

Marijke Mooijaart and Marijke van der Wal (eds.), *Yesterday's Words: Contemporary, Current and Future Lexicography* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2008). ISBN (10) 1-84718-469-3. (Price Gbp: 39.99. Price Usd: 59.99)

By Han Nijdam

Words can be dangerous. Juggling with them too much can lead to disasters, as anyone who has read *Foucault's Pendulum* by Umberto Eco knows. So why devote an entire volume to words and collections of words – dictionaries? What is the attractiveness of dictionaries? Are they some kind of magic spell books with the help of which you can control things by knowing their proper names? Or, phrased in terms of the post-‘Entzauberung der Welt’ era we live in: are we able to understand a language or a culture with the help of no more than a dictionary? The answer to all these questions must be negative, yet dictionaries seem to persistently have an aura around them that suggests they do indeed possess these marvellous and magic powers.

My objections to dictionaries are these. First and foremost, dictionaries don't give contexts to linguistic artefacts: they promote an atomistic view of a language and its culture. This is most acute in etymological dictionaries. Etymologies are very rewarding on the one hand, because one is able to know the oldest form and (often) meaning of a word, but unsatisfying at the other hand, because one doesn't learn how this etymon relates to other etyma in the same language at the same time. After all, cultural artefacts (linguistic artefacts included) become meaningful only in relation to other such artefacts.

Second, dictionaries can be based on other, older ones, thereby possibly copying and perpetuating occurring mistakes. This has, among other things, given rise to so-called ghost words: forms that have never existed, but are based on, e.g., incorrect readings of manuscripts. Such ghost words have proven very difficult to root out of a research tradition.

Third, lexicographers have to be knowledgeable about a thousand things: from tools that got out of use long ago via esoteric legal terms to the exact meaning of a specific colour term in an ancient language. This means they are doomed to make the occasional mistake. One could almost say that dictionaries are flawed by their very nature.

Having said this, it is interesting to see what dictionary makers themselves discuss when they meet. One such gathering is the International Conference of Historical Lexicography and Lexicology, the third of which, held in Leiden in 2006, has led to the present volume. It is divided into five sections – chapters – of which the first one forms the introduction.

The remaining four chapters are on ‘Dictionaries and Dictionary-Makers of Former Ages’; ‘The Vocabulary of the Past’; ‘Current and Future Lexicography of Early Language Stages’; and ‘Technology of Today for Yesterday's Words’. In all, these four chapters contain a total of 27 contributions, which deal with aspects of 12 different languages, one of which is a non-Indo-European one (Tommaso Pellin,

'What is a *wailaici*? The Chinese Dictionaries of Lexical Interferences and their Theoretical Outlook'), and one of which is a Creole language (Joseph T. Farquharson, 'Using Historical Dictionaries to Reconstruct Language History: the Case of Jamaican Creole'). The bulk of the articles deals with the various Germanic languages (English: 5, Frisian: 2, German: 2, Scots: 2, Dutch: 5). A smaller portion is on the Romance (Portuguese: 1, French: 1), Celtic (Welsh: 1, Irish: 1), and Balto-Slavic languages (Polish: 1). Last, there are those articles that do not deal with a particular language, but address other topics, such as the view of the eighteenth-century philosopher Leibniz on dictionaries (John Considine, 'Leibniz and Lexicography'). There are also two contributions on substrate words by Leiden scholars, which I will discuss below (Cor van Bree, 'Substrate Words' and Michiel de Vaan, 'On Wanderwörter and Substrate Words in Etymological Research').

In the introduction, the editors address the problem of the position of lexicography as an autonomous discipline. They seem to be very aware of this issue, since they start their article with the claim that 'metalexicography' has acquired the status of a 'recognized branch within applied linguistics' in the past few decades. So that one knows! They then proceed with shortly discussing the content of the various chapters of the volume. They end their introduction with abstracts of all contributions.

