

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #039

The Story Of A Fantastic Dictionary

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[00:00:04] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can improve your English while learning fascinating things about the world.

[00:00:18] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about the most famous English dictionary that has ever been written.

[00:00:27] It wasn't the first and it wasn't the last, but it is probably the most important and has gone down in history as the most amazing work of [scholarship](#)¹.

¹serious, detailed study

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[00:00:40] Yes. I know it's about a dictionary, and this might not sound like the most interesting of subjects, but I promise you that the story is pretty [intriguing²](#) and ends up being quite funny, certainly funnier than you think that a podcast about a dictionary would be.

[00:00:58] Some of the definitions of words are, well, they're not very [politically correct³](#) as we'll find out.

[00:01:06] Before we get right into the podcast though, let me just give you your customary reminder for those of you listening to the podcast on iVoox Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts, that you can find a copy of the transcript and key vocabulary for this podcast over on the website, which is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:29] The transcript is super helpful for following along with the podcast, and the key vocabulary helps explain difficult words so that you can build up your vocabulary at the same time as listening.

[00:01:42] So it's definitely worth a look.

[00:01:44] You can find out more at leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:49] Okay then let's talk about this dictionary.

² to interest someone a lot, especially by being strange, unusual, or mysterious

³ Someone who is politically correct believes that language and actions that could be offensive to others, especially those relating to sex and race, should be avoided

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[00:01:54] It was published in the year 1755, over 250 years ago.

[00:02:01] It took eight years to complete and is a work of extraordinary [scholarship](#).

[00:02:10] It's author was a man called Samuel Johnson, who was paid the equivalent today of about 250,000 pounds to write the dictionary.

[00:02:23] It wasn't the first dictionary.

[00:02:25] Dictionaries had been written before, and there were some attempts in the late 16th century to create English dictionaries.

[00:02:36] But Johnson's dictionary, this dictionary has gone down in history as the first real [authoritative](#)⁴ dictionary.

[00:02:46] The first one that actually [captured](#)⁵ the English that was used by [the masses](#)⁶, the kind of English that you would find spoken if you walked down the streets of London, Liverpool, or Bristol.

⁴ containing complete and accurate information, and therefore respected

⁵ the act of recording or taking a picture of something using a camera, or the recording or picture taken

⁶ the population

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[00:03:02] Before we talk about the dictionary itself, I think it's worth just [painting a picture⁷](#) of the kind of world, from a [linguistic⁸](#) point of view, that existed at the time that this dictionary was written.

[00:03:17] And also it's worth [reflecting on⁹](#) why people might want a dictionary.

[00:03:24] What was the actual purpose of a dictionary and why was Johnson paid to write one?

[00:03:32] Well, the Early Modern period of British history, so that's the period between 1500 and 1650, this was a period in which they were a huge number of new words added to the English language.

[00:03:47] It's [estimated¹⁰](#) that the number of words in use doubled in that 150-year period.

[00:03:57] Some of these new words were added to English after being borrowed from Latin or Greek.

[00:04:03] And others were just added from other languages, from other countries.

⁷ describing the situation

⁸ connected with language or the study of language

⁹ thinking about

¹⁰ roughly calculated or approximate

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[00:04:09] English as a language was a bit of a [mess¹¹](#) and there wasn't one central record of what all of these words actually meant.

[00:04:23] At the same time, people were starting to move from the countryside to the cities.

[00:04:29] [Literacy¹²](#) rates were starting to rise - that's the number of people who could read and write, and there was much more of a focus on the education of children.

[00:04:42] Unfortunately, at that time, that just meant the education of boys.

[00:04:47] So if you add all of these factors together, a large increase in the number of words in use, plus more people able to read and write, then you could say that it seemed clear that there was a need for some kind of [formal¹³](#) record of what all of these words actually meant, a record of the language.

[00:05:12] Without a record, words would mean different things to different people in different places, and there was the risk of different parts of the country all ending up speaking completely different languages.

¹¹ Something or someone that is a mess, or is in a mess, looks dirty or untidy

¹² the ability to read and write

¹³ public or official

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[00:05:28] There were a few attempts to create this [all-encompassing](#)¹⁴ dictionary, this attempt to [collate](#)¹⁵ all of the words and their definitions, but for a few hundred years, the efforts, the attempts made were overall [unsatisfactory](#)¹⁶.

[00:05:49] They didn't do a very good job.

[00:05:52] So [fast-forward](#)¹⁷ a century or so, we get to the early 18th century and the [scene was set](#)¹⁸ for Samuel Johnson, the hero of our story.

