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Forgotten But Important Lexicographers: John Wilkins and William Lloyd

A Modern Approach to Lexicography before Johnson

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

> "Sir, (said he,) Ray has made a collection of north-country words. By collecting those of your country, you will do a useful thing towards the history of the language." He bade me also go on with collections which I was making upon the Antiquities of Scotland. "Make a large book; a folio." Boswell. "But of what use will it be, Sir?" Johnson. "Never mind the use; do it."

I have not changed the punctuation and orthography used in *An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* in my examples. Since my analysis has a semiotic component, I decided that whatever inconsistencies or vagaries appear in the original text (whether printing errors or not) should remain. A key to the abbreviations used in the dictionary can be found in section 3.1. I will refer to *An Essay towards*, etc. as the Essay; likewise I will use AD to refer to the *Alphabetical Dictionary* which was published under the same cover as the Essay. Quotations taken from the Essay will be cited by page number only, e.g. (21).

Part of this research has appeared in my University of Illinois dissertation; it has undergone revision and alteration since then.

During the course of this project I have received support and aid from people too numerous to mention. I would like to take space, though, to individually acknowledge a few of the many. Professor Ladislav Zgusta suggested that I look into the good Bishop's work; he has been a continual (and persistant) source of encouragement and inspiration. Any credit from this work that

may result belongs to him; any faults which may surface belong entirely with me.

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My research would not have been possible without the excellent collection of old and rare texts at the University of Illinois Rare Book Room. I also was afforded invaluable research support from Helen Sullivan of the University of Illinois Slavic and Eastern European Library.

Finally, I must gratefully acknowledge the indefatigable efforts of Karen Dolezal, who patiently assisted me in the preparation of the manuscript for publication.

INTRODUCTION

There is perhaps no major work in the history of linguistics which has been at once so highly acclaimed and so widely ignored or forgotten as John Wilkins' *Essay towards a real character and a philosophical language* (1668). The lexicographical component of the Essay, the Alphabetical Dictionary (with William Lloyd as co-author), has received only passing mention until quite recently. However, in my research (e.g. Dolezal 1983) I have discovered that Wilkins and Lloyd are responsible for three innovations in the development of English lexicography:

(1) they introduced the broad range of the English vocabulary into the lexicon of the English monolingual dictionary (including a formidable number of multi-word lexical units);

(2) they were the first lexicographers to use a highly systematic and methodological construction of entries;

(3) their Alphabetical Dictionary was the first to have a self-defining lexicon (that is, words used for definitional purposes were also defined).

The scholarship on the history of English lexicography has left the Wilkins-Lloyd dictionary outside of the standard chronology of important developments. It is my intent and purpose to show how the Wilkins project must be considered a legitimate contribution to lexicography. With the help of Lloyd he constructed a dictionary which was far different from that of any of his contemporaries. The influence of the Essay on the progress of lexicography has been felt, if only as an undercurrent. It may be worth noting here that all of Wilkins' published works are cited in the bibliography of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Yet, his importance has not been recorded adequately by those who have investigated the history of lexicography.

Sledd and Kolb (1955) show more appreciation of the Essay as dictionary than most scholars in the 20th century who have written in the field. However, they feel that "Wilkins and Lloyd ... had perversely contrived to make the riches of their book inaccessible to the ordinary man ..." (Sledd and Kolb 1955:168); they do not explain how the Essay differs in 'perversity' from any other dictionary. James A. H. Murray, editor of the OED, wrote that until 1721 "The notion that an English dictionary ought to contain all English words had apparently as yet occurred to no one, at least no one had proposed to carry the idea into practice." Though the Essay is cited in the OED, evidently Murray had not examined it, for a distinguishing feature of the work is its wide range of English vocabulary. Mathews (1933) makes no comment on the Essay; Starnes and Noyes (1946) mention the dictionary in their annotated bibliography, but dismiss it as a proper work of lexicography and relegate it to those interested in universal language projects.

