

# MERRIAM-WEBSTER: VOICE OF AUTHORITY

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Since 1909, the three editions of Webster's New International Dictionary (henceforth to be referred to as N11, N12, and N13) have been the most widely accepted references for the coverage of American English. Their reputation is deserved; not only are they thorough in their coverage of modern words, they are scholarly in their treatment of obsolete terms, important to readers of older literature. (The coverage of obsolete terms in N13 is not as full as in N11 or N12, however.) Their appeal is to both the scholar and the layman. Unlike earlier dictionaries in both England and America, the N1s have done little to actually shape modern American English; lexicographers have grown to understand, however, that no modern dictionary does have a significant effect on the language. This realization has signalled a trend from prescriptive dictionaries (such as early Websterian ones) to descriptive ones (most notably N13). Although the N1s do not significantly affect the language, they provide an excellent mirror by which to examine the changes and progress of American English in the twentieth century.

To fully understand lexicographical progress indicated by the N1s, previous lexicographical traditions, both English and American, must be examined. Noah Webster, of course, was the most influential individual upon early American English. However, he based his early efforts upon Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language and upon already-established lexicographical traditions (Neilson, p. v). Johnson, then, is the earliest direct influence upon Websterian dictionaries, and so his Dictionary must be examined.

Johnson's Dictionary was the first true dictionary in England; there had previously been other word-books, but as Warburton noted in 1747, "we have neither GRAMMAR nor DICTIONARY, neither Chart nor Compass, to guide us through this wide sea of Words" (Warburton, p. xx, quoted in Sledd and Kolb, p. 6). Modeled after European dictionaries, Johnson's was hailed as an immense accomplishment. Its citations were numerous and garnered solely from great men of letters; its style was clear and straightforward; it was comprehensive with relatively few errors. As James Sledd and Gwin Kolb suggest, however, all of Johnson's lexicographical techniques came from Europe; he invented nothing new, although his techniques were new to England. England was clamoring for an authority on the English language; Johnson's Dictionary, commissioned by booksellers, gave England precisely that (Sledd and Kolb, p. 4). Johnson acted as arbiter over what was correct and incorrect, and his tendency was toward conservatism; he eschewed such words, for

example, as **fun**, **stingy**, **banter**, **chaperon**, and to **coax**. He described to **wabble** as "low, barbarous" and to **bamboozle** and **touchy** as "low" (Mencken, p. 100). H.L. Mencken finds this attitude "suffocating formalism" (Mencken, p. 101), but at the time it seemed natural to attempt to determine which words formed a vocabulary that was proper and elegant to speak.

This, then was Webster's precedent, and it is not surprising to see that his first dictionaries followed closely in Johnsonian tradition. His 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language was praised for its "clear, full, and accurate exhibition of all the various shades of meaning", much as Johnson's Dictionary was praised for its comprehensive definitions (Harris, p. v). More importantly, however, Webster acquired Johnson's attitude of the lexicographer as guardian of the language, as seen in his preface to the 1828 edition:

It has been my aim in this work...to ascertain the true principles of the language, in its orthography and structure; to purify it from some palpable errors, and reduce the number of its anomalies...and in this manner, to furnish a standard of our vernacular tongue, which we shall not be ashamed to bequeath to three hundred millions of people, who are destined to occupy and, I hope, to adorn the vast territory within our jurisdiction (Webster, p. 5, quoted in Sledd and Ebbitt, p. 34).

As in Johnson's England, Webster's America wanted this type of dictionary. America was just beginning to come into its own; it had only recently emerged from the Battle of 1812 and was beginning to conquer its Western frontier. American speakers, though, were not particularly concerned about determining which words were elegant; foremost was the question of which words were properly American. Webster standardized British pronunciations and spellings in order to fit his idea of a simplified American standard. Later editions (1840, 1847, 1859, the Unabridged of 1864, 1879) primarily stayed to the same format; except for the addition of a pictorial supplement, the only real difference between editions was the number of words in the vocabulary (Harris, p. v).

In 1888, the first volumes of the New English Dictionary (now the Oxford English Dictionary, henceforth the OED) were published; this scholarly work provided the impetus for a similar American work. The OED's extensive citations and thorough research, as well as listings of all recorded variants, makes it an ideal historical dictionary. The editors of N11 knew that a one-volume dictionary could not be a true historical dictionary; however, the OED was undoubtedly an influence on the comprehensive and encyclopedic nature of the dictionary.

