Right and Wrong Ways of Knowing: The Dictionary Craze and Conflicts of Learning in Eighteenth-Century Europe

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Abstract: This article explores how the eighteenth-century 'dictionary craze' – the explosive proliferation of alphabetically organized reference works – can be understood as part of a wider conflict of learning. Drawing on a wide mix of sources, I show that dictionaries, more than any other factual genre of the time, challenged established conventions about what constituted right and wrong ways of reading, learning, and ultimately knowing, and that this was a crucial reason for both the controversy and success of the genre.

After an overview of early modern norms of learning, the article examines how eighteenth-century disagreements about factual dictionaries challenged, reproduced, and reconfigured older views. By encouraging readers to follow their own curiosity, read in whatever order they liked, form their own opinions, remember temporarily, forget, and return when needed, dictionaries deviated from established ideals of disciplined study and 'digestive' reading, which held that 'true' knowledge was deeply incorporated in the individual. The dictionary's claim to be a 'shortcut' to learning also fueled discussions about the very meaning of 'knowing', and how much the road to learning could be shortened without missing the goal.

Introduction

In eighteenth-century Europe, book markets were struck by a conspicuous trend. The demand for *dictionaries* suddenly seemed insatiable. As the vernacular tongues gradually replaced Latin in print, language dictionaries were naturally of great interest and use. However, factual dictionaries – treating arts, crafts, and sciences in alphabetically ordered articles – turned out to be an even greater sales success.[1] By mid-century, contemporary observers described the explosive increase of alphabetically ordered reference works as a 'dictionary fever' or 'dictionary craze'.[2] Opinions about the phenomenon differed, though. Some interpreted the genre's explosive popularity in a positive light. They described factual dictionaries as revolutionary tools of learning, and their multiplication as a symptom of enlightenment and education spreading to a wider public. Others considered the dictionary genre a plague, spoiling youths, and undermining the very foundations of learning. Some even asserted that dictionaries were to blame for increasing death rates in Paris.[3] How can these contrasting opinions about factual dictionaries be understood?

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The proliferation of dictionaries in Enlightenment Europe is a well-known fact. The phenomenon has generally been explained as a combined reaction to information overload, increasing commercialization of the book market, and crumbling scholastic schemes of knowledge.[4] In this article, however, I will focus on another

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[1]   In the early eighteenth century, terminological distinctions were rarely made between dictionaries of languages and dictionaries of facts or subjects. They were all simply called *dictionaries*, *dictionnaires, lexica*, etc. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, there was a difference between how people discussed dictionaries of these two kinds. While the former were seen as an ancient genre, the latter were described as a new phenomenon, characteristic of the present age. See Linn Holmberg, 'Stranded Encyclopedias in Eighteenth-Century Sweden: Exploring the Rise of Alphabetical Encyclopedism', in *Stranded Encyclopedias, 1700–2000: Exploring Unfinished, Unpublished, Unsuccessful Encyclopedic Projects*, ed. by Linn Holmberg & Maria Simonsen (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 99–135 (108). Crossref.

[2]   Melchior Grimm et al, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, ed. by Maurice Tourneaux (Paris: Garnier, 1878), vol. 4, p. 29 (1 August 1758): 'la fureur des dictionnaires'. All translations are my own if nothing else is stated. Transcriptions reproduce the original spellings but capitalization has been adapted to modern standards.

[3]   *Gazette de santé* (1777, 10 July), p. 112.

[4]   Pierre Rétat, 'L'âge des dictionnaires', in *Histoire de l'édition française, vol. II: Le livre triomphant 1660–1830,* ed. by Roger Chartier & Henri-Jean Martin, 2nd edn (Paris: Fayard/Promodis, 1990), pp. 232–46; Richard Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions: Scientific Dictionaries and Enlightenment*

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context for understanding the eighteenth-century dictionary craze and the different reactions it provoked: I will explore it as part of a conflict of learning.

Eighteenth-century debates about dictionaries are still an understudied subject. By delving into discussions about the genre in several countries – but with an emphasis on France and England – I will argue that dictionaries, more than any other factual genre of the time, challenged established conventions about what constituted right and wrong ways of reading, learning, and ultimately, knowing, and that this was a crucial reason for both the controversy and success of the genre.

Previous research has shown that normative ideas about learning are intimately connected to media landscapes and strategies for dealing with information overload. Ann Blair's ground-breaking work on the period 1500–1700 has been of special relevance to my study.[5] The same can be said about other works on the history of reading,[6] and the history of education.[7] Concerns about dictionaries and learning have not gone unnoticed in studies of lexicography and encyclopedism either. Many researchers have mentioned in the passing how eighteenth-century actors complained about the rising number of dictionaries, and how the alphabetical ordering of knowledge was feared to foster a shallow and fragmentized under-

Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Crossref; Marie Leca-Tsiomis (ed.), *Dix-huitième siècle*, special issue: *Dictionnaires en Europe*, 38 (2006). Crossref; Peter Burke & Joseph McDermott, 'The Proliferation of Reference books', in *The Book Worlds of East Asia and Europe, 1450–1850: Connections and Comparisons*, ed. by McDermott & Burke (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), pp. 237–81. Crossref; Jeff Loveland, *The European Encyclopedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

5 Ann Blair, 'Reading Strategies for Coping with Information Overload ca. 1550–1700', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 64:1 (2003), 11–28. Crossref; Blair, 'Student Manuscripts and the Textbook', in *Scholarly Knowledge: Textbooks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Anthony Grafton et al (Genève: Droz, 2008), pp. 39–74; Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (London: Yale University Press, 2010); Blair, 'Revisiting Renaissance Encyclopedism', in *Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. by Jason König & Greg Woolf (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 379–97. Crossref.

6 Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Guglielmo Cavallo & Roger Chartier (eds.), *A History of Reading in the West*, transl. by Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003 [1995]); Rolf Engelsing, 'Die Perioden der Lesergeschichte in der Neuzeit: Das statistische Ausmass und die soziokulturelle Bedeutung der Lektüre', *Arkiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens*, 10 (1969), columns 944–1002; Reinhard Wittman, 'Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?', in Cavallo & Chartier, pp. 284–312.

7 Chad Wellmon, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). Crossref; Peter Josephson, 'Hotet från autodidakten: böcker, självstudier och universitetets förvandling till forskningsanstalt, 1768–1819', in *Universitetets gränser*, ed. by Peter Josephson & Thomas Karlsohn (Göteborg: Arche Press, 2019), pp. 61–93.

standing of matters.[8] Similar concerns were also aired in relation to newspapers and learned journals.[9]

However, there are many more sides to this debate that remain to be explored, and above all, understood against broader and older discourses about learning. What exactly was it that eighteenth-century actors disagreed about when portraying dictionaries as revolutionary tools for learning, or threats to everything that learning stood for? What concepts of learning – and knowing – were at work here? What traditions of thought did they relate to or criticize?

To answer these questions, this article will do two things. First, it will outline a background for understanding the eighteenth-century dictionary debates. In dialogue with earlier research, I will start by looking at older scholarly debates about the proper use and 'abuse' of reference works and then explain their arguments in light of early modern norms about the 'right' way to read, learn, and 'know' something, as expressed in several of the period's influential educational texts. Thereafter, I will investigate how praise and criticism of dictionary learning in the eighteenth century related to these older debates and norms. In doing so, I will draw on a wide range of sources from several countries, including prefaces of dictionaries, bookseller ads, and reviews in learned journals.[10] By combining these two strategies and corpuses of sources, I hope to carve out a position from where I can say something new not only about the driving forces behind the eighteenth-century dictionary craze, but also about conflicts of learning in the age of Enlightenment overall. But first, a few words about my analytical use of *knowing*, and its relationship to the empirical sources.

