

**Defining the Digital Dictionary: How to Build
More Useful Online Lexical References**
Ben Zimmer, Wall Street Journal

Electronic lexical references are often consulted for the simplest of goals, such as for the checking of spelling or the replacement of one word with a near-equivalent in a mechanical fashion. Such arid utilitarianism does little justice to the variety of ways that digital dictionaries and thesauruses can shed light on language and encourage lexical explorations. A digital reference can mine rich usage data from textual corpora to paint a picture of how words are used in actual context. It can create new spatial metaphors for semantic connections. Or it can add a historical dimension to trace how words related to a given concept have ebbed and flowed over the centuries.

Enriching traditional dictionaries with data-driven and visually stimulating features is the most promising way for lexicographers to engage with generations coming of age in the electronic era. If we are truly concerned with allowing learners to appreciate a language's lexical intricacies, we must supply tools that meet them on their own terrain. Increasingly, this is a technologized terrain, with expectations of interactivity and fluidity in sophisticated graphic interfaces. This presentation will survey some of the latest advances in English-language online dictionaries, with an eye to making such digital references maximally useful to 21st-century language learners.