The aims of all these early dictionaries were similar. The lexicographers felt that they were meant to instruct as to correct usage. As Webster wrote in his preface to his American Dictionary, its purpose was to "be a guide to the youth of the United States" (Webster, p. 4, quoted in Sledd and Ebbitt, p. 33). The OED was unlike the other earlier dictionaries in that it did not attempt to

be prescriptive, but historical.

Even the OED, however, was like the early dictionaries (to some degree) in its format. The format and style was simple in early dictionaries: a word followed by all of its meanings, with as many definitions illustrated by literary quotations as possible. The OED, of course, followed this more extensively than either Johnson or Webster, but the style was basically the same. Webster's early dictionaries included separate supplements at the end, such as "Names Noted in Fiction", "English Christian Names", and so on; later dictionaries, both Websterian and not, would combine these words into the main vocabulary section (Harris, p. v).

By 1909, then, lexicographical traditions are fairly established, both in terms of their philosophy of instruction and in traditional dictionary format; with the publication of N11, however, lexicographical tradition begins a slow trend toward descriptive lexicography and more encyclopedic coverage of the language, as indicated in its preface:

The first aim has always been accuracy...In all matters the attitude of the revision has been that it is the function of a dictionary to state the meanings in which words are in fact used, not to give expression to the editors' opinions as to what their meanings should be.

The next most important factors in lexicography, the preface continues, are thoroughness and adequacy of treatment, and finally symmetry and unity in the work (Harris, p. vii).

The critics noticed this trend and approved of it with few hesitations. A typical review is from the New York Sun (10 Oct 1909):

Their aim has been to make the dictionary not a mere standard of literary acceptance but a register of all English terms that are in use and need to be explained. While this may put an end to the worship of the dictionary as the arbiter of what is right and wrong use, it adds immensely to its practical utility and in explaining whatever words puzzle the persons who consult it.

The format of N11, too, was different from that of previous dictionaries. There was a radical change in the construction of the page, primarily in the use of a dividing rule to separate obsolete words, reformed spellings, some variants and foreign words, and other "minor" entries from the body of the vocabulary. These words were still easy to find yet did not distract from the more commonly used words by virtue of their separation. Other format changes often reflected the conflict of the desire to produce a comprehensive dictionary and the reality of producing a one-volume one; the editors try to save space wherever possible, that they might include more words. Examples of space-saving format changes include frequent tables (such as at army organizations), references to obvious prefixes and suffixes (e.g., a below-the-rule definition for stewardship is simply "see -SHIP"), and smaller type (Harris, p. vi).

The primary difference between N11 and earlier Webster's dictionaries is in its encyclopedic nature. Entries such as *arch*, *bone*, *constellation*, *Apocrypha*, *annuity*, and many others include much more than definitions; they include basic information about the subjects. Definitions are given "a more historic method" than in the International. Except for Biographical and Geographical sections, as noted, words in previous supplementary sections are distributed into the main vocabulary. The number of staff specialists was increased for the sake of complete treatment of specific subjects. Finally, as in previous editions of Webster's, the number of words and definitions is increased; here, however, it is increased even more than usual, from around 175,000 words to approximately double that amount (Harris, p. vi).

As previously stated, the critical response to N11 was generally quite positive. Critics accepted the changes in the language with little uneasiness, and so accepted a dictionary that reflected those changes. All of the 1909 reviews praised N11 for not adopting the orthographic "reform" of the Simplified Spelling Board (all words marked "reformed spelling" are below the rule) (Laughlin, p. 105-113). Here, as in most instances, N11 reflects the trend of English; the spelling reform movement died out in a manner of decades. The only generally offered criticism of the dictionary was that it was "extremely susceptible to the appeal of slang", as a *Nation* critic put it; it was not Johnson's idea, he said, to use the dictionary as "an experiment station where verbal candidates are tried out" (*The Nation*, 4 Nov 1909).

