



# **The Meaning of Everything The history of the Oxford English Dictionary**

**Professor Charlotte Brewer**

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I'm here today to talk to you about the Oxford English Dictionary, perhaps the most famous dictionary in the English-speaking world. Work on this great dictionary first began in the 1860s, and many people associate the OED in their minds with the days of Victorian Empire, when there was red all over the map of the world and England and the English language seemed at the centre of the world. So I shall start off my history of the OED with a brief sketch explaining this great dictionary in the context of its time:

What was it? Why was it great? How was it made? By whom?

But the OED is very much alive and kicking today: it is a living dictionary, and it is particularly alive at the moment, since it is part-way through a project of root-and branch revision which started in 2000 and is set to continue for quite a few decades yet - and this will be what I will come onto next.

Then finally I want to think about that phrase in my title: the meaning of everything. In what sense is or was that true? What do we mean by everything? How does that fit in with the history of the OED?

But let's begin by being clear what we mean when we refer to the Oxford English Dictionary. There are many many different Oxford dictionaries, and many of you will own one or more of these - the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, the Concise Oxford dictionary, the Pocket Oxford Dictionary, the Little Oxford Dictionary, the Junior Oxford Dictionary, and so on - mostly one volume desk dictionaries of one sort or another. But the king of them all is the full Oxford English Dictionary, which in its latest print incarnation, published in 1989, comes to 20 massive and very handsome volumes.

So: first questions: how was this made? and why is it that it is the greatest dictionary of English in the world? What makes it so supreme, in fact? The answer to the last of these questions is that it was very much a product of its time, in the best possible sense of that phrase. For its time was the Victorian era, when it really did seem feasible to set in motion and to bring to fruition schemes of heroic ambition - to go out and conquer and rule the world, to build wonderful architectural structures which made use of pioneering engineering techniques, or, in linguistic terms, to construct a dictionary that would contain every single word in the English language. And that was what the first lexicographers of OED set out to do.

As the novelist William Golding put it years later, reviewing the second edition of the OED in 1989,

'in the high days of Queen Victoria a dictionary was conceived, not to say dared, which matched her iron bridges, her vast ships and engines'.

The people who embarked on this magnificent project did not belong to a university or institute. Instead, they were gentlemen scholars of one sort or another, loosely connected through the London Philological Society, a sort of gentlemen's club for language scholars, and around the end of the 1850s and beginning of the 1860s they hatched this scheme and set in motion the idea of a dictionary that would record every word ever used in the English language. To do this, the first editors - or lexicographers, to use the technical term for a dictionary maker - drew up great lists of works from every period of the language's history - from the language of Beowulf, which we call Old English, through that of Chaucer (Middle English), the Elizabethans, the 17th and 18th centuries up to their own 19th century - and marshalled volunteers to read through them, noting down carefully all examples of language usage which they thought deserved inclusion.

They also scoured through all the major preceding dictionaries of English - including Johnson's, which they found very useful - and consulted glossaries, concordances, and word lists of every imaginable sort. The volunteer readers were asked to create what they called slips - i.e. bits of paper about 4 by 6 inches, like this example here.

You can see the word, and then the quotation from the source in which it is found. The quotation is very important, as I'll explain in a minute, as that is what usually tells you exactly what the word means. (This example is from a book by John Smeaton, the great 18c civil engineer, who built the Edystone Light house in Cornwall/Devon).

These slips accumulated and accumulated, as you can see in this famous picture of the chief editor, James Henry Augustus Murray, in his scriptorium - the sort of iron hut that he had built in his garden at North Oxford where he worked on creating this great opus. By the time that Murray started working on the project, it had moved out of the hands of individuals and had been taken over by Oxford University Press, i.e. the publishing house attached to the University of Oxford.

Once the editors had assembled several million slips, all sorted into alphabetical order, they set about reading through the bundles for each word and sense, scrutinising the quotations, and working out the earliest use of a word and looking at how its various senses developed. Here is a picture of the baskets they used to file and sort their material

- in this case the word *what*, a word that was eventually to occupy seven and a half pages in the printed OED. The letter 'W' was a notoriously difficult one which consumed vast amounts of lexicographical time; it took several years to complete and far exceeded the 'scale' of treatment that the publishers had originally hoped for.

Sifting and analysing all these examples of usage could be incredibly complicated. Several accounts survive of 'Dr. Murray [being] discovered walking in the midst of the senses spread out over his drawing-room carpet!'

