

DICTIONARY News

Merriam-Webster and the future of dictionary-making

John M. Morse

Once upon a time, not so long ago, Charles Levine and Joseph Esposito exchanged views in these pages about the future of dictionary-making, and not surprisingly, the name Merriam-Webster came up more than a few times. The overly simple version of that conversation was that Charles was predicting a coming boom in English lexicography, especially in creating products for nonnative speakers of English, while Joe thought the future of dictionary-making was pretty punk, mostly because Microsoft was going to take over the business by bundling a so-so dictionary with Windows. He ends his essay with the wistful "Good-bye Oxford and Merriam. It was nice to know you."

At the time, I thought it best not to respond. Joe, after all, was suggesting a certain degree of fecklessness on the part of the management of Merriam-Webster and OUP and predicting our eventual demise. As such, I thought any response from Merriam-Webster would be seen as self-defensive (we would resist the charge and reject the prediction) and lacking credibility (what else really could we say?).

However, in his last installment, Charles offered a glimpse of Merriam-Webster's business at the time and suggested that readers should stay tuned, so perhaps an update on Merriam-Webster and its view about the future of dictionary-making is now in order. First, I am happy to report that the state of health of Merriam-Webster is still quite good and that profits have increased in every year since that conversation took place. Interestingly, this buttresses Joe's gloomy scenario more than Charles' sunny one. Charles postulates that growth in the dictionary business would come from sales of products for nonnative speakers, and Merriam-Webster has really just begun to offer such products, so that doesn't explain the growth over the past five years. Joe, on the other hand, predicted a period of short-term growth for Merriam-Webster and Oxford, as we both pick up market share

from weaker rivals falling by the wayside, before Microsoft finally lowers the boom on both of us.

So Round 1 of dueling prognostications seems to go to Joe, but what neither Charles nor Joe addressed in any detail was how growth in online use of the dictionary would affect the business. I mean no criticism with that remark; the emergence of free online delivery as a significant source of revenue did not occur until after Charles and Joe made their comments, but the development is significant nonetheless. I don't think I'm making headlines to say that much of Merriam-Webster's growth in the past five years has come from revenues flowing from online use of our products. And, in a less parochial vein, I think we all should take some encouragement from the fact that *dictionary* is one of the most frequently submitted search terms to Internet search engines. Indeed, the good news coming out of the online experience so far is that a lot of people are using dictionaries. And the log files of our Web sites suggest the Web is well supplied with serious people asking serious questions about serious words.

Of course, it needs to be said that this growth in revenue has not come easily. It has required old dogs to learn some new tricks. If I had been asked twenty years ago what was the one aspect of publishing that dictionary publishers would never have to learn, I might well have said advertising sales. Who ever heard of ads in the pages of a dictionary? And yet, here we are, fully committed to a new way of making money that requires new knowledge, new skills, and new ways of looking at our business. In the online world, for instance, we don't sell the dictionary; we sell the eyeballs that look at the dictionary. This new business model will worry some dictionary-watchers and set them to wondering what nefarious effects it will have on editorial policies and on dictionary-making in general. I am

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happy to report that, at least so far, I see no bad effects at all. The main difference is greater sense of urgency to meet the needs of and delight the user, but that certainly can't be a bad thing.

None of this refutes Joe's central point about the power of bigger players to distort the world of dictionaries. Fears about Microsoft may seem increasingly archaic, but substitute Google for Microsoft and muse on the fact that one tweak of the Google algorithm for ranking search results can consign any Web site to the dust heap of history, and you realize how timely and appropriate Joe's concerns are.

However, I think our experience of the past ten years does cast some doubt on Joe's notion that the artfully bundled good-enough dictionary will prevail. One could point to the definition link on Google results pages as the moral equivalent of bundling in today's search-dominated world, and indeed the dictionary at the other end of that link profits from it, but it is hard to see that link transforming the world of dictionaries. In fact, so far, no bundled dictionary, whether with browser, search engine, operating system, or e-book reader yet looks likely to have a major impact on the dictionary business. And as for the world being inclined to embrace the good-enough dictionary, I note that the vast majority of Web traffic going to dictionaries continues to go to high-quality professionally created databases.

So, ultimately, I choose to side with Charles in this discussion. In part this is my native optimism. I am drawn to the truism that pessimists are usually right, but optimists have more fun. But I also believe that dictionary-making will flourish and that meeting the needs of English-language learners will be a big part of it. I would only qualify Charles' position by saying that the learner's dictionary component is just one part of the story.

My more-complex vision of the future of dictionary-making is understandably Merriam-centric, but I think the growth prospects for Merriam-Webster are not fundamentally different from those of any other U.S.-based dictionary-maker. In Merriam-Webster's case we see ourselves as a company expanding along three dimensions.

1. From being predominantly a print publisher to also having a significant electronic component.
2. From creating products intended primarily for native speakers of English to also creating products expressly designed for English-language learners.
3. From being primarily a domestic U.S. publisher to being a truly international publisher.

