

A.P. Cowie. *English Dictionaries for Foreign Learners: A History.* 1999, 232 pp. ISBN 0-19-925084-7. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

In the mid 1990s the evolution of the English learner's dictionary reached a zenith with the appearance on the market of four advanced-level monolingual learners' dictionaries. Three of these were existing works, i.e. the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (henceforth ALD), the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (henceforth LDOCE) and the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (henceforth COBUILD), which marked, to differing extents, significant departures from the lexicographical procedures followed by their predecessors. The last one, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (henceforth CIDE), was a completely new dictionary. This highly productive burst of lexicographical energy was also the catalyst for an even more productive and sustained body of metalexicographical research and writing that dealt with the topic of learners' dictionaries.

The plethora of books on learner lexicography can broadly be categorised as belonging to two main groups: those dealing with "research on dictionary use" (Wiegand 1984: 15) and those providing "criticism of dictionaries" (Wiegand 1984: 15). The latter can then be extended to include those resources that move beyond criticism and into the realm of speculation, such as the book *The Perfect Learners' Dictionary (?)*. There is, however, a third and very important element of metalexicography, which is broadly categorised by Wiegand (1984: 15) as "history of lexicography". This has unfortunately been a sparsely populated niche in the general body of metalexicographical work.

A.P. Cowie's *English Dictionaries for Foreign Learners: A History* is a valuable contribution to the field of metalexicographical research and writing that deals with the topic of learners' dictionaries, as it provides a point of departure for both research on dictionary use and dictionary criticism. Furthermore, it treats the dictionaries not as projects in isolation, but rather as results of a fascinating evolutionary process.

A previous reviewer, however, reacted negatively to the scope of the book, by stating that it only presents a "description of advanced-level learner dictionaries from their inception to 1989" (Nichols 2001: 205):

That a scholar as respected as Mr. Cowie should choose to gloss over a decade in which the impact of corpus lexicography became fully evident in dictionaries produced with the aid of corpora calls into question the ultimate usefulness of this book as a complete history of the subject.

In my opinion, though, this restriction of its scope is not necessarily a weakness, as a detailed discussion of the new generation of learners' dictionaries would not only lengthen an already formidable read, but also be unnecessary, because many other sources have discussed the methods and structures of these dictionaries (as was indicated in the first paragraph). As it stands, Cowie's work has made an important contribution by filling a vacuum that has existed in current research in this field, by providing a comprehensive (though

not complete) and insightful history that traces the innovative and pedagogical spirit that underpins EFL lexicography back to its roots.

The criticism of the book expressed by Nichols and discussed in the previous paragraphs is counterbalanced, in part, by the following statement in that review (Nichols 2001: 205):

Rather than in breadth, then, the strength of the *History* lies in its detail: in Mr. Cowie's descriptions of the scope of the task facing the earliest pioneers, and in his painstaking comparisons of the ways various early works treat the myriad elements that make up a learner's dictionary.

This attention to detail is already evident in the first chapter of the book, in which Cowie seeks to describe what he regards to be "The Genesis of the Learner's Dictionary".

The book begins with a brief introduction in which each of the major early role players — Harold Palmer, Michael West and A.S. Hornby — are introduced and cursorily profiled, particularly with regard to their contributions to EFL teaching and applied linguistics. Hereafter, Cowie confines chapter 1 to their lexicographical input and the seminal dictionaries or related books their work led to. It establishes the link between the vocabulary control movement (of which these men were part) and the eventual coming of age of the general monolingual learner's dictionary. Significantly, it also shows the association between vocabulary control and "work on phraseology and grammar" (Cowie 1999: 14), a point that is explored further in the second chapter of the book. All these influences, though, are shown by Cowie to be underpinned by a real concern for — and intimate knowledge of — the problems faced by foreign learners of English (mainly in India and Japan). These three innovators drew from wells of practical experience, which is probably why "nearly all of the elements that are now familiar to learner lexicography can be traced to the work of Palmer, West and Hornby" (Nichols 2001: 205).