One of his assistants...described coming into the work room at seven o'clock on an autumn morning. The tables, the chairs, the desks, even the floor were snowed under with the verb to put....Sir James...was playing chess with the senses. (K. M. E. Murray 1977: 298).

Interestingly, it was the short, common words, like *what* or verbs like *take* or *put* or *set*, that were the most difficult - in fact *set* was famous for taking 40 days to digest: the word ended up occupying over 18 large folio pages in the printed dictionary, extending to 154 main divisions and many many sub-divisions.

However, this laborious and time-consuming method of compiling the dictionary was absolutely central to its academic and scholarly stature: because it was the first dictionary ever to be compiled on the basis of such vast quantities of real evidence - actual examples of real usage, as witnessed by the quotations. Previous dictionaries had relied on lists of words, without going out there and getting the evidence, and OED's best predecessor, Dr Johnson, although he had used the same method - reading through real books to get real examples - had drawn on a far far smaller number of sources, and had concentrated much more on literary works for his examples of usage - half his quotations came from just seven sources: Shakespeare, Milton the Bible, and others. The OED spread its nets far further afield, and though they too drew heavily on the literary 'greats', they also looked at many hundreds of non-literary works relating to, as we've seen, building a lighthouse! and gardening, mathematics, botany, sports, carriage-making, all kinds of arts and crafts and commercial activities... and so they came up with a much wider range of vocabulary.

The lexicographers began, as I've said, by thinking they would record every word in the language, and in this respect they consciously diverged from the practice of dictionary-makers before them. Here is how they began the first proposal for the dictionary that was to become the OED, published in 1859:

'The first requirement of every lexicon is, that it should contain every word occurring in the literature of the language it professes to illustrate.

and they go on to say, very clearly, 'no censorship', 'no discrimination', 'this is a scientific project where we gather together the evidence before we make a decision on it':

'We entirely repudiate the theory, which converts the lexicographer into an arbiter of style, and leaves it in his discretion to accept or reject words according to his private notions of their comparative elegance or inelegance.'

Inevitably, they had to give up on both these ideals. The resulting dictionary would have been unmanageably large - they would never have been able to finish it - how could they possibly search out every word ever used? And of course, what about all the rude words, for example, which might have got them into difficulty both with the law and with their readers. We'll come back to these interesting points later?

Nevertheless, they did include an enormous amount of material:

- 500,000 words and senses defined
- Nearly 2 million quotations printed to illustrate these, selected from total of over 5 million collected altogether
- 178 miles of type in Nine miles of columns

These are quite vast numbers, when you think about the methods they were using - no electronic databases, simply reading through books and noting examples down by hand, then filing and sorting and processing all these thousands of slips by hand. And the results were remarkable, as everyone realised, pretty much from when the first instalment appeared, in 1884, through to the last one in 1928 - it took 44 years for them to get through the whole of the alphabet, and about 70 years from the time the dictionary was first thought of until the time it was completed.

So much for the factual side of the dictionary. What about the human side?

Over this period, editors came and went, as did many sub-editors and editorial assistants. The main editor,

as we have seen, was James Murray, and he was assisted by his chief editor Henry Bradley; both died before the dictionary was completed.

In time, two other chief editors were taken on: W. A. Craigie and C. T. Onions, who survived the project - here they are,

Onions looking rather mysterious and sinister - a difficult and waspish man, with many children, and always short of money and kept down by his senior editors and by Oxford University Press itself.

Many men worked underneath these editors: here is a photo taken around the early 1900s, of them all dressed in neat suits, in the Old Ashmolean in Oxford, one of the OED 'offices', with their reference books spread among them

but it wasn't just men, and it wasn't just a professional work place: here is a photo of Murray the day before he died, aged 88, in July 1915 in his scriptorium in Oxford, with his personal staff, who included his two daughters Elsie on the left and Rosfrith on the right, both young women by now [slide 14]. But they had been put to work much younger. There is a magnificent biography of James Murray by his grand-daughter, Elisabeth Murray, called *Caught in the Web or Words*, in which she describes how Murray's 11 children were put to work from very young. And these children made a substantial work-force, as you can see from this family photo, taken around 1896:

This comes from *Caught in the Web of Words*:

'Every afternoon the children went to the Scriptorium to collect some packets of recently edited slips. As each child reached an age when he or she could read, they were pressed into service. Rosfrith, the ninth, remembered her father catching her by the pinny one day as he passed her in the hall, and exclaiming 'It is time that this young woman earned her keep'. The little girl, left-handed and rather delicate, was more backward than the others and had hardly as yet mastered her letters. She was soon in tears and the nurse had to come to her rescue'.

