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In memoriam Noel Osselton

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OBITUARY



In Memoriam Noel Osselton (1927–2024)

Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade 

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In 1991, we published *Language: Usage and Description*, a book subtitled “Studies presented to N.E. Osselton on the occasion of his retirement”.¹ “We” were Noel’s colleagues and former colleagues from the universities of Newcastle upon Tyne in Great Britain and Leiden in The Netherlands. At both universities he had consecutively occupied the Chair of English Language, first in Leiden for fourteen years from 1969 onwards and subsequently in Newcastle, until his retirement eight years later. The biographical note at the start of the book, written by John Frankis (Newcastle) and Robin Smith (Leiden), ends with the words: “we wish [him] long and fruitful years of retirement”.² Sadly though, this period has now come to an end, as a few months ago a message arrived from his daughters that Noel had died peacefully and in their presence on 1 November at the great age of 97.

Long and fruitful his retirement has certainly been, as the list of publications compiled to supplement the inventory in his Festschrift of 1991 demonstrates (see Appendix). And to assess the impact of his work I checked references to his publications in articles in the two journals in which he published most, *English Studies* and the *International Journal of Lexicography*. References abound in my own work on Late Modern English usage, particularly spelling, since halfway through the 1980s Noel had developed the important concept of a dual spelling system for eighteenth-century English, according to which private spelling differed significantly and systematically from that found in print since around 1700. The concept is referred to in as many as three papers in the proceedings of the 21st International Conference on English Historical Linguistics,³ which was held in Leiden in 2021 (online, due to the Covid pandemic) and of which Noel had been one of the founding fathers during the late 1970s. Most of the references I found in the two journals analysed, however, are to Noel’s subsequent lexicographical work, published throughout the period of his official retirement from the University of Newcastle. In 2022, for instance, Juhani Norri, with as many as 37 hits when I searched the article for “Osselton”, notes that “Osselton’s calls for more consistent terminology in the labelling of old words, presented several decades ago, are still valid”.⁴ And Noel’s work will continue to be cited, as an advance reading of Joan Beal’s revised entry of the

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¹Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Frankis, eds., *Language*.

²Frankis and Smith, “Noel Osselton,” 4.

³Caon et al., *Unlocking the History of English*.

⁴Norri, “Temporal Labels and Specifications in Monolingual English Dictionaries,” abstract.

lexicographer Henry Cockeram (fl. 1623–1658) for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* showed.⁵

Noel not only continued to attend conferences or be invited to contribute to collections of papers on matters lexicographical as the overview below demonstrates, he also regularly reviewed books published in his field. Fifteen years ago he was listed as a “top contributor” to the *International Journal of Lexicography*, occupying fifth place in the league table.⁶ His own dictionary work for the English–Dutch, Dutch–English dictionaries originally published by Wolters but “now Koenen” as he informed me in a letter, continued until well into the early 2000s. With a reference to Samuel Johnson’s famous dictionary of 1755, he continued in the same letter: “Dictionary work is commonly thought of as drudgey, but I find it distinctly therapeutic: gently constructive, you can do it at odd moments whenever you please, forget all about it, and resume later exactly as you left off; and (like life) it goes on more or less for ever” (29 January 2004). For Noel, academic life did go on, though obviously not quite for ever: his last published article, in as far as I’ve managed to trace them,⁷ dates from 2018. He assessed book manuscripts for Oxford University Press and continued to offer comments and advice on my own work, as he had done in much earlier times as my PhD supervisor. New ideas for research or projects he was working on also appear in the letters, such as on the Dutch printer and lexicographer “Francois Halma’s [(1653–1722)] highly unorthodox use of metalanguage in his French–Dutch dictionary”. As a preliminary title for the article he suggested ‘A bilingual dictionary for a bilingual society’. “We’ll see,” he added. Another project he mentioned was something he had done “some decades ago”, in the course of which he had carried out “a pretty complete survey of all the spelling rules set out in English grammars and spelling books in the 16th to the 18th century, or those I could lay my hands on, anyway”. Such projects and ideas now constitute part of his academic legacy.

Following the decease of his much beloved wife Hanneke, with whom he published one of his earlier articles in *English Studies* more than sixty years ago,⁸ he passed his time dining once a week in College, in Durham where he lived (“keeps you in touch with University politics”) and doing volunteer work in the botanical garden there. “For the rest,” he wrote in his last full letter to me of 9 August 2018, “I give my time to the research Library on Palace Green (beside the cathedral) – well stocked with fine seventeenth and eighteenth-century volumes from the libraries of former (and indecently wealthy) bishops of Durham (all the best classical and vernacular dictionaries – could be worse!)”. Could be worse, indeed. One can’t help thinking that this must have felt like time well and enjoyably spent for this long-lived and continually active scholar. “He was a good man,” two former colleagues commented independently of each other when I told them that Noel had died. And that is what he was: as a teacher and former supervisor, as I gratefully acknowledged when interviewed about my own academic career,⁹ and as a scholar and friend.

⁵Beal, “Cockeram, Henry (fl. 1623–1658).”

⁶de Schryver, “Bibliometrics in Lexicography.”

⁷With thanks for further additions to Joan Beal, Carol Percy and Jack Lynch.

⁸Osselton and Osselton-Bleeker, “The Plural Attributive in Contemporary English.”

⁹Percy, “Interview with Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade,” *passim*.

