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Modes of Definition in Johnson and His Contemporaries

Jack Lynch

There has long been a kind of sport in Johnsonian circles—the game of catching Johnson out and reveling in his failed predictions. Perhaps the most famous of these misfires is his opinion of Sterne: “Nothing odd will do long. ‘Tristram Shandy’ did not last.”¹ That line decorates the jackets of several editions of Sterne’s famously eccentric book; fans of Sterne enjoy gloating over how far wrong the Great Cham could be. At least one of Johnson’s false predictions, though, has not attracted much attention. “That part of my work on which I expect malignity most frequently to fasten,” Johnson wrote in the Preface to his *Dictionary* (1755), “is the *Explanation*.”² In fact surprisingly few commentators have fastened malignity—or even attention—on Johnson’s “explanations,” or, as we would say, definitions.

That is not to say there has been *no* attention, or no malignity. There were objections to his definitions from the beginning. Charles Richardson, under the influence of the cranky John Horne Tooke, complained at great length about Johnson’s definitions, and found his methods “a short and infallible recipe to write sheer nonsense.”³ Noah Webster was another lexicographer who felt Horne Tooke’s influence: in 1809 he wrote that “Even the definitions, which constitute the whole value of *Johnson’s Dictionary*, are deficient in precision beyond any thing I could have imagined without a minute attention to the subject.”⁴ Richardson and Webster, though, were unusual in the attention they paid to the subject.

A Victorian tradition of praising Johnson’s definitions nonetheless countered the complaints of Richardson and Webster. Thomas Carlyle, for instance, noted, “Had

¹ *Boswell’s Life of Johnson. Together with Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson’s Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–1964), 2:449.

² Samuel Johnson, Preface to the *Dictionary*, in *Johnson on the English Language*, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb and Robert DeMaria Jr., vol. 18 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 88 (hereafter cited as *Johnson on the English Language*).

³ Charles Richardson, *Illustrations of English Philology* (London: Printed for Gale and Fenner, 1815), 15.

⁴ Webster to Thomas Davies, July 25, 1809, in *Letters of Noah Webster*, ed. Harry R. Warfel (New York: Library Publishers, 1953), 323.

Johnson left nothing but his *Dictionary*, one might have traced there a great intellect, a genuine man. Looking to its clearness of definition, its general solidity, honesty, insight and successful method, it may be called the best of all Dictionaries.” Even Macaulay was uncharacteristically generous toward Johnson: “The definitions,” he wrote, “show so much acuteness of thought and command of language, and the passages quoted from poets, divines, and philosophers are so skilfully selected, that a leisure hour may always be very agreeably spent in turning over the pages.”⁵ George Alfred Stringer praised “the nice discrimination with which each word in Johnson’s *Dictionary* is defined and illustrated.” He concluded that “Studied from *any* point of view the *Dictionary* is a wonderful treasury, and in many respects it will never again be equalled, certainly never excelled.”⁶ In a lecture delivered in 1967, J. P. Hardy continued the Victorian tradition of belletristic commendation: “Anyone who uses Johnson’s *Dictionary* will find that its level of performance in definition is, for the most part, exceedingly high.”⁷ Elizabeth Hedrick sums up the conventional wisdom when she says the definitions are “generally considered the *Dictionary*’s great strength.”⁸

Most such panegyrics, though, are subjective and impressionistic; few explain what constitutes a good definition, or even compare Johnson’s definitions with those of his predecessors, contemporaries, or successors. Both scholarly and belletristic modern readers certainly enjoy focusing on his quirky definitions: the personal ones like *lexicographer* and *grubstreet*, the political ones like *Whig* and *excise*, the wrong ones like *pastern* and *leeward*, the incomprehensible ones like *cough* and *network* are familiar to many who have never given serious thought to the *Dictionary*. But even experts pay little attention to the tens of thousands of ordinary definitions. There has been abundant commentary on Johnson’s illustrative quotations, on the corpus or canon of authors on whom he drew, on his usage notes, on his place on the descriptive–prescriptive continuum, on his treatment of obsolete words, on his attitudes toward cant and orality, even on his notoriously weak etymologies. Some of the better criticism of the *Dictionary* has tried to extract a theory of language from Johnson’s practice, and to identify the works that most influenced him, John Locke and Isaac Watts above

5 Thomas Carlyle, “The Hero as Man of Letters,” in *Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, ed. Michael K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin, and Mark Engel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 157; Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Essay on Johnson*, ed. Samuel Thurber and Louise Wetherbee (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1924), 25.

6 George Alfred Stringer, *Leisure Moments in Gough Square; or, The Beauties and Quaint Conceits of Johnson’s Dictionary* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Ulbrich & Kingsley, 1886), 11.

7 J. P. Hardy, “*Dictionary*” *Johnson* (Armidale, N.S.W.: University of New England, 1967), 6.

8 Elizabeth Hedrick, “Locke’s Theory of Language and Johnson’s *Dictionary*,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 20, no. 4 (Summer 1987): 422–444, at 424. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Hedrick, whose comments on an earlier version of this essay proved valuable in reworking it.

all.⁹ Nevertheless, the specific techniques he used to define words have received little scrutiny.