Right and Wrong Ways of Knowing: An Analytical Overview

Eighteenth-century actors did not use the phrase 'right and wrong ways of knowing', but they often spoke normatively of 'true knowledge'. In some contexts, this

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[8]   Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions*, pp. 25–27; John Considine, '"Our Dictionaries err in Redundancy": The Problem of Encyclopedism, Past, Present, and Future', in *Symposium on Lexicography XI*, ed. by Henrik Gottlieb et al. (Tübingen: De Gruyter, 2005), pp. 195–205. Crossref; Krister Östlund, 'Johan Ihres kritik mot den franska encyklopedin: reaktion mot en påstådd kulturell urartning', *1700-tal: Nordic Yearbook for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 2 (2005), 30–37. Crossref.

[9]   Uriel Heyd, 'News Craze: Public Sphere and the Eighteenth-Century Theatrical Depiction of Newspaper Culture', *The Eighteenth Century,* 56:1 (2015), 59–84. Crossref.

[10] This article is a pilot study of a five-year research project titled 'The Dictionary Craze: Transforming Knowledge in Early Modern Europe', conducted within the Pro Futura Scientia Programme (2020–2025), and financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. The project analyzes thousands of accounts of dictionaries and learning in some twenty periodicals, published in France, England, the Dutch Republic, the German states, Sweden, and Denmark between c. 1665 and 1800. This article summarizes some of the preliminary results.

referred to the epistemic status or value of a knowledge claim. In other contexts, however, it referred to the knower's behavior. This study focuses on the latter. To highlight the distinction, something more needs to be said about both meanings.

The early modern period was seething with debates about knowledge, and knowledge could be spoken of in many different ways. From the seventeenth century onwards, plenty of philosophers engaged in epistemological discussions about the possibilities, methods, and sources for obtaining true and certain knowledge of the earthly and the divine. Such debates typically went hand in hand with metaphysical speculations about the nature and origin of the soul, and the potential and limits of human reason and senses.[11] In everyday conversation, however, people commonly agreed that 'knowledge' came in different forms – in sciences, arts, and crafts – of which many were unbothered by metaphysical questions of absolute truth. Instead, they focused on what was useful, effective, aesthetical, probable, or widely accepted, although this too was an issue of ongoing negotiation and change.[12]

Irrespectively of the object, form, or epistemic quality of a knowledge claim, knowledge was fundamentally spoken of as something *held* by individuals:[13] firstly, by the original thinkers, observers, practitioners, or chosen ones receiving the word of God, whose trustworthiness was crucial to the legitimacy of their knowledge claims;[14] and secondly, by individuals who incorporated – from people and texts – what they accepted to be valid practices and claims about a given subject. In early modern Europe, the learning and knowing of intellectual matters was intimately bound up with the reading and understanding of books.[15] For this reason, scholars and educators had plenty of opinions about how to read, study, evaluate,

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[11] For an overview, see A. P. Martinich & Avrum Stroll, 'Epistemology', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed 28 October 2022: https://www.britannica.com/topic/epistemology

[12] Richard Yeo, 'Classifying the Sciences', in *The Cambridge History of Science: Eighteenth-Century Sciences*, ed. by Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 241–66. Crossref; Donald R. Kelley (ed.), *History and the Disciplines: The Reclassification of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997).

[13] For a longer account of the history of speaking about 'knowledge' as tied to the individual's mind, the faculty of thinking, and the agency of the human soul, see Wellmon, pp. 22–24.

[14] As early shown by Steven Shapin, epistemic authority in the early modern period fundamentally depended on the trustworthiness of the person making a knowledge claim, whether it was an ancient authority or a contemporary natural philosopher. See Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. xxv–xxxi. Crossref.

[15] According to Wellmon, pp. 24–28, in classical antiquity, interpersonal contact had been seen as the ideal medium for transferring knowledge between individuals. After the fall of the Roman empire and the rise of Christian monasticism, texts achieved a higher status as carriers of authoritative knowledge. This attitude to texts remained a dominant feature in scholastic and humanist cultures of learning.

learn, and remember for the individual's knowledge to be considered 'true'. This 'trueness' had thus more to do with the *behavior of the knower* than the epistemic quality of the knowledge held. To 'know' something was not a static mental state, but a continuous effect of learning, reading, and studying – that is, the knower's actions. Once an understanding had been obtained, it could be deepened indefinitely, and it had to be properly maintained in order not to be corrupted or forgotten.

As I will show, when opinions in the eighteenth century clashed over the dictionary genre's rising popularity, they also clashed over what behaviors underpinned the very meaning of being a knowing person. To understand this clash, we need to look at some older debates.

Older Debates about Reference Works, Reading, Learning, and Knowing

In his *Reflections upon Learning* (1708), the English antiquarian Thomas Baker (1656–1740) grouched about the never-ending stream of new books piling up in European bookshops, which seemed to make learning into an almost impossible project. 'Books crowd in daily, and are heap'd upon books, and by the multitude of them, both distract our minds, and discourage our endeavours', he wrote.[16] How were people supposed to handle this overabundance of texts? Baker concluded bitterly: 'I cannot but think we should have more learning, had we fewer books'.[17]

Baker was not the first (nor the last) to express this opinion. It had been a core argument to motivate all sorts of compilations since the dawn of book print technology. By gathering the most essential from the 'best' authors in one work, compilations reduced the necessity to buy and consult several books, and thereby made it possible for educated people to spend their time (and money) more wisely.

Yet how to properly use compilations had long been debated among the learned. According to Ann Blair, a discourse about the 'abuse' of reference works emerged in the late sixteenth century, when mentions of scholars who systematically read summaries, abridgements, and extracts *instead* of studying the original texts increased. The fact that wrong-doers were often anonymized testifies to the shame involved for scholars who tried to take this 'shortcut' in learning.[18] Alluding to this debate, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) advised in 1612 that 'some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested'.[19] In other words, there were right and wrong ways to read different books. Compila-

16   Thomas Baker, *Reflections upon learning* (London: Bosvile, 1708), 'Preface', n.a. (10–11).
17   Baker, n.a. (12).
18   Blair, 'Reading Strategies', p. 22.
19   Blair, 'Reading Strategies', pp. 13-14.

tions were only meant to be consulted, not read from cover to cover. But where did this idea come from?

Although Blair has paid great attention to what early modern actors advised about reading, note-taking, and information management, her studies do not delve deeper into the relationship between such recommendations and prevalent ideas about learning and 'knowing'. To understand the intellectual conflict lines surrounding dictionaries in the eighteenth century, I believe it is crucial to do so.

The early modern period swarms with educational treatises, guides, and manuals in the art of studying, reading, excerpting, and writing. The issue of how the individual's knowledge is gained, held, and maintained tends to be the underlying subject of such normative writings. One of the key questions was how to successfully navigate the rising ocean of books. In this area, many manuals repeated similar advice. To really 'know' and master something, *selectivity* was crucial. Therefore, one should choose a limited number of good books and take the time to really understand them rather than jumping from one text to another. For example, in his hugely influential textbook on the art of reading, *De ratione libros cum profectu legendi* ('On the Method of Reading Books Successfully', 1614),[20] the Italian Jesuit Francesco Sacchini (1570–1625) advised his pupils not to read too many *new* books in their spare time. They should rather revisit works they had already read, since 'it is much better to learn a few things well, than to taste many'.[21] He further stressed the usefulness of taking notes as a way of forcing the mind to dwell on the text, and thereby 'digest' its content.[22]

The metaphor of *digestion* was frequently used in educational writings of the time.[23] Just like the body was digesting food, the soul or mind was thought to digest intellectual matters by devoting them careful attention. And just like there were dangers in over-eating, there were dangers in over-reading. In the *Winter-Evening Conference* (first printed 1684) – a popular book on Christian morality and self-discipline, often recommended to university students in late seventeenth-century England[24] – the Anglican clergyman John Goodman (c. 1625–1690) warned that

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[20] Sacchini's work was printed in several editions and translations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was widely used in Jesuit schools throughout Europe. See Markus Friedrich, *The Jesuits: A History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 344. <u>Crossref</u>.

