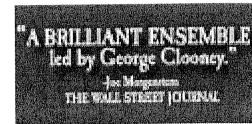


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When a Dictionary Could Outrage

By GEOFFREY NUNBERG

“A passel of double-domes at the G. & C. Merriam Company joint in Springfield, Mass., have been confabbing and yakking for 27 years — which is not intended to infer that they have not been doing plenty work.” Thus began an editorial that appeared in The New York Times on Oct. 12, 1961, excoriating the recently published Webster’s Third New International Dictionary.

At 2,700 pages and almost 14 pounds, Webster’s Third was a literally weighty work, the product of over 700 editor-years of effort, the publisher boasted. But it was widely denounced for what critics viewed as a lax admissions policy: it opened its columns to parvenus like “litterbug” and “wise up,” declined to condemn “ain’t,” and illustrated its definitions with quotations from down-market sources like Ethel Merman and Betty Grable. That was reason enough for The Times to charge that Merriam had “surrendered to the permissive school” and that the dictionary’s “say as you go” approach would surely accelerate the deterioration already apparent in the language. In The New Yorker, Dwight Macdonald wrote that the editors had “made a sop of the solid structure of English,” and in an Atlantic article called “Sabotage in Springfield,” Wilson Follett called the Third a “fighting document” that was “out to destroy . . . every obstinate vestige of linguistic punctilio, every surviving influence that makes for the upholding of standards.” (The dereliction that most appalled Follett was the Third’s refusal to reject “that darling of the advanced libertarians,” the use of “like” as a conjunction.)

The uproar spilled over beyond the culture pages. In his novel “Gambit,” Rex Stout had his detective Nero Wolfe feed his Third to the fire a page at a time while declaring it “subversive and intolerably offensive.” In a New Yorker cartoon by Alan Dunn, a receptionist at Merriam tells a visitor: “Sorry. Dr. Gove ain’t in.” The reference was to Philip Babcock Gove, editor of the Third. A crusty former Naval Reserve officer from New Hampshire and a political conservative, Gove was an unlikely target for vilifications like “subversive” and “Bolshevik.” But it was his fate to become the only American lexicographer whose name could appear in a New Yorker caption without need of identification.

Gove was naïve to imagine that the dictionary could be purged of all subjective value judgments. Yet the Third wasn't the radical manifesto critics made it out to be. Mmes. Merman and Grable notwithstanding, its three most frequently cited sources were Shakespeare, the Bible and Milton. And the editors insisted — quaintly, by modern lights — on including only words that had been documented in respectable venues. In a letter responding to the Times editorial, Gove pointed out that “double-dome” had been used by John Mason Brown and Alistair Cooke, and that “finalize” could be found in “highly reputable places” like The New Republic and The Times itself.

Still, the controversy signaled a turning point in American attitudes about language. It introduced the words “prescriptivist” and “descriptivist” into the cultural conversation, and fixed the battle lines for the ritualized squabble over standards that persists across media old and new. The keening indignation, the dire prophecies of imminent cultural disintegration — it's easy to have the impression that little has changed over the past 50 years.

But the furor over Webster's Third also marked the end of an era. It's a safe bet that no new dictionary will ever incite a similar uproar, whatever it contains. The dictionary simply doesn't have the symbolic importance it did a half-century ago, when critics saw the Third as a capitulation to the despised culture of middlebrow, what Dwight Macdonald called the “tepid ooze of Midcult.” That was probably the last great eruption of cultural snobbery in American public life. Today's defenders of Western culture sound their alarms just as clamorously, but they wouldn't be so uncool as to object when a dictionary draws its words from hip-hop or the Internet: now all is legitimated under the rubric of pop culture.

In retrospect, in fact, the Third seems downright fusty. Word harvesting in Gove's time hadn't changed since Samuel Johnson, with readers patiently culling citations from printed works. Now the Internet puts tens of thousands of new words at the lexicographer's fingertips, the great majority of them technical terms, media stunt words like “Brangelina” and “sexploits,” or what Dr. Johnson would have called the “fugitive cant” of chat rooms, tweets and social networks (think of “meep” and “woot”). And modern dictionaries don't keep words waiting in the vestibule long. Over the last year the Oxford English Dictionary has inducted “wassup,” “BFF” and “muffin top” (of the abdominal, not the culinary, variety). The new Chambers Dictionary includes “freegan” and “geek chic,” and Merriam-Webster has recently added “staycation.” Not that lexicographers will include any word that swims into their ken: so far they've drawn the line at “refudiate,” though the editors of the Oxford American chose it for their 2010 Word of the Year. But nowadays the dictionary is about as hard to get into as Sam's Club.

A lot of these items will expire before your hamster does. But there's little need for a bouncer at the door once dictionaries go online, where space is effectively limitless. And one can make room in print editions by tossing out last season's fads, like "yadda, yadda" and "Monicagate," both of which were proffered as evidence of the up-to-dateness of the Encarta World English Dictionary when it was published in 1999. (Though it was perhaps rash for the Oxford Concise to squeeze in "jeggings" and "mankini" by dropping "cassette tape," a word that may yet require elucidation for antiquarians poring over early issues of Rolling Stone.)

True, many new additions are solid citizens, like "C.F.O." and "USB." But publishers know it's the pop-culture words that the media will write about, under headings like " 'Woot,' 'Sexting' Now Officially Real Words." And where critics once railed at dictionaries for including popular slang, now they greet it appreciatively. When the O.E.D. announced that it would be including texting abbreviations, The Times ran an editorial headed "OMG!!!! OED LOL!!!!," exulting that the inclusion of Internet parlance in "our most exalted linguistic inventory" was an "affirmation of the plasticity of the English language."

But in one regard The Times hasn't changed its attitude over the last half-century. Whether condemning Webster's Third for including "yak" or applauding the O.E.D. for adding "OMG," it has always assumed, like most everyone else, that the recognition conferred status as a "real word." Yet lexicographers themselves disavow any such role — their inclusion of "woot" or "staycation" means little more than that the words have been popping up a lot lately. Indeed, the day is long past when any dictionary could circumscribe the "official" language. The boundaries are irremediably blurred — between public and private, formal and casual, high, middle and low.

Even so, people continue to grant the dictionary an exalted status. It can trick itself out in jeggings and mankinis, but the public still pictures it wearing a bow tie and a seersucker suit. Understandably, dictionary publishers aren't above trading on those attitudes to promote their books. But they haven't quite come to terms with one telling point that Wilson Follett made in his philippic on the Third: "The lexicographer cannot abrogate his authority if he wants to."

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