

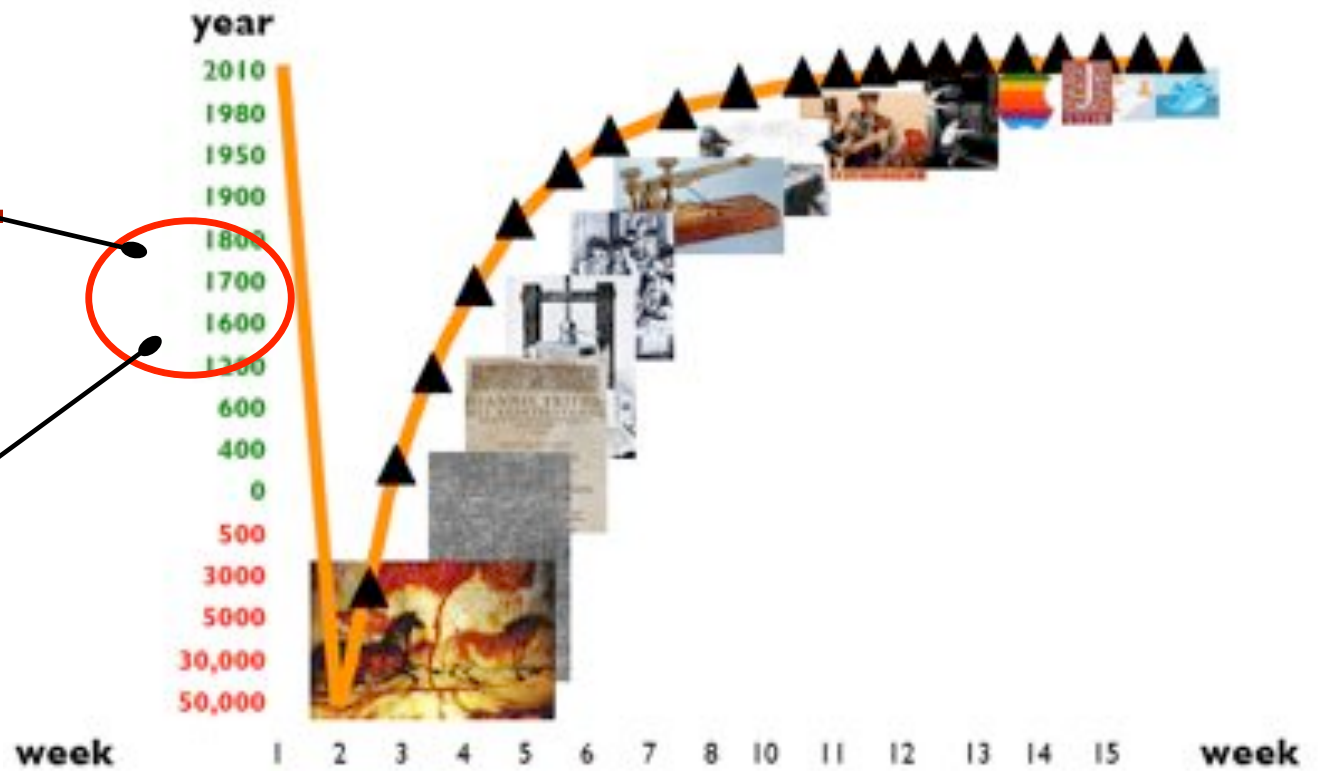
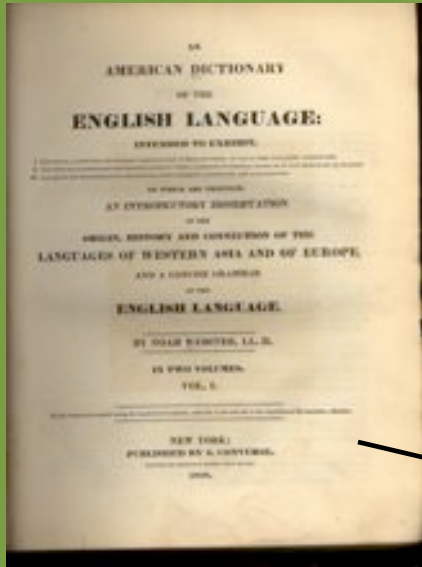


# Language and the Dictionary

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**Geoff Nunberg**  
**History of**  
**Information**  
**Feb 23, 2012**