[21] Blair, 'Reading Strategies", p. 15; Friedrich, p. 344.

[22] Blair, 'Student Manuscripts and the Textbook', p. 64.

[23] Peter Stallybrass, 'Eating the Book, or Why we Need to Digest What we Read', in *Text, Food and the Early Modern Reader: Eating Words*, ed. by Jason Scott Warren & Andrew Elder Zurcher (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 168–84. <u>Crossref</u>; Katharine A. Craik, *Reading Sensations in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 93–114. <u>Crossref</u>.

[24] See for instance *A Letter of Advice to a Young Gentleman at the University* (London: n.a., 1701, 1750), pp. 28–29.

those who read too much easily over-burdened their minds, 'digested' nothing, and thus understood little. 'They stuff themselves so full of other men's notions, that there is no room for their faculties to display themselves', he observed. To avoid this, he advised students to read a few books many times over, and converse with friends to make sure they understood everything clearly.[25]

Similar advice was given in monastic environments in France. In *Traité des études monastiques* ('Treatise on Monastic Studies', 1691), the Benedictine scholar and historian Dom Jean Mabillon (1632–1707) stated that it was 'much better to know a little and have a well-ordered heart, than to know an infinite number of things and neglect ourselves'. [26] For men of the world, Mabillon admitted that it was probably useful to know a little about everything, but for that knowledge to be useful, it still had to 'reach the heart through serious reflection'.[27] Those who bragged about their memory and all the books they had read seldom cared about understanding things profoundly or becoming more capable persons. The same was true for people 'stricken with a restless curiosity, [who] pass from one subject to another, stopping at none'.[28] In Mabillon's view, true knowledge was something deeply felt: a personal, multidimensional familiarity with a subject that was attained through long experience, disciplined study, and which transformed the person by making him better, wiser, and more capable in his judgement.[29]

The ideal of selectivity and the metaphorical association between reading and eating had ancient roots. In his moral *Epistles*, the Roman politician and stoic philosopher Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE) had advised readers who truly wanted to learn something to focus on 'a limited number master-thinkers' and carefully 'digest' their works. Reading too many authors, or reading in a hasty, sloppy manner was a waste of time, just like 'food does no good and is not assimilated into the body if it leaves the stomach as soon as it is eaten'.[30] Seneca ascribed moral qualities to these behaviors. Restless, erratic, and excessive reading was 'the sign of a disordered spirit', since a man with a well-ordered mind – who was calm and composed – did not fear lingering in the company of his own thoughts.[31] As in all things, temperance was a cardinal virtue.

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[25]   John Goodman, *Winter-Evening Conference between Neighbours*, 4th edn (London: Leake, 1689), vol. 1, pp. 50–51.

[26]   Jean Mabillon, *Treatise on Monastic Studies*, transl. by Jean Paul McDonald (Oxford: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 246–47; Jean Mabillon, *Traité des études monastiques* (Paris: Robustel, 1691), pp. 390–91.

[27]   Mabillon, *Treatise*, p. 247; Mabillon, *Traité*, pp. 391–92.

[28]   Mabillon, *Treatise*, p. 246–247; Mabillon, *Traité*, p. 390.

[29]   Mabillon, *Treatise*, p. 186–187; Mabillon, *Traité*, p. 291.

[30]   Seneca, *Epistles 1–65*, transl. by Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1917), p. 7: 'On Discursiveness in Reading'.

[31]   Seneca, p. 7.

Seneca's recommendations resonated with even older ideas about the nature of thought, perception, and memory, well-known among the literate classes in the Roman empire. In *Theaetetus,* Plato had compared the functions of the soul/mind to a wax tablet (often used as a writing tool in ancient Greece). In this dialogue, the young Theaetetus had suggested to Socrates that when we experience things with our senses, the soul processes the impressions by leading an 'inner discourse' with itself.[32] That inner discourse makes an imprint on the soul, like an imprint on a wax tablet. The amount and quality of the wax varied in different souls: some had more, some had less, while some had softer and more impressionable ones. But the more the individual reflected on a matter, the stronger and clearer the imprint would become.[33] In the end, Theaetetus and Socrates rejected the idea that the soul's processing of sensory impressions could lead to certain knowledge about the nature of things. But they still identified active reflection as a crucial tool for 'digesting' ideas and impressions, irrespectively of their epistemological status.[34]

In medieval Europe, textual 'digestion' could imply different behaviors depending on the nature of the text and the purpose of the reading, and thus encompassed memorization, transcription, spiritual contemplation, and logical analysis. In both scholastic and humanist cultures of learning, however, the status of ancient texts as sources of authoritative knowledge made memorization a central tool for textual digestion.[35] With the rise of the new natural philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, critical thinking became a new ingredient in the meaning of digesting books to 'know' them. An early example of this idea can be found in *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque artium* ('The Uncertainty and Vanity of all Sciences and Arts', first published in 1526), in which the German polymath

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[32] Plato, *Theaetetus,* in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato,* transl. by Lane Cooper, ed. by Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 895 (190: a).

[33] Plato, p. 897, 900–01(191:d–e, 194:c–195:a).

[34] Although Aristotle defined the soul differently than Plato, he too used the wax metaphor for describing the workings of the sensory impressions on mind and memory. He also drew the conclusion that an 'excess of objects perceived destroy the sense organs', which later generations could interpret as supporting the thesis that 'mindless' over-reading was something bad. See Aristotle, *On the Soul,* transl. by W. S. Hett (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 137 (book II, sect. xii).

[35] See M. B. Parkes, 'Reading, Copying and Interpreting a Text in the Early Middle Ages', in Cavallo & Chartier, p. 91, 99; Jaqueline Hamesse, 'The Scholastic Model of Reading', in Cavallo & Chartier, p. 107; James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. 1 (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1990), especially 'Towards a Typology of Reading in the Fifteenth Century', pp. 18–20. Crossref; Anthony Grafton, 'The World of the Polyhistors: Humanism and Encyclopedism', *Central European History,* 18:1 (1985), pp. 31–47. Crossref.

Agrippa (1486–1535) roasted university teachers and students for 'over-burdening' their minds with 'innumerable things and words'.[36] Many of them bragged about their extensive memory, but a few critical questions rapidly revealed how underdeveloped *their own thinking* on the subject really was.[37]

Among mechanistic philosophers, arguments against 'mindless' reading and memorization got visceral. In *Recherche de la verité* ('The Search after Truth', 1674), the French cartesian philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) theorized about the interconnectedness between the mental faculties and the brain by alluding to Plato's metaphorical imagery of the wax tablet. He argued that human memory was a function of animal spirits creating 'tracks' in the fibers of the brain.[38] Every time a certain idea was thought, the animal spirits in the blood ran over the same track, thus making it deeper and easier to return to (i.e., remember).[39] For this reason, when people stuffed their minds full of texts without reflecting (i.e., leading an inner discourse with themselves), the animal spirits only created shallow and blurry tracks in the brain, which manifested as a fuzzy understanding. In Malebranche's view, reading without reflecting was physically degenerative. To explain why so many people still followed this obsolete practice, he stressed the pressure of tradition, but also that many individuals were either too lazy or physically incapable to put themselves through the pains of reflection.[40] Memorization was easy. Critical thinking was hard.

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Against this background, one can more easily understand the scholarly objections towards the 'abuse' of reference works in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. If information was gained too easily and quickly, the reader would not take the time to properly consider, understand, and digest the content, or let it transform him as a knowing person. True knowledge required time. If learning was a road, and the road was cut too short, the traveler would not reach his goal.