By 1934, criticism of this type was fading away; N12 was a somewhat more liberal dictionary for a more linguistically liberal public. Its aims were similar to those of N11's, but it develops the Everyman idea even further--that is, that the dictionary is meant for the average reader (Laughlin, p. 105-113). It attempts to be comprehensive without being historical; this is a fine distinction, however, because in the preface N12 says that it is emphatically a "Citation Dictionary" (Neilson, p. vii). This Everyman idea becomes evident when examining the preface's aims in comparison with the preface of N11. N11's criteria, recall, were accuracy, thoroughness, and unity; N12's listed aims are (in order) accuracy, clearness, and comprehensiveness (Neilson, p. vii). "Clearness" has become a major factor in the preparation of the dictionary, whereas N11 found even simple unity more important. Furthermore, N12 strives to record the language of common usage; it is even more liberal in its acceptance of slang terms than N11 was.

The format changes from N11 to N12 are few but significant; they represent attempts to be encyclopedic without taking up unnecessary room. Color plates and more pictorial illustrations add useful everyday information without taking up much room, for example. The most obvious manifestation of this, though, is found in its lists of compounds and hyphenated words (Neilson, p. vii). Under *bone*, for example, is a listing of "Compounds and Phrases" without definitions: *boneache*, *bone bleacher*, *bone boiler*, *bone-break-*

ing, and so on. Further down the page, after the entry *boned*, appears another such list, with the lead-in "Combinations, meaning having (such) bones, are:" ; this listing includes such hyphenated and solidly-written terms as *bareboned*, *high-boned*, and *stiff-boned*. This technique of listing compounds whose definitions are obvious (or derivable from the meanings of the parts) allows for comprehensive coverage--a reader can see if *bareboned*, for example, is hyphenated or not--without taking up undue room with obvious definitions such as "having bare bones".

The primary difference between N12 and N11 is in the wealth of N12's encyclopedic information. A typical example may be found in the entries for *assets* in both dictionaries. In N11, it is defined in general terms with only a few subdivisions mentioned. In N12, a definition of *assets* in accounting terms is also included, defining such phrases as *quick assets*, *current assets*, and other types. N12 is much more of a general reference book than any previous dictionary in either England or America.

On the whole, the critical reception of N12, like that for N11, was quite positive. Critics found few faults with definitions and etymologies, and the slang entries, as noted, were accepted. (In fact, some critics were disappointed that N12 was not comprehensive enough in its treatment of slang and obscenities.) Negative criticism was generally limited to a few critics' dislike of the pronunciation system and to some dismay at a few definitions that seemed unnecessary, e.g. "wall of stone" for *stone wall*. The basic lexicographical principles were not questioned at all (Laughlin, p. 105-113).

With the 1961 publication of N13, however, the trend away from prescriptiveness suggested in the prefaces to the first two N1s came to a head. N13 represented the first totally descriptive major English dictionary. Its preface states that it adheres to the same three cardinal virtues as N12--accuracy, clearness, and comprehensiveness--yet its aim is very much different (Gove, p. 6a). While N12 was more liberal than its predecessors, it still attempted to suggest proper usages. N13 for the most part eliminates usage labels; it includes only "obsolete", "slang", "archaic", "substandard", and "nonstandard". N13's general purpose was to report on, not to make judgments on, the nature of American English as it existed.

Its format, too, departed greatly from tradition. It excised all words obsolete before the publication of Johnson's dictionary, whereas N12's cutoff date was 1500 (Gove, p. 6a). It eliminated the rule at the bottom of the page as well as the lists of combinations and phrases after entries (*boneache*, *bone bleacher*, *bone boiler*, and *bone-breaking*, for example, are nowhere to be found in N13). Most geographic names are not included except, for some, in adjectival form (e.g., the definition for *Atlanta* begins "of or from Atlanta, the capital of Georgia" but does not include the noun form separately). Most proper names are also not included. The only word capitalized in the entire dictionary is *God*; the rest are printed in lower-case and designated as *cap*, *usu cap*, *often cap*, or sometimes *cap* as necessary. Field labels such as "Music" and "Astron-

omy", printed by appropriate definitions in NI2, are here omitted. The pronunciation system is even more elaborate than previously, with 89 separate symbols and no key at the bottom of the pages. There are many other differences as well, most of which involve more specific details than these (such as the indication of the plural of words ending -Y being the misleading -ES); these are among the most frequently mentioned in critical reviews (Chapman, p. 202-210).

Perhaps the most obvious change, however, is that NI3 changed most of the previous definitions into single phrases. In some cases, such as the infamous example of door's definition, this makes for some confusion:

A movable piece of firm material or a structure supported usu. along one side and swinging on pivots or hinges, sliding along a groove, rolling up and down, revolving as one of four leaves, or folding like an accordion by means of which an opening may be closed or kept open for passage into or out of a building, room, or other covered enclosure or a car, airplane, elevator, or other vehicle...