Johnsonians, then, whether amateur or professional, have paid surprisingly little attention to Johnson's definitions. Conversely, experts in definition have paid surprisingly little attention to Johnson. He rarely shows up in modern linguistic discussions of definition, except as part of a quick glance back at the inchoate prehistory of serious lexicography. Johnson's name appears nowhere in Juan C. Sager's *Essays on Definition*, for instance, and he gets just a quick tip of the hat in Ladislav Zgusta's *Manual of Lexicography* and Sidney I. Landau's *Dictionaries*.¹⁰ Henri Béjoint notes that in early dictionaries, "the frequent words were treated with an economy of style that looks strange to our modern eyes," and adduces as an example Johnson's definition of *fish* as simply "an animal that inhabits the water."¹¹ *The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography* includes a sidebar, "Defining in Dictionaries: A Brief History," that places Johnson in an era when "defining styles had not yet been standardized and were quite heterogeneous." The authors are content to praise him because he "ended up with a realistic appreciation of the limits of lexicography, and he saw his task as a practical one."¹² Several lexicographers and lexicologists note that Johnson was among the first to state explicitly the principle that noun phrases should be interpreted in the form of noun phrases, verbs in the form of verbs, and so on—"The rigour of interpretative lexicography requires that the explanation, and the word explained, should be always reciprocal"—but only a few have paid any attention to whether he makes good on his promise.¹³

Scholars know what many beginning students do not—that dictionaries contain much more than just definitions—and those other aspects of Johnson's *Dictionary* have been well documented. But surely it is noteworthy that the profession has neglected the subject of definition so thoroughly. A review of the scholarship on the subject is largely a review of its absence. Although the word *definition* appears in any number

9 The two best overviews on this subject are Robert DeMaria Jr., "The Theory of Language in Johnson's *Dictionary*," in *Johnson after Two Hundred Years*, ed. Paul J. Korshin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 159–174, and Hedrick, "Locke's Theory of Language." See also Rackstraw Downes, "Johnson's Theory of Language," *Review of English Literature* 3 (October 1962): 29–41.

10 See Juan C. Sager, ed., *Essays on Definition* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 2000); Ladislav Zgusta, *Manual of Lexicography* (Prague: Academia; The Hague: Mouton, 1971); and Sidney I. Landau's *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography* (New York: Scribner, 1984).

11 Henri Béjoint, *Modern Lexicography: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 96.

12 B. T. Sue Atkins and Michael Rundell, *The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 432.

13 See, for example, Robert Ilson, *Lexicography: An Emerging International Profession* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 117.

of articles on Johnson, it is almost always either metaphorical, as in *self-definition*, or merely evocative, as in *the definition of brilliant*. Robert DeMaria's *Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning*—an epochal work, which can be said to have begun the modern study of the book—has no index entry for *definition*. This is hardly a failing, since DeMaria does more than his share of important things, but it is revealing. Allen Reddick's similarly influential *Making of Johnson's Dictionary, 1746–1773* has an entry for *definitions*, *Johnson's system of*, but it gets only a smattering of page references. This is true as well for the collection Anne McDermott and I edited in 2005, *Anniversary Essays on Johnson's Dictionary*.

The result is the counterintuitive situation in which very few have paid attention to Johnson's *Dictionary* for the things most everyday users seek in a dictionary—the definitions. Odd as it sounds, other than the famous Preface, the part of Johnson's *Dictionary* that has received the least critical attention is the part he actually wrote himself.

There is one extended discussion of Johnson's definitions, though it never appeared in print: Jeffrey T. Gross's University of Virginia dissertation of 1975.¹⁴ Gross's interest is in Johnson's definitions of common words, especially phrasal verbs, and he devotes particular attention to Johnson's attempts to surmount some of the perennial problems that face lexicographers. Among published criticism, one article stands out, James McLaverty's "From Definition to Explanation" (1986). McLaverty relates Johnson's definitions to a debate between Watts and Locke on the nature of language.¹⁵

I would like to encourage more attention to Johnson's habits in defining—how, in short, does he define words? How, then, should we talk about definitions?—what is there to say about them? Since the question has largely gone unasked, and it is unclear what form an answer would take, my arguments here can be nothing more than tentative. I offer my conclusions in the hope of encouraging further discussion.

14 Jeffrey T. Gross, "The Process of Definition in Dr. Johnson's Dictionary: The Poet, Philosopher, and Moralist as Lexicographer" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1975). Only one article, "Dr. Johnson's Treatment of English Particles in the *Dictionary*," *University of Mississippi Studies in English* 2 (1981): 71–92, was drawn from it.