From the beginning of the book, Cowie shows the commitment by EFL lexicographers to accommodate the productive needs of their target users alongside the receptive needs that are usually well met by most dictionaries. In chapter 1 the concept of the effective use of grammar representation in the EFL dictionary, especially in aid of text production, is shown to be at the heart of pioneering efforts in this field. Chapter 2 sees a narrowing of this focus and mainly explores the profound influence that the emphasis placed on the natural and adequate reflection of phraseology had on shaping the EFL dictionary as an effective tool for text production. It deals in great detail with the distinctions between different types of combinations and their placement and subsequent treatment in early EFL dictionaries. The distinction between idioms and collocations on the one hand, and collocations and so-called "open" compounds on the other, as well as the polemic criterion of transparency, as applied to collocations, are just some of the issues Cowie deals with in a systematic and very structured, analytical way. The pre-corpus gathering of collocations also merits some discussion. These issues are not, however, viewed in isolation and are always discussed within the broader parameters of the book, i.e. their relevance

in the historical discourse and therefore the manner in which they were addressed by Palmer, West and Hornby, as well as by subsequent compilers of the earliest reference works for learners.

The focus on syntax and phraseology is carried through to the next chapter in which the second generation of learners' dictionaries is discussed and which "spans the period between the compilation and publication of *ALD 2* (in 1963) and the first appearance, in 1978, of the ... *LDOCE 1*" (Cowie 1999: 82). However, Cowie expands this focus in order to provide a blueprint for dictionary criticism. The lexicographical treatment of "pronunciation", "verb and adjective patterns", "definitions and glosses", "illustrative examples" and "idioms and phrasal verbs" is evaluated (with minor alterations to these broad categories, depending on the dictionary under evaluation). In chapter 3, this classification is applied to, in turn, *ALD 2*, *ALD 3* and *LDOCE 1*, with detailed critical analyses being provided within the broader framework for each of these dictionaries. Interestingly, Cowie changes tack in chapter 5 and, instead of discussing each dictionary in turn, identifies broad categories (altering his blueprint somewhat), i.e. "microstructure and macrostructure" (dealing especially with issues of main vs sublemmatisation), "grammatical schemes and codes", "definitions", "style, attitudinal, and register labels" and "sense relations and lexical fields". He then proceeds to give brief critical discussions within these categories of the treatment of each in *LDOCE 2*, *COBUILD 1* and *ALD 4*, all of which are classified as belonging to the "third generation of learners' dictionaries" and published within a few years of one another in the late 1980s.

In both these chapters, which can arguably be considered to be, as a unit, the crux of the book, the analyses are careful and detailed, plotting with great aplomb the balance between adhering to theoretical insight and paying attention to practicalities. Such analyses are usually most evident in the writings of a metalexigrapher with extensive practical experience, as Cowie clearly illustrates. There is, however, a major point of possible criticism, which is again succinctly revealed by Nichols (2001: 206-207):

Particularly in the third and fifth chapters, we find a bias toward Oxford dictionaries showing itself in Mr. Cowie's comparisons of works that compete with each other, despite his obvious efforts to be fair. Certain opinions that resulted in choices that he made as ... editor ... are presented as absolutes: his criticism of tightly controlled defining vocabularies, for instance, or his defense of parenthetical elements in definitions to indicate possible objects of a transitive verb.

This criticism is certainly valid and in line with my own observations regarding these chapters, but it can be argued that bias is, in the metalexigraphical musings of practical lexicographers, inevitable. It is certainly not unique to this book and is evident in many of the other writings on learners' dictionaries. It is, I would further argue, an inevitable by-product of the commercial polarisation of the learner's dictionary market and the corresponding (commercially motivated) alliance of academics and lexicographers to particular publishing houses. In fact, the previous reviewer (commendably) declares a bias too, having been "trained at Longman as a corpus lexicographer" (Nichols 2001: 207).

