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- 1 Contents
3 Editor's Note (Nicola McLelland)

ARTICLES

- 5 Henry Fowler and his eighteenth-century predecessors (Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade)
25 The Oxford Quarto Dictionary (Charlotte Brewer)
41 'To observe things as they are without regard to their origin': Henry Sweet's general writings on language in the 1870s (Mark Atherton)
59 Abstracts from the Henry Sweet Society Colloquium, March 31st, 2008

REVIEW

- 61 Ekaterina Velmezova: *Les lois du sens: la sémantique marriste* (Bern, etc., Peter Lang, 2007). Reviewed by Andries van Helden

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

- 65 Books & Pamphlets / Journals / Articles & Reviews (ed. David Cram)

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

- 67 Minutes of the Henry Sweet Society Annual General Meeting (March 31st, 2008)

- 69 Conference report: ICHOLS XI,.University of Potsdam (Toon van Hal)
- 72 Members' News
- 74 "His Manner of Discourse". Professor Werner Hüllen (John L. Flood)
- 77 Call for Papers: *The Annual Colloquium of the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas* (14–17 September, 2009, Jesus College, Oxford)
- 78 Conference announcement: *Linguistic prescriptivism and patriotism: from nationalism to globalization* (August 17–19, 2009, New College, University of Toronto, Canada)
- 80 Call for Papers: *International Conference on Language and History, Linguistics and Historiography* (April 1–4, 2009, University of Bristol)
- 81 Call for Papers: *Good usage and sociolinguistic variation. Diachronic perspectives and national traditions* (16–18 July 2009, Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge)
- 84 The ISLE Richard M. Hogg Prize 2009
- 85 The Vivien Law Prize in the History of Linguistic Ideas (deadline September 30, 2009)
- 87 Style Sheet for the *Bulletin of the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas*
- 90 Subscription information

The Oxford Quarto Dictionary

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Abstract

Oxford lexicography at the beginning of the 20th century was dominated by the *OED*. This work, based on the analysis of vast quantities of historical evidence, represented the acme of 19th-century scientific philological scholarship which was to give birth to the academic discipline of linguistics. Many educated people at the time, however, were opposed to the descriptive analysis of language, especially given the declining standards of literacy they frequently identified in newspapers and elsewhere. In the 1920s, Oxford University Press planned a dictionary that would straddle these two positions, and persuaded H. W. Fowler to take on its editorship. The ‘Quarto’ dictionary, as it was first called, was to be an innovative work which would combine scholarly lexicographical method with judicious information on usage, at the same time drawing on great works of English literature as its sources. After many years of labour, the project was aborted in 1958 (Fowler having died in 1933). Its early stages and eventual demise, as revealed in papers in the archives of Oxford University Press, illustrate the clash between prescriptivism and descriptivism (still alive today) in language matters, and the increasing irrelevance, to both dictionary users and makers, of literary example.

The Quarto dictionary will be unfamiliar to most readers, since it was never published. But Oxford University Press, who conceived and planned this work in the 1920s-1940s, once hoped and believed that it would become the chief horse in its dictionary stable, outstripping in sales and significance its two most successful dictionaries to date, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.¹ The surviving papers for this dictionary, stored at Oxford University Press (OUP), reveal the great regard and warm hopes the publishers had for the Quarto, seemingly conceived as a cross between the *Concise* on the one hand and the *OED* itself on the other—while also containing a significant element of H. W. Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* (1926). OUP planned that the Quarto, whose title was later switched to ‘Oxford Dictionary of Modern English’, would do something no dictionary had ever done before, that is, provide consistent and thorough information about usage and currency. At the same time, it would recognize the importance of great literary works of the past to contemporary culture, and therefore to language.

Both these elements can be seen in an incidental discussion of the Quarto which appeared in a review of a new edition of the *Shorter OED*, published anonymously (as was then the custom) in the *TLS* on 12 October 1946. The author was the recently

¹ The Quarto is also discussed in Burchfield (1989): 142-5, McMorris (2001), and Brewer (2007b).

retired Secretary to the Delegates of OUP (i.e. its chief executive), R. W. Chapman: scarcely a disinterested critic therefore, but an insider who had exerted enormous influence on the course both of the great *OED* and its smaller offshoots: the *Concise* and *Pocket* Oxford dictionaries, edited by H. W. Fowler and his brother, and the *Shorter* itself. After praising the *Shorter*, Chapman observed that

Near the end of his life H. W. Fowler [d. 1933] had the notion of an ‘unconcise’ dictionary, in which the vocabulary should be treated more generously than one not very large volume had permitted. But the new dictionary was to be also ‘unhistorical,’ confined to modern English: that is, to the language as it is spoken and written today. Today was to include the day before yesterday, and more; for the Bible and Shakespeare, it was thought, are still modern, current in the minds and speech of educated Englishmen.’ (p. 492)

Chapman continued, ‘Report runs that the machine is not quite at a standstill’—and indeed Chapman himself, together with his wife Katharine Marion Metcalfe (an Austen scholar), worked extensively on the Quarto over the 1940s, as witnessed by many notes still preserved in the OUP archives.

