

THE AMERICAN HERITAGE
DICTIONARY
OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

WILLIAM MORRIS, Editor

Published by

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY / BOSTON
ATLANTA / DALLAS / GENEVA, ILLINOIS / HOPEWELL, NEW JERSEY / PALO ALTO

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Two Park Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02107

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ISBN: 0-395-20360-0 (new college edition; thumb-indexed)
0-395-20359-7 (new college edition; plain edges)
0-395-24575-3 (high-school edition)
0-395-09066-0 (larger-format edition)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-86995

Manufactured in the United States of America

Computer-composed by Inforonics, Inc.
in Maynard, Massachusetts

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Introduction

by William Morris

This Dictionary of the English language is an entirely new work and it represents in many respects a notable departure from previous British and American lexicographical practice. The editors of this Dictionary approached their task imbued with a deep sense of responsibility as custodians of tradition in language. Consequently at a time when language, already a historical melting pot, was and is under constant challenge—from the scientist, the bureaucrat, the broadcaster, the innovator of every stripe, even the voyager in space—the editors undertook to prepare a new dictionary. It would faithfully record our language, the duty of any lexicographer, but it would not, as so many others in these permissive times, rest there. On the contrary, it would add the essential dimension of guidance—that sensible guidance toward grace and precision that intelligent people seek in a dictionary.

To many people a dictionary is a forbidding volume, a useful but bleak compendium, to be referred to hastily for needed information, such as spelling and pronunciation. Yet what a dictionary ought to be is a treasury of information about every aspect of words, our most essential tools of communication. It should be an agreeable companion. By knowledgeable use of the dictionary we should learn where a word has come from, precisely what its various shades of meaning are today, and its social status.

In the five years of preparation of this work, many of the leading scholars and scientists of the English-speaking world have collaborated with our permanent editorial staff in the enterprise of recording with accuracy and authority those elements of our language which are of concern to literate people. The vocabulary recorded here, ranging from the language of Shakespeare to the idiom of the present day, is that of the educated adult. The “educated adult” referred to is, of

course, a kind of ideal person, for he has at his fingertips a most comprehensive lexicon, not only for the conduct and discussion of everyday affairs, but also for all of the arts and all of the sciences.

We have had the enthusiastic cooperation of many distinguished linguists, several of whom have contributed articles on their areas of special interest in the pages following. Morris Bishop, poet and past president of the Modern Language Association, comments with wit and keen perception on the levels of usage to be found in our society today and the contributions of our Usage Panelists (described below) in resolving controversial questions of linguistic propriety. Morton Bloomfield, Professor of English at Harvard University, records the story of the evolution of the English language from its Germanic origins to the present day. Calvert Watkins, Professor of Linguistics and the Classics at Harvard University, contributes a fascinating account of the Indo-European origins of English. Henry Lee Smith, Jr., one of the nation’s best-known linguistic scholars, Professor of Linguistics and English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, analyzes the relationships among the diverse American dialects. Richard Ohmann, Professor of English at Wesleyan University and editor of *College English*, the journal of the National Council of Teachers of English, analyzes grammar and meaning in light of the most recent research. Wayne O’Neil, Professor of Humanities at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, explicates new insights into the relationship of spelling to pronunciation in English. Henry Kučera, Professor of Linguistics and of Slavic Languages at Brown University, describes the application of computers to linguistic analysis and lexicography. Taken together, these introductory articles bring layman and student alike abreast of the latest important

developments in language study.

We have engaged the services of hundreds of authorities in every range of human endeavor and scholarship, from archaeology to space research, from Indo-European to computer programming. Over a four-year period, many thousands of definitions were sent to these specialists for emendation or approval.

To furnish the guidance which we believe to be an essential responsibility of a good dictionary, we have frequently employed usage-context indicators such as "slang," "nonstandard," or "regional." But going beyond that, we asked a panel of 100 outstanding speakers and writers a wide range of questions about how the language is used today, especially with regard to dubious or controversial locutions. After careful tabulation and analysis of their replies, we have prepared several hundred usage notes to guide readers to effectiveness in speech and writing. As a consequence, this Dictionary can claim to be more precisely descriptive, in terms of current usage levels, than any heretofore published—especially in offering the reader the lexical opinions of a large group of highly sophisticated fellow citizens.

In order to acquaint the reader with the history of our language, we engaged a special staff of more than a score of linguistic scholars, working under the direction of Professor Watkins at Harvard. With the help of the Dictionary's own staff of etymologists, they conducted a five-year research program amounting to a re-evaluation of the histories of all the words in the Dictionary. The etymologies are written in plain language with no abbreviations or symbols. In addition, an innovation was made in presenting more fully than ever before the *prehistoric* origins of the language; following the main body of the Dictionary is an Appendix of Indo-European roots, giving detailed and fascinating information about the ancient interrelationships of thousands of widely different words.

A major concern of the editors has been the language used in the word definitions themselves. Our aim has been to phrase definitions in concise, lucid prose. Here, too, we have undertaken to eliminate "dictionary shorthand"—the frustrating signs, symbols, and abbreviations that are commonplace in other dictionaries. Except for a few obvious abbreviations (*n.* for *noun*, *v.* for *verb*, and the like), we have followed a policy of spelling out all definitions. Where necessary to clarify a meaning or idiomatic usage, the editors have included an example, either quoted from literature or staff-written. We have also eliminated the meaningless lists of undefined compound forms which serve, in many American dictionaries,

merely the purpose of inflating the so-called "entry count."

Simplicity and clarity have been sought in the system of representing the pronunciations. American speech takes many forms. The aim here is not to represent all or even most of its variations, but to provide one or more pronunciations for each word that can be easily reproduced from familiar symbols by the reader untrained in phonetics. The pronunciations are those that would be regarded as standard even by those who may themselves have regional "accents."

One important aspect of the fresh approach taken by the editors of this Dictionary is obvious at a glance. Utilizing the most recent advances in typographic design and printing, we have created what we believe to be a most attractive dictionary. The page, with its large, readable type and wide margins, was expressly designed to invite *reading*. The inclusion of several thousand illustrations, both in line drawings and photography, represents another notable advance in dictionary design. The pictures have been chosen as much as possible in an attempt to add genuine meaning to the subjects they illustrate. Though the pictures are in many cases attractive in themselves, the aim has been less to add beauty to the book than to give the reader fuller information than would be possible in a dictionary of traditional design.

As has been implied above, a primary aim of our staff has been to make this Dictionary as readable as we possibly could. We editors know that dictionaries can be fascinating. Working closely with them day by day, we see the vast amounts of interesting information that many users are not aware of, usually because it is hard to work one's way through the thorny underbrush of conventional sign language to find the treasure that lies buried in the entries. It is our earnest hope that, by presenting our Dictionary in inviting and readily readable fashion, without any lessening of authority, we will encourage the reader to explore and enjoy the riches of our remarkable tongue.

In the preparation of a work of this magnitude the cooperation of many hands and minds is essential. Of greatest significance, perhaps, has been the generous contribution of the members of our Usage Panel, who borrowed many hours from their busy pursuits to the end of creating what one panelist calls "a dictionary put together with deep respect for people who have an eye and ear and tongue for what is still the richest, most rewarding language in the world."

Thanks, too, are due to our many consultants and advisors in the various scholarly, scientific, and technological disciplines. To the scores of our editorial staff associates involved in the day-to-day tasks of creating and editing this Dictionary, we extend our unstinting thanks and appreciation.