"*A good definition is like a good poem: beautiful and worthwhile in itself*"

Interview with lexistar Erin McKean

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Before starting Wordnik[1], Erin McKean[2] was Editor-in-chief for American Dictionaries at Oxford University Press[3]. She is the Editor of the irregularly-published recreational-linguistics journal *VERBATIM: The Language Quarterly*[4], and the author of *Weird and Wonderful Words*[5], *More Weird and Wonderful Words*[6], *Totally Weird and Wonderful Words*[7], and *That's Amore*[8] (also about words), as well as of the novel *The Secret Lives of Dresses*[9]. She has served on the Board of the Dictionary Society of North America[10] and on the Editorial Board for its journal, *Dictionaries*[11], as well as on the Editorial Board for the journal of the American Dialect Society[12], *American Speech*[13]. She also serves on the Advisory Boards of the Credo Reference[14] and of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*[15]. She has an A.B./A.M. in linguistics from the University of Chicago. She rants about dresses on her blog (A Dress A Day[16], listed as one of the top fifty online fashion blogs by Fashion IQ), and is disconcertingly bad at Scrabble (but surprisingly good at roller-skating). She can be reached at erin@wordnik.com.

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[1] http://www.wordnik.com/
[2] See also http://www.crunchbase.com/person/erin-mckean
[3] http://global.oup.com/?cc=it
[4] http://www.verbatimmag.com/
[5] McKean, E., (Ed.), *Weird and Wonderful Words*, Oxford University Press, 2003.
[6] McKean, E., (Ed.), *More Weird and Wonderful Words*, Oxford University Press, 2003.
[7] McKean, E., (Ed.), *Totally Weird and Wonderful Words*, Oxford University Press, 2006.
[8] McKean, E., *That's Amore*, Walker Company, 2007.
[9] McKean, E., *The Secret Lives of Dresses*, Grand Central Publishing, 2011.
[10] http://www.dictionarysociety.com/
[11] http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/dictionaries/
[12] http://www.americandialect.org/
[13] http://www.dukeupress.edu/Catalog/ViewProduct.php?productid=45601
[14] http://corp.credoreference.com/
[15] http://dare.wisc.edu/
[16] http://www.dressaday.com/

Wordnik

Wordnik is a blend of online dictionary genres, involving a collaborative community-driven component built around a "professional" core. User-generated content is encouraged here, but in a "guided" way, with less emphasis on user-created definitions than usual in collaborative projects. Wordnik embeds content from other datasets: Twitter and Flickr are being tapped for real-time quotes and relevant images, respectively. The service employs modern data mining techniques to identify quotes of the self-defining and exemplar types in corpora. Overall, there is less reliance on traditional definitions and the emphasis is shifted to quotes[17].

When and why did you decide to abandon "traditional" lexicography and simply enjoy words?

When I was working on print dictionaries, I was lucky enough to have a lot of opportunities to talk to the people who actually used them… but I found myself spending more time explaining why the word they were interested in wasn't in the dictionary (or wasn't updated, or wasn't fully explained) than I did talking about what really interested them. So I figured that maybe print dictionaries were the wrong way to help people who loved words and wanted to have more of them.

Selecting words for a dictionary will never be an exact science, but you gave a radical solution to the problem. With the slogan "All the Words", you welcome new words without asking too many questions… So, is there enough room to welcome all of them?

Oh yes – we have plenty of space for all the words! Space isn't the problem. The real question is: how can we give you useful information about all of the words? That's trickier. And what is useful is different for different people. For some words, people really want a precise definition – say, scientific and technical words. What exactly is a "yottabyte"? For others, people want to know how the word fits into the system of English: what's the relationship between "very," "terribly", "quite", and "awfully"? But for some words, it's just enough to know it exists, such as "awesomepants".

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[17] Fuertes-Olivera, P. A., Bergenholtz, H., (Eds.), *e-Lexicography: The Internet, Digital Initiatives and Lexicography*, Publishing, 2011.

With Wordnik, you definitely said good-bye to validation. As you say: "If you love a word, use it. That makes it real". Is it enough to make it a word? The risk is that it could be frustrating even only trying to monitor them…

Yes, if I were trying to list all the words I would be very frustrated! But luckily now most of my work is focused one level up: how can I set processes in place that will add relevant data to as many individual words as possible? Sometimes that's figuring out ways to add good sentences; sometimes that's figuring out ways to make it easy and fun for human beings to make lists themselves.

Crowdsourcing is central and once a word is included in Wordnik, its clever software "populates" the entry by bringing in examples from its corpus, from the Web, and from the Twittersphere, and (when appropriate) grabbing images from Flickr. Will the lexicographer be replaced by software? Is the definition, patiently crafted by a lexicographer, doomed to extinction?

I think a good definition is like a good poem: beautiful and worthwhile in itself. But not every subject gets a poem, and not every word needs a definition. Definitions are still helpful when space is limited, but when you limit your knowledge of a word to just the definition, you limit your understanding as well.

Wordnik is compatible with the priorities and expectations of the Web users, especially digital natives: if a word is used, people expect to find it in their online dictionary. What contributions are you bringing to lexicography by your new approach? Do you officially state that speed and convenience getting a useful answer now are more important than authority? Or is it simply a matter of enjoyment of language for its own sake?

With Wordnik, I hope that we are encouraging people to develop their own critical thinking skills, which are essential for being a successful digital native. Wordnik has no authority other than the authority it inherits from the data it shows: if a word has a wonderful example from the Wall Street Journal, for instance, then the authority for the use of that word isn't Wordnik, it's the WSJ. And if there is a well-reasoned, well-written comment from a Wordnik user on a word, you can go and check out that user's profile page (if it's

public) and base your acceptance of that comment on your assessment of that user's trustworthiness. And even if there's no data for a word, you can always check the "statistics" at the bottom of the page, and see how many other people have looked up the same word! If it's in the thousands, it's probably a relatively decent word. If it's in the single digits, well… users should always, always consider the source for anything they find online, and make judgments accordingly.

In my opinion, those asserting that "if we are worrying less about control and more about description, then we can think of the English language as being this beautiful mobile" are extremist descriptivists! How do you describe your approach to lexicography?

I think most lexicographers are what I call "practical descriptivists". We want to show as much data as possible about as many words as possible. And that data should really include information about whether other people consider a word appropriate, suitable, of some literary merit – all the opinions of the prescriptivists, in fact! But they should be presented as "data about opinions" and not as incontrovertible fact.

I can't resist asking you how IATE[18] would be if powered by Wordnik.

IATE is a huge effort … just the thought of having data in so many different languages makes my head spin! Wordnik is really limited to English. I encourage people to "steal" Wordnik-like ideas, though – show more data, make it easy for users to contribute, and (most of all) have fun! Language is fun and we should keep it that way.

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[18] http://iate.europa.eu/iatediff/switchLang.do?success=mainPage&lang=it

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