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## Samuel Johnson: The Lexicographer

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### Abstract:

Samuel Johnson published his two volume work “*The Dictionary of the English Language*” on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1755. Johnson has been a famous critic, biographer, essayist, poet, prose writer. In spite of several physical and financial problems Johnson achieved great laurels in literary field.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century there was an urgent need for a dictionary which could meet the intellectual hunger. Thus Johnson started on this project single handedly which he promised to finish it in three years though he could manage only in nine years. In this work also Johnson had to bear great problems but he managed it well and came victorious. Johnson’s work was not the pioneer in this field but the duration, his virtually single handed effort, with very little financial support and above all his frequent use of quotations goes in his favor. The first dictionary came in 1538 followed by several others, but the credit goes to Johnson for his unique contribution. The most significant feature of Johnson’s Dictionary was the use of 42773 quotations in explaining the meanings of the words. Before Johnson stepped to venture on this project none had cleared the meaning of words so clearly therefore there was an urgent need for one such document.

Thus besides quotation the use of humor and prejudice was another notable characteristic of this Dictionary.

The history of Johnson writing the Dictionary dates long back when he was approached by publishers in 1746 with a meager sum of 1500 guineas. The Earl of Chesterfield Phillip Stanhope promised to be a patron, which according to Johnson he hardly ever played his part.

The Preface to Dictionary is an integral part of the book. It is here that Johnson highlighted his aim, intention, objective and besides his feelings in attempting the project. In spite of the fact that Dictionary was massive in physical form, huge in its content and one of the most successful work of Johnson, it was least explored. The constructive research began only in the twentieth century. The research work cleared the myth and fact of Johnson’s single handed attempt as well as amanuenses.

The other major research made during this period was the style adapted by Johnson in his Dictionary. The use of very long and complex words was the notable feature. Johnson’s personal feelings and his strong morality was also noted in this work.

The results of the various work brought to forefront the merits and demerits of Johnson’s Dictionary to forefront. It also highlighted the salient features of his character depicted through his work.

**Key Words: Dictionary, History, Preface, Patron, massive, Style, research, merits, demerits, character**

Samuel Johnson the biographer, essayist, critic, poet, prose writer, parliamentary writer, dramatist and conversationalist, has been an extraordinary lexicographer too. He published his two- volume Dictionary on 15 April 1755,

*“The Dictionary of the English Language”*.

This Dictionary has also been at times published as *Johnson’s Dictionary*.

Robert Burchfield the modern lexicographer commented on Johnson’s Dictionary:

In the whole tradition of English Language and literature the only dictionary compiled by a writer of the first rank is that of Dr. Johnson

Samuel Johnson the premier literary figure of mid-eighteenth century was born to Sarah and Michael Johnson on 18<sup>th</sup> Sep, 1709. Though his father was once sheriff of the town yet, he had to face financial troubles right from birth to his education at Oxford and even later in his literary career. He had caught tuberculosis from his wet nurse and had contracted scrofula too. He could barely see from one eye. Yet the laurels attached to Johnson’s name are immense. Though he had to bear physical, financial hardship he rose to great heights. Had it been any other person it would not have been possible for him to attain so much in the literary field as Johnson. His father when died left him penniless with an inheritance of twenty pounds. Next thirty years for him was a long struggle with poverty. He became incurable hypochondriac. A deep melancholy undertook him. It was under these circumstances that his literary career began with Gentleman’s magazine. In 1738 came his poem ‘*London*’ with this he became an unknown but notable poet. Slowly he earned a name for himself and it was in these circumstances that Warburton praised him which was no light thing then. It was in this state of reputation that Johnson was approached by group of eminent booksellers to publish a Dictionary in two folio volumes.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century with people becoming more focused and turning to literature there was an urgent need for a proper dictionary which could satisfy the rising intellectual needs of the people. Thus Johnson undertook the massive assignment with a promise to fulfill it in three years but eventually it turned to be nine years before he could finish it. Since Johnson did the work singlehandedly with virtually no physical or monetary help, to be precise (except clerical help which consumed the partly sum of 1500 guineas) it was a remarkable achievement. In his lifetime Johnson produced several revised editions.

