
Reviewed by Patrick Hanks, University of Wolverhampton

R. M. W. Dixon is one of the world’s most original, thought-provoking, and productive linguists. He has written studies of the aboriginal languages of Australia, South America, and elsewhere. His theoretical work, in particular A new approach to English grammar on semantic principles, which appeared in 1991, played an important role in reintroducing the notion of meaning to linguistics after it had been lost sight of during the heyday of generative grammar.

Now, he has written a characteristically robust book on English dictionaries. It is with some regret, therefore, that this review must report that, although D has an important point to make, he has written a muddled book—or rather, two quite different books in approximately alternating chapters. The important point that D wishes to make is that English dictionaries in general—even dictionaries aimed at foreign learners of English—fail to provide guidance on the phraseology that is associated with each word. D argues that ‘[a] dictionary should tell you when to use one word rather than another’ (his very first sentence in an introductory section entitled ‘Prologue: The work in advance’; p. ix). Chs. 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 12, 13, and 15 develop this argument. Interspersed with these are seven chapters (4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 14) that constitute a historical survey of English monolingual dictionaries. Neither the historical survey nor D’s polemic on what dictionaries ‘should’ do benefits from being juxtaposed in this way.

Let us look first at the historical survey. D’s main contribution here is to correct the widespread misconception that the first monolingual dictionary in English was Robert Cawdrey’s Table alphabeticall of 1604. Eight years earlier, in 1596, Edmund Coote had published The English schoole-maister, part of which is devoted to glosses of about 1,680 words recently imported to English from Latin. D attributes this error of historiography to the American lexicographer Mitford M. Matthews (1933). In actual fact, the error (if that is what it is) can be traced back to James Murray’s Romanes lecture of 1900.

Within lexicography, two very different approaches to recording and explaining the lexicon of a living language may be distinguished. In both cases, the aim of the lexicographer is to compile an inventory of the words in a language. The first possible approach is to explain the meaning of words in light of their origin and history. The second is to establish the meaning of each word in terms of its present-day usage. Both are valid—for different kinds of dictionary users—but only the second of these approaches is relevant to D’s polemical aim, which means that almost half of his book is irrelevant to his declared purpose.

Nevertheless, there is a point to be made here, although it could have been made more succinctly. The extraordinary fact is that during the European Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the belief became established that etymology guarantees meaning. Putting it another way, scholars working on the lexicon, having noticed (correctly) that in contemporary languages many words have several different meanings, assumed (incorrectly) that the oldest meaning of a word would be its most literal meaning. For this reason, for over 300 years armies
of lexicographers in all of the major languages of Europe have attempted to trace and record older uses of each word and to arrange them in some sort of coherent order. Insofar as people want to read the literature of the past, this is a useful exercise—though it has nothing to do with D’s argument that ‘a dictionary should tell you when to use one word rather than another’.

To appreciate the point, the reader only has to consider the recorded history of the meanings of thousands of everyday English words such as *awful* (which is no longer normally used to mean ‘full of religious reverence’), *nice* (which no longer means ‘ignorant’), *camera* (which no longer means ‘a small room’, nor ‘the treasury of the papal Curia’), and *literal* (which no longer normally means ‘of or pertaining to letters of the alphabet’). These are examples of older meanings of contemporary words, recorded in accordance with the historical principles on which are founded major lexicographical works such as the *Oxford English dictionary* (*OED*) and the Merriam-Webster dictionaries. Unfortunately, folk belief, reinforced by nineteenth-century scholarship, has led to the ill-founded assumption, which still dogs computational and other linguists as well as the general public, that such dictionaries are a reliable guide to contemporary usage. They are not.

In this historically oriented part of his book, D accuses monolingual lexicographers in several places (e.g. Ch. 10) of plagiarism. He does this even in cases where it is clear that a dictionary publisher has paid good money for the right to use an old dictionary as the foundation for a new one. He mocks (137) lexicographers who have a row of dictionaries propped open in front of them. Here he betrays ignorance of a difference between the goal of a work of scholarship and the goal of a work of lexicography. It is not part of the aim of dictionaries to create an original work of scholarship. Instead, monolingual lexicographers aim to compile an inventory of the lexicon of a language and, among other things, to come up with the most succinct and accurate account of the meaning(s) of each lexical item.

Perhaps D might have taken a more charitable view if he had thought that the lexicographers with a row of dictionaries in front of them were examining the work of their predecessors in order to see if they could do better. Lexicography is accretive. Even in this context, however, innovation is possible. Here, the elephant in the room is phraseology. During the past thirty years, corpus linguists have been able to detect phraseological patterns in the use of words. But dictionaries—especially monolingual dictionaries—do not do a very good job of explaining the phraseological patterns that are associated with each word in a language.

