

Dictionaries  
A Very Short Introduction

By Lynda Mugglestone

- What features do you think a good dictionary should include?
- Dictionary-users and dictionary-makers can often have very different ideas about the proper role of dictionaries. Why?
- Dictionaries can never include all words or meanings. What factors influence the decision to include or exclude a word/ meaning ?
- Should dictionaries try and control language?
- How neutral can or should dictionaries be?
- How can a definition be wrong?
- Dictionaries have changed considerably over their history. Think about two contrasting examples of the 'the dictionary', and the differences these reveal.
- Dictionaries, like novels, have authors. What implications does this fact raise?
- Samuel Johnson, like James Murray, wrote at length about what he thought a dictionary should be and do. How useful is it to have records of this kind, as compared to the evidence of the dictionaries themselves?
- Throughout their history, dictionaries have made use of a variety of types of evidence for the use of language. What are the advantages and/ or disadvantages of different kinds of evidence?
- Language is always changing. How do you think dictionaries should deal with new words and meanings?
- The Internet means that users can now write their own dictionary entries on sites such as Urban Dictionary or Wiktionary. Look at entries for the same word on Urban Dictionary and in a conventional printed dictionary. What differences can you find ? How would you define the word you have chosen?
- Is lexicography an art or a science?
- What changes has the advent of computers brought to dictionary-making and use?
- How useful is it to give the etymology of words in a dictionary?
- Labels in dictionaries – such as 'slang' or 'obsolete' or 'offensive' – are often a topic for critical scrutiny. Why?

Other books by Lynda Mugglestone

L. Mugglestone *The Oxford History of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008)

L. Mugglestone *Talking Proper The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007)

L. Mugglestone *Lexicography and the OED Pioneers in the Untrodden Forest* (Oxford : Oxford University Press 2001)