

An investigation into First English Dictionary by Robert Cawdrey's: A Table Alphabeticall

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Abstract:

It is unquestionable that English language is increasingly becoming a topic of much concern and importance today. English language nowadays is considered as the language of politics, economics, military, etc., and it came to gain ground over other languages for its significance. Globally, English is renowned as a dominant world language and the learning and teaching of this language is rapidly growing.

This paper highlights the first English Dictionary by Robert Cawdrey, a school teacher, and it tries to find out the reasons which have pushed Cawdrey to make this dictionary . It also identifies certain differences that exist between present dictionaries and past ones. Moreover, the paper also looks at the structure of A Table Alphabeticall.

Key words: Lexicography, Lexicology, Robert Cawdrey, A Table Alphabeticall

INTRODUCTION

A Dictionary is defined according to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (henceforth LDOCE in short) (4th edition, 2003), as a book that gives a list of words in

alphabetical order and explains their meanings in the same language, or another language.

We rely on dictionaries to provide us with definitions of words, and to tell us how to spell them. They are used at home and at school, cited in law courts, sermons and parliament, and referred to by crossword addicts and scrabble players alike. (Howard Jackson , 2002, *Lexicography* P: 2)

Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabetical*, printed 1604, is the first monolingual dictionary of the English language. The first edition of the dictionary contained 2543 headwords, providing a concise definition for each of those headwords – the standard entry rarely exceeded more than a few words, usually synonyms (Siemens 1994, P 147). The later editions stretched the total number of definitions to 3264 words by 1617.

During the 16th century a vast number of new words began to appear in the English language as a result of developments in arts, medicine, and science. New words began to spread between the zones of common usage and cultivated speech which sophisticated well-travelled individuals spoke. A significant moment in the Renaissance period was the establishment of the English printing press, which had huge ramifications on Early Modern English. Valuable manuscripts and the Bible were now being printed rendering them permanent and the printing press made books available to more people – encouraging more people to develop the ability to read at a time when literacy rates were low (Boyanova ,2011, P: 254). By the 17th century Early Modern English was in an uncertain state, which led to a substantial amount of lexicographic work on the English language. This coincided with the establishment of the printing as literacy rates became higher, justifying the need for codification of the language (i.e. dictionaries). Scholars such as Thomas Elyot, John Checke, and Thomas Wilson argued for the English language to remain pure.

They wanted speakers of English to employ more native, simple Anglo-Saxon words; and for words of a foreign origin to be rejected ((Starnes & Noyes 1991, P: 8). Prior to *A Table Alphabetical*, there existed only bilingual dictionaries on the major European languages which came as a result of people's interest in travelling abroad. Cawdrey was disturbed by the state of the language, arguing that "some men seek so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mother's language", powdering it with over-sea's language. He goes so far describing it as "counterfeiting the King's English".

Cawdrey's aim was to teach "the true writing and understanding of hard usual English words" – the term 'hard' referring to words of a foreign origin that were prominent in contemporary Early Modern English. This was at a time when foreign languages became more prominently spoken in England, influencing the English language. Cawdrey identified a specific audience for his dictionary, them being "Ladies, Gentlewomen, and any other unskillful persons". Throughout the Renaissance period, men were the benefactors of education, acting as the pioneers of change, whereas women tended to be housewives – few girls enjoyed the privilege of going to school. Educated men were proficient in Latin, Greek, and probably some French – they were the innovators of contemporary language. His preferred reader was women who were literate and possessed a 'plaine' vocabulary. Cawdrey's concern was didactic and his epistle addresses concerns regarding contemporary language use and innovation at that period (Siemens, 1994). *A Table Alphabetical's* purpose is to provide women and any other unskillful persons (i.e. people who were unable to read Latin, French, and Greek) definitions by the interpretation of plain English words, so that they could better understand many hard words that they will commonly hear or read. Foreign words are very prominent throughout the first edition of the dictionary, featuring a mixture of English, French, Latin and Greek words.

