

WHITHER THE DESK DICTIONARY?

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For a number of reasons an exaggerated reverence for the dictionary has always constituted an important aspect of North American culture. This has had some unfortunate consequences, notably a timidity in, and the preservation of an authoritarian attitude toward, matters of language. On the credit side, our willingness to buy dictionaries has made the compilation and publication of them a profitable business; as a consequence, American initiative has given the consumer far better dictionaries for less money than can be purchased in any other country.

Again, however, the fact that dictionaries must be commercially profitable has resulted in certain unfortunate emphases. An undue amount of stress has been placed upon their prescriptive rather than their descriptive functions. Much material not strictly the business of the lexicographer has come to be included in them. Most striking of all, within recent years, has been the tremendous increase in the size of the dictionary. Within the last seventy-five years, the volume intended for handy desk or table reference has swollen from a modest two or three hundred pages to somewhere between twelve and fourteen hundred, necessitating at times the use of paper too thin to be serviceable. The volume has increased in size and thickness until today, if desk dictionary is still to be considered the appropriate term, the volume belongs with Biedermann furniture; it certainly does not match an *escritoire*. Desk dictionaries today have nearly one-fourth as many entries as the unabridged Webster or the Oxford.

It has already been suggested that this increase in size is due primarily to commercial competition rather than to a careful attempt to meet the precise needs of consumer. Charts, illustrations, the total number of entries all make good advertising copy and sales talk. As a consequence, every new entrant in the field must meet the challenge of its predecessors with more charts, more illustrations, and a larger number of entries. To this the latest comer, the G. & C. Merriam Company's Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary is no exception. It had to equal or surpass the previous records established by the American College Dictionary, which made a profound impression upon its appearance approximately sixteen months ago. Naturally this invites a comparison between these lexicographical leviathans, since for the next several years they are likely to be the two chief competitors in a field of five. Of the remaining three, the Macmillan

Modern Dictionary may be dismissed as negligible, the Winston and the Funk and Wagnalls' New College Standard Dictionary remaining well behind the leaders despite certain noteworthy features in each, particularly the last named.

In an excellent article written just before the release of the Webster NCD, James B. McMillan¹ established as a framework for such a comparison one which may well suit our present purpose. He suggested an evaluation of "(1) the quantity of information, (2) the quality of the information, and (3) the effectiveness of presentation."

The quantity of information suggests first of all the total number of entries. Both dictionaries, of course, extend far beyond what may be called the ordinary potential of use. I open the pages of one at random and find gaberlunzie; I turn to the other and learn that Pietermaritzburg had 63,162 inhabitants in 1946. I could survive the omission of both items with ease. I mention this because not infrequently the buying public regards gross figures with far too much respect, if not awe. The fact that ACD has 188 entries from poem to politics as compared with 132 for NCD moves me not a whit; part of this is due to ACD's sensible inclusion of biographical material and place names within a single alphabetical arrangement -- a real point of superiority -- the rest of it arises merely from differences in editorial policy with respect to separate entries for compounds, derivatives, and various part-of-speech functions of the same word.

So far as new or current words are concerned, there is again little to choose: both include existentialism, frequency modulation, and sulfathiazol; both missed the obvious by neglecting coffee table and cookout. The sixteen months which have elapsed since the appearance of ACD gives its competitor a slight edge on the inclusion of names and places which have recently become important. NCD was able to gather in such items as Georgi Dimitrov, E. C. A., and Israel as the name for the present Jewish state. On this point, however, Professor McMillan's comment is pertinent and happily put -- "No desk dictionary attempts to compete with the annual world almanacs and encyclopedia yearbooks, *and none should.*"² Other quantitative aspects tend to cancel each other out. NCD lists more foreign words and phrases, geographical names and biographical entries, but ACD has more illustrations and charts, and gives as main entries more common phrases

¹"Five College Dictionaries," College English 10 (1949) 214-221.

²Italics mine.

and literary titles. But these matters are incidental and of only minor significance.

Qualitative aspects of the dictionaries are discussed by Professor McMillan under such divisions as accuracy in reflecting present-day variations in pronunciation, use of recent scholarship in etymological treatments, skill in the employment of usage labels, and the accuracy and clarity of definitions. With respect to the first of these, the superiority of the ACD over its four competitors in the field, including the earlier Webster Collegiate is now no longer evident. Of twenty test words, variant pronunciations of which are often ignored by lexicographers, ACD has all the pertinent data on nineteen, and NCD on eighteen.³ So far as etymology is concerned, each dictionary had its expert, and where they differ it would appear to be a case of accepting the opinion of Malone as opposed to that of Bender, or vice versa, the only point being that the former for the ACD performed his task two years ago, whereas Bender for the NCD worked in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties. In general, words of moot etymology are relatively few in number, nor should we expect original contributions in this field from a dictionary. All that can reasonably be required is that it keep up with current scholarship. In this respect, ACD has somewhat the better record; NCD does not show the same evidences of revision in accordance with recent changes of opinion, often appearing to be content to rest upon the work done for the New International.