# Where We Are





## Itinerary: 2/26

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Rise of the vernacular

The creation of the modern dictionary

The circles of knowledge

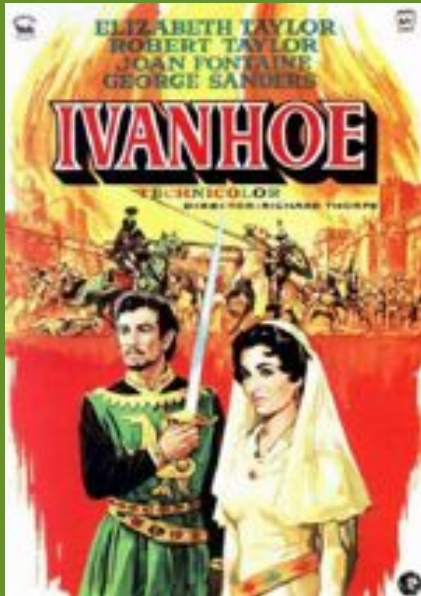


# Rise of the Vernacular

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# The stirrings of English



English diglossia/triglossia in the Middle English period

English the spoken vernacular

French used by nobility, in courts.

Latin used for religion, scholarship.



# The creolization of English



Whan that **Aprill** with his shoures soote  
The droghte of **March** hath **Perced** to the roote,  
And bathed every **veyne** in swich **licour**  
Of which **vertu engendred** is the **flour**;  
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
**Inspired** hath in every holt and heeth  
The **tendre** croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the ram his halve **cours** yronne,  
And smale foweles maken **melodye**,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(so priketh hem **nature** in hir **corages**);  
Thanne longen folk to goon on **pilgrimages**...



# Out of the shadow of Latin

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Emergence of standard dialects

(London English, Parisian French, Tuscan Italian)

Printing & Literacy

The Reformation

Proto-nationalism



# The Emergence of the Vernacular



## The decline of Latin

1661 Boyle publishes *New Experiments Physico-Mechanical* in English, followed by *The Sceptical Chymist* in 1661  
later arranges for Latin translations of works to counter piracy

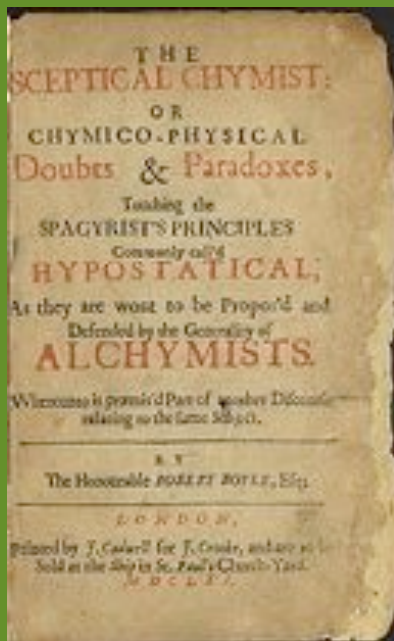
Pct of Latin titles in  
German-speaking world:

1650: 67%

1700: 38%

1750: 28%

1800 4%







# The Emergence of the Vernacular

Concerns that the vernacular (i.e., ordinary spoken) language is not an adequate vehicle for philosophy, history, etc.

Besyde Latyne, our langage is imperfite,  
Quhilk in sum part, is the cause and the wyte [fault],  
Quhy that Virgillis vers, the ornate bewte  
In till our tounge, may not obseruit be  
For that bene Latyne wordes, mony ane  
That in our leid ganand [suitable language], translation has  
nane....

Gawin Douglas, 1553

Shall English be so poore, and rudely-base  
As not be able (through mere penury)  
To tell what French hath said with gallant grace,  
And most tongues else of less facunditie?

John Davies, 1618



# Refining the Vernacular

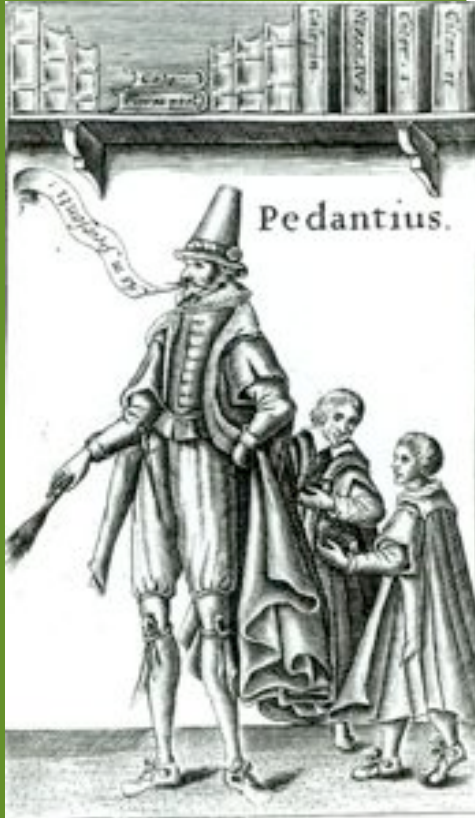


"Inkhorn words" -- learned words coined from Greek or Latin: *absurdity, dismiss, celebrate, encyclopedia, habitual, ingenious*

Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that wee never affect any straunge ynkehorne termes, but to speake as is commonly received: neither seeking to be over fine or yet living over-carelesse, using our speeche as most men doe, and ordering our wittes as the fewest have done. Thomas Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique*, 1553



# Refining & Codifying the Language



Frontispiece from  
Pedantius, 1581

Robert Cawdrey, Table Alphabeticall, 1604:

Some men seek so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language, so that if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell, or understand what they say, and yet these fine English Clearks, will say they speak in their mother tongue...Also, some far journied gentlemen, at their returne home, like as they love to go in forraine apparrell, so they will poulder their talke with over-sea language....



# The Composition of Mod. English

When in the **Course** of **human events** it becomes **necessary** for one **people** to **dissolve** the **political bands** which have **connected** **them** with another and to **assume** among the **powers** of the earth, the **separate** and **equal station** to which the **Laws** of **Nature** and of **Nature's** God **entitle** **them**, a **decent respect** to the **opinions** of mankind **requires** that **they** should **declare** the **causes** which **impel** **them** to the **separation**.

*Anglo-Saxon*

*Old Norse*

*French*

*New Latin (inkhorn)*



# The Creation of the Modern Dictionary

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# Early Wordbooks

Early dictionaries are usually bilingual (e.g., Latin-Cornish), organized thematically.

*A*  
Table Alphabeticall, con-  
teyning and teaching the true  
writing, and vnderstanding of hard  
vsuall English wordes, borrowed from  
the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine,  
or French. &c.

With the interpretation thereof by  
plaine English words, gathered for the benefit &  
helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other  
unskillfull persons.

Whereby they may the more easilie  
and better vnderstand many hard English  
wordes, which they shall heare or read in  
Scriptures, Sermons, or elsewhere, and also  
be made able to vse the same apply  
themselves.

*Leger, et non intelligere, negligere est.*  
As good not read, as not to vnderstand.

AT LONDON,  
Printed by I. R. for Edmund Wea-  
uer, & are to be sold at his shop at the great  
North doore of Pauls Church.  
1604.

Robert Cawdrey's Table Alphabeticall of 1604, the first English dictionary to explain the  
meanings of the 'unskillfull'.

extreme, appearing wondrous, springing it selfe.  
extrale, a trance, as frowning.  
extemporall, } suddaine, without  
extempore, } premeditation, as  
extemporarie, } study.  
extende, spread forth, prolong, as make lon-  
ger, to enlarge.  
extenuate, lessen, minish, as make lesse.  
externall, outward, strange.  
exultare, pioushe, much joyous.  
extinguish,

of hard English words.

extinguish, put out, as quench.  
extinct, put out.  
extirpare, to pull vp by the rootes.  
exult, bounce, as praise highly, to lift vp.  
exort, to lusing out, to begitt from by too-  
longe.  
extract, draw out.  
extravagant, bounding out of order.  
extraordinarie, besides, as make them com-  
mon custome.  
exuberancy, plenty.  
exult, bragge, triumph, as leape for joy.  
exulcerate, to make sore, as corrupt.

F

Fabricate, make, fashion.  
fabulous, fained, counterfeited, much tal-  
ked of.  
facere, merry contented.  
fact, deed.  
facile, easie.  
faction, division of people into sundry parts  
and opinions.  
factious, that maketh division, contentious.  
factor, one that doeth business for another.  
facultie, licence, power, aptitude, ability.  
fallacie,

First monolingual dictionaries  
appear in early c. 17. with  
Robert Cawdrey's *Table  
Alphabeticall of Hard Usual  
English Words*, 1604  
(" for the benefit and helpe of  
Ladies, Gentlewomen, or other  
unskillful persons")



# The desire for "illustration" in France

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1530: Founding of Collège de France, with French admitted as language of higher education

1539: Ordonnances de Villers-Cotteret (1539) establish use of French in law courts

Percentage of book titles published in Paris in French:

1501	10%
1528	14%
1549	21%
1575	55%

Would to God that some noble heart could employ himself in setting out rules for our French language... If it is not given rules, we will find that every fifty years the French language will have been changed and perverted in very large measure. G. Tory, 1529

# Formation of the Académie Française



L'habit vert  
et l'épée.

