ORGANIZING KNOWLEDGE: COMPARATIVE STRUCTURES OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY HISTORICAL DICTIONARIES


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Between 1838 and 1857 language scholars throughout Europe were inspired to create a new kind of dictionary. Deemed historical dictionaries, their projects took an unprecedented leap in style and scale from earlier forms of lexicography. These lexicographers each sought to compile historical inventories of their national languages and were inspired by the new scientific approach of comparative philology. For them, this science promised a means to illuminate general processes of social change and variation, as well as the linguistic foundations for cultural and national unity. This study examines two such projects: The German Dictionary, Deutsches Worterbuch, of the Grimm Brothers, and what became the Oxford English Dictionary. Both works utilized collaborative models of large-scale, long-term production, yet the content of the dictionaries would differ in remarkable ways. The German dictionary would be characterized by its lack of definitions of meaning, its eclectic treatment of entries, rich analytical prose, and self-referential discourse; whereas the English dictionary would feature succinct, standardized, and impersonal entries. Using primary source materials, this research investigates why the dictionaries came to differ. This has been framed with reference to the different social structures in which the relevant philologists (and scientists in general) were embedded in each society at the time. It is argued that the German dictionary reflects romanticist notions of scientific knowledge and its attainment, and the nascent professionalization of German science. The legacy of criticism towards the work showcases how romanticist ideals were unsustainable amidst the continued expansion of the German middle class and increased academic segmentation. British philology was far less professionalized, offering fewer resources alongside fewer boundaries to participation. To smooth over differences in skill and to gain legitimacy from outside owners of resources, the production of English dictionary is characterized by a high degree of standardization and corroboration. Together the dictionaries illuminate an era facing the challenges of democratizing knowledge and its creation. They showcase the social and historical basis for different models of knowledge production, their advantages and limitations, and can provide insights for understanding contemporary trends in scientific collaborations.

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Status of Research: Completed/published
Research Type: Graduate Dissertations
Related Fields: Historical Sociology, Language, Sociology of Knowledge

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Source URL: https://soc.washington.edu/research/graduate/organizing-knowledge-comparative-structures-intersubjectivity-nineteenth-century