The progress and eventual fate of this aborted dictionary is interesting in itself, if a sad illustration of how great travails and high hopes can come to nothing. It also illuminates two features of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century assumptions about language which are now, in academic circles, largely defunct: first, that there is a place for prescriptivism (though the degree to which this is baldly proposed or acknowledged tends to vary), and secondly, that the literary classics of English literature are fundamental to the use and understanding of the English language. And not just English literature: Chapman introduces his *TLS* remarks on the Quarto by quoting Propertius on Virgil: ‘Nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade’, thus indicating that a greater work may be about to trump the *Shorter OED* (which had sold 40,000 copies in its first two years) just as the *Aeneid* was to trump the *Iliad*. One of the striking characteristics of the thousands of papers—incidental daily exchanges, substantial documents on policy, quips, discussions, even angry protests—that make up the OUP dictionary archives is the way that the language of these men (they are all men), who played so big a part in the production of dictionaries and word-books over this period, is liberally scattered with quotations from Greek and Latin as well as English literary sources. Chapman’s views on dictionaries, and the language he uses to express them, illustrate now-obsolete (or obsolescent?) intellectual attitudes alluded to by R. W. Burchfield when he revised Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* in 1996 and wrote in his preface

What I want to stress is the isolation of Fowler from the mainstream of the linguistic scholarship of his day, and his heavy dependence on schoolmasterly textbooks in which the rules of grammar, rhetoric, punctuation, spelling, and so on, were set down in a quite basic manner. For him, the ancient Greek and Latin classics (including the metrical conventions of the classics), the best-known works of Renaissance and post-Renaissance English literature, and the language used in them

formed part of a three-coloured flag. This linguistic flag was to be saluted and revered, and, as far as possible, everything it represented was to be preserved intact. (p. vii)

In some respects, however, Fowler was not in the least isolated from the linguistic scholarship of his day—or at any rate, from the scholars. Certainly he was much beloved by the publishers of what we think of as one of the first great descriptive linguistic enterprises—itsself the acme of the ‘scientific’ method of the nineteenth century—the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The present paper explores both these issues by reviewing the first stages of the Quarto dictionary, as revealed in the OUP archives. It also shows how Fowler’s interest in usage on the one hand, and in literary excellence on the other, contributed to this dictionary but also in the end led to its demise.

The Fowler’s Net

Although Chapman reported in the *TLS* that the Quarto was Fowler’s idea, this seems to be quite untrue. On the contrary, the publishers carefully and cannily spread what they called a ‘Fowler’s Net’ for Fowler himself, hoping to tempt and manoeuvre him into this project for reasons that were variously lexicographical, pragmatic, and financial. To understand the Press’s conception of the Quarto, and why it should have the attitude it did towards the dictionaries and word-books it published, we need to remind ourselves of the lexicographical output of OUP as a whole. Dictionaries and word books do not appear fully formed, but are institutional products—that is to say, they need to be produced and published by a publishing house, which will have financial viability as its prior consideration. OUP was a private company, and although the *OED* swiftly established itself as the national dictionary, it was entirely unsubsidized by either government or universities. Since taking the work over from the Philological Society in 1878, the Press had found the *OED* a heavy financial and administrative burden, and by the mid-1920s the senior publishers were deeply unhappy about the slowness with which it was grinding to completion (which it was finally to do in 1928).² In particular, there were problems with both surviving senior editors: W. A. Craigie, after a series of tussles over money and other matters, had disappeared to a chair in Chicago in 1925, planning to produce a series of further dictionaries independently of *OED*; while his co-editor, C. T. Onions, who remained in Oxford, was difficult and slow. The continuing costs to OUP of salaries and overheads on the one hand, and managerial energy on the other, were punitive. There was also the public profile of the Oxford dictionaries to be thought about: OUP had to be seen to be maintaining its dominance in the publication of major works of lexical scholarship, including subsidiary dictionaries and word-books as well as *OED* itself.³

² The first edition of *OED* was re-issued in 1933 accompanied by a short Supplement.

³ For an account of the first edition of *OED*, see Murray (1977) and Muggleston (2005); for the *OED* publishers and lexicographers in the 1920s see Brewer (2007b), Chapter 1; and for Craigie’s projects see Brewer (2007b: 29-31, 75-76) and Adams (2008).

