THE WIKI-FICATION OF THE DICTIONARY: DEFINING LEXICOGRAPHY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

The future of lexical reference books, such as the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary (OED), is going to be determined, in part, by the emergence of free on-line dictionaries, such as Wiktionary and Urban Dictionary. Specifically, we are witnessing a paradigmatic shift of authority in which users, rather than editorial boards, are making decisions concerning the content associated with a lexical entry's definition. In effect, the exclusive privilege formerly enjoyed by professional lexicographers is now being extended unequivocally to laypersons. It is pertinent to ask, therefore, what effect this state of affairs will have on the ways that dictionaries are compiled and used. For some, including Jill Lepore of the *New Yorker Magazine*, online collaborative lexical references are "Maoist" resources, "cobble[d]…together by non-experts who "pilfer" definitions (79). This paper rejects such a characterization and seeks, instead, to provide a description more suitable for critical inquiry. By contrasting the entry "bomb" as it appears in the OED, Wiktionary, and Urban Dictionary, and by making use of contemporary linguistic theory, the author posits that: word meanings are highly constrained by popular usage; and, users regularly provide semantically and pragmatically significant, and grammatical accurate, definitions; and, in providing users the flexibility to modify entries in real-time, user-generated dictionaries are [illegible] as catalogues of the current state of language. It is concluded that, whereas traditional dictionaries may be the better resource for diachronic analyses of words, Wiktionary and the like may prove better for synchronic analyses. Finally, if traditional references are going to remain relevant, they may need to incorporate collaborative functionality.

I. Background

1. History

The forms and functions of the general English language dictionary are the product of more than one thousand year's worth of changes in lexicographical theory, methodology, and praxis, such that contemporary users would hardly categorize the earliest specimens as "dictionaries." For example, consistent with lexical references of other languages from the preceding three millennia, the first English dictionary, Ælfric's *Nomina (*c.1000) was little more than a bilingual gloss of common words and phrases.[1] The first monolingual

[1] 1200 Latin terms listed alongside their Old English counterparts

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dictionary of English, Robert Cawdrey's 1607 *A Table Aplhabeticall* was, contrary to its name, not strictly alphabetical, and was also little more than a list of "difficult" words with synonyms from common parlance.

Considered collectively, few English dictionaries before the 18th century contained the hallmark features of today's standard references. Innovations, from the systematic alphabetization of headwords (or lemmas), to pronunciation guides, to quotes illustrating usage, came into being only gradually, were not adopted across the board, and are occasionally still the topic of debate.

2. The current state of lexicography

The past two decades of lexicography have seen enormous changes relative to all the preceding years; these changes have largely corresponded to the introduction of digital technologies, and most recently, the Internet, as tools for both lexicographers and users of English dictionaries. For all the benefits they have afforded, these changes have not come without cost to the industry. Tarp, for instance, argues that, despite advances in lexicographic theory, the profession is facing an "identity crisis" which manifests itself in many ways, including "a tendency to let computers take over and reduce the crucial role of the lexicographer" and a failure to "link lexicography, as a social theory and practice, to the general problems and needs of the… information age" (21). Gouws also sees lexicography as at a "crossroads": in one direction lies the radical re-envisioning of lexical data delivery in terms of "the medium, the functions, the structure, the contents and the usage possibilities"; in the other direction, lies the perpetuation of tradition (265).

The maturation and popularity of participatory, Internet-based lexical references like Wiktionary and Urban Dictionary are forcing the industry to ask many of the same meta-lexicographical questions that led to previous improvements in the modern dictionary: What is the best (i.e. most logical, most cost effective) way to compile a dictionary? How, and for what purposes, do people use dictionaries? What details should be provided with an entry? Arriving at the correct answers to these questions is an important theoretical exercise, and an even more important practical one, considering that both Wiktionary and Urban Dictionary rank within the top 1000 most popular websites in the word; the Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED), by comparison, falls just below the 70,000 mark.[2] There can be no question that, for profit-seeking dictionary makers, free on-line dictionaries are game-changers, unlikely to recede in influence or popularity.

