

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *A polar dictionary: cold words*, by Bernadette Hince. Wallingford, UK: CABI. 472 pp. ISBN: 978-1-83699-152-6.

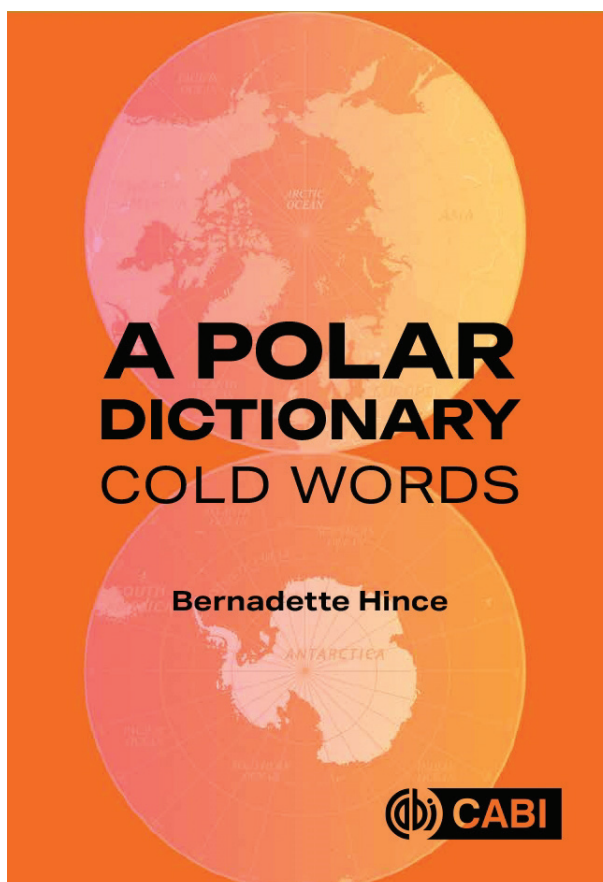
“Modern dictionaries are the work of large faceless committees [...] It’s almost impossible to hear the individual voice of the lexicographer” (Lynch 2021). So begins a piece about Samuel Johnson, who singlehandedly wrote a very famous English dictionary. He peppered it with wit and dyspeptic snark: Johnson’s own voice was very much in evidence. For example, his patriotic dislike of French shone through in his definition of *finesse*: “Artifice; stratagem; an unnecessary word which is creeping into the language” (Johnson 1755). He also poked fun at himself, defining *lexicographer* as “A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge [...]” (Johnson 1755).

Johnson’s aversion to French notwithstanding, the richness of the English language lies at least partly in the thirst with which it sponges up foreign words. It has been this way all through the language’s development, starting with the language of the settlers to Britain from what is now southern Denmark, northernmost Netherlands and north-eastern Germany in the 5th century; through the influence of the related Germanic language of the Vikings who came to plunder and also settle a few hundred years later; and the conquest by the Normans, whose language was rooted in Latin, in the 11th century (McCrum et al. 1986). In more recent times, English has been boosted by lexical infusions from the far-flung reaches of the British Empire, for example, the Indian subcontinent, where the British Raj ended within my parents’ lifetime, and the (official) decolonization of British Africa, which was finalized within my own.

With *A polar dictionary: cold words*, we are treated to an intimate look at the English of the Far North and the Far South. Bernadette Hince is well-suited to the task of making such a dictionary. Her doctoral dissertation was on the environmental history of the French, Australian and New Zealand Subantarctic islands; she served as science editor for the *Australian national dictionary* (Ramson 1988); she edited for publication several Antarctic-related journals by polar adventurers; and she wrote *The Antarctic dictionary* (2000). Hince has also produced, since the early 1990s, numerous shorter publications and conference papers on narrow topics that

Correspondence

Helle V. Goldman, Norwegian Polar Institute, Fram Centre, PO Box 6606 Stakkevollan, NO-9296 Tromsø, Norway. E-mail: goldman@npolar.no



cluster around the intersections of food, culture, history, the polar regions and words (ANU undated).