In contrast to the *OED* lexicographers, the Fowler brothers were unusually easy to deal with. There were three lexicographical ones altogether: H. W., the oldest and best known; F.G., who died in 1918 after collaborating with H. W. on *The King's English* and the first edition of the *Concise*; and A. J., who worked on both the *Shorter OED* and the early stages of the Quarto. Their value to the Press was likewise threefold, in terms of cost, efficiency and popularity—the last ensuring the Press great financial gain. Firstly, as frugal individuals, they were content with very moderate rewards (one of the index entries in Jenny McMorris's biography of H. W. Fowler reads 'payment, attitude to (regarded as unimportant)'). Secondly, they worked swiftly and met deadlines. H.W.'s and F.G.'s first book on language, *The King's English*, initially discussed in December 1904, published less than two years later. The *Concise*, an abridgement of the *OED* and the first complete English dictionary to be published by OUP, took longer, appearing in 1911, but the work involved was dispatched with remarkable speed.⁴ The *Pocket*, a further abridgement, appeared promptly in 1924, as did a second edition of the *Concise* in 1929; while the book for which H. W. Fowler is now chiefly remembered, *Modern English Usage*, came out between these two works in 1926. Thirdly, their books brought both immediate and sustained income to the Press. The sales figures for the *Concise* and *Pocket* dictionaries, and for both *The King's English* and *Modern English Usage*, are staggering. *Modern English Usage* sold out almost straightaway and the archives record orders for reprinting of first 10,000, then 20, 000, then 50,000 copies, all within June to October 1926.⁵ Similarly, the *Concise* and *Pocket* dictionaries sold rapidly, in many tens of thousands every year, all over the world, and were crucial in helping to establish OUP's supremacy in English language lexicography, a position it held virtually unchallenged until the 1950s and 1960s. These three factors help us understand what it was about Fowler's Quarto dictionary that made Chapman and his deputy Kenneth Sisam—an astute publisher whose eye was always on the balance sheets—think that it would wash its face financially (unlike the *OED*). At the same time, however, they thought the Quarto would be an intellectually and culturally appropriate product for OUP, in their own words a 'great dictionary'.

The first hint of the work that was to become the Quarto is a suggestion made by Craigie, in 1920, for a post-*OED* project for his co-editor Onions: an 'Oxford Dictionary of Modern English' which would 'give a full idea of English as it now is (or as it may be about 1925), with copious illustrative material.'⁶ Next come a series of letters and memos between the publishers in November and December 1925. By now, it is clear that they are no longer thinking of Onions as a likely editor, but instead have fastened on Fowler—an interesting choice, given that he was by now 67 (whereas Onions was a mere 52). Perhaps they were prompted to do so by a letter to the *TLS* of March 5 1925, pointing out that what students needed was a dictionary 'intermediate' between the *Concise* and the *OED*:

⁴ The 1911 *Concise* edited the letters *S - Z* independently, since these had not been dealt with by *OED* by the time the smaller dictionary was published. See further Allen (1986).

⁵ OUP Archives (OUPA): MEU.

⁶ Brewer (2007b: 27-28).

Such a work would contain all that is really needful and most valued in the unabbreviated work, with a really adequate selection of parallel passages, a feature in which the New English Dictionary [i.e., *OED*] is so satisfying and full. The editor of the two ‘abbreviated’ volumes, Mr. Fowler, has deserved so well of the reading public, that perhaps he might be induced to set about the larger undertaking. Its value would be immense.

The Press returned an official reply to this, to say that the Abridged version of the *OED*, eventually to become the *Shorter OED*, was well in hand. Meanwhile, however, they must have discussed the idea behind the scenes, for on 27 November 1925 Sisam wrote to Fowler as follows:

I put to you an unofficial query ... Why not, instead of revising C.O.D. on a similar scale [as Fowler was in fact to do, publishing a second edition four years later in 1929], do a great Dictionary of current English on the same excellent lines—a modest thing of some 1500 quarto pages, which would be—what A.O.D. [the ‘abridged’ *OED*] will never be—a Dictionary of Current English. I need not say that if you had the will, funds would be forthcoming.⁷

A few days later (5 December), Sisam wrote again to say, ‘your dictionaries have been so much sought after by the public that you can hardly be surprised if we as publishers are developing a taste for them which approaches mania’. There followed a series of exchanges and negotiations, in which Sisam continued to court and coax, and Fowler to profess himself flattered and obliged but to fend off commitment. Thus on 12 December 1925, Fowler wrote, ‘Even a dictionary man may have his feelings, & be pleased to hear that his compilations are popular & that more of them would be welcome. Also, the kind of dictionary that you propose—current English, & on COD and POD lines but less severely compressed—has undeniable attractions for the compiler; & it was with regret that I told you it would not do for me.’