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3. Critical Issues

The use of technology itself—or, perhaps, the recognition by lexicographers of its value and potential—is not mainly the issue. Since the 1960s, a number of dictionaries makers have turned to computational, or corpus, linguists for data and insight into the English language.[3] More recently, most major publishers have offered CD-Rom and online

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[2] Rankings as of April 30, 2011; from Alexa.com
[3] A successful example being *Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary*, from HarperCollins.

versions of their printed dictionaries and allocate significant portions of their budget for the continued development of digital resources.[4]

The main issue, then, is, to paraphrase a metaphor from Tarp, that current incarnations of electronic or digital lexical references from publishers such as Oxford are simply "faster horses," which is anecdotally what Henry Ford believed consumers would have requested if he had asked them what improvements to transportation they would like to see. In contrast, Wiktionary, Urban Dictionary and other participatory cyber-lexical references are "Model-Ts." They are, in many respects, the embodiments of innovativeness and change that Gouws proposes. Yet, as with any radical disruption to the status quo, the recent changes in lexicography have not been welcomed by all, and rather, have been the target for concern and criticism. For example, Jill Lepore of the *New Yorker Magazine* refers to Wiktionary as a "Maoist" resource that has been ""cobble[d]…together"; she asks sarcastically, "Who needs experts?", and claims that Wiktionary is "only as good as the copyright expired books from which it pilfers" (79).

Jonathan Green, author of the three-volume *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, was equally as irreverent in describing the Urban Dictionary in an interview on the radio program *On the Media*:

> The Urban Dictionary is the antithesis of what I do. I don't want to… to hell with it, I will be snotty. The Urban Dictionary is amateur hour. They're students at four in the morning out of their heads and having fun and sending this stuff in. So, for me the Urban Dictionary is playtime, but it has got nothing to do with lexicography.

Both critics have slightly different takes on the same theme: because these dictionaries are created "ground-up" by users rather than by professionals, they are unreliable as, or do not qualify as, legitimate lexical references. I reject these characterizations on the grounds that they rely on fallacious assumptions about lexicography, and because I believe they do little to expand our critical understanding of an important phenomenon.

II. Discussion

1. Experts and expertise

The main charge against Wiktionary and Urban Dictionary involves the fact that they are compiled by non-experts and amateurs. If I understand correctly, there are only two possible interpretations of expertise in the context of lexicography—one would refer to expertise in act of compiling a dictionary, the other, expertise in the language being compiled. I am arguing that, in either case, examining the notion of lexicographical expertise leads us to the conclusion that these charges are not well founded.

[4] The OED specifically has been available since 1988 on CD-Rom and since 2002 online, and the Oxford University Press has invested more than $55 million in efforts to revise its online content. Pocket electronic dictionaries, popular in Japan, South Korea, and other Asian countries since the early 1980s (Tono), also represent the integration of technology and lexicography, though these products are usually brought to market by electronics manufacturers rather than dictionary publishers.

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1a. Expertise as a matter of compiling a dictionary

As dictionaries have changed, so too has "the lexicographer." What was once a "pastime… for introverted word collectors" (Hartman 3) or for "…amateurs with other occupations" (Béjoint 221), is now a profession for those who have been trained in the vocation of compiling dictionaries. Gone, too, is the image of the lone, abbot-like "drudge," as Samuel Johnson defined *lexicographer* in his epic 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language* (qtd. in Crystal, "Cambridge" 74); today, many, if not most, major, general-purpose English dictionaries are the product of teamwork.

First, lexicographers are properly concerned with making the product or commodity "dictionary." In the process, they are engaged in "a descriptive activity, recording existing use rather than laying down prescriptive or normative rules about how words should be used" (Bloomfield qtd. in Hartmann p.5). Traditionally, in the process of determining the best way to "describe" the language, lexicographers have made decisions as to a dictionary's macrolevel structure, concerned with the selection and ordering of the wordlist, and microlevel structure, including how to separate the meanings of polysemous words, or whether to reference non-standard pronunciation, for example. However, in present-day scenarios, the authority of the lexicographer to make these decisions is limited by their publishers, who, in turn, make decisions based on matters such as production costs.

