



A Question of Words

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Sue Unstead investigates the thinking behind children's dictionaries.

How do children's dictionary publishers establish criteria for lexicons? What are the rules for dictionaries? And how do lexicographers decide which words should be included for each age group? **Sue Unstead** investigates.

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Dictionary definitions

It is interesting to compare definitions across the age groups.

Oxford First Dictionary (age 5+)

light noun

Light is what lets you see. It comes from the sun, flames, and lamps.

Oxford Junior Dictionary (age 7+)

light noun

Light is brightness that comes from the sun, the stars, fires and lamps.

Oxford Primary Dictionary (age 8+)

light noun

Light is the form of energy that makes things visible, the opposite of darkness.

Oxford School Dictionary (age 10+)

light noun

Radiation that stimulates the sense of sight and makes things visible.

[image:Oxf Junior Dict.jpg:left]

Oxford, a name synonymous with language and dictionaries, and all the associations with scholarship and learning, a trusted name for parents and teachers. It comes as a surprise therefore to encounter such vehement responses to a press

article on a new edition of the **Oxford Junior Dictionary**. Odder still that this debate should take place more than a year after the publication of the book, yet the volume of web comment suggests some extraordinary linguistic transgression has taken place. The lexicographer, dictionary publisher and entire publishing house are accused of proscribing language and 'excluding' words, thus restricting access to Britain's heritage.

Hang on! This is a modest reference book aimed at children just starting lower juniors, gaining confidence in reading and writing and developing dictionary skills. The so-called omissions that cause such offence are words relating to religion and church architecture (*abbey, altar, bishop, parish, minister, monastery, psalm, pulpit*). Critics also suggest that a whole swathe of English words on the natural world have also been expunged (*acorn, dandelion, goldfish, guinea pig, sycamore*). It's true that we can't look up *thrush*, but we can find *robin, sparrow* and *blackbird*, and I can't help thinking that a junior illustrated field guide would in any case be very much more useful. These words, we are told, have been 'dropped' in order to make room for new words relating to computers and IT such as *blog, broadband* and *text* used as a verb. There are also new additions that tie in with the Primary National Strategy requirements, words such as *phoneme*, familiar to most schoolchildren but less so to their parents.

One might have hoped that this outpouring of rage (mostly in the **Daily Telegraph** and picked up by the **Guardian** too) was evidence of a healthy and continuing interest in language and etymology, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the audience for whom this little book is intended. Far from being a 'junior' version of the august **Oxford English Dictionary**, believed by many to be the accepted authority on the evolution of the English language over the last millennium, this particular volume is designed for children of 7 and upwards, a reference tool for the classroom, hence the inclusion of many words relating to IT and the National Curriculum. It is only one of a range of 17 dictionaries on Oxford's list that span the age range from first pictorial dictionaries to portable pocket editions for secondary school children. And if you go up one year in the target age range to the **Primary Dictionary**, a fatter publication for 8-11 year-olds, you will find that all the 'offending' words are included. A comparison with a dictionary designed for the same age group from Collins reveals that similar omissions have been made.

Dictionaries for different abilities

[image:Collins First Dictionary.jpg:left]

So how do lexicographers decide what should be included at each age group? Nathan Gaw, Primary Publisher for Collins Education, explains how they tailor their dictionaries for different abilities. 'We have thematic dictionaries for younger children but as a child moves up the age range the books become more and more like adult dictionaries. Headword lists are fuller and more complex, definitions move from providing a sentence with the headword in context to providing a 'standard' adult definition. Illustrations are used more sparingly, typefaces get smaller and use adult rather than infant fonts and the format of the books becomes smaller. Every dictionary in our range follows the same broad layout, with an introduction to using the dictionary at the front and a Word Wizard section at the back providing information and activities related to words and language. So while the consistent layout makes it easy for children to move up the range, the level is always appropriate for their ability.'

Vineeta Gupta, Children's Dictionary Publisher at OUP, emphasises the importance of the page layout, especially at the youngest level. 'Children need a lot of support as they develop their dictionary skills, so we introduce colour with A to Z listings down the side of the page, headwords picked out in colour, tinted panels on grammar and word families. Children are also having to learn to read down the page in a column format rather than across the page.'

Freelance lexicographer Andrew Delahunty, who works with a number of dictionary publishers including OUP, says that even for the younger age group he feels it is important not just to concentrate on nouns and concrete things but on descriptive words such as '*devour, droop, squirm, ghastly, placid, ponderous*' to help children with their creative writing.

The importance of classroom testing

How do the dictionary publishers establish the criteria for the lexicons for each dictionary? How do they make rules for different age groups? Nathan Gaw says there are a number of factors that determine the lexicon. These include curriculum guidance, feedback on existing products, the view of educational experts and, probably most important, lots of field work with teachers and children. Given that we have a well established range of children's dictionaries we have a pretty good idea of what is appropriate for different age groups so the discussion is about which words are no longer relevant and any new words which should be included.

Decisions on which words to include, which to take out are particularly difficult for the younger age group, where space is so limited. A constant juggling act is how Andrew Delahunty describes it. Oxford, like Collins, stresses the importance of classroom testing, ideally face to face. For the **Oxford School Dictionary**, questionnaires were sent to 3,000 schools, with six focus groups run and editorial questionnaires sent to 200 schools.