The Wilkins project is important to lexicography (and lexical theory in general); no less than 262 pages of the Essay's 456 pages are tables of words defined according to a method which I find to be consistently applied. Added to this are 157 pages of words arranged alphabetically and defined systematically. The present work hopes to effectively document and explain the principles which underlie the construction of lexicographic definitions; I will also hope to show where the Essay (and its dictionary) stands in relation to its immediate successors and predecessors.

Because of the relative sophistication of Wilkins' and Lloyd's dictionary, I have used recently developed theories of lexicography to analyze it. I am not claiming that Wilkins and Lloyd developed early versions of modern theory; however, I will claim that they were guided by the same linguistic principles, albeit unstated, that inform our theories. My task has been to uncover these unspoken principles.

In Chapter One I will give an overview of the Essay. This chapter contains background information necessary for understanding the broader context of the more specific analyses of the remaining chapters. I will provide a short introduction

to the people who worked with Bishop Wilkins on this project and a summary of the main sections of the Essay.

Chapter Two places Wilkins' and Lloyd's contribution into the context of the early history of lexicography. I compare vocabulary selection and definitions in English dictionaries published from 1604-1721. This period is generally acknowledged as the pre-modern period. I will concentrate on the question of the general inclusion of English vocabulary items. There is also a section tracing a pattern of borrowing throughout the period; my evidence will suggest that lexicographers who succeeded Wilkins and Lloyd were aware of their dictionary.

In Chapter Three I analyze the construction of entries in the Alphabetical Dictionary. This chapter constitutes the central argument for consideration of the AD as anticipating the modern practice of lexicography. My purpose is to show how closely Wilkins and Lloyd constructed definitions according to systematic principles. I do not believe it is a coincidence that much of their work can be explained by way of modern lexicographical methods. I hope to document the scope of their achievement and the amount of lexicographical detail that appears in the dictionary.

Chapter Four is a further explication of the dictionary and its adequacy. I will discuss the issues of circularity of definition. In order to emphasize the forward-looking nature of the AD I have included some comparisons with Samuel Johnson's dictionary. I have chosen Johnson for comparison because his dictionary is traditionally considered to be the demarcation between the early and modern periods of lexicography. Though my project is not directed at possible influences upon Johnson via Wilkins, I think my data will show that Johnson was familiar with the AD. Even if we ignore the question of influence, the comparisons should convince the reader that in some important aspects Wilkins and Lloyd are more compatible with modern lexicography than Johnson (that Johnson is the arch-prescriptivist while Wilkins and Lloyd are the arch-descriptivists is one obvious example of this point).

CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW AND SELECT ANALYSES OF THE ESSAY

1.0 General Introduction. In this chapter I will present a general analysis of the major sections of the Essay. I will include some biographical data on John Wilkins and his collaborators, selecting particularly those that have a bearing on this project.

1.1 Organization of the Essay. The Essay is divided into four parts with a dedicatory epistle to the reader, preceding, and an alphabetical dictionary, following, the four parts.

1) first part, the "Prolegomena";
2) second part, the "Universal Philosophy";
3) third part, the "Universal Grammar";
4) fourth part, the "Real Character and Philosophical Language".

1.1.1 The Epistle to the Reader. John Wilkins introduces the purpose of the Essay. The main intent is to create a universal language. Wilkins, in this section, explains the necessity for a language constructed on the basis of a universal philosophy. His intentions are:

1) to facilitate communication between nations, scholars, and businessmen;
2) to reform language usage;
3) to eliminate "defects" of "letters", "words", and "grammatical constructions".

Wilkins sought to clarify "some of our modern differences in religion, by unmasking many wild errors that shelter themselves under the disguise of affected phrases" (Epistle Dedicatory). We also find a theme sounded which reminds us of many voices in the history of English language reform "... this grand imposture of

Phrases hath almost eaten out solid knowledge in all professions; such men generally being of most esteem who are skilled in these Canting forms of speech, though in nothing else" (18).