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This is not to say that lexicographers' work is somehow unimportant or that their mastery of the craft is inconsequential; rather, it is to suggest that notions of expertise raised here cannot be disarticulated from the real conditions in which the professional lexicographer applies his or her knowledge. These conditions are perhaps less glamorous than some might believe: "The work of modern lexicographers," according to Béjoint, "has become even more repetitive… and an increasing part of the job is to extract what the corpus contains and note it on pre-formatted templates" (222). Admittedly, lexicographers are likely to have a nuanced set of skills for the interpretation of corpora or for the manipulation of "existing text [used] to produce endless variations from the same database" (222); still, the means by which dictionaries are compiled professionally would look familiar to contributors to Wiktionary and Urban Dictionary, who are also working with pre-formatted templates when adding or editing entries (see Images 1 and 2 below). In the age of computers, it is data entry—not data description—that has come to define a portion of the lexicographers task, whether that person is an employee of the Oxford UP or a maker of Oxford Shoes who happens to participate in cyber-lexicography. Moreover, in those cases where decisions about adding a new word or phrase to the collection *are* being made, the criteria stipulated by Wiktionary are arguably rigorous and, as far as I can see, consistent in scope, objective, and rationale with the criteria of major publishers.[5] Correspondingly, modern professional lexicographers and contributors to

[5] Wiktionary's "Criteria for Inclusion"can be found at http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Criteria_for_inclusion; conditions for inclusion are expressed differently, if at all, by publishers. A representative example can be found on the OED Online's FAQ page as well as the Merriam-Webster FAQ page.

sites like Wiktionary may share more in common with each other than the former share with their predecessors.

Another point of criticism that weakens through explication is the idea that democratically compiled dictionaries are pilfered copies of standard dictionaries. The corollary to this would presume that professional lexicographers always begin the process of cataloging words anew each time a dictionary is compiled. Both of these positions are inaccurate. Until propriety copyright laws came into being, copying from earlier works, either directly or indirectly, was commonplace (see Osselton) such that "history of lexicography everywhere is a story of plagiarism (Béjoint 220). Even today, one takes pieces of what has come before. Wiktionary's use of previously published material is not, by any lexicographic standard, a discredit to its validity; rather, it is reflective of a practice whose efficacy has been tested since the birth of craft. Additionally, not all of the definitions found in cyber-references are copies, since new expressions and phrases are continually added, in the case of Wiktionary, for instance, at a rate of about 1600 new words each day for the last six months.[6] Although it is unclear what percentage of these entries are actual neologisms or expressions that have been left out of other publications, it is safe to assert that a good many must contain definitions not found elsewhere. That Urban Dictionary contains mostly "attitudinal" definitions (contrasted with the more familiar style of Wiktionary's definitions) is further evidence that copying is not the only method employed by users of collaborative dictionaries (Ooi 316).

Contributors to Wiktionary or Urban Dictionary are presumably not professional lexicographers, they do not have to concern themselves with production costs, and may have only a passing degree of familiarity with the traditional formal conventions of dictionary-making; this notwithstanding, the very fact that these resources are popularly recognized as dictionaries suggests that certain important aspects of lexicography have been successfully appropriated by laypersons. There are, admittedly, discernable differences between dictionaries compiled by professionals and those compiled by non-experts. One notable difference is the degree to which principles are (or are not) applied uniformly across the text; one analysis of Wiktionary, for example, found that a number of microstructural elements for a given entry do not necessarily carry over into other entries (Fuertes-Olivera); with Urban Dictionary, uniformity seems not to be even a desired condition. Of course, there is the obvious difference of editorial decisions being made democratically with collaborative resources, the value of which "should never be underestimated," but that should be "handled with due care" (Gouws 274). I believe that, in spite of these differences, the distance between the professional lexicographer-as-compiler and the on-line contributor is not as great as some critics would have us believe.

