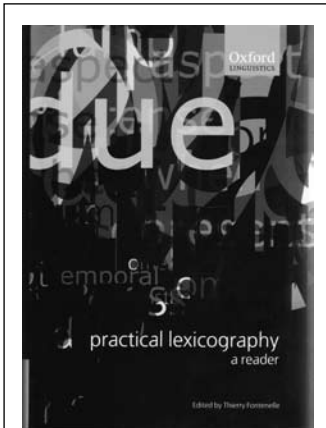


Thierry Fontenelle (ed.). *Practical Lexicography, A Reader*



Thierry Fontenelle (Editor)
Practical Lexicography, A Reader

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practical

1. Based on practice or action rather than theory or hypothesis
2. Being likely to be effective and applicable to a real situation; able to be put to use¹

From

<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/practical>

In the 20 years that I worked for Van Dale, a Dutch publishing house specialised in lexicography, I regularly met people who were not linguists, but who nonetheless showed an interest in the dictionary phenomenon. Once, we received a letter from a user of our comprehensive English-Dutch dictionary who complained that the – in his opinion rather common – word *is* was not included. He felt disappointed about this lacuna in his expensive and respectable dictionary. It's easy to respond with disdain to such criticism, but I too have sometimes sought in vain for words in French, English and Spanish dictionaries. Some of these may well have been irregular verb conjugations that I did not recognize as such. If one fails to connect an unfamiliar inflected form with the infinitive, it is difficult to look up the word in its alphabetical place [in printed books], and the meaning will remain obscure. Including only the infinitive of a verb as a keyword in a dictionary is an efficient, space-saving convention in traditional lexicography, but it is by no means user-friendly. As far as I am concerned, one of the blessings of consulting dictionaries on a computer is that looking-up *is* will immediately show the entry **be** (and in French *va* and *ira* will lead to **aller**).

But not only to disappointed users have I explained lexicographic conventions. There are quite a few non-linguists around who want to know how to bring about a dictionary. Sometimes life itself creates a need for a dictionary that does not already exist. And sometimes individuals decide to put one together themselves. Such people encounter all kinds of practical questions.

¹ In a traditional (printed) dictionary the definition would probably have been corrected before publication. For example into "Likely to be effective and applicable to...". The interesting thing about publications on the Internet is that it is very likely that soon after publication of these pages the definition will be corrected.

I remember the owner of a transport company who saw opportunities in Bulgaria. A Bulgarian-Dutch dictionary however did not exist. A mathematician from Hong Kong who lived and worked in The Netherlands noted that he could not help his daughter with her homework. Her Dutch was much better than his and she did not always understand what he could explain in Mandarin. He decided to compile a Chinese-Dutch dictionary. A third example is a bank employee who, in his spare time, started a comprehensive multilingual financial lexicon.

All these people sought practical advice and they turned to a specialized publishing house for help. That is how I came into contact with them. Some of their many questions were:

- Under which entry do I place fixed phrases and idiomatic expressions?
- What percent of the words begin with A, with B, and so on?
- What does the blueprint of an empty dictionary look like? Which building blocks are universal and essential?
- What are the typographical conventions, such as the use of bold and italics?
- Where can I find information on tools/software to build a dictionary with?
- What are the conventions for the clustering of words derived from the same base (for example *active*, *activist*, *activism*, *activity*, *activate*)?

I would have liked to be able to refer them to *Lexicography for dummies*, which no doubt would have had the answers to such questions. However, this title was not available then, and to my knowledge is still not. (For lack of it, I usually referred to the English edition of Bo Svensen's *Handbok i lexicografi* or Sidney Landau's *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography*.)

With potential users such as those described above in mind, I looked at *Practical Lexicography, A Reader* compiled and introduced by Thierry Fontenelle and recently published by Oxford University Press in the series Oxford Linguistics. It immediately became clear to me that this title aims at a completely different user group. There is a deep gap between the basic practical questions of lay persons who pursue their first steps on the path of lexicography, and what the academic world holds for *practical*. Some of the questions quoted above are touched upon in the very first contribution by Samuel Johnson, written in 1747. The other twenty one articles are of no help for those who need basic practical assistance.

