

ANOTHER DICTIONARY CURIO

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Abridged basic dictionaries are rarely plumbed by serious word-watchers. In the February 1995 *Word Ways*, I enumerated the unique and fascinating features of one such elementary dictionary. In continuing to search for its antecedents and variants, I discovered a separate family of intriguing student dictionaries.

Curious features shared by this family of dictionaries include

- * antiquated definitions, although the books bear first publication date of 1988 or later (Car: n. A chariot; a vehicle in pageants; a railway or tramway carriage)
- * religiously partisan entries and definitions, although the book jackets do not hint at any sectarian audience (Christ, n. The ANOINTED; the Messiah; the Saviour)
- * truly quaint definitions (Bird, n. One of the feathered race)
- * omission of many common entries, while including rare and technical terms
- * capitalization of all entries, thus obliterating a useful spelling aid
- * inflated word counts, so that a cover claim of "Over 360,000 words and meanings" actually translates to about 32,000 entries

The dictionaries in question share seven identifying marks: (1) all include the phrase New Webster's Dictionary in their title; (2) all are copyrighted by P.S.I. Associates; (3) their title pages each bear the legend "edited by R.F. Patterson, M.A., D.Litt."; (4) each is also self-described as for "Home - School - Office"; (5) every entry is capitalized; (6) each book begins with a two-page computer glossary; (7) all are paperback.

The four versions that I have in hand are (1) a gray-blue New Webster's Expanded Dictionary ("Over 360,000 words and meanings"), hereafter denoted NWD360; a turquoise-colored New Webster's Dictionary ("Over 250,000 words and meanings"), hereafter abbreviated NWD250; (3) a custard-colored Giant Print New Webster's Dictionary ("Over 125,000 words and definitions"), hereafter called NWD125; and (4) a slim blue volume entitled New Webster's Dictionary, with no word count given, hereafter denoted NWDX. NWDX entries are a selection of the entries of NWD125. NWD125 in turn is a reduced selection of NWD250, and NWD250 is a condensation of NWD360.

Let's look more closely at three aspects of the NWD series: selection of entries, wording of definitions, and random omission of common words.

Selection of Entries

The NWD dictionaries are remarkable both for the entries they include, and the entries they omit. Each edition has an introductory 42-word glossary of computer terms, and each edition defines the disease AIDS. These are virtually the only indications that the dictionaries were printed in the last 40 years. These dictionaries were all published within the last seven years, yet there are no entries for acid rain, astronaut, computer, egghead, feminism, gene, hijacking, nuclear, racism, transistor or Watergate, a few trial words I searched!

The NWD dictionaries all were published in America, but are replete with Briticisms. Petrol is defined, but not gasoline. A billion is defined as "a million of millions". A trillion is "the product of a million multiplied twice by itself." The definition of corn apparently describes wheat instead. NWD360 also includes entries for gaol and draughtsman. The NWD360 definitions for checker and alumina use the British terms chequer and aluminium. These latter words are not, however, separate entries. The British flavor is consistently inconsistent: kerb, tyre, colour and similar spellings are also missing. Spellings such as archaeology and palaeontology were revised to archeology and paleontology, but listed alphabetically as though spelled -aeo-.

"No informal usage!" seems to be a guiding principle of NWD. Flu, memo, polio, sub and zip are not found; the reader must instead know to look up influenza, memorandum, poliomyelitis, submarine and zip-fastener. Other informal usages notably absent include gal, gee, lab, pal, pep, pub and zoo. NWD360 includes math, but only as meaning "a mowing (as in aftermath)". NWD inconsistencies include the presence of entries for blab, blurb, gab, pup, jiffy and dad (but not mom).

