

N.E. Osselton. *Chosen Words. Past and Present Problems for Dictionary Makers*, 1st edition 1995, x + 188 pp. ISBN 0 85989 419 3. Exeter: University of Exeter Press. Price £27,50.

Introductory remarks

This book is an informative collection of sixteen essays by one of the pioneers of modern-day academic Lexicography. It is the product of over forty years' scholarly work on prominent lexicographers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries like Cawdrey, Kersey, Bailey, Johnson and others. With the exception of two of the essays all the others have already been published before in various journals and books. They cover a wide variety of topics but still the author, a founder member and later President of The European Association for Lexicography, has managed to achieve a remarkable thematic cohesion. Although the original version of some of these essays were published as early as 1963 and 1964, they still are relevant to the current lexicographic discussions. This can already be predicted by merely looking at the subtitle of this book: *Past and Present Problems for Dictionary Makers*. In the *Preface* the author identifies the common theme running through the essays as that of a shared past in dictionary making. The choices confronting a modern compiler of dictionaries often worried early dictionary makers too. Although this book does focus on the practical problems of lexicographers it has a much wider scope than the lexicographic practice because this collection of essays also has to be regarded as a substantial metalexigraphical contribution.

A remarkable aspect of this book is the way in which it displays the growth and development of lexicography as an academic industry and a fully-fledged discipline within the field of linguistics. While the original research for some of these essays was done in the 1950's when there was little scholarly interest in dictionaries in America and Europe, the work on some of the latest contributions was done as part of a flourishing focus on dictionary research.

The sixteen essays in this book are the products of research on closely related topics. Although, as a separate chapter, each essay forms an integral part of the book, it may still be read — and enjoyed — as an independent study. Immediately following the title of each chapter, the original date of publication is given. An added value of this collection is the *End notes* to chapters in which references are provided to later work in the same field. For the scholar using this book these references enhance the academic value of this collection.

Thematic cohesion in *Chosen Words*

A collection of essays written by one author can easily have an arbitrary character which leaves a reader unfulfilled. In the *Preface* to *Chosen Words* Osselton

says the bringing together of articles written over a long period of years has inevitably resulted in some duplication of material. This duplication has to be regarded as a positive aspect because it strengthens the thematic cohesion of this book.

The first chapter deals with the character of the earliest English dictionaries. Chapters two to six focus on various aspects of the macrostructural selection: the inclusion and treatment of figurative words, common words, dialect words, old words and literary words. Chapters seven, eight and sixteen discuss bilingual dictionaries. The use of sources is a theme dealt with in chapters ten and fourteen, while spelling stimulates an interesting discussion of fixing versus codifying in chapter nine. The compilation of a sixteenth century English dictionary and alphabetisation in early dictionaries of English are the topics of chapters eleven and twelve respectively. An innovative typological shift towards bilingualized learners' dictionaries is not only something of the present era but has been performed in the eighteenth century. This is discussed in chapter thirteen. Dictionary criticism is the theme of chapter fifteen, and although the discussion in this chapter is directed at three historical dictionaries, the general principles introduced in this discussion have a far more general applicability.

In spite of a variety of topics covered in these essays, there is one theme running through all of them: the historic perspective on (English) Lexicography. However, the way in which Osselton deals with the history of dictionaries makes this book just as interesting for a synchronic approach to the study of dictionaries because of the comprehensive picture it portrays of the development of English dictionaries.

The present-day study of dictionaries can best be done within a theoretical framework. One such model is the metalexicographical approach of Wiegand. Metalexicography can be divided into four components, i.e. the *History of Lexicography*, a *General Theory of Lexicography*, *Research on Dictionary Use* and *Criticism of Dictionaries*. The coherence of *Chosen Words* can best be illustrated by the way in which this book contains elements of all these components of a metalexicographical model. The most salient feature of this book is its portrayal of Historical Lexicography. In its focus on older dictionaries and the development of lexicographic activities *Chosen Words* gives a clear indication of the importance research on dictionary use has for the compilation of any new dictionary. Although the "sociology of the dictionary user" and the so-called "user perspective" are terms used in the present lexicographic discussions, Osselton gives a thorough account of the role these notions have played in the compilation of the earliest dictionaries. Today dictionary criticism does not always have a profound influence but quite often it does lead to substantial changes and improvement in dictionaries. Osselton's reflection on earlier criticism and its influence or lack thereof on specific dictionaries of the past, gives evidence of definite changes in the attitude of lexicographers towards linguistically motivated comments on their work. The formulation of a General Theory of

Lexicography is an ideal and ambition many lexicographers and linguists share today. Such a theory has to be based on sound principles. In more than one of the essays Osselton refers to lexicographic principles applied or not applied in the compilation of various dictionaries of the past.