CAWDREY'S INFLUENCES

Cawdrey's dictionary depended upon many diverse sources and his work reflects the influence of both Latin-English dictionaries and monolingual glosses. His material mainly came from Latin-English dictionaries, didactic texts, glosses, as well as various religious, scientific, legal and literary books that were available at the time (Siemens , 1996). He extracted many words from two other dictionaries that were written before his, Coote's English Schoole-Maister (1596) and Thomas Wilson's Arte of Rhetoricke (1533). He also searched 'Exposition of Certiane Difficult and Obscure wordes' by John Rastell (1598), Fulke's New Testament (1600) and various works of Chaucer. Cawdrey's dictionary strongly reflects the influence of Coote's and Thomas' dictionaries as Starnes & Noyes (1991, P: 18) claim that some 92% of Cawdrey's words and definitions derive from Coote's and Thomas'. The English School-Maister was the immediate inspiration of Cawdrey to the point where even the title-pages mimic each other (Starnes & Noyes 1991, P: 13-14). A Table Alphabetical contained twice as many words as Coote's, and he was so satisfied with simple definitions offered by Coote, that he would simply copy them into his own dictionary. Cawdrey did indeed borrow many definitions from Coote's, but he often enhanced and expanded the information through his own means (Starnes & Noyes 1991, P: 15). Another definite source of Cawdrey was Thomas' Latin-English dictionary to which he turned to for many of his 'hard English wordes' and definitions. It had a considerable influence as over 40% of Cawdrey's words came from Thomas' dictionary alone (Starnes & Noyes, 1991, P: 15-16).

MACROSTRUCTURE LEVEL

The front matter of A Table Alphabetical is short, comprising an inscription and an epistle. Cawdrey's epistle justifies the

need for the existence of his dictionary. He is concerned with the state of the English language and has a dig at certain circles within society who “speak outlandish English”. Cawdrey’s rant about the “fine English Clearks” in his epistle implies he was indeed a purist, although his dictionary was intended for didactic purposes.

It can be clearly seen that Cawdrey’s dictionary along with other pre-18th century dictionaries mainly served the purpose of explaining words by giving other equivalent words (e.g. translations & synonyms) (Noyes ,1943). Cawdrey intended to deal with “any kind of word, old or new – even proper names, which might present difficulties in understanding” (Schäfer 1970, P: 34). The words he defined were in contemporary use, appearing in Sermons and Scriptures. Immediately looking at A Table Alphabetical, it looks bland and restricted in content compared to today’s standards. In the four editions, he provides definitions of almost 3300 words. The hard words that Cawdrey defined were mostly nouns, comprising 1579 nominal definitions. He also defined 826 adjectives, 795 lexical verbs and 29 other words (including adverbs). All headwords are lemmatized with the majority of the definitions following a headword that is reduced to its lemma form (Siemens , 1996). Pages are set out as continuous lists of words with few space breaks, while words are listed in a single column. The layout of the pages reflects the ‘table’ element of the dictionary’s title.

Headwords are laid out in a now traditional A-Z fashion which is an intriguing choice considering Cawdrey notes in his Epistle of his awareness that readers may not understand the structure of the alphabet – even providing a brief lesson of how to read the alphabet. Headwords are not immediately obvious when looking through the dictionary and it can be perplexing at times when looking up a word. In most dictionaries, headwords tend to be formatted differently so as to separate them from their definitions. Cawdrey merely italicized the headwords and

made no attempt to either enlarge the font size or format them independently; therefore the result of this is that pages look overly congested with material, hindering attempts to find particular words. Each headword is followed by a comma along with the definition, and at first sight the headword can appear as if it is part of the actual definition. Cawdrey could have improved the formatting of his headwords and definitions as it conveys the impression of a rushed job. Entries are short and sweet, rarely going beyond a line. Definitions contain clauses and synonyms which are separated merely by commas, while punctuation is at times random, e.g. colons are present at the end of specific definitions suggesting they have some relationship with the subsequent entry – which they do not.

