

**Language Variation  
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# Learning from Dictionaries

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EVERYBODY knows what a dictionary is, in a vague way, but not enough users realize what a tremendous lot of information is compacted into the one or more volumes, or what generations of scholarship and practical ingenuity have gone into its preparation. The approach of most dictionary readers is immediate and limited. They want to check on a spelling, a meaning, a grammatical point, or (bless them!) an etymology or historical source. That is what they do with the dictionary, and it is perfectly legal. But they are not really using the dictionary. For that, one has to have more than a momentary interest. The true reader of dictionaries is the person who, having (like everyone else) a question to be answered, gets out the book and starts leafing toward the proper place but does not get to it directly—perhaps not at all. This reader's track is a zigzag, like the flight of a bee, ranging here and there but not methodically. Among so many kinds of flowers the temptation to sample is irresistible. They all furnish nectar and wax—what Matthew Arnold called “sweetness and light”—and the supply is inexhaustible.

So this poor wight (see under *W*), leafing along toward, let's say, *eschew* or *hebetude*, spots a picture of an *oryx* or a *festoon* and pauses to learn about it. Or else the corner of his eye catches the letter combination *spl-*, which runs down from *splash* to *splatter* to *splenetic*, all of which stir his curiosity. Or up comes a cross-reference with the mysterious abbreviation “*cf.* this” or “*cf.* that,” which needs to be explained. So the obedient reader looks up the list of abbreviations and finds that *cf.* is short for Latin *confer*, which means *see further*, and such knowledge starts another chase. A “true reader” really enjoys the dictionary, has fun with it, rides it like a pet horse, builds up the Scrabble muscles, gets his or her money's worth out of it.

Dictionaries have to be of different sizes, from pocket size up to the multivolume, according to the user's need. For most people, most of the time, a medium-sized one-volume book, easily portable for quick look-up and for playing word games, will have most of the words they want and a great many more than they would probably ever use. But that's where the “money's worth” begins. Within the limits of its size, a good one-volume dictionary gives an astonishing amount of information. The basics are spelling, pronunciation, grammar (part of speech), etymology (historical source), meaning or meanings, and some indication of the word's status in use.

Familiarity with these elements is, of course, essential if we are really to understand the word and use it appropriately.

The *headword* under which this information is listed is given in the currently accepted "standard" spelling. Readers who want to know how people spelled a word in past times must go to a much larger, historical dictionary with dated entries, such as the big *Oxford*, of which the first edition has twelve volumes plus four supplementary ones. If a portable, medium-sized book does not have the information they need, they can consult the big one. It covers the English language from Anglo-Saxon beginnings to its present worldwide use. There is so much in it that even experienced readers find it difficult going. For most people, the medium-sizer is enough.

How do lexicographers (dictionary makers) decide what words to put in and what to leave out? The language has had, and lost, many thousands of words, formerly common, now no longer used. They have become fossils, historical curiosities. The useful contemporary dictionary will try to include all the words now or recently current that anyone would be likely to look up. How recent? A rule of thumb says, anything used in the past hundred years. But the closer we get to the present moment, the more difficult it becomes to decide. New words are popping up every day; many writers invent or concoct words as a feature of their style; new inventions, methods, discoveries, attitudes, and happenings become facts of contemporary life and have to be named. The dictionary cannot possibly put everything in. Furthermore, those new words are of uncertain viability; many will disappear in a short time, others in a few years; yet others will have come to stay. The lexicographer has to estimate future trends and omit the probably ephemeral words. For the most recent words and meanings there are *The Third Barnhart Dictionary of New English* (Barnhart) and the *Merriam Twelve Thousand New Words*.

Since some words have more than one accepted spelling—with the variants about equally frequent in use—the spelling of both or all should be recorded. Examples are *forbade*–*forbad* (an older and a newer form), *scull*–*skull* (in boating), and (in the big Merriam-Webster's *Third New International* triple variants, *piggyback*, *pickaback*, and *pig-a-back*, which represent slight differences of pronunciation associated with different ways of interpreting or understanding the word.

When such variants are given, it must be understood that they are equally acceptable. A second or third spelling would not be given unless it occurred about as often as the first. Word-frequency counts help the lexicographer decide which form to enter first, but when the tallies are roughly the same, the older form is usually given precedence (as in the case of *forbade*) as the more "conservative." Writers using the dictionary ma

choose between alternative spellings according to their own stylistic taste or purposes.

