

WEBSTER'S FOURTH: ANOTHER REVIEW

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The year 1985 will long be remembered for the logological event of the century: the publication in Springfield, Massachusetts of the 4th Edition of Webster's Unabridged. Priced attractively at only \$1395 (plus sales tax, where applicable), Webster's Fourth New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged comes in the form of 20 large volumes. The regular edition is in the usual buckram binding. The deluxe Collector's Edition, priced at \$2500, comes in a genuine calfskin binding. In addition, each page of text has been treated with a special luminescent chemical, permitting the owner of the dictionary to use it in the dark - a convenience for insomniacs.

Each of the 20 volumes has roughly 1500 pages, similar in size to those of the 3rd Edition. The first 14 volumes constitute the 4th Edition proper. The last 6 volumes represent a reprint of the first three editions of Webster's unabridged, for the benefit of semanticists and philologists, who would be profoundly unhappy with the 4th Edition by itself. The publishers have announced that the 4th Edition is the final one of the series. Beginning in 1990, they will issue a New Words dictionary quinquennially, to keep owners of the 4th Edition abreast of the changing English language. Each New Words dictionary will be about the size of the current Collegiate dictionary, covering perhaps 150,000 new words, including any words in the 4th Edition whose meanings or statuses have changed.

Compared with previous editions, the 4th Edition is a radically new reference work, showing an innovative boldness in design and execution truly unprecedented in the history of lexicography. To begin with, the publishers determined to make their dictionary a repository of the living language. They therefore automatically excluded all words and terms not known to have appeared in print more recently than in the year 1900. The 4th Edition is, accordingly, the first dictionary of purely 20th-century English. The publishers have been commendably thorough - even words appearing in Shakespeare's plays have been excluded if they have not been used in 20th-century materials. The publishers regard their action as a public service: eradicating obsolete words from their dictionaries will encourage translation of the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries into the English of today, ridding literature of an eyesore. Anyone who wishes to burrow in the language of another world is still free to do so, by referring to the last six volumes of the set.

Another remarkable innovation pioneered by the 4th Edition is its elimination of word etymologies. A survey conducted by the publishers, soliciting user requirements and preferences, established that only a handful of individuals, members of the academic and scholarly community, ever read etymologies in dictionaries. The overwhelming majority of dictionary users was interested in the current spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of words - not in their dead past. The etymologies of English words remain available to language experts, in the last six volumes of the 4th Edition. As for new words, most of these are in the scientific and technological domains and draw on the so-called International Scientific Vocabulary, which is of precious little concern to language researchers.

The space saved by eliminating etymologies has been put to a remarkable use by the publishers. Listed for the convenience of the dictionary user are all transposals, transadditions, and transdeletions of each dictionary entry and of its standard inflectional forms - all, that is, which happen to be within the Websterian word stock, drawn from all four of the unabridged editions. This unexpected boon to logologists is bound to have a far-reaching effect on recreational linguistics. For one thing, it is certain to spur interest in logology among members of the general public.

Probably the most important single change in the 4th Edition, as compared with earlier ones, is the philosophy concerning word stock which it reflects. All previous editions concentrated on the general vocabulary of English, being careful not to explore specialized fields too deeply. The 4th Edition takes the broader view that the language of the sciences and technologies needs to be made fully accessible to John Q. Public. As a result, the number of dictionary entries in the 4th Edition has increased many times over that in previous editions. The publishers state that the new edition includes "considerably more than" 2.7 million entries. They decline to be more specific, in order not to give rival dictionary publishers a target to surpass. Based on sample counts, my own estimate is that the first 14 volumes of the 4th Edition include well over 3 million separate entries. Interested readers may wish to undertake an exact count - I have other fish to fry!

The 4th Edition combines the best features of previous editions. On the one hand, it continues to view language descriptively rather than prescriptively, assigning those meanings to words that the users of English actually give them. The same principle has been applied to pronunciations, spellings, and grammatical features covered by the 4th Edition. On the other hand, lengthy definitions have been split into two or more individual sentences, to make them easier to read and understand. Proper names, rigorously excluded from the 3rd Edition, have been reinstated, with a massive infusion of names in literature, mythology, the Bible, history, politics, astronomy, and other areas not covered by most nondictionary reference works. Biographical and geographical names continue to be excluded, however, since the publishers issue separate dic-

tionaries of those names. Both color plates and black-and-white illustrations have been sharply increased over those in the 3rd Edition, to make the encyclopedialike 4th Edition more attractive to the average purchaser.

Previous editions dabbled in Scottish and Irish. The 4th Edition has adopted the view that Scottish Gaelic, Irish Gaelic, and Welsh are three of the languages spoken within the United Kingdom - the motherland of English. The publishers have, therefore, included the 50,000 most commonly used words in each of these three languages in the 4th Edition, accounting for 150,000 of the aggregate number of dictionary entries. By contrast, other languages native to the British Isles - Manx and Cornish, for instance - unfortunately continue virtually to be ignored.

The pages of **Word Ways** have featured numerous references to the fake 45-letter words included in the 2nd and 3rd Editions of Webster's unabridged. The publishers have finally thrown in the towel, deleting the purported name of a rare lung disease. Instead, the 4th Edition devotes one full page to spelling out and defining the 3644-letter chemical name of the protein bovine glutamate dehydrogenase, printing the word itself in type of extra-large size, with ample spacing between consecutive lines, to make it as easy as possible to read. The publishers must be congratulated on this thoughtfulness.

Someone in the offices of the publishers must have been reading **Word Ways**, **The Enigma**, and **The Cryptogram** over the years. I was astonished to discover that much or most of the vocabulary of recreational linguistics - possibly, 1500 specialized terms - is included in the 4th Edition. If you now wish to know what an isogram, anachuttle, or quadade is, in the realm of logology, all you need to do is look the word up in Webster's 4th!

The most daring feature of the 4th Edition, by any measure whatever, is an appendix of 100,000 words included in the far reaches of Volume 14. These are new words which, the publishers predict, will first enter the English language within the next ten to fifteen years - complete with their definitions. By including this appendix, the publishers are actually giving us a portion of the content of the next two or three of their planned quinquennial **New Words** dictionaries in advance - laying their reputations on the line in the process. Every owner of the 4th Edition is obviously going to compare that appendix with the actual vocabularies of the future quinquennial updates, to see how precognitive the publishers are.

The chief criticism to be leveled against the 4th Edition is, perhaps, the minor treatment it accords Spanish - the language likely to become the national tongue in years to come. On the whole, however, the work marks a milestone in the history of lexicography, and I urge every reader to plunk down his \$1395 or \$2500 (plus sales tax, if applicable) for a copy of the 20-volume set without any delay. It's worth every penny of the asking price - and more!