Curious and Archaic Definitions

Many words prominent in recent news headlines have simplistic or outmoded NWD definitions that would befuddle the 1990s reader: consider

Budget a little sack with its contents; a stock; the annual statement regarding the British finances

Cocaine the active principle of coca, used as a local anesthetic

Fascist a member of an Italian organization formed to oppose Bolshevism, Communism, and Socialism, in all their forms

Satellite an attendant, an obsequious dependent

See also abortion, colonialism, compute, drug, ether, jet, rocket, space and terrorism.

The NWD definition for Christ, which I quoted above, caught my eye immediately.

Antichrist the great adversary of Christ

Baptist one of those Protestants who believe in adult baptism by immersion

Mormon a member of a sect founded in the United States in 1830, who practice polygamy; a Latter-day Saint

Penitentiary one who does penance; an office or official of the R.

Catholic church connected with the granting of dispensations, etc.; a house of correction

Popery the doctrine and practice of the Roman Catholic church (a Protestant term)

Sabbath the day of rest; Sunday

Non-neutral definitions also include those for Catholic, curia, gospel, Inquisition, Jesus, Messiah, papist and transfiguration.

Some definitions reflect considerable male chauvinism, for example

Catamaran a kind of raft; a cross-grained woman

Clergy the body or order of men set aside for the service of God, in the Christian church

Hysteria a nervous affection chiefly attacking women, characterized by laughing and crying, convulsive struggling, sense of suffocation, etc.

Mankind the species of human beings; males of the human race

Prude a woman affecting great reserve and excessive delicacy

Many medical definitions have a Victorian flavor. Besides abortion, cocaine and hysteria, all cited previously, unhelpful medical definitions include

Genetic relating to origin or production

Hymen the god of marriage

Malaria noxious exhalations causing fever; fever produced by this cause

Obstetric related to midwifery

Vaccine pertaining to cows or to cowpox

Virus contagious poisonous matter; extreme acrimony; malignity

Other definitions that seem light-years removed from an MTV-age dictionary include

Addict to apply habitually, generally in a bad sense

Caption seizure; arrest; heading or short title of a division of a book, or of a scene in a cinematograph film

Cartel a challenge; an agreement for the exchange of prisoners

Fake to lay a rope in coils

Galaxy the Milky Way; that long, luminous track in the heavens, formed by a multitude of stars; an assemblage of splendid persons or things

Sambo the offspring of a black person and a mulato [sic]

Even the separate computer glossary has anachronistic entries for a book first published on the eve of the 1990s. Long-bypassed CP/M receives equal billing with DOS as a computer operating system; data cassettes are defined as a primary computer storage medium, although they "transfer 30-120 bytes (characters) per second. That's slow." The glossary further informs us that "most personal computers store up to 64K bytes (64,000 characters)."

Some NWD definitions are memorable for their simple ingenuousness. A few choice morsels are

Bonnet a dress for the head

Buxom gay; brisk; wanton

Colt a young male of the horse kind; a young foolish fellow

Copulate to come together, as different sexes

Moon the changing luminary of the night

Orgasm immoderate excitement or action

Pilgrimage a journey to some holy place; the journey of human life

Omissions of Common Words

I was earlier shocked to discover an elementary dictionary that left out 40 per cent of the most common two-, three- and four-letter words. Two of the four NWD editions approach this record! How can you describe a dictionary that omits an, if, me, of, ox, us, ask, dog, joy, now, old, the, two, way and zoo, but finds space to define bagnio, chalybeate, ctenoid, epithalamium, glyptic, jardiniere, nuciferous, syzygy, xylophagous and zoetrope?

The first fact to consider is the dictionaries' word counts. For instance, NWD250 advertises "Over 250,000 words and meanings." Users might be led to understand that the dictionary has over 250,000 entries. This is impossible, since NWD250 has only 252 pages, with an average 81 entries per page. NWD thus has about 20,500 actual entries. Similarly, NWD125 has an estimated 12,200 entries, and NWDX about 9,400 entries.

To further investigate the NWD dictionaries systematically, I refined a computerized wordlist. Scanning 14 independent wordlists of varying size, I included only the 8350 words or entries found in all of them. The table below gives the number of two-letter, three-letter and four-letter words that the various NWD dictionaries missed.