When Johnson began this project he was not totally free. In 1749 he published the *Vanity of Human Wishes* an imitation of Tenth Satire of Juvenal. Besides he was already engaged in Shakespearean work and it was only that, he left it, to do work on this Dictionary. Therefore one finds so much borrowing from works of Shakespeare in his Dictionary too. When one analyses the Shakespearean works the influence is discernible. In fact it is vice versa in both the works.

In England Sir Thomas Elyot’s dictionary was the first dictionary published in 1538 followed by Richard Mulcaster’s in 1583.[Hitchings, 2005] All these and many more those followed lacked proper glossary of hard words which were foreign, obscure. These dictionaries did not clearly, clear the meanings of English words then used. Johnson’s dictionary was one such comprehensive document on which the literary audience could rely.

Johnson's dictionary had 42773 words to which were added more words in later editions. Significant change that Johnson brought to this dictionary was the use of literary quotations for illustrating the meanings of the words used. Another notable feature was the use of humor and prejudice in various definitions. Thus Johnson's Dictionary brought far reaching effect on Modern English. Till Oxford English Dictionary was published 150 years later Johnson's Dictionary continued to play significant role in the field of dictionary.

The foundation of Dictionary was laid in 1746 when a group of publishers approached Johnson to write a dictionary on the English language. Thus a contract of 1500 guineas was signed on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1746 with William Strahan and associates. [Lane, 1975] Before starting the work Johnson wrote a Plan for the Dictionary. The patron of the Plan was Philip Stanhope, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Chesterfield. [Lane 1975, pp. 117-118] The Earl promised to lend all the support for his work, though whenever Johnson approached him he was sent back from the door and he was not given any attention from the Earl. This Johnson felt insulting. The Earl on his side wrote two essays as 'letter of recommendations' after the Dictionary was published in 'The World'. Since as patron Johnson felt that the Earl had not fulfilled his job therefore he wrote a letter to Chesterfield, which became one of the famous letters. Here Johnson criticized The Earl for not completing his work properly as a patron and he felt ditched.

Johnson wrote the *Plan of an English Dictionary* in (1747). In his Plan Johnson announced his ambition as to what he aimed to pursue in his Dictionary. He was very clear from the beginning that the work he is undertaking is considered as 'drudgery for the blind'.

He wrote:

lexicographer holds the lowest place.....my lord I entered with the pleasing hope that as it was low likewise it would be safe'.(Plan 1747)

He aimed to rationalize spellings, trace etymologies, see to the proper pronunciation and find out the correct meaning of idioms. So the popular misconception that Johnson was trying to fix English language was in fact false as later while writing dictionary he realized difference between stability, stagnation and understanding of living native language. He also intended to 'instruct the learners'. According to him it was not enough to delight the critic'.

Thus Johnson's initial aim at writing dictionary was to change the course of writing.

He once remarked:

Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, require that it should fix our language and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition. With this consequence I will confess that I flattered myself for a while (Plan 1747)

In the Preface to Dictionary he unfolded his intention and feelings about how he felt the writer of a dictionary is treated. He wrote that in dictionary he presented a work for those who aspired to exactness of criticism and elegance of style. According to him:

Writers of dictionaries are considered as slave of science and pioneer of literature to remove rubbish and clear path of learning and genius

In his Preface Johnson seemed quite methodical. He planned to correct the speech which was '*copious*', '*detect adulteration*'. He proposed to adjust 'orthography' without disturbing the pronunciation. He planned to correct or 'proscribe' the absurdities and improprieties in English language. He was quick to notice barbarity in English language. Johnson also tries to analyze the confusion relating to the origin of words from French or Latin. He highlights the role of dominions and churches in this confusion. One also notices how cleverly Johnson does not neglect Etymology of words and thus divides them into primitives and derivatives. Johnson also accepted certain follies which he planned to administer in the Dictionary. For example he did not write those double or compounded words which did not have signification.

In his Preface itself Johnson knew and therefore wrote that,  
as far his explanations are concerned he would be targeted the most.....  
.....that part of my work on which I expect malignity most frequently to fasten, is the Explanation, in which I cannot hope to satisfy those who are perhaps not inclined to be pleased, since I have not always been able to satisfy myself.

Thus one can clearly notice Johnson's clarity as far as reception of his work was concerned. The difficulty he was about to encounter in interpreting language he had imagined well in advance.

