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But What Is A Dictionary For?

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Sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables and to lash the wind are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength.

Preface, A Dictionary of the English Language, Samuel Johnson

In February, 1983, **Time** magazine published a story concerning Ariel Sharon's role in the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Beirut. Sharon sued **Time** magazine for libel, accusing them of printing a story which implied that he had encouraged the massacre. Although the suit is important for fairly weighty reasons—because it touches on questions of freedom of the press and the extent to which public figures can demand absolute accuracy of the press—it also demonstrates the power of the dictionary, the high level of importance of the dictionary in our contemporary society, and in demonstrating that importance, reminds us once again of our responsibility as promoters of dictionary use to know the dictionary's limitations as well as its value.

The judge instructed the jury to look at what the words in the paragraph in dispute literally meant and what they implied "to the average reader" (**Time**, Jan 28, 1985, p. 62). In other words, the jurors were to use their own knowledge of English to determine whether the paragraph in question stated or implied that Sharon encouraged the Phalangists to massacre the Palestinians to revenge the death of Bashir Gemayel. During their deliberations the jurors asked for a dictionary, presumably because, as **Newsweek** phrased it, "Larger facts about Sharon's degree of responsibility for the massacres...became confused with facts about the nuances and exact words of the paragraph" (Jan. 28, 1985, p. 46). Although the news reports do not tell us why the jurors asked for a dictionary, we can assume that the jurors clearly felt some need to confirm their own judgements about the meaning of the paragraph, or to settle disagreements over the "nuances" of the words in the paragraph.

The news reports do not tell us which dictionary the jurors asked for or which one they were given. Nor do the reports tell us how the jurors used the dictionary. We can only assume that they felt a need to look up the meanings of some of the words in the paragraph. But the lack of information points to some important assumptions about dictionaries. The first is simply that any dictionary will do. (Although it may sound facetious, the implication is that because the dictionary is divinely inspired, all versions are equally reliable and valid.) The second is that the definitions given in the dictionary are more accurate or valid, in some unspecified way, than those contained in the heads of the "average reader." The third is that when two people disagree about some aspect of language use, a dictionary is a legitimate arbiter of the disagreement (perhaps the preferred arbiter). All of these implications are potentially misleading if they are accepted without qualification, and because they can be misleading, we need to do what we can to insure that the "average reader" places a reasonable amount of faith in the accuracy and usability of the dictionary, but does not raise it to the level of divine text.

The assumption that all dictionaries are equally valid leads to what I call the "grocery store special" syndrome. If all dictionaries are equal, then it simply does not matter which one you buy or use. The special which you can buy for 99 cents if you purchase \$5.00 worth of groceries is as good as the **Webster's Collegiate** or **American Heritage** which costs 20 times that much at the local bookstore. The **Funk and Wagnall's** you used in high school is essentially the same as the one just published. There is, of course, a grain of truth to this contention. Language does not change so rapidly that a dictionary published in 1956 is only a curio. The bulk of the definitions given in the 1956 dictionary will be valid in 1985, or in 1996 for that matter, but language does change, and dictionary users should be aware that new definitions develop and old ones pass away. The grocery store special is often an old edition of a current well known dictionary. The printing plates are sold to an enterprising company which reprints the dictionary and presents it as contemporary. Such reprints do not reflect the changes in

language. They are windows on the past, not representations of the present.

Publishing an accurate contemporary dictionary is an expensive undertaking. A staff must be maintained in order to keep abreast of changes in definitions, to find and define new words, to note the passing of old words, to collect citations for the development of definitions, to note changes in spelling or pronunciations, in short, to keep a watchful eye and ear on English and to incorporate the results of the watching into the next edition of the dictionary. Because good contemporary dictionaries do attempt to reflect changes in language, it would be interesting to know whether the jurors in the Sharon deliberations were given a reprint of a forty year old Merriam-Webster's dictionary or a recent edition of a well researched contemporary dictionary. An extreme example of the importance of knowing the age of the dictionary being used can be found in older and newer definitions for **revenge**, a key word in the paragraph in question in the Sharon suit. In the 1895 edition of **Webster's Academic Dictionary**, published by the G.C. Merriam Co., **revenge** is defined as "vt. 1. to inflict harm in return for (an injury, insult, etc.); to exact satisfaction for; to avenge. 2. To inflict injury for, maliciously.—n. 1. a revenging; vengeance. 2. Malignant wishing of evil to one who has injured us" (p. 480). The 1967 edition gives these definitions: "vt. 1: to inflict injury in return for [—an insult] 2: to avenge for a wrong done [—oneself]...n. 1: an act or instance of revenging 2: a desire for revenge 3: an opportunity for getting satisfaction or retrieving oneself." The 1983 edition of the **Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary**, also published by the G.C. Merriam Co., gives these definitions for **revenge**. "Vt. 1: to avenge...usu. by retaliating in kind or degree 2: to inflict injury in return for [—an insult]...n. 1: a desire for revenge 2: an act or instance of retaliating in order to get even 3: an opportunity for getting satisfaction" (p.1009). Although the three editions are substantially the same, the focus on the notion of an act performed in response to an earlier act by someone else, the latest definition characterizes the act as "getting even" while the earlier stresses the maliciousness of the response. "Getting even" is not quite the same as "maliciously" inflicting injury. The 1967