It is probably most often in regard to pronunciation that people misunderstand and misuse the dictionary. They assume that there is only one "right" way to pronounce words and that the dictionary is a sort of judge, exercising linguistic laws to condemn mispronunciations. For them what the dictionary prints has the force of gospel truth. Such commandments are not what modern scientific dictionaries try to write. It is true that the pronunciation or pronunciations given are intended to represent a kind of standard. But since pronunciations, even those of educated speakers, vary widely throughout the world, the dictionary maker has to choose. For whom is the book intended? Users in England, in America, foreigners learning English? What shall it recognize—British differences, Canadian, Australian? Limitations of space again come into play: the prevailing differences of pronunciation among educated speakers in one nation or another may be given; beyond that, only conspicuous variants. But a modern dictionary's pronunciation is descriptive—it does not tell the reader how he or she *should* pronounce. Nor can it record all the variant ways in which a word is pronounced. For example: British *prīvacy*, American *prīvacy*; British *med's'n*, American *medis'n*; British *coróllary*; American *córollary*. If one wants greater detail, there are pronouncing dictionaries—in Britain, Daniel Jones's, in the United States, John Kenyon and Thomas Knott's. If you are looking for folk speech or regional differences, that's, as they say, a whole nother ball game: consult the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, edited by Cassidy. It does not at present go beyond the letter *H*, but it covers the whole country, and more volumes are in preparation.

In indicating pronunciation, each dictionary has its own scheme, which will be found somewhere in the book, usually in the introduction. More scholarly dictionaries approximate the International Phonetic Alphabet, and the middle-size are moving in that direction. Whatever the scheme favored, it is essential that the user find it and apply it; otherwise the information about pronunciation is sure to be misunderstood.

Dictionaries generally record the part of speech, or grammatical class of each word, as it stands in the present state of the language. But the English language is subject to easy variation, and even the best writers, with a sensitive feel for what is acceptable, may use a word as a part of speech it has never been used as before. This is especially evident in the way English can shift back and forth between verbal and nominal uses and has been doing so ever since it lost a distinctive inflectional system late in Anglo-Saxon times—and the practice is increasing nowadays. *Talk* as a verb came into English in the thirteenth century; in the fifteenth it also became a noun, and both are quite

normal today, though the first time the word was used as a noun it have seemed a bit strange. *Tail*, an old Germanic word, is a noun in earliest Anglo-Saxon records; it did not come in as a verb till the seventeenth century, but once in, the usage became fully established. Today we are accustomed to having detectives or secret service people *tailing* their vic

The earliest record of *syllable* as an English noun is found in Chaucer's late-fourteenth-century use; it did not become a verb till the early seventeenth, when Milton writes of "airy tongues that syllable men's nar Such shifts or "conversions," now commonplace, may be deliberately as elements of style. Under sensitive control, functional shifts can be effective; they can also produce blundersome results. Other converted of speech, in effect new words, include adjective to noun: "a serious preposition to noun: "an *in* with the management"; noun to adjective: "party"; and so on. Such conversions are easy to make, but the dictionary record only those that have become accepted in general usage.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with new words. In a changing developing world we need them. Many will be attempted: those that p really useful will survive. A recent example is the word *hopefully* in the s of "it is to be hoped" or "I hope": "Hopefully I can finish this job today had appeared occasionally from the 1930s forward; then suddenly in 1960s it began to pop up everywhere. Puristic critics, always suspicious any novelty or vogue, strongly condemned it. One writer in the *New Times*, which holds up a high standard of usage, enclosed the term in quotation marks as if it smelled bad. Certainly he did not accept it fully. How *hopefully* in this sense has proved so useful and has been adopted so wi in following years that some former critics have recanted; only the 1 conservative still object to it, and it has spread from the United State Britain, Australia, and other parts of the English-speaking world. It now be considered established in acceptable usage.

Nowadays we are less afraid of neologisms than in former centu Foreigners producing pseudo-English expressions are a source of hum native speakers, and some natives can blunder ludicrously, but those have a sensitive feel for the language can produce effective and accept new words.

An important guide for full understanding of the meaning of a w is its etymology—its historical source, where it came from and how it de oped—generally given in middle-sized and larger dictionaries. Some w retain their original meaning closely; very few ever lose all connection v it. Because English began as a Germanic language, the majority of its b words are of that origin: *head, foot, body, arm; strong, weak, great, small; l hate, land, sea*, and thousands more. They form the core; not many h

been displaced by later acquisitions. The French words brought in with the Norman Conquest and after are the only other body of terms to become deeply planted, especially short words of everyday occurrence, such as *chief*, *corps*, *brace*, *fort*, *grand*, *voyage*—in frequency of use, only one step behind the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary.

Latin words began coming into English with Christianity—*deacon*, *altar*, *Satan*, and others—and continued down the years also in secular uses into the Renaissance and later. As such words became common, new ones were formed with the addition of Latin prefixes and suffixes. Since Latin was the first language of education, these derived words, competing with the native Germanic words, carry an air of importance and, at their best, dignity that the simpler words may not have. Compare Anglo-Saxon *strength*, French *power*, Latin *potency*—with their decided though subtle differences of implication.

The growing influence of Latin as the language of the church and of law led to sometimes false latinization of earlier words: Anglo-Saxon *igland* became modern *island* under the influence of Latin *insula*, to which it is unrelated historically. Similarly, the word *soldier* came into English in the thirteenth century from Old French *soudier* (a fighting man paid with *sous*), but by the next century, under the influence of Latin *solidus* and *solidarius*, it acquired the *l*, which it has preserved ever since. (Incidentally, the pronunciation without *l* can still be heard and is colloquially spelled *soger*.) To know the origin and development of a word can add greatly to our appreciation and effective use of it.