While writing the Preface character of Johnson comes to forefront. His honesty so well noticed in all his works is also seen in the Preface while he talks about interpretative lexicography. He observes that in interpretative lexicography though he tried he was not successful.

He remarked:

the explanation and the word explained should be always reciprocal  
(Preface to Dictionary)

In the last part of the Preface Johnson admits that as a good lexicographer he labored to settle orthography, tried to display analogy and regulate the structures but he was not fully successful in his endeavors.

Johnson also put to notice readers attention to the circumstances under which the Dictionary was written by him:

English Dictionary was written with little assistance of the learned and without any patronage of the great, not in the soft obscurities of retirement or under the shelter of academic bowers but amidst inconvenience and distraction in sickness and in sorrow  
(Preface to Dictionary)

It is observed that in the mid-eighteenth century linguistically England was behind other European countries. The Tuscan and the Creusa dictionary had already appeared in 1612 and 1694. But the significant aspect was Johnson's attempt of trying to complete work of a nation.

Johnson's Dictionary got full recognition from the public. Normally a lexicographer should be content if his work are received by the world with cold esteem. But Johnson was very fortunate. He got a recognition which no lexicographer had ever received. In fact his Dictionary was read with pleasure. His definitions showed acuteness in thought and one notices great command over language. The quotations from poets and philosophers have been skillfully selected. The only fault one can acknowledge is Johnson as a terrible etymologist. He had little or no knowledge of Teutonic language except for English and English was no Teutonic language. So Johnson had to depend on Junius and Skinner. Johnson's Dictionary brought him name and fame but as far his financial condition was concerned it helped little. Whatever little money (1500 guineas) he got was spent in paying his clerical staff. In fact the master of such famous work had to toil for subsistence.

Johnson's Dictionary was one of his most famous works but perhaps least explored. The Dictionary was massive. It is only in last 60 yrs or so that scholars began to examine this book. Initially the process began in 1950's but it was only in 1960's that Eugene Thomas began proper research. This research is also vital with regard to the assistance Johnson got from the amanuenses, in contrary to the misconception that Johnson had no help either physical or financial (got advance payment for publishing and writing of dictionary). [Smith, 1755] The critics while evaluating Johnson's Dictionary feel that the history of lexicography is the proof of the fact that assistants influence dictionary making more than any philosopher or any great author would do or have done. In reality the credit should go to John Kersey, of 'A New English Dictionary', who published his work in 1702.

The size of the dictionary was 18 inches by 20 inches wide. It weighed 20 pounds and had 2300 pages. It had 42,773 entries. Its cost was four pound 10 shillings. Since this edition was expensive so few thousand could be sold. In 1756 came 10-shilling edition which was commercially more successful. Even a miniature version came out in 1790. The dictionary had 114,000 quotations. These quotations were from more than 500 authors. Johnson was the first lexicographer to use quotations in this manner. This method of illustrative quotations greatly influenced the later dictionaries. Johnson's use of quotations from Milton to Shakespeare reflected the literary genius of Johnson. For example in the following word 'opulence' he explains thus.

***Opulence:***

Wealth, riches, affluence

'There in full opulence a banker dwelt,  
Who all the joys and pangs of riches felt  
His sideboard glittered with imagined plate  
And his proud fancy held a vast estate'.

(Jonathan Swift's)

While writing Dictionary if a quotation did not appeal to him he did not deter to twist or rewrite it. Johnson also used common items from the press of his times.

Johnson's personal touch and his character is easily discernible in the Dictionary.



For example he gives funny explanation in these words.

**Excise:** a hateful tax levied upon commodities and adjudged not by common judges of property but by wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid.

**Lexicographer:** a writer of dictionaries a harmless drudge.

**Monsieur:** a term of reproach for a Frenchman.

Johnson's Dictionary is also known to be full with whimsical words. For example the word **writative**. Then he explains with usage in a sentence. 'Increase of year's makes men more talkative but less writative.

Another very notable feature of Dictionary was meticulousness in explaining words. A single word is explained by several definitions and illustrations.