1b. **Expertise as a matter of language and linguistic knowledge**

As a general rule, lexicographers are not linguists, though there is apparent overlap in the subject matter to which both are dedicated.[7] In fact, there is no implicit requirement that a lexicographer have any background in linguistics or even language studies, and there is

[6] statistics from http://stats.wikimedia.org/wiktionary/EN/TablesArticlesNewPerDay.htm
[7] See Béjoint

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little evidence to suggest that it would be beneficial if he or she had such a background. The real relationship between lexicographers and linguists actually ranges from professionally cooperative to distrustful on both sides (cf. Bejoint; Andersen and Neilsen; Hartmann). Furthermore, while “all the branches of linguistics have something to contribute” to the task of lexicography, the general impression one obtains from the literature is that linguistic theory, while occasionally useful, has had “no real influence on the dictionary text” (Béjoint, 272-275; cf. Hartman; Tarp).

In the making of dictionaries, lexicographers cannot reasonably act as experts on the plethora of topics whose related terminology is found between the pages of their books. Neither can they be expected to serve as authorities on the various semantic, syntactic, or phonological features of a given entry. These matters are the domain of language specialists, and in major publishing companies, a “division of labour” ensures that it *is* specialists who provide the necessary data (Hartmann, p. 7). In short, I am arguing that lexicographers should not be heralded as experts on language *sui generis*. This position challenges the generally held assumptions to which many dictionary users adhere, namely, that the dictionary, by virtue of its creators’ unquestioned expertise, is “a shibboleth,” “an arbiter,” “eternal,” or “infallible on the meanings of words” (Béjoint 232-238). An equivalent misconception is that a dictionary contains all the words of the language; one hears claims such as, “If it’s not in the dictionary, it’s not a real word.” These beliefs, however preposterous, die hard and certainly contribute to the false notion that lexicographers are indefatigable, peerless language experts, if not the mythical “language police.”

Expertise of the kind needed to make a dictionary is perhaps not satisfied by the sole condition that one be a native speaker of the language, although meta-linguistic intuition and introspection has certainly factored into the dictionary-making process (see Béjoint); at the same time, determining categorically and objectively what constitutes linguistic expertise in the context of lexicography is an elusive task at best. In the digital age, access to the same internal and external resources needed for compiling linguistic data is available to both professionals and non-professionals; as a result, the title of “expert” may simply be a convenient term to describe whichever group has greater facility with these resources.[8] And while it may well be the case the professional lexicographers, on the whole, are more competent as a result of more years of experience, current trends suggest that it is only a matter of time before the balance shifts.

Still, it would be impossible to overlook the underlying concerns of Lepore and Greene, namely, that the loss of experts in the field would result in some kind of epistemological anarchy. Lawrence Sanger, co-founder of Wikipedia, is less concerned, arguing that, “online communities, even if wildly successful, would threaten neither the existence nor some traditional roles of experts” (62). One reason is that is, even if one were to attempt to ascertain the degree to which online resources, such as Wikipedia or Wiktionary, are reliable by comparison with their printed counterparts, someone (i.e., an “expert”) would

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[8] By “internal,” I mean native-speaker intuition; by “external,” I mean resources that are regularly used in lexicography—including corpora such as the million-word International Corpus of English, which is freely available on line: http://ice-corpora.net/ice/index.htm.

need to judge the comparison. Gouws sees a role for lexicographical expertise in the Wiki- landscape specifically, describing a scenario in which lexicographers "make the final call" in the democratic compiling process by vetting the suggestions of contributors before they are incorporated into the reference (275).

