Introduction: The Folklore Buried in Dictionaries

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Beyond folklore archives and folklore monographs, and beyond the pages of dedicated journals such as *Folklore* itself, there are a variety of other, less obvious, sources where folklore data can be found. One such source is dictionaries. By 'dictionary' we do not mean 'dictionaries of folklore', such the famous *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (Leach 1949-50), Simpson and Roud's *Dictionary of English Folklore* (2000), or the dictionary of the *Kalevala* (Turunen 1981). What we have in view are ordinary common-or-garden linguistic dictionaries. Recently, one of us put together an edited collection—*Dictionaries as Sources of Folklore Data* (Roper 2020a)—in order to focus attention on this under-recognized source of data, as well as on some of the methodological issues involved in making use of that special class of data. This special issue of *Folklore* aims to look again at some of the dictionaries examined there, to look at other dictionaries rich in cultural data and particularly in oral traditions, and to investigate in greater depth some of the issues the book raised.

We might begin with the observation that it is far from a given that dictionaries should be repositories for oral traditions. When, for example, Samuel Johnson was compiling his dictionary, he took as its basis an existing written work, Nathan Bailey's 1730 *Dictionarium Britannicum*, into whose pages he interleaved additions which, according to his friend Sir John Hawkins, 'he collected by incessant reading the best authors in our language' (McDermott 2005). The phrase 'examples from the best writers' formed part of the explanatory title of his *Dictionary*, and elsewhere in the work he referred to them as his 'authorities' (Johnson 1755, 13). Authority resided in authorship, in the written word; indeed, Johnson's *Dictionary* formed the most substantial anthology of English literature that had yet been published. His preference for literary over oral sources is comprehensible given that the model for dictionaries of European vernacular languages, as they developed in the early modern period, were medieval glossaries of ancient Latin and Greek—that is, of languages whose contemporary use was largely restricted to the page.

Nevertheless, Johnson's decidedly literary dictionary contains citations from ballads and entries on supernatural figures (Roper 2020c, 20). Other English lexicographers, including some of Johnson's predecessors, were more enthusiastic about the spoken, as opposed to the written, language (Wood 1998, 114). A century

earlier, John Evelyn's advice on dictionary-making to the Royal Society's 1664 committee to improve the English language and rid it of foreign and courtly 'corruption' was that

> it would be enquir'd what particular Dialects, Idiomes, and Proverbs were in use in every several Country of England, for the Words of the present age being properly the *Vernacula*, or classic rather, special reguard is to be had of them. (Evelyn 1852, 3: 161)

The Royal Society's project came to nothing, but dictionaries of the period regularly included proverbs. In fact, Johnson's model, Bailey, inserted 'a great Number of *English* Proverbs with the Explication and Use' in his *Dictionarium Britannicum* (Bailey 1736, 6).

Contemporary compilers of dictionaries in other parts of Europe also incorporated proverbs either as citations of word use or as a separate appendix. Proverbs, routinely used both by classical authors and in the Bible, were, of course, part of a literary tradition, but they also circulated in contemporary oral culture. Proverbs too had 'authority', but their authority was diffused among the entire population who spoke a particular language: it derived from 'The People'. This category would become more significant in the eighteenth century, not just as a lexical arbiter but also as the locus of political sovereignty. In the age of revolutions that followed, it was necessary to define what constituted a 'People' or, to use another term employed by the many framers of new constitutions, a 'Nation'. One answer was supplied by language. 'De Tael is gantsch het Volk'—language is the people entire—claimed the Flemish poet Prudens Van Duyse (Deprez 1998, 3: 3047), and his phrase became the title of the organization that led resistance to the imposition of French as the national language of Belgium after the Brabant Revolution of 1830. Jacob Grimm likewise told the 1846 conference of Germanists, 'neither rivers nor mountains separate peoples, the border of a people . . . is only determined by language' (Germanisten Versammlung 1847, 11).