However, with the rise of the urban middle class in the second half of the seventeenth century, there was an increasing demand for 'easy learning' that could provide laymen with a general education. Educators who responded to this demand

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[36] Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *The Vanity of Arts and Sciences* (London: Speed, 1676), p. 48.

[37] Agrippa, p. 49.

[38] Nicolas Malebranche, *De la recherche de la vérité*, 6th edn (Paris: David, 1712), p. 278, 294–95, 377.

[39] Malebranche, p. 377.

[40] Malebranche, pp. 394–95.

often joined in with critique of mindless scholarly pedantry,[41] but they also challenged norms associated with disciplined, 'hard' study. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), John Locke (1632–1704) stressed that most boys of the English gentry would grow up and become men of business. In contrast to Mabillon, he described curiosity and vanity as useful motivators for learning, rather than distracting desires to be controlled. Curiosity was 'but an appetite after knowledge', he wrote.[42] Since humans were vain and proud creatures, 'let their vanity be flattered with things, that will do them good'.[43] Besides specialized knowledge of their chosen professions, the English gentry needed a general education to cultivate their manners, judgement, and ability 'to speak of any subject'.[44]

As many historians have shown, the practice and rhetoric of conversation came to permeate many central spaces of Enlightenment culture, such as salons, coffee-houses, academies, scientific societies, journals, and political assemblies.[45] In these environments, conversation emerged as a more social alternative to solitary reflection to 'digest' intellectual contents and improve one's learning. Thus, the individual's 'knowing' was increasingly judged by the way he spoke. Here, the dictionary would turn out to be a great ally.

The Rising Popularity of Dictionaries

Before the seventeenth century, alphabetical order was not a very popular choice for arranging factual contents of compilations. Since Antiquity, it had been much more common to use hierarchical, topical, or chronological orders.[46] Even though alphabetical order became more recurrent after the diffusion of print technol-

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[41] Pedro Javier Pardo Garcia, 'Satire on Learning and the Type of Pedant in Eighteenth-Century Literature', *Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*, 13 (2014), accessed 12 December 2022: http://www.edicions.ub.edu/revistes/bells13/

[42] John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London: Churchill, 1693), p. 134.

[43] Locke, p. 136.

[44] Locke, pp. 174–75, 193–204, 221–24, 233 (203).

[45] David Randall, *The Conversational Enlightenment: the Reconception of Rhetoric in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). Crossref.

[46] See Judith Flanders, *A Place for Everything: a Curious History of Alphabetical Order* (London: Picador, 2020), p. 45, 74–75. See also Dennis Duncan, *Index, a History of the: a Bookish Adventure* (Dublin: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 24, 26–28, 36–43. Illustratively enough, the earliest known work to have used the title 'dictionary' – the *Dictionarius* of the thirteenth-century philologist John of Garland – was written as a narrative, in which the author walked the streets of Paris and recounted the names of things he saw. See Frédérique Lachaud, 'La première description des métiers de Paris: le *Dictionarius* de Jean de Garlande (vers 1220–1230)', *Société française d'histoire urbaine*, 16:2 (2006), pp. 91–114.

ogy, contemporaries did not start commenting on its rising popularity until the latter half of the seventeenth century. At this point, not all works using alphabetical order were titled 'dictionary' (they could just as well be called *thesaurus* or *bibliothèque*), nor did all works titled 'dictionary' use alphabetical order.[47] Yet the association between the dictionary title and alphabetical order strengthened as a discourse about dictionaries as a genre took form.

One of the first attempts to define and historicize the dictionary genre is found in the *Grand dictionaire historique* (1674), compiled by the French historian, scholar, and Catholic priest Louis Moréri (1643–1680). In the preface, he enumerates several alphabetically organized compilations on language, history, geography, and sciences, printed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Despite carrying various titles, he describes them all as being 'in a certain sense, dictionaries', which he had used to compile his own work.[48] In Moréri's narrative, the dictionary genre was the result of the humanist endeavor of rediscovering ancient languages and learning. Due to their use of alphabetical order, dictionaries were of a 'marvelous usefulness, and especially appreciated by the learned', since they allowed scholars to quickly find a piece of information, a reference, or simply refresh one's memory.[49] Alluding to the debate about abuse of reference works, however, he reinforced the idea that there was a right way to use dictionaries: they should not replace the reading of original texts but rather facilitate navigation in and between them. In this way, Moréri seems to have imagined that the reader of his dictionary would be a scholar: someone who (just like him) spent large parts of his life reading, studying, and writing.

However, at the time of the publication of Moréri's *Grand dictionnaire historique*, it was no longer obvious that scholars were the automatic receiver and user of a dictionary. Since the early seventeenth century, a number of small, vernacular dictionaries had appeared in England, France, and the German states that covered the terminology and elements of practical arts and professions.[50] One of

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[47] A late but good example is Jacques Ozanam's *Dictionnaire mathématique* (1690), which was thematically organized but complemented with an alphabetized index. At this point, however, reviews in learned journals pointed out that the use of 'dictionary' in the title produced expectations of alphabetical organization. See *Journal des savants* (1690, December), p. 478.

[48] Louis Moréri, *Grand dictionaire historique, ou le mélange curieux de l'histoire sainte et profane* (Lyon: Girin & Riviere, 1674), 'Preface', p. a3v: 'Tous ces ouvrages sont, en certain sens, des dictionaires'.

[49] Moréri, p. a2: 'Ces livres sont d'une merveilleuse utilité, & les gens de lettres en ont fait une estime particulièr'.

[50] For an overview of early German mining dictionaries, see Linn Holmberg, 'Sven Rinman's *Bergwerks Lexicon* (1788–1789) and the Emergence of Mining Encyclopedias in Preindustrial Europe' in *Specialized Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, 1650–1800: A Tribute to Frank Kafker,* ed. by Jeff Loveland & Stéphane Schmitt (Liverpool University Press, forthcoming 2024).

the first to praise the benefits of alphabetization in such works was the English captain Henry Mainwaring (1587–1653). In the *The Sea-Mans Dictionary* (1644), he declared that his work was intended for novices who quickly wished to learn the language and procedures on board a ship. Normally, this kind of knowledge took many years of practice to attain, but Mainwaring promised that his book could achieve the same result in only six months – *if* the student would 'let me read this book over with him, and be content to look sometimes at a model of a ship and see how things are done'. If agreeing to this, Mainwaring assured that the novice 'shall (without any great study, but conversation) know more, be a better seaman, and speak more properly to any business of the sea, than another gentleman who shall go two or three years together to sea without this'.[51] The secret was spelled education through conversation, or as Mainwaring phrased it, the ability 'to make a man understand what other men say, and speak properly himself'.[52] To facilitate this mission, the English captain had brought all terms 'into an alphabet', which made them easier to find quickly when conversing.[53] At the same time, he stressed that the dictionary was to be read in its entirety, not just consulted sporadically.

Compared to Moréri, Mainwaring thus had quite a different idea about how a dictionary should be read, by whom, and what role it could play for the reader's learning. His dictionary was not an aid for reading other more important books. It was the only book necessary for seamen to read, complemented by conversation, observation, and practice. Moreover, the captain claimed that the format would not just spare the young sailor years of time but also increase the very quality of his knowing: because of it, he would know *more* and be a *better* seaman. Indeed, Mainwaring suggested that the dictionary provided a quite radical *shortcut* – and there was no shame in taking it.

