

H-Net Reviews

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The Oxford English Dictionary on Compact Disc. Oxford University Press.

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This is the first time I am reviewing a dictionary, and so I initially had no idea how to approach the task. Clearly, it would be impossible to read every word of the book, and take the strategy of looking for details to praise or censure. A story about Bertrand Russell then came to mind: apparently he was once asked by the journal *Mind* to contribute a review of Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*. His friend Colette described the effort as, "very much like swallowing a whale." In the end, the review was never finished. If Husserl is a whale, then the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a whole school of them. How on earth could I ever finish this review? There seemed only one solution: to try some words and phrases at random, and see what results I found. Where should one start? I chose something I knew well already—the presumed origin of my own name. It took only a moment to enter the letters "s-t-i-r-k," and initiate the word search. In about two seconds (running on an IBM Aptiva), the familiar meaning appeared:

1. A young bullock or heifer, usually between one and two years old.

Together with this definition, a dozen or so quotations illustrating the usage of the word since about A.D. 1000 come to the screen. Altogether, the search process was much easier and quicker than locating the right volume from a full-sized *OED*, placing it down onto a desk, and leafing through the pages. It was also far easier on the eyes than poring over a single volume edition with a magnifying glass. Although this definition of my name amounted to everything I knew, the *OED* cited a reference "1" on the left corner of its screen, indicating that it was only the first of more than one interpretations. What could the second meaning be? At the bottom of the screen a convenient feature called "MAP" displayed an outline of the whole lengthy entry. I clicked on entry "2," to find the word's second usage:

2. Used as a term of abuse: a foolish person.

I begin to wish I hadn't noticed it now. Still, there's always something

new to be found in the *OED*, even in entries you thought you knew perfectly well. I decided upon another word to research, the origin of the word "penguin". One tale I had heard traced it back to the Latin "pinguis" (genitive "pinguinis"), meaning "fat", while another derived it from the Welsh "pen gwyn", or "white head." Neither story seemed very plausible to me. Let us see what the *OED* has to offer:

Origin obscure: see Note below.

Now a problem arises. On the printed page, it is easy enough to scan down and locate the word "Note." On the computer screen only a few lines at a time are visible: where could the note be? Scrolling takes some time, and unfortunately the "MAP" feature only locates the various senses of the word "penguin." There seems to be no quick way of locating notes. It was a reasonable guess that the note would appear after all the various senses, so I used "MAP" to take me to the last sense of "penguin," and scrolled through that. There luckily I found the note, and the information I wanted:

[...] The attribution of the name penguin to "the Welsh men" and its explanation as Welsh pen gwyn "white head" appears also in Ingram, and later in Sir Thomas Herbert's *Travels in ed. 1634 as a surmise, in ed. 1638 as an accepted fact.* But, besides that the Great Auk had not a white head (though it had white spots in front of the eyes), there are obvious historical difficulties, which some would remove in part by supposing the name to have been originally given by Breton fishermen. Other suggestions that the name is derived from L. pinguis "fat" or is an alteration of "pin-wing" referring to the rudimentary wings, are merely unsupported conjectures.

The search for the word "penguin" has located a slight deficiency in the *OED*'s search apparatus. Next, I decide to try locating a phrase in the dictionary. The last search made the phrase "Welsh rabbit" come to mind—or perhaps better yet, I could use an interesting variation, "Welsh rarebit". With a printed dictionary, of course, a difficulty can arise in deciding which word of the phrase to look under—"Welsh" or "rarebit"? How-

ever, the disk version of the dictionary should make this search easy. I chose “phrase” rather than “word,” and typed in “Welsh rarebit.” A list of phrases beginning with “Welsh” appears, but “Welsh rarebit” is not there! Neither, for that matter, is “Welsh rabbit.” What can this mean? The only way to find out seems to be to try “rarebit” as a word. Now, at last, the expected entry appears:

