# A Lexical-Semantic Interpretation of Johnson's *Dictionary* Entries

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***Résumé :*** *L'ouvrage de référence, le* Dictionnaire *de Samuel Johnson souligne le rôle primordial que l'usage de la langue a pour la signification des mots. La synonymie, la paraphrase et la métaphore conventionnelle sont les plus forts moyens parmi lesquels le lexicographe donne de définitions réelles, correctes et judicieusement agencées.*

***Mots-clés:*** *signification, usage, dictionnaire*

## Argument

The history of the English lexicography begins with the publication of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1775.The 'work that defined the English language'(Lynch 2004) has been attributed great value since it has influenced the future development of English dictionaries.

The paper focuses upon the analysis of Johnson's *Dictionary* entries underlining the scholar's encyclopedic knowledge and his mastering of the English language at all levels up to revealing the spirit of a whole age: "Among early English lexicographers, Johnson was the first to write memorably by design; he was the first to assert the cultural authority of dictionary definitions."(Adams 2009).

## The Background

It is common knowledge that the entry represents the alphabetized headword by which the word or expression being defined is identified. Most headwords are canonical forms making up a paradigm and being representative of a certain natural language in its standard. The structure of the entry can be taken into account by observing the following items, as suggested by Landau (1989: 84-85):

1. The main entry or headword.
2. Any additional word class a word belongs to/ part of speech of the headword, i.e. verb/noun/adjective. Some dictionaries allot separate headword status to each part of speech, others do not.
3. Any inflected forms given such as optional presence of identical past tense and past participle forms in *-ed* and *-ing* forms.
4. Run- on derivatives without definitions.
5. Run - in idioms or other fixed expressions included within an entry.
6. Variant spellings.
7. Words given in lists and derived by prefixation with common prefixes, such as *in,-non,-re,-un.*

These references may overlap with abbreviations or encyclopedic entries, the selection being made by the lexicographer. The main entry form in a dictionary serves a number of different purposes thus indicating the referred spelling, the usual printed form of the lexical unit and syllabication (Landau 1989: 87).

## Corpus Analysis

A comparison of these modern entry constituents with the Johnsonian ones shows that the: "[…] *Dictionary* is not distinguished by its innovations […] but by the skillful and original execution of techniques already established, albeit provisionally, in early modern English lexicography. What Johnson did, he did supremely well" (Landau 1989: 25).

Johnson's *Dictionary* entry includes: the headword; the word class specification together with the stem if it is a derived word; etymological references; combining forms; meaning definition by synonyms or/and paraphrase, conventional metaphors; contextualization sources (specification of authors, dictionaries and literary quotations)

A tentative semantic analysis of the definitions reveals the author's 'authoritative tone and occasional flashes of idiosyncratic humor'
(Hanks 2006: 188), pinpointing the current usage of the words: "Words must be sought where they are used" (Johnson, *Preface* 1755*)*.

The following research samples provide illustrations of the Johnsonian meaning techniques applied with a view to" sort the several senses of each word, and to exhibit first its natural and primitive signification," followed by "its consequential meaning," and then "the remoter or metaphorical signification."(*Johnson*, *Plan of a Dictionary* 1747).

***a. Definition by synonymy***

e.g. *Loggerhead*. n. s.[ *logge*, Dutch and *head*] A dolt; a blockhead; a thickscul.
*Shakespeare*

Johnson provides etymological information and defines meaning using synonyms. The noun also enters the expressions *to fall to Loggerheads* or *to go to Loggerheads* meaning *to scuffle; to fight without weapons.* In contemporary English it might collocate with *be* in the idiomatic expression *be at loggerheads (with sb)*, meaning if two people or groups of are at loggerheads, they disagree very strongly, e.g. *Clare's at loggerheads with her boss over the new working hours* (Longman 1995). *Dolt* is marked as *old-fashioned*, *blockhead* as *informal*, whereas *thickscul* is retrieved in the idiomatic expression *sb can't get it into their (thick) skull* used in *spoken* English with the meaning of being unable to understand something very simple
(Longman 1995), e.g. *She can't get it into her thick skull that I'm fed up with her complaints*.