Unlike other dictionary makers - such as Samuel Johnson – Cawdrey did not directly refer to the origin of words or writers at that time. Cawdrey fails to provide referential dictionaries that were seen in most dictionaries published after Cawdrey. Unlike Johnson and other subsequent dictionaries, entries do not state a headword's word class, or list multiple senses; nor does *A Table Alphabetical* list examples of the headwords in use. Cawdrey marks headwords of foreign origin, labeling Greek words (g), French words (fr), words of a larger category (k), while opting not label Latin words – possibly because they had become accepted or naturalized.

Another intriguing feature is the typeset of the first headword at the start of a new letter. Under certain letters, the first two letters of the first word are capitalized, e.g. ABandon, BAile, MAcerate, and RAcha. This only occurs at the start of each letter and there does not appear to be any specific reason to this pattern.

HARD WORD DEFINITION

Cawdrey's method of definition was uncomplicated and bears heavy resemblance to that of Coote and Thomas. He wanted to

make hard words understandable, therefore definitions are predominantly brief and the most typical form of definition is to provide a number of synonyms. Siemens (1996, P: 149) notes that in the original 1604 edition, three quarters of definitions span less than one line, while one third of definitions comprise three words or less. 1171 definitions conform to these basic patterns. Cawdrey sought to explain words using as few words as possible. The influence of the traditional manner of definition in bilingual dictionaries is evident in that Cawdrey often attempts to define using one or two words. (McLemee ,2007, P: 67) claims that the terse definitions of hard words suggests that Cawdrey had never seen or lacked sufficient knowledge about the thing he was defining. (McLemee ,2007, P: 201) points out that Cawdrey defines “crocodile” and “akekorne” as “beast” and “fruit”. “Crocodile” seems somewhat exaggerated in its definition.

I have chosen to look at a selection of words to analyze whether Cawdrey really does define the headword within the realms of comprehension and discuss the adequacy of his descriptions.

Cawdrey defines ‘baptist’ as ‘a baptiser’ – using a noun to define a noun. This is of particular interest because the definition is too identical to the headword being described. Yes it is straightforward, but I would question the chances of a reader from the 17th century understanding what a baptiser is, yet failing to grasp the meaning of a baptist. It is interesting to see how he uses *downe* in his definitions of *depreesse* and *repreesse*, being to keep down and put downe. *Depresse* is emotive while *repreesse* is physical, but the method of definition suggests these two are more related than they actually are.

Comedy is designated as a kind of stage play. An intriguing choice by Cawdrey is that he recognizes it as a ‘kind’ of stage play yet there were no other definitions containing stage play. This definition is unique, yet it gives no sense as to the topic of a *Comedie* stage play. So, while it would have been

useful to know what a Comedie is, the individual would have no idea what a Comedie is about; should they ever read, hear, or see one. Cawdrey, oddly, elaborately defines tragedie as a solemn play, describing cruell murders and sorrowes. In contrast to his definition of comedie, he extends beyond identifying it as a play, giving insights as to the nature of such a play through the use of an adjective and a verb phrase – far more than what he included in his description of comedie. Like all of Cawdrey's headwords that he recognizes as a kind of a larger category, the definitions – while being comprehensible – are too terse and vague, giving no thorough explanation of the word he is defining. There is nowhere in this dictionary that Cawdrey does give any indication that the words he has used do provide a thorough and logical explanation of things (Schäfer 1970). This is exemplified in his definition of pomengranet, abricot, and barbarie as a kind of fruit – giving no notion as to the appearance, origin, or taste of these fruits. His definition of the various kinds of birds follows an identical pattern. On a couple of occasions, Cawdrey does provide a more in-depth explanation of the headword in question such as describing lethargie as a drowsie and forgetfull disease; yet his description of emerods as a kind of disease implies that his knowledge of lethargie was far greater than his knowledge of emerods. Cockatrice is described as a kind of beast but it is not labelled (k), unlike crocodile. As McLemee (2007) earlier argued, the fact that he categorized both crocodile and cockatrice as beasts suggests that Cawdrey had never seen either.

Cawdrey saw great importance in literature – describing it as learning. Rather than perceiving literature as a body of classical writings of a specific period or language as it commonly is now, he perceived it as the manner of teaching; the source of knowledge. Many of the great literary figures were innovators of the English language. Literature was prestigious; educated and sophisticated men knew their literature. Literature tended to act as the referential source of hard words.