We see a traditional and an emerging business for each of these transitions, with the traditional business persisting even as the emerging business grows. This gives us two conditions for each of three variables, which if you remember your high school math, means that there are two to the third power, or eight, different businesses for Merriam-Webster, ranging from print products for native speakers in domestic markets (still our biggest business) to electronic products designed for English-language learners in international markets (our newest business).

Of all these transitions, the move from print to online delivery has been most transforming and holds the potential for letting lexicographers engage with dictionary users in much more intimate and meaningful ways, including blogs, message boards, open dictionaries, widgets, and personalized pages. Joe worries that we will stunt our growth by limiting the market for dictionaries to plain old humans, as opposed to building dictionaries to meet the needs of computers, and he may be right. But for right now, there is plenty of new and exciting business to go around in meeting the language needs of human beings.

Interestingly, the move to electronic delivery has brought some unintended consequences. By offering a free *Collegiate Dictionary* on the Web, we have introduced Merriam-Webster dictionaries to more people in international markets than we were ever able to do with our print products. Our print products, after all, face two daunting challenges in international markets. In English-speaking countries, they go up against very good locally produced native-speakers' dictionaries, which enjoy much well-deserved loyalty. And in non-English-speaking countries there is a need for learner's dictionaries that our native-speaker's dictionaries cannot wholly meet. But online, the situation is different. In English-speaking countries, the free Merriam-Webster online dictionary enjoys much greater acceptance than the print products ever did. In Canada, for instance, the market acceptance of our online dictionary dwarfs the market acceptance of our print products. And in non-English-speaking countries, the benefits of the online site – audio pronunciations and a more user-friendly display of data, to name two – have been discovered and are appreciated by an encouragingly large number of English-language learners.

However, we have long known that if we are to have a significant global presence, and enjoy the kind of growth that Charles predicts, we must offer products designed expressly to meet the needs of English-language learners.

And that is what we will do this year. In September, we will publish the first full-featured advanced learner's dictionary from an American publisher: *Merriam-Webster's Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*. This is a project that has been almost ten years in the making and has absorbed nearly all of our lexicographers' time, energy, and creativity. And we are already at work on the abridged, bilingual, and children's versions of these products. All of which is to support Charles' point that creating products for English-language learners will provide employment for lexicographers for as far out as the eye can see.

As originally conceived, this dictionary was a product designed to be a print product for the international market, and that opportunity still remains and is significant, but the prospects for this dictionary have become much more multi-dimensional since we embarked on this project in the late 1990s.

First, the domestic market for the dictionary has grown considerably. There is no need to rehearse the numbers here; readers of these pages are well aware of the growth in the number of speakers of English as a second language in the United States, and the need for high-quality reference products to meet the needs of these language-learners. So the traditional business of selling print products in domestic markets is enlarged as we add more products designed for English-language learners.

But it is really the transition to digital delivery that enriches the prospects for the new dictionary. A few years ago, we reserved the domain *LearnersDictionary.com*, and we anticipate that much of the use of this new dictionary will be online. As with native speakers' online products, the opportunities to create a rich and rewarding online experience are many and exciting. And there will also be a reciprocal benefit as future growth of traffic to our Web sites can come from serving the needs of English-language learners in both domestic and international markets.

So will all this save us from Joe's predicted demise?

Maybe yes and maybe no. If the only way to survive in this world is to attract

large amounts of investment capital by promising large growth multiples, then we are probably doomed. The plain fact is that dictionary publishing has always been a tough business. Trying to sell a book like the *Collegiate Dictionary* for the same price as a trade hardcover book when the dictionary has four times the number of pages offers just a taste of the madness of dictionary publishing. But this is the path we have been on since 1847 when George and Charles Merriam dropped the price of *Webster's* dictionary, which had once sold for \$20.00, to \$6.00. As I look back over the history of dictionary publishing, it is hard to see any moment when it was a high-growth industry, and yet dictionary publishers have survived.

We survive for a number of reasons. We scrimp and save and run our businesses as efficiently as possible, thereby reporting profits when other kinds of publishing might not. We have always lived in the commercial world, which teaches hard lessons about the dangers of getting out of touch with consumers. Some investors still believe that in the long run we will prevail, and they value being part of an important and exciting project in the history of human knowledge. But most of all, we survive because of the good hard work of lexicographers whose sense of dedication and conscientiousness drive them to build better dictionaries than they were asked to – dictionaries that exceed all reasonable expectations. And that really is the dictionary-maker's secret weapon. We know how to create more profit, attract more capital, and build better products than anyone would have any right to expect. So, in a way, I agree with Joe; by any rational standard, we probably ought to be considered a dying breed. Like Joe, I can easily think of twenty factors that will lay us low. But in the end, like Charles, I also think we have a bright future, in part because there is an obvious, substantial, and persistent need for the information we provide but also because we are a stubborn and resourceful lot who for centuries have figured out ways to do more with less than any other part of publishing. Dictionary publishing is a dirty job, but dictionary-makers are just the ones to do it.

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Merriam-Webster, Incorporated

Merriam-Webster, Inc. acquired the rights to revise and publish Noah Webster's dictionaries in 1843. Since then, the company has maintained its supremacy in the English dictionary market in the USA. Today, it continues as the leader in both print and electronic language reference publishing with reference products, learning tools, and word games, including *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition*.

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