<p> <cite>rarebit: see Welsh rabbit.</cite>

<p> Why wasn’t “Welsh rabbit” in the list of phrases I obtained before? I try it again, but this time I make a mistake, and try searching for “Welsh rabbit” as a word, instead of a phrase. Lo and behold, there it is! A list of related “words” has now also appeared, including “Welsh rarebit,” “Welsh Wales,” and “Welsh uncle.” The previous list of phrases I had obtained did not include “Welsh rabbit” or “Welsh rarebit,” but had included “Welsh uncle.” The logic of these results is a complete mystery. Finally, on page 9 of the handbook that accompanies the disk, I find an explanation:

<p> <blockquote>“The editorial decision whether to treat a two-word combination or a phrase in the <cite>OED2</cite> as a subsidiary headword or a phrase, or even as a main headword, depends on many factors and there is no absolute rule about which category any given item will be in. For example, back bench is a headword, back beat is a subsidiary headword, and back alley is treated as a phrase.”</blockquote>

<p> And “Welsh uncle,” it appears, is both a word and a phrase. Thus, interestingly, we have stumbled upon a problem facing the user of the disk, which does not exist in the printed version. A phrase can always be found quickly enough in the printed dictionary under one headword or the other, and it does not matter to the user what category the dictionary compiler thought it fell under. The disk, on the other hand, forces you to choose whether to look up a word or a phrase, and the results, as we have seen, can seem fairly random.

<p> I felt that I should try to research a definite phrase, and chose “at sixes and sevens.” The <cite>OED</cite> search came up with a definition, but it was a rather mysterious one:

<p> <blockquote>1. a. The abstract number seven. at or on six and seven, at sixes and sevens: see six n. 5. be sic seven: see sic a. 1 b.</blockquote>

<p> I had no clue about this meaning, and decided I had better check the fifth sense of “six”—which could be a job for “MAP.” The structure of the entry for “six” as a noun turned out to be rather complex. Even with the use of the search tool, “MAP,” scrolling took some time. In fact, “sixes and sevens” appeared as a “MAP” heading, on which I clicked:

<p> <blockquote>5. In phrases with six and seven, sixes and sevens, etc., originally denoting the hazard of one’s whole fortune, or carelessness

as to the consequences of one’s actions, and in later use the creation or existence of, or neglect to remove, confusion, disorder, or disagreement.</blockquote> <p> How strange it is not to be able to find a straightforward definition for the everyday phrase “at sixes and sevens!” I do not think the one mentioned above would be helpful to anyone who was unfamiliar with the phrase. Here, the <cite>OED</cite> becomes more of a source of extra information for the scholar, rather than the source of a basic definition. I must confess to being disappointed that the disc version was not more flexible.

<p> At this point, I realize I’ve become eager to hunt out points to complain about in the <cite>OED</cite> disc version, and decide to further research situations where the disc version of the dictionary is superior to the printed word. Since I am writing from Japan, I choose the topic of Japanese borrowings into English. I recalled the argument of a colleague that the nineteenth century English word “funny,” in reference to a kind of boat, was related to Japanese <cite>fune</cite>, whose meaning covers vessels of all kinds. According to the <cite>OED</cite>:

<p> <blockquote>funny (“fVnI), n. [perh. f. next adj.] A narrow, clinker-built pleasure-boat for a pair of sculls. Also loosely, any light boat.</blockquote> <p> “Perhaps from next adjective” is the suggested etymology, and there is a convenient “NEXT” function to find the next entry in the dictionary. This turns out to be “funny” in the sense of humorous, and there is no mention of a Japanese connection. I wonder how many words are borrowed from Japanese into English: here is the disc version of <cite>OED</cite> really comes into its own. In less than a second, I am told, “343 etymologies found.” What an astonishing number! Of course we can all think of one or two, like “tsunami” and “kimono,” but what about the remaining 341? They vary from “adzuki” to “zori.” How many hours, days, weeks, would that search have taken using a printed <cite>OED</cite>? <p> Of course this makes one wonder just what words count as English at all. For instance, sticking to those listed as borrowed from Japanese, let’s try “fusuma”:

