Psychology's Johnson

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Among these unhappy mortals is the writer of dictionaries, whom mankind have considered, not as the pupil, but the slave, of Science, the pioneer of literature, doomed only to remove rubbish and clear obstacles from the paths of conquest and glory, without bestowing a smile on the humble drudge that facilitates their progress. Every other author may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach, and even this negative recompense has yet been granted to a very few. [Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language, 1755.]

PSYCHOLOGY has attracted its share of dictionary makers, quite a drove of them in the past two decades. But some have wanted industry, others understanding; and none of their compilations has been truly satisfactory. In Stuart Sutherland the discipline has now secured a worthy lexicographer. And there are not a few parallels between Johnson and Sutherland: they enjoy the same robust good sense; they share a somewhat cholerick style; and both are men who have placed their private melancholia in the public domain.

Dr Johnson was blunt in deflecting criticism of his dictionary. "Ignorance madam, sheer ignorance" was his response when asked why he had defined pastern as the knee of a horse. And Sutherland follows, writing in his preface: "It is customary for dictionary writers to acknowledge that their work is likely to contain mistakes, and to ask readers to write pointing out any they encounter. I apologise for any errors that have crept into mine, but I beg the reader not to draw my attention to them..."

I will here respect Professor Sutherland's sensibility, but if the sales of this excellent dictionary prompt an early reprint, then I shall be pleased (for a professional fee) to supply to the publisher a list of more than 20 errors of substance. For the present, I shall be content to note a few which I consider significant.

The dictionary-maker depressed. Perhaps today he would be recognized as suffering from Aerophagia: "Swallowing air, a common neurotic habit that can produce discomfort and belching" (Johnson). Compare: "patron... Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery" (Johnson).

Sutherland uses the second of these jokes (mutatis mutandis) to convey his jaundiced view of cognitive scientists, social scientists, Gibsonians, Skinnerians and the sillier kinds of psychotherapist. And in general, it is a depressing view of psychological science that emerges from his dictionary. What becomes manifest is the lack of system, the categorical anarchy, with which we today approach the study of the mind. Psychologists have little to call their own except a ragbag of experimental paradigms and a heterogeneous collection of vague explanatory terms such as 'arousal' and 'drive'. For the rest, we depend on borrowings from other disciplines.

There is no better way of commending this book than to quote again from the choleric Doctor: "The words of this dictionary, as opposed to others, are more diligently collected, more accurately spelled, more faithfully explained, and more authentically ascertained" (A Dictionary of the English Language, preface to the eighth edition).

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