

Heming Yong and Jing Peng, *A Sociolinguistic History of British English Lexicography*

Book Review

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There are many books about the history of English dictionaries – that is, of dictionaries and wordlists compiled for the use of English-speakers. But, as Heming Yong and Jing Peng point out in their introduction (pp. 4–6), hardly any of them cover the subject all the way from the beginnings to the present day. Jonathon Green's *Chasing the Sun* (1996), did so, but it was written for a popular readership, and it is nearly 30 years old. The more academic two volume *Oxford History of English Lexicography*, edited by A. P. Cowie (2009), inevitably lacks the narrative energy and unified perspective of a good monograph. Other works, for instance Henri Béjoint's *The Lexicography of English from Origins to Present* (2010) and Sarah Ogilvie's *Cambridge Companion to English Dictionaries* (2020), have historical sections, but they are not full length historical accounts. A readable, yet scholarly, overview of the history of English dictionaries would be most welcome.

The work under review here is therefore meant to fill a significant gap. It runs chronologically from Anglo-Saxon England to the 21st century, in six historical chapters and a coda on 'accomplishments, developments, and prospects', the midpoint being, reasonably enough, somewhere in the 18th century. Its title indicates two respects in which its coverage is deliberately restricted. One is the focus which the authors call 'sociolinguistic' – although 'social' might have been nearer the mark, for there is, for instance, an index entry for 'Esquire, R. H.' (*esquire* is not in fact a surname), but none for 'ethnicity', and there is one for 'Glorious Revolution', but none for 'gender'. Just as a textbook on the history of the English language may have more to say about diglossia than about the mechanics of the Great Vowel Shift, so the *Sociolinguistic History of British English Lexicography* has more to say about Johnson's prescriptivism than about his revisions. Space is taken up by inexpert summaries of British social history, which must be meant to add to the sociolinguistic value of the work. The other restriction is the regrettable attempt, inconsistently sustained, to confine the book to British dictionaries. These cannot be adequately discussed in isolation from their global counterparts.

Sadly, Yong and Peng's book has many faults. They may be sampled by looking at pages 1, 114, and 228 – the first, middle, and last pages of the main text – but there is not a page without one or more of the kinds of shortcoming which are to be found on these three.

First, simple error. This can be seen in the first words of the main text: 'Modern English dictionaries have their direct and remotest sources in the glossaries compiled in Britain between the 7th and 8th centuries' (1). This is simply not true: wordlists from Anglo-Saxon England were not used by later medieval English lexicographers, and indeed the work of the latter was itself a very minor influence on later 16th-century English dictionaries. The history of English lexicography is discontinuous, a fundamental point which has not occurred to Yong and Peng. They double down on their erroneous opening claim a little later, saying that 'Throughout the Middle English period, the compilation of Latin-Old English glossaries sustained' (p. 23; they must mean 'continued'). This statement is likewise not true. No attempt is made to support it: did the authors just make it up? To do them justice, their treatment of recent dictionaries is

less erroneous than their treatment of the earliest material, though there are slips, such as the claim (p. 187) that George Orwell's memoir *Down and Out in Paris and London* is a slang dictionary.

Second, failure to consult primary sources. This is exemplified on page 114, which begins with two paragraphs, one of them a bald list of dictionaries, both of which are summarized from Monique Cormier's contribution to the *Oxford History of English Lexicography*, and continues with three paragraphs summarized from Joan Beal's contribution to the same (which the authors ascribe repeatedly to Werner Hüllen). It is very difficult to find any direct, original analysis of a dictionary published before the 20th century anywhere in this book. The material taken from secondary sources is not consistently referenced, and in this respect, the relation of the *Sociolinguistic History of British English Lexicography* to its sources is like that of a textbook, not of a scholarly monograph. One passage, praising the 'thorough, intense, and lively scholarship' of the *Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang* (188), is taken directly, and without acknowledgement, from a publisher's advertisement for the book in question. Not all of the secondary sources listed at the back of the book, which include a number of Wikipedia articles, appear to be cited in the main text. There is, moreover, something odd about the print sources: only one of them was published after 2013, namely *The Cambridge Companion to English Dictionaries* (2020), to which there is a single passing reference in the main text (p. 220). An extreme symptom of this failure to keep up with recent scholarship is that when Yong and Peng explain what they mean by 'electronic dictionaries' (p. 211), they quote from a reference book published in 1998.

Third, the use of ornate and stilted language to conceal weak ideas. This, too, can be seen on the middle page, where one of the few original sentences reads

The precise phonetic annotation of words was a significant attribute and signifier for the maturing standardization of English dictionaries in the 18th century, and the making of English pronouncing dictionaries pushed that attribute and signifier to a new level of amelioration and perfection. (p. 114)

This is, of course, nonsense: there were no precise phonetic transcriptions in the 18th century, and the English pronouncing dictionaries available at the end of that century were far from perfect. Yong and Peng mean 'Pronunciation was indicated with increasing sophistication in 18th-century English dictionaries, and especially in pronouncing dictionaries': why say in 43 words what can be said in 15? Likewise,

the very last sentence of the main text ends with the statement that English dictionaries will, in the remainder of the present century,

be proceeding on the presupposed track to an improved and heightened level of functional differentiation, type serialization, path internationalization, content localization, technological digitalization, publication branding, and formal synthesization. (p. 228)

This means, in short, that they will keep improving; will they really? That will surely depend on whether it continues to be profitable for dictionary publishers to make a better product than the cheaply produced online dictionaries which are such a temptation to unwary users. The publishing houses which have closed their dictionary departments in recent years doubt that this will be the case, a point which calls for reflection.

In conclusion, the *Sociolinguistic History of British English Lexicography* is not a trustworthy source of information. It is very largely a compilation from secondary sources, rather than being the product of critical analysis of primary sources. It is verbosely and imprecisely written. I began a paragraph earlier in this review with the word *sadly*, and I meant it, for it is genuinely sad to encounter a book about which there is nothing favourable to be said. But this is such a book: it is thoroughly unsatisfactory in every respect.

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