,773 entries and over 114,000 quotations and etymologies. Johnson defined not only the words of common usage but those of specific professions and disciplines of study including history and philosophy. He also defined terms of war and

navigation, and a host of other unique words. He broke philological ground by offering preferred spellings, pronunciations, and plurals. Although he studiously excluded words he found crude or obscene, Johnson included many words he dismissively described in his definitions as "vulgar," "low," or "common."

The majority of entries provided etymology and derivation. Johnson copiously quoted sources from widely diverse disciplines and authors to illustrate the meaning and correct usage of terms. Authors he referenced repeatedly include John Milton (200), William Law (173), John Wilkins (88), Alexander Pope (80), and William Shakespeare (21). He referred to portions of the Bible in the definitions of 71 different words.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, he intentionally excluded many writers including Thomas Hobbes whom he ". . . scorned . . . to quote. . . at all because I did not like his principles."<sup>13</sup>

Even in 2009, the 300th anniversary of Johnson's birth, the *Dictionary* is more than a fascinating reference to the English language at a certain point in time. A close inspection of the first edition confirms that Johnson remains "supreme among lexicographers. . . in his understanding of the metaphor, of the relations between the primary and transferred senses of words; and in that he [shows] a poet's understanding."<sup>14</sup> The work also remains relevant in the twenty-first century because it is a true "literary creation as is shown not only in the . . . definitions . . . but in the verve and lucidity of hundreds of articles."<sup>15</sup> To browse the two folio volumes of the first edition is a pure delight with some term of interest or surprise to be found on every page. The masterpiece also reflects the personality, wit, erudition, moral views, prejudices, and compulsive tendencies of the compiler.

As noted above, Johnson was the first English lexicographer to define words and to give them an etymology.<sup>16</sup> Johnson's definitions, more than the massive nature of the work itself, contribute to the enduring popularity of the *Dictionary*. These definitions also, to an even greater extent than James Boswell's seminal biography *Life of Johnson*,<sup>17</sup> provide insights into Johnson's personality. A sampling of the terms found in the *Dictionary* reflect as much about Johnson the man as they do about the English language in the mid-eighteenth century.

FROM SAMUEL JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY



*Curtain-lecture: a reproof given by a wife to husband in bed*

*Dull: not exhilarating; not delightful; as, to make dictionaries is dull work*

*Enthusiasm: a vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour or communication*

*Essay: a loose sally of the mind, an irregular, indigested piece, not a regular and orderly composition*

*Excise: 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*

*Justice: the virtue by which we give to every man what is his due*

*Mouth-friend: one who professes friendship without meaning it*

*Mushroom: an upstart; a wretch risen from the dunghill; the director of a company*

*Oats: a grain, which is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people*

*Patron: one who countenances, support or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery<sup>18</sup>*

*Pension: 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*

*Pettifogger: a petty small-rate lawyer*

*Shabby: a word that has crept into conversation and low writing; but ought not to be admitted into the language. Mean; paltry*

*Spinny: I suppose small, slender. A barbarous word*

*Tory: . . . from an Irish word signifying a savage. [Defined as] one who adheres to the antient constitution of the state, and the apostolical hierarchy of the Church of England, as opposed to a whig*

*Vermicelli: a paste rolled and broken in the form of worms*

The publication of the *Dictionary* and its excellent reception firmly established Johnson's position as the leading arbiter of the English language and one of the most influential intellectuals in London. The influence of Johnson's achievement even reached across the Atlantic Ocean where Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and undoubtedly many other educated Americans of the eighteenth century purchased copies of the *Dictionary* for their personal libraries and considered it the definitive guide to the English language.

Thanks to his loyal friend and somewhat biased biographer, James Boswell, Johnson's professional and personal lives are incredibly well documented. At several points in his *Life of Johnson*, Boswell mentions Johnson's fascination with the theory

and the practice of law. In 1738, Johnson investigated the possibility of entering the legal profession, despite having no legal training, and opined, "I am a total stranger to [legal] studies; but whatever is a profession, and maintains numbers, must be within the reach of common abilities, and some degree of industry."<sup>19</sup> Although disappointed to learn that without formal training he would not meet the requirements of the Inns of Court,<sup>20</sup> he maintained a lifelong interest in the study of and the language of law. Johnson's familiar moniker, "Dr. Johnson," stems from the LL.D.s *in honoris causa* he received from Trinity College in 1765 and from Oxford in 1775.<sup>21</sup>