In a 2014 essay, Hince asked “What do you do after you write a dictionary?” Her answer was, in short, that you write another. Having assembled the specialized vocabulary with which English-speaking explorers and researchers described what they encountered in Antarctica (Hince 2000), Hince turned to the North, which was, after all, where much of the Far Southern vocabulary had come from. Examples are words such as *polynya*, *pancake ice* and *nunatak*. Hince was particularly interested in words drawn from the languages of the indigenous peoples of the Northern circumpolar region. (Australia, where Hince is based, offers a parallel. Australian English developed from the language of British settlers who, finding themselves in a challenging and alien environment, borrowed from Aboriginal languages to describe it. They also played with words to create a vibrant and distinctly “Aussie” vocabulary.) She made study trips to Greenland, Canada, Alaska and other

places. A gap in her publication record (ANU undated) between the piece in 2014, quoted above, and the book now under review gives an indication of the effort and time it took to prepare. (Johnson contracted with a group of London booksellers to produce his dictionary in three years; it took nine.)

A *polar dictionary* comprises about 3000 headwords and 12 000 quotations. Some of these quotations do not contain the word in question but predate it and show a need for it. *Permafrost* is an example. There are five quotations that use the word, starting with one from 1943, when a palaeontologist coined the term, and concluding with one from 2023. The reader may thus follow usage of the word through time. Preceding these five quotations is a brief passage from Benjamin Franklin's 1748 almanac that describes permafrost: "The Frost is never out of the Ground." *Kayak* is another example. There are nine quotations for this word, of Inuit origin, spanning 1662 to 2017, but before these is a 1576 quotation describing the vessel in question without naming it.

Prominent labels identify some words as "historical," "obsolete," "offensive" or "humorous." There are also labels like "mainly historical," "apparently historical" and "sometimes derogatory or offensive," showing the dictionary-maker's sense for nuance and shades of grey. (Indeed, Hince published, in a Tasmanian literary magazine, an article entitled "Words for grey," which I would very much like to read.) An example of a "humorous" (also "historical") term is *Alaska strawberries*, which are dried beans. Perhaps operating from a broader definition of humour, I would have tagged more terms in this dictionary as "humorous," for example, *auroraholic* (a person who craves sightings of the aurora), *bag drag* (the process of taking oneself and one's bags to be weighed before air travel to, from or within Antarctica), *Cape sheep* (the albatross), *frozen chosen* (people who have worked in Antarctica) and *snotsicle*. Another term I would have categorized as "humorous" is *jafa/jafo*, defined as "An egghead, an academic, a scientist," from the acronym used in the Australian sector of Antarctica for the phrase "just another fucking academic/observer." The author presumably sees an applicability for this word that extends beyond Antarctica since she wonders why *jafa/jafo* "has not been taken up more widely."

It is a pleasure to see Tore Gjelsvik—the director of my institute from 1960 to 1983 and the founder of the journal in which this review is published—quoted under the *Age of averted interest*. This was the roughly 50 years in the 19th century during which there was little global interest in Antarctica. Other headwords testify to Norwegian polar activities, such as *Maudheim sledge*, *Nansen cooker*, *finnesko* (a Norwegian word for a particular type of reindeer-skin footwear made by the Saami) and

sennegrass (the sedge that keeps feet dry and warm in those shoes). The dictionary includes several words of Saami origin, such as *duodji* (Saami handicrafts and the cultural heritage they embody), *gakti* (traditional Saami apparel), *geres* (a particular kind of Saami sled) and *guksi* (a birchwood drinking vessel). This last one has just two quotations. One is a definition in a 1990 book about Arctic languages and the other is from the English edition of a Swedish crime novel published in 2020. This gives you an idea of Hince's thoroughness and also the occasionally low threshold for inclusion in the dictionary.

I could not help thinking that Hince may have gone too far here and there. There are separate entries for *euphausia*, *euphausiacean* and *euphausiid* (all to do with the tiny crustaceans known as krill). *Notothenia*, *nototheniid* and *notothenioid* as well as a particular species in this group of fishes—the *yellowfin notothen*—are all separate headwords. *To flense*, *flenser* and *flensing plan* each has its own definition; likewise, *to overwinter*, *overwinter* (the noun), *overwinterer* and *overwintering*. Then there are terms such as *mosquito season*, the torments of which are suffered in so many other parts of the Earth that I wondered why the term was included here. Did *walrus meat* and *walrus hide* really merit their own separate listings, after *walrus*? These terms are not playful alternative names for something (such as *Alaska strawberries* or *Cape sheep*). In contrast, I could see why *dog meat* warranted its own definition since readers unfamiliar with the history of Antarctic exploration might assume, mistakenly, that the term refers to the food supplied to dogs.