I believe that dismissing Wiktionary or Urban Dictionary on the grounds that their contributors are not titled experts, as the above-mentioned critics seem to have done, serves little purpose: it does not challenge or attest to the integrity of online lexical references since its basis for comparison is based on fallacy, and it does not offer lexicographers any practical advice for staying relevant in the digital age, since, as Sanger notes, those involved in the editorial process (e.g. publishers, research institutions) need to "rethink the privilege they accord to experts in their own knowledge-creation processes" (63). This accordance of privilege, if it is not rethought, may prove to be a weight around the neck of those who would like to see the craft of lexicography develop well into the foreseeable future.

Figure 1. Template for creating a verb entry on Wiktionary

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Figure 2. Template for adding a word to Urban Dictionary.

3. Analysis

A simple contrastive analysis of the treatment of noun "bomb" in OED Online, Wiktionary, Urban Dictionary reveals some interesting things, particularly about the descriptive quality of on-line collaborative resources. By way of an illustration, suppose a reader were to encounter the following two sentences in a contemporary film periodical:

1. "That new movie with Ben Affleck is a *bomb*. (Don't go!)"
2. "That new movie with Matt Damon is the *bomb*. (Go!)"

Assuming that our reader is unsure of this periodical's time period or county of origin, we would like to know how these resources afford the reader an opportunity to disambiguate the two distinct meanings of *bomb* expressed above.

Distinct meanings (abbreviated) of the entry *bomb*	**OED**	**Wiktionary**	**Urban Dictionary**
1. An incendiary device	X	X	X
2. A success / failure	X	X	X
3. A large sum of money	X		
4. Marijuana; rolled marijuana	X		X
5. A mass of lava	X		
6. An attractive person		X	X
7. An old car	X		X
8. A statement that causes a strong reaction		X	X
9. A forward pass (in football)		X	
10. A vessel for high-pressure chemical reactions (in chemistry)		X	
11. A kind of graffiti			X

Figure 3. The distinct meanings of the entry *bomb,* by dictionary.

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3a. Differences in the number of definitions

Table 1 is a list of the common discrete meanings of the noun *bomb* by their inclusion in each dictionary. First, assuming for convenience that there are approximately eleven "common" meanings for *bomb* as indicated above, and making no claim as to whether most speakers of English would "agree" with these definitions, it is Urban Dictionary that provides the greatest number of semantic distinctions, at seven; OED and Wiktionary are equally represented on the table with six apiece. The fact that a perfect consensus among the references has not been achieved is far from surprising: most general-purpose English dictionaries differ in both their wordlist and their treatment of polysemous words (cf. Béjoint; Hartmann). In other words, no dictionary can be said to have all possible definitions for all possible words. Accepting, then, that the number of available definitions is always going to vary, the first question we would like to ask is, *Are these definitions all valid?*

3b. Determining the validity of the definitions

Establishing the outward validity of dictionary definitions is almost impossible, for, as "[f]our-fifths of the vocabulary of English has a highly restricted circulation" (Crystal 9) we assume, by extension, that the semantic nuances of meanings also have restricted circulations. Definitions that might seem grossly inaccurate to some speakers may be entirely valid to others—a condition that obtains regularly when dealing with slang, jargon, and regionalisms, for example. Lexicographers may need to offer practical answers to questions that most of us would prefer to deal with at the theoretical level only: Should we include meaning 11, which has applications only in the realm of grafitti art, or meaning 10, whose sense is only readily understood by specific types of chemists?

The difficulties of this situation are compounded by the fact that, in accordance with many contemporary models of language,[9] the actual meaning of words is highly constrained by contextual and pragmatic specificities.[10] This theme is addressed throughout the work of Gee, who makes a compelling case for connecting words to social practices (24):[11]

> People tend to think that the meaning of a word or other sort of symbol is a general thing—the sort of thing that, for a word, at least, can be listed in a dictionary. But meaning for words and symbols is specific to particular situations and particular semiotic domains. You don't really know what a word means if you don't carefully consider both the specific semiotic domain and the specific situation you are in.

