

"AN HORRIBLE USAGE"

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Your editor advises me that he does not consider it the purpose of Word Ways "to serve as a watchdog over the purity of the English language," but concedes that an occasional growl might do no harm.

Let me attack, then, a practice that is widespread and in my view indefensible -- yet is perpetuated by many in the best position to serve as preceptors of good usage. I refer to using an before "historical" or "historic".

I cringe whenever I hear or read it, which is often. It ejects from the lips, or pens, of U.S. Presidents, TV and radio announcers, authors, professors, editorial writers, Congressmen -- and from lesser human beings who feel that these illustrious mortals must know whereof they speak and should be emulated. And -- this saddens me to have to report -- it has even snuck past the sacred portals of Word Ways.

To call this usage bookish or pedantic is, to me, too kind a judgment; I consider it to be in the "lifted pinky" category of verbal communication. You know, the spurious gentility represented by the extension of the little finger while raising a cup of tea to the lips.

I feel sure that many who use "an historical" are simply parroting the phrase without giving the matter any thought. Not many Americans would speak of spending the night at an hotel. And few would follow consistency by asking Johnny: "Did the teacher give you an history lesson today?"

I have searched in vain through dictionaries and books purporting to serve as guides to good American and English usage for absolute support of current-day usage of "an historical". Many straddle the issue, simply reporting that the phrase "is used" by "some" or "many" writers and speakers. Disapproval of such usage, on the other hand, is not hard to come by.

To start near the beginning, I consulted Noah Webster's archetypical dictionary, which came out in 1806 (a facsimile edition was published in 1970 by Bounty Books). This is the work that the Merriam-Webster people claim as the prototype for all their output, much as Catholics lean on St. Paul.

In Noah's pathfinding work, a definition of more than one line is rare, and he gives no guidance on various uses of an, simply saying

it denotes "a fingle perfon or thing." However, I was glad to see that he defines "biography" as: "a hiftory of lives, a writing of lives." NOT, "an hiftory." (The cursive s's, here approximated by f's, are Noah's.)

Those who accept H. W. Fowler's A Dictionary of Modern English Usage as a reliable guide do not have to search far to find what he thinks of "an historical"; it's right there in his initial entry:

"... an was formerly usual before an unaccented syllable beginning with h (an historical work), but now that the h in such words is pronounced the distinction has become pedantic, & a historical should be said & written ..."

The Concise Oxford Dictionary has this:

"Before all consonants except silent h use a; a history, a historian, though some still write an before h in unaccented syllable ..."

Well, that's a straddle; probably the lexicographer didn't want to draw down upon him the wrath of friends using the lifted pinky form.

A Grammar of Present-Day English by Pence and Emery leaves the door half open: "The article a is used before a consonant sound: ... a history book ..." Then, this:

"Some prefer to write an before an h-sound in an unaccented syllable: an historical fact (but: a history of England)."

Wilson Follett's Modern American Usage is forthright:

"Some very Anglophile or very bookish Americans, and perhaps others influenced by them, are addicted to an before historical, homiletic, humble, and other words with a formerly silent h ... The normal, American feeling is that such words begin with consonants, not vowels, and that it is archaic and unnatural to precede them with an instead of a. This feeling has the right of way in speech and should have it in writing ..."

A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage, by Bergen Evans and Cornelia Evans, is unequivocal:

"The form a should be used before an h that is pronounced, as in history and hotel. Formerly these h sounds were not pronounced and an historical novel, an hotel, were as natural as an honorable man, an hour, an heiress. This is no longer true and these archaic an's, familiar from English literature, should not be repeated in modern writing."

That watchdog of good usage at The New York Times and my own favorite authority because of his common-sense approach -- Theodore M. Bernstein -- in his admirable The Careful Writer; A Modern Guide to English Usage has this to say:

"There is a lingering tendency on the part of some American writers to use 'an historic document', though they wouldn't be caught even in a British pub saying 'an hotel'. But the preferred form these days, on both sides of the Atlantic, is 'a historic document'."

Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition lumps together users of the two. After giving the general rule, it says:

"Some writers, however, use an before words beginning with h in an unaccented syllable, as in an historical, an hotel . . ."

Webster's Third New International Dictionary, that G. & C. Merriam opus which abdicated all claim to being an arbiter of good usage when it avowed in the preface that it regards a dictionary's function as "to state meanings in which words are in fact used, not to give editorial opinion on what their meanings should be" -- what says it? About what you'd expect, except the apposite portion of the entry will hardly be cited as an example of clear writing. After telling other ways an is used, it says:

"(3) frequently before h-initial words which have an initial /h/ sound when pronounced in isolation, whose first syllable has weaker than primary and usually weaker than secondary stress, and which may or may not in pronunciation have an /h/ sound after the /n/ (an historian) . . ."

(The virgules are Merriam's, although theirs slant the other way.)

Whoever rewrote the entry for Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary -- which, incidentally, is a better work than its unabridged source -- cleaned up the syntax a little:

"(3) frequently before h-initial words which have in an initial unstressed syllable an /h/ sound often lost after an (an historian) . . ."

Perhaps because it is even more concise, the 1974 paperback edition, The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, doesn't deal with the issue. It simply says: "an . . . -- used before words beginning with a vowel sound." (Parenthetically, this latest paperback edition -- which I am glad to see drops the word "new" from the title (finally!) -- supersedes an earlier paperback edition titled The New Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary. Why a publisher would use the word "new" in the title of a work of which successive editions can be expected is a mystery. I can only suppose it is a sales come-on like that used by makers of soap powders, who believe that "new" will be equated with "better". One would hope that the gents who supply us with scholarly publications would be above this kind of puffery.)

If I seemed a little rough on Webster's Third unabridged -- better known in my circle as The Permissive Third -- be advised that I feel I acted with admirable restraint. Who can defend a dictionary that lists the misspelling "supercede" as a variant spelling of supersede?