This brings us to the other half of D’s book—the polemic. This aspect of *The unmasking of English dictionaries* is seriously disappointing. D rightly laments the failure of English dictionaries to describe the phraseology associated with each word, but he fails to do justice to the one English dictionary, COBUILD, that attempts to give a systematic account of lexical phraseology. Here, I briefly discuss just one example, which will serve to illustrate both the problem of phraseology and D’s failure to come to grips with it. D cites part of the COBUILD entry for the adjective *brief* (206):

• *brief* Something that is brief lasts only for a short time.

He rightly complains that ‘a standard definition, *lasting only for a short time*, is shorter and just as effective’ (206). What he has failed to notice is that, in this particular entry, COBUILD is not true to its own principles. What it could and should have done is to say what sort of things are typically ‘brief’. Even with a corpus of only 7.3 million words (not 500 million words, as stated by D, who appears to have been misled by the publisher’s marketing department), COBUILD lexicographers in the 1980s had enough evidence to get a better level of generalization about phraseology. Corpus pattern analysis, even in those days, could have shown that it is not just ‘something’ but, more restrictively, ‘events, processes, or documents such as letters and reports’ that are stereotypically brief. D seems to be unaware of a book about the project, Sinclair 1987, in which the principles of COBUILD are discussed.

Surprisingly, D also makes no mention of a fellow immigrant to Australia, Anna Wierzbicka, whose detailed studies of various aspects of the English lexicon—for example, speech-act verbs (1987)—are always insightful and based on an innovative set of principles. Unfortunately, as far as lexicography is concerned, D seems to be stuck in a time warp around 1960–1970 and unaware of subsequent studies of the English lexicon.
REFERENCES


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In *Meaning and linguistic variation: The third wave in sociolinguistics*, Penelope Eckert brings us her ‘intellectual autobiography’: a curated sequence of papers from her career wrapped in first-person narratives about the social and personal context in which each paper was written. While the book covers the full span of E’s career, the focus is on third-wave sociolinguistics, which she defines as ‘a theoretical perspective that puts the meaning of variation, in all its dynamism and indeterminacy, at the center of analysis’ (xi). In tracing the origins of key third-wave theoretical constructs to earlier work by both herself and others in the first and second waves, E builds up an unmistakable narrative arc covering the full span of her career.

The first two chapters of the book, presented under the heading ‘Beginnings’, deal primarily with E’s years studying Gascon in St. Pierre de Soulitan at the time when the region was shifting from Occitan varieties to French dominance. In contrast to the historical phonological focus of her M.A. thesis and Ph.D. dissertation, the papers she chooses for inclusion here focus on the politics of multilingualism. Ch. 1, ‘Gascon’, discusses how minority nationalist projects such as the Occitan movement crucially rely on linguistic unification, but in doing so inevitably erase the finer-grained sources of linguistic diversity within their own borders (Eckert 1983). Ch. 2, ‘Stigma and meaning in language shift’, uses the relationship between French and Gascon to illustrate how diglossia involves not the peaceful coexistence of two varieties but rather the oppression and stigmatization of the ‘low’ variety; the introductory material here situates the paper’s inception in the political context of the Ann Arbor Black English trial (Eckert 1980). This pair of papers captures the beginning of E’s concern with the nuances of language’s ideological force. Although they are distinct in flavor from the rest of the chapters, their inclusion effectively foreshadows the themes of locality, identity, and the semiotic landscape found in the later chapters about the third wave.

The second section, titled ‘My participation in the second wave’, is dominated by the Jocks and Burnouts of Belten High (Eckert 1989a). Chs. 3–6 lay out E’s analytic insights into the social and linguistic practices of these high school social groups in suburban Detroit. Ch. 3 (‘Jocks and Burnouts’), E’s study of the width of blue jeans as a signifier of different social groups occupying different parts of the high school (Eckert 1982), marks the first appearance of ‘style’ as a central theoretical construct that transcends linguistic practice. In Chs. 4 (‘Jocks, Burnouts and sound change’), 5 (‘The local and the extra-local’), and 6 (‘On the outs’), E delves progressively deeper into the territory laid out in Ch. 3, persuasively weaving the social life of adolescents into the study of sound change in progress (Eckert 1988, 1989b). In this, probably E’s best-known work, she argues that macrosocial structures like class and gender shape language change only insofar as they are indirectly realized on the ground through hegemonic oppositions between identifiable, locally specific social categories. The narrative portions of this section lay out clearly why the classic Jocks and Burnouts research, with its continued focus on static categories as opposed to