For example word '**turn**'

The inherent humorous nature is not hidden in the Dictionary. The patent style of using long sentences and long words is once again highlighted in the book. He seldom thought if the words were comprehensible to readers. The words like 'odontalgick' or 'deosculation' remained a mystery to readers. He has been also charged with formulating words on his own. He did not spare the feelings of Scots while referring to the meaning of 'oats'. Where ever he felt the word was not needed in the Dictionary he omitted them. Johnson has been criticized for imposing his personal feelings on the readers.

Johnson was criticized for inferior etymologies but at the same time defended too. Johnson was a strong nationalist and did not see the need to fall upon Latin for every derivative. The criticism originated from the comparison between Johnson's Dictionary and Bailey's Dictionarium Britannicum. In all this criticism one must keep in mind that the dictionary was written 250 yrs ago and thus to compare and judge in to-days context is not logical.

The words meanings were explained by definitions. The definitions were polysyllabic and mostly quirky. The meaning of word cough has been given as 'a convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity'. **Hope** is 'an expectation indulged with pleasure. The meanings Johnson gave to different words have also undergone significant change from 18<sup>th</sup> century. For example the word **high-flier** meant someone who carries his opinions to extravagance. Similarly a urinator was a diver, one who searches under water. Thus one notices radical change in the meanings of different words from the eighteenth century.

The witty character in Johnson's definition was noteworthy. Among English lexicographers Johnson is considered the first to write memorably by design and probably first to assert the cultural authority of dictionary definitions. (Adams, 2009)

Johnson the moralist could not tolerate certain vulgar words though he admitted few, like bum, piss etc. Another noticeable feature in his selection of word was verbal curios like belly-god, "one who makes a god of his belly or amatorculist, "a little insignificant lover" or prick louse, "word of contempt for a tailor". Since Johnson had high standards of accepted social behavior, so certain words were socially unacceptable. The barbaric words such as budge, con, gambler, shabby etc were such words. Similarly one also finds changed meaning from Johnson's times to now. For example **cruise** was a small cup. Some such words one notices in Dictionary. Reader does not fail to see Johnson's

knowledge of different foreign languages. In his first volume of Dictionary the very last word is *knur* and *knurle*. *Knor* has been explained as German word. This justifies the fact that even though Johnson may not be proficient but had some knowledge of this language.

In his book Johnson has devoted a chapter on the history of the English language in detail. This deals with the origin of English language from Gothic or Teutonic. Johnson also describes Dr.Hicks genealogy. This detailed description explains how the English language attained the present form. In the Preface to Dictionary Johnson was very clear from the very beginning as to what to expect from the critics.. He knew he would not be spared and as a lexicographer he should not expect a smile for the tremendous labor that a writer of dictionary puts in. In fact writers in other fields could aspire for praise but lexicographer could only hope to escape reproach. When he surveyed the work undertaken he found speech copious, no rules, perplexity and confusion which needed to be regulated and many such irregularities needed to be redeemed. Thus he set himself to an assignment where he had no assistance from general grammar. He thought it his duty as a lexicographer to correct or proscribe the absurdities and improprieties which the language had.

At first he set to correct uncertainties in vowels. This he found to have come from the derivatives from original language. Even where derivation was clear he sacrificed uniformity to custom, convey – inveigh, deceit - receipt. In all these explanations Johnson expected malignity. He knew he could not satisfy all as he himself was not fully satisfied. To interpret any language is not easy. Johnson did not pay much heed to compound or double words except when they had significance. Diminutive adjectives or adverbs were less enthusiastically used by him as their significance was clear.

Johnson acknowledges that many terms that refer to particular occupation in spite of being necessary have been omitted and similarly certain words have been considered but their senses have escaped observation. For all these failures he asks for apology. Johnson resolved to finish his work in time even though it might not have been complete. As far as the terms of art and manufacture were concerned they too were left out as he could not visit each and every merchants place to gather knowledge. Thus in the concluding portion of the Preface Johnson admits that his work had failures and would not be spared the condemnation but one has to keep in mind the adverse circumstances like ill health, lack of patronage and assistance of the learned people while attacking him.

Henry Hitchings once remarked on Samuel Johnson:

Dictionaries are like watches. The worst is better than none and the best cannot be expected to go quite true

This came true in the Dictionary that Johnson published in 1755. In spite of several imperfections it was English language's most significant cultural monument. Hitchings effectively traces the character of Johnson and his society through dictionary. He narrates Johnson's biography in such a way so as to reveal how the turbulence in his life affected his description of words with their meanings. Johnson's definitions were filled with



emotion and moral judgment and each and every description of the word in dictionary reveals his character.