The potential of language to redraw political maps helps explain the centrality of language studies, including the making of dictionaries, among the intellectual preoccupations of the period. Another cause was the rapid development of philology, the science of the historical development of a language, and its relationships to other languages. No longer were etymologies the result largely of guesswork, as many had been in Johnson's *Dictionary* (Nagashima 1998), they were becoming matters of precision. Both factors influenced Jacob Grimm and his brother Wilhelm, in whose working lives nationalism, philology, folklore, and lexicography were intermixed. While readers of this journal may be more familiar with the

brothers' publications as collectors of folktales, legends, and myths, they considered their dictionary, the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, to be their greatest undertaking.

The *Deutsches Wörterbuch* began as a make-work scheme for the brothers who had been dismissed from Göttingen University because they refused to abjure their oaths to the Hanoverian constitution. The contract was signed in 1838, but the first volume was not printed until 1854, and it would take several teams of scholars and more than a century before the project was completed in thirty-two volumes. The initial proposal from the Leipzig publisher Karl Reimer was a dictionary of the German language from Luther to Goethe: thus, it resembled Johnson's dictionary in its reliance on the 'the best authors' (Harm 2019). But the Grimms, by temperament and ideological conviction, were more enthusiastic about the language that a baby 'hears at the maternal breast, spoken by the soft and gentle voice of the mother' (Norberg 2022, 143). Mother tongue rather than male authorities was the wellspring of language. They were also hostile to imposed uniformity and celebrated 'even the smallest and most despised dialect' (Norberg 2022, 13). They preferred writers like Luther and Hans Sachs, whose written language was more idiomatic and reliant on oral tradition, but they were also willing to rely directly on the 'folk'. Hence, for example, according to the paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder (1986), their dictionary provides one of the largest collections of German proverbs.

In theory the Grimms disliked the very idea of language prescription: Jacob wrote that a language grew in accordance with 'natural laws'; it could only be marred by the 'abstractly deduced, feeble and falsely conceptualized rules' (Pourciau 2017, 43) of grammarians and dictionary-makers. In practice they, like all lexicographers, walked a line between a prescriptive dictionary that advocated 'correct' usage, and a descriptive dictionary which recorded language 'as she is spoke'.[1] Prescription was inevitable, not least because it was the Grimms who chose what language was closer to their 'natural' ideal. (And Jacob in particular could be quite autocratic about language-use he despised, such as unnecessary and 'undeutsch' borrowings from the French.) The brothers had to be pragmatic about who would use their dictionary and why. They understood that High German would be the *koine* of any new political arrangement in the German lands, and while not enthusiastic about state-directed compulsory education and the imposition of a standardized language, they recognized it was a fact. Their own books, including the *Wörterbuch*, would be used by schoolteachers and other agents of uniformity employed by German states. Schools were factories for nation-building because citizens—the constituent elements of a 'People' or a 'Nation'—had to be made; they were not found in nature any more than borders were. The brothers, as they sometimes acknowledged, were caught in a nationalist paradox: the people defined the nation yet they had to be

schooled in the national culture and language. Almost in despite of themselves, the Grimms were engaged in a political, state-building project.

Nonetheless the Grimms' commitment to the 'natural laws' of language development shaped their dictionary. They did not argue that there was an essential relationship between names and things, but they came as close as it was feasible for comparative linguists to this Cratylian position. According to Jacob Grimm, a youthful language 'is rich in root forms which fittingly express those things and experiences which fall within the sphere of our external senses'. Later, root words would be adapted, combined and inflected 'for the expression of subtler thoughts' (Voss and Schlicher 1935, 180). So the origin of words lay in sensate experience, and their subsequent history derived from their pliancy as metaphors for increasingly recondite concepts. In theory the Grimms' dictionary would list definitions from the primordial, experiential usage first, moving on to the latest and most abstract (though in practice they did not always follow this ordering). Language encoded and relayed experience from one generation to another, but each language differed because each people's experiences also differed; for example, in their interactions with the natural world varied according to climate and topography. Grimm further argued, in a Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment's universality of reason, that a people's ability to develop was limited by their language's potential for expression, which was itself historically conditioned. Language was a shared and collective inheritance, which grew and changed; it offered innumerable opportunities for self-expression, but they were not limitless. Language put bounds on what could be thought and said, what could be imagined even, and so speakers and writers were always working within a collective tradition.

