

'Who Needs Dictionaries?- How Dictionaries Are Dissolving Into The Bigger World Of 'Search''

Michael Rundell

British Council: 9th October

Report by Scott Sherriff

Ed. Michael Rundell

Introduction

Michael Rundell began his involvement in dictionary production in 1980. The subsequent decades have seen such extraordinary change that Michael began by revealing 90% of what he used to do has altered. As 'search' displaces the word 'look up', is there a future for the paper dictionary or, like the encyclopedia, will it soon become a 20th century relic? Beyond this, will dictionaries in any form survive, as digital natives increasingly use the Web as their primary source of lexical information?

Two Significant Revolutions in Dictionaries

The 'corpus revolution' of the 1980s, spearheaded by John Sinclair and his colleagues on the COBUILD project, saw language corpora being used for the first time in the compilation of dictionaries. The past twenty five years have seen steady improvements. Corpora have become much larger, and the software for querying them more sophisticated. Yet this revolution was essentially 'internal', leading to better dictionaries but still, in essence, traditional dictionaries.

The effects of the 'digital revolution' will be more profound. The CD-ROM dictionary was first produced about twenty years ago, followed by other handheld devices. But the Web has now taken a more central role, generating significant 'external' effects and creating a completely new, and still emerging, paradigm.

Paradigm Shifts

Dictionary publishers formerly had a reliable business model, producing one-size-fits-all dictionaries, and clearly aware of who their competitors were. That security has been undermined by the rise of online dictionaries. Fundamentally, the printed dictionary is no longer a privileged lexical gatekeeper. The tight control publishers historically exerted is weakening, leading to radical changes in the old top-down model of dictionaries that saw many consumers but few providers. The phenomenon of 'crowdsourcing', evidenced in blogs, forums and 'citizen journalism', is also influencing

the very nature of the dictionary and ensuring that their architects are manifold and diverse.

Liberated from space constraints and taking advantage of multimedia and hyperlinking, the electronic dictionary's range is infinite, affording the possibility of a multilayered approach to defining words that demonstrates to the user the many ways in which it can be encoded. Online dictionaries, replete with pronunciation aids, sound effects and games, have the capacity to offer the user a far more holistic experience than their paper counterparts.

The rather elaborate and convoluted process which publishers applied to new words vying for inclusion in their dictionaries has been replaced in the digital sphere by what could be described as lexical democratisation. For example, lexicographers in Malaysia offer citizens the opportunity to vote on their preferred translations of new technical terms, to determine how they are entered in the national dictionary.

Not fixed to a five-year publishing cycle, online dictionaries can be effortlessly current. The lexical fallout from global events such as the financial crisis can be nimbly and swiftly addressed, with words such as 'subprime' and 'quantitative easing' accordingly accounted for.

The price to be paid, Michael argued, is the loss of that sense of the dictionary being an authority. However, as conventions continue to be contested, many users will prioritize up-to-date-ness over authority and welcome suspension of the restrictive criteria vocabulary was subjected to. The shift is an attitudinal one. In the past, one would have said "If it's not in the dictionary it cannot be a proper word". Now, if it's not in the dictionary we are inclined to think that it's not a proper dictionary!

Final Thoughts

In order to survive, Michael averred, dictionary publishers must be considerably more adept in their responses to the challenges posed through the Internet than the music industry was. The emerging business model will be more complex than what went before, with licensing of data, advertising, and apps all part of the mix. Alternatively, it may simply be a matter of maintaining a quality product that appeals to a niche market. In any event, traditional dictionary publishers would be wise to embrace the notion that they are now part of a wide and dynamic 'language engineering' community and seek to reap the benefits that such a lexicographical landscape could yield.