Education is explained as bringing up which is slightly different to its meaning in contemporary English usage. In modern English, education strongly correlates with learning.

As (McLemee ,2007,P:67) states, Cawdrey's method of writing is that of simple translation and that strongly applies to his definitions of words deriving from the French and Greek languages. Cawdrey described translation as altering, changing, and that is exactly what he did for the most part. Words from the French and Greek were often translated to their English equivalent – though not always translated into plain English words. Looking at (now obsolete) *gourmandize*, he explains it as *deuouring*, *gluttony*, both of which I would consider hard words themselves. It is an unnecessary choice of definition as it would have seemed more appropriate for him to explain *gourmandize* as excessive eating, as this would presumably compliment his preferred reader's level of vocabulary. Another example of this is how he defines a prophet as he that *prophecieth*. Again, it is an intriguing choice bearing in mind that Cawdrey recognizes both *prophet* and *prophecie* as hard words. Why he feels the need to use the verb form (*prophecieth*) to define it is a mystery because the chance of the reader being able to comprehend what *prophecieth* means would appear to be very slim in light of the fact that *prophet* and *prophecie* are interpreted as hard words – so one would expect *prophecieth* to follow.

Multiple senses of words appear to have been ignored, an example being *sex* explained as *kind*. Cawdrey neither properly defines this headword nor lists other senses for it. He bluntly defines it as *kind* – assumedly referring to a particular kind of gender. It is odd that he fails to mention the other meaning that *sex* embodies, and that is sexual intercourse. *Sex* in the 16th century was a kind of taboo word which possibly explains the omission of its verbal sense. However, Cawdrey oddly includes *incest* as a hard word and he describes this in some detail – one of the longest entries in the dictionary – as

unlawful copulation of man and woman within the degrees of kindred, or alliance, forbidden by gods law, whether it be in marriage or otherwise. He further includes sodomitrie as when one man filthy lie with another man. If sex was a taboo word, then it's a surprise to see sodomitrie and incest included because I consider them as indexing 'stronger' meanings than what sex embodies. His definitions of incest and sodomitrie are explicit, leaving little room for misinterpretation.

CONCLUSION

It seems clearly the purpose of Cawdrey's great work is to help women and any other unskillful persons (i.e. people who were unable to read Latin, French, and Greek) definitions by the interpretation of plain English words, so that they could better understand many hard words that they will commonly hear or read. Many of the words that were included in A Table Alphabetical are still in existence today, but over the last few centuries most of the Latin words have diminished. Some of the words that were included in his dictionary are spelt a bit differently to the words we use today (demaund, temporarie), while a number of foreign words have now become naturalized into the English language, such as reliefe, defie, and defraude. Cawdrey's dictionary successfully depicts and defines the salient hard words of Early Modern English and it gives an immeasurable insight into Early Modern English lexicography. A Table Alphabetical paved the way for a number of post-16th century dictionaries, including the renowned Oxford English Dictionary, which includes so many words at this present time. It is hard to believe that Cawdrey's edition was the format for newer versions. A Table Alphabetical was a success and it clearly exemplifies the movement in English lexicography from word lists to dictionaries (Siemens, 1994). The simplicity of this book therefore provided great help for those people who wanted to either understand sermons and English written books, or

just to learn how to spell the words correctly (Siemens ,1996). He indeed did provide the true orthography of hard English words, providing the authentic spellings of borrowed foreign words. For the most part of the book, Cawdrey provides terse definitions using plain English words.

RESULTS:

Based on the conclusion, the paper finds out the following:

- 1- A Table Alphabetical paves the way for a number of post-16th century dictionaries, including the renowned Oxford English Dictionary, which includes so many words at this present time.
- 2- The main purpose of A table Alphabetical is to help women and any other unskillful persons (i.e. people who were unable to read Latin, French, and Greek) definitions by the interpretation of plain English words, so that they could better understand many hard words that they will commonly hear or read.
- 3- The structure of A Table Alphabetical is quite different from present dictionaries' structure, but it was a massive success and it marks the shift in lexicography from wordlists into dictionary.

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