Many dictionaries include lists of synonyms, or words of closely similar meaning, as in *strength*, *power*, and *potency* noted above. These have a basic similarity of meaning but at the margins they can differ greatly, and no sensitive user of the language would confuse them. In fact, though many meanings come close, it is safe to say that no two words are ever identical. The careful speaker and writer must be perpetually aware of this. Good definitions show the core of similarity and the shades of difference among words; synonymies come closer by putting the words side by side.

Dictionaries pay attention in another way to the differing colors or weights of words—specifically, the types of speakers who use or avoid them, the occasions on which they are ordinarily used, the kinds of discourse to which they are appropriate. Such indication is usually done with usage labels, which vary according to the editors' purpose. A prescriptive dictionary—common in the latter eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries—sought to warn the reader against usages considered unsuitable to elegant, careful, upper-class, or literary style. Labels often used were *illiterate*, *vulgar*, *low*, *cant*, *dialectal*, *provincial*. With the rise of general education, prohibitions of

this kind have been greatly moderated. The former literary or written standard has been adjusted toward an educated colloquial standard: usage labels are less threatening. Nevertheless, words cannot be rightly used without respect to context: plain objects such as “shoes and ships and sealing-wax” may need no more than a plain definition, but for a great many others a guiding label of some sort is clearly necessary. Usage labels that appear frequently today are *colloquial* (which many people confuse with *local*), *dialectal* (which is still widely taken as condemnatory even when not intended so), and *slang*, which is the most difficult to define and therefore tends to become a catchall for anything nonstandard. Conservative publications with an ear for style hold to a less colloquial level, but stories and plays that depict speakers of all social levels and types must represent their speech accurately—and the dictionary that does its descriptive duty and aims at a wide body of users must put in all kinds of language and must label entries appropriately. Careful editorial notes are often added when space can be afforded.

Finally, of course, and of prime importance, are the definitions. The writing of definitions is both a discipline and an art. The discipline consists in extracting the senses of a word or phrase by collecting, comparing, and digesting actual examples of its use and working out ways—sometimes formulas—for stating the result. The familiar formula “of or pertaining to” appears as early as 1623, in Henry Cockeram’s *English Dictionarie*: “*Local*. Of, or belonging to a place.” This and other established methods of concise statement enable the definer to come neatly to the point.

Defining as an art requires that one find an accurate synonym or a paraphrase that describes the thing referred to, usually in simpler terms, and says neither more nor less than necessary to do so. Dr. Johnson’s often derided definition of *network* is an example of Homer nodding: “*Network*. Anything reticulated or decussated at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections.” The familiarity of the word and the apparent simplicity of the thing make such a definition seem ludicrously ponderous—like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. But these lapses on Johnson’s part were few. Every so often in the *OED* one finds a definition taken from Johnson’s *Dictionary* and repeated verbatim with the simple acknowledgment “Johnson.” This is the highest form of praise: James Murray, the editor, is admitting, “I cannot improve on this.”

The most often used, apparently most simple, words develop many different senses. A good dictionary normally presents these meanings in a rational sequence that gives due attention to the dates at which each new meaning developed and others died out. The lines of sense development are usually straightforward, the literal meanings coming first and the transferred

or metaphorical ones later. But there are some curious exceptions, as in the case of *fast*. This was present in Anglo-Saxon as both adjective and adverb, with the simple meaning of "firm" or "fixed"; the word developed within the period the further sense of "tight," then "vigorous," and ultimately "quick" or "rapid"—the exact opposite of the first sense. Both senses survive today: "Tie it fast" is completely ambiguous out of context.

Some dictionaries list variant meanings not in the order of historical development; but, assuming that the reader is most likely to want the current senses, they give those first and the older meanings later. This "quick lookup" feature may be more convenient for the reader who presumably comes to the desired information sooner, but it does not illustrate as well the chronology of sense development, which shows the life and growth of the word.

Finally, it is safe to say that every user of the language, without exception, can learn from a good dictionary. It is a compendium (see under *C*) of most that is known about the vocabulary or lexicon of a language and usually includes the parts of morphology and syntax reflected in the form of words, the common phrases and collocations into which the words enter, and their stylistic status. We learn our language to a great extent piecemeal, haphazardly, putting it more or less in order as we go. But the structure as a whole does not always emerge clearly: we tend to remain with a jigsaw of partial patterns and missing pieces. The dictionary, intelligently and regularly used, is a great aid to completing the picture, to ordering, enlarging, and refining our command of the language both as speaker and writer. The *maker* of a dictionary, in Dr. Johnson's rueful words, may feel at times like a "harmless drudge," but no *readers* of a dictionary need ever feel that way. Between the two covers of that one book they have, in Christopher Marlowe's phrase, "infinite riches in a little room."