This assumption about language was quite common among lexicographers of the period, and it explains the prominence of oral traditions—of folklore—in their projects. The Grimms were not the only lexicographers to double as folklorists. Their influence is patent in the work of Vladimir Dahl, who shared his collection of folktales with his friend Pushkin, before donating it to Alexandr Afanas'ev, who in turn included many of them in his classic folktale collection (Afanas'ev 1859). Dahl (1863-66) was also the compiler of the most 'famous of Russian dictionaries', which, like Jacob Grimm, he imagined Russian family patriarchs reading to their sons as education and entertainment. Although close to both Pushkin and Gogol, Dahl drew on hardly any authors as his 'authorities', using instead proverbs and sayings: his four volumes contain more than thirty thousand. Each dictionary entry became 'a kind of multi-voiced entity, a certain drama or chorus of unidentified native Russian voices' (Vinitsky 2019, 446) and, thus, in Dahl's view the true expression of the Russian folk spirit. An even closer contact of Jacob Grimm's was the Serbian philologist Vuk

Karadžić, the compiler of four volumes of Serbian ballads, a collection of folktales, and the first dictionary of Serbian. In the process he reformed and codified the Serbian language, including its orthography, on the Adelungian principle 'Write as you speak', which necessarily promoted the oral over the written record (the latter was thin in any case for Serbia) (Karanović and Dražić 2020). Karadžić was, in turn, an influence on the Dalmatian folk song collector Niccolò Tommaseo (Bonazza 2008). Exiled from his native region of mixed Slavic and Romance language-speakers, which remained under Habsburg authority, Tommaseo became the lead scholar on the monumental Italian Risorgimento project *Dizionario della lingua Italiana* (10 volumes, 1861-79). He drew extensively on Tuscan proverbs and rhymes to illustrate his dictionary, thus advancing the cause of the Tuscan dialect, especially the version spoken in the mountains around Pistoia where he collected songs, as the *koine* for the newly unified kingdom (Rinaldin 2020).

The connection between lexicography and folklore was, if anything, more marked among the next generation of language scholars who turned their attention to those minority, regional, or dialectal languages which either lacked a well-developed written record or whose literature was languishing under the imposition of an alternative, state-sponsored official language. Necessarily such lexicographers relied more on oral tradition for evidence of word use. Roper offers one example below in his contribution on Father Alcover's Catalan dictionary, whose assembly was both an expression of and a contribution to the Catalan *renaixença* after centuries of state-sponsored Castilianization. Others can be found in the Flemish dictionaries compiled in Belgium between the 1860s and 1920s, in which, interestingly, Catholic priests also played a leading role. Mother tongue education became an ideological issue in the nineteenth-century culture wars because Catholics insisted that central truths of the Christian faith could only be engraved on the heart if learnt in one's mother tongue. 'When my mind was first awakened/ And I prayed to God for the first time . . . It was in my beautiful Flemish language,' wrote the priest Leonard Lodewijk de Bo in a poem called 'De Moedertaal' (The Mother-Tongue) (Bo 1873, 37-39). De Bo also compiled a massive dictionary of the West-Flemish dialect, which includes a handful of traditional lullabies that appear in no other collection of Flemish folklore (Bo 1892, 85 and 227): as he supplies no source, perhaps he learnt them from his mother? The significance of mother-tongue, and lullabies, is emphasised in a poem written by Guido Gezelle, de Bo's friend and another West-Flemish priest, in protest at the contemporary Frenchification of the Renaissance historian 'Jacques De Meyere' (or as Gezelle names him, Jacop Meyer): 'Zyn wiegelied was vlaamsch, gelyk de moeder, die 't hem zong, en voor hem zorge droeg, die wakker lag en schreide of

loech' (His lullaby was Flemish, like the mother who sang it to him, and who looked after him, as he lay awake crying or laughing) (Gezelle 1895, 91-92).