Hince includes many commonplace words that have special meanings in the polar context, such as *zucchini*, a type of prefabricated hut used in Antarctica. On the island Tristan da Cunha, it was for a time customary to strike a suspended gas cylinder to alert inhabitants to an imminent announcement of public importance. This makeshift instrument was locally known as the *gong*, which Hince defines, explaining the makeshift function of the gas cylinder on Tristan da Cunha. In this case, the general meaning of the word *gong* and the polar one seem so similar that it could have been left out of this dictionary. Yet the inclusion of the word meant that I learned a quirky titbit about life on Tristan da Cunha, which may well flit across my mind on the rare occasion that I stumble across a gong (or a gas cylinder).

Grey text boxes scattered throughout the dictionary are mostly devoted to place names, such as Inaccessible Island, Hudson Bay, Kerguelen Islands, Kurile Islands, Novaya Zemlya, South Georgia, Snares Islands and Svalbard. These are all followed by eponymous entries, typically animals or plants, such as *Svalbard reindeer* and *Svalbard saxifrage*, *Kerguelen cabbage* and *Kerguelen tea* and *Snares fernbird* and *Snares Island tomtit*. In some instances,

the grey place-name box precedes but a single entry, as the box about the island of Attu precedes *Attuan* (an inhabitant of Attu Island), which strikes me as somewhat thin. These geographical boxes sometimes mention the person who discovered the place or is otherwise associated with it. For example, the boxes for Hudson Bay and Gough Island explain who Henry Hudson and Charles Gough were, respectively. That places such as the Arctic islands of Jan Mayen and Franz Josef Land lack boxes is presumably justified on the grounds that there is no Jan Mayen reindeer, no Franz Josef Land poppy.

A sprinkling of these grey text boxes are dedicated to notable polar figures. There is one for Fridtjof Nansen, preceding *Nansen cooker* and *Nansen sledge*. Osbert Salvin has a box, which comes before *Salvin's albatross* and *Salvin's prion*. Likewise, John Richardsen has a box, above *Richardsen's collared lemming*. Douglas Mawson does not have a box, although the explorer is referred to in the definition of *mawsoni* (a fish). Ernest Shackleton does not have a box, but he is named under the headword *Shackletonia*. Robert Scott and Roald Amundsen do not have boxes, but both rivals are mentioned under *Scott tent*. There seemed to be a logic in all this that was a snowflake's breadth beyond my grasp.

Similar to the “blurry” (p. vii) perimeters of the volume's geographical coverage, which headwords were admitted and which were left out were evidently matters not governed by black-and-white rules. Did I entirely understand why some words were included and others omitted? No, but I did not mind. The making of any dictionary entails decision-making guided by rules that are not hard and fast (Stamper 2020). In the case of *A polar dictionary*, the choices reflect the judgement of the solitary lexicographer, and are ultimately an expression of her voice, rather than the collective call of a “large faceless” committee (to bring this back to the lines quoted at the start of this review). Hince's voice in the volume is among its most delightful aspects. Regarding *bakeapple* (another word for cloudberry), Hince remarks, presumably on the basis of personal experience, that the common assertion that these berries taste like baked apples is “nonsense.” With *wriggly tin* (corrugated sheet metal used for roofing), Hince declares “I love this name.” And the word *dogloo* (a snow doghouse) is “wonderful.” This is the “harmless drudge” peeking out from behind her towering piles of source materials and giving us a wink. After justifying the

inclusion of *woolly mammoth* in the dictionary on the grounds of the preservation of specimens in Siberian permafrost, Hince confides that these extinct elephantids “are here also as a testimony to persistence—mine, not theirs. After 33 years, about 3000 definitions and 750 000 words of text, on July 2023 this happens to be the last definition I completed for *Cold words*.” With this, the reader is allowed to share, in a tiny way, the author's satisfaction in completing a big job.

Lovers of “this wild, vibrant whore of a language” (Stamper 2017: 9) should be glad that Hince happened upon her “skinny niche” (p. vii) and gave us this book of lexicographical scholarship (at 472 pages, not so skinny). As people have always been in motion, seeking new parts of the world to explore, exploit and make their own, so has language been in motion, evolving and expanding through invention, wordplay and borrowing, sometimes—as in the Arctic and Antarctic—in exceptionally harsh circumstances.

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