15 James McLaverty, "From Definition to Explanation: Locke's Influence on Johnson's Dictionary," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 3 (1986): 377–394. Another brief but relevant discussion appeared in the same year: DeMaria's "Theory of Language in Johnson's *Dictionary*," esp. 168–169. There are, of course, discussions of specific definitions and kinds of definitions. Kathleen Wales discusses Johnson's use of synonymy in "Johnson's Use of Synonyms in Dictionary and Prose Style: The Influence of John Locke?," *Prose Studies* 8, no. 1 (1985): 25–34; Silvia Cacchiani looks at intensifiers in "Desperately, Utterly and Other Intensifiers: On Their Inclusion and Definition in Dr Johnson's *Dictionary*," *Textus: English Studies in Italy* 19, no. 1 (2006): 217–236. See also Chris P. Pearce, "Recovering the 'Rigour of Interpretive Lexicography': Border Crossings in Johnson's *Dictionary*," *Textus: English Studies in Italy* 19, no. 1 (2006): 33–50.

One might begin with the questions that twentieth- and twenty-first-century lexicographers consider the most important aspects of definition, but many of the concerns of modern linguists were not germane in an eighteenth-century context. Such an approach would necessarily be ahistorical, and would amount to judging the past according to how well it lives up to the standards of the present. On the other hand, one might consider the theories about definition that circulated in Johnson's day, particularly what was called *logical definition*, derived from Scholastic notions and made newly relevant by many seventeenth-century English philosophers. As Sidney I. Landau points out, "Although the distinction is not always made, and when made not always observed, logical definition is not the same as lexical definition. Logical definition—Richard Robinson calls it real definition, because it attempts to analyze things in the real world, as distinguished from words—has been the chief preoccupation of philosophers."¹⁶ This has the advantage of being historical, but the disadvantage of being too abstract to be genuinely useful—McLarty has related Johnson's conceptions of linguistic "explanation" to philosophical "definition," but the idea is difficult to apply to many other kinds of definition in Johnson's *Dictionary*.

It seems the most responsible way to approach the question is by comparing Johnson's practice to that of other lexicographers.¹⁷ I therefore describe some of the means lexicographers have used to define words, and then examine the frequency with which Johnson and the creators of other dictionaries used each of them. Before getting to the list, though, we might acknowledge some of Johnson's failures. "Some words there are which I cannot explain," Johnson frankly acknowledged in the Preface, "because I do not understand them."¹⁸ Of *trolmydames*, he writes, "Of this word I know not the meaning"; *stammel*, likewise; or *etch*, "A country word, of which I know not the meaning"—here he is unambiguous about his shortcomings. He is similarly clear about his failure in producing some impenetrable definitions. Zgusta includes in his list of four fundamental principles of definition that "The lexical definition should not contain words 'more difficult to understand' than the word defined."¹⁹ Johnson, however, knew full well that "To explain, requires the use of terms less abstruse than that which is to be explained, and such terms cannot always be found; for as nothing can be proved but by supposing something intuitively known, and evident without proof, so nothing can be defined but by the use of words too plain to admit a definition."²⁰

Some of Johnson's definitions fail for another reason. Richardson, writing in *Illustrations of English Philology* (1815), was eager to point out Johnson's shortcomings.

16 Landau, "Dictionaries," 120.

17 These include Robert Cawdrey, Thomas Blount, Edward Phillips, John Kersey, Nathan Bailey, Benjamin Martin, John Ash, Noah Webster, and Charles Richardson. See note 39 for full bibliographical particulars.

18 *Johnson on the English Language*, 90.

19 Landau, "Dictionaries," 124.

20 *Johnson on the English Language*, 89.

“Are you in search of a short and infallible recipe to write sheer nonsense?” he asks. “I will present you with one in an instant.—‘The rigour of interpretative lexicography, (says Johnson) requires that the explanation, and the word explained, should be reciprocal.’ Obey this rule, in your use of his Dictionary, and your success is ensured. I will give you an instance;—That stumbling-block to all keen metaphysicians, the word CAUSE.” Johnson’s definition of *cause* is “that which produces or effects any thing.” Then comes Johnson’s definition of *to effect*: “To produce as a Cause.” And then *to produce*: “To cause.” “Substituting the explanations for the words explained,” Richardson writes, “A Cause is, that which causes or causes as a cause—any thing.” Richardson concludes, therefore, that “no man can possibly succeed in compiling a truly valuable Dictionary of the English Language, unless he entirely desert the steps of Johnson.”²¹

Johnson, though, was well aware of these dangers, and needed no Richardson or Horne Tooke to point them out. “Some explanations,” he wrote, “are unavoidably reciprocal or circular, as *hind, the female of the stag; stag, the male of the hind*.”²² Even if we go beyond those narrowly circular definitions, we still run into the problem of circularity, because words are always necessarily defined in other words, all of which must be found in a dictionary. It is impossible to escape circularity altogether.²³ When the circle of definition is too narrow, though, the definition becomes useless. Richardson pointed out the narrow circle of *produce, cause, and effect*; there is an even narrower circle in the entry for *defluxion*, which Johnson unhelpfully defined as “a defluxion.”²⁴

After these examples of failed definitions, though, we can turn our attention to those that make at least a pretense to a proper explanation. For these I would like to propose that there are at least nine modes of definition—not a comprehensive list, but this catalog can serve as a starting point for further discussion.