Since it is impossible to review all 27 contributions, I will first discuss the contributions on Frisian and Dutch. Then I will highlight some contributions that particularly interest me and that will hopefully also be of interest to the readers of *Trefwoord*: those on etymology and substrate words (chapter 3) and those on digitalizing dictionaries and language databases (chapter 5).

## FRISIAN

There are two contributions on Frisian. One is on Old Frisian (Anne Popkema, 'A New Step in Old Frisian Lexicography: The *Altfriesisches Handwörterbuch*'), the other one on Modern Frisian (Pieter Duijff, 'Towards Standard Frisian in the *Friesch Woordenboek*'). Oddly enough, both have been placed in chapter 2: 'Dictionaries and Dictionary-makers of Former Ages'. This is of course the right place for Duijff's contribution, since it deals with the first complete Modern Frisian dictionary, the *Friesch Woordenboek* from 1911. It analyses trends of standardization of the Frisian language in this dictionary, since at the time it was written, there was no Standard Frisian. Instead, there were various dialects to choose forms from.

But what about the contribution by Anne Popkema on the new *Concise Old Frisian Dictionary (Altfriesisches Handwörterbuch)*? Old Frisian is a thing of the past, that is true, and yes, the scholar who started the *Altfriesisches Handwörterbuch*, Dietrich Hofmann, passed away in 1998. And yes, the project started a long time ago, in the 1960's. But the scholar who has finished this job, Anne Popkema, was alive and kicking last time I met him. Moreover, when the volume appeared, the *Altfriesisches Handwörterbuch* hadn't even been completed – it only appeared this last December (2008). Its odd location aside, Popkema's contribution gives a nice overview of both the history of this project, as well as the scope of the *Altfriesisches*

*Handwörterbuch*. For one thing, it shows a 60% increase of lemma's compared to its predecessor, the *Altfriesisches Wörterbuch* by Holthausen and Hofmann (Heidelberg 1985). Another feature is that the *Handwörterbuch* indicates whether a form is Old East Frisian or Old West Frisian (the two main Old Frisian dialects). Last, via so-called siglen (short titles), the dictionary shows in which texts a lemma occurs. All this makes this new dictionary most welcomed and awaited.

## DUTCH

Of the five contributions on Dutch in this volume, two deal with Old Dutch (Kenny Louwen, 'A Glimpse behind the Scenes of the *Oudnederlands Woordenboek (Old Dutch Dictionary)*' and Tanneke Schoonheim, 'Sources of the *Old Dutch Dictionary*'). Since 1999 a team of lexicographers and historical linguists has been preparing, compiling material and writing an Old Dutch Dictionary at the Institute of Dutch Lexicology (INL) in Leiden. After the present volume appeared the *Old Dutch Dictionary* has been completed. It can now be consulted online (<http://gtb.inl.nl/>).

Both contributions give a short introduction into the background of the project. The sources that are used for *Old Dutch Dictionary*, e.g., and the problems the editors are faced with concerning these sources. It turns out that almost all sources are influenced by High German to a lesser or higher degree, except for the place-names and some glosses. It is to be regretted that these contributions have not been integrated into one larger article on this project, since there now appears to be a considerable amount of overlapping and redundant information in the two.

Next are two contributions on Early Modern Dutch (Marijke Mooijaart, 'Dictionary of the Golden Age') and Modern Dutch (Vivien Waszink, 'On *retrograde* and *retrojeans*: the Classical element *retro* in the Dutch Dictionaries WNT and Van Dale and in the English OED'). I will treat them chronologically. The reason for this is that Marijke Mooijaart in her contribution holds a strong plea for a dictionary of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch, which does not exist today. Mooijaart suggests this might be an excellent task to be taken up by the INL once the Old Dutch Dictionary has been finished. One has to take refuge to the *Dictionary of the Dutch Language* or WNT, a dictionary of Modern Dutch, when one wants to look up a 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup>- century Dutch form. More than once, the WNT does not provide an accurate meaning, since Modern Dutch deviates from Early Modern Dutch in some ways. Vivien Waszink's contribution, finally, is on the element *retro*, and the way it has changed its meaning and use in Dutch and English over the last two centuries.

