Wired Word Sources

By David Isaacson,
Professor & Humanities Librarian

I have a mad passion for dictionaries and other word books. One of the
great pleasures of being a reference librarian is the opportunity to browse,
skim, and sometimes even get lost in the scores of dictionaries available in the
Central Reference Department, Waldo Library. But now I can satisfy some of my
word lust without moving from my computer. The World Wide Web currently
provides instant access to hundreds of good, scores of excellent, and a handful of
superlative dictionaries, thesauri, and glossaries for free at http://www.yourdic-
tionary.com. This Web site does not sup-
plant a good collection of print
dictionaries, but it does offer a convenient supplement to such a collection. If you
happen to have a computer handy while you read this, you might want to open
yourdictionary.com as you continue to read. If not, come along for the ride any-
way. If you want virtually instant (and
instantly virtual) access to a lot of useful word information, this Web site is a good
starting point.

For the devotee of clean and neat,
http://www.yourdictionary.com is a graphi-
cally busy Web page, but not overwhelm-
ingly so. I like the way the design guides the
eyes to (more or less) sensible choices. Keep in mind this page seems designed—
as so many Web pages are—for quick lookups first. Traditional book-oriented
people like me, who often choose to
pause and reflect, can make intelligent choices at leisure if we want to. But if you
are in a hurry—the assumption behind many general interest Web pages—the
first thing your eyes will see at the upper
middle of the screen is a box labeled
Quick Lookup (English) inviting you to
type in a word. Right below this box is
another one labeled Thesaurus, which
also invites you to type in a word.

I do have an objection to the Thesaurus
option being featured so prominently. Some people—indeed, in my experience,
far too many—don’t use book thesauri intelligently (An alternative plural is the
word ‘thesauruses,’ but I prefer thesauri
because it’s shorter and much less of a
tongue-twister. I dare you to say ‘thes-
auruses’ fast over and over.) Most the-
sauri—in print or online—don’t provide
definitions, just lists of somewhat similar
words. This is dangerous for naive users.
I was such a chap in high school. I sought
to impress a speech teacher with my
enlarged vocabulary. So I decided that
since Roget’s International Thesaurus listed
‘heinous’ as one of the synonyms for
‘bad,’ I could just use it to substitute for
‘bad’ in a sentence like: “They had a very
heinous time trying to fix the flat tire.”
The teacher, as well as all my classmates,
quite understandably laughed at my
choice. To tell the truth, Miss Labb
tittered, but the students guffawed. They
were not being cruel; they taught me a
lesson. I have treated Roget’s gingerly ever since.

Taking ‘heinous’ as an example, the
Quick Lookup feature of yourdic-
tionary.com, which leads the user to an
online version of Merriam-Webster’s
Collegiate Dictionary, provides a handy,
conscise entry containing what the average
user wants to know: spelling, pronuncia-
tion, origin, and meaning. Mind you, this
is a medium-sized dictionary either in
print or online; it does not have the depth
and detail of one of the unabridged dic-
tionaries. (If you are connected to WMU’s
server, you can have online access to the
entire Oxford English Dictionary for free if
you are a registered student, staff, or fac-
ulty member. But that is the subject of another article.) Some online dictionaries
have a built-in audiofile—usually with a
rather cultured computer voice enunciating
very carefully to let you hear how a
word should sound—but this Web site
lacks that feature.

I like the no-nonsense definition of
heinous: “hateful or shockingly evil: ABOMINABLE.” Not quite the right
word, I think you will agree, for my 1957
speech about changing a tire. By the way,
when I entered the word ‘bad’ in the
Merriam-Webster online Thesaurus box I
didn’t get heinous as a synonym. I did get
a lot of other words, such as: “disgusting,
fool, nauseating, noisome, noxious, offen-
sive, repulsive, sickening; abhorrent, hate-
ful, loathsome, obnoxious; uneasy;
thankless, ungrateful; distasteful, distress-
ing, sticky; ungracious, unhandsome.” I
don’t recommend using all these syn-
onyms at once, unless you are Anthony
Hopkins.

