

The body of a reference work in relation to its index: an analysis of *Wordsmanship**

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In *Wordsmanship: a dictionary*, common terms are headwords, and their rarefied synonyms are index entries; there is a complex network of cross-references among the headwords, but no references in the index. The compiler of the dictionary observes that use of the index will become unnecessary as the reader becomes familiar with the reference work. In the context of a serious analysis of the structure of this humorous book, general aspects of the design of a reference work in relation to its index are considered. It is concluded that indexers should be consulted at the design stage of reference books, as they may suggest reversal of the primary entries and the index entries, refine the cross-reference structure, revise locator notation, and select appropriate typography.

In her discussion of *Wordsmanship* Bella Hass Weinberg offers two goodies: she treats us to an in-depth analysis of what makes a reference work tick, and introduces us to an entertaining book.

The important thing about *Wordsmanship* is that it does most things in reverse, or at least in a different order. The book is, in effect, a satire on dictionaries.

Why devote five pages of *The Indexer* to a review of a 95-page book? Because, as Weinberg points out, this article is not about *Wordsmanship* but about reference works and their indexes.—J.S.

The English writer Stephen Potter (1900–69) achieved great success, even a devoted cult, with his sequence of humorous works, Gamesmanship (1947), Lifemanship (1950) and One-upmanship (1952), in which he devised and delineated 'the art of winning games without actually cheating' and gave a new word and concept to the English language, defined in Collins English dictionary thus: 'one-upmanship n. Informal. the art or practice of achieving or maintaining an advantage over others'.

In 1981 Dr Laurence Urdang, the author of The Oxford thesaurus and editor of Verbatim, The Language Quarterly as well as The Random House unabridged and College dictionaries, and of Collins English dictionary, extended the concept to produce a spoof dictionary, Wordsmanship, pseudonymously and anagrammatically (who better so to do?). 'Wordsmanship provides entries for the common, every-day, garden variety words for which are given obscure equivalents that are unlikely to be familiar to most interlocutors'; to a neighbour working in his garden who has given you offence and whom you wish to put down, you observe, 'Given up your customary flânerie for a bit of fossorial activity, eh, Schliemann?'

Urdang endowed the dictionary with an index 'to help those poor souls who might have encountered another owner of Wordsmanship who has sprung some obscure word on them at a party', as he privately explains.

Manifestly but a merry butterfly on the wheel, this work may nonetheless serve as a microcosm to demonstrate principles that

should apply to reference works of any type and magnitude; enabling us to learn from satire in an unusual way.—H. K. B.

Wordsmanship is a humorous dictionary cum index, which recently came to my attention. A serious analysis of the work is the subject of this article. In teaching indexing and thesaurus construction, I have found it important to use simple examples to illustrate complex principles. Dictionaries are reference works to which everyone can relate, and I hope that the discussion of this entertaining one will serve to convey serious points. In analyzing the structure of *Wordsmanship*, I consider general questions of the relationship of the body of a reference work to its index, as well as the potential role of indexers in the design of reference works.

Purpose and structure of the work

The three-paragraph description on the dust jacket of *Wordsmanship* does not convey the book's essence. The blurb states that the author 'has created the dictionary for the 1980s. At a time when people are increasingly unsure of their command of language, Mme duGran returns to *basics* . . .'. This might lead one to think that the dictionary will help one determine, for example, when to use 'disinterested' as opposed to 'uninterested', but rather than dealing with such basic questions of usage, this reference book teaches the reader esoteric terms that can be used to eliminate 'social insecurity'.

The Foreword notes that '*Wordsmanship* offers no grammatical or syntactic advice, but that is of no consequence, for illustrative examples are listed for all of the main entries' (p. 7). Grammatical information is not completely lacking; part of speech is given for each headword, and one may infer that the same information applies to the fancy synonym. Unusual plural forms are given for some entries; others provide morphological variants, such as adjectives derived from nouns.

While addressing grammar, the author does not comment on the lack of pronunciation information for the rarely heard synonyms. A great many of these, such as 'iracund', require this. One will not be very effective at the sport of *Wordsmanship* unless one pronounces the obscure terms correctly; the reader must look up this information in a standard dictionary. *Wordsmanship* is thus not a self-contained reference work providing all the categories of linguistic information that the user will require.