e.g. *Doghearted*. a. [dog and *heart]* Cruel; pitiless; malicious.
*Shakespeare*

Being aware of their various contextual usages, "Similarly and in contrast to earlier lexicography, Johnson's dictionary entries—little critical essays about lexical form, meaning, and usage—talk in voices big enough to carry across the centuries" (Adams 2009), Johnson separates the synonyms by a semicolon. This difference in meaning variation is still identified in contemporary English where we find them members of separate synonymic series as suggested by Hayakawa 1987:
e.g. <u>Cruel</u>*, bestial, brutal, nasty, sadistic (132 )*
*Inexorable, merciless,* <u>pitiless</u>*, relentless ( 293)*
*Vindictive, malevolent,* <u>malicious</u>*, mean* ( 648)
As indicated, *cruel* is the most general in its series, applying to both the harsh and harmful act and attitude of inflicting pain on others, lacking sensitivity and compassion. *Pitiless* and *malicious* are only essay components adding other semantic features to the dominant of the series. *Pitiless* refers to the cold, steel-hard quality in human beings, that of not making or allowing the slightest concession. *Malicious* implies the intent to do evil or harm, being applied chiefly to actions and motives.

***b. Definition by paraphrase, synonymy, conventional metaphor***

e.g. *Bellygod* n .s. [ from *belly* and *god*].A glutton; one who makes a god of his belly.
*Hakewill*

*Bellygod* is nowadays considered archaic (Webster 1996) but in Johnson's time it was much favoured since the state of one's belly could tell whether things were right in a household. Even Johnson considered himself a bellygod: "Johnson wasn't fat, but he could be something of a bellygod himself", admitting that he minded his belly very studiously (Lynch 2005:16). At present, the synonym *glutton* is used with the meaning of *the one who eats too much or is given to excessive eating and drinking* ((Webster1996) revealed by Johnson's conventional metaphors *one who makes a god of his belly* (above) and *a slave to the appetites* for defining *Bellyslave*.

e.g. *Backbiter* n. s. [from *backbite*] A privy calumniator; a censurer of the absent.

*South*

Through the remarkable conventional metaphor *a censurer of the absent* Johnson epitomizes the meaning of *saying mean or spiteful things about (one absent)*, being attuned to the age of insults to which he himself was a contributor without being insolent: "In this world where insults flew fast and furious, Samuel Johnson was second to none […], achieved this status because he adored a good argument and relished verbal combat"( Lynch 2005: 2-3).

e.g. *Footlicker* n.s. [*foot* and *lick*] A slave; an humble fawner; one who licks the foot.

*Shakespeare*

The term is still in use denoting a person who humiliates himself for getting any kind of favour or advantage (Webster 1996).The conventional metaphor is contained in the paraphrase *one who licks the foot.* As a synonym we retain the noun *fawner*, as derived from the verb *fawn*.

e.g. *Linseywoolsey*. a. [*linen* and *wool*] made of linen and wool mixed. Vile; mean; of different and unsuitable parts.

*Stapleton*

*Peel'd, patch'd, and piebald, linseywoolsey brothers* (Pope's Dunciad, b.iii)

The word is 'a corruption from linen' as Johnson writes and it has both a concrete meaning and an abstract one which points to something incongruously minded.

e.g. *Inconversable*. a. [*in* and *conversable*] Incommunicative; ill qualified by temper for conversation; unsocial.

*More*

"Johnson made up his own word to show how important sociability was to him."(Lynch 2005:57).

## Concluding Remarks

A dictionary entry can offer clues to both linguistic and cultural knowledge. The way in which it encapsulates information varies according to the author(s) along the time: "Johnson assumed levels and types of literacy that seventeenth-century lexicographers could not safely assume, and the purpose, structure, and style of his *Dictionary* suit the age and place, London, in which it was written, published, and, for the most part, read […] And that's true, partly due to Johnson's insight and skill: He more aptly identified quotations; wrote reasonably accurate, often elegant, if sometimes controversial, definitions; he was even good at guessing etymologies […] His was an Olympian lexicography" ( Adams 2009).

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