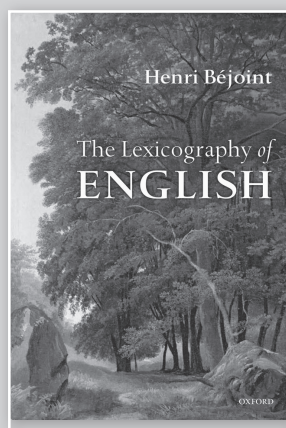


## Henri Béjoint. *The Lexicography of English. From Origins to Present*



**The Lexicography of  
English. From Origins to  
Present**

Henri Béjoint  
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This well-written book is a treasure house of information. Since English prides itself on a greater number of various dictionaries than any other language, a major work on English lexicography inevitably becomes a survey and analysis of general lexicography. The balance between “theory” and “practice” in such works depends on the author’s tastes and predilections, because dictionary making hardly needs “theory” in the sense in which we understand *linguistic theory* or *theory of numbers*. Those attempt to explain the nature of certain phenomena, while “lexicographic theory” generalizes the experience of the profession. The difference between such questions as “What is a phoneme?” (or “What is a separate word?”) and “What is a dictionary?” requires no elaboration. Béjoint knows it and, most fortunately, never promotes *Theory* with capital *T*; Chapter 10 shows that in his case a small *t* may sometimes also be unnecessary. He has a realistic view of the uneasy union between lexicography and linguistics; especially revealing is the section on linguistics and structuralism (pp. 264-66). Lexicography cannot disregard the progress in semantics, but a dictionary purports to be a convenient reference book, and, inasmuch as no amount of theorizing will tell us where the line between several remote senses of a word and homonyms lies (to give just one example), every time we write an entry on a polysemous word, the age-old question presents itself anew. The same holds for the question about the descriptive versus the prescriptive mode (yes, dictionaries should provide us with a faithful transcript of the chosen language at any given moment rather than lay down the law, and yes, millions of people open dictionaries to find out how to spell, pronounce, and use words correctly, that is, according to the accepted standard) and about the breadth of inclusion (the more words between the covers, the better, but something must be left out, so where should one draw the line?). The recent literature on such matters is enormous, and lexicographers profit by knowing it. However, even the most erudite among them still depend on the requirements of the publisher, their own common sense, and intuition (a fancy synonym for experience that has become second nature). This book is certainly descriptive, not prescriptive, but Béjoint has given so much thought to lexicography that anyone who is interested in the subject will learn a good deal about all its angles from his exposition. His

additional strength lies in his expertise in French lexicography. The field being what it is, Béjoint had many serious predecessors. References to B.T. Sue Atkins, Michael Rundell, Patrick Hanks, and especially Sidney Landau have been strewn most generously in the text.

Despite its title, Béjoint’s book does not discuss English specialized dictionaries, dictionaries of slang, etymology, local words, usage (they are only mentioned in passing), let alone bilingual dictionaries of physics, engineering, medicine, and the like. An attempt to cover everything would have resulted in a multivolume version of *The Oxford History of English Lexicography*, a utopian project. As could be expected, not the same attention has been given to every major dictionary. For example, James Stormonth’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1885) fell through the cracks. *The Century Dictionary* got minimal coverage (less than a page, p. 89). Béjoint says that it still has admirers. Since I am one of them, I am grieved to see how underestimated this magnificent work is. The same holds for Henry Cecil Wyld’s 1932 *The Universal Dictionary of the English Language* (“... good on pronunciation and etymology, and could have been successful if it had been published in other circumstances,” p. 110). This verdict and note 18 on p. 268 (“He [Wyld] wrote *A Short History of English* (1914), *A History of Modern Colloquial English* (1920), etc.”) show that Béjoint is not quite aware of Wyld’s stature and the excellence of *The Universal Dictionary*. On pp. 233-34 we read about the cases in which the outcome of court procedures depended on dictionary definitions. If Béjoint had followed the history of *Dictionary of American Regional English*, he could have added a few more curious examples to this section.

On the other hand, occasionally the book contains more than its structure and indexes suggest. For example, I looked up *etymology* in the index and found five references: etymology in Blount, p. 58; in Bailey, p. 64; in Richardson, p. 83; in *OED*, p. 102; in *W*, p. 134. Additionally, on p. 72, Béjoint speaks about etymology in Samuel Johnson; on p. 83 about Horne Tooke; on p. 140, about the *American College Dictionary*; on p. 85 about Webster’s derivations; on p. 45 about Walter von Wartburg’s *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (incidentally, headwords

