



The History of English in Ten Minutes

The Age of the Dictionary

Narrator:

With English expanding in all directions, along came a new breed of men called lexicographers, who wanted to put an end to this anarchy – a word they defined as ‘what happens when people spell words slightly differently from each other’.

One of the greatest was Doctor Johnson, whose ‘Dictionary of the English Language’ which took him 9 years to write.

It was 18 inches tall and 20 inches wide – and contained 42,773 entries – meaning that even if you couldn’t read, it was still pretty useful if you wanted to reach a high shelf.

For the first time, when people were calling you ‘a pickle herring’ (*a jack-pudding; a merry-andrew; a zany; a buffoon*), a ‘jobbernowl’ (*loggerhead; blockhead*) or a ‘fopdoodle’ (*a fool; an insignificant wretch*) – you could understand exactly what they meant – and you’d have the consolation of knowing they all used the standard spelling.

Try as he might to stop them, words kept being invented and in 1857 a new book was started which would become the Oxford English Dictionary. It took another 70 years to be finished after the first editor resigned to be an Archbishop, the second died of TB and the third was so boring that half his volunteers quit and one of the ended up in an Asylum.

It eventually appeared in 1928 and has continued to be revised ever since – proving the whole idea that you can stop people making up words is complete snuffbumble.