Useful Anthology

This observation is by no means a disqualification of the book. It probably just illustrates the polysemy of the word *practical* (see illustration). I hoped for a practical book in sense no. 2. It turned out to be practical in sense no. 1. *Practical Lexicography* offers fascinating reading for people like me, who feel at home on lexicographical territory. The great merit of the editor, Thierry Fontenelle, is that he compiled a reader's digest from the huge mountain of publications in congress proceedings, in magazines and in books. He divided the field into twelve parts: I Metalexigraphy, Macrostructure, and the Contribution of Linguistic Theory; II On Corpus Design; III On Lexicographical Evidence; IV On Word Senses and Polysemy; V On Collocations, Idioms, and Dictionaries; VI On Definitions; VII On Examples; VIII On Grammar and Usage in Dictionaries; IX On Bilingual Lexicography; X On Tools for Lexicographers; XI On Semantic Networks and Wordnets; XII On Dictionary Use.

For each part, Fontenelle selected one or several articles – all of them published before – that thoroughly discuss the subject. All chapters are written by people who practice or practiced the lexicographical craft. In that sense, the title of the book is well chosen; no academic theory but results of research and thought by professionals with practical experience in dictionary making.

For someone like me there is every reason to be grateful to the compiler. All too often issues of the *International Journal of Lexicography* remained unread, all too often congress bundles landed on the bookshelf too soon. For those who work in commercial lexicography, an excuse for not reading specialist literature is always available. After all, we are at meetings all the time, busy with planning, struggling with tight budgets and timetables. If someone takes the trouble to pack the most relevant lexicographic baggage in one single volume, there is every reason for gratitude. Since Thierry Fontenelle looks beyond the horizon, with his experience as an academic researcher at the University of Liege, as former president of Euralex and as program manager at Microsoft Natural Language Group, his selection is hardly for me to criticize. I can report that from my experience as lexicographer and publisher I have the impression that all areas are being covered and that his choice of authors is excellent.

Date: up to, or out of

Nonetheless I venture to make a few comments. A lot has changed, rapidly and

drastically, in lexicography. Not so much since 1747, but rather since the 1980s. Most articles in the book clearly illustrate this, and in some contributions change is the very subject. However, because developments have not come to a standstill, information that was published several years ago runs the risk of being somewhat out of date. A majority of sixteen out of the twenty two articles was first published over ten years ago and the bibliographical references in these articles refer to texts that are several years older. In itself that is no problem; the contribution from 1747 by Samuel Johnson proves that texts can remain relevant and valuable long after their first publication. But, for example, a phrase like "... particularly as the day of the electronic dictionary approaches" strikes as a little unworldly, until one realizes that the article dates from 1992. Because the average age of the articles is rather high, there is also a risk that important recent developments are not mentioned at all. Nothing is said for example about what I will call "Internet lexicography". The size and reputation that the Internet encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* has acquired, implies that its lexicographic counterpart – *Wiktionary* – needs to be mentioned in a volume like *Practical Lexicography*. *Wiktionary* claims to have more than 750,000 entries with an English definition. There are more than 55,000 registered users, and since it was launched, there have been more than 4 million editorial actions. Maybe its quality is disputable, but the fact that some of the constraints of traditional commercial lexicography do not seem to be applicable to this form of large-scale democratic lexicography makes it interesting enough to deserve a place in a recent book about the field.

A related phenomenon is what I call the online community dictionary. Examples include the online bilingual dictionaries for African languages to and from English, compiled within the framework of Simultaneous Feedback (<http://tshwanedje.com/sf>), as the developer calls it. Such developments are likely to influence the way dictionaries are being compiled and consulted.