[00:06:07] When Johnson started out on his task, he saw his role as to provide order, and to help [stabilise](#)¹⁹ the rules surrounding the English language.

[00:06:20] He thought it had got too [messy](#).

¹⁴ complete, total

¹⁵ to bring together different pieces of written information so that the similarities and differences can be seen

¹⁶ not satisfactory, not considered good enough

¹⁷ move ahead, move forward

¹⁸ the scene was ready, the environment was ready

¹⁹ If something stabilises, it becomes fixed or stops changing

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[00:06:22] There were too many [anomalies](#)²⁰, too many [peculiarities](#)²¹, too many strange rules, and he saw it as his task, his role, to [set things straight](#)²², to document the English language as it should be documented.

[00:06:41] I'm sure you might be thinking, "[hang on](#)²³, even now it is full of [anomalies](#) and [exceptions](#)²⁴, if he improved it, what was it like before?"

[00:06:53] Well, after eight years of [scholarship](#), Johnson realised that the English language was actually too complicated and [convoluted](#)²⁵, too [messy](#)²⁶, for him to fix.

[00:07:06] And he sort of gave up on his original task, his original mission of fixing English.

[00:07:14] The fact that language is a living [organism](#)²⁷, something that constantly changes, meant that he decided that his role was just to record the language of the day.

²⁰ a person or thing that is different from what is usual, or not in agreement with something else and therefore not satisfactory

²¹ the quality of being strange or unusual, or an unusual characteristic or habit

²² to correct things

²³ to wait for a short time

²⁴ someone or something that is not included in a rule, group, or list or that does not behave in the expected way

²⁵ very twisted

²⁶ untidy

²⁷ a single living plant, animal, virus, etc.

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[00:07:29] Not to actually fix anything.

[00:07:31] And so he did record the language of the day, and he did so with incredible accuracy.

[00:07:41] In his dictionary there were 40,000 words.

[00:07:46] Each word was defined in detail, and the definitions had quotations and examples.

[00:07:55] When you think of the work that must have been required to achieve this, it's pretty amazing.

[00:08:03] This was obviously in a world before computers, the internet, Google, before information was so easy to access.

[00:08:13] So it was a huge, [gargantuan](#)²⁸ task.

[00:08:16] No wonder it took him eight years to complete with the help of six assistants.

[00:08:23] Not only was it a hugely impressive piece of work, but lots of it was also pretty funny, and you can see his sense of humour coming out in the definitions of some of the words.

[00:08:38] He's sort of hidden funny jokes in some of the definitions.

[00:08:42] So for example, the definition of oats.

²⁸ very large

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[00:08:48] Now, if you don't know what oats are, the actual definition that you'd find today is something like "a plant that is a type of grass or as a grain used in baking and cooking or to feed animals".

[00:09:03] So it's used for cereals, but also for animals.

[00:09:07] In Johnson's dictionary, he defined oats as "a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people".

[00:09:20] As you may know, there was a lot of [rivalry](#)²⁹ between England and Scotland at the time.

[00:09:26] Well, there is still to this day, and he was saying there that oats are something that people in England give to their horses, but in Scotland are eaten by the people.

[00:09:39] So basically comparing English horses with Scottish people.

[00:09:44] Yes, a little bit racist, you could say, but this was probably actually a joke for his assistants, five of whom were Scottish.

[00:09:54] Secondly, he makes fun of himself.

[00:09:58] The technical term, the actual word, for the job that Johnson did was a lexicographer.

[00:10:07] So lexicographer is the name for someone who writes dictionaries.

²⁹ continued competition

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[00:10:12] But in Johnson's dictionary, when he had to write the definition of lexicographer, he wrote "a writer of dictionaries, a [harmless](#)³⁰ drudge that [busies](#)³¹ himself in [tracing](#)³² the original and detailing the signification of words".

[00:10:32] Now, you may not know what drudge means.

[00:10:36] It's defined as a person who has to work hard at boring and [unpleasant](#)³³ tasks and who is not respected by other people.

[00:10:45] So basically he's saying that his job is to work on boring tasks and to be [unappreciated](#)³⁴.

[00:10:54] And finally, and I particularly like this one, he gave the definition of lunch as "as much food as one's hand can hold".

[00:11:04] Obviously lunches with Samuel Johnson would have been pretty [extensive](#)³⁵.