In the coming decades, Mainwaring's arguments were repeated by compilers in other countries, who addressed other less educated groups of the population. For example, in 1677, a Parisian doctor named De Meuve published a pharmaceutical dictionary in French, intended for apothecaries.[54] According to the author, apothecaries (who often lacked higher education) were notorious for their insufficient understanding of Latin, which caused much disorder in the practice of medicine. In this work, he had translated everything they needed to know from

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[51] Henry Mainwaring, *The Sea-Mans Dictionary: or, an exposition and demonstration of all the parts and things belonging to a shippe: together with an explanation of all the termes and phrases used in the practique of navigation* (London: Bellamy, 1644), pp. 85–86.

[52] Mainwaring, p. 85.

[53] Mainwaring, p. 84.

[54] De Meuve, *Dictionnaire pharmaceutique ou plustost apparat medicopharmaco-chymique* (Paris: D'Houry, 1677).

authoritative works in Latin, divided the content into smaller articles, and placed them in alphabetical order for easy retrieval. To make the reading more pleasant, he had even included small 'dialogues' in the articles, which explained preparations and medical properties in an easy way, fitting for collective reading aloud and conversation. Like Mainwaring, De Meuve argued that the dictionary format would make learning easier for the targeted group – and reviewers of the work agreed. [55] Apparently, taking a shortcut in learning was only reprimandable for scholars, who after all aspired to attain 'true knowledge'. For the less educated, it was better that they learned a little than stayed completely ignorant. But as we shall see, this assumption would grow problematic as literacy increased and new groups in society made claims to be 'learned'.

Even though the rising esteem for dictionaries was evident already in the late seventeenth century, nobody could have foreseen the hype that would surround the genre in the coming century. Soon dictionaries were made on every imaginable subject. Over time, the professional, confessional, and socio-economic backgrounds of both compilers and consumers varied greatly, and so did their use of dictionaries. The compilers were typically male but could otherwise belong to any part of the literate population: the nobility, the clergy, or the rising urban middle class. They were scholars, monks, priests, academics, lawyers, doctors, and statesmen as well as natural historians, explorers, chemists, merchants, missionaries, and amateurs (or, as often was the case, a combination of several epithets). Undoubtedly, many compilers occupied professions within the book trade, such as booksellers, printers, journal editors, journalists, writers, and translators. As previous studies have pointed out, it is hard to know for sure how dictionaries were read and by whom,[56] but titles and prefaces make clear that the works rhetorically targeted all parts of the literary population – including women, children, and students.

The dictionary craze grew especially strong in France. French book historians have shown how the number of printed dictionaries increased explosively in the 1740s, reached a peak in the 1770s, and then decreased significantly in the 1780s.[57] This development is not only evident from bookseller catalogues. Contemporary journals and literary magazines are swarming with reviews and letters to the editors concerned with dictionaries. The longest-running scholarly journal of the Old Regime, the *Journal des savants* (1665–1790), contains almost a thou-

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[55] *Journal des savants* (1677, April), p. 88: 'Meuve, *Dictionnaire pharmaceutique*'. For equally positive reviews of later editions, see *Journal des savants* (1678, February), pp. 77–78; (1690, May), p. 202.

[56] Loveland, pp. 321–23, 331–33.

[57] Rétat, p. 232.

sand news items devoted to dictionaries. As can be seen in Figure 1, the majority are concerned with factual dictionaries from the 1740s onwards.[58]
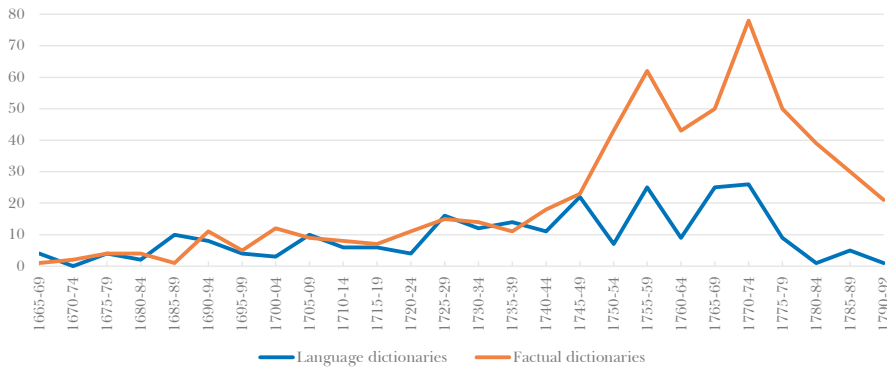

Figure 1. News items about dictionaries in the Journal des Savants *(1665–1792)*

Reviews and letters printed in the *Journal des savants* show that opinions about the dictionary genre became more conflicted as the number of publications increased. We shall start by looking at the positive voices.

Praise of Dictionary Learning

From the 1740s onwards, an increasing number of reviews in the *Journal des savants* argued that for purposes of learning, the dictionary format was superior to other types of factual genres. One reviewer explained that by making a dictionary, compilers spared everyone 'the trouble and tediousness' of having to read through a full book, to page back and forth in chapters, or even to skim through a table of content or an index (which were often faulty, anyway). [59] In a dictionary, the reader found each subject treated in one place, as fully as possible, simply by searching for the headword. In this way, it offered a more effective learning experience than other books. Ten years later, two Parisian booksellers remarked that the utility of

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58 These numbers are the result of a complete inventory of the *Journal des savants* (1665–1792) that I made during the spring 2021. As language dictionaries, I have counted mono-, bi-, and multilingual dictionaries devoted to general languages, e.g., English and Portuguese. As factual dictionaries, I have counted dictionaries that cover the terminology and elements of one or several subjects or fields of knowledge (e.g., love, religious cults, history, geography, or chemistry), of which most are monolingual and written in vernacular languages.

59 *Journal des savants* (1748, October), p. 619: 'Beauclas, *Dictionnaire universel, historique, chronologiques, géographique, de jurisprudence civile'* […] la peine & les longueurs inséparables […] d'une recherche dans la lecture entiére d'un traité'.

dictionaries had been recognized by scholars for a long time, but now, they were more popular than ever because 'people see them as a shortcut to become learned in little time, for a cheap prize'.[60]

As we have seen, the idea of the dictionary as a 'shortcut' to learning was not new, but it was new to portray this shortcut as something positive for the general population, worthy of defending. Some compilers contributed more than others to providing arguments for such a defense, and for tying the dictionary to a new philosophy of learning. One of them was Ephraim Chambers (c. 1680–1740), the former apprentice of a globe maker and author of the *Cyclopaedia, or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1728).[61] The latter has long played a central role in the history of modern encyclopedias, as the forerunner of the French *Encyclopédie* as well as of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Yet little has previously been said about Chambers' views on dictionary learning.

In the preface of the *Cyclopaedia*, Chambers began by stating that progress fundamentally depended on shortcuts. Language was the first shortcut, which made it possible to transmit the learning of one individual to another. Arts and sciences were the next ones, since they were systems of conclusions 'orderly and artfully laid down in words, to save others the labor and expense of making [th]em at first hand'.[62] The dictionary, finally, was just another step in the process. By extracting the most essential from the best works on every subject, and rewriting everything into concise articles in alphabetical order, the dictionary could transmit knowledge in a more effective way than other books.[63]

In a way, Chambers alluded to the old Senecan ideal of selective reading, with the dictionary as a replacement for master-thinkers. At the same time, however, he questioned the idea that readers needed to be selective and carefully digest everything they read. He even disputed the idea that over-reading was counterproductive to learning. People should not fear overburdening their minds, he stressed. 'Ideas are transient things and seldom stay long enough with us to do us either much good, or harm'.[64] Even if busy readers forgot much of what they read, the very act of exposing oneself to many things would make the mind more perceptible, and help forming a better, more critical judgement. For men of the world, a good judgement trumped specialized knowledge, and the former did not require

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[60]   Jacques-Bernard Durey de Noinville, *Table alphabetique des dictionnaires* (Paris: Chaubert & Herissant, 1758), 'Avis de libraires', p. iii: 'on les regarde comme une voie abrégée our devenir sçavant en peu de tems & a peu de frais".