* *Wordsmanship: a dictionary*, by Claudine duGran. Illustrations by George Booth. Essex, CT; Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire: Verbatim, The Language Quarterly, © 1981. 95pp.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss lexicographic theory, but I feel obligated to note that *Wordsmanship* does not deal with the differential usage of a term or with semantic valence, i.e., the acceptable combinations of a word with other words. For example, the fancy synonym given for 'bad' is 'egregious'. In high school Latin, I recall learning the meanings of the prefix and stem of the latter word, which is more often used to mean 'sticking out' than 'bad'. The illustration of usage given in the book, 'That was one of the most egregious films I've ever seen', would not teach the reader when it is appropriate to substitute the esoteric term for 'bad', or that the most common combination of the adjective with a noun is in the phrase 'egregious error'.

After providing examples of the use of this work to achieve one-upmanship, the author concludes the Foreword as follows:

[A] handy index at the back of the *Dictionary* will lead you to the simpler word. The index has been provided for novices only, however, for, with sufficient practice, it should prove entirely unnecessary. (p. 9)

The assumption of the author in placing common terms as headwords in the body of the dictionary is presumably that readers will consult these to learn more sophisticated terms. The index is thus not likely to serve the novice reader, who would have no reason to seek the entry 'nociceptive', for example. Someone who does not know what this word means is more likely to consult a general dictionary, as he or she would have no idea that the word is useful in the sport of *Wordsmanship* (a first cousin of verbal volleyball).

Readers familiar with the work, however, may wish to return to an example of the usage of a fancy term or to one of the amusing cartoons that accompany the examples. (The compiler's private explanation of the purpose of the index [see Editor's note above] confirms this.) Such readers will have the inconvenience of double lookup: searching the fancy term in the index to determine the common term under which it is treated. (The one-word glosses are inadequate guides to usage.) Sophisticated speakers may wish to know whether a given term is included in the book; such users will have to go through a double lookup as well to get to the full entry.

Thus, in terms of the two categories of user that indexes are designed to serve—those who have read the book and those who have not—a case can be made that the headwords and the index entries here should have been reversed. Additional reasons for this will become evident in the discussion of cross-references, in the following section.

The most serious problem with this reference book is that the body of the work and its index *in combination* do not provide access to all of the information about a term. In looking up 'afflatus' in the index, for example, one is referred to INSPIRATION (*sic*, all uppercase). That headword is found on page 43, but a cartoon illustrating its usage is on the following page (not a facing page). Another example of this is in Figure 1. Neither the index nor the headword directs the reader to the cartoon; moreover, the dictionary lacks a list of illustrations.

Cross-references

The index has no cross-references, but the body of the work does: between near synonyms of common terms (see entries *payment* and *perplex* in Figure 1). Some of the semantic

relationships are quite distant, e.g., 'materialistic *see* mechanical'; moreover, the illustrative sentence for the latter term, 'Frimkin's banausic instincts made him gravitate to the wealthy', would be more appropriate under the former headword.

A better example of near synonymy is the reference 'gaping *see* open-mouthed' (p. 33). [The latter headword is misfiled before 'opaque' on page 55; we may attribute this to the fact that indexing and lexicographic software were not highly developed in 1981.] For 'open-mouthed' the reader is given two obscure equivalents—'patulous' and 'rictal'—but use of only the second is illustrated. From 'patulous' in the index, however, one is led to two headwords: OPEN-MOUTHED and SPREADING; the second gives a sentence illustrating usage of the esoteric term. The reader would have been better served by a *see also* reference from the first headword to the second.

There is an occasional *see also* reference within the body of the work; 'bristly' has three fancy equivalents and a *see also* reference to 'hairy', where we are introduced to a fourth fifty-cent word. That associative reference is provided in only one direction, but there are reciprocal *see also* references between 'hunger' and 'mania', a rather far-fetched link. The equivalent of 'hunger' is given as 'bulimia', which serves to illustrate semantic change; the latter term currently refers to a disease of dieters.

There is also an occasional omnibus reference (one headword with a *see* reference to multiple terms), e.g., 'murmur *see* sigh, whisper'. (The semantic equivalence implied here is highly debatable.) More common are multiple *see* references to a single headword, e.g., 'fatness', 'plumpness', and 'obesity' all lead to 'stoutness'.

