

## English Dictionaries in Global and Historical Context

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Ross Finnie, an economics professor at the University of Ottawa, recently crunched demographic data on Canadian households to find accurate predictors of children's going to university.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, there was a positive correlation between total family income and children's rates of university education. Children whose homes contained books or whose parents had gone to university were also more likely to go to university. But surprising many, and no doubt delighting dictionary publishers, was Finnie's finding that the presence of a dictionary in the home was the single best predictor of children's participation in university education.

From June 3-5, 2010, the English Department and the Strathy Language Unit of Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, will host a conference on dictionaries where the focus is wide angle. In other words, the aim of this conference—English Dictionaries in Global and Historical Context—is to bring to light the social significance and cultural import of English dictionaries, as well as their impact on our understanding of language. Historical and contemporary English and English-bilingual dictionaries and other lexically oriented pedagogical and reference texts will be under scrutiny.

Most literate people, lexicographers included, take the existence of dictionaries as a class of book for granted. Obviously, people in oral cultures do not. In societies that don't have writing, lexicon cannot be atomized and codified around a sequencing of graphemes as inherently meaningless as it is pervasive and conventionalized—the alphabet, of course. And, neither can the lexicon be documented in quite the same way in societies with ideographic writing systems or highly agglutinative morphology. Is there a relationship between the institutionalized organization of English word hoard and culture, social organization, or ideology of language? What happens when “dictionaryed” and “non-dictionaryed” societies confront each other?

At the interface of English and Aboriginal languages, for example, we might ask under what circumstances, by whom and for whom were bilingual dictionaries made? We can look at their real and putative authors, the texts themselves, their publication history, their European reception, their use or lack of use by Aboriginal people. We can look,

perhaps only indirectly, at the effect they had on Aboriginal worldview, identity, language, language acquisition and retention, creativity, storytelling and literature. Were dictionaries tools of oppression or cultural bridges? And why recently have some bilingual English dictionaries been “de-bilingualized” and reconceived, resulting in publications such as *He Ptaka Kupu*,<sup>2</sup> the first adult monolingual dictionary of the Māori language?

These are just some of the many questions that could be explored at this conference, and the organizers, while we would like to suggest possibilities, do not want to delimit them for potential participants.

Other topics that could be explored include the relevance of the concept of plagiarism to dictionaries, the relationship between lexicographers and their publishers, and between lexicographers and their “readership.” And what about the financial life of dictionaries? Have English dictionaries been cash cows, money pits, or loss leaders for their publishers? How have dictionaries been marketed and where and to whom have they been sold? Has the commercial nature of most dictionary publication kept dictionaries relevant to a wide literate public and prevented them from falling prey to academic fashions and excesses? Or has the commercial nature of dictionary publishing hampered the open exchange of resources and ideas and held back the development of innovative electronic formats and online delivery. For, as Adam Kilgarriff quipped in the pages of an earlier number of this newsletter, “If dictionaries are free, who will buy them?”<sup>3</sup>

The keynote speaker at English Dictionaries in Global and Historical Context will be the author Mark Abley. Having written a widely acclaimed book on endangered languages, *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages* (2003),<sup>4</sup> Abley turned his attention to the world's least threatened language—English. *The Prodigal Tongue: Dispatches from the Future of English* (2008) is meticulously researched and global in outlook. The book has raised two fascinating questions with respect to dictionaries and society. Can the authority that we attribute to dictionaries—or that lexicographers have arrogated to themselves—withstand the spontaneous, unsanctioned, neologistic and

lexicographical melee of the Internet? (Abley is fascinated by the popular, user-compiled online dictionary of slang *urbandictionary.com*.) And can it withstand what we might call the “anti-standardization” of the English language—the hutzpah, hypercreolization and creative language mixing that is an essential and globally emulated aspect of the hip-hop movement?<sup>5</sup>

At this conference, some presenters may look at what words (and what people and what things) have been systematically excluded from traditional dictionaries. Others will tackle the historical relationship between linguistic prescriptivism and nation-building as well as the relevance and nature of national dictionaries of English in the twenty-first century. Others still will examine the historical link between language standardization and literary movements and creativity.

Sinfrey Makoni and Alastair Pennycook argue that language is performance and that languages—certainly standard languages—are a fiction, a fiction that has been imposed at great cost to the indigenous languages of Africa and to speakers of creoles. Pennycook derides “the myth of English as an international language” with the comment: “This thing called English colludes with many of the pernicious processes of globalisation, deludes many learners through false promises it holds out for social and material gain, and excludes many people by operating as an exclusionary class dialect, favouring particular people, countries, cultures and forms of knowledge. ...There is something rather bizarre in the belief that if everyone learned English, everyone would be better off.”<sup>6</sup>

This critique of standard English from the point of view of foreign language learners, and by extension of the lexical reference resources that support or reify it, is difficult to reconcile with the view that many English speakers have of their dictionaries—that these books carry cultural knowledge forward through the centuries and across linguistic frontiers, allowing them to read historically and cross-culturally and keeping them from being governed entirely by the politics of the here and now. Intergenerational data from the study by Ross Finnie mentioned above suggest that parents value their literacy and their formal education as more than a gateway to relative prosperity. So would a world without English dictionaries be a better one?

At this conference, we hope to start with English dictionaries and lexical reference texts and let them take us to broader questions of society and governance, culture and creativity, literacy and language. Participation will not be limited to those

presenting papers; others are welcome to register and attend. We look forward to welcoming you at the conference at Queen’s University next year.

- 1 Finnie, R., Mueller, R.E., Sweetman, A. and Usher, A. (eds.), 2009. *Who Goes? Who Stays? What Matters? Accessing and Persisting in Postsecondary Education in Canada*. Queen’s Policy Studies Series 63. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Press.
- 2 Edited and published by Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori (Māori Language Commission, New Zealand) in 2008.
- 3 Kilgarriff, A. 2005. If dictionaries are free, who will buy them? *Kernerman Dictionary News* 13.
- 4 Abley, M. 2003. *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin; Toronto: Random House.
- 5 Abley, M. 2008. *The Prodigal Tongue: Dispatches from the Future of English*. New York and Toronto: Random House, 49-53 and 144-166.
- 6 Pennycook, A. 2007. The Myth of English as an International Language, in S. Makoni and A. Pennycook (eds.), *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 101-102.

### The conference **English Dictionaries in Global and Historical Context** will take place at Queen’s University, Canada, from 3 to 5 June 2010.

The university was established in 1842 on the shore of Lake Ontario in the heart of Kingston, a historic city of 117,000 inhabitants, midway between Toronto and Montreal.

The hosting departments are the Department of English Language and Literature and the Strathy Language Unit, a research unit endowed to produce an authoritative guide to Canadian English usage. The deadline for submission of abstracts is 31 August 2009.

Both university residence and hotel accommodation will be reserved for conference attendees, and there are also charming B&Bs in the quarter near the university. Early booking of accommodation will be essential.

[http://post.queensu.ca/~strathy/topics/dic\\_conf.html](http://post.queensu.ca/~strathy/topics/dic_conf.html)