Modeled on the accademia della Crusca, Florence (1583), which published 1st dict. In 1612

Formed in 1635 by Cardinal Richlieu; 40 members ("les immortels")

1st ed. of dictionary appears in 1694 (6 or 7 others since then).

Model for other language academies in Sweden, Spain, Romania, Portugal, Russia, etc.







# The "Reading Revolution"

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"Sixty years ago the only people who bought books were scholars, but today there is hardly a woman with some claim to education who does not read. Readers are to be found in every class, both in the towns and the country, even the common soldiers... take out books from the lending libraries." *Deutsches Museum*, 1780

"I cannot help observing that the sale of books in general has increase prodigiously within the last twenty years. The poorer sort of farmers who before that period spent their winter evenings in relating stories of witches, ghosts, hobgoblins, etc. now shorten the winter nights by hearing their sons and daughters read tales, romances, etc. and on entering their homes you may see Tom Jones, Roderick Random, and other entertaining books stuck up on their bacon-racks." James Lackington, 1783



# The emergence of a public discourse

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"Rank and privilege" in theory set aside, and discourse becomes ostensibly impersonal:

"...when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances." David Hume, 1757

Cf modern sport-talk radio...



# Publics and "Public Opinion"

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"It is certainly right and prudent to consult the public opinion. ... If the public opinion did not happen to square with mine; if, after pointing out to them the danger, they did not see it in the same light with me, or if they conceived that another remedy was preferable to mine, I should consider it as my due to my king, due to my Country, due to my honour to retire ... but one thing is clear, that I ought to give the public the means of forming an opinion." Charles James Fox, 1792

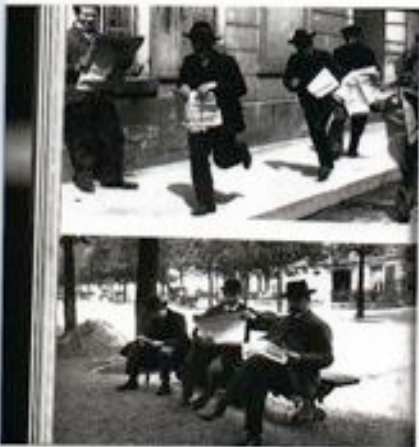


# Print and the Creation of "Imagined Communities"



[Britain] has become a nation of readers. --Samuel Johnson, 1781

The newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life...creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. --Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.





# Print, the Public, and Linguistic Anxiety



[Britain] has become a nation of readers. --Samuel Johnson, 1781

The problem of the public sphere:

How to coordinate public opinion via an impersonal print discourse between people who are anonymous to one another, in the absence of context...



# The Growing Sense of Crisis

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John Dryden (1693): "we have yet no prosodia, not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar, so that our language is in a manner barbarous."



William Warburton (1747): the English language is "destitute of a Test or Standard to apply to, in cases of doubt or difficulty.... For we have neither Grammar nor Dictionary, neither Chart nor Compass, to guide us through this wide sea of Words."



# The Growing Sense of Crisis

---

Continuing desire to fix ("ascertain") the language:



"Suffer not our Shakespear, and our Milton, to become two or three centuries hence what Chaucer is at present, the study only of a few poring antiquarians, and in an age or two more the victims of bookworms."  
Thomas Sheridan



Short is the date, alas! of modern rhymes,  
And 'tis but just to let them live betimes.  
No longer now that Golden Age appears,  
When partiarch wits survived a thousand years:  
Now length of fame (our second life) is lost,  
And bare threescore is all ev'n that can boast:  
**Our sons their fathers' failing language see,  
And such as Chaucer is shall Dryden be.**  
Cf Alexander Pope, "Essay on Criticism"





# An academy to "ascertain" the language?



1712: Swift writes "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue in a Letter to Lord Harley

*My Lord; I do here in the Name of all the Learned and Polite Persons of the Nation, complain to your Lordship, as First Minister, that our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; and the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities; and, that in many Instances, it offends against every Part of Grammar. ...*



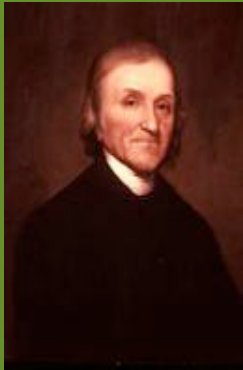


# The Rejection of an Academy

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If an academy should be established for the cultivation of our stile, which I, who can never wish to see dependance multiplied, hope the spirit of English liberty will hinder or destroy...