In the index, 'discommode' refers to two headwords: DISTURB and INCONVENIENCE. As 'discommode' is the only fancy term given as the equivalent of these two common words, one wonders why there was not a *see* reference from 'disturb' to 'inconvenience' or vice versa, as there is between other headwords.

The index entry 'aculeate' has three locators: POINTED, SPINY, STING. Usage is illustrated under the first and last headwords, while for the second, 'aculeate' is listed merely as a synonym to 'acanthoid'. There is thus an unfortunate scatter of the information related to a single word, and the user can learn its multiple senses only by jumping around the book.

Although there are no blind or circular references (fanatic that I am, I checked them all), there seems to be poor control of the structure of the work. Like an index compiled by an amateur, this dictionary does not have a rigorously thought-out network of references; the author seems to have just sprinkled some in.

Essential references are sometimes lacking. Some of the sentences contain two fancy terms, but the reader is not referred to the entry for the second. For example, the sentence illustrating the use of the synonym 'ninnyhammer' for 'fool' also contains the adjective 'gormless'. One must go to the latter term in the index to find out that its usage is illustrated under the headword 'dull'. That entry includes the phrase 'gormless fool', but does not send the reader to the latter headword.

Under the headword 'weekly', in a sentence illustrating the use of 'hebdomadal', there is the phrase 'mephitic fetor'. Checking the index under the first word in the phrase will bear



overabundance, *n.* *nimiety*: *It's a pity, but there appears to be a nimiety of gormless microcephalics in that organization.*

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painful, *adj.* *nociceptive*: *Fremdwort's love affair with the widow Sneckpiff was a most nociceptive interlude.*

pan-shaped, *adj.* *patellate*: *His patellate face gives me hives.*

parasitic, *adj.* (worm) *helminth*: *Niminy—the helminth—has borrowed money from everyone, including his five-year-old niece.*

autecious: *Oscar's relationship with his friends has always been an autecious one.*
—*helminthic*, *adj.*

patience, *n.* *longanimity*: *Humperdinck waited so long at the brothel that he almost exhausted his longanimity.*

payment, *n.* *see reward.*

peacocklike, *adj.* *pavonine*: *Farfanella's pavonine behaviour was just to show off her new dress.*

peel, *vb.* *decorticate*: *Decorticate a grape for me, would you, Darling?* *desquamate*: *Keep your eyes desquamated in case the beadle comes by.*

perishableness, *n.* *caducity*: *The caducity of Professor Hedgeline's novels makes one wonder why he bothers writing them at all.*

perplex, *vb.* *see bewilder.*

perquisite, *n.* *appanage*: *These days, the two-hour coffee breaks, morning and afternoon, as well as two-hour lunch breaks have become the standard appanage of many jobs.*

Figure 1. Facing pages (56–57) from *Wordsmanship: a dictionary*. The entry for 'overabundance' on page 55 does not refer to the cartoon, nor does the index entry for 'nimiety'.

fruit, but checking the second will be for naught. The identification within sentences of words that have their own definitions would have obviated fruitless searches. References to such terms could have been handled by typographic variation, the subject of the following section.

Typographic design

A designer is credited on the verso of the title page, but as is so often the case, the person who handles the aesthetic aspects of a book's design does not understand how it may be used as an information source. The key component of the dictionary is the usage examples, yet the distinctive terms are not differentiated typographically within them (see Figure 1). In many dictionaries sentences illustrating usage are all in italics, but in those the keyword is the boldfaced headword. In *Wordsmanship*, however, the difficult word is not boldfaced—its common synonym is.

As noted above, in the illustrative sentences additional difficult words that have their own definitions could have been flagged by typographic variation. A device used to identify other headwords within definitions in the glossary of the recently published American thesaurus standard is *underscoring*, with a headnote explaining the significance of this typographic feature.¹ In *Wordsmanship*, however, even if some such device had been used, double lookup would be necessary: the reader would have to go from the illustrative sentence to the index to identify the common word under which the difficult

one is defined. Thus the case for reversing the headwords and index entries becomes stronger.

As has already been noted in several quotations, the designer selected small caps for the locators in the index, i.e., the headwords (see Figure 2). This typography does not match the lower-case headwords in the body of the work and is, moreover, considered difficult to read.

The lack of running heads in the body of the work and the index may perhaps be excused in a small reference book like the one under discussion; these design elements are, however, often omitted in reference tools for which they are critical.