The next day Sisam reported to Humphrey Milford, head of the London office (and the original recruiter of the Fowler brothers for *The King’s English*, back in 1904),⁸ ‘He is beginning to nibble; and I don’t believe anybody else could do the job so economically and so well.’ He added, ‘This is Fowler’s special and peculiar province. His work has freshness which the trained lexicographer seems to miss.’ Writing to Fowler to encourage him further, he mentioned a particular attraction of the scheme for the publishers, whose feathers had been ruffled by Craigie’s defection to the States and his proposal to take the *OED* slips with him: ‘The quarto would put into the shade the series of vast dictionaries which Craigie is now planning in America’.⁹

A more specific sense of the Quarto emerges in a letter of 18 December. ‘My dear Fowler’, Sisam begins, ‘We have talked over this great Dictionary of current English, in one volume, quarto, about 1500 pages and we are unanimous in our view

⁷ This and following letters are quoted from OUPA/SOED/1925.

⁸ See McMorris (2001: 58-59).

⁹ See note 3 above.

that we should wait for your leisure and your brother's [A. J.'s] surviving interest, because nobody else is likely to put the thing through so well'.¹⁰ Sisam then asks a number of questions about the content of the dictionary. Would it define words found in historical literary works, 'in other words will it treat Shakespeare and the Bible as part of Modern English?' And 'as phrases and idioms are your strong point will the extra space [sc. in comparison with the *Concise*] give any room for pointing out the differences of meaning in the periods of modern English?' Would the quotations be dated, and 'Will the technical man, the doctor, the lawyer and business man be able to treat this book as his bible?' But Sisam did not want to press Fowler too hard:

These are points which require thinking over and I do not really want any answer. In the end we must abide by your judgement. But for my part I should like to see it contain, in the extra space, all sorts of information about usage which the narrower limits of C.O.D. and P.O.D. exclude. I once heard C.O.D. described as the only dictionary one could read. This one should be more readable...'

We can see what is beginning to emerge here: full illustrative material drawn from great writers of the past, but also full attention to matters of usage, and a sense that the dictionary is to be a functional work for practically-oriented dictionary users.

The archives go quiet on the Quarto for several months, presumably because Fowler was wholly occupied with *Modern English Usage*. But once this work had come out, to quite extraordinary acclaim, Chapman reported to Sisam that he had ensnared Fowler for the further project: 'I have urged HWF to devote his last years to the work of Unconcising.'¹¹ (The memo is headed 'The Fowler's Net'; Chapman is quoting the headline of a leader published in *The Times* of 19 October, 1926, which celebrated *Modern English Usage* as a 'fascinating and formidable book'). The publishers were delighted to have secured this commitment from Fowler, and their motivation was not merely financial: they believed that the Quarto would embody the cultural and academic values of the day. Earlier, Chapman had explained to their elderly lexicographer that 'The Abridged [i.e. the *Shorter*] is very important. But the Less Concise Quarto is much more important. Many men can abridge—only you can spread the Fowler's Net'.¹²

Criticisms of Fowler's scholarship

The documents quoted above make it clear that the publishers particularly valued Fowler's ability to write well about usage. When he began serious work on the Quarto, in 1930, Fowler came up with an innovatory scheme, namely the consistent and pervasive use of status labels, to be indicated by letters:

¹⁰ OUPA/QOD/1925/2.

¹¹ OUPA/QOD/1926/4, 11 Nov 1926

¹² OUPA/SOED/1926/1, 2 Nov. 1926.

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| • A—archaic | • O—obsolete |
| • D—dialectal | • P—pedantic |
| • E—erroneous | • R—rare |
| • F—familiar | • S—slang |
| • G—general | • T—technical |
| • J—jocular | • U—unseemly |
| • L—literary | • F—fustian [added 1931] |
| • N—nursery | • I—illiterate [added 1931] ¹³ |

While this scheme was a key element in the Quarto, it brought difficulties with it. On the one hand, the use of labels suggests that the dictionary is to be descriptive. On the other, we can see that a term such as ‘unseemly’ invokes notions of taste and decorum more akin to prescriptivism. In addition, the view that ‘Shakespeare and the Bible’ are ‘part of Modern English’ looks inappropriate for a descriptive dictionary. Such inconsistencies, or incompatibilities, were to turn into faultlines in the conception with which Fowler and the Press were working. In the end, as we shall see, they made it impossible to bring the project to completion.

It seems that C. T. Onions, one of the two surviving *OED* editors, was wary of the prescriptive character of Fowler’s work, and moreover doubtful about his scholarship. While Sisam and Chapman were developing their plans for the Quarto, *Modern English Usage* was going through the press. Onions—a waspish and severe person—expressed his lack of sympathy with the work, speaking of it as ‘this book, with which I have so many quarrels, & which will sell so well’.¹⁴ Elsewhere, commenting on some material Fowler had separately prepared for the *Shorter OED*, Onions was similarly condemnatory, describing it as ‘Unscholarly’.¹⁵

