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.yourdictionary.com. This Web site does not supplant 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 anyway. 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 graphically busy Web page, but not overwhelmingly 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—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 ‘thesauruses’ fast over and over.) Most thesauri—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 yourdictionary.com, which leads the user to an online version of Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, provides a handy, concise entry containing what the average user wants to know: spelling, pronunciation, 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 dictionaries. (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 faculty 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: “hatefully 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, foul, nauseating, noisome,noxious, offensive, repulsive, sickening; abhorrent, hateful, loathsome, obnoxious; uneasy; thankless, ungrateful, distasteful, distressing, sticky; ungracious, unhandsome.” I don’t recommend using all these synonyms at once, unless you are Anthony Hopkins.

Fortunately, yourdictionary.com offers the user much more than this one dictionary and thesaurus. Many word processing programs offer at least mini-dictionaries and thesauri. What makes this site useful to someone who actually has a discrete question to answer is the numerous choices of many more specialized 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 dictionaries 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 Abenaki 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 language 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 bibliography. They also provide a reference link to another key site www.worldlanguages.com that provides additional access to thousands of resources.

Another easy thread from this Web page is the category of Specialty...
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 look-ups in dozens of bilingual or multilingual sources. (This is only one of several headings found under 'Nyms & Such such as "Thesauri," "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 quite 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 Phrase 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 pulpit. 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.isaacs@michigan.edu.