This is not to say that native speakers walk around without any semantic reference for words of their language; certainly, words are associated with conceptual information in the mind (see Jackendoff). Rather, it is to say that meaning is simultaneously derived from linguistic and non-linguistic cues when it is used, and whether or not these cues are significant to a given speaker is determined by many factors. Dictionary definitions, therefore, can be only mere approximations of meaning in a representative range of plausible semiotic domains and situations. In deciding how to define or represent the meanings of words, lexicographers are faced with the same challenges that language users face, namely, how to "fix" word meanings so that they can be appropriately understood by the community-at-large.

In summary, one could attempt to argue validity from a number of positions: Perhaps the OED's definitions are more "universally accepted," making them more valid than Urban Dictionary's; or, perhaps Wiktionary's definitions are more up-to-date, rendering them more valid than the OED's. No matter the position one wishes to defend, it should be

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[9] I offer a detailed analysis of the relationship, particularly, the correspondences, between contemporary psycho- and sociolinguistic theories of language in Penta (2008).

[10] One example from Jackendoff (2002) relates to the meaning of *drink* in the sentence, "I hear Harriet's been drinking again," in which the one understands that *drink* refers specifically to alcohol, not something else. For native speakers, this information is ascertained through extra-linguistic analysis.

[11] Gee defines *semiotic domain* as "…any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities…to communicate distinctive types of meanings" (18)

clear that it would only serve a rhetorical, not a practical, purpose. The best that dictionary-makers can do is to apply whatever conditions have been pre-established for defining words, then proceed in good faith to describe them as best they can.

3c. The descriptive sufficiency of the definitions

Referring again to Table 1, we find that only two of the definitions make it into all three dictionaries: 1. An incendiary device, and 2. A success / failure. Since there is little room for debate regarding the first meaning, the second meaning will be the focus of this discussion.

If we accept that dictionaries will have different but equally valid interpretations of a word's meanings, the next question is, *Do these definitions provide sufficient information to help clarify the meaning of 'bomb'?* In Figures 4, 5, and 6, we find that each dictionary chooses to present its analysis in a different way. The OED groups the alternative meanings into one entry, simultaneously signifying *bomb* as a "success, [especially] in entertainment" or, in the U.S., "a failure." Wiktionary separates the opposing meanings into separate sub-entries, and reports that, in slang, *bomb* refers to a kind of "failure" or an "unpopular product"; the positive connotation, "a success", is characterized as a feature of British slang (N.B. Wiktionary's use of "the bomb" as a definition of *bomb* is treated below). Finally, Urban Dictionary also separates the meanings into sub-entries and offers an entirely unique evaluation, stating that, the negative connotation of failure was in use prior to 1997, and, alternatively, that the meaning "excellent" occurs after 1997.

This analysis, at least superficially, suggests that our cyber-lexicons are on par with the OED in handling semantic information. At the same time, none of these definitions is wholly sufficient for disambiguating the example sentences. Of course, each of these dictionaries offers a range of other resources to assist the reader, namely, illustrative examples, usage notes, and hyperlinked text. I believe it can be shown that, with respect to these resources, it is actually Wiktionary and Urban Dictionary that provide the best tools for the user.

1. Illustrative examples

Illustrations, which have been a feature of dictionaries for hundreds of years, allow a reader to refer to words in contextualized utterances in order to glean appropriate meaning and usage. In keeping with Gee's position, these illustrations may best be understood as a type of signpost, so to speak, such that users can simulate real-world contexts in attempting to internalize new words. A fitting question, then, is, *Are these dictionaries successful in providing useful illustrations*?

Of the three illustrations provided by the OED, only one, from the *New Yorker,* provides enough information to clearly indicate the connotative quality of *bomb*; this is accomplished by apposing the words "failure" and "bomb'" (i.e., success); the quote from the *Listener* is entirely ambiguous—there is no indication that "going like a bomb" should be understood as either positive or negative; finally, *The Beatles* illustration hints at the use of *bomb* to mean failure, relying on the expression "to go *down* a bomb."