definition specifies that the revenger had a "wrong" done to him, which is not quite the same thing as an "insult," and specifies as well the notion of "retrieving" oneself, which suggests "saving face," a concept not so obviously contained in the earlier and later definitions. In other words, it makes a difference whether the jurors use the 1895, the 1967 or the 1983 dictionary to determine the nuances of the meaning of **revenge**.

In the long run, it is of greater consequence that the jurors asked for a dictionary to determine the nuances of the meanings of the words in the paragraph in question than which dictionary they used. The sentence that seemed to be the focus of discussion during the jury's deliberations is "Sharon also reportedly discussed with the Gemayels the need for the Phalangists to take revenge for the assassinations of Bashir, but the details of the conversation are not known." There are no words in this sentence which are not well known and used reasonably frequently by a native speaker of English. If there were specialized words of low frequency use or technical words with particular meanings (perhaps psychological terminology or intelligence gathering language), it would be quite reasonable for the jurors to want to consult a reference which would provide them with information beyond their knowledge. But for a jury of "average readers" to need a dictionary to check the meanings of the words in the sentence quoted suggests an excessive reverence for The Dictionary as well as a disregard for the importance of the role of syntax in determining the meaning of individual words.

Dictionaries, even those which presume to be prescriptive, recognize that their primary function is to record the use of language. Therefore, any definition which appears in the dictionary should be a reflection of common usage, and by logical extension, an "average reader" could be presumed to know the meaning given in the dictionary unless it were a specialized meaning. Such specialized meanings are frequently evident from the word's use in the text. Because our normal meaning for the word simply does not fit we turn to the dictionary to discover a meaning we did not know existed. Rare words will also send us to the dictionary.

But we should be confident that we know what common words mean in normal usage. There are no words in the quoted sentence that should require a normally educated user of English to need a dictionary to understand. In fact, if there are disputes about the meaning of the word, then the dictionary should reflect that fact, which means that disputants on opposite sides of the question would both be proven "right" when they consulted the dictionary.

Dictionaries should be valued, but not revered. As recorders of the language, dictionaries are by definition always behind the times. A new meaning or the loss of an old one will not appear in the dictionary until it is widespread enough to warrant inclusion, and by that time it is widespread enough that most people are probably aware of the change. For example, Sharon **reportedly** "told" and "discussed" particular matters in the paragraph in question. If we consult the 1983 **New Collegiate** to determine the meaning of **reportedly**, we will find only "according to report" (1000), when in fact the word seems to have developed a specialized meaning, especially in the media. In cases where a reporter can not prove the truth of a statement (or does not wish to reveal sources), s/he will characterize the statement with the adverb **reportedly**. This particular usage is now spread wide enough that the "average reader" who read the original article would be likely to know that the writer was hedging, but that meaning does not appear in a 1976 dictionary. If two jurors disagree about whether **reportedly** is a hedge, and does not simply mean "according to report," the more conservative view will win out on consultation of the dictionary, not because the dictionary is "right" but because it is behind the times.

Furthermore, "meaning" does not reside solely in words. It is at the very least a product of the conjunction of syntax and lexicon. It is as well the rhetorical choices that are made. Meaning resides in a **text**, and a text is only partly defined by the words. In our example sentence, the subordinate clause, "the details of the conversation are not known," can appear first or last. If it appears first with an "although," the sentence reads, "Although the details of the conversation are not known, Sharon also reportedly discussed...the need for the Phalan-

gists to take revenge for the assassination of Bashir." The effect on the reader is quite different from "Sharon also reportedly discussed... the need for the Phalangists to take revenge for the assassination of Bashir, but the details of the conversation are not known." The former creates a much more uncertain statement than the latter. The dictionary will not tell the reader that, nor will it tell the reader how to interpret **need**. The syntax can be read as meaning "Sharon felt that the Phalangists had an obligation to take revenge" or "Sharon talked about why the Phalangists felt that they had an obligation to take revenge." Looking up the meaning of **need** does not increase the "average" reader's knowledge sufficiently to disambiguate the meaning. We must look at the whole context, not simply the meanings of the individual words.