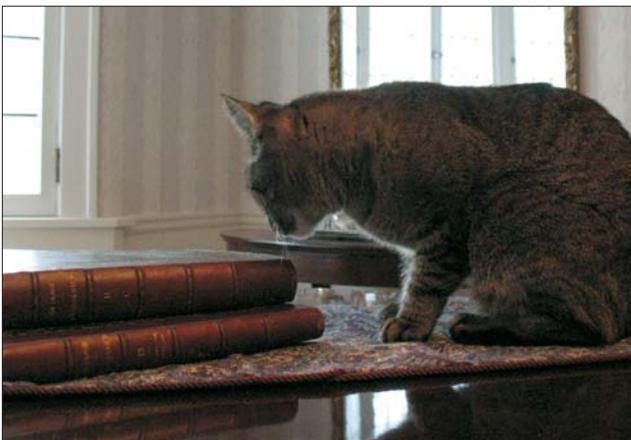
Always short tempered, as Johnson became more revered in London's social circles, he became increasingly infamous for his

abruptness, often bordering on rudeness. Shortly after the publication of the *Dictionary*, a woman trying to ingratiate herself with Johnson commented that she was surprised and pleased to have found no indecent words in either folio volume. Annoyed with her fawning, Johnson retorted, “So you have been looking for them, Madam?”<sup>22</sup>

Boswell’s biographical masterpiece also offers insights into Johnson’s personality and private life, including the softer side of the man who is best known for his biting wit and irascible demeanor. In reflecting upon Johnson’s frequent acts of kindness, Boswell wrote, “Nor would it be just . . . to omit the fondness which [Johnson] showed for animals he had taken under his protection. I shall never forget the indulgence with which he treated Hodge,<sup>23</sup> his cat: for whom he himself used to go out and buy oysters, lest the servants having that trouble should take a dislike to the poor creature. I [Boswell] am, unluckily, one of those who have an antipathy to a cat, so that I am uneasy when in the room with one; and I own, I frequently suffered a good deal from the presence of this same Hodge. I recollect him one day scrambling up Dr. Johnson’s breast, apparently with much satisfaction, while my friend smiling and half-whistling, rubbed his back, and pulled him by the tail; and when I observed he was a fine cat, [Johnson said], ‘Why yes, Sir, but I have had cats whom I liked better than this;’ and then as if perceiving Hodge to be out of countenance, [added], ‘but he is a very fine cat, a very fine cat indeed.’”

Johnson created a monumental work in the *Dictionary* that “stabilized” the English language and earned him immortality.<sup>24</sup>

*Dean Howland’s cat, Hodge, named after Dr. Johnson’s famous feline, exhibits an instinctual appreciation for a rare treatise on British law.*



He certainly was far from being a drudge. Subsequent to Johnson’s death in 1784, generations of lexicographers built upon his work to further record, define, and refine English. Noah Webster perhaps stated it best when he wrote, “Johnson’s writings had, in philology, the effect which Newton’s discoveries had in mathematics.”<sup>25</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Strahan, 1773).
- 2 Jonathan Green, *Chasing the Sun: Dictionary Makers and the Dictionaries They Made* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 1.
- 3 Lynch, Jack, ed., *Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary* (New York: Walker, 2003), 2.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Bill Bryson, *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 152, quoted in Samuel Thumma and Jeffrey Kirchmeier, “The Lexicon Has Become a Fortress: The United States Supreme Court’s Use of Dictionaries,” *Buffalo Law Review* 47 (1999): 234.
- 8 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, entry for Samuel Johnson written by Macauley, vol. 15, 11th ed. (1910), 444.
- 9 Lynch, *Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary*, 5.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 566.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 41. See also Kusujiro Miyoshi, *Johnson’s and Webster’s Verbal Examples with Special Reference to Exemplifying Usage in Dictionary Entries* (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 2007), 7.
- 12 Allen Reddick, *The Making of Johnson’s Dictionary 1746 -1773* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 121.
- 13 Lynch, *Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary*, 14.
- 14 Matthew Hodgart, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Arco, 1962), 47.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Green, *Chasing the Sun*, 266.
- 17 James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: Henry Baldwin, 1791).
- 18 Johnson may have particularly personalized this definition since he was frequently in conflict with one of his benefactors as he was compiling the *Dictionary*.
- 19 *Boswell’s Life of Johnson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 97.
- 20 George Rice, “Samuel Johnson, LL.D., on Law, Lawyers and Judges,” *American Bar Association Journal* 63, no. 9 (1977): 1218.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 James Sledd and Wilma Ebbitt, *Dictionaries and That Dictionary* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, [1962]), 17.
- 23 The name Hodge is old English for “from the country.”
- 24 Rice, “Samuel Johnson,” 1217.
- 25 Noah Webster, “To David Ramsay” (October, 1807), in Harry R. Warfel, ed., *Letters of Noah Webster* (New York: Library Publishers, 1953), 284.