Centre for Evidence Based Medicine, Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Twitter @JKAronson

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2023;380:p289
http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p289
Published: 3 February 2023

When I use a word . . . . Medical wordbooks

Books in which words are collected, with definitions of their meanings and other information, such as etymologies, are commonly called dictionaries. However, other words are available, and apply to different types of the same thing: alveary, etymologicon, expositor, gazetteer, glossary, gradus, idioticon, lexicon, onomasticon, synonymicon, thesaurus, vocabulary, and wordbook. Medical dictionaries include Dunglison's *New Dictionary of Medical Science* (1833), which is really a lexicon, the *New Sydenham Society's Lexicon*, which is really a wordbook, and Dorland's *American Illustrated Medical Dictionary* (1900), which is a dictionary.

Jeffrey K Aronson

Dictionaries

If you were to ask anyone what to call a book that contains a list of words in alphabetical order, giving their meanings and perhaps other information about them, such as their origins, they would almost certainly say "a dictionary." But several other words are used to describe such books or books like them. Here are 14 such words, in chronological order of their first appearances in print (dates in parentheses), based on information contained in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), from which the quoted definitions are taken.

Glossary (1380): "A collection of glosses; a list with explanations of abstruse, antiquated, dialectal, or technical terms; a partial dictionary." A glossary typically includes general descriptions of specific words or terms rather than pure definitions. It may include references to published papers that in some way illustrate the descriptions. Many glossaries are lists of terms appended to a text. Book-length examples include *A Medical Glossary* by William Turton (1797) and the series of glossaries published by Edinburgh University Press under the general title *Glossaries in Linguistics*. These include glossaries of corpus linguistics, sociolinguistics, language and mind, morphology, applied linguistics, English grammar, and several others. The full title of Turton's 622-page glossary is *A Medical Glossary in Which the Words in the Various Branches of Medicine are Deduced from Their Original Languages*. Unlike many glossaries, Turton's includes etymologies, as his title promises.

Dictionary (1480): "A book which explains or translates, usually in alphabetical order, the words of a language or languages (or of a particular category of vocabulary), giving for each word its typical spelling, an explanation of its meaning or meanings, and often other information, such as pronunciation, etymology, synonyms, equivalents in other languages, and illustrative examples. Also (from the late 20th cent.): an electronic resource performing this function." There are more instances of books that call themselves "dictionaries" than ones that use any other term.

Expositor (1530): "That which explains or interprets. (Sometimes used as title of a book.)" A rare example is John Bullokar's 1616 book *An English Expositor: teaching the interpretation of the hardest words used in our language*.

Vocabulary (1532): "A collection or list of words with brief explanations, definitions, or translations of their meanings, either in the form of a stand-alone list or book, or (now more usually) as part of an elementary grammar or reader, especially one intended for learners of a foreign language; a wordlist." *A Medical Vocabulary* (1862) by Robert Gray Mayne is a good example.

Alveary (1574): "A repository, esp. of knowledge or information. Originally as the name of a dictionary encompassing several languages." This term became obsolete a long time ago. Henry Cockeram, in his *English Dictionarie* of 1623, this year celebrating its 400th anniversary, defined "alveary" as a beehive. And "alveary" has another meaning: "A hollow in the external ear in which earwax collects; (also) the external auditory canal." As one who suffers from wax in my alveary, I regret that this meaning is also now obsolete.

Wordbook (1598): "A book containing a list of words (of a particular language, discipline, text, etc.) arranged in alphabetical or other systematic order; a glossary, a vocabulary." The *OED* adds a note: "The term is sometimes used specifically to avoid the implication of completeness or elaboration of treatment characteristic of a dictionary or lexicon." Few dictionaries actually call themselves wordbooks, even though some would be better so described. The earliest English dictionaries were dictionaries of so-called hard words. The first attempt at a comprehensive English dictionary, that by Robert Cawdrey, which he called *A Table Alphabeticall ...* (1604), with its 2500 or so words, is better regarded as a wordbook. Cockeram's *English Dictionarie* of 1623 also fits that description. In *A Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), James Boswell described Johnson's dictionary of 1755 as "a work of much greater mental labour than mere Lexicons, or Word books, as the Dutch call them." The Dutch do indeed call a dictionary a wordbook (Woordenboek) as do the Germans (Wörterbüch).

Lexicon (1603): "A word-book or dictionary; chiefly applied to a dictionary of Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, or Arabic." To which the *OED* adds "The restricted use is due to the fact that until recently dictionaries of these particular languages were usually in Latin, and

BMJ: first published as 10.1136/bmj.p289 on 3 February 2023. Downloaded from http://www.bmj.com/ on 19 April 2024 by guest. Protected by copyright.

in modern Latin lexicon, not dictionarius, has been the word generally used." *A Greek-English Lexicon* by Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, colloquially known as "Liddell & Scott," first published in 1843 and never out of print since, is an excellent example of a bilingual dictionary. Alexander Schmidt's *Shakespeare-Lexicon*, published in two volumes (1874 and 1875), deals with every word in the canon, from A to Lysimachus and M to Zounds.

Etymologicon (1616): "A work in which the etymologies of words are given or discussed; an etymological dictionary." The *OED* marks this as "Now chiefly historical." However, we might note *The Etymologicon: A Circular Stroll Through the Hidden Connections of the English Language* (2016) by Mark Forsyth, also the author of *Horologicon*, a word that does not feature in the *OED*. Stephen Skinner's *Etymologicon Linguae Anglicanae* (1671) was an exploration of the etymology of English words, perversely written in Latin. A major source of Skinner's definitions was *The New World of English Words* by Edward Phillips (1663), a dictionary of 13 000 hard words, written in English.[1] Skinner translated Phillips's definitions into Latin.