Both Gezelle, a collector of folklore as well as a poet, and de Bo were active participants in the heated language politics of nineteenth-century Belgium. In their case it was as proponents of West-Flemish particularism in opposition to other Flemish activists who pursued alignment with the Dutch language (many priests felt that Dutch was too 'Protestant' for the Catholic sensibilities of Flanders). Their case illustrates the commonalities between philology and folklore as identity-making activities, be it national, regional, ethnic, social, or religious. Language and folklore—whether custom, belief, or oral literature—draw on shared traditions. Those who use the language or participate in the ritual are thereby linked one to another, and also bound to those who came before. (The correspondence with the community-bonding rituals of the Church leapt to the eye of these priests.) The perdurance of this community makes claims on the future too. But the existence of a collective identity also implies a limit, some measurable distinction from other collective identities. Lexicography is necessarily an identity-making activity, even at the sub-national level. The very existence of a dictionary is a claim to cultural distinction which might, in turn, generate calls for some kind of political recognition. Dictionaries are boundary-forming, as they require choices about what should be included, what excluded, and what words can be legitimately claimed by one region, one people, one state, rather than another.

Folklorists have been equally implicated in reifying boundaries, separating what is ours from what is yours. However, given that, after a long period of being taken for granted, the formative links between folklore scholarship and nationalism (and regionalism) have been increasingly scrutinized in recent years, these ideological connections are not the primary focus of the articles that follow. Their focus is rather on the folkloric content to be discovered buried in the pages of dictionaries. This historical backdrop helps explain why it is there to be found, and in such abundance. The argument of the guest editors of this issue is that some dictionaries are to some extent folklore archives, and that the types of material they include may often be the kind of thing that is overlooked by folklorists in other contexts. For example, dictionaries, by their nature, favour shorter verbal traditions (and even non-verbal traditions such as the folk illusions discussed by Claiborne Rice and K. Brandon Barker in their article below). Proverbs are the most esteemed genre and are ubiquitous, but one also finds jokes, puns, tongue-twisters, charms, curses, prayers, prognostications, toasts, greetings, farewells, vows, blessings, threats, riddles, naming and nicknaming practices, and numerous other short genres. For example, lullabies, nursery rhymes, and children's singing games abound, not only in

de Bo's West-Flemish dictionary but also in the dictionaries of the Antwerp dialect and the southern East-Flemish dialect, the latter assembled by Isidoor Teirlinck, one of the pioneers of children's folklore (Cock and Teirlinck 1902-1908).

Another such short genre is the mimologism: a word that mimics the sound of the thing it represents. For those who distrust the slippery, arbitrary quality of words as symbols, mimologisms take us closer to the ideal of language as the voice of nature, in which signifier and signified are intrinsically related. This, for instance, is how the Belgian author André Baillon justified his preference for the Flemish dialect of Westmalle over French (the language he actually chose to write in):

> How should one name a hen that has chicks? "A hen with chicks". That's too long. A "broodhen"? She's no longer brooding. A "mother"? One thinks of nappies and swaddling clothes. The word smells of milk. But look no further. Listen to the hen: she clucks, she says her name: Clouc! That's what the locals call her. (Dufays 1989, 68)

One cannot help feeling that the Grimms would have approved of that logic, and of the inclusion in the Antwerp dialect *Idioticon*, under the headword *kloek*, of the proverbial phrase 'onder geen kloek uitgebroed zijn' applied to a sharp or crafty person, who was not 'hatched from under a hen' (Cornelissen and Vervliet 1899-1903, 2: 669).

Dictionaries might be particularly rich in verbal genres, but they are also resources for researching custom and belief. Vuk Karadžić's Serbian dictionary, for example, doubles as an encyclopedia of Serbian folk life, including its major annual festivals, divinatory and prophylactic rituals, and even material culture. De Bo expounds at length on folk ideas about the sources of illness and the dangers of superstitious thinking under the rather unlikely headword *aksteroge* (meaning a corn in the sense of a callus, and literally 'magpie's eye'). Dictionaries may contain information on customs per se, but they may also contain evidence of customs in other circumstances, when, for example, they describe how an object was used. Karadžić's dictionary, under the headword *zapis* (writing), includes information about the magical use of writing in amulets and cures. Likewise, beliefs may be described qua beliefs, but they may also peep out behind other folklore genres. Dictionary entries may offer belief in proverbial form, such as in the case of the Frisian saying, recorded in Joost Halbertsma's dictionary discussed by Anne Dysktra below, that 'De sîke op it bæd ind di fâye er foar', meaning that the visitor to the sickbed was in greater danger of dying than its occupant. Even after belief had passed away, words and phrases have the power to summon up older worldviews: for instance, in Frisian babies are not 'born' but are 'fetched', suggesting that they come from somewhere