This judgement on Fowler, from someone in charge of the *OED*—i.e. what we think of as the exemplar of descriptivism, a dictionary based on evidence, not linguistic or polite precept—was repeated by Otto Jespersen in an article published in 1926, in which he described Fowler as ‘an instinctive grammatical moralizer’, and minced him to pieces over his treatment of the gerund.¹⁶ Jespersen was not the only professional grammarian to take this view (see further below). Such judgements may remind us of Burchfield’s comment, made in 1986, that Fowler was linguistically isolated. But despite these criticisms, Fowler was intimately familiar with the descriptive linguistic scholarship of the *OED*, having painstakingly abridged it to create first his *Concise*, and then his *Pocket Oxford Dictionary*. He was in regular and very frequent contact with Sisam, who himself was intimately involved with the completion of the *OED*, with the first *OED* Supplement, and with the Press’s lexicographical plans generally. It might be more accurate to say that the prescriptive aspects of Fowler’s treatment of language—which strike us as academically rebarbative today, but which continue, manifestly, to delight the general reader—can also be found in the OUP publishers who enabled and drove forward these dictionaries. And it can also be said that tendencies to prescriptivism can be found in the *OED* lexicographers themselves.

¹³ This list is compiled from OUPA/QOD/1930/1; OUPA/QOD/1931/37.

¹⁴ OUPA/MEU/1/52, 17 June 1925.

¹⁵ See correspondence between Onions, Sisam and Chapman, OUPA/SOED/1924/2-4 (January 1924).

¹⁶ Jespersen (1926).

Prescriptivism vs descriptivism

The relationship, and inherent conflict, between prescriptivism and descriptivism is at least as old as Quintilian.¹⁷ We can see Johnson struggling with it in the Preface to his Dictionary, while today the commercial success of Lynne Truss's *Eats Shoots and Leaves*, in some respects a direct descendant of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, is the classic example of popular desire for standards of correctness and normative grammar. Usage and correctness were important issues at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, not least on account of increasing literacy in English both at home and abroad. The programme of universal education initiated in the Education Act of 1870, the expansion of the British Empire, and the increased publication and dissemination of newspapers in English both at home and abroad, meant that many more people were engaging in public literacy than ever before, with what were, to some, quite horrifying results. Despair over the solecisms—the 'blunder', 'cacophony', 'verbiage', 'false pathos' and 'avoidable dulness'—of 'journalists and amateur writers' had pricked H. W. Fowler and his brother into writing their first book on usage (*The King's English*), and the correspondence between H. W. Fowler and Chapman's predecessor as head of OUP, Charles Cannan, over the preparation of this work, is full of exclamations of disgust at journalistic locutions, which Cannan called 'a heap of filth of various degrees of abomination'.¹⁸ Such horror of 'newspaper slip-slop' was widespread among educated and scholarly writers.¹⁹ A good example is the review of the completed *OED* which was published in the *TLS* on 19 April 1928. Its author, C. W. Brodribb, a classicist and assistant editor of *The Times*, hailed the *OED* as a descriptive linguistic enterprise but also expressed strong fears and anxieties about the 'newly literate'—i.e. the masses that were now, having been educated by the State, eligible to vote—and the neologistic evils of newspapers. He finished with a recommendation: 'what is now wanted is a standard of good, or at least passable, English... Now that the Dictionary is complete there should be ground for hoping that, although it does not set up to be an arbiter, it will nevertheless be more and more resorted to as one.'

OED was seen as being at odds with prescriptivism, since it was grounded on the study of empirical data gathered from a wide range of texts from 1150 to the present. It sat squarely in a tradition of nineteenth-century scientific philology that was to give birth to the various forms of linguistics that developed in the twentieth century—whether the post-Saussurian work of Bloomfield in the US, the Prague School in Europe, or, in the UK, Daniel Jones at UCL (who developed the phonetic studies of Henry Sweet) and J. R. Firth at SOAS.²⁰ But while much of the *OED* did record usage objectively, this dictionary contains a detectable element of prescription, in ways which now strike us as curiously at odds with its descriptive purpose. Sometimes this prescriptivism appears in definitions (e.g. the second sense of *caucus*

¹⁷ Quintilian & Honeycutt (2006 (1856)); see e.g. 2.13.15.

¹⁸ Fowler to Cannan, Dec 19 1904 (Misc/370/3), and Cannan to Fowler, 31 Jan 05 (OUPA/Misc/370/10).

