Dictionaries, another Netscape?

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The article “The Coming Boom in English Lexicography: Some Thoughts about the World Wide Web (1)”, by my friend, Charles M. Levine, is a very nice work. I will add one small item, then expand upon it: it is not exactly true that Microsoft created their own dictionary to avoid paying royalties to Houghton Mifflin. The royalty issue was part of it, but they also wanted more control over the database. The real game for Microsoft is using lexical databases within computer algorithms, as in natural-language processing. No dictionary on the market today is built for that application. In other words, Microsoft now views lexical databases as an aspect of strategic technology, not simply an aspect of marketing. In this respect, Microsoft cares more about their dictionary than about their encyclopedia.

I do not disagree with Levine’s comment on how long the “old” dictionary business will be around. Who knows? It’s also not important. In the absence of growth, the old business will be strained for capital, which will beget smaller investments, which will in turn hasten the decline. In the short term, this will redound to the benefit of market leaders, such as Merriam-Webster and Oxford University Press, yet people underestimate what bundling with Windows can mean. There used to be – used to be – a company called FTP Software that created a utility that linked a PC to the Internet. Now that utility’s clone is built into Windows. Buy any FTP stock lately?

I can add that my grim vision (from a reference publisher’s point of view) of Microsoft originated in the 1980s, when I first got involved with dictionaries as the
First, legacy publishers such as OUP will continue to muddle along, with growth becoming harder to come by except at the expense of their smaller and declining rivals; eventually they will stop publishing for broad markets altogether and the remaining activity will be to focus on the scraps Microsoft leaves on the floor.

Second, Microsoft will create what I will call the Mainstream Dictionary, a good-enough product for most people most of the time. Intellectuals will hate it, but there are not enough of them to matter. Arguably, Microsoft’s Encarta Dictionary, a better product than I would have anticipated, is version 1.0 of the Mainstream Dictionary. One of the surprising things that Microsoft did in the creation of Encarta was to go out and hire some exceptional lexicographers, perhaps under the guidance of their hardcopy publishing partner, Bloomsbury Press, in the UK. I say “surprising” because Microsoft’s willful ignorance of anything to do with cultural material is astounding. In the USA, Anne H. Soukhanov directed a big part of the operation; in the UK, Faye Carney apparently played a similar role. Both are exceptionally knowledgeable dictionary-makers and both were trained by Merriam, by the way; Carney also worked at Oxford, which has a less rigorous but broader program), but they are not business strategists. The source of Microsoft’s dictionary strategy lies elsewhere, perhaps in the company’s DNA. Microsoft’s competitors should not be distracted by these personnel appointments, as it is not lexicography that can save them but strategy.

Third, an entirely new class of lexical applications will emerge, for which there is no apparent winner at this time, that will be based on machines talking to machines, rather than having dictionaries created for human use. This is important. Nearly all dictionaries nowadays are built with people in mind. And how could it be otherwise, one might ask. But consider what is going on when you want to talk to your car or computer. Voice recognition technology (and its less sophisticated sister, text-to-speech synthesis) requires dictionaries that are built into it, inaccessible to human eyes and ears. Comparably, search technology uses lexical products to find items within huge databases. Who will be the dictionary publishers for such applications? Companies like AT&T, Microsoft, Lucent, and Hewlett Packard. Good-bye, Oxford and Merriam. It was nice to know you, but at some point we all have to move on.