The first mode of definition may be the least interesting, but it forms a large part of almost every dictionary: it defines a word by referring to its obvious etymon

21 Richardson, *Illustrations of English Philology*, 15–17. In its form, Richardson’s derision recalls Coleridge’s contemporary taunt, reducing the opening couplet of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* to “Let Observation with extensive observation observe mankind extensively” (*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–1971], 4:685). Reducing a lexicographer to tautology seems to be a particularly effective put-down.

22 *Johnson on the English Language*, 93.

23 Compare Béjoint: “Circularity is inevitable, particularly for the definitions of very frequent words, and especially of function words, as Samuel Johnson had already noticed in the Preface to his dictionary. The only thing the lexicographer can do is avoid the simplest types, like $A = A$, or $A = B$ and $B = A$. The longer type, $A = B$, $B = N$, and $N = A$, is unavoidable” (*Modern Lexicography*, 203). We might add, as an extreme example, that the *Oxford English Dictionary* includes dozens of occurrences of forms of *to be* in the definition for *be* v.

24 He goes on to add, “a flowing down of humours.” He was not alone in this kind of definition; Bailey defined *nail* as “the nail of a man’s hand.”

and offering a mechanical glossing of its affixes. These are typically introduced by a few simple formulas, such as “the quality or condition of being” such-and-such. For example, one might define *national* as “related to the nation,” *nationalize* as “to make national,” or *nationally* as “in a national manner.” These definitions rarely tell us anything we did not know already; they are little more than signs pointing to other definitions, and are usually included only to demonstrate that a word exists, or to provide an opportunity to give pronunciations, illustrative quotations, and the other kinds of material dictionaries often provide. The alternative, however, is to repeat the substantial part of the root’s definition in every entry, as when John Ash defines *narrate* as “to relate, to tell,” *narrated* as “related, told,” *narrating* as “relating, telling,” and *narrator* as “one that relates.” Most dictionaries, viewing that sort of repetition as a waste of space, often resort to definitions that refer to the entry of the etymon.

The second, and probably the most obvious, mode of definition is more satisfactory, but still poses its own problems. It is the single synonym: the suggestion is that the word being defined, the *definiendum*, can be replaced unproblematically with the single word doing the defining, the *definiens*. Johnson often resorts to these when he defines inkhorn terms, as in his definition of *puniceous* as “purple,” or *cephalalgia* as “the headach.” Such definitions are often convenient for associating an obscure word with a more familiar one, but there are several substantial problems with using synonyms in definitions. The first problem is, as Johnson wrote in the Preface, that “Words are seldom exactly synonymous; a new term was not introduced, but because the former was thought inadequate.”²⁵ He also noted that the subtle differences between apparent synonyms are important: “The difference of signification in words generally accounted synonymous, ought to be carefully observed; as in *pride*, *haughtiness*, *arrogance*.”²⁶

Even if we could find two words that are perfectly interchangeable in one sense, at least one of them is likely to be polysemous, and they will almost never coincide in *all* their meanings. As Landau points out, “One cannot define *backyard* . . . by the English word *lot*, since *lot* has a lot of other meanings.”²⁷ Atkins and Rundell maintain “there is a fundamental objection to defining by synonym, namely, that no two words are exactly alike. True synonymy . . . entails complete interchangeability in every possible context of use.”²⁸ Locke even writes that “a *Definition* is nothing else, but *the shewing the meaning of one Word by several other not synonymous Terms*.” He dismisses the definition of *motion* as “passage” by saying “This is to translate, and not to define,” charging those who would write such a definition with “put[ting] one synonymous Word for another.”²⁹

25 Johnson *on the English Language*, 91.

26 Ibid., 18:49. See also Wales, “Johnson’s Use of Synonyms,” 27.

27 Landau, “Dictionaries,” 138.

28 Atkins and Rundell, 421.

29 John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 3.4.6 (422) and 3.4.9 (423).

Somewhat more sophisticated, and often more satisfying, than a single synonym is a small number of synonyms, as with Johnson's definition of *computer* as "Reckoner; accountant; calculator." A naive assumption might be that these three synonyms of the *definiendum* must all be synonymous, not only with the *definiendum* but with one another. I suspect few actual dictionary users, however, make this assumption in practice. More likely they understand that the *definiendum* is not exactly the same as any of the offered *definiencia*, but that its meaning can be discerned in the points at which those other words, though perhaps polysemous themselves, overlap. When Johnson defines *patron* n.s. 3 as "Advocate; defender; vindicator," he does not suggest that *patron* shares all the meanings of *advocate*, all the meanings of *defender*, and all the meanings of *vindicator*; instead he points in the direction of the meaning or meanings shared by all three words. An *advocate* might be a lawyer, a *defender* might be warrior, and a *vindicator* might be the author of a theodicy; but a *patron* is one who resides at the intersection of those three polysemous terms. Johnson makes extensive use of this mode, as when he defines *name* n.s. 5 as "Renown; fame; celebrity; eminence; praise; remembrance; memory; distinction; honour."³⁰ Sometimes, as here, the words seem to be the result of free-form brainstorming, but Johnson was sometimes explicit about drawing synonyms from two language families: "I have endeavoured frequently to join a *Teutonick* and *Roman* interpretation, as to *CHEER*, to *gladden*, or *exhilarate*, that every learner of *English* may be assisted by his own tongue."³¹