else (specifically, according to Halbertsma, a hollow tree in the woods). And, of course, supernatural creatures also require definitions. To give one example, in Lise Winer's *Dictionary of the English-Creole of Trinidad and Tobago* (2009), we find entries on such entities as the *douen*, *jumbie*, *La Diablesse*, *Mama Glo*, *Papa Bois*, *Phantom*, and *soucouyant* (see also Winer 2020). Vuk Karadžić's dictionary even includes entries for a substantial number of imaginary herbs! Given that most folklore surveys rely on arrangement by taxonomy or theme, one of the great advantages of dictionaries as data is that they may throw up examples of rarely-documented folklore which otherwise fall between the gaps of such taxonomies, or, indeed, may be too rude or everyday to suit the dignifying agenda of writers on the culture of downtrodden groups.

There are, we admit, limits to the folkloristic utility of dictionaries. Some dictionaries were meant for general circulation and use, and therefore their compilers shied away from erotic or scurrilous material. Vuk Karadžić, partly at Jacob Grimm's urging, did include vulgar and lewd words in the first edition of his dictionary, only to be condemned by the Orthodox Church; he was more circumspect in the second edition. To give another example, the priest Resurrección María de Azkue, who might be considered the Basque equivalent of the Catalan Alcover, both as a folklorist and lexicographer, excluded any word for pederasty from his famous Basque dictionary on the basis that the good Catholic folk of the Basque country would never have encountered the idea, let alone the practice. Georges Lacombe, his colleague in the Basque Academy, felt that Basques might nonetheless need to refer to the concept, and suggested the neologism 'Dodgsonkerria', after Edward Spencer Dodgson, the Essex-born Bascologist and notorious importuner of young men (Bidart 2001, 195). (It was not included.)

The first of the articles in this special issue is that of Thomas A. Dubois, which presents a survey of dictionaries of Sámi, and how these have changed (been 'decolonized') over the years, as their authorship has shifted from missionaries (such as Stockfleth 1852) to indigenous language activists (such as Svonni 2013). In Mikael Svonni's dictionary, which has entries for 'car' and 'computer', the dropping of certain coverage of traditions might be taken as part of an attempt to avoid folklore in order to avoid the threat of exoticization. This touches on the question of the intended user of a particular dictionary. Svonni's dictionary assumes that its intended reader will already be familiar with supernatural figures, and will be able to find information on such characters in publications other than dictionaries.

Such a chain of dictionaries as Dubois's article covers exhibits more than simply changes in linguistic ideology, they also can hint at changes in popular beliefs. For example, Dubois notes that Jens Andreas Friis's dictionary (1887) includes a term

not found in earlier dictionaries, '*juovlla-stallo*, Julenisse', suggesting that the influence of the Norwegian *nisse* tradition had begun to be noted in Sápmi at this time. Such dictionaries, though they may attempt to present a purist view of a culture, may in fact present a portrait of exchange and hybridity almost despite themselves. Another one of the many interesting aspects of Dubois's account is the example it gives of occasions when we are able to see behind the anonymity of the dictionary to locate the human being who must have been the informant for particular data. In Konrad Nielsen's Sámi dictionary (1932-38), if a particular word is only presented in Guovdageaidnu dialect, we know who precisely must have said it, as Nielsen only had one informant who knew that dialect. This is an interesting case given that many of the frustrations of using dictionaries as sources of folklore data arise from the cramped nature of the format, something which means material is often fragmentary and decontextualized and that informants too often go unnamed. Such moments of seeing through the sometimes blank authoritativeness of a close-printed page to a particular individual at a particular time and place is one of the joys of repurposing dictionaries.

