Summary of July 2013 Address

David Blair, on the creation of the Macquarie Dictionary – Where is English Going?

David studied English and Linguistics at Sydney University and obtained his Masters with the thesis “Early Australian Pronunciation”. His career includes Biblical Studies, The Fisher Library and New South Wales High Schools before taking on research at Macquarie University. David is on the Editorial Board of the Macquarie Dictionary. He is editor of the Pocket Macquarie and Macquarie Junior Dictionaries. He has for many years advised the ABC on usage and pronunciation of English and is a member of the ABC Standing Committee on Spoken English. He has authored several standard texts on linguistics and recently edited a book on the Current State of Australian English.

David introduced himself as a lexicographer, not a prolific and not well-known species and unlikely to be suggested by a child as being what they want to become when they grow up. David presented his talk in three parts.

1. How did we start?
David reminded us that to write a new dictionary one does not start with a blank sheet of paper and an attempt to remember all the letters starting with A. What is needed is the rights to an existing dictionary, a pair of scissors and a pot of glue. Macquarie’s story began in 1969 with a phone call from Brian Clouston, the founder of Jacaranda press in Brisbane. He declared that what the country needed was an aggressively Australian Dictionary, and asked Professor Arthur Delbridge if he was prepared to compile one. David advised that Arthur agreed and tentatively predicted it could be done in two or three years. For various reasons it was not until 1981 that the first edition saw the light of day.

To put that first edition together was indeed a matter of scissors and paste. Jacaranda had secured the rights to Paul Hamlyn’s Encyclopaedic World Dictionary (EWD), which could be then used as a base wordlist. Space above a shop in Ryde was rented and work was commenced on pulling the EWD apart. As it was the end of a school year senior students from a local high school were paid to cut out every one of the 80,000 entries and paste them onto 6x4 filing cards. While this was being done the editors were putting red pencil through those words in the EWD, which an Australian dictionary would not need. As the EWD was British, with an inexplicable Scottish and South African bias, there were plenty of those and David gave us several examples of words he was responsible for removing. David admitted that it goes against the grain, of course, for lexicographers to remove words from a dictionary; but it is necessary in order to make room for new words that will be added.

2. How did we continue?
David advised there are three concurrent processes needed, to transform the British wordlist into an Australian dictionary.

(a) Word catching – This involves listening to radio/TV, to people’s conversations and reading magazines, novels and newspapers. This process continues to the present day. David informed us of a word that no English dictionary has recorded which had just been published in Column 8 – “souffleuse”. It turned out to be a theatrical prompter. If the word continues to appear, the Macquarie and other dictionaries will need to add it to future editions. As time went on, correspondence from readers and electronic databases became more and more important. Further points from David to illustrate this were envelopes stuffed with new-word examples written on cornflake packets coming in from Alice Springs and huge databases of printed material that their programs could scan and check for words that were unrecognised.

(b) Word checking – You have to make sure that the word that you have found is not a fake or a mistake. That the word is not localised, that you have the meaning right and you have to be sure the assistant editors are concentrating. David gave numerous examples of regional newspapers with spelling mistakes, double meaning words and phrases and setting traps for editors e.g. coup de grace – lawnmower.
(c) let one person make the decision as to whether a word is to go in, remain in or be removed. David suggests that you have to spread the expertise but in the end you have to stop the natter. A technique for the Macquarie Editorial Board is to permit each member to have one word in the dictionary even when all other members wanted it dropped. David’s word was *omphaloskepsis* – “the art of contemplating one’s navel”.

3. What have we got?
David indicated that what we do not have is a Bible. A good dictionary is just an up-to-date record of how educated people are using the words of the language, designed to help us understand how a word is used and pronounced, which we can use to help us to avoid embarrassing gaffes. So a dictionary is not magic, any more than words are magic. For David it is true that words can be powerful in their effect, and it’s hard to remain impervious to them. David gave examples of the admen and their use of words to represent a product and it is not only in primitive societies that the knowledge of a person’s true name gives power. It is easy to slip into believing that something only exists if it has a name e.g. it’s much more satisfactory to learn from a doctor that we have a *virus* than to be told merely that we have something unspecified that's going around at this time of the year.

David concluded by reminding us of the lessons we can learn from his presentation – (i) don’t take dictionaries too seriously. They are a useful resource that are worth learning to use, but they are not God’s word; (ii) Do keep an eye on words- both your own, to make sure they say what you mean; and those of others*, to make sure you are not being manipulated; and (iii) Watch your vocabulary. The bloke behind you might be a lexicographer, taking notes.

Questions from members, who raised many good points including impact of “texting”, pronunciation at the ABC, foreign words, recent use of “misogyny” and sports presenters, brought forth interesting responses.

John Slater’s vote of thanks on David’s talk reminded him of his own memories of living in the Yorkshire Dales and of not being understood. John acknowledged that David had presented both an interesting and enjoyable subject and he thanked him for taking the time to come and talk to us.