Assessment of the work

While I agree with the author's statement, 'The Information Explosion, which began in the 1950s and has continued, unabated, ever since, makes it almost impossible for anyone to find his way through the morass of knowledge without a well-organized reference book' (p. 7), I disagree with the author's subtle claim to have created such a work.

From a librarian's/information scientist's/indexer's perspective, *Wordsmanship* is a seriously flawed reference work. Its author failed to consider thoroughly how the body and the index would be used, as well as which elements would be most frequently sought. The reference book and index were apparently designed by the author, with poor control of cross-references. The typographic designer's choices detract from the informational aspects of the work.

| | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| mephitic HARMFUL, PUTRID | ninnyhammer FOOL |
| meretricious INSINCERE | nitid BRIGHT |
| microcephalic PIN-HEADED | niveous SNOWY |
| micturant URINATING | nocent HARMFUL |
| minacious THREATENING | nociceptive PAINFUL |
| minatorial THREATENING | nocuous HARMFUL |
| minatory THREATENING | nodus PROBLEM |
| minify BELITTLE | noxious HARMFUL |
| misanthrope MAN-HATER | nugatory TRIFLING |
| misogynist WOMAN-HATER | nullifidian SKEPTIC |
| missive LETTER | numen PRINCIPLE |
| moiety HALF | numina PRINCIPLE |
| molluscoid CLAMMY | numinous MYSTERIOUS |
| mordacious SARCASTIC | nutational NODDING |
| mucid MOLDY, SLIMY | obfuscate BEWILDER |
| mucronate POINTED | obfuscatory BEWILDER |
| muliebrity FEMININITY | objurgate SCOLD |
| multifarious VARIED | obmutescent SILENT |
| mundane WORLDLY | obnubilate OBSCURE |
| munificence GENEROSITY | obsecrate IMPLORÉ |
| myrmidon HENCHMAN | obtest IMPLORÉ |
| nadir DEPTHS | obvolution ROLL |
| nanocerebral DIMWITTED | occidental WESTERN |
| narcoleptic SLEEPY | oeillade OGLE |
| natant FLOATING | oeuvre WORK OF ART |
| natatorium SWIMMING | on the qui vive ALERT |
| POOL | operose BUSY |
| necessitous POVERTY- | oppidan URBAN |
| STRICKEN | oppugn DISPUTE |
| neoteric NEW | oppugnant CONTRARY, |
| nescience IGNORANT | DISPUTE |
| nescient IGNORANT | orgulous PROUD |
| nexus LINK | oriental EASTERN |
| nictitate BLINK | orotund POMPOUS |
| nimiety EXCESS, | oscitance LAZY |
| OVERABUNDANCE | oscitancy LAZY |

Figure 2. A page from the index to *Wordsmanship*. The locators are the headwords in the dictionary.

A humorous reference book can have a good structure and an excellent index. A case in point is the winner of the 1985 Wilson Award, an index to *The experts speak*, a collection of misinformation.² (I am taking this opportunity to reveal to the world that the book was on the reject pile when I arrived for the judging. Always one to make my own decisions, I examined all the rejected indexes myself, and then convinced the committee that this one deserved the award.) The index to that book is very funny, but beautifully structured.

I do not take *Wordsmanship* as a parody of a dictionary. [I happen to be a champion at the game of Chicanery (known as 'Call my bluff' in the United Kingdom), in which all the members of a team make up fake definitions for a difficult word, except for the team member who reads the correct meaning from a dictionary; the members of the opposing team almost always vote for my ersatz definitions.] The dictionary under discussion here contains real words with correct examples of usage. It is a specialized tool, designed to amuse but also to educate. While enjoying the humor, as an indexer I find the structure of the book frustrating, owing to its scatter of related information.

It is unlikely that the author deliberately created a dysfunctional reference work. A better index and network of cross-references would lead the user to related humorous

components of the book, thus serving the author's purpose. If the book was in fact intended to be a dysfunctional parody of a reference work, then I hope it has served here to underscore some points about the design of good reference books and indexes.

Generalizations and implications

The structure of a single reference work which happened to cross my path of late has been discussed in this paper, but there is a broader purpose to the analysis.

James Benson, in reviewing a recently published textbook of reference service, noted that 'More attention should have been paid to the variety of organizational schemes used within a type of information source'.³ In my view, not only should students of library-information science focus on the relationship between the text of a reference source and its index; indexers should be consulted at the *design* stage of reference books, not merely handed page proofs after the structure of the body of the work is fixed.