In the use of labels, too, ACD seems to be more precise and in somewhat greater accord with present usage, although here both dictionaries leave much to be desired. NCD still characterizes movie as slang, and like the ACD tycoon as colloquial, though certainly one is justified in wondering if this word is really used in informal spoken language. NCD labels the substantive plug in the sense of advertisement as "cant or colloquial," certainly confusing to the reader. In the matter of geographical labels the record of both dictionaries is only mediocre, though here again ACD has a decided edge. In it one at least may learn that assurance 'insurance,' lorry, and napkin 'diaper' are British, but the corres-

³The twenty words are: adult, altimeter, apparatus, carrousel, cerebral, chassis, contemplative, eczema, exit, exquisite, finance, inhibition, kilometer, lever, margarine, Nevada, precedence, program, quintuplet, and senile. Of these NCD misses the pronunciation of inhibition without h, and both neglect the pronunciation of senile with the vowel of let.

ponding American terms are not labelled U.S. In both dictionaries the reader may discover that cowcatcher is employed in this country, but he will continue in the dark as to the corresponding British term. In neither dictionary is the British use of leader 'editorial' or oddmnt so labelled.

Dialect ascriptions within the United States are equally unsatisfactory. Both do characterize gallery as Southern, neither records lug as a bulk measure, ACD labels tunnel for funnel as dialect, but without indication of the region where it is employed, whereas NCD records the meaning only, with no indication of its regional status. Neither dictionary records rareripe nor indicates the regional use of scallion. To this reader at least, matters such as these are more important than the location of Kalamazoo or indicating the existence of such a combined form as scalpulovertebral.

There appears also to be a fairly sharp division between the two dictionaries with respect to the technique of definition. ACD is more likely to attempt to define through illustration, employing the words in question in sentences or illustrative phrases. NCD definitions are at times more compactly written, which may represent a gain in actual content in terms of the space employed for them, but occasionally this also involves a sacrifice in ease of comprehension. This same general difference in treatment holds true for the synonymy; NCD gives more synonyms, treats them more compactly. ACD proceeds in a more leisurely fashion and again tends to discriminate through illustration. Which technique is preferable is at present largely a matter of the taste of the consumer; which is more effective can be determined perhaps only through controlled experiments.

In arrangement and presentation of material, ACD is still the innovator, with definitions arranged in order of frequency, the etymology placed at the end of the treatment, and the single alphabetical order of entries. The last of these is clearly advantageous. The case for the other two is based upon the assumption that the average user does not look for a concept of semantic development when he consults a desk dictionary, but as these volumes grow in size, this assumption is less likely to be valid. The most radical change in NCD is the transfer of the running pronunciation key from the bottom of each page to the end papers. I prophesy that this will cause considerable criticism, largely because the limitations of this key are not apparent to the average user. Looked at from the long range or evolutionary lexicographical point of view, this is probably not a bad thing, but it also illustrates the straits to which competition for total inclusions will drive dictionary publishers.

NCD still has its excellent Guide to Pronunciation with the system of references to it throughout the text, an argument in its favor which in my view will compensate for any three or four other shortcomings which have been noted, although the use of the schwa symbol by ACD is almost as strong a counter-argument.

All in all both are good dictionaries, both have their weaknesses and their strong points, but one cannot help asking whether we have not reached the ultimate in size. Can these volumes become even larger and more cumbersome? Are not these dictionaries written too much from the point of view of the crossword puzzle fan and to satisfy the naive expectation that any single-volume work can serve as a source of knowledge in all fields? Is it not time, perhaps, that the desk dictionary be returned to the English language? It was originally an abridgement of a large work. If the so-called abridgement grows much larger than the present volumes, we may next expect that some keen and sensitive entrepreneur will present us with an abridgement of an abridgement.

REVIEWS

Chao, Yuen Ren. Mandarin Primer, an Intensive Course in Spoken Chinese. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard University Press, 1948. viii +336 pp.

Mandarin Primer by Y. R. Chao, like most of the works by the same author, contains more than the title indicates. Although it is primarily a textbook to help beginners learn to speak Mandarin, it is also a standard book for those who are interested in the linguistic aspects of the Chinese language and those whose interest is in a method of teaching a foreign language.

In Mandarin Primer, Mr. Chao solves numerous problems which have been puzzling many a linguist. Anyone who wishes to be informed of the sound system of Mandarin will find a detailed descriptive analysis of pronunciation and romanization. A large portion of the material may be found in the first part of the introduction to Concise Dictionary of Spoken Chinese by the same author. However, Mr. Chao has added individual descriptions for each of the sounds in the sound system of Mandarin. Besides numerous other details, he has made the chart "Finals in All Tones (*Memorize!*)" and that for "Retriex Finals in All Tones" more complete than those in the Dictionary. Even though one can find the rest of the material on pronunciation in the Dictionary, one will find that a re-reading of the analysis will solve many of the pronunciation problems involved.

In the treatment of grammar, Mr. Chao stresses the fact that grammatical features in one language do not