The last contribution on Dutch is interesting because its authors, Karina van Dalen-Oskam and Joris van Zundert, go down roads not many scholars have travelled so far ('The Quest for Uniqueness: Author and Copyist Distinction in Middle Dutch Arthurian Romances based on Computer-assisted Lexicon Analysis'). They present the tentative beginning of a method to identify authors and scribes of a medieval text, in this case the Middle Dutch Arthurian romance *Walewein*, by means of a statistical analysis. This method was developed for modern texts, and although it is not easy to apply to a Middle Dutch text, it still yields some promising results. We know for example that the first part of *Walewein* was written by a certain Penninc

and the second part by a Pieter Vostaert. And indeed Van Dalen-Oskam and Van Zundert do find significant differences in choice of lexical items and high frequency words in these two parts. Unfortunately, the text at their disposal had not been PoS-tagged, which would have yielded more accurate results.

Although I am quite excited by the possibilities that are opened up by these two scholars, I am less so by the way they communicate their message. Their description of Burrow's Delta procedure is almost incomprehensible to someone without a statistical background. Moreover, the figures they use have been reproduced so poorly that they are almost impossible to interpret. For this, of course, the authors cannot be held responsible. This has to do with the meagre quality of the print work, of which I shall be saying a bit more in my conclusion.

### **Chapter 3**

Chapter 3 contains two interesting contributions on substrate words (Cor van Bree, 'Substrate Words', Michiel de Vaan, 'On Wanderwörter and Substrate Words in Etymological Research'). Substrate words are words that have been borrowed from an indigenous language by a language that has become the dominant one. Thus, metaphorically, the second or superstrate language has been laid over the first, or substrate language like a blanket. This substrate language, however, peeps through holes in the blanket of the superstrate language by means of certain words. It has been observed that in specific areas of the lexicon, the old language is so strong that it pushes out the new words and so the resulting language (i.e. a mixture of substrate and superstrate) retains the old ones. Some of these areas are: terms for body parts, body motions, important aspects of nature.

The two contributions have been printed in the right order, because De Vaan comments on the contribution by Van Bree, which can be found earlier. Whereas Van Bree makes a plea for identifying some more areas of the lexicon in which possible substrate words can be found, such as micronature, home, agricultural features, and feelings, De Vaan doubts whether this approach is viable at all, since he thinks these areas cannot be easily demarcated, and Van Bree's method has a heuristic value at most.

Although Van Bree presents some very interesting instances of Frisian substrate forms in Town Frisian and in the dialects of Holland, Groningen, and Drenthe, it must be admitted that it lacks a rigorous theoretical underpinning. De Vaan on the other hand, gives a nice overview of what the problems are when one is confronted with substrate words, *Wanderwörter* – words which travel through a chain of languages, thus becoming almost irretraceable to its original donor language – and other possible kinds of language contact, especially in the remote and thus unrecorded past. A very readable and interesting contribution!

### **Chapter 5**

The final chapter has been devoted to the 'Technology of Today for Yesterday's Words'. One almost hears Dr. Bunsen Honeydew's famous opening phrase 'Here at

Muppet Labs, where the future is being made today' echoing in one's head, because 'tomorrow' or 'future' seem to be implied in this title.

This chapter contains five contributions. The one by Van Dalen-Oskam and Van Zundert I already discussed. Their article is profoundly unlike the remaining four, since these are all on the problem of migrating a dictionary from hard copy to a digital format.

One contribution describes what happened when the dictionary-makers of the *University of Wales Dictionary (Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru)* switched to digitalizing their dictionary halfway the process (Andrew Hawke, 'Computerization on a Shoestring: *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*'). The editorial staff started using microcomputers in the 1980's, at the very beginning of this development. The main aim was to economise on the budget of the project. Over the last few years, the staff has also digitalized the earlier volumes that had only appeared in hard copy.

