

Confessions of an Epeolatrist

*Words do not live in dictionaries; they live in
the mind.*

*All we can say about them is that they seem
to like people
to think and to feel before they use them.*
— Virginia Woolf, “Craftsmanship”
[essay], 1937

I wonder if any law-enforcement agencies know that the writer of this column is an *epeolatrist*? And further, that his wife condones it?

It’s true, and I feel no shame. Especially not on the day I’m writing this: It’s the 250th birthday of Noah Webster. So—could this column be about anything else? Noah, Noah!

epeolatry

Pronunciation: ep-i-OL-uh-tree

Meaning: *noun*, The worship of words.

Etymology: From Greek *epos* (“word”) + *-latry* (“worship”). The first citation of the word is from Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his 1860 book *Professor at the Breakfast Table*.

Usage: “I read my dictionary for a few more minutes, until tiredness eventually brought my epeolatry to an end for the day.” Roger Day; *Anurada Negotiates Our Wobbly Planet*; Lulu; 2006.¹

The words Noah Webster defined and the compendium he published had such an influence on how Americans use their language that his name has come to be regarded on this side of the Atlantic as almost synonymous with *dictionary*, in much the same way that “Jell-O” now substitutes for *gelatin dessert* or “Kleenex” for *facial tissue*. It’s not just a brand, it’s the whole cow.

Many “Webster’s” dictionaries invoke the name in their titles to capitalize on consumer confusion and thus boost sales, but people often don’t understand why. The answer lies in a 1917 court decision

(*Saalfield v. Merriam*, 238 Fed. 1, 8–9 [CCA 6th, 1917]), which held that the copyright to Webster’s 1806 *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* had expired in 1834. (The more famous *An American Dictionary of the English Language* of 1828 incorporated the 1806 work.) Thus, the gate was left open for a flood of “Webster’s” dictionaries that continues to this day. Only one dictionary currently published can trace its lineage directly to Webster’s original work: the “Merriam-Webster” series. Works like *The American Heritage Dictionary* are in the brave—audacious even—minority.

This, then, provokes the question, Why did/does everyone want to copy Webster? The answer lies in how Noah Webster combined scholarship with innovation. It took from 1800 to 1828 for Webster to arrive at his 70,000 definitions—an average of about 8 per day, about 12,000 of them entirely new. Along the way, he studied no fewer than 26 languages. But the book was not merely scholarly; it broke new ground by including terms from the trades, arts, and sciences, disdaining the sanitary, highly literary definitions that populated prior dictionaries.

An important point that frequently gets overlooked when people discuss Webster’s 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language* is that word *American*. It should be read as if it were printed in boldface—insistently, with a stress on it. When Webster worked on his book, the United States was still actively repudiating its colonial past. This fervor took many forms, and Webster weighed in by inveighing against the spellings and usages preferred in England. A New World demanded a new coinage; Webster obliged by listing words that were uniquely, defiantly American.

Webster had already declared his intentions in 1789, one year after the United States Constitution was ratified and the year Washington was inaugurated: “Great Britain, whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be our standard; for the taste of her writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline.”

Webster's definitions often reveal a most discerning mind engaged in a careful thought process. For instance, you can almost hear him thinking as he zeroed in on the meaning of the word *admiration*:

Admira'tion, n., from admire, *v.t.* [L. *admiror*, *ad* and *miror*, to wonder; *demirror*.]

Wonder mingled with pleasing emotions, as approbation, esteem, love or veneration; a compound emotion excited by something novel, rare, great, or excellent; applied to persons and their works. It often includes a slight degree of surprise. Thus, we view the solar system with admiration.

As another example, consider his definition of the verb *surprise* (especially sense 2):

Surprise, *v.t.* surpr'i'ze. [L. *super*, *supra*, and *prendo*, "to take".]

1. To come or fall upon suddenly and unexpectedly; to take unawares.
2. To strike with wonder or astonishment by something sudden, unexpected or remarkable, either in conduct, words or story, or by the appearance of something unusual. Thus we are surprised at desperate acts of heroism, or at the narration of wonderful events, or at the sight of things of uncommon magnitude or curious structure.
3. To confuse; to throw the mind into disorder by something suddenly presented to the view or to the mind.

Not only did his thoughtful definitions challenge those of the learned Samuel Johnson, his best-known predecessor and England's supreme lexicographer, but so did his spellings: for instance, *centre* became *center*; *flavour* lost its *u*, as did others of its

ilk, such as *colour* and *honour*; nouns ending in *-xion* were converted to *-tion*. (To this day, the *Oxford English Dictionary* still lists *connexion* as the preferred spelling.)

Webster *did* list *connexion*, but in doing so accompanied his preferred version with a slightly prickly but still gentlemanly explication and a nod to Merry Olde:

Connexion, n. connection. For the sake of regular analogy, I have inserted *connection*, as the derivative of the English *connect*, and would discard *connexion*.

The entire public-domain text of the 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language* may be searched online at 1828.sorabji.com/1828 or 1828.mshaffer.com, which also provides a link to a Firefox browser plugin.

Important as dictionaries are, no one should ignore the fact that words pre-existed them, just as singing pre-existed musical notation. Being the innovator he was, Noah Webster would surely have approved of Virginia Woolf's 1937 assessment—which you can now hear online in the only known recording of her voice—that “words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind”:

[Words] are highly sensitive, easily made self-conscious. They do not like to have their purity or their impurity discussed. If you start a Society for Pure English, they will show their resentment by starting another for Impure English. . . . They are highly democratic, too; they believe that one word is as good as another; uneducated words are as good as educated words, uncultivated words as cultivated words, there are no ranks or titles in their society. Nor do they like being lifted out on the point of a pen and examined separately. They hang together, in sentences, in para-

graphs, sometimes for whole pages at a time. They hate being useful; they hate making money; they hate being lectured about in public. In short, they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change.^{2,3}

So—I hope you enjoyed (also, appreciated, ate up, basked in, benefited from, delighted in, derived pleasure from, devoured, dug, feasted on, filled up on, freaked out on, got high on, grooved on, indulged in, liked, loved, made merry with, rejoiced in, relished, reveled in, rioted in, savored, smacked your lips over, took advantage of, took pleasure in, used to advantage, wallowed in, were fond of, were partial to, were pleased with) my column!

Chuckle of the Month

“Newcomer Has Eye on Mah's Seat.” (Front-page story in the 28 October 2008 *Palo Alto Daily News* about the local school-board election.)

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References

1. A.Word.A.Day: epeolatry [Internet] [cited 2008 Oct 28]. Available from: wordsmith.org/words/epeolatry.html.
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3. Woolf V. Craftsmanship. In: The death of the moth and other essays. Adelaide: University of Adelaide; 2004 [Internet] [cited 2008 Oct 28]. Available from: ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91d/index.html.