The fundamental question is whether the bias is strong enough to detract substantially from the value of Cowie's analyses. I would argue that it is not, and that, despite the points mentioned by Nichols (which should also not be accepted uncritically), the bias mainly has the following result: the analyses of Oxford dictionaries are truly engrossing, the prose comes alive and one is left with the sense of having been afforded a rare glimpse into the mind of the lexicographer, as not only the decisions, but also the thought-processes that motivated those decisions are laid bare. Far from being the weakest parts of the book, these are, in my opinion, the strongest. Furthermore, Cowie does try "to be fair", as is attested to by Nichols, and generally succeeds, which is why "these chapters contain highly useful summaries of the different approaches both of successive and competing editions" (Nichols 2001: 207).

Wedged between these excellent chapters though is a curious attempt to give a nod to the influence of the computer on learner lexicography, which is sadly unsuccessful. Nichols' (2001: 207-209) estimation of this chapter and particularly the deficiencies of its treatment of corpus-based lexicography, is, in my opinion, valid and extremely useful, and cannot be improved upon. I therefore defer to that account.

I would like to add some criticism regarding an area which Cowie rather disappointingly undertreats, i.e. the importance and value of dictionary-making systems. Cowie's observations in this regard are limited to a very brief treatment of "the lexicographical workstation" and little mention is made of the fundamental obstacles that faced the evolution of computer-based lexicography in the time period within which this chapter is situated. These obstacles are, in brief, the transition from elementary word processing to working within structured tag sets, and, eventually, the debate whether to continue working in an SGML- or similarly based text editor, or to make the paradigm shift to working within database-driven dictionary-making software. The eventual evolution of dictionary-making systems has had a profound influence on the editorial process, allowing for faster, more accurate and better integrated compilation of dictionaries, improvements to and more comprehensive automatisation of final editing and quality control processes, and the ready export into data formats for paper-based or electronic publishing. That a comprehensive historical overview of these developments is omitted from a book of this extent is a great disappointment.

With the last chapter Cowie seems to be on more solid footing again. It provides a critical and very informative overview of research into dictionary use and presents an especially insightful discussion on the balance that needs to be maintained between using dictionaries for encoding (productive) and decoding (receptive) purposes. His concern for a perceived neglect of the encoding function of learners' dictionaries is especially evident here and he (Cowie 1999: 176) states in this regard:

This equilibrium, however, has been increasingly challenged since the early 1980s, and, side by side with a general increase in 'user-friendliness', the 1990s have witnessed a shift in favour of designs which prioritize decoding.

He acknowledges that there is ample evidence from user-related studies to motivate such a priority-shift, but proceeds to critically analyse these results and to state a solid case for returning to a more balanced approach when dealing with a larger scale learner's dictionary. It is his focus on the need for the improvement and structured teaching of dictionary skills that is especially compelling. He also comes out in favour of the use of so-called "bilingualized" dictionaries to "serve as a bridge between an introductory bilingual dictionary and the advanced monolingual work" (Cowie 1999: 198). The chapter ends with a summary of the most salient findings and issues regarding user-related research into learners' dictionaries, one which serves as a very useful introduction into the branch of metalexigraphy dealing with research on dictionary use.

In conclusion, Nichols (2001: 209) aptly credits the book as follows:

In the end, Mr. Cowie's ability to summarize lexicographic issues and controversies that are, more often than not, quite complex is of help to a reader coming to this topic for the first time.

This finding has been in keeping with my experience in reading this book. Though it is obviously not the last word on this intriguing and vastly important topic, it is a detailed, enlightening and essential introduction to the evolution of learners' dictionaries. If read in unison with sources such as the critical review by Nichols often quoted here, it can provide a solid platform for the critical study of the latest generation of these influential reference works that target such a huge segment of the international lexicographical market.

References

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