The way in which the essays in this publication can be categorised within the different components of the Wiegand model emphasises the validity of this model but also the theoretical basis of Osselton's work. The need lexicographers have for an underlying set of theoretical principles is illustrated quite explicitly in this book by Osselton's sound interpretation of the principles governing Samuel Johnson's work, which Johnson himself expressed in no uncertain terms. Already in the first chapter Osselton refers to Johnson's semantic discipline and the *Preface* of his dictionary, foreshadowed by his *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (1747), as an exposition of lexicographic theory. This date, Osselton argues in chapter ten, may be taken as the starting point for the science of lexicography, in England at least.

Central themes

Although this book focuses primarily on older dictionaries and early lexicographers, the themes and problems identified in the different chapters are just as relevant to present-day dictionaries and lexicographers. A distinctive feature of this book is the reoccurrence of certain themes in different chapters and their interactive relation. Dictionaries have to present their users with real language and not with the lexicographers' subjective interpretation thereof. Therefore the sources used by lexicographers to collect their material is of major importance for the success of any dictionary. Osselton repeatedly emphasises this aspect of the lexicographer's work. In historical linguistics secondary documentation will be of little value. However, dictionaries often rely on this form of documentation. The validity of this procedure is questioned by Osselton in his discussion of its application in a dictionary like the *OED*.

The presentation of real language compels the lexicographer to inform the dictionary users of the stylistic values and taboos of certain lexical items. This can be done by means of labelling — another topic discussed in various chapters but always relevant to both the specific dictionary dealt with in the respective chapter and dictionaries in general. Labelling is a topic discussed, e.g. with regards to figurative use, old words and extensively in the chapter on dialect words. This chapter also contains an interesting typology of dialect entries.

Samuel Johnson

Samuel Johnson is a central character in this book. One of the most interesting chapters (chapter ten) deals with his treatment of phrasal verbs. From a survey

of historical evidence, Osselton claims, it appears that the modern treatment of these lexical items in English dictionaries has been Johnson's invention. In this chapter Osselton not only discusses Johnson's treatment of phrasal verbs but he also gives the reader an interpretation of some of the passages in Johnson's Preface in which he identifies some crucial points lexicographers are still concerned with. The idiomatic nature of phrasal verbs, the semantic unpredictability of some and the self-explanatory nature of others have definite implications for their lexicographic treatment. Johnson's comments on these problems are interpreted in a sound manner by Osselton.

In chapter nine some aspects of Johnson's spelling conventions are discussed. Although many people claim that Johnson attempted to fix the spelling in his dictionary, Osselton shows how he actually embarked on an attempt to codify a recognised spelling. Various influences on Johnson's selection of spelling conventions are presented in an intriguing essay, dealing with an extraordinary lexicographer.

In conclusion

This book, a title published in the series *Exeter Studies in Linguistics* with R.R.K. Hartmann as General Editor, is another valuable contribution to the field of Lexicography, emphasising the quality of research done by Osselton in the fields of Linguistics and Lexicography. *Chosen Words* confirms the status of Lexicography as a linguistic discipline in its own right, as well as the status of the University of Exeter, and especially its Dictionary Research Centre, as one of the leading international institutions for lexicographic research.

Chosen Words has to be regarded as a fine example of academic Lexicography. However, this book can and should be appreciated by a much wider audience than practising and theoretical lexicographers. Any person interested in historical linguistics will benefit from this work. This book will also appeal to a more popular audience. Dictionaries are the most important containers of linguistic information utilised by ordinary language users. *Chosen Words* will be a stimulating experience on their reading list.

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