1.1.2 The First Part. In this section, Wilkins discusses the origin of languages, writing systems, a short history of English, and the "defects to be provided for." It is this last topic which is of interest to my project. Ideally, in this new language, it would be impossible to utter "pretended, mysterious, profound notions, expressed in great swelling words [which being] rendered according to the genuine and natural importance of words will appear to be inconsistencies and contradictions ... either nonsense, or very flat and jejune" (Epistle Dedicatory). The key phrase in this passage is: "the genuine and natural importance of words"; it is my belief that a major consequence of Wilkins' effort to establish a method to represent concepts in a non-ambiguous manner was a classification and explication of a basic English vocabulary (lexicon).

1.1.2.0 The Defects. The defects, according to Wilkins, which needed attention, were found in: 1) the words of human languages; 2) the letters of human languages.

1.1.2.1 Defects of the Word. The defects of words of language consisted of: 1) Equivocals, 2) Synonymous words, 3) Anomalisms in grammatical constructions, 4) difference in writing and pronouncing. The Equivocals, found in all languages, are words of "several significations": in Latin, *Malus*, signifies 'Apple-tree', 'Evil', and 'the People', etc.; also, there are the words made equivocal by inflexions: *Lex, legis, legi / Lego, legis, legi;* in English, the word, *Bill*, signifies 'Weapon', 'a Bird's Beak', and 'a Written Scroul'; *Grave*, signifies 'Sober', 'Seplucher', and 'to carve'.

> As for the ambiguity of words by reason of *Metaphor* and *Phraseology*, this is in all instituted Languages so obvious and so various, that it is needless to give any instances of it; every Language having some peculiar phrases belonging to it, which, if they were to be translated *verbatim* into another Tongue, would seem wild and insignificant (17).

Synonymous words are very "obnoxious" indeed and "Make language tedious, and are generally superfluities ... 'Tis said that the *Arabic* hath above a thousand several names for a *sword*, 500 for a *Lion*, and 200 for a *Serpent*, and fourscore for *Honey*." English may not be so excessive says Wilkins, but it abounds with synonyms. He cites his Tables as providing plenty of examples. The Tables provide lists of synonymous words along with the Radicals; synonymous words also appear in the appended Alphabetical Dictionary. This aspect of the Essay underlines a great Wilkins paradox; he speaks out against superfluity, but finds synonymous and derivative words necessary "to supply their [The Tables] defects; and besides a great help to Learners, who without such a direction, might not perhaps at first be able to find out the true place and notion of many words" (Epistle to the Reader). This disarmingly simple statement anticipates a modern practice of lexicographers, the location of a word (lexical item) in the system of synonyms (see Zgusta 1971: 259sq.).

Defects of the Letter.

> ... men should either speak as they write or write as they speak ... As to our Language, several persons have taken much pains about the Orthography of it ... And yet so invincible is custom, that still we retain the same errors and incongruities in writing which our Forefathers taught us (18-19).

According to Wilkins, the Alphabet is defective in five ways: 1) The order of letters is "inartificial and confused ... The vowels and consonants being promiscuously huddled together, without any distinction." Wilkins would rather have them grouped by a method; "the proper end and design of that which we call *Method*, [is] to separate the Heterogeneous, and put the Homogeneous together, according to some rule of precedency" (14-15; all phonetic citations are in 14-15). I find that the same general method underlies his classification of concepts; 2) The letters are both redundant and deficient -- redundant because the "same power" and "sound" are given to several letters (/k/=C or K; /f/=f or ph) -- deficient because of vowels "of which there are 7 or 8 several kinds commonly used" though the Latin Alphabet has only five; "two, namely (i and u) according to our English pronunciation of them, are not properly Vowels, but Diphthongs." He also mentions