



In other words, a dog is a quadruped of the genus *Canis*



DATE?" is a shorthand question uttered with the utmost frequency in the dens and lairs of lexicography, for dates are of vital significance to those studying word biographies and compiling dictionaries.

Dates capture and determine not only meaning, pronunciation or level of formality of headwords in dictionaries, but definitions and the expectations of definitions too.

This is demonstrated in the recent publication of the 12th edition of the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* for it is exactly 100 years since the first edition was delivered to the English-speaking world.

That might surprise those who know that the first *Oxford English Dictionary* was not published until 1928, but yes, the *Concise* jumped the gun. Since 1911 definitions have generally tended to become more informal, specific and detailed, although the succinctness varies somewhat.

In 2011, a bore is defined as "a dull and uninteresting person or activity". In 1911, a bore was "a nuisance, a tiresome person or a twaddler".

Today a rat is "a rodent resembling a large, long-tailed mouse, typically considered a serious pest," while earlier it was simply "a rodent of some larger species of the mouse kind".

Our vocabulary increases with our

knowledge and most definitions actually require more space these days. The 1911 edition contained 38,000 headwords, the 2011 publication containing almost twice that number at 66,500, and it's 640 pages longer. There were no entries in 1911 for such lexical youngsters as credit crunch, cybersecurity, spin doctor, or zero tolerance, these creeping into editions since the 1990s.

An interesting evolutionary example in word definition is that of "dog". In Kersey's *A New English Dictionary* of 1702, dog is defined as "a beast" and shortly after in Kersey's 1708

Dictionary Anglo-Britannicum it was defined as "a well-known creature". In the 1737 edition of *The New General English Dictionary, Peculiarly Calculated for the Use and Improvement of Such as Are Unacquainted with the Learned Languages*, dog is defined as "a fourlegged beast very familiar and useful to mankind". *Walker's Dictionary* of 1823 defined dog as "a domestick animal remarkably various in his species" and Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1843 more concisely put it: "A well-known domestick animal".

The Oxford English Dictionary (updated 2011) uses a more specific, scientific global definition: "A quadruped of the genus *Canis*, of which wild species or forms are found in various parts of the world, and



numerous races or breeds, varying greatly in size, shape, and colour, occur in a domesticated or semi-domesticated state in almost all countries". It is only the final definition here that differentiates dog from cow, horse, or pig.

Dictionary word biographies provide us with knowledge of changes of use and habit, but today's communication technology also helps us to note such changes within a short time. Recently I found a copy of *History of the English Language*, published in 1886, which informed me that kangaroo was a Polynesian word. Such errata were understandable in 1886, when little was known of English usage in other latitudes and longitudes. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Polynesia was a blanket term for islands of the wider Pacific, and it was not until the 1830s that it was given a more restricted usage. In the communication climate of the time, news of that change could well have taken decades to disseminate.

I am often asked by fiction writers to provide a usage date for a term intended for use within the time setting of their work. Databases and dictionaries that include written citations are invaluable in determining a usage date. Spoken usage precedes written usage in general, so an appropriate chronological usage is usually easily determined.

A *DomPost* reader wrote to me about the use of "loo" in the script of the film *The King's Speech*, being sure that the

term would not be used in 1936. The term was actually recorded in written form in the 1920s, and undoubtedly used in spoken form within a particular area many years before that. And what about "Skip to my loo/lou"? A very dated and entirely different usage. Lou comes from High Frisian, Saxon and German, the term for love.

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Not a cow: In a 1702 dictionary a dog is defined as "a beast", and in 1737 as "a fourlegged beast very familiar and useful to mankind".