Fortunately, yourdictionary.com offers
the user much more than this one dictio-
nary and thesaurus. Many word process-
ing programs offer at least mini-
dictionaries and thesauri. What makes
this site useful to someone who actually
has a discrete question to answer are the
numerous choices of many more special-
ized word sites. On the left column of the
main screen, for instance, we are
prompted to choose among what are
claimed to be the ten top language dictio-
naries in this order: Spanish, French,
German, Japanese, Chinese, Hindi,
Arabic, Russian, Thai, Portuguese and
260 more. Indeed, click on “more” and
the next screen has a linked listing from
A benaki to Zulu. What’s even more
amazing is that if you open Abenaki, it
begins with links to several Algonquin
dictionaries followed by other Native
American dictionaries classed by tribes
such as the Cheyenne, Cree, Mohawk,
Ojibwe, etc. The site claims to have the
most comprehensive links to the lan-
guage dictionaries of the world and is
constantly increasing. In the 3 to 4 months
between the writing of this article and the
submission of the proof, 30 languages
were added to the list noted as “more.”
However, since the compilers calculate
that there are some 1,000 languages that
are written out of over 6,800 spoken, they
still have over two-thirds of the written
languages to add to their extensive bibli-
ofraphy. They also provide a reference
link to another key site www.worldlan-
guages.com that provides additional access
to thousands of resources.

Another easy thread from this Web
to the page is the category of Specialty

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Dictionaries, which not only includes rather familiar specialties like law, business, computing, genealogy, humor, and sports, but 80 more! (The exclamation mark is used on the Web page, but I'm impressed too!). One of these categories, 'Chocolate,' leads me to four separate dictionaries. These are, indeed, quite specialized dictionaries. For instance, it is only the Mexican Chocolate glossary by Elaine Gonzalez that defines: 'Cacao Lavado' as "Washed (but not fermented) cacao beans". Still another section of yourdictionary.com (found on the lower right of the main screen, and also at the foot of the screen) guides us to 'Nyms & Such where the category of 'Multilingual' provides online-bookcase of dozens of bilingual or multilingual sources. (This is only one of several headings found under 'Nyms & Such such as "Thesaurus," "Abbreviations," "Grammar Guides," and others that add even more breadth to this Web site). The multilingual sources are further arranged by categories such as 'General,' 'Education,' 'Film,' 'Leather,' and 'Water.' I chose a question that took me hours to answer a few years ago before online dictionaries existed, or, at least, before I was in the habit of using them: What are the French and Spanish terms for gesundheit? Even with this feature, it took me a long time to conclude that you really can't translate this German word into either French or Spanish. I would argue you really couldn't translate it into English, either, although it has become a very common loanword in English. "God bless you" or "Bless you," or the literal "Good health" are rough synonyms in English for gesundheit, but they don't have the same feel. A good translation ought to have the same connotation, not just denotation, of the original source. (It is impossible to sneeze and say gesundheit simultaneously.)

This multilingual site is intelligent enough, however, to recognize the important difference between merely searching for a somewhat equivalent word in one language in a dictionary of another language. So we are directed to another category. "Translate between European languages." I am very happy to report that this translation site decided that the "English" gesundheit translates into both French and Spanish as gesundheit. But guess what—and I am not making this up," as Dave Barry says—the "English" word gesundheit translates into German as health!

My response to this seemingly bizarre translation of an English-German word back into English instead of German leads me to say "go figure." Which, in turn, led me on a trek to find "go figure." After about 20 minutes of searching all manner of slang and new word sources from yourdictionary.com, I finally found a definition of "go figure." I rather like it: "Invitation to try and explain the sense behind the apparently bizarre statement or action of a third party." (Why third, rather than second party, though?) This comes from something called "The Plain Talk Finder." It would take far too much space to list all the clicks it took me to get to this definition, but persistence finally paid off. It figures.

