

## SUE ATKINS, LEXICOGRAPHER AND LINGUIST' (1931-2021)

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*Rosamund* MOON

Sue Atkins, Dr Beryl T. S. Atkins, died in September 2021 at the age of 90. She was one of the foremost lexicographers of recent times, part of the great tradition of distinguished Scottish lexicographers, and she made a major contribution to both bilingual and monolingual lexicography, to both practical and theoretical lexicography, and beyond that to linguistics in general. Her work was widely known and her influence widely felt in the UK, in Europe, in the USA and rest of the world. A tribute to Sue Atkins can be found on the Euralex website (<https://euralex.org>), and a longer tribute will appear in the *International Journal of Lexicography* (2022, Vol. 35/1). There is an extended article on her life and work in Wikipedia.



By the time I met Sue Atkins in 1981, when I joined the Cobuild project, she had already established a formidable reputation as a leading bilingual lexicographer, working for the Glasgow-based publishers Collins (later HarperCollins). A collaboration with the French publishers Robert had led to a major, radical reconceptualization of what and how a bilingual dictionary should be: focussing on contemporary language, including major varieties of the two languages; showing not just words and fixed phrases but ordinary phraseologies; equally accessible to both English- and French-speaking users, whether decoding or encoding; simple to use; and written, checked, and edited by teams in both France and the UK. Sue and co-editors Alain Duval and Rosemary Milne were instrumental in the design, development, writing, and delivery of this new and very successful dictionary, first published in 1978, with its eleventh edition appearing in 2020.

In the late 1970s, Sue began discussions with Collins and her brother John Sinclair, Professor of English at the University of Birmingham, with a view to producing a new kind of dictionary of English for EFL and ESL learners, one that would focus on language in use, take phraseology fully into account, and be based on an ab initio lexicographical examination of real English as evidenced in a new multi-million word corpus of contemporary English texts, both written and spoken. The Cobuild Project, this collaboration between Collins/HarperCollins and the University of Birmingham led to an extraordinary period of lexical and linguistic research in the 1980s, re-evaluating received ideas about words and meanings, and foregrounding usage, frequency, phraseology and collocation in the subsequent dictionary entries. Sue had a very important role in the conception of the dictionary, training of the lexicographical team, and evaluation of the developing text. (I particularly remember an extraordinary diagram she drew of English noun patterns.) Our first dic-

tionary, *The Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*, was published in 1987 under the editorship of John Sinclair and Patrick Hanks, and was followed by a series of further dictionaries, grammars, and other teaching materials.

In the later 1980s, Sue moved to Oxford University Press, where she became lexicographical adviser on a major new French-English dictionary project, in close collaboration with Hachette. This followed general working principles similar to those established through the Collins-Robert project, but importantly also drew on a large corpus as the basis for lexical analysis, prior to lexicographical treatment and translation. The first edition of the *Oxford Hachette French Dictionary* was published in 1994.

By this time, Sue Atkins' activities extended much further than dictionary publishing and lexicographical design. She was heavily involved in the development of the British National Corpus in the UK, a major resource for corpus linguists and others. Another collaboration was with Charles Fillmore at the University of California, Berkeley, leading to the FrameNet Project; another with Antonio Zampolli (University of Pisa), developing new synergies between linguistics, lexicography, and computer science. My second period of working alongside Sue was on the Hector Project in the early 1990s: this was a collaboration between Oxford University Press and Digital Equipment Corporation in Palo Alto, USA. The lexicographical team, headed by Patrick Hanks, worked on disambiguation of corpus lemmas and allocating sense tags to uses; our computer scientist colleagues worked on corpus software and ways in which our data could be formalized and used to establish a basis for automatic sense disambiguation of text.

I also knew Sue through Euralex, the European Association of Lexicography: she was involved with Euralex from its foundation in Exeter in 1983. She served on the board for many years, was president from 1992-1994, and was later made an honorary member, with a Festschrift (*Lexicography and Natural Language Processing*) published by Euralex in her honour in 2002. Her many initiatives under the Euralex aegis included innovative surveys of dictionary usage: see, for example, Atkins/Varantola 'Monitoring Dictionary Use' (*International Journal of Lexicography*, 1997, Vol. 10/1).

Sue's wide practical experience in lexicography and her many years of training lexicographers led naturally to her running courses in practical lexicography and dictionary design, most notably with Michael Rundell and Adam Kilgarriff in their annual series of Lexicom workshops (<https://lexicom.courses>); also through their specialist Lexicographical MasterClasses. The Atkins/Rundell 2008 textbook, *The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography*, is unequalled.

Sue Atkins was hugely respected and admired, and she was also much loved. She was an extraordinary woman: full of energy, a brilliant mind, highly creative, far-sighted, clear-sighted, witty, kind. She will be sorely missed by her family and friends of course, her many colleagues over the years, and the wider international community of lexicographers.