

THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY

ALAN FRANK

Boston, Massachusetts

Though heralded as "NEW!", the organization of the second edition of The American Heritage Dictionary (AH) is actually a throw-back to the earlier days of dictionary making. The design adopted by the dictionary makes it more useful to the general public but less interesting to logologists.

This edition begins, as did its predecessor and many older dictionaries, with a collection of special articles. Two of these are worth noting. The first is a "debate" between Dwight Bolinger and William F. Buckley, Jr. over "Usage and Acceptability in English." Representing the view that "the prevailing usage of its speakers should be the chief determinant of acceptability in language," Bolinger makes a good argument both that that's the way it is, and that's the way that works. Unfortunately, writing for the negative, Buckley thinks he's in the *New York Times Magazine* and ends up being more entertaining than convincing. He should have warned of the troubles of linguistic anarchy, and the shades of meaning which can get lost when words are used indiscriminately.

The other special article is by Henry Kučera and is entitled "The Mathematics of Language." Kucera discusses various measures of the size of the English language and, though one of his intermediate conclusions of "340,193 different word forms" may be over-precise, readers of *Word Ways* should appreciate the article.

Like Webster's New International, this second edition has added Biographical and Geographic sections at the end. Though shorter than N12's, they are much more up-to-date: places listed include Bangladesh and Zimbabwe (with locator maps), Beijing, Ho Chi Minh City, and Warren, Michigan. Updates in the biographical section are even more apparent: Nadia Comaneci wasn't born when N13 came out, let alone N12. Many other important people, such as Edward Sapir and Babe Ruth, omitted from N12 for whatever reason, are included here. And the many portraits ease the strain on one's eyes while searching for that elusive trigram. It should be noted, though, that names and places are not new to the dictionary; they have merely been selected out from the main body (yet "Roland" remains).

But the main feature of any dictionary is its word entries. The AH has 70,000, including run-ons (but not inflected forms), about what one would expect for a collegiate. But certainly all readers of this review already own a dictionary of at least that magnitude, and probably N13. For them, the question may be "Should I buy this dictionary for its new words?" The claim is made of

"25,000 new words and meanings"; a brief comparison I made with the original edition suggests 10,000 new words and 5,000 new meanings.

But these are just absolute numbers; how does AH compare to the latest (1981) N13 addenda, and just what does it have? I have obtained a list of about one hundred words which have entered common English usage since 1978. Many of the words on the list are not found in either N13 or AH; here are a dozen particularly common ones: **antsy**, **busload** (in the figurative sense), **copter** (as a verb), **desktop**, **eggy**, **endgame** (still two words in N13, and not in AH at all), **handheld**, **moaner**, **pager** (in the sense of a portable message-receiving device), **redial** (as a verb), **salesboy**, and **sнарfed**. Another fifteen were found in both dictionaries: ***aerobics**, **airfare**, **ballpark**, **bleep**, **cannoli**, **chugalug**, ***condo**, **crazy** (as a noun), ***disco** (as a verb), ***gasohol**, **hummus**, ***munchies**, ***nurd**, **sickie**, ***slammer**, **zinger** and **zonk**. Those marked with an asterisk are also found in the Second Barnhart Dictionary of New Words (B), and **pager** can be found there as well.

Thus, the differences boil down to a small set: **matchup**, **wimpy**, and **winless** are only in N13; **grahams**, **jiver**, and **veggies** favor AH. Since AH is more recent, it also spells some words solidly that are hyphenated in N13: **coverup**, **foxtrot**, **lifestyle**, and **shootout**; the situation is reversed for **carpool** and **jumpsuit**. Taking the liberty of extrapolating these results to the whole book, I estimate that AH contains more than 1,000 new words not in N13 or B (and, most likely, nowhere else).

In the sequence of definitions, this edition of AH is like its predecessor in presenting senses not "historically or by frequency of use [but] analytically, according to central meaning clusters from which related subsenses and additional separate senses may evolve." For example, it lists the definitions of "profession" in the following order: 1) An occupation or vocation requiring training in the liberal arts .. and advanced study .. 2) The body of qualified persons of one .. field. 3) The act or instance of professing. 4) An avowal of faith in a religion. This is certainly the most useful order for someone who just wants to know what a word means. Compare N13's order: 1) [4 above]. 2) [3 above]. 3a) Religious conviction, b) the faith professed. 4a) [1 above], b) a vocation, c) [2 above]. Less useful, but it shows the development of the word. Again, AH is new by reverting to an old lexicographic style.

The definitions themselves are functional, as definitions should be. The policy is continued of labeling meanings with specialized uses, such as **Biol.**, **Econ.**, or **Baseball**. Although the etymologies are adequate, the dictionary suffers from the removal of the appendix of Indo-European roots which was present in the first edition.

Usage labels continue to be present, although somewhat revised. The labels "rare" and "poetic," useful to non-native speakers, have been removed. The large group of words formerly gathered under

the classification "vulgar" has been broken down; though ass remains "vulgar," snot is now merely "slang," and the well-known word for sexual intercourse has been promoted to a new category, "obscene." And watch yourself with words labeled "offensive," for they are "not only insulting and derogatory, but a discredit to the user as well." With this in mind, I won't give any examples.

Detailed "Usage Notes" have been updated slightly from the previous edition. Use of like as a conjunction is no longer considered inappropriate to formal writing, though the reader is cautioned that purists may "pay more attention to his words than their content." Other changes which have been made have also made the notes less judgmental. It would be better if the usage notes were judgmental; those who wished to write clearly rather than correctly would still be free to do so, but it would be with more knowledge of the situation than AH now provides. In fact, the current policy leads to much beating around the bush; after spending over 650 words discussing what pronoun agrees with everyone, it quits, quoting Fowler: "everyone must decide for himself (or for himself and herself, or for themselves)." The first edition used only 200 words to say that it takes the singular verb or pronoun.

Two final complaints: first, nineteen pages are wasted for a list of American colleges (I didn't know that's what they meant by a "collegiate" dictionary); second, the thumb indices are badly placed. The AB index, instead of being either at the beginning of A or the beginning of B, as in normal books, is located at ar-rain, and similarly for the others.

Although AH has faults, none preclude it from being a useful day-to-day dictionary of first reference, and its newness gives it a considerable advantage over other collegiate dictionaries, even those only ten years old. The advantages over the 1981 N13, though, are slim, and the final decision of whether to purchase it must depend on what it is intended to replace or supplement and to what use it is intended to be put.