¹⁹ For 'slip-slop', see *Notes & Queries*, 21 Feb. 1857. The writer's point is contested in Hall (1877: 166-72)

²⁰ See Aarsleff (1983), Collins and Mees (1999), Plug (2008).

is said to be ‘grotesquely misapplied’), sometimes in the notes on usage (e.g. failing to pronounce the ‘p’ at the beginning of words of Greek origin like *psyche* is described as ‘an unscholarly practice’, such pronunciation being denigrated as ‘irretrievably mutilated by popular use’), sometimes through the use of a special symbol (the paragraph mark, ¶) to indicate ‘catachrestic or erroneous’ usage. These adverse judgements often fly in the face of the quotation evidence adduced to demonstrate the history of a word’s use.²¹

The same scholarly inconsistency can be seen in the academic reviews which greeted Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*. Typically, these condemned Fowler on linguistic grounds while praising his book as ‘eminently readable’. ‘In Mr. Fowler’s chosen field of activity, viz. linguistic science,’ wrote Kemp Malone in *Modern Language Notes*, ‘sound and abiding work cannot be done by a man weak in phonetics and neglectful of the historical approach to the problems of which he writes....It would be easy to cover many pages with illustrations of the deficiencies of Mr. Fowler as a man of science.’ Such devastating strictures notwithstanding, ‘Grammarians and layman alike ought to have [MEU] on their shelves, and if they fail to find it highly enjoyable and highly stimulating, there is something wrong with them’.²² The most recent assessment of Fowler as a grammarian, by David Crystal (forthcoming, 2009), helps us understand how professional linguists could come to such ambivalent views. Reading *Modern English Usage* in its entirety, he finds that ‘Fowler...turns out to be far more sophisticated in his analysis of language than most people realize. Several of his entries display a concern for descriptive accuracy which would do any modern linguist proud. And although the book is full of his personal likes and dislikes, his prescriptivism—unlike that practised by many of his disciples—is usually intelligent and reasoned.’

By contrast with the academic reviews, contemporary notices in the less specialised press were almost wholly adulatory. The literary scholar Ernest de Selincourt, writing in the *TLS* (10 June 1926), thought the work ‘must delight everybody who ever had a thought for the language’. Identifying some small complaints, he explained that ‘humours like these are too infrequent to affect the value of his work, a work of sterling soundness and essentially English common sense—a work, too, in the presence of which every journalist must tremble.’ Such remarks, like those of Brodribb, make it clear that there was, at any rate in some people’s eyes, a place for a dictionary that would help regulate the language (especially the language of journalists) rather as Johnson’s was seen to have done—in other words, for Fowler’s Quarto.²³ As Lord Chesterfield had written in 1754, in anticipation of Johnson’s work (and of Brodribb’s view of the *OED*), ‘The time for discrimination seems to be now come. Toleration, adoption and naturalization have run their lengths. Good order and

²¹ See further Muggleston (2000), Brewer (2007a).

²² *Modern Language Notes* 42 (1927): 201-202; cf. the review by P. Fijn van Draat (of Utrecht) in *Englische Studien*, 63 Band, 1928-29, 82-86. F. Sidgwick, however, in *Review of English Studies* 2 (1926): 490-492, commended the book on grammatical grounds as well as finding it irresistibly readable.

²³ Cf. Herbert (1935:49), who deplored the pusillanimity of *OED* in this respect and called for ‘a *Good English Dictionary* showing us not only what is said but what is sound’.

authority are now necessary...We must have recourse to the old Roman expedient in times of confusion, and chuse a dictator'.²⁴

Language and literature

Johnson, of course, had chosen his quotations wherever he could from the great writers of the past. This brings us to what Burchfield identified as Fowler's reverence for 'the best-known works of Renaissance and post-Renaissance English literature, and the language used in them', which was entirely typical of his day. The strong connection between language and literature was repeatedly assumed by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural commentators, whether J. H. Newman, who thought that the 'sayings' of 'a great author...pass into proverbs among his people, and his phrases become household words and idioms of their daily speech, which is tessellated with the rich fragments of his language', or W. D. Whitney, the American lexicographer and linguist, who explained that 'the great body of literary works of acknowledged merit and authority, in the midst of a people proud and fond of it, is an agent in the preservation and transmission of any tongue, the importance of which cannot easily be over-estimated'.²⁵ The fear that language was in decline characterised the early twentieth century as much as the eighteenth, or the twenty-first, and such fear was (then, if not now) often expressed in terms of the resultant loss to culture of great literary works of the past, that 'such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be'. In the words of the poet laureate Robert Bridges,

we are inheritors of what may claim to be the finest living literature in the world. Now the history of languages shows that there is a danger lest our speech should grow out of touch with that literature, and losing, as it were, its capital, and living from hand to mouth, fall from its nobility and gradually dissociate itself from apparent continuity with its great legacy, so that to an average Briton our Elizabethan literature would come to be as much an obsolete language as Middle English is to us now.²⁶

Such beliefs explain why it was thought that a dictionary whose main function was to provide information about usage, as the Quarto was to do, needed also to provide illustrations from great writers of the past. The idea that great works of literature are vital to the well-being of our language is now problematic—partly owing to the cultural difficulties, now widely recognized, of identifying or establishing a canon, and partly because contemporary linguists take the view that how language has been used in the past is not necessarily relevant to how it is used today. (It should be noted that R. W. Burchfield, editor of the *OED* Supplement (1972–86), demurred from both these positions, strongly criticising twentieth-century linguists 'with shovels intent on burying the linguistic past and most of the literary past and present...those who

²⁴ Reprinted Bolton & Crystal (1966: 126).