The belief that the dictionary is "right" and can provide final arbitration in language matters leads not only to the difficulty just mentioned, but leads as well to the rejection of current, legitimate language use. Frequently this belief is heard as, "If it isn't in the dictionary, it isn't right, accurate, legitimate (or some such synonym)." Many people still believe that if a pronunciation is not listed in the dictionary, it is not the "correct" one. Yet, every major standard dictionary carefully specifies that any "educated" pronunciation, no matter what regional or ethnic flavor it carries, is acceptable. Most dictionary users do not read the prefatory matter which explains the pronunciation guide, and many users would feel that a dictionary which does not give "correct" pronunciations would be flawed. We often consult a dictionary to settle a point. When we play Scrabble, we consult a dictionary when we suspect our friends of making up words for the sake of a few measly points (especially ones with x or z in them).

Our over reliance on the dictionary for arbitrating all matters linguistic had its roots in Samuel Johnson's dictionary, in which he established the expectation that words could and should be annotated for usage level. Nineteenth and early twentieth century dictionaries developed and established the tradition so firmly that the popular expectation today is that a dictionary must tell users about acceptability in usage as well as record definitions.

There is nothing inherently wrong-headed in expecting a dictionary to contain usage notes, but to expect any given dictionary to be the final arbiter is to expect more than mortal dictionary editors can accomplish. Usage notes can be quite useful and at the very least are informative for those of us who are interested in language. But usage notes in dictionaries are limited by the space available, by the editorial policies of the dictionary, and by the available research.

Like our own knowledge of the meaning of words, we must look at usage variation in context. Without a text produced in a particular environment, we cannot make an accurate decision about the appropriateness of a particular usage. Without prior knowledge, we cannot even know whether we **should** be concerned about making usage decisions. For example, in the paragraph we have been working with we find this sentence, "**Time** has learned that it also contains further details about Sharon's visit..." For most speakers of English, there is no choice to be made between **further** and **farther**. We learned one or the other as the normal usage for our speech community when we were acquiring our language, and it never occurs to us that there is a choice to be made. However, English teachers and pop grammarians (such as John Simon and Edwin Newman) teach us that we should make a distinction between these two words. Because the semantic distinction between **farther** and **further** is slight, a good many of us find it difficult to remember just what the distinction should be, thus we turn to our dictionary to confirm our knowledge.

Unfortunately, we will find that we are in trouble when we make that apparently logical move. The dictionaries do not agree on the distinction. The 1976 **New Collegiate** we have been using as a reference lists **farther** as a synonym of **further** and gives no indication that they are not interchangeable. (The 1895 edition agrees with the 1976 one.) On the other hand, the **American Heritage Dictionary** (Houghton Mifflin, 1976) gives a usage note at **farther** which distinguishes the two. The 1983 **New Collegiate** also gives a usage note, but it is quite different from the **American Heritage** note. Which are we to believe? Of course the most reasonable option is to believe the one that agrees with us, but that does not solve our arbitration problem,

unless we abandon the dictionary as a language arbiter. This final course is the most sensible choice simply on the grounds that usage notes in dictionaries (and in usage handbooks) are in disarray at best. In **Usage in Dictionaries and Dictionaries of Usage** (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1975), Thomas Creswell compared the notes on 318 disputed usage items in 20 dictionaries and usage handbooks. He expected to find some consensus about some core of usage items, but instead he found that he was "trying to order chaos." Of the 316 items, he found only 17 on which the sources either agreed were acceptable or ignored and only 15 on which his sources either agreed were unacceptable or ignored. The remaining 284 items showed no pattern of agreement at all.

The only conclusion that we can draw from Creswell's study is that in the matter of usage decisions, we are left on our own. We turn to our dictionary to see what it says, but we must be aware that there is a great deal of disagreement on usage matters in dictionaries. We can shop around until we find a dictionary whose editorial stance agrees with ours, but that does not make us or the dictionary "right." It means that we can marshal some support for our viewpoint, but we cannot turn to the dictionary to be a final arbiter of usage matters.

Why bother with a dictionary at all if we finally must rely on our knowledge of language? I hope the obvious answer is that most of us are aware that because the English language is such a complex communication system, it is virtually impossible for us to know all that can be known about it. As a result we must continually (I doubt continuously) increase our knowledge of English if we are to be responsible and effective users of the language, if we are to be able to be effective listeners and responsible producers of English. One way of increasing our knowledge is to turn to dictionaries to confirm and extend our knowledge. A well researched, up-to-date dictionary can give us information that we do not have, can clear up misconceptions that we may have about usage, can help us figure out whether our notions about meanings and usage accord with others' notions. A good dictionary is an excellent reference tool, but it is not divinely inspired nor is it infallibly accurate.