

samuel johnson dictionary of english language

samuel johnson dictionary of english language stands as one of the most significant milestones in the history of English lexicography. Published in 1755, this monumental work was the first comprehensive dictionary to define and describe the English language in a systematic and scholarly way. Samuel Johnson's effort not only shaped the development of English dictionaries but also influenced the study of the language, literature, and culture for centuries. This article delves into the origins, development, structure, and lasting impact of Johnson's dictionary. The discussion includes its historical context, the challenges faced during its compilation, and its linguistic and cultural significance. Readers will gain insight into why the Samuel Johnson dictionary of English language remains an essential reference in the evolution of English lexicons. The article is organized into key sections for clarity and depth.

- Historical Background and Compilation
- Structure and Features of the Dictionary
- Language and Lexicographic Innovations
- Cultural and Scholarly Impact
- Legacy and Modern Relevance

Historical Background and Compilation

The creation of the Samuel Johnson dictionary of English language occurred during a period when English lexicography was fragmented and inconsistent. Before its publication, various smaller dictionaries existed, but none provided an authoritative or comprehensive source for English vocabulary. Johnson was commissioned in 1746 to undertake the project, which he completed over nearly a decade, publishing the dictionary in 1755. This section explores the historical circumstances that necessitated such a work and the process Johnson followed to compile it.

Commission and Motivation

In the mid-18th century, the English language was rapidly evolving, yet lacked a standardized reference. Johnson was approached by a group of publishers who recognized the commercial and scholarly potential of a comprehensive dictionary. Motivated by the challenge and intellectual pursuit, Johnson accepted the task largely on his own, without the assistance of a large team.

Research and Compilation Process

Johnson's dictionary was the result of extensive research, involving reading a wide array of literary, scientific, and philosophical texts. He compiled over 40,000 entries by hand, often defining words with illustrative quotations from prominent authors. The dictionary's production was labor-intensive, requiring meticulous attention to detail and considerable personal dedication.

Challenges Faced

Johnson encountered numerous obstacles, including limited resources, the absence of modern linguistic tools, and the complexity of capturing the nuances of English usage. Despite these challenges, he managed to create a work of exceptional quality and scope, setting new standards for lexicography.

Structure and Features of the Dictionary

The Samuel Johnson dictionary of English language was innovative not only in content but also in its organization and presentation. Unlike previous works, it combined definitions, usage examples, and etymology in a coherent format. This section examines the dictionary's structural characteristics and distinctive features.

Entry Composition

Each dictionary entry typically included the word's pronunciation, part of speech, definition(s), and illustrative quotations. Johnson's definitions were often concise yet precise, providing clarity and context. The use of literary quotations helped demonstrate practical usage and enriched the reader's understanding.

Alphabetical Arrangement

Johnson's dictionary was arranged alphabetically, following a systematic order that enhanced accessibility. Although alphabetical ordering was not new, Johnson's meticulous adherence to this system contributed to the dictionary's usability and scholarly value.

Innovative Features

Several pioneering elements distinguished Johnson's dictionary:

- Inclusion of extensive quotations from classical and contemporary authors
- Attention to spelling standardization
- Detailed explanations of word origins and meanings
- Coverage of idiomatic and figurative language

Language and Lexicographic Innovations

Johnson's work introduced significant linguistic and lexicographic innovations that influenced future dictionaries and the understanding of English vocabulary. His approach combined prescriptive and descriptive elements, reflecting both how words should be used and how they were used in practice.

Prescriptive and Descriptive Balance

While Johnson advocated for careful and correct usage, he also documented colloquial and emerging terms. This balance allowed his dictionary to serve both as a guide and a record of contemporary English, bridging tradition and innovation.

Standardization of English

The dictionary played a crucial role in standardizing English spelling and grammar at a time when variation was widespread. Johnson's choices often influenced accepted norms, contributing to language stabilization during the 18th century.

Lexical Enrichment

Johnson enriched the English lexicon by including a broad range of vocabulary, from technical and scientific terms to slang and regional expressions. His work acknowledged the language's diversity and complexity, paving the way for more inclusive dictionaries.

Cultural and Scholarly Impact

The publication of the Samuel Johnson dictionary of English language had profound cultural and academic repercussions. It not only served as a linguistic authority but also became a literary and intellectual landmark.

Influence on Literature and Education

Johnson's dictionary was widely used by writers, scholars, and educators, shaping the language of literature and instruction. Its rich quotations connected language study to literary heritage, fostering greater appreciation of English literature.

Lexicography as a Discipline

The dictionary established lexicography as a serious scholarly field. Johnson's methods and standards influenced subsequent lexicographers and set benchmarks for future dictionary projects worldwide.

Public Reception and Criticism

Upon release, the dictionary received acclaim for its scope and quality, though some critics noted occasional idiosyncrasies in definitions and judgments. Nevertheless, its overall impact was overwhelmingly positive, securing Johnson's reputation as a preeminent literary figure.

