

ELECTRONIC LEXICOGRAPHY

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The formation of electronic lexicography, which is only now beginning to be recognized as a field in its own right, date right back to the late 1950s/early 1960s, when it went under the names of computer or computational lexicography and the dictionaries themselves were referred to as machine-readable rather than electronic. At that point, the scope of the field was restricted to “the use of computers in making dictionaries” (Logan 1991: 353). The role of computers at the time appears clearly from Urdang’s (1966) reports on one of the earliest dictionaries to have relied on computer technology, the first edition of the Random House Dictionary of the English Language: “We had been alert to the development of computer technology in the years preceding and we hoped to use computers to do the sorting, codifying, rearranging, and checking the data at hand, and the text to be written” (ibid, 31). Those expectations were amply fulfilled. However, the computer technology of the time did not extend to the actual production of the dictionary, which was still published by conventional means: “Originally, we had intended preparing a tape for input to some automatic typesetting device.

Unfortunately, there were no firms large enough or versatile enough or confident enough of their equipment to convince our manufacturing department that such an undertaking would be feasible” (ibid, 33). In those days, neither lexicographers nor dictionary users had any contact with the computer. Lexicographers “continued to write dictionary entries on paper (increasingly, using structured forms), and it was left to computer specialists to input the data” (Atkins and Rundell 2008, 112).

The first dictionary to move from the machine-readable dictionary to the lexical database, thereby greatly helping lexicographers design dictionary entries, was the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1978). Quite a few years elapsed before the first dictionaries began to appear on CD-ROM and dictionary users could truly begin to experience for themselves the benefits of having a dictionary in electronic form. Things really began to accelerate in the 1990s with the rapid development of a range of new mediums, in particular handheld devices and (a little later) online dictionaries. Today lexicography is largely synonymous with electronic lexicography and many specialists predict the disappearance of paper dictionaries in the near future. Symptomatic of this trend is the announcement by Oxford University Press in 2010 to the effect that the next edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, the uncontested historical dictionary of the English language, will probably no longer be published in paper format because demand for the online version is so radically outstripping demand for the printed version.

This introductory chapter has three main objectives. First, it aims to define the scope of the field of electronic lexicography as profiled in the volume and give a general overview of the profound changes brought about by the electronic medium. Second, it describes the structure of the volume and briefly summarizes the contribution made by each chapter. And third, it pulls the threads together and

sketches some priorities for the future of electronic lexicography. In this volume electronic lexicography is used as an umbrella term to refer to the design, use and application of electronic dictionaries (EDs), which are in turn defined as primarily human-oriented collections of structured electronic data that give information about the form, meaning and use of words in one or more languages and are stored in a range of devices (PC, internet, mobile devices) (for typologies of EDs, see de Schryver 2003, Nesi 2009 and Lew 2011). However, computer-oriented lexicons, i.e. lexical tools that are primarily designed for use in natural language processing (NLP) applications, are not totally absent from the volume, given that the line between these two types of lexical resources is progressively narrowing and NLP resources like WordNet are increasingly being integrated into human-oriented tools.

The growing integration of computer technology into dictionaries has led to changes of varying degrees of importance. Overall, these have tended to be rather trivial, often consisting of a mere conversion of the content of the paper dictionary to the electronic medium. Weschler's (2000) observation that "electronic dictionaries are still fundamentally paper dictionaries on a microchip" is unfortunately still valid for a number of electronic dictionaries today. However, this has started to change and many recent dictionary projects are testimony that the innovations afforded by the electronic medium can radically transform every facet of dictionary design and use. In what follows, six of the most significant innovations:

- 1) corpus integration; 2) more and better data; 3) efficiency of access;
- 4) customization; 5) hybridization; 6) user input.

Our analysis takes into account both the opportunities they open up and the difficulties they might pose to lexicographers and/or users.

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