I answered another reference question with yourdictionary.com that I might not have found by the conventional procedure of riffling through print dictionaries. The question was for an architectural meaning of the word 'oratorio.' Even the venerable Oxford English Dictionary only told me an archaic meaning of this usually musical term could mean pulpuit. That's not what the questioner had in mind. But, guess what? This was an old as well as an obscure word, I chose Webster's New World Dictionary, the 1928 edition. I have used the facsimile print edition of this source before, and would, eventually, have found this book again, but yourdictionary.com prompted me to choose this source early rather than later. That is one of the very nicest features about well-designed Web sites: they prompt you to make choices you might not otherwise think of on your own. (Turn this around and a Web site can prompt you to make all sorts of choices you may not have wanted to make, which fuels the conservative objections to all manner of objectionable matter on Web sites.)

I am not going to take more space to tell you all the word puzzles and games this unique site beckons you to get lost in. I do not have the energy to play mere word games with this site; it takes too much time and effort just to use it for conventional reference work. But it turns out that this work is great intellectual play too. Just take it from me: you can have words with this site for many hours. I did not use up company time to test this, but I know some folks, who must remain nameless, who might be so tempted.

My conclusion about www.yourdictionary.com is similar to my evaluation of other Web sites like this one. You never know how useful such a site is until you try it. Some of my sample searches were faster, but were not necessarily more accurate than similar searches in printed dictionaries, which I can reach as quickly by walking a few paces from my office as I can by typing on a keyboard. I would recommend you try this site for yourself. If you get stuck finding a word, you can still resort to seeing me in person or at two of my virtual avatars—my answering machine (616-387-5182) or e-mail david.isaacson@wmich.edu.

Friends' Activities

The Friends of the University Libraries had an active autumnal season beginning with a special letter insert in the Fall 2001 issue of Gatherings written by Friends' President Richard Brewer. Dr. Brewer's letter to all who supported the mailing encouraged membership support of WMU's Friends of the University Libraries. The Friends organization uses its membership dues to purchase items that fall outside of the normal library budget including special equipment, rare works, and other unique needs of the Libraries. Brewer also noted that the Friends sponsored several activities such as presentations and talks for the Friends that are of "general interest to people who are bookish, educated, or intellectual, or all three." For those who misplaced the mailing, please contact Bettina Meyer, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5080.

Preceding the publication of the Fall issue of Gatherings, one of the "general interest" talks was presented by Albert A. Bell, Jr., Professor of History at Hope College. Dr. Bell spoke on the topic of "Publishing a Mystery Today and Publishing: A Mystery Today" on October 12, 2001 at 4:00 in the Meader Rare Book Room, Waldo Library. Speaker and Author Bell amusingly outlined his experiences with publishing outside of the traditional scholarly venue. (His vitae cites mainstays of the academic reference collection such as Exploring the New Testament World: An Illustrated Guide to the World of Jesus & the First Christians (Thomas Nelson, 1988) and Resources in Ancient Philosophy: An Annotated Bibliography of Scholarship in English, 1965-1989 (Sarecsource Press, 1991).

Professor Bell states that he has "loved writing since I was in high school... I consider myself more of a story-teller than a literary artist... I try to write books that I would enjoy reading." For more about his life, go to http://www.albertbell.com, where you can also read reviews and write him about (or order) his books. Bell published his first article in 1972, and began his fiction career in the 1980s. He moved from historical fiction to mystery stories, and, of course, ran into the frustrations of attempting to be published as a first-time novelist. After multiple rejections, he joined other avant garde authors who are "self published," which, he insists, is the "way to go." As massive conglomerates absorb independent publishing companies, fewer new authors are able to break through the barriers and be published. Therefore, Albert Bell and others have found that working with online publishers such as iUniverse permits them to produce works that, in turn, can be marketed and sold.