Non-natives read English too

With the people I referred to at the beginning of this text in mind, I would like to make a final critical comment. But in all honesty, I am also talking about myself. Maybe it is less a criticism than an observation and it is by no means limited to the field of lexicography. It regards every area in which the dominant publication language is English.

Lexicography in Asia, Vol. 2 *Perspectives in Lexicography: Asia and Beyond*

Perspectives in Lexicography: Asia and Beyond comprises a selection of papers from the Fourth ASIALEX International Congress, held at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in June 2005. The papers were edited by Vincent B.Y. Ooi, Anne Pakir, Ismail S. Talib, and Peter Tan, from the English Department of NUS, who organized the conference. It will be published by K Dictionaries on October 1, 2008, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the publication of *Lexicography in Asia* (Tom McArthur and Ilan Kernerman (eds.), Password Publishers, 1998). Details will be made available in September 2008 on the K Dictionaries website: <http://kdictionaries.com/lia/lia2.html>

For users of English as a foreign language, native speakers can be the grindstones on which we sharpen our competence in English. But in situations where we need all our concentration to follow a line of thought, or understand a clever reasoning, the use of flowery language and infrequent idioms are obstructions on the road to understanding. For example, an elaboration on the subtle nuances in meaning and use of an English verb requires a far greater effort by a non-native than by a native speaker of English. We foreigners have to make a double effort: decode a text in a foreign language, and understand the complexities in a language that is not our own. And so I am faced with the following dilemma. May I discourage learned and lettered authors to write in the full wealth of their mother tongue? I definitely would not mind if they showed some awareness of the limitations in the competence of the English language of foreign lexicographers. If learner's dictionaries restrict their defining vocabulary for the benefit of non-native users, maybe authors who write for an international audience could make a similar effort.

As an example of what I mean, I quote one sentence: "There is no dearth of interesting and perspicacious commentaries on this aspect of language." Maybe the author is just trying to encourage the use of dictionaries. If so, she succeeded. I decoded the text into "There are many interesting and clever commentaries on this aspect of language."

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Password – a productive dictionary family

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I first saw *Password* dictionary some years ago when I was a university student. It was my brother's book, which he received as a present. I remember that when I opened it I was quite confused by the structure. Who would put so much English language into an English-Estonian dictionary? I have to admit that I had absolutely no knowledge of any structural differences in dictionaries. At the time, I, like most dictionary users, never read or showed any interest in the preface or instructions for use. Why bother?

Later on, while already working on dictionaries, I came to understand the *why* part – and it still fascinates me. Now I'm happy to know that I'm not the only *Password* "freak"!

There are many dictionaries on the publishers' and lexicographers' shelves, but very few of them can be considered as both *purpose-built* and *purpose-served*. I would, without doubt, consider *Password* and its family of products as just that.

The Estonian version of the semi-bilingual *Password* dictionary (*PASSWORD Inglise-eesti seletav sõnaraamat. English Dictionary for Speakers of Estonian*) was first published by TEA Publishers in 1995. It was a huge success among Estonians, which might somehow be taken as pure

luck. After Estonia regained independence at the beginning of the 1990s, there were other things to achieve than publishing dictionaries, and at some point there were only a few English-Estonian dictionaries available on the market. TEA published *Password* at the peak of the demand for proper and reliable dictionaries. There were several reprints after its first launch and in 2006 TEA published an updated version along with a CD-ROM.

However, there would not have been such success without good content. Estonians have always been "language-oriented" people. Even during the Soviet rule, schools taught English, German and French, and we have had notable language teachers. *Password's* idea of teaching the English language through English itself suited our public well, since almost everyone knew English to some extent. Estonian equivalents to English meanings simply supported learners' comprehension.

I personally like dictionaries that entice you to think a little, and when I understand what the dictionary is trying to convey then I like it even more. *Password* is a dictionary that does not have a simple structure; rather, it has the simplest structure needed in order to convey meaning in an economical way.