Her younger brother, the last child, Jowett - here he is in the photo, in a sailor suit, with long hair, described what it was like to be slip-sorting in the 1890s:

'We received no pocket money as a matter of course, but had to earn it by sorting slips. Hours & hours of our childhood was spent in this useful occupation. The motive actuating us was mercenary: we wanted money for Christmas or birthday presents, or to spend on our summer holidays, & the only way to get it was to sort slips. We were paid according to age, not according to skill or speed. The standard rate was one penny an hour, but this rose to two-pence, three pence or even sixpence as you mounted up in your teens.'

So you can imagine how this life of dictionary-making took a heavy toll on Murray himself, and the members of his family - and in fact everyone involved in it. For what this book also shows is what an unremitting struggle it was to get the dictionary out: the editors, being scholars and perfectionists, wanted to produce as perfect a work as possible, with as many words and quotations and definitions etc as possible, while the publishers - Oxford University Press themselves - had to balance the books and get its staff to complete a work which they could sell and try to make some money on, so as to begin to pay back the enormous cost of paying all these people salaries for so many years. (The first edition cost some £300,000 in total, then an utterly enormous sum). One way of maintaining control of the project was to keep wages low, and put constant pressure on all the staff to HURRY UP. The historical archives in Oxford

are full of letters from the publishers bemoaning the slowness and waywardness of the editors and staff, and from the editors and staff bemoaning the unreasonableness and strictness of the publishers... they make sorry reading.

But all this child-labour - and extensive underpaid adult labour too, and extensive unpaid voluntary labour: literally hundreds of volunteers, educated men and women who were able to find the time to read books and note down useful vocabulary and send off their bundles of slips - it was all worth while and it all paid off because it eventually produced so magnificent a result. The OED created a revolution in lexicography, the art or science of dictionary-making, because it was the first dictionary to set out to be so comprehensive, all-inclusive, and the first to be based on such a vast accumulation of real evidence of how language was actually used. As Craigie and Onions, the second two (surviving ones) of the chief editors, wrote in their preface to a re-issue of the OED in 1933, five years after the first edition had been completed - and this is a useful summary of the work:

Its basis is a collection of some five million excerpts from English literature of every period amassed by an army of voluntary readers and the editorial staff. Such a collection of evidence - could form the only possible foundation for the historical treatment of every word and idiom which is the *raison d'être* of the work...

...It is a fact everywhere recognized that the consistent pursuit of this evidence has worked a revolution in the art of lexicography.'

So that is how, very briefly, the dictionary was originally put together, how it took its toll on individual lives, why it was revolutionary as a dictionary. But 1928 was not the end of the story. It is a living dictionary, and work on it has never really stopped since those early days in the 1860s. So let's look now at what has happened since 1928:

First, it was re-issued in 1933, with a short Supplement, to cover all the new words that had come into the language over the 44 years it had taken to write the dictionary - obviously this is a particular hazard for dictionary-makers: every time you bring out a new dictionary, you find that language has moved on and you have missed important words & phrases out - like moob, or sub-prime, or toxic debt, to take topical examples. The first edition editors had left out appendicitis, which was embarrassing when Edward VII's coronation was postponed in 1902 for this very reason, and they also found it very difficult to keep up with the extraordinary advances in technology of the time - satisfactory definitions for words like aeroplane, (aerodrome, aerodynamic), were all missing, because these objects hadn't been invented or established in 1884 when the volume for A came out, and the first edition hadn't got up-to-date definitions for terms like film, jazz, movies, pictures, talkie, or coinages such as cinema.

In 1933 things came to a halt? but by the 1950s, after the war, everyone could see that the OED was fast going out of date. So the publishers had to decide: should they crank into gear and start creating the dictionary all over again? or should they just publish another supplement? They went for the 2nd option, as being cheaper and more manageable, and a second Supplement came out in the 1970s and 1980s.

But by then, two important things began to play a significant role.

The first of these had been gradually building up: more and more linguistic scholarship on the English language had been undertaken and published since the first edition was complete, meaning that linguists were becoming more and more aware of errors, partialities and gaps in the first edition of OED. The editors themselves had always known about this, of course, in fact in 1951, C. T. Onions had written powerfully about the problem: as he put it, this greatest of dictionaries, despite its public reputation for unimpeachable

authority, had 'hosts of wrong definitions, wrong datings, and wrong crossreferences. The problem is gigantic.'