Alphabetically arranged reference works are considered self-indexing, yet many, such as encyclopedias, have separate 'back-of-the-book' indexes. Attempts to eliminate these, such as the *Micropaedia* of the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the marginal index of the *ALA World Encyclopedia of Library and Information Services*, have failed: the *Britannica* later added an index, and after Hans Wellisch's devastating review of the marginal index,⁴ the American Library Association published a traditional index in subsequent editions of its encyclopedia.

A mistake made by amateur indexers of alphabetically arranged reference works is providing no access to the headwords in the primary sequence. In this analysis of *Wordsmanship*, a case has been made that the headwords and index entries should have been reversed, and that incomplete access to related entries is provided both by the network of references in the body of the work and via the index, portending a potential loss of information on the part of the reader.

Shortly before completing this article, I read to my daughter a children's story which concludes with a reference to indexes that is relevant to this discussion. The story, 'Curious Ferdinand and his amazing spectacles', is about a whiz-kid who is able to diagnose diseases. After he helps the prime minister and is offered a reward, Ferdinand says, 'A new dictionary of diseases would be nice', and then adds, 'with an index'.⁵

Why would a dictionary need an index? It is reasonable to assume that the headwords in a dictionary of diseases would be technical terms, and that the index would have entries for symptoms and common names of disease to lead users to unknown technical terms.

The work of indexers is closely related to that of lexicographers: both generally produce alphabetically arranged tools and provide links between semantically related terms. As Cross put it, 'Indexing as we know it did not come into its own until the eighteenth century, when Dr Johnson, in compiling his dictionary, can be said to have indexed the English language, with inimitable organization and skill'.⁶ [All commas as in original.] Indexers are trained to control references rigorously, and this skill would be valuable to dic-

tionary makers and encyclopedia editors alike in connecting related headwords.

Many reference works are arranged in a classified sequence, and a detailed alphabetic index provides access to specific pieces of information. If indexers were brought in at the design stage, the decision might in many cases be made not to classify the body of the work, but rather to have an alphabetic arrangement with classified indexes. For example, an association that I belong to publishes a membership directory that features a primary geographic arrangement and an index of personal names. The most frequent use of the directory, however, is to find the address and phone number of a single individual—not to identify members in a given region; the index and the body of the directory should be reversed to permit direct access to personal names, with secondary access to geographic groupings.

Besides thinking about user needs and envisioning the information that will be sought in a work, indexers pay attention to typographic details such as variation of fonts to create entries of maximum clarity, as well as to the use of running heads, guidewords, and continuation headings to orient readers to the section of a book that they are consulting. Indexers often create special locators for illustrative material, a component of *Wordsmanship* for which no access was provided. Mulvany notes the advisability of bringing in indexers to plan the locators of multipart and/or frequently revised technical and policy manuals;⁷ indexers should also be consulted on the locators of bibliographies and other types of reference works that have numbered entries.

There exist many poorly designed reference works, and even excellent indexes cannot compensate for their design flaws. A classified body with an alphabetic index may seem like a sophisticated structure for a reference work, but it often frustrates the user who would prefer a single lookup in a self-indexing tool. That is why the alphabetic encyclopedia is a more popular form of reference work than the systematically arranged German *Handbuch*. In a recent article in *The Indexer*, David Crystal describes a time-consuming search for a specific piece of information in a classified reference work without a detailed index.⁸

Indexers who suggest the rearrangement of a classified work into a self-indexing tool—when warranted—are not limiting the demand for their services, as there is so much that they can contribute to an alphabetically arranged reference work in the areas of control of internal cross-references, typographic design, and overall user-friendliness. It is the latter quality which should give indexers a feeling of superiority, not the use of esoteric words that are accessible only to a few OROTUND (headword 'pompous') individuals.

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Indexing a local newspaper using dBASE IV — continued

The dBASE IV software has proved useful due to its efficiency, availability and ease of use. These features, in combination with guidelines for indexing and revisions of the thesaurus and the index lead the librarians to believe that this will be at least a seven-year project — more than 180 years of local information will be indexed. The index will lead the patron to the appropriate date, page and column of the full text available on microfilm from the newspaper and the District Library.

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