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Wiktionary's distinguishes connotation through association (i.e. by including it directly below the definition) in the case of illustration 1, and both by association and context (i.e. the use of "fabulous") in illustration 2. Urban Dictionary achieves clarity through association (i.e. by co-indexing the definition with the related illustration) and by context, using "hated" and "loved." In summary, this analysis reveals that, like we can conclude that the illustrations, either alone or in tandem with the definitions, provide only limited access to meaning.

2. Usage Notes and Hyperlinks

Only Wiktionary and Urban Dictionary provide usage notes, and although each dictionary employs hyperlinks throughout their full collection, only Wiktionary uses them in each part of its entry. I believe it is a combination of the usage notes and hyperlinks that make these collaborative dictionaries more useful than the OED in guiding our reader towards an understanding of the different connotations of *bomb*.

Wiktionary's entry contains the following usage note: "The diametrical slang meanings are somewhat distinguishable by the article. For 'a success', the phrase is generally *the bomb*. Otherwise *bomb* can mean 'a failure'." By noting how speakers make syntactic decisions to fix the meaning *bomb* in context is a critical part of this entry's overall value. Hence, if we reconsider the example sentences in light of this proviso, we find that the separate connotations are finally discernable. Wiktionary also assists the user in another way: in the previous discussion of descriptions, I only briefly mentioned this dictionary's unorthodox practice of defining *bomb* with "the bomb"—blatantly violating Béjoint's "non-circularity" rule (325). In actuality, "the bomb" is a hyperlink to a separate entry on the site, presented in Figure 7, which treats these words as a cohesive, idiomatic unit. Definition 2 and illustrations 3 and 4 in this latter entry reinforce the usage note in the main entry, providing our imaginary reader with an arguably sufficient description to correctly interpret *bomb*. Similarly, Urban Dictionary advises the use of the "modifier the" and provides illustration 2 to support this.

Generalizing from the above analysis, it should be clear that many features of Wiktionary and Urban Dictionary are as adequate as, if not better than, the OED in describing the language. It has been shown that their semantic and syntactic/pragmatic information is accurate, and that their incorporation of usage notes and hyperlinks is effective in delivering the appropriate data to the user. I believe, however, that one of the most important advantages of online collaborative dictionaries is that their very functionality allows them to stay perpetually up-to-date, literally cataloging the language as it is used every day.

Whether or not this would be desirable to most dictionary users is a matter of individual preference, but it is one that is only possible with collaborative dictionaries: the fact that language constantly changes presents unique problem for traditional lexicographers, which is that, by the time a paper dictionary is published, some words and meanings will have fallen out of use (i.e. become obsolete) and others will have been coined. Thus, with traditional print English dictionaries, there is no real potential for staying truly current. With online versions of these dictionaries, in which the decision to change or add an entry is presented to an editor or editors, there is going to be a considerable lag, again,

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reducing the likelihood that these resources would reflect the current state of language. In brief, collaborative functionality invites users of the language to contribute reports of their linguistic experiences in real-time, and relies on the same community of users to ensure the accuracy and quality of these reports. Though some critics will decry this democratization of the lexicographic process, one is left to wonder whether the "drudges" of yesterday would have appreciated the extra pairs of eyes, ears, and hands that make cyber-lexicography so productive.

Bomb, n.

Etymology: < French *bombe*, < Spanish *bomba* (see first quot.), probably < *bombo* 'a bumming or humming noise' < Latin *bombus*. The word is thus ultimately identical with *boom*. Compare the earliest English instance *bome*, directly < Spanish; also 17th cent.*bombo* from Spanish or Italian Variously pronounced: see the rhymes: in the British army/bʌm/ was formerly usual.

e. A success (esp. in entertainment); also *U.S.*, a failure.