Multiple synonyms are not always easy to count, particularly with polysemous words. Since Benjamin Martin was the only lexicographer before Johnson to number senses, it is often difficult to tell whether a list of words in a definition is really to be understood as a series of synonyms, or a number of distinct senses. In Thomas Blount's definition of *navitie* as "diligence, stirring, quickness," is the reader meant to understand that *navitie* has three distinct meanings—(1) diligence; (2) stirring; (3) quickness—or that it has a single meaning, understood as the intersection of those three terms? When Phillips defines *naiant* as "swimming or floating," are we to understand these as two distinct possibilities, applying to both swimming things and floating things, or as a pair of words that seek to approximate a single sense? It is not always easy to tell, and I have often had to make judgment calls about how best to classify a definition. In the first set of tallies, I will consider both varieties of the synonymous definition as one mode.³²

30 See Wales: Johnson "makes use of a greater number of synonyms in his definitions" than his contemporaries ("Johnson's Use of Synonyms," 27).

31 *Johnson on the English Language*, 93.

32 In order to justify my treating single and multiple synonyms as a single mode, I anticipate some of my conclusions by noting that Johnson's handling of single versus multiple synonyms is in keeping with the practice of the other lexicographers. Johnson uses synonyms of any sort in 45 percent of his definitions in the sample beginning with *na-* considered below; 7 percent of those definitions are nothing but a single synonym. Benjamin Martin gives the same figures; for Bailey they are 25 percent and 7 percent respectively,

A third mode of definition, and one closely related to the synonym, is the antonym. I include in this category definitions that are defined in terms of a lack or want, as when *nameless* is defined as “without a name,” and *ablepsy* as “want of sight.” Words with privative affixes are obvious candidates for this sort of definition by antonym, as when *unorthodox* is defined in negative terms as “Not holding pure doctrine,” or *nonconformity* as “Refusal of compliance.” But many other kinds of words lend themselves to definitions of this sort, and even seemingly positive terms can be defined as the antonyms of related negative terms. Thus Johnson defines one sense of *natural* with the explanation “Not forced; not farfetched,” and *real* adj. 2 is “Not fictitious; not imaginary.”

The fourth and fifth modes form a pair. For some noun phrases—especially human artifacts, though also some natural phenomena—it is possible to describe their components, their purposes, or both. When Johnson defines *oxymel* as “A mixture of vinegar and honey” he describes the parts; when he defines *picktooth* as “An instrument by which the teeth are cleaned,” he describes the function; when he defines *gawntree* as “A wooden frame on which beer-casks are set when tunned,” he gives both the mode of construction and the purpose for which it was created. The definition of *paper* n.s. 1—“Substance on which men write and print; made by macerating linen rags in water, and then spreading them in thin sheets”—is a good example of a definition that indicates both the purpose and the manner in which paper is created.

The sixth mode, the most demanding of all, is known as *genus-differentia* definition, and it has received the most extensive scholarly commentary because of its deep history in philosophy. Its origin is Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*: “it is right when any one is conversant with a certain whole, to divide the genus into the individuals which are first in species, . . . then to endeavour thus to assume the definitions of these.”³³ Lexicographers had no need to learn this lesson directly from Aristotle; it was recycled by many Scholastic thinkers, and resurfaced among seventeenth-century philosophers including Isaac Watts. Locke was explicit about its applicability to lexicography: “in the defining of Words, which is nothing but declaring their signification, we make use of the Genus, or next general Word that comprehends it. Which is not out of necessity, but only to save the labour of enumerating the several simple Ideas, which the next general Word, or Genus, stands for.”³⁴

and for John Ash 44 percent and 12 percent respectively. Johnson uses multiple synonyms in 23 percent of his definitions, compared to 12 percent in Bailey, 27 percent in Martin, 18 percent in Ash, 41 percent in Webster’s *Compendious Dictionary*, and 20 percent in Webster’s *American Dictionary*. In 20 percent of his definitions, Johnson combines synonymy with some other mode of definition. This, too, is in keeping with his contemporaries: 12 percent in Martin, 22 percent in Ash, 29 percent in the *Compendious Dictionary*, and 18 percent in the *American Dictionary*.

33 *Posterior Analytics* 2.13, in *The Organon, or Logical Treatises, of Aristotle*, trans. Octavius Freire Owen, 2 vols. (London, 1853).