in it are not Latin but reconstructed Proto-Romance or Proto-French forms, and what do the dates 1922-28 mean?). On pp. 59-60 *Gazophylacium Anglicanum* (1689), an etymological dictionary, is said to be “considered anonymous by some but attributed to Stephen Skinner, the famous author of the *Etymologicon Linguæ Anglicanæ* (1671) by others, with a second edition called *A New English Dictionary Showing the Etymological Derivation of the English Tongue* in 1691, which explained the etymology of ‘all common English words’, and it had a second part with proper names.” *Famous* is a relative concept, but who suggested that *Gazophylacium* was written by Skinner? The book seems to have been an abridged pirate translation of the *Etymologicon* by a well-hidden publisher. On p. 47, a footnote refers the readers to a bibliographical survey of English etymological dictionaries. Note 13 on p. 101 warns them that Bayle’s 1696 *Dictionnaire historique et critique* is a dictionary of history but adds that in 1992 a two-volume etymological dictionary (*Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française*) appeared. In connection with incongruent titles Béjoint cites Jacques Azaïs’s *Dieu, l’homme et la parole*, “a highly original etymological dictionary” (1853; p. 8). The usual trend is opposite, namely, to call a dictionary etymological only because it supplies the included words with etymologies. In England this tradition was perpetuated by Nathan Bailey. A more recent teaser using the adjective *etymological* as a marketing ploy is Chambers’ dictionary (for more than a century, beginning with 1867, *not* an etymological dictionary despite the promise on the title).

Collecting such crumbs for the index must have looked like a waste of time to Béjoint, the more so as, according to him, “[t]here were also ...dictionaries of etymology, although the field is more than adequately covered by the OED: the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 1966, by G.W.S. Friedrichsen, R.W. Burchfield and C.T. Onions, no less, which had several reprints, the *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, 1999, etc.” (125). *No less*, as I understand, refers to the impressive team; the rest shows that it is better to stay away from the subject of which one has no firsthand knowledge. Needless to say, the *OED* is not an etymological dictionary, though Murray and Bradley were great etymologists and though their etymologies are splendid. Other great dictionaries also used to employ specialists familiar with the study of word origins. As pointed out above, polysemy is hard to keep apart from etymology, and we find remarks on this subject on pp. 263-64,

265, 275, 276, and 283. A passage (from an article by Rundell) on p. 282 is worth quoting:

“Most learners... would probably see some connection between *bay*, in its meaning of ‘an indentation in the coastline’, and *bay*, when it means ‘a recess’ (as in a *loading bay* or a *bay window*); conversely, few learners would see any connection whatever between the two main meanings of *club* (‘a society that people join’ and ‘a heavy stick used as a weapon’). Nevertheless, the historically motivated (but counter-intuitive) organization of the native-speaker tradition has in general been carried over into the MLDs [monolingual learner’s dictionaries], so that *bay* appears in L[ongman] D[ictionary of] C[ontemporary] E[nglish] and A[dvanced] L[earner’s] D[ictionary] as five separate noun homographs, while *club* appears as just one. Even more confusingly, *drill* (‘a tool for making holes’) and *drill* (‘a form of instruction based on repetition’) are grouped together in one homograph, while *drill* (‘an agricultural tool for planting seeds’) is shown as a separate entry.”

On the same page, Béjoint discusses *game* ‘activity, sport’ and *game* ‘wild animals’ and says (note 37): “From an Old Saxon word meaning ‘fellowship’, and the use of the word for an amusement, and a metonymy.” For *Old Saxon* read *Gothic*, and of course an English word, unless it is a borrowing, can be from neither Old Saxon nor Gothic. *Gaman* ‘amusement, diversion’ was attested in Old English. All this goes a long way toward showing that someone who wants to appreciate this book to the full should read it from cover to cover. I devoted so much space to etymology because it is my field, but I have no illusions about its place in lexicography and could offer many quotations like the following from Howard Jackson’s 1988 book *Words and their Meaning*: “[L]exicographers consistently, or perhaps persistently, put into dictionaries certain kinds of information for which the vast majority of users have no need and would not miss if they were not included in dictionaries. Into this category would come grammatical information including part-of-speech labels, etymology and perhaps pronunciation” (p. 244 here).

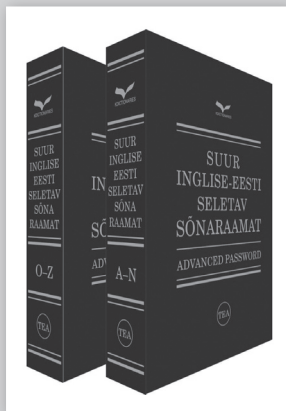
Besides a short introduction and an equally short conclusion, the book contains ten chapters: 1. “Dictionaries and the Dictionary,” 2. “A Brief History of English Dictionaries,” 3. “The British Tradition of the Scholarly Dictionary,” 4. “The American Tradition of the Utility Dictionary,” 5. “A New Tradition: The Dictionary for Foreign Students,” 6. “English Dictionaries of the Twentieth Century: The Cultural, the Functional, and the Scientific,” 7. “The