There then follows Jonathan Roper's piece on the Catalan lexicographer and folklorist Antoni Maria Alcover and his mammoth *Diccionari Català-Valencià-Balear*. In addition to his role as 'Apostle of the Catalan language' (Ceba Herrero and March Noguera 2019, 1089), Father Alcover collected and published more than four hundred Majorcan folktales. While he was not a nationalist in the militant sense, Alcover did hope for greater autonomy for the Catalan-speaking territories. He came from a Carlist family, committed to a particular form of ultra-Catholic monarchism, and he remained involved in politics, baiting liberals and those conservatives he considered vacillating. In his view, Catalan speakers formed a 'people', distinct not only in their language but also their mores and their character. That separate identity, expressed both in language and folklore, required some form of political expression if it was to be preserved. Given his background it is worth noting that Alcover does not shy away from documenting the vulgar register in the Catalan language in the dictionary, in contrast to his avoidance of it in his folktale works. Roper also touches on two other issues in this piece. The first is the nature of the networks of correspondents that often underlie such dictionaries, which are sometimes taken to be the work of a single 'great man'—in this case, in the contributions to the dictionary from the folklorist Sara Llorens. Secondly, he mentions the afterlife of dictionaries and their role in stimulating fresh cultural production.

Anne Dykstra's piece looks at the implicit portrayal of marriage (and wedding customs) in the remarkable dictionary of J. H. Halbertsma. Halbertsma is not the only Frisian lexicographer to have had an interest in folklore: Waling Dykstra, who wrote a

substantial monograph on folk life and folklore (W. Dykstra 1895-96), also edited a dictionary, the *Friesch woordenboek* (W. Dykstra 1900-11). Likewise, Ype Poortinga, a veteran collector of folktales in post-war Friesland, was also one of the editors of the volumes of the *Lyts Frysk Wirdboek* (Sipma and Poortinga 1944; Buwalda, Meerburg, and Poortinga 1952). But Halbertsma's dictionary (1876) is something *sui generis*. For example, it only goes up to the letter 'F' (due to the author's death) and secondly, its entries are chiefly in Latin, which must make it one of the very last dictionaries of a living European language whose metalanguage is Latin. However, the generous size of its entries and their general discursiveness means it does not suffer from one of the common problems encountered when using dictionaries as sources of cultural information: the limited data found in brief definitions. Dykstra is able to garner sufficient information from the dictionary's entries, especially proverbial data, to be able to find a portrait of marriage drawn within it—a portrait that turns out to be a showcase for attitudes to relationships between the sexes more broadly.

Rice and Barker, who have jointly authored a reference work on folk illusions (2019), conduct an intriguing investigation of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, with a view to drawing from its pages unnoticed information on such folk illusions. Coming as they do from a scholarly tradition that places a great importance on context, they naturally ponder the question of what use the often decontextualized information found in dictionaries might be. Happily, they find that a combination of such dictionary information with contextual sources allows for a triangulation of available knowledge. This matching is eased by the fact that the questionnaire this dictionary was based on contained twenty-six questions that involved the interviewer making gestures to elucidate what was to be described. Thus, this dictionary was not as exclusively verbal as one might suspect. Their work also engages with the debate that followed Elliott Oring's call (2019) for efforts to find regularities (or laws) in folklore, an intervention which also argues against the inductive kind of contextualized analyses typical of recent years to urge more hypothesis-driven research.

The special issue closes with Roper offering a companion piece to his book chapter (2020b) that focused on (chiefly rural) dialect dictionaries from Victorian England as repositories of folklore. His article here examines regional dictionaries published in the different social situation of urbanized and industrialized twentieth- and twenty-first century England for their folklore data. One of the topics he touches upon is that of 'vernacular dictionaries', that is, dictionaries compiled by people who have noticed something interesting enough in the language surrounding them for them to want to document it, but who have little or no linguistic background. He

finds that such sources, while they may need shrewd treatment when used as sources, sometimes catch aspects of culture that escape scholarly dictionaries.

Altogether this special issue can be considered as taking forward and deepening the rich topic of the folklore data buried in dictionaries raised by the various authors in the 2020 book. It can also be considered as an argument for seeking out sources of folklore data different from the familiar archives, journals, and monographs, while maintaining an awareness of these other sources' particular limitations and virtues.

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Note

[1] Antoni Alcover, whose Catalan dictionary is examined by Jonathan Roper in this volume, agreed: 'Languages are not the work of scholars or academies. For scholars, academies regulate a language, formulate its grammar. However, shaping the language, producing it—only the people can do that' (Ceba Herrero and March Noguera 2019, 1098).

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