

Andrew Delahunty

Lexicographer: a writer or compiler of a dictionary (OED)

Did you notice who was the author of Emma Chichester Clark's beautiful new illustrated dictionary? Probably not. This seems to be the fate of lexicographers. Andrew Delahunty quotes Johnson's definition, 'a harmless drudge,' but to readers of all ages who love words, they are important people.

Earliest dictionaries, he explains, seem to have been books to explain hard words like the seventeenth century *A Table Alphabetical*. In 1755, Samuel Johnson's famous dictionary was marked by his very personal style. (Revealing, alas, his prejudices about porridge and the Scots.) Today, dictionaries are more likely to be versions of the 'dictionary of all the words' and lexicographers are supposed to be more objective.

Andrew has now been working on dictionaries for adults and children and language reference works for twenty years. He had no special intention to become a lexicographer though he did enjoy browsing dictionaries. He is freelance and often works with a team. Andrew explains that most of the training is done on the job, possibly because a house style is important, especially when a range of expertise is used. Specialists may be needed for pronunciation, or etymology and Andrew says scientists are always welcome because lexicographers tend to come from an arts background. They would tend to start with a 'head list' and then decisions would have to be made, according to the nature of the dictionary. Should it give parts of speech? Should the definitions be in complete sentences? The aim is for consistency of content and style. A Managing Editor holds it all together. On a big team, the individuals may perhaps receive batches of words, sometimes by topic (all the clothing or religions) or perhaps by near synonyms (thin, narrow – a thesaurus approach). It may be done alphabetically. The lexicographers decide how many meanings of a single word to give, according to the level of the particular dictionary.

Andrew is clear about what is needed for children's dictionaries and sees it as important to get the definition exactly right in the sense of being as simple as possible but precisely accurate. In the past, children's dictionaries tended to be 'cut down' versions of adult dictionaries. Consequently, definitions were often difficult to understand. Now, they are written specifically for the age range and the style has become more informal and friendly. They also tend to be trialled in schools and teachers are sent questionnaires to discover what they need and appropriate attention is given to multicultural concerns. It would not be likely these days, for example, for festivals to be discussed solely in terms of Christian festivals. And like everyone else, they would be aware of the needs of the National Curriculum.

Asked what is the difference between adults' and children's dictionaries, Andrew replies in practical terms. The lexicographers would consider its size, the age range it is intended for, the particular area of coverage. You can't put everything in a book intended for fives to sevens but he would put in some terms they would already know. This would give them confidence and demonstrate how dictionaries work. He says he keeps in the back of his mind a consideration of the kind of answer a parent might give. He points out that when working on a dictionary, it is *always* important to keep in mind who the users are whether small children, people learning English or a general reader. "People come to dictionaries with different enquiries," he says. "We have to satisfy the expert without alienating the less expert."

For children, he starts where the child is and his ability to do this must be greatly enhanced by his visits to primary schools. These sound entirely fascinating. He says he will ask children to write their own definitions of words and is often surprised. A bird, for example, will yield all the details relating to



appearance and then they will offer something like 'fragile' or, in the case of a child whose little brother is frightened of birds, 'scary'. They will pool their thoughts to refine the definition, enabling him to demonstrate the difference between a dictionary and an encyclopaedia. They also make comparisons by looking at different dictionaries. Along the way, the children learn about the arrangement of dictionaries and their conventions and he points out links between the words which leads on to rhymes, opposites, anagrams and the history of words. They enjoy knowing about the origins of words (like *television* or the romantic *astronaut*) and in some cases this can help to fix their meanings.

It is good to hear about his open-mindedness about children. "An entry is only successful if the reader understands it," he says. He welcomes his recent collaboration on the picture book dictionary and is obviously delighted with the wit and playfulness in the illustrations. His brief for this book was not so different but he had in mind fairy tale characters and kept aware of the illustrating possibilities. He was especially pleased by the occasional surreal effect, as when Emma has insects playing musical instruments because the two words come on the same page. He is also pleased because this book can be used as a picture book and by the way in which it encourages playfulness with language. It enabled him, he says, "to add interesting stuff about words." It would be good to have more books like this which offer a scholarly aspect of lexicography but at the same time demonstrates the fun to be had with language. Andrew Delahunty, clearly in touch with his young readers, seems a good person to do them.

Pat Thomson

See page 25 for other dictionaries and, for adults, look out for

The Oxford Dictionary of Nicknames
Oxford £15.99 ISBN: 0-19-160539-0