And second, the 1980s ushered in the periods in which computers really started to make a visible difference to our lives: transforming our access to knowledge and the way we could store data. Oxford University Press, the OED's publishers, seized on these two things. First, they digitised the first edition and the supplements - an incredibly time-consuming and laborious and expensive task. They combined the result into one big entity, bringing it out both in printed form

as we saw before, and also turned it into a CD Rom.

But they didn't stop there. It was also in the 1980s that OUP took the momentous decision to re-edit the whole dictionary again from start to finish. I say momentous - I mean that it is an extraordinarily expensive decision, but it was also a very unusual one for a commercial firm working under normal economic constraints, because the work is likely to take many decades. At present there are around 60 editors working away on the dictionary, mostly in the UK but also at an office in New York, and they are about a quarter of the way through the alphabet (they started with the letter M, released in March 2000). Here is a picture of the Oxford group

and the two chief editors [slide 23], both of whom started work on the second Supplement in the 1970s and have devoted their working lives to the OED.

Now this new dictionary - the Third Edition of the OED - is new in more ways than one. Not only is it re-visiting every single entry in the original dictionary and re-creating it afresh, with all the new scholarship and information about language that we now have to hand, a hundred years or so on from the first edition, but it is also being edited and published in an utterly different way.

The OED is now no longer appearing in successive print instalments, but is published online every quarter - so it has left the medium of print altogether and launched itself into the ether.

In other words, the OED today is at the cutting edge of lexicography and of technology - in fact the two things, technology and lexicography, work hand in hand. This means that today's OED editors are quite as ambitious in their aims as were their Victorian predecessors, although the way they deal with the language of English spoken round the world is very different.

Now let us move to the third part of what I want to talk about today, and focus on the title of this talk: The meaning of everything: the history of the OED. I have swiftly sketched the history of the dictionary, but what about the idea that the OED tells you the meaning of everything? What might that itself mean? What is the nature of this 'everything'?

As we have seen, the original plan was to gather together all the words ever used in the language. Now, this is a wonderful, somehow a terribly engaging notion, and it leads very naturally to the idea that dictionary contains everything that has ever been thought or said by anybody speaking English. In turn, that makes the OED a record of the language's culture and of that culture's history. People saw this from very early on. One of the reviewers said in 1899.

Everything is to be found here, but one feels that human faculties are inadequate to penetrate the details of so vast a collection (1899) and another, in 1933, quoted the French writer Anatole France saying that the



dictionary is the universe in alphabetical order - - there is a sense in which all human riches are found here - "here is God's plenty."

And an ordinary member of the public, writing in in simple praise of the [Shorter] Oxford dictionary in 1937, tried to explain what he loved about it so much:

'the world seems spread before one and the dictionary's breadth of view seems to be commensurate with reality; in no other book I know of is such freedom from mental oppression to be found: here there is no author's arbitrary handling of the material of life to irk the reader' (1937)

What people have especially loved about the OED is its apparently endless and comprehensive list of words and definitions, and also its munificent store of quotations, on which as we have seen the definitions are based. The quotations are one of the reasons the book is so very long, and it is, as I have said again and again, the reason why this dictionary of English is the greatest ever written: all its massive scholarship is based on empirically gathered evidence. They also make the dictionary a wonderful read.

Any entry will show you this and I thought we would look at the one for the word dictionary itself, which gives you an idea of how the quotations help build an entry - and also give the editors some room to exhibit different points of view.

But seeing an entry like this also gives you an idea of how reliant the editors were on quotations - of course, that is why, as I have explained, the dictionary was so revolutionary: it relied on properly assembled data. Now the nature and provenance of the OED quotations is something that it has only recently become possible to study with any thoroughness, as a result of OUP putting the dictionary into electronic form in the 1980s and 1990s. We can search the OED electronically in ways that the first editors could never have dreamed of, and we can come up with very interesting results. Thus it is possible to see that the first edition of OED favoured certain quotation sources over others, in ways that naturally and appropriately reflected their cultural assumptions:

But, given that OED's basis to fame is its quotations, do these sources for their pool of words and their interpretations of them tell us about language per se? Or do they tell us about the quotation sources that the lexicographers and their volunteers most liked reading? - Or to put it another way, is the history told by the OED the history of certain types of source rather than others? Does it therefore tell us the meaning not so much of everything, but of some things?

In general, you can see from this and much more detailed sorts of electronic searches that the OED editors favoured high literary sources, they preferred poetry to prose, they quoted far far less from female than from male sources, and they especially favoured the 16th and 19th centuries. For decades, linguists have taken OED evidence on trust as telling them about the language. But now we are beginning to wonder whether reading from a wider range of non-literary sources, and reading more in texts written by women, we mightn't improve and widen our picture of the English language. A third of the novels published at the end of the 18thc, for example, were by women - yet only a tiny fraction of the OED's quotations come from such sources.