³⁰ not able or not likely to cause harm

³¹ If you are busy, you are working hard, or giving your attention to a particular thing

³² finding the origin of something, especially if it was lost before

³³ not enjoyable

³⁴ not appreciated or considered worthy by others

³⁵ covering a large area; having a great range

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[00:11:09] It's quite fun to think that he [buried](#)³⁶ these little jokes in this work of what is otherwise incredibly impressive [scholarship](#).

[00:11:20] I have developed even more respect for Johnson after now four months or so of creating definitions for all of the key vocabulary in the podcasts for you.

[00:11:32] If you haven't seen this already, all of the more difficult words are [highlighted](#)³⁷ and we provide definitions for everyone so that the podcast is easier to understand.

[00:11:44] There are so many words in English with multiple different definitions and providing a meaning that is clear and easy to understand and correct for the context of the word is often quite hard.

[00:12:01] And today, at least, we have the advantage of the internet, of being able to consult multiple dictionaries and see examples in order to either choose the best one or [adapt](#)³⁸ it slightly to fit the purpose.

[00:12:17] Johnson was starting completely [from scratch](#)³⁹, from nothing.

³⁶ (literally) to put a dead body into the ground, in this sense it means 'hidden'

³⁷ to attract attention to or emphasise something important

³⁸ to change, or to change something, to suit different conditions or uses

³⁹ from the beginning, without using anything that already exists

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[00:12:21] And to think that this one person, or I should say one person and small team, to think that they were responsible for documenting 40,000 words, it's pretty impressive.

[00:12:36] So even though being a lexicographer is, as Johnson may say, a harmless drudge, it's certainly one that deserves a lot of respect.

[00:12:48] Okay then I hope that this has been an interesting look into this pretty amazing dictionary.

[00:12:54] Of course, the English language is constantly [evolving⁴⁰](#), as is almost every language, and there are hundreds of new words added every year, and a lexicographer's work is never done.

[00:13:08] As always, I'd love to know what you thought that the show.

[00:13:12] Had you heard of the story of Johnson before?

[00:13:15] Are there similar kinds of stories of famous lexicographers, famous dictionary writers, in your country?

[00:13:22] I'd love to know.

[00:13:23] You can email in.

[00:13:24] That's, hi hi@leonardoenglish.com.

⁴⁰ to develop gradually, or to cause something or someone to develop gradually

[00:13:28] I read and respond to every single one and love hearing from you.

[00:13:33] Okay then that is it for today's episode.

[00:13:37] I hope that you're staying safe wherever you are.

[00:13:40] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:13:45] I'm Alastair Budge and I will catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Scholarship	serious, detailed study
Intriguing	to interest someone a lot, especially by being strange, unusual, or mysterious
Politically correct	Someone who is politically correct believes that language and actions that could be offensive to others, especially those relating to sex and race, should be avoided
Authoritative	containing complete and accurate information, and therefore respected
Captured	the act of recording or taking a picture of something using a camera, or the recording or picture taken
The masses	the population
Painting a picture	describing the situation
Linguistic	connected with language or the study of language
Reflecting on	thinking about
Estimated	roughly calculated or approximate
Mess	Something or someone that is a mess, or is in a mess, looks dirty or untidy

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Literacy	the ability to read and write
Formal	public or official
All-encompassing	complete, total
Collate	to bring together different pieces of written information so that the similarities and differences can be seen
Unsatisfactory	not satisfactory, not considered good enough
Fast-forward	move ahead, move forward
Scene was set	the scene was ready, the environment was ready
Stabilise	If something stabilises, it becomes fixed or stops changing
Anomalies	a person or thing that is different from what is usual, or not in agreement with something else and therefore not satisfactory
Peculiarities	the quality of being strange or unusual, or an unusual characteristic or habit
Set things straight	to correct things
Hang on	to wait for a short time
Exceptions	someone or something that is not included in a rule, group, or list or that does not behave in the expected way

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Convolutd	very twisted
Messy	untidy
Organism	a single living plant, animal, virus, etc.
Gargantuan	very large
Rivalry	continued competition
Harmless	not able or not likely to cause harm
Busies	If you are busy, you are working hard, or giving your attention to a particular thing
Tracing	finding the origin of something, especially if it was lost before
Unpleasant	not enjoyable
Unappreciated	not appreciated or considered worthy by others
Extensive	covering a large area; having a great range
Buried	(literally) to put a dead body into the ground, in this sense it means 'hidden'
Highlighted	to attract attention to or emphasise something important
Adapt	to change, or to change something, to suit different conditions or uses

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From scratch

from the beginning, without using anything that already exists

Evolving

to develop gradually, or to cause something or someone to develop gradually

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.