

Everything You Always Wanted to Know
about Dictionaries (But were Afraid to
Ask): A Massive Open Online Course

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Outline

- Why we're doing this: what was the genesis of the MOOC, what are its objectives?
- Who is doing this, who's publishing it, when it's happening, and who is it aimed at?
- A brief overview of the course content
- Methodology: how MOOCs are different from other forms of teaching and learning
- What we have learned in producing the MOOC, and how we see things developing

Why a dictionary MOOC?

- The first Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) about dictionaries and dictionary-making
- A topic about which non-experts often have strong opinions but little real knowledge
- Challenge common misconceptions about dictionaries (normative vs descriptive)
- Promote knowledge of the information-types dictionaries contain and their evidence base
- Raise awareness of the latest trends in lexicographic research, the roles of language technology, corpora and crowdsourcing, insights into the lexicographic process

Course developers

- **Sharon Creese**, Coventry University: formerly a journalist, then Editor at Macmillan Dictionaries; teaches at Coventry, recent PhD in dictionaries, new words, and the media
- **Barbara McGillivray**, research fellow at The Alan Turing Institute and University of Cambridge, formerly language technologist at Oxford Dictionaries. Research in semantic change detection
- **Hilary Nesi**, Professor in English Language at Coventry University. Research on corpus development and analysis, English for academic purposes, design and use of dictionaries and reference tools for academic contexts
- **Michael Rundell**: lexicographer since 1980, currently Editor-in-Chief of macmillandictionary.com and Chief Lexicographic Officer of Lexical Computing Ltd
- **Katalin Süle**, Dictionary Publisher at Macmillan Education, has worked on Macmillan Dictionaries since 2000

Partners

- Coventry University Online
 - the digital arm of Coventry University, developing a range of online MA, MBA etc programmes
- FutureLearn
 - a private company owned by the Open University
 - offers a huge range of courses in partnership with dozens of universities worldwide
 - leverages maximum participation

Audience and launch date

- Provides an introduction to the world of dictionaries to a broad, non-technical audience: language teachers, students, and interested laypeople
- Proposed launch date: late 2018, repeated next year

Objectives

- *Not* a training course in lexicography
- Rather, an introduction to the world of dictionaries and corpora
- Not tied to the products of one specific publisher
- A different learning experience, adaptable to the learners' own dictionary-using habits
- Gather insights from participants' comments and responses - potentially valuable research data

FutureLearn's approach to teaching

- Based on the view that all human learning involves interaction
- Teacher input is restricted and opportunities for peer-to-peer conversation are maximized
- Provocative, “bite-sized” materials, learners are expected to post their own responses and comments
- Short video and audio recordings and articles
- Further reading activities are heavily guided

FutureLearn terminology

- **Weeks:** “personally meaningful study periods” (Sharples, 2017)
- Each Week starts with a **Big question**, designed to stimulate participants’ interest
- Each Week is broken up into **Activities**
- Each Activity has several **Steps**: initial discussion, reading/writing, followed by discussion and reflection, final round-up Step
- This MOOC consists of six Weeks, each Week consisting of around 20 Steps

Course actors and pace

- **Participants** work at their own pace and can access any part of the course at any point
- **Moderators** see to the day-to-day management of the contributions
- **Interviewees:** experts give short interviews with course educators
- **Course educators** may also contribute summary postings at key points in the course
- The learning environment changes constantly as more and more contributions are submitted

A couple of videos

- When and why have you used a dictionary?

[Video 1](#)

- Introspection: how many meanings does *party* have? [Video 2](#)

Brief outline

- **Week 1** Introduction: Why use dictionaries when you can use search engines?
 - includes a poll to gauge users' attitudes at start of course, repeated in final Week
 - sections on dictionary use-cases, the dictionary as a cultural artefact
- **Week 2** What's in a dictionary
 - the range of information-types in both traditional and digital dictionaries
 - contexts of dictionary use

- **Week 3 Evidence:** where does the information in dictionaries come from?
 - pre-corpus evidence (citations etc)
 - an introduction to corpora and corpus-querying software
 - the relationship between dictionaries and language data
- **Week 4** What goes in a dictionary, and who decides?
 - issues of inclusion and coverage
 - notion of dictionary as “gatekeeper”
 - differences between traditional and user-generated material

- **Week 5 Meanings and definitions**
 - how meanings are created - the relevance of context
 - why some words have more than one meaning
 - how to explain meanings
- **Week 6: what does the future hold?**
 - emerging trends and technologies
 - automating lexicographic processes, such as neologism detection
 - role of user-generated content
 - closing poll and summary of the course

What we have learned

MOOCs: a very different model for teaching and learning

- more collaborative, more task-based
- pace and variety of teaching styles, short bite-sized “Steps”
- conveying complex ideas in non-academic mode: e.g. “articles” are typically 1-2 pages
- maintaining participant interest and engagement
- covering the essential features of the field in six Weeks

Future prospects

- A more advanced version? It depends on user feedback and perseverance
- Course data as a source of research material
- Possibility of creating a community of active users and potential contributors
- Very much an experiment at this stage