<blockquote> A sliding screen, covered with paper on both sides, used to separate room from room in a Japanese house.</blockquote> <p> Can we really claim that “fusuma” has been absorbed into English as a word? A short step further would enable all the words contained in the vocabularies of foreign language textbooks to be entered in the English dictionary—for after all, such words appear in what is essentially an English language book. <p> What other wonders are peculiar to the disc version of <cite>OED</cite>? Many of the example quotations

found in the dictionary come from named authors, and it is possible to search for quotations by author's name or quotation fragment. Here again we find something valuable, which would be utterly impossible using the printed version. I tested the name "Arthur Koestler," hoping to find the word he was so proud to have coined, "holon". Partial success. There are over 600 quotations from his works, but none of them about holons. The word "holon" is not in the <cite>OED</cite>, as a subsequent search reveals. <p> What else can one do? There is a facility for looking up Greek borrowings directly, typing the Greek right in from the keyboard. This is fine, but unfortunately there does not seem to be any mechanism by which the Greek keyboard appears in pictorial form on screen. The character set is presented on page 91 of the handbook, where one learns that the Greek theta, for instance, can be obtained by typing "q" at the keyboard. The same list can be obtained from the "HELP" menu. I tried this out with the Greek "bathys" for "deep," and among the familiar words like "bathyscaphe" and "bathysphere," I noticed the unfamiliar "bathukolpian": <p> <blockquote>bathukolpian, a. rare. Deep-bosomed. bathukolpic, a. [see -ic] = prec. 1825 Blackw. Mag. XVII. 222 Our bathukolpian attendant. 1872 M. Collins Pr. Clarice I. i. 8 A colossal red-haired maiden of twenty, bathukolpic.</blockquote> <p> My vocabulary has been enlarged by one item. <p> As well as Greek, other alphabets and symbols can be accessed by mnemonic codes enclosed in <> brackets. These include the excellent International Phonetic Alphabet, which led me to wonder how far this <cite>OED</cite> on disc could be used as a rhyming dictionary. <p> Certainly "wildcards" are available for all character sets: for instance, if one is uncertain about the spelling "wierd" versus "weird," it is possible to search for "w??rd", and be assured that "weird" is the only

spelling with the appropriate meaning. <p> Now suppose I wanted to find words rhyming with "dawn". It's quite easy to enter the phonetic symbols corresponding to "-awn", and place the wildcard "*" in front. "*" can stand for anything at all, so the search should reveal all words whose phonetic representation ends in the sounds "-awn." The handbook warns against such searches with initial wildcards, as they may take an inordinate time to execute, but, surprisingly, this one is quite fast. A few seconds later a list of possible rhymes appears, ranging from "adorn" through "leprechaun" to "withdrawn." Pretty good. <p> "Orange" is reputed to be a hard word to rhyme: the possibilities for "-ange" appear very quickly again. Stress is the problem, of course: "fringe" has the right sounds, but unfortunately inevitably carries a stress. There seems to be no way of adapting the search to allow for this. Scrolling through shows that almost all the entries are unsuitable for the same reason. A couple of hits, though: how about "harbinger," or "lozenge"? <p> So there you are. You can do many things with the <cite>OED</cite> on disc, which you could never manage with a print version. But be warned: if you are just looking for simple, straightforward definitions of this or that, then try a more straightforward dictionary (the concise <cite>OED</cite>, perhaps). When you are searching, try to be as flexible or cunning as you would be with an ordinary reference book: the information you want may well be there, but may not be obviously accessible. And when you are using the search engine, remember that the terms "word" and "phrase" may have meanings far different from what you ever thought they did. <p> As for me, I would hate to be parted from such a wonderful source of information on the English language. I can heartily recommend the <cite>Oxford English Dictionary</cite>, Second Edition, on Compact Disc. <p>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
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