Gazetteer (1704): "A geographical index or dictionary." An example of a specialised type of dictionary. The word originally (1611) meant "one who writes in a gazette; a journalist, a retailer of news."

Onomasticon (1710): "A vocabulary or lexicon of (especially personal) proper names, usually presented in alphabetical order. In early use also: a list of nouns; a lexicon." The onomasticon of Eusebius of Caesarea, titled Περὶ τῶν τοπικῶν όνομάτων τῶν έν τῇ Θείᾳ Γραφῇ, literally *On Place-Names in Holy Scripture*, written before 324 AD, is actually a gazetteer. The *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum* (1897) was a list of Anglo-Saxon proper names, from Aba to Zacharias, from the time of Beda (i.e. Bede) to that of King John, compiled by William George Seale.

Gradus (1764): This term comes from the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, literally "steps to Parnassus," Parnassus being the home of the Greek Muses. A gradus was "a dictionary of prosody formerly used in British public schools. Hence: any later work of similar plan and object." *Gradus ad Parnassum* was also a name given to sets of piano exercises, reflected in the title of the first movement of Debussy's *Children's Corner Suite*, "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum."

Synonymicon (1813): "A list or dictionary of synonyms." The *OED* includes only one example of this, from 1813, implying that it is a hapax legomenon. However, several other examples exist. Here, for instance, is John McCabe in his novel *Paper* (Granta Books, 1999): "Darren came across a synonym for thesaurus. ... Synonymicon. Darren had a few stabs at trying to say the word out loud, placing the emphasis at different junctures, which yielded *syn*onymicon or syn*ony*micon or synony*mi*con, none of which sounded particularly English." When in doubt, stress the antepenultimate syllable.

Idioticon (1834): "A dictionary or glossary of a dialect or minority language, especially one dealing with a small area." This has nothing to do with stupidity; the word comes from the Greek word ἰδιώτης, meaning private. Most idioticons are written in Dutch or German, an exception being *The Words Of Anti-Semites and Kindred Idiots: An Idioticon* by Dov Ivry (2013). However, in this case "idioticon" is supposed to refer to idiots.

Thesaurus (1852): This comes from the Greek word θησαυρός, a store or treasure. It is "a collection of concepts or words arranged according to sense; also (U.S.) a dictionary of synonyms and antonyms." The term was first used in the title of the most famous example of all, Peter Mark Roget 's *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases Classified and Arranged [etc.]*. In a later use (from 1957) it has come to mean "A classified list of terms, especially key-words, in a particular field, for use in indexing and information retrieval." Roget, London-born in 1779, studied medicine in Edinburgh and became a surgeon in the Manchester Infirmary before moving to London to practise. He later was made a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and served as secretary of the Royal Society and president of the Medical and Chirurgical Society. Compilation of the thesaurus occupied him after he retired in 1840.

Medical dictionaries

In the preface to *A Medical Glossary* (1797), William Turton wrote that he had brought together "such [medical terms and idioms] as usage has fixed, or learned men have adopted, and have contented myself with deducing them from their proper roots." He also commented that "the unmeaning jargon of Paracelsus and his followers I have properly omitted." He credited his authorities as "Blanchard, Castellus, Minshew, Schindler, and Golius."

Turton's etymologies are mostly accurate, but he does stray occasionally. Here he is, for example, on "ferrum," which he defines as "Iron, steel" and which he derives "from "fero to strike or wound, because offensive weapons are made of it, for which reason it is judiciously called Mars by the chemists."

Robley Dunglison's *New Dictionary of Medical Science* was first published in 1833 in two volumes. It was more a wordbook than a dictionary, but very extensive, with many thousands of entries, but brief descriptions and no etymologies. Its later title was *Medical Lexicon: A Dictionary of Medical Science*. New editions were published frequently, in 1839, 1842, 1844, 1845, 1846, 1848, 1851, 1853 (twice), 1854, 1855, 1856, and 1857; by 1893 it had achieved 21 editions.

Robert Gray Mayne's popular *Medical Vocabulary*, first published in 1862 saw several further editions until it formed the basis for the *New Sydenham Society's Lexicon*, which was published in 25 fascicles between 1879 and 1899.

In 1900 W A Newman Dorland published *The American Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, including pronunciations, some etymologies, or at least languages of origin, and brief definitions. It also introduced tabular data, such as lists of tests, and illustrations, features that persist in the latest edition, *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, the 33rd (2019).

One more word

Some dictionaries are so well known that they are referred to simply by the name of their author. The term "Fowler," for example, is often used when referring to H W Fowler's book *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, first published in 1926 and which has seen three revised editions since, by Ernest Gowers, Robert Burchfield, and Jeremy Butterfield. The *OED* describes Fowler as being especially taken as the standard guide to correct English grammar and usage.

Similarly, "Webster" is often used when referring to any one of the many dictionaries that bear Noah Webster's name, typically the first of those, the *American Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1828. Later editions are often called "Merriam-Webster."

These names merit their own entries in the *OED*, bringing my list of dictionary words, including "dictionary," to 16. But there is a 17th, perhaps the most unusual term of all, the obsolete slang term "Richard Snary" (1621), defined as "a dictionary, esp. humorously represented as a person." The origin, although you have to think about it, is from "Dick Snary."

BMJ: first published as 10.1136/bmj.p289 on 3 February 2023. Downloaded from http://www.bmj.com/ on 19 April 2024 by guest. Protected by copyright.

Competing interests: none declared

Provenance and peer review: not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

1 Starnes DT. English dictionaries of the seventeenth century. *Studies in English* 1937;(17):-51.

BMJ: first published as 10.1136/bmj.p289 on 3 February 2023. Downloaded from http://www.bmj.com/ on 19 April 2024 by guest. Protected by copyright.