The new OED, the third edition of the OED, is tackling all this by starting up reading programmes all over again, far more inclusive than the old - and by trawling vast electronic databases for historical linguistic evidence to supplement and correct the first edition.

That is one respect in which the new edition is changing things. But there are others which are just as

important. If you remember, the first edition editors were very clear, in their proposal of 1859, that there was going to be no censorship:

'We entirely repudiate the theory, which converts the lexicographer into an arbiter of style, and leaves it in his discretion to accept or reject words according to his private notions of their comparative elegance or inelegance.'

This looks fairly straightforward: everything is to get in.

But lots and lots of words were left out precisely because they were insufficiently elegant - dialect words, slang words, obscene words, words relating to sex and the body. We know they knew these words, of course, just as we all know them today. In fact, they spent a good deal of time agonizing over what to do with them. Enormous quantities of James Murray's correspondence remains in archival stores of letters in Oxford, and you can read discussions there about the pros and cons of including the word 'condom', for example, which one of Murray's volunteers thought was a word 'too utterly obscene', and how to deal with words referring to sexual parts of the body - particularly the female body. These weren't just matters of elegance, either: J. S. Farmer, who was producing a dictionary of slang at the time, had his printers lay down their tools when they saw what he wanted them to print in his second volume, which covered the letters c-f, and when he took them to court he lost the case. The result of all this is that the first edition of OED is curiously squeamish when it comes to sex and the body. condom didn't get in, and nor did other words relating to birth control (sheath or sponge, e.g.), nor did those two famous four-letter words in the English language beginning with c and f, among a good number of others. So this turned out not by any means to be a dictionary that told you the meaning of 'everything'. And lots of words about which the editors felt uncomfortable were included, but on different terms: they weren't given quotations, or they were even defined in Latin. I feel I shouldn't give you examples, but I'm sure you can think of them yourselves, and find a first edition of the dictionary to look them up in. This reminds one of the joke about Dr Johnson, when congratulated by a couple of ladies on the absence of rude words from his dictionary, who replied to them how pleased he was that they were pleased, but of course, in order to know that his dictionary was blameless, the dear ladies must have gone through the volumes actually looking for such rude words?

In the 1970s, the editor of the second Supplement, Bob Burchfield, was careful to put all these rude words into the OED furnished in many instances with quotations going back hundreds of years which had been sitting in the OED files in Oxford, just waiting until they could be used [slide 29]. But his Supplement came out after the Lady Chatterley's Lover Trial, when times had changed and nobody felt embarrassed any more. Burchfield himself, used to quote his mentor C. T. Onions, who had opined, sternly, that the OED should only include language which was 'fit for the drawing room'. Clearly, few people have drawing rooms today, and the Third Edition Editors at work in Oxford and New York today have absolutely no problems with 'inelegant' language either.

We have changed our social attitudes in countless other ways too. As you can imagine, given the time at which the OED was first produced - and here I show you a map of the British Empire in 1897, when both the Empire and the OED were in full swing and British views on race and colour were very very different from what they are now [slide 30]. Definitions for words like chink, wog, darkie, betray views about non-British cultures, or about our own British cultures, which we would utterly repudiate today, and they popped up all over the place in the first edition of the OED. One of the most famous is the definition for canoe, which the first OED defined in the 1920s as 'A kind of boat in use among uncivilized nations... any rude craft in which uncivilized people go upon the water; most savages use paddles instead of oars'; whereas 'in civilized use' it is 'a small light boat or skiff propelled by paddling'. Obviously, this is an unacceptable definition, and Burchfield and his editors got rid of it.

So - does this mean that the OED is not quite as good a history of everything as it set out to be and as it is often understood to be? It represents certain sorts of literary and linguistic history - of great writers, and of



subjects which were thought appropriate by the Victorians and Edwardians. It does an unbelievably good job at this, and it is now being revised with awesome comprehensiveness. But the unrevised OED tells us something just as important, too: it tells us the social history of words - those that were left out, those that were put in, those that were defined in ways we would now regard as benighted or politically inappropriate. But history is history, nasty as well as nice, and the dictionary, as I said at the beginning, was a product of its time... No doubt, in years to come, people will look back at the cultural attitudes locked in our own 21st century vocabulary and reading - euphemisms for death, e.g., or our preference for certain sorts of texts over others - and find it as illuminating to study the Third Edition of OED as we find it to study the history of the first.

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