



In praise of the harmless drudge – the true hero of the language



APPARENTLY the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855) – after whom the unit of magnetic induction was named – told the diplomat and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) – after whom Berlin's university is now named – that: "Linguistics is for people who have enough pedantry to be mathematicians, but not enough intelligence."

Personally, I am sure that there are some brilliant linguists and some not-quite-so-bright mathematicians as well, but the appeal to pedantry – although rather negatively phrased – rings bells.

Von Humboldt may have needed this quality rather less than other linguists (or philologists) of his period. Most of the linguistic work of the period was historical, tracing spelling changes from language to language and looking in detail at the circumstances under which a new and different spelling arose in one language rather than another.

You cannot undertake that kind of work without a good eye for detail. Another branch of linguistic description that was, relatively speaking, in its infancy at the period, was lexicography, and lexicographers, too, need to be aware of all the details, need to be sure that they treat words consistently even if one begins with B and another with Y, and need to have a very broad knowledge of a range of subjects to track down the subtle differences in meaning that differentiate words in different areas of human endeavour.

It might be rather unkind to label all lexicographers "pedants"; "sticklers for detail" sounds much kinder. But it is certainly true that many lexicographers have shown their dedication to their task and their downright eccentricity in a number of ways.

One of the earliest of the English lexicographers was Robert Cawdrey. His *Table Alphabeticall* "conteyning the true writing, and understanding of hard vsuall English wordes for the benefit and

help of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons" was published in 1604, while Shakespeare was busy writing plays.

He was such a dedicated worker that he paid scant attention to his wife, who eventually got so annoyed with him that she threw his whole manuscript in the fire. She should have known him better. He just started again.

Some of you may have seen a version of this episode in the *Blackadder* TV series, without realising that it is based on historical reality.

Samuel Johnson's great *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1755, the first dictionary that tried to list all the words of English rather than just the hard ones, shows his personality, wit and his tastes in definition after definition. Two of the most famous are: "Lexicographer: a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge" and "Oats: a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people".

Joseph Wright, who wrote the *English Dialect Dictionary* (1898-1905), was sent to work in a mill at the age of six and did not learn to read until he was 15. He walked from his home town of Bradford in Yorkshire to the University of Heidelberg in order to gain the education which led him to eventually become a professor of philology at Oxford University. He was one of J.R.R. Tolkien's teachers.

James A H Murray, the first editor of what was to become the *Oxford English Dictionary*, came from Hawick in the Scottish lowlands, and left school at the age of 14. He was an autodidact, and was given his first honorary doctorate by Edinburgh University the year after he completed his BA in London.

As is well known, he had readers from all round the world send him citations of words in the books they had been reading, and he talked the Post Office into installing a letterbox right outside his home in Oxford so that it

22-Sep-2010

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Opinion

Market: Wellington

Circulation: 88100

Type: Metro

Size: 312.42 sq.cms

MTWTF--


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would not be too far to go to post his own voluminous correspondence.

He paid his children (of whom he had 11) from a very early age to put the slips on which the words were recorded into alphabetical order for him.

New Zealand has had more than its fair share of lexicographers, too, including Eric Partridge, R W (Bob) Burchfield and Harry Orsman. Without all these heroes – pedants or not – we would have

a much poorer description of our language.

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GOT A QUERY

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