²⁵ Newman (1873: 292-93); Whitney (1867: 23).

²⁶ Bridges (1925: 5).

believe that synchronic means “theoretically sound” and diachronic “theoretically suspect”’, who never quote ‘from the language of even our greatest living writers’. Such procedures ‘leave one looking at a language with one’s eyes partly blindfolded.’²⁷

Bridges’s remarks on the relationship between language and literature form part of ‘a full and definite statement’ of the motives and aims of the Society for Pure English (SPE), a body he was relaunching in 1925 after a period of decline. In the same document, he writes powerfully of the dangers to English of contamination from other languages, adopting standpoints in tune with those of Brodribb and others which we could not now admit as linguistically respectable: ‘wherever our Englishmen are settled abroad there are alongside of them communities of other-speaking races, who...establishing among themselves all kinds of blundering corruptions, through habitual intercourse infect therewith the neighbouring English’.²⁸ But Bridges was regarded as an expert on language and was about to become Chairman of a special Advisory Committee for Spoken English (1926), advising the BBC how its announcers should pronounce their words. Living in Boar’s Hill outside Oxford, he was in frequent contact with the officers of OUP, his publishers, and with the editors of the *OED* (Henry Bradley was a close friend, Sisam a neighbour), providing him with the opportunity to disseminate his opinions on language not only to the nation in general but also to the OUP in particular.²⁹

Also involved with the SPE, either then or formerly, were the four senior editors of *OED* (James Murray and Henry Bradley as well as Craigie and Onions), Kenneth Sisam, and many distinguished scholars and men of letters such as W. P. Ker, W. W. Greg, Helen Darbishire, F. R. Leavis, H. L. Mencken, Henry Newbolt, de Selincourt, F. P. Wilson, Lytton Strachey and H. G. Wells. Chapman and Jespersen were likewise closely associated, both writing several tracts for the Society—as was H. W. Fowler himself, who contributed even more. And although we think of Jespersen as standing at the head of the tradition of descriptive grammarians, and although (as already mentioned) he excoriated Fowler for trying to make English accord with Latin in its grammatical behaviour, Jespersen’s own method was, in part, based on descriptive grammatical analysis of the works of great writers of the English literary canon (e.g. the prose and verse of Shelley and Byron, and the writings of Macaulay, Carlyle, Tennyson, Dickens and Swinburne)—selected, therefore, on cultural rather than linguistic grounds.³⁰ In this respect it accorded closely with the assumptions about the relationship between language and literature we have seen expressed by Bridges and others.

These connections and ambivalences shed light on why OUP wanted the Quarto dictionary, and why they thought Fowler was the person to edit it. They also shed light on why Onions was rejected as an editor. Onions was a difficult and dislikable person, and moreover slow—but he was someone who seemed to believe much more than the

²⁷ See further Brewer (forthcoming), Burchfield (1972-86, vol 4, x-xi).

²⁸ Bridges (1925: 5).

²⁹ Bridges’s recommendations on pronunciation for the BBC were widely discussed, e.g. in *The Times* in letters and articles in 1928. Linguists today remember him for his battle with Daniel Jones over the *schwa*; see Collins & Mees (1999: 104-111).

³⁰ Jespersen (1905): chapter 1.

Press or Craigie did in descriptivism, i.e. in what he called his ‘lexicographer’s conscience’. (An example of this can be seen in his insistence, in 1931, that the sexual sense of the term *lesbian* should be included in the *OED* Supplement, on the grounds that ‘the word is in regular use, & no serious Supplement to our work should omit it.’ Craigie and OUP overruled him and the definition was omitted—only entering the *OED* many years later in 1976).³¹

Failure and demise

If the Quarto was so in tune with these specific aspects of the linguistic culture of the day (though out of tune with others), why did it come to nothing? The answer seems to be that the work was subject to a series of misfortunes, and that these slowed it down so severely that both its content and its linguistic assumptions became too outdated for the work to be recoverable. From 1930 onwards Fowler devoted himself to the Quarto as his main project, but when his wife died in 1930 his productivity fell off and he himself died in 1933. (Announcing his death, OUP, with whom he had been so long and prosperously associated, declared, in terms of praise unfamiliar to today’s linguists, ‘*Modern English Usage*, a model of sound learning, good taste and good feeling, has done more than any other book of our time to maintain the purity of the English language’). Fowler had previously enlisted a collaborator, H. G. Le Mesurier, who revised the *Pocket* and *Concise Oxford Dictionaries* and continued work on the Quarto with A. J. Fowler; on 22 Feb 1937 Chapman bullishly reported to the OUP Delegates that ‘these gentlemen have completed DEGHI, and with the alphabet complete (a week or two ago) to *Jam* the mid-point is in sight. The editors can hardly be persuaded to take any holiday, and their performance is admirable.’³² But neither they nor Le Mesurier’s own collaborator, Edward McIntosh, who in turn took over the other smaller dictionaries, were able to bring the Quarto to completion. At Le Mesurier’s death in 1940, the work was said to be ‘three parts done’; but—as OUP’s archives show—it proved impossibly difficult to find a replacement editor who would stay the course.

