Mother tongue

# Introduction

Chapter 10: Order out of Chaos

**What is this chapter about?**

* How big is the English language?
* Words and their meanings
* The most popular English dictionaries

**How I dealt with the topic:**

* I have divided the chapter into 8 parts, which I will go over in order.

**Information**

The sources are mixed in with the information I got from the chapter. The sources are listed at the end.

1. The meaning of words and the attempts at counting

* Should derivatives of words be counted separately?
  + e.g.: child and childish - happy, happiness and unhappy
* Experts tried to count how many words people knew
  + e.g.: Shakespeare, the average person in that time, fruit pickers,…
* Academics estimated that Shakespeare had a vocabulary of around 10,000-15,000 words (which is extremely low)
  + People stopped trying to count eventually because one can possess thousands of words without ever using them!
  + The numbers were too different
* **Fun fact:** Shakespeare has never written the words: Bible, Trinity, or Holy Ghost. That doesn’t necessarily mean that he didn’t know them.

2. The average person’s vocabulary

* Philologist Max Müller thought the average farm labourer had an everyday vocab of only 300 words!
* Stuart Berg Flexner suggested the average well-read person knew about 20,000 words and used about 1,500 to 2,000 in a normal week’s conversation
* It is proven to be hard to calculate the average person’s vocabulary size
  + If I ask you what *independent* means, you could say ‘not dependent’, which is correct, even though you don’t know what it means. That’s why that first definition is followed by a second one, which explains the word.
  + Some meanings of words we can guess

3. How to prove if we know a word? – how our memory works

* How do you define words like *the, what* and *am*?
* We know every meaning of a word, but if we are asked to write them all down, we can’t.
  + “The simple fact is that it is hard to remember what we remember, so to speak.”
    - = The number of words we use is much smaller than the words we know
* “Our memory is a high fickle thing”. (-*Dr. Alan Baddeley*)
* Experiment: when people were asked what the capital of every country was, they had a harder time with countries like Bulgaria and Uruguay. Though when they were given the initial letter of a capital city, they often suddenly remembered.

**The problem**: we have more verbal information in our brains that we can’t get out at one time, so we can’t predict accurately how much material we possess.

**How many words does the average student know?**

* One of the most famous studies(1940):
  + R.H Seashore & L. D. Eckerson
  + Selected one word from every left page of a Funk & Wagnalls standard desktop dictionary and asked college students to define or use those words in a sentence.
  + Conclusion: average student has a vocab of 150,000 words
* Similar study: 250,000 words
* Professor tested himself on every word in *Webster’s dictionary*: 33,456 words!

🡺 the framing of a test is crucial to receive correct answers

4. The nuances of English

* The 9 words that account for one-quarter of all the words in English: *and, be, have, it, of, the, to, will, you*
* In a dictionary will be written that *tall* and *high* sort of mean the same thing, but you can’t use both words in the same context.
* Some synonymous words cannot be used as each other’s replacement
* P143 example: “*on the strength of dictionary definitions alone a foreign visitor to your home could be excused for telling you that you have an abnormal child, that your wife’s cooking is exceedingly odorous, and that your speech at a recent sales conference was laughable, and intend nothing but the warmest praise*.” (*Bill Bryson)*
* Some words have a definition but are used in other senses. *Keep* means ‘to retain’, but is more used as in ‘keep cool’ or ‘keep smiling’.

5. The invention of new words

* English and other languages are changing all the time.
* Johnson once said: “No dictionary of a living tongue can ever be perfect, since while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding, and some are fading away.”
  + In other words: when a new dictionary is published, some words are getting too old and disappear from the language, and other words are new and being used more often.
* A report in the *New York Times* in 1990 said words were being added at the rate of 15,000 to 20,000 a year.

6. Johnson’s dictionary

there were dictionaries before Johnson’s, but his was the one we remember most, along with Webster’s dictionary and the latest Oxford dictionary. All of them had flaws and shortcomings but were still described as magnificent, which is why they are the ones talked about in the chapter.

* The first important English dictionary: 43,000 words (S. Johnson’s dictionary) 1755
* 450,000 words (*Webster’s Third New International*) 1961
* Latest: 615,000 (*Oxford English Dictionary*) 1989

### Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

* Given a contract by London Publisher Robert Dodsley to make an English dictionary
* example of his mistakes:
  + *Fancy* with an *f*, but *phantom* with a *ph*
* Institutionalised differences such as:
  + *Flower* and *flour*
  + *Metal* and *mettle*
* Sometimes his etymologies were incorrect, and his proofreading careless
* He would write definitions that were not simply written and were sometimes extremely long
* Dictionary took 9 years to make
* The original name of the dictionary: *A Dictionary of the English Language: In Which the Words are Deduced from their Originals, and Illustrated in their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers. To Which are Prefixed A History of the Language, and an English Grammar*.

7. Webster’s dictionary

Noah Webster (1758-1843)

* Claimed to have mastered 23 languages, but that was proven to be false.
* His book The Elementary Spelling Book (1788) sold so many copies that historians lost track
  + It was estimated that by the end of the 19th century, it had sold more than 60 million copies
  + = Except for Bible, it is probably the best-selling book in American history
* An important thing to note is that Noah Webster was a highly religious Christian. He said: “Education is useless without the Bible”. His dictionary has 6 thousand Bible references and is therefore a pretty helpful tool for people who are studying the bible.
* Some favourite radical changes of his:
  + Soop instead of soup
  + Bred instead of bread
  + Groop = group
  + Wimmen = women
  + Tuf = tough
* He also attacked the American tendency to drop the ‘u’ from words like colour, humour,…
* His dictionary retained many irregular spellings, some of which we still use today:
  + Acre, glamour
* His dictionary contained 70,000 words, far more than Johnson’s
* The volume after his death was called the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a better version

8. The Oxford English Dictionary

* Most ambitious philological exercise ever undertaken
* The intention was to record every word used in English since 1150 and trace it back through all its shifting meanings, spelling and uses.
* The man chosen for the job: James August Henry Murray(1837-1915)
* His eleven children were roped into the business from the moment they learned the alphabet
* Project took more than 4 decades, the book had 15,000 pages
* Hundreds of volunteers helped him with the work
* A notable contributor was Dr W.C. Minor, but he was an inmate at Broadmoor, a hospital for the criminally insane
  + In one year, he made 12,000 contributions to the dictionary from the private library at Broadmoor
* In 1884, the dictionary was beginning to be published, under the name of *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles; Founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by The Philological Society*.
* After Murray died, the dictionary has been known as *The Oxford English Dictionary*
* Since then, it has been updated over 20 times

# Sources

*Websters Dictionary 1828 - Noah Webster*. (z.d.). Websters Dictionary 1828. https://webstersdictionary1828.com/NoahWebster

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