#### PIX

English Spanish Picture Dictionary for iPhone  
Marquee Publishing  
Toronto, Canada  
September 2010  
Compatible with iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad.  
Requires iOS 4.0 or later.  
<http://marqueepublishing.com/app-pix.html/>  
<http://itunes.apple.com/il/app/pix-english-spanish-picture/id389305736?mt=8#/>

Published in collaboration  
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#### ADVANCED PASSWORD

Suur inglise-eesti seletav sõnaraamat  
 Password Advanced English Dictionary for Speakers of Estonian  
 TEA Kirjastus  
 Tallinn, Estonia  
 April 2011  
 2,318 pages, 250 x 170 mm  
 Hardcover, 2 volumes  
 ISBN 978-9949-24-031-9 (vol. 1)  
 ISBN 978-9949-24-032-6 (vol. 2)  
 ISBN 978-9949-24-033-3 (vol. 1+2)  
<http://tea.ee/>  
<http://kictionaries.com/products/advanced/kaedee.html/>

From the series  
 KERNERMAN SEMI-BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES

Study of Dictionary Users and Uses,” 8. “Lexicography and Linguistics”. 9. “Computers and Corpora in Lexicography,” and 10. “A Theory of Lexicography?”. The book has been written for lexicographers, but at least two chapters (Six and Seven) will provide enjoyment to anyone who cares about language and culture. To give some idea of how chapters are organized, I will reproduce the rubrics of Chapter 6: 6.1 Cultural and Functional Dictionaries. 6.1.1 The mouthpieces of a culture (6.1.1.1 Politics and religion, 6.1.1.2 Ethnicity, 6.1.1.3 The taboos of sex and excretion, 6.1.1.4 Gender, 6.1.1.5 Proper names and culture, 6.1.1.6 What can the lexicographer do?); 6.1.2 Some dictionaries are more cultural than others; 6.1.3 The common features of modern dictionaries (6.1.3.1 Dictionaries are more user-friendly, 6.1.3.2 Dictionaries represent more varieties of English, 6.1.3.3 Dictionaries have more terms), 6.2 The end of a period? (6.2.1 Lexicographers: slaves or masters? 6.2.2 Lexicography: an art, a craft, or a science?). Each of the other chapters contains many more rubrics.

In Chapter 6 we read, among other things, about the difficulties of defining words and remaining, if not politically correct, at least politically neutral. In some cases this goal is unattainable (think of *God*, *communism*, and so forth). As regards Béjoint’s own formulations, I was amused only once, when I read that for a teenager the dictionary is a book to help her to do her homework (p. 227). Even in our progressive age I hope that boys also use dictionaries to prepare for classes. Some humor is unconscious. On p. 104, Béjoint explains what the term *derivative* means; his opinion of his readers’ level of linguistic sophistication becomes abundantly clear. On p. 221 he quotes a respectable author in whose opinion the Grimms came to lexicography from literature and lets it go without a word of comment. The section on students’ inability to use a dictionary would have been funny if it were not so sad.

Béjoint’s attitude toward scholarship and scholars is commendable. He does not want lexicographers to jump on the bandwagon of every linguistic theory (cf. “...the more information the linguists come up with, the more difficult it is to include it in a dictionary,” p. 345; “Linguists are interested in the definition of words, but they have not produced much,” p. 331). He is not enamored of Halliday’s theory to such an extent as to support its application to lexicography: “For Lexicographers, the distinction between syntax and lexicon is important because it determines what goes into the dictionary, as opposed to what

should be left to the grammar, and the current rapprochement is not much help: if there is no difference between lexical information and grammatical information, then the dictionary can contain anything, and the limit is only practical,” p. 40. Béjoint is aware of the circumstance that “[t]he corpus revolution has not solved all the problems of lexicography.... The corpus shows what is used, not what is not used but is part of the language.... It provides data, but cannot give explanations.... It is about performance, not competence” (p. 369). He has shown how dictionaries have progressed over the centuries and what excellent reference tools they have become. And yet “...one cannot help thinking that modern dictionaries, although more sophisticated than ever, have also become less imaginative, less exciting. In this sense, one can regret the old days, when dictionaries were much worse, and also much better” (p. 222).

*The Lexicography of English. From Origins to Present* is an eminently readable book. A set of illustrations (samples of dictionary pages) enhances its value, as do a copious bibliography and indexes.

The book is practically free from typos. I have noticed only a few: p. 7, top, *slov* -, not *slov*; p. 15, middle, Norwegian has  $\emptyset$ , not  $\ddot{o}$ ; p. 191, second paragraph, *Millennium*; p. 277, top: “In English, nouns are lemmatized in the masculine singular form....”: masculine?; p. 349, *Häufigkeitwörterbuch*: the first umlaut is missing. The reference to Hausmann et al. in Osselton 1999 should be to 1989. Somewhere Shcherba’s name appears as *Scerba* without hačeks, but I have lost the page reference. The only circumstance that impedes reading is a great mass of acronyms cluttering the text, but they were probably unavoidable.

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