The other contributions all describe how an existing dictionary in hard copy was transformed into a digital format and which problems arose during the process. Interestingly enough, there is a lot of common ground here. Researchers run into the same problems and are faced with the same considerations, irrespective of whether we are dealing with an 18<sup>th</sup> century French dictionary (Philippe Caron, 'Computerizing Féraud's *Dictionnaire Critique de la langue Française* from a Full-text Electronic Version to a Softly Tagged Release'), an Irish dictionary (Julianne Nyhan, 'The Problem of Date and Context: Migrating an Irish Language Dictionary from Hard Copy to Digital Format') or an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish dictionary (Susan Rennie, 'The *Electronic Jamieson*: Towards a Bicentenary Celebration').

Of course, there are differences in approach and horizon. Whereas Caron's contribution is rather straightforward, Nyhan takes a more theoretical stance. She goes into the problem of what a text is, and thus participates in a theory forming discussion that has been held in TEI-circles. The practical problem that triggered Nyhan's thought on this matter is interesting, as is her solution. Throughout the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, the terms 'earlier' and 'later' are used in a relative sense. They cannot be replaced in the digital format by, e.g., 'Middle Irish' and 'Modern Irish' and thus cannot be processed digitally, since they cannot be tagged sensibly. This has led Nyhan to the insight that it is not the entire dictionary which is 'the text', but that 'the text' is the individual entry. That is how the end user sees and uses a dictionary. Thus, a dictionary is a collection of texts.

One other interesting feature of the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* deserves to be mentioned. Because of the nature of the Irish language and the historical sound changes it underwent, the language has a complicated orthography. Nyhan uses *airthach* 'oath of confirmation or denial' as an example. This word could also be rendered as *aurthach*, *urthach* or *erthach*. In the hard copy of the dictionary, it was not possible to find the entry *airthach* when one was confronted with *urthach*, because there are no cross references. This has been solved in the electronic version of the dictionary, thus making it much more user-friendly (<http://www.dil.ie/>).

Although the *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language* is exemplary, my heart was won by the story about digitalizing the *Etymological Dictionary of the*

*Scottish Language* (<http://www.scotsdictionary.com/>). It is a success story of a well defined project that was executed with grace and ease, with a few personal touches to top the story off. When one looks at both websites though – of the Irish and Scottish electronic dictionaries respectively, that is – it must be admitted that the Irish beat the Scots as far as Jamieson's electronic dictionary is concerned. There is, however, another, more official *Electronic Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (<http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>). Here, the Scots and the Irish are each other's equals.

In all, I found this chapter to be the most illuminating one, since it deals with dictionaries going on the internet, a development that is still taking place worldwide and will take a lot of time and energy of an entire generation of scholars. Through articles like these, one can learn from each other's insights. And of course check online whether the authors have been telling the truth and have not been trying to make their project look better than it really is.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this volume offers a kaleidoscopic content, with lots of interesting contributions. All articles give a short introduction to the problem they address. But almost none of the authors takes the time to really expand on a subject. So the large number of contributions is an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time. I must applaud the editors though, for having made one extensive bibliography at the end of the volume. This must have cost them an extra effort, but now references have not disappeared into the footnotes, like they sometimes do in publications like these.

Before I go into the intrinsic problems surrounding a proceedings volume, I must say something about the looks of the book. I am sorry to say it looks cheap. It has a sober black cover and cloth, and is printed on very white paper in contrast. Moreover, I do not find the lettering and layout very appealing. Like I already mentioned, the figures in the article by Van Dalen-Oskam and Van Zundert have been reproduced so poorly, that they are indecipherable.

Last, I want to shortly address the whole concept of a proceedings volume. Are these publications of interest to anyone who did not attend the conference? I think the answer is not a simple yes or no. One of the dangers is that the contributions become too short to make a lasting impression. I think that in this case, a critical mass has almost been reached. That means that this volume is good for getting informed about a large amount of research projects. If one wants to learn more about any of the topics addressed, however, one has to go back to bookshop or library again. I am, however, glad to have learned especially about the digitalization projects that are presented in the volume. They have given me ample food for thought.

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