The editors of NI3, however, made the definitions consistent in this manner; no longer mini-essays, they were short but straightforward phrases that could usually be easily understood (Time, 6 Oct 1961, p. 49).

The differences from NI2, then, involve nearly every aspect of the lexicographical process. Besides focusing on descriptiveness instead of prescriptiveness, NI3 eliminates much of the encyclopedic nature of the previous two NIs. Gone are the supplements such as the Biographical Dictionary and the Gazetteer, for example. Going back to the word assets (listed in NI3 under asset), the definition is of the simpler variety of NI1; however, it lists most, though not all, of NI2 subdivisions of assets as separate cross-references ("see CAPITAL ASSETS, CASH ASSETS, CURRENT ASSETS [...]"). NI3 did not aim to be the general reference book that NI2 was; it simply wanted to present each word in common usage in its proper place in the dictionary (hence the moving of capital assets and the like, as well as the placement of abbreviations in the main vocabulary section) with a definition that would be as clear as possible to as many people as possible.

The critical reception to NI3 could generously be described as mixed; in actuality, many critics attacked it with the ferocity of a wolf pack (Sledd and Ebbitt). Most negative reviews focused on its renunciation of usage authority; several focused specifically on the label for the word ain't, which included the phrase "used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers". As surveys by linguistic geographers have shown, however, ain't is indeed common among cultivated speakers, although not usually accepted in formal writing, and the label is therefore correct (Mencken, p. 462, note 6). Others attacked its lack of encyclopedic coverage; they failed to realize that Gove was not trying to produce another NI2, but a work that had its emphasis on the lan-



guage most likely to be encountered and therefore the most likely to be looked up in the dictionary.

Although not encyclopedic in its scope, many critics faulted the dictionary for its overinclusiveness. For example, a National Review article's criticism:

...the new dictionary has only one standard--inclusiveness. Since this goal can never be achieved, nor all the possible variations be listed or anticipated, the new book is at best inconsistent and at worst oppressive. Since it tries to include everything, it places a strange stigma on those things it overlooks--and they are many. Are these, then, nothing? (Wills, p. 98).

Of course, there will be sins of commission and omission in any dictionary. Yes, N13 overlooks wouldn't; in any dictionary of this size, however--including the previous NIs--errors like this are going to appear.

The critics failed, of course, if their aim in criticism was to strike a significant blow to the acceptance of N13 as the authority on American English. This failure is predictable and certainly understandable. The language of the America of N13 is not the same as that of the America of N12 or N11. The language has been changing, and the attitudes about the language have changed as well. Historically, each NI has been a mirror not only for the language it encompasses but for its time. The efforts of linguistic purists to stop linguistic changes are as fruitless as attempts to stop dialects from evolving or to stop the flow of time itself. When critics realize that language changes, they must realize that one of the purposes of dictionaries is to include and describe those changes. While the NIs have broken with lexicographical tradition -- at first slowly, and then almost entirely--they have not broken with linguistic realities, which is more important. The three NIs reflect not only the language but the needs and desires of their readers as well.

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### A CONCISE DICTIONARY OF ACRONYMS

*Word Ways* readers should by now be familiar with Gale Research Company's three-volume acronym dictionary, the most comprehensive work of its kind in existence (the 1988 edition has more than 450,000 entries). Stuart W. Miller has attempted to fill a different niche with his Concise Dictionary of Acronyms and Initialisms, published by Facts on File in 1988 for \$29.95. In particular, he attempts to identify those acronyms that readers might most frequently inquire about--ones found in newspapers, magazines, or crossword puzzles. This book contains about two thousand in a 175-page book, from A (alto, etc.) to Zr (zirconium).

The dictionary cautions the reader that JAP (Jewish-American Princess) and Bohunk are pejorative, but fails to label MCP (Male Chauvinist Pig) and SOB similarly. I missed an acronym much seen in the last year or two: NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard). Although IBM, GE and GM are widely known, I believe that some of the stock ticker-tape symbols (such as T for AT&T, or KO for Coca-Cola) might better have been omitted.

The author, a librarian, asserts that libraries warmly welcome this reference, and believes that it will be "useful in a personal reference collection as well".