It seems that over the years the number of headwords included in the dictionaries has not changed, but there has been a move to make the entries longer. Now it is not enough to simply present a word and define it. Children need examples of the word used in context and an example sentence. Oxford are unique among children's dictionary publishers in using citations or example sentences drawn from a bank of children's authors ranging from J K Rowling, Anne Fine, Dick King-Smith, Philip Pullman and C S Lewis. The older dictionaries broaden the range of literature, drawing on the classics by authors such as Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe and J D Salinger, as well as non-fiction writers such as Nelson Mandela and Michael Palin. The use of attributed quotations follows the **OED** in the grand tradition of Samuel Johnson.

[image:Oxf First Dict.jpg:left]

Like many other dictionary publishers Oxford's lexicographers draw upon a vast word bank, a corpus that for the **OED** amounts to some 2 billion words. Funded by OUP in order to stay at the forefront of language, they are unique in having a separate children's corpus of some 35 million words drawn not only from fiction but from non-fiction, magazines, sources that relate to children's hobbies and interests outside school. Lexicographers can search both adult and children's corpus, but Vineeta Gupta explains how the value of the latter can be seen from the example sentence for *peer*. Most lexicographers, if asked to produce a natural-sounding example of the word *peer* would come up with something like *they peered through the window*. Although the sentence illustrates the meaning of the word, it is not particularly exciting or imaginative. A children's corpus can give examples with a lot more colour and vitality, such as *I long to explore inside it but the door is always locked, and when I peer through a window all I can see is darkness and dust*, (Roald Dahl, **The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me**). Lexicographers are also backed by a special reading programme that can provide pithy citations from the corpus, drawing upon **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** for the word *elixir*, for example, and **Buffy and the Vampire-Slayer** for the word *fang* for the **Oxford English Dictionary for Schools**. Citations such as this help to motivate the child says Gupta.

The ability to compare a word from the children's corpus with one from the adult database can sometimes be illuminating and can help distinguish between what a 7-year-old and a 14-year-old will use. The children's corpus for example links the word *terrible* with *secret*, *storm*, *fright*, and *danger*; while the adult one to the words *tragedy*, *ordeal*, *blow*, and *shame*. This resource helps lexicographers to target word definitions, making them appropriate for the age group.

I ask Nathan Gaw how dictionaries reflect changing language and currency. As dictionaries are re-edited or new titles published, we review the currency of the lexicon and add or remove words as appropriate. However we want the books to have a good shelf life so try to avoid words that we think are faddy. There is also a physical limitation as to how many words can be included, so if we want to add a new word we'll have to take out an existing word, which means that a new word really has to be worth including to earn its place. We consult lots of teachers to get their views on potential additions and removals.

Writing resources

Sitting alongside the dictionaries and enhancing their value is a range of other resources such as spelling dictionaries

and thesauruses. Traditionally a dictionary has been seen as a tool to look up words when reading, while a thesaurus is particularly useful for creative writing and project work especially in the classroom. The **Oxford Primary Thesaurus** offers more than just synonyms. Many entries include a Word Web that gives related language. Vineeta Gupta explains that 30 years ago a thesaurus entry for the word *alien* would just have given the synonym *extraterrestrial*, but a child writing a story about aliens might want to know what planet they came from, what body parts they might have (*antenna, blotches, scales, slime, sucker, tentacle, webbing*), what kind of transport they use (*flying saucer, pod, mothership, time machine*). This kind of support for creative and independent writing provides all-inclusive language rather than just a listing of words.

And what of the future? OUP are currently testing the electronic market, but nothing, says Gupta, 'beats the accessibility of a small dictionary in the classroom'. Free downloads are available to help teachers extend the use of the dictionaries, such as alphabet word searches, group activities on word origins etc with the intention to help motivate the child as well as to build dictionary skills (www.childrensdictionaries.co.uk [3]).

Meanwhile OUP Publicity Manager Harriet Bayly is delighted by the reaction at the Bath Festival of Children's Literature to a workshop presented by the author of the **Rhyming Dictionary**, John Foster, and lexicographer Andrew Delahunty. They found that it wasn't just children that came, but whole families, and the adults wanted to be involved too. Gupta laughs: 'Everybody is fascinated by language.'

Oxford First Dictionary (5+), 978 0 19 911519 8, £11.99 hbk

Oxford Junior Dictionary (7+), 978 0 19 911512 9, £7.99 hbk

Oxford Primary Dictionary (8+), 978 0 19 911533 4, £10.99 hbk

Oxford School Dictionary (10+), 978 0 19 911534 1, £9.99 hbk

Oxford English Dictionary for Schools (11+), 978 0 19 911239 5, £9.99 hbk

Collins First School Dictionary (5+), 978 0 00 720352 9, £10.99 hbk

Collins Junior Dictionary (7+), 978 0 00 720369 1, £6.99 flexi

Collins Primary Dictionary (9+), 978 0 00 7203871, £7.99 flexi

Collins Concise School Dictionary (10+), 978 0 00 720388 8, £9.99 hbk

[image:Sue Unstead.jpg:left]

Sue Unstead is an editorial consultant and author of children's non-fiction. She has a background in publishing and was children's publisher at Dorling Kindersley for ten years.

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