[61]   Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions*, pp. 37–38.

[62]   Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia, or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (London: Knapton et al, 1728), 'Preface', p. vii.

[63]   Chambers, p. xxii.

[64]   Chambers, p. xxx.

the latter. Dictionaries were the perfect tool for shaping a philosophical and independent mind, he argued. As compilations, they naturally brought together a multitude of different views, which stimulated readers to form their own opinions and prevented them from becoming dogmatic and small-minded.[65]

Twenty years later, these thoughts were further elaborated in the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772), edited by Denis Diderot (1713–1784) and Jean D'Alembert (1717–1783). In the *Prospectus* (1750), Diderot praised the dictionary genre for being partially responsible for the enlightenment spreading in society.[66] He described the dictionary format as a revolutionary tool of learning, and promised that the coming *Encyclopédie* would help 'multiply the number of true savants, distinguished artists, and enlightened amateurs' in society.[67] As a dictionary, it would explain all the arts, crafts and sciences in such a concise *and* thorough manner that no previous knowledge was required of the reader, since 'the articles would explain each other'.[68] Diderot thus suggested that the *Encyclopédie* – *because it was a dictionary* – would be a self-sufficient system of learning.

The idea that a dictionary could be at once more concise *and* thorough than other books was emphasized by others as well. In the 1780s, a reviewer explained that thematic treatises always needed to suppose some fundamental knowledge on behalf of the reader and therefore left several notions of arts and sciences unexplained. If the reader did not know the corresponding terms, he would easily give up or achieve only an imperfect understanding of the subject. But if the treatise was written in the form of a dictionary, it could offer explanations of *all* central terms mentioned throughout the work. Since the reader only read as much as he wanted, the dictionary was equally useful to children and adults, beginners and experts, laymen and professionals. With this flexibility, it easily outrivaled other factual genres.[69]

Compilers and reviewers also argued that the alphabetical order gave readers an unprecedented freedom to form their own educational path to knowledge: to decide for themselves in what order to read and learn about things, and to simply follow their own curiosity. In theory, this was an option that readers had with all books, but the dictionary not only allowed it – it forced it. Alphabetization broke up chronologies, disrespected hierarchies, ignored boundaries between fields,

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[65]   Chambers, p. xxix.

[66]   Denis Diderot, *Prospectus de l'Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* [1750], in *Oeuvres de Denis Diderot,* ed. by Jacques-André Naigeon, vol. 3 (Paris: Desray & Deterville, 1798), p. 4.

[67]   Diderot, p. 31: 'multipliant le nombre des vrais savans, des aristes distingués, et des amateurs éclairés'.

[68]   Diderot, *Prospectus,* p. 56: 'les articles s'expliquent les uns par les autres'.

[69]   *Journal des savants* (1781, June), pp. 354–62: '*Dictionnaire de physique*'.

and even by-passed the established movement from the basic to the advanced. As an enthusiastic reviewer of a chemical dictionary phrased it in 1781: 'the apparent disorder gives the reader freedom to take the course he sees fit, and it is very possible that he makes a better choice than the author would himself'.[70] Several writers therefore came to speak of the alphabetical or *dictionarial* order as a method of study that placed the reader's need and interest first.[71] The dictionary was the ultimate choice for an individualized, anti-authoritative, curiosity-driven learning. In this sense, dictionary learning emerged as the antithesis of traditional education.

Not every dictionary compiler would advance such arguments in their prefaces, but enough of them did to make these ideas so widely known that reviewers could address them even if the compilers did not. Towards the end of the century, it sufficed to say, as a reviewer did in 1770, that 'today, when someone wishes to learn something immediately, [....] and without following any particular order, the dictionaries provide the shortest path'.[72] In the same period, dictionaries were regularly described as just as useful to scholars and busy professionals as to 'the great mass of readers who want to inform and entertain themselves but not study',[73] women, and 'young people incapable of long-term reading'.[74] In short, dictionaries suited everyone.

Commercial interests obviously played a central role in the positive rhetoric surrounding the dictionary genre. It was in the interest of both compilers and booksellers to attract as many buyers as possible, and some reviewers writing for learned journals were compilers and/or booksellers themselves.[75] On the other hand, reviewers did not hesitate to point out when a dictionary's grandiose claims to learning fell flat, or when it seemed to be the work of an inexperienced hack-

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[70] *Journal des savants* (1766, August), p. 535: '*Dictionnaire de chimie* [....] laisse au lecteur la liberté de se former tel plan qu'il juge à propos, & il est très-possible qu'il fasse à cette égard un meilleur choix que l'Auteur même'.

[71] *Journal des savants* (1774, October), p. 697; *Journal des savants* (1773, November), p. 764; *Journal des savants* (1764, November), pp. 754–55.

[72] *Journal des savants* (1770, September), pp. 607–08: '*Dictionnaire de littérature* [...] Aujourd'hui on veut être instruit sur le champ, tout-à-la fois & sans ordre des différentes parties d'une science, les dictionnaires sont la voie la plus courte'.

[73] *Journal des savants* (1768, May), p. 354: '*Dictionnaire portatif des faits & dits mémorables de l'histoire ancienne & moderne* [...] la foule des Lecteurs qui cherchent à s'instruire en s'amusant & qui ne veulent point étudier'.

[74] *Journal des savants* (1772, February), p. 123: '*Dictionnaire historique d'éducation* [...] la jeunesse peu capable d'un lecture de longue haleine'.

[75] Ephraim Chambers, for instance, edited the London-based *Literary Magazine*. See Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions*, p. 45.

writer, ordered by a greedy publisher.[76] In short, not all dictionaries were praised, nor were all criticized.

Whether the praise of the genre was driven by profit or honest opinion, the simple fact that it was repeated over and over certainly affected the attitude of generations of compilers, sellers – and readers. In the London-based *Gentleman's Magazine*, a reader openly confessed in 1750 that his 'library chiefly consists of Chambers Dictionary, the General Dictionary [by Bailey], and your Magazines', and thanks to 'the alphabetical range of the former, I can turn to such subjects as I want, to study or amuse myself with'.[77] Another reader described how he loved spending 'murky' evenings by the fireside, 'turning over my dictionary', for the sake of amusement and learning.[78]

Preserved catalogues of private libraries further show the appeal that factual dictionaries had to many Enlightenment intellectuals in several countries, whose broad interests and participation in public debates distinguished them from the specialized scholar. Voltaire had close to sixty dictionaries,[79] while Thomas Jefferson had about forty.[80] Even in Sweden, the wealthy iron master and entomologist Charles De Geer collected some fifty dictionaries on a broad range of subjects, of which the majority were French.[81]

But not everyone was caught up by the enthusiasm.

Criticism of Dictionary Learning

Already in the first decades of the eighteenth century, scholars and professionals in various fields began expressing worries about how the rising number of dictionaries affected youths and their view of learning.[82] In 1733, the Swiss theologian and philosopher Jean-Pierre de Crousaz (1663–1750) published a critical commentary on Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire critique et historique*. The latter had first been published in 1697 but recently appeared in a fourth edition in Amsterdam and seemed to be more popular than ever. Crousaz saw himself as a progressive educa-

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[76] *Journal des savants* (1771, July), pp. 476–77: 'Sue, *Dictionnaire portatif de chirurgie'*.

[77] *Gentleman's Magazine* (1750), vol. 20, p. 247.

[78] *Gentleman's Magazine* (1788), vol. 58, pp. 29–30.

[79] *Bibliothèque de Voltaire: catalogue des livres* (Moscow: Académie des sciences de l'URSS, 1961).

[80] James Gilreath, & Douglas L. Wilson (eds), *Thomas Jefferson's Library: a Catalog with the Entries in his Own Order* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1989).