Legacy and Modern Relevance

The legacy of the Samuel Johnson dictionary of English language endures in contemporary linguistics, lexicography, and cultural studies. Its foundational role continues to be recognized and celebrated today.

Enduring Influence on Dictionaries

Modern English dictionaries owe much to Johnson's pioneering work in content, structure, and methodology. His integration of literary quotations remains a valued feature in many comprehensive dictionaries.

Academic and Historical Significance

Scholars study Johnson's dictionary to understand 18th-century English language, cultural attitudes, and lexicographic history. It provides a snapshot of linguistic usage and intellectual thought during a formative period.

Commemorations and Editions

Various reprints and annotated editions celebrate the dictionary's importance. Institutions and literary societies honor Johnson's achievement as a landmark of English letters and scholarship.

1. Comprehensive and authoritative work on English vocabulary
2. Innovative combination of definitions and literary examples
3. Standardization of English language conventions
4. Influence on literature, education, and lexicography
5. Enduring legacy in modern linguistic studies

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Samuel Johnson and what is his Dictionary of the English Language?

Samuel Johnson was an 18th-century English writer and lexicographer. His Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1755, was one of the first comprehensive dictionaries of English and had a significant impact on the development of the language.

Why is Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language considered important?

Johnson's Dictionary was important because it standardized English spelling and usage at a time when there was no authoritative source. It also included literary quotations, which helped illustrate word meanings and contributed to English literature and lexicography.

How long did it take Samuel Johnson to complete his Dictionary of the English Language?

Samuel Johnson took about nine years to complete his Dictionary of the English Language, working mostly alone from 1746 to 1755.

What were some unique features of Johnson's Dictionary compared to earlier dictionaries?

Johnson's Dictionary included detailed definitions, illustrative literary quotations, and sometimes witty or insightful commentary. It also attempted to fix the English language's spelling and usage, which was not common in earlier dictionaries.

How did Samuel Johnson's Dictionary influence modern English dictionaries?

Johnson's Dictionary set a standard for future lexicographers by providing clear definitions, examples from literature, and a comprehensive approach, influencing later dictionaries like the Oxford English Dictionary.

Is Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language still relevant or used today?

While it is no longer used as a practical dictionary, Johnson's Dictionary remains relevant as a historical document illustrating 18th-century English language and lexicography, and it is studied for its literary and linguistic significance.

Additional Resources

1. The Life of Samuel Johnson

This biography by James Boswell is considered one of the greatest biographies in English literature. It provides an intimate and detailed account of Samuel Johnson's life, including his work on the Dictionary of the English Language. The book offers insights into Johnson's personality, his struggles, and his immense contribution to English literature and lexicography.

2. Samuel Johnson and the Dictionary

This book explores the creation and impact of Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language. It delves into the challenges Johnson faced during the compilation process and the innovative methods he employed. The text also discusses how the dictionary influenced the standardization of English.

3. Johnson's Dictionary: A Biography

This volume traces the story behind the making of the Dictionary of the English Language, highlighting Johnson's vision and determination. It covers the historical context of 18th-century England and the significance of Johnson's work in the evolution of English lexicography. The book is accessible to both scholars and general readers interested in language history.

4. The Art of Lexicography: From Samuel Johnson to the Present

This book examines the development of English dictionaries from Johnson's pioneering work to modern lexicography. It discusses how Johnson set standards and conventions that shaped dictionary-making practices. The book also compares Johnson's dictionary to contemporary reference works.

5. *Words and Their Masters: Samuel Johnson's Dictionary and Its Legacy*

Focusing on the linguistic and cultural impact of Johnson's dictionary, this book analyzes how it influenced English language usage and literary style. It also explores Johnson's role as a language prescriptivist and his approach to definitions. Readers gain an understanding of the dictionary's enduring relevance.

6. *Johnson's Dictionary and the Enlightenment Mind*

This book situates Johnson's dictionary within the broader intellectual movement of the Enlightenment. It discusses how Johnson's work reflects Enlightenment values such as reason, order, and progress. The book also explores the dictionary's role in shaping 18th-century English thought and education.

7. *Lexicographers at Work: The Making of Johnson's Dictionary*

Detailing the practical aspects of compiling the dictionary, this book offers insights into Johnson's research methods, sources, and editorial decisions. It sheds light on the collaborative efforts of Johnson and his assistants. The book is valuable for understanding the labor-intensive process behind one of the most important English dictionaries.

8. *Samuel Johnson: A Dictionary of His World*

This reference book provides background information on the people, places, and ideas connected to Johnson and his dictionary. It contextualizes the dictionary within Johnson's personal and professional life. The book serves as a companion for readers interested in the historical and cultural milieu of Johnson's era.

9. *The Dictionary and the English Language: Samuel Johnson's Contribution to Linguistics*

This scholarly work analyzes Johnson's dictionary from a linguistic perspective, highlighting its innovations and limitations. It discusses Johnson's influence on subsequent dictionaries and the study of English linguistics. The book is suited for readers interested in the academic study of language history and lexicography.

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