34 Locke, *Essay*, 3.3.10 (412–413).

James McLaverty describes Watt's influence on Johnson on this point in particular: the best way to ensure that definitions are "reciprocal with the Thing defined" and that "the *Definition* may be used in any sentence in the Place of the *Thing defined*" is "*per genus et differentiam*—the method used by Wilkins in drawing up his tables."³⁵ In this kind of definition the lexicographer, confronted with a word, gives the kind of thing, the *genus*, to which the word belongs, and then provides one or more *differentiae* to distinguish this particular thing from others. (Modern lexicographers sometimes use the terms *hypernym* and *hyponym* to make the same distinction.) Johnson does this with many words: the *moose* is "The large American deer," which places the animal in its kind (*deer*), and tells us it is unlike other deer because it is large and American; an *opiate* is "A medicine that causes sleep," which tells us the kind of thing it is (*a medicine*) and its particular somnific powers that distinguish it from other medicines. And while it is easiest to do this with substantives, especially concrete nouns, it can be done with verbs as well, as when Johnson defines *prate* as "To talk carelessly [*sic*] and without weight": prating is talking, but a particular kind of talking.³⁶

As a coda to the description of *genus-differentia* definitions, it is worth noting that some of Johnson's definitions consist of nothing but a genus—and these, we have to admit, are among the weakest definitions in the book. To learn that a *trocar* is "A chirurgical instrument" leaves us little wiser than when we began; likewise *gavot*, which is "A kind of dance," or *traytrip*, which is "A kind of play, I know not of what kind." I call this genus-only style a seventh mode.

I conclude my catalog with two more varieties. Mode number eight is to define a word by not defining it at all—rather, letting someone else define it. Johnson sometimes allows his quotations to do his defining, particularly when he copies definitions directly out of encyclopedias. Of course we should remember that Johnson almost always wanted his quotations to supplement his definitions. As he put it in the Preface, after dwelling on the challenges of producing useful definitions, "The solution of all difficulties, and the supply of all defects, must be sought in the examples."³⁷ Those who point gleefully to the curt definition of *Whig* as "The name of a faction" often neglect the 170-word quotation from Burnet that follows. Under this rubric I count those that include no original definition at all, and depend entirely on another writer to do the explaining.

Finally, I am left with mode number nine, a miscellaneous catch-all of "other," since no finite list of modes of definition could hope to be comprehensive. Perhaps

35 McLaverty, "From Definition to Explanation," 381.

36 As Atkins and Rundell put it, this kind of definition works with "many classes of verb, including verbs of motion (thus *trudge*, *tiptoe*, and *stroll* can all be defined using the genus 'walk'), verbs of making or creating (*reproduce*, *photocopy*, and *forge* can all be defined with the genus 'copy', which is itself a hyponym of 'make' or 'create'), and several others." *The Oxford Guide*, 415.

37 *Johnson on the English Language*, 93.

another critic will extend my study by distinguishing some of these miscellaneous modes more precisely.

Having distinguished these nine classes, I should add that they are not always clearly demarcated. A synonym with an *un-* prefix might just as easily be seen as an antonym; a short noun phrase in a definition—say, defining *nacre* as “mother of pearl”—might be treated as a synonym if we focus on it as a single verbal unit, or as another kind of definition if we regard it as separate words tied together syntactically. What is more, the various modes need not be mutually exclusive. Johnson very often defines a word or sense using several of these methods at once. In defining *omelet* as “A kind of pancake made with eggs” he gives us the genus and its components. The eighth sense of the noun *name* shows three of these modes in just five words: “Appearance; not reality; assumed character.” There we have a synonym, an antonym, and a genus-differentia definition. (This is why, in the table below, the totals across the columns always add up to more than 100 percent—if a word is defined with several methods, it is counted several times.)

Having created this list, I now suggest what to do with it. Since it is impossible to say on an *a priori* basis how common each of these nine modes should be, it seems most productive to compare Johnson’s practice with that of the other lexicographers of his day—and, since that pool is limited, with the creators of the other major English monolingual dictionaries before the rise of scientific philology late in the nineteenth century. Some rudimentary numerical analysis may prove valuable.

Genuinely reliable numerical comparison of the defining habits of various dictionaries is probably impossible. The first reason is that dictionaries take different approaches toward the kinds of words they include: Ash, for instance, includes many proper names (*Nahum*, *Nabonassar*, *Narbarth*) and many inflected forms (*narrow*, *narrowed*, *narrower*, *narrowest*, *narrowing*) as separate headwords; Johnson does not.³⁸ And some lexicographers give just one sense for each lemma—Martin and Johnson begin the systematic practice of numbered senses—whereas earlier lexicographers tend to lump many senses together, sometimes separating them with semicolons, but often just running them together into one long definition. Consider the word *narration*: Cawdrey defines one sense in three words, Kersey discusses two senses in a total of twenty-seven words, and Bailey identifies five distinct senses in two hundred twenty-nine words. They are not really comparable. Moreover, quantitative methods can tell us nothing about qualitative matters. A table can tell us whether a lexicographer had recourse to synonyms, but it cannot tell us whether those synonyms were well chosen.

38 Ash also often lists proper names twice, once as a noun, once as an adjective: *Namptwich*, substantive, “A town in Cheshire”; *Namptwich*, adjective, “Belonging to Namptwich; made at Namptwich.” Even Johnson, though, was aware of the difficulties of distinguishing senses; in the Preface he writes that “kindred senses may be so interwoven, that the perplexity cannot be disentangled.” *Johnson on the English Language*, 91.

It can tell us nothing about whether a definition is clear, elegant, or even minimally accurate. Any numbers we derive from comparisons, therefore, may be thought-provoking, but it makes no sense to report them to six significant digits.