1961 New Yorker 28 Oct. 43/2 What had once been called a failure became a 'bomb'.
1962 Listener 11 Oct. 581/2 Leslie Crowther, introducing *The Black and White Minstrel Show* from the Victoria Palace, remarked, 'We're going like a bomb here.'
1963 The Beatles 5 Once, Paul McCartney and I played Reading as the Nurk Twins. Went down a bomb, I recall.

Figure 4. Partial entry for "Bomb, n." in the OED Online (edited for readability; hyperlinks indicated by underline).

Bomb.

From French bombe, from Italian bomba, from Latin bombus ([illegible]ming sound"), from Ancient Greek βόμβος (*bombos*, "booming, humming, buzzing"), imitative of the sound itself.

Noun

2. **(*slang*) A failure; an unpopular commercial product.**
   (1)That movie was a bomb[illegible]
4. **(*chiefly UK slang*) A success; the bomb.**
   (2)Our fabulous new [illegible]pets have [illegible]lling like a bomb.

Usage Notes

- The diamet[illegible]slang meaning[illegible] somewhat distinguishable by the article. For "a success", the phrase is gener[illegible] Otherwise bo[illegible] mean "a failure".

Figure 5. Partial entry for "Bomb" in Wiktionary (edited for readability; hyperlinks indicated by underline)

BOMB

1. (before 1[illegible]) Something really bad; a failure

2. (after 1997) Something considered excellent and/or the best (uses modifier "the")

1. I hated that movie! I'm not surprised that it was a total bomb at the box office.
2. I loved that movie! It was the bomb!

Figure 6. Partial entry for "Bomb" in Urban Dictionary (edited for readability)

The bomb.

Alternative forms

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- **(*a success*): <u>da bomb</u>**

2. **(*<u>slang</u>*) A success; something <u>excellent</u>.**

   (3)Their new record is the bomb.
   (4)That party was the bomb!

Figure 7. Partial entry for "The bomb" in Wiktionary (edited for readability; hyperlinks indicated by underline)

III. Conclusion

Gouws offers a thoughtful synopsis of today's dictionary users, reminding us that digital technology is forever going to change the practices of lexical reference (273):

> People are not interested in access to dusty heavy volumes on bookshelves or even to electronic dictionaries on CD, which are merely digital versions of printed dictionaries with a limited added value. Their access process should lead them to data on their computers, i-pods and cellular phones where a dynamic and optimal retrieval of actual information is achievable in a quick and unproblematic way

I believe this assessment holds true in the case that we are interested in conducting synchronic analyses of the language, especially if one is only concerned with word meanings in their most contemporary sense. Yet, for diachronic analysis, particularly of word etymologies, resources like the OED may still have the upper hand. Quite frequently, Urban Dictionary provides no historical information about its entries, which is what, I take it, Greene means when he says that "it's got nothing to do with lexicography." In the same vein, Wiktionary's etymologies often cross references pages that do not exist. Furthermore, both of these former dictionaries do only a fair to acceptable job of identifying the source of their illustrations. By comparison, the OED not only offers consistently excellent word histories, it also dates and cites each illustration. This level of consistency may prove to be one of the main reasons why many of us will never entirely abandon the "dusty heavy volumes."

Perhaps drawing such a strong line between the "old" and the "new" dictionaries is unnecessary. After all, people in the digital age are remarkably adept at navigating both worlds, and seem to find ways to utilize multiple resources simultaneously. "Nowadays," we are reminded by Ooi, "the user is not only encouraged to combine the strengths of multiple dictionaries… but also to sift through more information in order to get to the required definition" (113). But today's users are also in a very special position not only to "get" the definition, but to interact with the it in ways previously unattested, that is, to challenge, manipulate, or contribute to it as part of a growing and highly connected, collective knowledge base. We are beginning to see the potential of this scenario just as we are seeing its weaknesses. Now may be the time for dictionary makers to redefine themselves in the digital age, to plug into the collective and share its expertise of a truly ancient craft—and to allow the community to share its own sense of what a dictionary should be. The alternative approach, which would be the maintenance of the status quo, may mean being written out of the future of lexicography.

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