[81] Erik Gustav Liliebjörn, *Katalog öfver Leufsta bruks gamla fideikommissbibliotek: nominalkatalog upprättad år 1907* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1907).

[82] See for instance *Journal des savants* (1710, December), pp. 652–55; *Journal des savants* (1714, May), p. 340.

tor. A decade earlier, he had published an educational treatise in which he – inspired by John Locke – argued for the role of pleasure and curiosity in children's learning.[83] He even suggested that dictionaries could be a great tool to discuss subjects that children asked about.[84] In his commentary on Bayle's dictionary, however, Crousaz attacked the growing trend of regarding dictionaries as self-sufficient shortcuts to learning. He remarked how young people 'want to know everything, read everything, and understand everything at the same time'. If they are allowed to act on this impulse, they 'digest nothing, nor evaluate it as they should. They fill their memory with chaos'.[85] Many dictionaries seemed to encourage this behavior, he believed. Crousaz therefore advised against young people reading factual dictionaries without supervision. Left unguided to explore complex subjects on their own, they would jump from article to article but never take the time to understand subjects more profoundly. When confronted with contradictory views, they would quickly get confused, loose their patience, and start doubting everything instead. Dictionaries were a gateway to skepticism and atheism, rather than a thorough understanding of things.[86]

In 1754, the French academician abbé Charles Bellet (1702–1771) expressed similar views in a memoir where he asked whether the ongoing multiplication of dictionaries was for the betterment or ruin of learning.[87] Bellet agreed that good dictionaries could help readers navigate the ocean of texts, yet he was deeply critical of the hype surrounding the genre. Many dictionaries seductively promised access to knowledge that it would normally take years to acquire. Now this seductive message had led to hordes of people reading nothing but dictionaries. To nuance his critique, he divided the population into two types of readers: deep and shallow. For deep readers, who felt a great love for learning, dictionaries could be of great assistance. For shallow readers, who often were young, uneducated, lazy, or busy, dictionaries were a pitfall leading to ignorance and apathy. By providing easily available answers to veritably anything, they were disrupting readers on their path to learning by suggesting that no further research was necessary.

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[83]   Jean-Pierre Crousaz, *Traité de l'education des enfans* (La Haye: Vaillant & Prevost, 1722), pp. 11, 204, 219–20, 404.

[84]   Crousaz, p. 262, 420.

[85]   Crousaz comment was summarized in several journals, including the Amsterdam-based *Bibliothèque raisonnée des ouvrages des savants de l'Europe* (1733, January–March), p. 80: '*Dictionnaire historique & critique* de Bayle […] on veut tout savoir, tout lire, & tout apprendre en même temps: on ne peut ainsi rien digerer, ni juger de rien comme il faut. On remplit sa mémoire d'un chaos'.

[86]   *Bibliothèque raisonnée des ouvrages des savants de l'Europe* (1733, January–March), p. 80.

[87]   Charles Bellet, 'Question sur les dictionnaires', in Durey de Noinville, p. 1–26. Abbé Bellet's memoir was first presented to the Academy of Belles-Lettres in Montauban in 1754.

Moreover, readers got used to finding answers in one and the same place, rather than learning how to evaluate the opinions of several sources.[88] In short, dictionaries risked shaping a public of uncritical, unreflective, authority-bound readers, without deeper understanding of the limits of their own knowledge. On the other hand, Bellet admitted that it was better that the great mass of people acquired at least some shallow learning than stayed completely ignorant. In the long run, the progress of arts and sciences lay in the hands of a small elite of geniuses anyway, and they would never settle for reading only dictionaries.[89]

The consequences of shallow dictionary learning continued to be a much-debated subject in the coming decades. With the upsurge of the 'portable' dictionary in the second half of the century, critical remarks turned into a tsunami in the French press, as the stakes were raised from shallow learning to financial ruin and death. In 1764, an anonymous journalist complained about the flood of portable dictionaries of jurisprudence, and remarked how 'the citizens consult them, talk according to them, think themselves sufficiently informed, pass acts, sign conventions and contracts, and go to trials that ruin them completely. [...] These dangerous tools breed problems for which there are no cures'.[90]

When another dictionary of jurisprudence appeared two years later, the compiler himself – a lawyer named Joseph Renauldon – acknowledged in the preface that the dictionary genre was currently corrupting an entire generation. 'For the young people who enter law school, I warn them', he said, 'nothing is more dangerous than dictionaries'. As an experienced lawyer, he had seen how law students were so 'confident of being able to solve problems with dictionaries' that they skipped reading the original texts. Consequently, they never studied anything in a solid and consistent manner. This behavior had even spread to experienced judges, he claimed. Still – as a reviewer of the work acidly remarked – there he was, bringing another law dictionary into the world, admitting that it could still be useful, *if only people used it right*.[91]

Most thus agreed that dictionaries were useful. The problem was how they were used – and by whom. Nowhere was this as evident as in the field of medi-

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[88] Bellet, pp. 16–24.

[89] Bellet, pp. 25–26.

[90] *Journal des savants* (1764, June), p. 346: '*Dictionnaire portatif de jurisprudence* [...] les Citoyens qui les consultant, parlent d'après eux, se croyent instruits suffisamment, passent des actes, souscrivent des conventions, contractent des engagemens, & entreprennent des procès qui souvent entraînent la ruine totale de leurs fortune' [...] ces facilités dangereuses, naissent des inconvéniens auxquels il n'y a plus de remède'.

[91] *Journal des savants* (1766, April), pp. 216–17: '*Dictionnaire des fiefs & droits seigneuriaux* [...] A l'égard des jeunes gens qui entrent au Barreau, je les en avertis, rien n'est plus dangereux pour eux que les dictionnaires', 'sûr de trouver dans les Dictionnaires la solution des difficultés'.

cine. In the 1750s and -60s, several cheap, vernacular, portable medical dictionaries were printed in Paris. They typically promised to provide 'everyone' with sufficient knowledge of any disease, and access to secret remedies.[92] Soon pirated editions started popping up in other parts of France and Europe, swarming with errors, which – allegedly – lead to the death of several people.[93] In the *Gazette de santé*, a member of the medical community blamed dictionaries for contributing to increasing death rates in Paris. It is 'all those dictionaries', he sighed, 'that place medicine in the hands of everyone, and which are nothing but weapons in the hands of fools'.[94] The article was rapidly reprinted and translated in several journals, including *Stockholms lärda tidningar* in Sweden.[95] In 1768, an anonymous reader cried out his frustration in a letter to the editor of the *Journal des savants*:

> Cannot people ever realize that the true purpose of a dictionary is not to provide knowledge about the sciences, [...] it is not made to be read but to be consulted; [...] the real knowledge that belongs to the sciences, it should not be communicated in alphabetical order, and it should not be learned from dictionaries, but rather from textbooks that explicitly treat the sciences and arts by their principles and rules, where one passes methodically from the simple to the complex, from the known to the unknown.[96]

The anonymous reader's opinion was clear: the dictionary craze fundamentally challenged established conventions about how to read and learn from books.

Concluding Remarks

When explaining the skyrocketing popularity of factual dictionaries in eighteenth-century Europe, previous research has primarily pointed to the benefits of

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[92] *Journal des savants* (1758, March), pp. 187–88: '*Dictionnaire médicinal*'; *Journal des savants* (1760, May), p. 293: '*Dictionnaire portatif de santé*'.

[93] *Journal des savants* (1761, November), pp. 766–67.

[94] *Gazette de santé* (1777), n° 28 (10 July), p. 112: 'tous ces dictionnaires pour mettre la médicine à portée de tout le monde & qui sont autant d'epées qu'on met entre les mains des fous'.

[95] *Stockholms lärda tidningar* (1778), p. 606.