Still, with all these caveats, can we say anything about Johnson's practice and how it compares to that of other early lexicographers? Here I report the results of some tallies of the frequency of each of these nine types of definition in Johnson and ten other important early modern dictionaries, from Cawdrey in 1604 to Richardson's second edition of 1844.³⁹ It would be best to compare like with like, but the diversity of the dictionaries makes this impossible: the wordlists differ too much from dictionary to dictionary to allow us to look at the same words in all eleven dictionaries. But we can compare representative samples. The accompanying table gives my counts of each of the nine modes of definition in each of the eleven dictionaries for all the words or numbered senses beginning with the letters *na*-.

Why *na*-? That range has a few advantages.⁴⁰ It is long enough to give reliable results without being so long that counts are impractical. It contains a good mix of

39 The works cited: Robert Cawdrey, *A Table Alphabeticall, Conteyning and Teaching the True Writing, and Vnderstanding of Hard Vsual English Words, Borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c. with the Interpretation Thereof by Plaine English Words* (London: I. R[oberts], 1604); Thomas Blount, *Glossographia; or, A Dictionary, Interpreting All Such Hard Words, Whether Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Teutonic, Belgick, British or Saxon; as Are Now Used in Our Refined English Tongue* (London: Tho. Newcomb, 1656); Edward Phillips, *The New World of English Words; or, A General Dictionary: Containing the Interpretations of Such Hard Words as Are Derived from Other Languages; Whether Hebrew, Arabick, Syriack, Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, British, Dutch, Saxon, &c.* (London: E. Tyler, 1658); John Kersey, *A New English Dictionary; or, A Compleat Collection of the Most Proper and Significant Words, Commonly Used in the Language* (London, 1702); Nathan Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum; or, A More Compleat Universal Etymological English Dictionary than Any Extant*, 2nd ed. (London: T. Cox, 1736); Benjamin Martin, *Lingua Britannica Reformata; or, A New English Dictionary . . . to Which Is Prefix'd, an Introduction, Containing a Physico-Grammatical Essay on the Propriety and Rationale of the English Tongue* (London, 1749); John Ash, *The New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language: In Which All the Words Are Introduced, the Different Spellings Preserved, the Sound of the Letters Occasionally Distinguished, the Obsolete and Uncommon Words Supported by Authorities, and the Different Construction and Uses Illustrated by Examples* (London: E. and C. Dilly, 1775); Noah Webster, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language: In Which Five Thousand Words Are Added to the Number Found in the Best English Compendis* (New Haven: Hudson & Goodwin, 1806); Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (New York: S. Converse, 1828); Charles Richardson, *A New Dictionary of the English Language: To Which Is Prefixed a Grammatical and Etymological Examination Adapted to the Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (London, 1844). I do not provide a tally of etymological definitions for Richardson's *New Dictionary*, since every entry is structured around the etymon.

40 I use the same range, for many of the same reasons, in *The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 186.

parts of speech, a mix of commonplace words and inkhorn terms, a mix of the concrete and the abstract, a mix of words derived from Germanic and Romance roots, as well as directly from Latin and Greek, and a mix of monosemous and richly polysemous words. There are no prefixes (*electro-*, *micro-*) to distort the tallies. The *na-* range has one other strong advantage: by the middle of the alphabet, lexicographers have usually worked out their principles and procedures, whereas early letters often show the signs of improvisation.

The results of my counts are presented in the following table.

	Etymon	Synonym(s)	Antonym	Parts	Purpose	Genus-Diff	Genus	Quote	Other
Cawdrey 6 entries		50%							83%
Blount 34 entries	3%	36%		6%		21%			50%
Phillips 37 entries		24%				19%			65%
Kersey 54 entries	9%	37%	4%	7%		15%	7%		28%
Bailey 197 entries	4%	25%	2%	5%	3%	29%	4%	<1%	43%
Martin 97 entries	2%	45%	6%	4%	2%	23%	2%		34%
Johnson 196 entries	6%	45%	13%	1%	2%	17%	2%	4%	32%
Ash 277 entries	9%	44%	3%	3%	2%	31%	5%	<1%	33%
Webster 1 98 entries	5%	55%	6%	1%	1%	20%	5%		40%
Webster 2 306 entries	5%	34%	6%	2%	1%	15%	2%	8%	58%
Richardson 44 entries	-	41%	2%	9%	2%	18%	2%	9%	39%

84 Modes of Definition in Johnson and His Contemporaries

Several things are evident at once. The first is that, with few exceptions, Johnson is rarely out of step in almost every category. His modes of definition are roughly similar to those of the other major lexicographers working from 1604 to 1844. If Johnson deserves praise for better definitions than those of his contemporaries, it is not because he took a radically different approach.