In the 1940s Chapman went through Fowler’s records intensively and made a number of recommendations, and after several false starts with other candidates, the Germanist lexicographer C. T. Carr was appointed as editor in 1949. A report of that year, by Dan Davin (the Assistant Secretary in charge of dictionaries), described its ‘present weaknesses’: ‘(i) it contains too many obsolete words and senses and (ii)...the modern quotations end about 19thC for the most part. We think that, given the title [now *Oxford Dictionary of Modern English*, or ODME], the 19th century flavour is too pronounced’.³³ The surviving papers for ODME bear out this judgement: many of the quotations recorded for head-words peter out in the 1880s. In 1955, Davin was still

³¹ Brewer (2007b): 49-50. Fowler had treated the term obliquely in the second edition of the *Concise* (1929), cross-referencing *Lesbian vice* to *Sapphism*, itself explained as ‘unnatural sexual relations between women’.

³² OUPA/CG39/CPGE000226: ‘Oxford Dictionaries. Memorandum for Delegates’, R.W. Chapman, 22 Feb 1937.

³³ *Ibid.*, ‘Oxford Dictionary Projects’, D.M. Davin to G. Cumberlege, 28 Oct 1949.

repeating the point that ‘the Fowlers’ reading did not take in much of the 20th century’, and he adds the bad news that ‘they had a predilection for archaic words and senses’. ‘Severe revision’ was now called for; ‘Chapman has been reading through the whole of the text and we have had volunteer readers combing for good 20th century quotations. [Chapman specified Wodehouse, T.S. Eliot, and the speeches of Churchill and of Roosevelt as likely sources]. Carr and McIntosh are coordinating the results and Carr himself is revising slip by slip. The process still has a long way to go and I should not care to guess when he will be ready. If we are lucky we may publish in 5 years, hardly less.’³⁴ Disaster struck again when Carr pulled out of the project in 1957. ‘I find I am so jaded by the work and nauseated by the thought of the messy part which still awaits revision’, he wrote to the Press, ‘that after much anxious thought and hesitation I have decided to tell you that I cannot continue....Lexicography gets one down after years of labour’.³⁵ The work was finally abandoned in 1958.

It may have been the sense that the literary quotations were dated and inappropriate, and that appealing to literature of the past as a standard for current usage was now less appropriate, that contributed to Carr’s depression and to the Quarto’s death. Or the problem may have been the usage labels, whose consistent and appropriate application was clearly agonizingly difficult (e.g. was it really feasible, either conceptually or in terms of available space in the dictionary, to make distinctions between ‘general’, ‘technical’ and ‘literary’ senses of the noun *city*?)³⁶ Nevertheless, as Chapman’s report of 18 July 1948 explained,

The discrimination of words and senses, devised by H.W.F. for this dictionary, is a new thing in lexicography. O.E.D. and other dictionaries have, of course, distinguished uses as obsolete, or as low (Johnson’s word), or as slang. But this is the first systematic attempt to distinguish between, e.g., general, literary, and technical uses.³⁷

Chapman was right to see this innovation as both timely and useful. After the publication, in 1961, of *Websters Third International Dictionary*, many other dictionaries on both sides of the Atlantic started to indicate the usage status of the words they treated. Usage, if not literary example, is now firmly established on the lexicographical and (popular) grammatical agenda; it is no coincidence that recent reprints of the original editions of *The King’s English* and of *MEU* have sold well, along with Burchfield’s re-editing of *MEU*. (A further edition, by David Crystal, is shortly to appear). As regards this lexicographical innovation, Fowler’s plans for the Quarto were prescient. But the other characteristic of the Quarto, its assumption that ‘great writers’ of the past—however identified—are a fundamental and pervasive influence on the language of the present, seems to have disappeared altogether, at any rate for the time being.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid, D.M. Davin to J. L. Austin, 14 Jan 1955.

³⁵ OUPA/OP1264/PB/ED/009256: Carr to Davin, 1 Aug 1957.

³⁶ Examples given for this distinction (on slips preserved in ODME boxes) were, respectively, ‘the slums of our great cities’, ‘the cathedral cities’, and ‘a city of the dead’.

³⁷ OUPA/ODME/11/61.

³⁸ The current revision of *OED*, however (i.e. the Third Edition, available at <http://dictionary.oed.com/>), continues to cite such writers; see Brewer (2007b): 253-54.

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