NWD360 (32,400 words)	3 of 30	12 of 349	24 of 1212
NWD250 (20,500 words)	5 of 30	28 of 349	58 of 1212
NWD125 (12,200 words)	11 of 30	128 of 349	381 of 1212
NWDX (9,400 words)	12 of 30	159 of 349	484 of 1212

NWD250 omitted only ad, ax, ha, id and la; NWD125 and NWDX further omitted such common words as an, if, me, of, ox and we. Their rate of omission among two-letter words was 37 to 40 per cent.

Among 349 common three-letter words on my list, NWD360 omitted only 12, many of which were apparently too slangy for Dr. Peterson. NWDX omitted 159 of 349 words, a staggering 46 per cent omission rate! Inexplicable three-letter omissions in the intermediate NWD125 include aid, and, bar, big, but, dig, era, fit, gun, jar, joy, now, old, ore, rat, sad, she, sin, sky, son, the, two, way, yet, you.

Among the 1212 common four-letter words on my list, NWD360 missed only 24, and NWD250 only 58. But NWD125 missed 31 per cent, while NWDX missed 40 per cent. Amazing four-letter omissions from NWD125 included able, bird, busy, case, city, coal, cold, cure, date, earn, fair, fold, germ, king, lady, maid, more, must, neck, nice, null, pile, play, rain, real, room, same, shoe, some, this, tire, tree, wall, wild, wine and wise.

To put the above omission rates in context, I tabulated the same statistics for a hard-cover Thorndike Barnhart Beginning Dictionary (1974 edition) which I had at hand. This common school dictionary had some 15,500 entries, and its omission rates among common two-, three- and four-letter words were 7, 6 and 5 per cent respectively. These rates are similar to NWD250 and may represent an acceptable threshold rate for basic dictionaries. The rates are leagues better than NWD125, which could easily be mistaken for NWD250 in appearance.

Cursory perusal revealed a few instances of extended lexicographic lacunae between consecutive entries: beef-bereft, birch-bismuth, bowsprit-bracket, cactus-caisson, door-dossier, eligibility-elongation, gadget-gallant, knowledge-labor, nude-number, ribald-ricochet, righteous-riotous, runner-rustic and tawdry-teak. A later (1994) edition of NWD250 capriciously omits 16 pairs of consecutive pages and renumbers pages accordingly.

In a random sampling of the NWD series, I encountered various cases where compounds of a word were defined, but not the stem. Examples from NWD125 include iconoslast [sic] and iconography as entries, but not icon; reef-point but not reef; hamstring but not ham; cow-catcher but not cow; Dog-star but not dog; airplane and airport, but not air.

After an independent survey of NWD250, Ross Eckler concluded that the NWD are merely unattributed reprints of a British dictionary that must have been compiled, or last revised, prior to 1946. The most recent entries he noted were wartime terms like jeep, atomic bomb, radar, plutonium and nylon; other World War II entries include blitz, Gestapo, Nazi, penicillin and swastika. Eckler's deduction satisfies many questions about these dictionaries. Even if the NWD dictionaries were intact resurrections from a 1940s time capsule, however, some of their cited definitions would already be anachronistic or merely quaint.

You can't judge a book by its cover: that time-worn proverb is nowhere better illustrated than by the NWD dictionaries. "Over 250,000 Words and Meanings" and "New Computer Terms Section" are large-print boasts on their bright modern covers. "1990 Edition" reads a typical NWD title page, yet the definitions are throwbacks to a halcyon age. NWD250 and NWD125 closely resemble each other in size, but the former defines a relatively complete set of words while the latter omits up to 40 per cent of a benchmark list. One wonders how many schools and parents have bought NWD dictionaries with no idea of their inflated word counts, chauvinistic and sectarian flavoring, distinctive antiquarian charm and curious vocabulary selection.