The next observation derives from the first, and has to do with the extent of Johnson's influence on the lexicographical tradition. Critics have long argued over how much Johnson changed the way dictionaries were made: Did he in fact standardize spellings, as many histories of the language say he did? Did he establish a standard English, or arrest linguistic "decay"? Those questions are too large to answer here, but if these results can suggest anything about Johnson's influence on the modes of definition, it is that his influence was minimal. There is no obvious shift in modes of definition before and after Johnson. It is true that the careful discrimination of senses developed by Martin continued apace, so perhaps the increased attention to polysemy in dictionaries after 1755 can be partly attributed to him.⁴¹ Likewise the use of illustrative quotations, common on the Continent but very rare in general English lexicography before Johnson, was an innovation that was genuinely influential. These, however, have little to do with the shape the definitions themselves took.

There are, however, a few departures from the norm, and they deserve attention. The first is Johnson's uncommon dependence on the antonym, which appears in roughly one out of seven or eight of his entries—more than twice the rate of any other lexicographer. This was evidently part of his conception of his task from the beginning. Even in the *Plan* he writes that he will have to "explain many words by their opposition to others; for contraries are best seen when they stand together."⁴² I suggest that this is typical of one of the characteristics of Johnson's mind: he often tests propositions by testing them against their opposites. Although Johnson nowhere refers to *antonyms* (the *Oxford English Dictionary* says the word would not be coined until 1870), his writings are filled with words like *opposed*, *opposite*, *contrary*, and *contrariety*, and it suggests a fundamentally dialectical approach he took to knowledge. He even confessed to taking pleasure in proceeding by testing ideas against their opposites: as Sir John Hawkins recorded Johnson's words, "I dogmatise and am contradicted, and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight."⁴³ One of the reasons Boswell's *Life* is successful

41 The typography appropriate to numbered senses was also original with Johnson. As Paul Luna argues, "if we look at how the Dictionary's typography articulates its underlying structure, we can see that Johnson's page was genuinely innovative and set the standard for English dictionaries for a century." Paul Luna, "The Typographic Design of Johnson's *Dictionary*," in *Anniversary Essays on Johnson's Dictionary*, ed. Jack Lynch and Anne McDermott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 175–197, at 175.

42 *Johnson on the English Language*, 50.

43 Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. O M Brack Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 56.

as a literary document is that Boswell so often provides a foil for Johnson's mind. It would be interesting to see the total number of occurrences of the phrase "No, Sir," in the *Life of Johnson*; it certainly appears before many of the most famous ipse dixits. A more extensive exploration of Johnson and the antonym is certainly called for.

The second thing that emerges from this exercise is Johnson's comparative lack of interest in the genus-differentia style, which features in just 17 percent of entries—compared to 29 percent in Bailey, 23 percent in Martin, and 31 percent in Ash (though Webster and Richardson are comparable to Johnson's practice). This seems to confirm some of McLaverty's assertions: Johnson was more interested in linguistic "explanation," which comes from social convention, than in logical "definition," associated with Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy. Locke recognized that, "though defining by the *Genus* may be the shortest way; yet, I think, it may be doubted, whether it be the best." He explicated what he called "the ordinary Definition of the Schools," only to assert that "Languages are not always so made, according to the Rules of Logick, that every term can have its signification, exactly and clearly expressed by two others."⁴⁴ On this point Johnson clearly sided with Locke.⁴⁵ He recognized that strictly logical definition is liable to mistakes on the lexicographer's part and confusion on the reader's part: "sometimes things may be made darker by definition. I see a cow. I define her, *Animal quadrupes ruminans cornutum*. But a goat ruminates, and a cow may have no horns. Cow is plainer."⁴⁶ McLaverty suggests that Johnson began with logical definitions as a goal, but was forced to abandon them: "It was definitions of this sort—'strictly logical'—that Johnson had once hoped to achieve, but hoped in vain, he tells us in the Preface."⁴⁷

This essay remains preliminary and tentative, but I hope to suggest that quantitative analysis can help us to derive coherent theses out of a comparative analysis of Johnson's and other lexicographers' means of defining words. Whether the numbers I have come up with in this brief survey are representative of larger trends is not clear; my sample size is small, and others are free to question my classification of these hundreds of definitions. Many of them depend on judgment calls, and another reader, even one using the same categories I have spelled out, would come up with different figures. Attention to this sort of feature of the *Dictionary* nevertheless has the potential to

44 Locke, *Essay*, 3.3.10 (413).

45 McLaverty writes, "Johnson sided with Locke against Watts on the fundamental question of the extent of human knowledge." He shared Watts's view that "explanations *per genus et differentiam* were brief, perspicuous, and elegant, and he used one where he could, but he agreed with Locke that few things or ideas could be adequately defined because human knowledge is too limited: simple ideas are irreducible, mixed modes too complex, substances essentially unknown." He concludes that this is the reason for "the preference for the word *explanation* or *interpretation* in the *Dictionary*." McLaverty, "From Definition to Explanation," 389–390.

46 *Life*, 3:245.

47 McLaverty, "From Definition to Explanation," 381.

illuminate aspects of Johnson's modes of proceeding and his achievements, whether his presumed "theory of language" or his debt to particular earlier lexicographers. Numerical analysis cannot take the place of careful reading of Johnson's works, but I hope that it can help us be more precise when we declare that Johnson wrote "good" definitions.

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