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Appendix. Noel Osselton's additional publications since the bibliographical account in his Festschrift of 1991:

- 1990 English Lexicography from the Beginning up to and Including Johnson. In F.J. Hausmann, O. Reichmann, H.E. Wiegand and L. Zgusta (eds.), *Wörterbücher. Ein internationales Handbuch zur Lexicographie/Dictionaries. An International Encyclopedia of Lexicography/Dictionnaires. Encyclopédie internationale de lexicographie*. Volume 2. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter. 1943–1953.
- 1990 Unsuccessful Saywhats. Review of Jürgen Schäfer, *Early Modern English Lexicography*, 2 Volumes. Oxford: Clarendon Press. *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4571, 9 November 1990. p. 1201.
- 1991 Review of Gabriele Stein, 1985, *The English Dictionary before Cawdrey*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag. *International Journal of Lexicography* 4/4, 316–318.
- 1993 Review of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, 1989, prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 20 volumes. *International Journal of Lexicography* 6/2, 124–131.
- 1994 Dr Johnson and the Spelling of Dispatch, *International Journal of Lexicography* 7/4, 307–310.
- 1994 Dialect in General Dictionaries. In Karl Hyltdgaard-Jensen and Viggo Hjernager Pedersen (eds.), *Symposium on Lexicography VI*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag. 103–114.
- 1995 *Chosen Words: Past and Present Problems for Dictionary Makers*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- 1996 Authenticating the Vocabulary: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Lexicographical Practice. *Lexikos* 6: 215–232.
- 1997 Nicholas Rowe and the Glossing of Shakespeare. In J. Batchelor, T. Cain and C. Lamont (eds.), *Shakespearean Continuities*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 277–289.

- 1997 Review of Jonathan Green, *Chasing the Sun. Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries they Made*, London: Jonathan Cape. *European Journal of English Studies* 1/2, 243–245.
- 1998 English Specialized Lexicography in the Late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. In *Fachsprachen, Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft / Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science [HSK]*, Volume 14/2. 2458–2465. Reprinted in Roderick McConchie (ed.), *Ashgate Critical Essays on Early English Lexicographers*. Volume 3: *The Sixteenth Century*. 2017. Farnham etc.: Ashgate.
- 1998 Reprint of: Informal Spelling Systems in Early Modern English: 1500–1800 (1984). In Mats Rydén, Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Merja Kytö (eds.), *A Reader in Early Modern English*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. 33–45.
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- 1998 Review of Michael Proffitt (ed.), *Oxford English Dictionary Additions Series*. Volume 3. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. *International Journal of Lexicography* 11/3, 245–247.
- 2000 Murray and his European Counterparts. In Lynda Mugglestone (ed.), *Lexicography and the OED. Pioneers in the Untrodden Forest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 59–76.
- 2002 Review of *Caught in the Web of Words. James A. H. Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary* (pb edition, 2001). *International Journal of Lexicography* 15/4, 332–333.
- 2003 Bishop Lowth Converted: An English Grammar for Catholics in the Late Eighteenth Century. *English Studies* 84/5, 448–52.
- 2004 Review of Bill Ramson, *Lexical Images. The Story of the Australian National Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2002. *International Journal of Lexicography* 17/1, 89–90.
- 2005 Review of Samuel Johnson. *A Dictionary of the English Language*. London, 1755. CD-ROM. Oakland, Ca: The Warnock Library. *International Journal of Lexicography* 18/4, 546–548.
- 2005 Hyphenated Compounds in Johnson's *Dictionary*. In Jack Lynch and Anne McDermott (eds.), *Anniversary Essays on Johnson's Dictionary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 160–174.
- 2006 Usage Guidance in Early Dictionaries of English, *International Journal of Lexicography* 19/1, 99–105.
- 2007 Innovation and Continuity in English Learners' Dictionaries: The Single-Clause when-Definition. *International Journal of Lexicography* 20/4, 93–99.
- 2007 Alphabet Fatigue and Compiling Consistency in Early English Dictionaries. In John Considine and Giovanni Iamartino (eds.), *Words and Dictionaries from the British Isles in Historical Perspective*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing. 81–90.
- 2008 The *Glossographia Anglicana Nova* (1707, 1719) and the Royal Society. In Marijke Mooijaart and Marijke van der Wal (eds.), *Yesterday's Words. Contemporary, Current and Future Lexicography*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 88–95.
- 2009 The Early Development of the English Monolingual Dictionary (Seventeenth and early Eighteenth Centuries). In A.P. Cowie (ed.), *The Oxford History of English Lexicography*. Volume 1. *General-Purpose Dictionaries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 131–154.
- 2010 Review of Giovanni Iamartino and Robert DeMaria (eds.), *Samuel Johnson's "Dictionary" and the Eighteenth-Century World of Words* (2006). *The Age of Johnson* 20, 339–347.
- 2017 Reprint of Hakluyt's *Language* (1974). In D.B. Quinn (ed.), *The Hakluyt Handbook*. Volume 1. London: The Hakluyt Society. 23–30.
- 2018 Quotation and Example in Johnson's *Abridged Dictionary* (1756–78), *International Journal of Lexicography* 31/4, 475–484.
- 2020 Reprint of: Thematic Genitives (1988). In D. Nixon and J. Honey (eds.), *An Historic Tongue. Studies in English Linguistics in Memory of Barbara Strang*. Reprinted 2020. London: Routledge. 138–144.