[96] *Journal des savants* (1768, January), p. 57: 'Un lettre sur le *Grand vocabulaire François* [...] Ne pourra-t-on jamais se persuader que le vrai but d'un dictionnaire n'est point de donner la science, mais seulement d'en faire connoître les instrumens, que le mot est son objet & non la chose, & qu'il est moins fait pour être lû que pour être consulté; [...] quant aux connoissances réelles qui constituent la science, ce n'est point par ordre alphabétique qu'on doit les communiquer, ce n'est point dans les dictionnaires qu'il faut les puiser, c'est dans les livres élémentaires, qui traitent expressément des sciences & des arts par principes & par règles, où l'on passe méthodiquement du simple au composé & du connu à l'inconnu'.

alphabetical ordering of information. In contrast, this study has focused on how contemporaries perceived and discussed the dictionary as a tool for learning. Although related to the former, it implies a different perspective. Above all, it offers another explanation for the dictionary genre's explosive appeal in the age of Enlightenment.

When eighteenth-century actors disagreed about dictionaries' role in learning, they disagreed about behaviors. It was one thing to use the dictionary as a *tool* – as a complement in the reading of other books – and quite another to use it as a *short-cut*, read in place of other books with the ambition of becoming 'learned' faster.

The critical voices repeated concerns that centuries earlier had been raised against the scholarly abuse of reference works. Their arguments were drawn from a well-established discourse on learning with roots in antiquity, which held that 'true knowledge' required long experience and disciplined, orderly study. The intellectual content of books needed to be carefully 'digested' and incorporated into the knower, in order to transform and improve his understanding. For this reason, excessive reading of books that provided answers too easily would hinder readers rather than help them to become knowing persons. Easy retrieval also risked stimulating an uncritical, hasty, sloppy, erratic way of reading, where the mind was overburdened with impressions that were never properly analyzed, understood, or remembered. Moreover, critics feared that the mishmash of conflicting opinions gathered in dictionaries would make young readers overwhelmed, confused, apathetic, skeptical, and in the worst-case scenario, atheistic. Against this background, the explosive popularity of dictionaries could indeed be seen as a threat to the very foundations of learning – as it had hitherto been conceived – since the format affected readers' behaviors.

Proponents of dictionary learning saw things from another perspective. The dictionary craze rose and flourished concurrently with a more liberal philosophy of education, favored by the growing urban middle class. This philosophy stressed the benefits of easy, general learning in a thriving culture of conversation and politeness, in which the usefulness of an individual's knowledge was measured by his or her ability to converse rather than by scholarly depth. Vernacular factual dictionaries became great resources in this context. Not only did they promise keys to the proper meaning of words, but also to provide sufficient information to make readers conversant in veritably any subject. As curiosity was reconceptualized as a natural appetite for knowledge rather than a distracting desire to be suppressed, the fragmented structure of dictionaries could be seen as particularly permissive of a new, curiosity-driven form of learning. As reviewers and readers enthusiastically pointed out, the dictionary format encouraged readers to read in whatever

order they preferred, however much or however little they liked, to form their own opinions, to browse, to learn, and to amuse themselves at the same time.

Thus, when proponents and critics of dictionary learning disagreed, they seemed to have done so for (at least) two reasons. Firstly, because they drew different conclusions about human nature and the driving forces for learning. While critics feared that the richness of opinions in dictionaries would cause confusion, proponents argued that it would produce more independent and non-dogmatic minds. While critics feared that dictionaries would make lazy readers even lazier, proponents argued that the easy access would trigger their natural curiosity. If not, they were not meant for studies anyway. In the end, the pros outweighed the cons, especially for the readers who thrived when they were allowed to pursue their curiosity freely, rather than forced to follow a predetermined route. In their own way, both sides problematized uncritical belief in authorities, but they had different ideas about what role the dictionary could play in forming a critical mind.

Secondly, proponents and critics disagreed about what knowing and learning meant, and how it could be attained. Here the dictionary debates activated much older questions. If learning was a road, how much could it be shortened without missing the goal? Was it necessary for studies to be long and laborious for the knowledge to 'take', or could it stick better if it was pleasant and easy, and adapted to readers' occasional needs? Critics commonly agreed that good dictionaries were excellent as *aids* for finding information and for refreshing one's memory. They could even agree that pleasure and curiosity made learning easier. But when it came to providing a basic education, the dictionary was not a shortcut – it was a detour. To follow a well-established order, to start with the basic principles, rules, and go from the simple to the more complex, *that was the shortcut*, because it implied taking advantage of the collective knowledge gathered by predecessors. Proponents, on the contrary, suggested that it was more efficient to look things up when needed, rather than memorizing, understanding, and 'incorporating' them far in advance, hoping that they would prove useful later. Indeed, this was the revolutionary potential of the dictionary: it allowed for readers to *know temporarily* – to inform themselves on a subject, remember it for a while, forget, and return if necessary. Doing so challenged scholarly norms associated with disciplined study and digestive reading, while simultaneously promoting a new meaning of being a 'learned' and knowing person.

Who, then, were the people expressing these conflicting views?

Proponents and critics of dictionary learning did not form two united fronts. On the whole, it is difficult to identify any clear-cut group as predominantly positive or negative. Compilers, consumers, sellers, and reviewers of dictionaries could offer both praise and critique. As we have seen, some compilers – such as the

French lawyer Renauldon – were immensely critical of how dictionaries were used in their fields, yet still believed in the genre's utility. Naturally, it is necessary to separate criticism of individual dictionaries (for being badly executed, for containing too much, too little, or heretic, provocative, erroneous, or outdated statements) from criticism of the genre, the dictionary craze as a societal phenomenon, or dictionary learning as a strategy. For instance, in several cases the confessional identity of the compiler clearly affected the content and reception of a dictionary (such as that of Pierre Bayle), but nothing suggests that attitudes – positive or negative – toward dictionary learning were contingent of confessional identities. However, it seems that the most critical voices stemmed from the well-educated and professionally well-established, who worried about the behaviors of the next generation within their fields. The strongest proponents, on the other hand, seem to have been actors deeply engaged in the new media landscape and public sphere, advocating for general education, and learning by conversing.

General opinions about the dictionary genre also changed over time, as the number of publications kept growing. Towards the end of the century, even the most liberal-minded educator could see risks with the extreme freedom that dictionaries encouraged. In the hands of philosophers, they could accomplish great things. In the hands of the lazy and uneducated, they were potentially dangerous, threatening to form a generation of imbecile dictionary readers, who ruined themselves in court, or killed someone while trying to cure them. In the end, right and wrong depended on *who* you were.

Still, it would not be entirely correct to describe conflicting attitudes toward dictionary learning as simply a clash between elite and popular culture. Dictionaries could be described as weapons in the hands of fools, but critics were generally less worried about uneducated merchants, artisans, and peasants reading dictionaries. As Bellet (and many before him) pointed out, perhaps it was better that these people acquired at least some shallow learning than stayed completely ignorant. The biggest threat was rather that already well-educated groups – judges, aristocrats, and public intellectuals – were seduced by the dictionaries' message of easy learning, and slowly abandoned established practices and ideals. In this sense, critics feared a bigger change in learning behaviors, with unknown consequences.

Two hundred and fifty years later, these fears and conflicts are still with us. The Senecan ideal of selective reading has gone extinct in the digital age. With the pressure of staying up-to-date with globally amplified research in twenty-first-century Academia, there is little room for slow, digestive, repetitive reading. We have gotten used to hasty reading, temporary knowing, and forgetting. Knowing where to find information is more important than incorporating it into oneself. Old wrongs have become the new right, or at least, a necessity to stay afloat on the

vast and ever-rising ocean of texts. It is an old struggle, yet ideas about right and wrong keep oscillating.

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