The Dictionary was the dialogue between Johnson and his times. It was like a national project where it involved imperialism. Dictionary was a proof in growth of scientific thought and influence of foreign influence. It testified as a work of literature with Johnson himself as a great literary figure and voracious reader. The Dictionary paved way for later Dictionaries like Oxford to have a literary background rather than simply writing with spoken words.

The merits and demerits of Johnson's dictionary and Johnson as a lexicographer has also been analyzed objectively by Adams. He feels the claims of Johnson's creditable work are exaggerated. It is often suggested that Johnson was the first professional lexicographer but Adam suggests John Kersey the author of A New English Dictionary of 1702 as the pioneer in this field. The myth that Johnson single handedly produced the work though in reality he had half a dozen helpers in form of assistants has been a matter of discussion by various authors. The use of literary quotations to illustrate meanings of words dates to 1598 when John Florio used this method in his work, *Worlde of Wordes*. Johnson is also attributed to introducing sense division to entries but the proof of Benjamin Martin doing so in 1747 speaks of another matter. Johnson is also attributed to asserting the cultural authority of dictionary definitions. He through his dictionary strived to preserve and protect the English language though he was not the first to do so. Thus question often arises that if Johnson was not first in doing so many things as far as Dictionary is concerned then why he is generally regarded as the pioneer in this field. The answer probably is due to his accurate work whether it concerned the quotations or their explanation or the vast use of different authors. Then again one notices Johnson's Dictionary to be urbane. His work was more of a literary work to be read like a book and consulted than a mere dictionary.

The highlight of Johnson's Dictionary was that in one dictionary he incorporated all the genres of a dictionary. Normally dictionaries are dispassionate., they do not entail personal feelings into them. Johnson's Dictionary was unlike many dictionaries. The meanings of the words given or the choice of the words kept in the publication were based on his personal feelings. The moral aspect played significant role. It was like a cultural criticism, more like political lexicography. It was as if whole nation and nationalist feelings were involved in it. The way he proposed the use of quotations was altogether a new genre. Sidney Landau in his work *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography* remarked:

Johnson's Dictionary is not distinguished by its innovations.....but by the skillful and original execution

He further remarked:

What he did he did supremely well

Adam Smith in the **Edinburgh Review** lavishes praise on Johnson's work. According to him the work had full collection of all the different meanings of each and every English word with examples of different authors. If the work is compared to any dictionary Johnson's work appears extraordinary. The esteemed work of French academy

and Della Crusca had the support of numerous learned men and it took longer time for them to compose it but Johnson work was a work of literary single person .and composed in less time as far as the magnitude of work is concerned. The merit of dictionary is great yet it cannot escape the defect which one notices in the plan of dictionary which does not seem to be very accurate grammatically. The significations of words are judiciously collected but have not been digested into different classes and synonymous words have not been carefully picked. Thus one can agree to Smith's view that the frequent resort to Dictionary itself is a sign of its credibility. The way dictionary raised the status of lexicography and created a new genre is the merit of Johnson Dictionary.

Johnson's Dictionary has been praised by Boswell as:

a work of greater mental labor than mere Lexicons

This view Johnson utilized for building his self defense against critics critical views. Johnson in his Preface calls his labor as duty and not dull. But various studies belie his pronouncements in the Preface and comparative study with Dictionary suggests different linguistic views than what he professes in Preface. In his act of self defense he portrays language as an intractable force of nature. This dramatic depiction is an act of self defense against those critics who tried to belittle his work. Even Johnson's cry of we have long preserved our constitution and let us make struggle for language is another act of self defense. In this he uses the word us thus shifting blame to 'us' a form of collective responsibility. These high powered rhetoric of Johnson gives better understanding of Johnson's approach to language and one understands how rhetorically charged Preface is more often consulted for his views than dictionary itself.

Thus Johnson's Dictionary even though may not have been first in many things, but it was a Dictionary written on grand scale incorporating the genres of several dictionaries. Its reputation was confined not only to Britain but reached America too. This was a remarkable achievement for later Webster and Worcester Dictionary were from America and Johnson's Dictionary had already created a name for himself in that continent.

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