Johnson, Preface to the *Dictionary*



As to a publick academy... I think it not only unsuitable to the genius of a *free nation*, but in itself ill calculated to reform and fix a language. We need make no doubt but that the best forms of speech will, in time, establish themselves by their own superior excellence...

Joseph Priestly, *Rudiments of Grammar*, 1761

Contrast the role of the state in French....



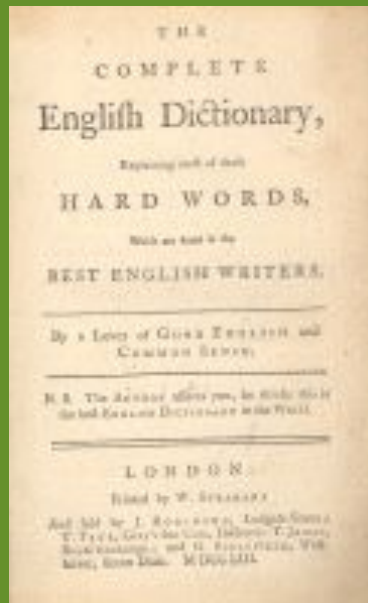
# Wesley's Dictionary



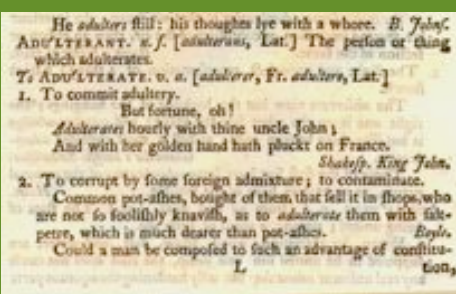
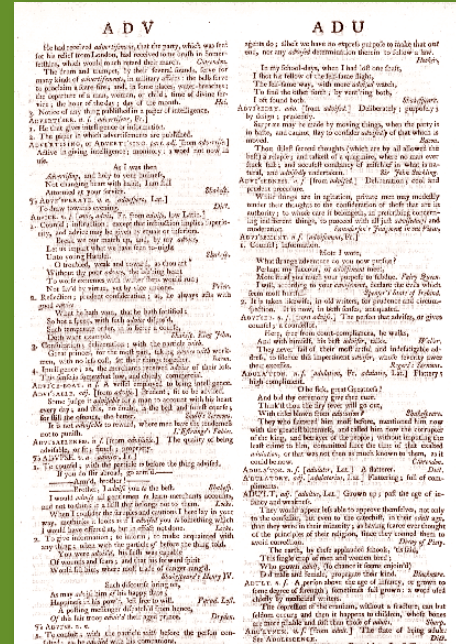
The COMPLETE English Dictionary, explaining most of the HARD WORDS which are found in the BEST ENGLISH WRITERS.

By a Lover of Good English and Common Sense.

N. B. The AUTHOR assures you, he thinks this is the *best* English DICTIONARY in the world.



# Johnson to the Rescue!



1746: J. approached by "conger" of booksellers to make dict. for 1500 guineas

Johnson installs himself and his amanuenses in Gough Square to begin work on the Dictionary

1747: The "Plan of an English Dictionary" appears

1755: Appearance of 'j' Dictionary

Hodge





## Some Johnsonian Definitions

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Excise: A hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid.

Lexicographer: A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.

Oats: A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland appears to support the people.



# The Success of the *Dictionary*

---



Talk of war with a Briton, he'll boldly advance,  
That one English soldier will beat ten of France,  
Would we alter the boast from the sword to the pen,  
Our odds are still greater, still greater our men . . .  
First Shakspeare and Milton, like Gods in the fight,  
Have put their whole drama and epick to flight...  
And Johnson, well-arm'd like a hero of yore,  
Has beat forty French, and will beat forty more!"

David Garrick



# The Success of the *Dictionary*

---



The English Dictionary appeared; and, as the weight of truth and reason is irresistible, its authority has nearly fixed the external form of our language; and from its decisions few appeals have yet been made. Robert Nares, 1782

*Did the Dictionary really fix the language?*

Johnson condemns words like *bully*, *coax*, and *job*.

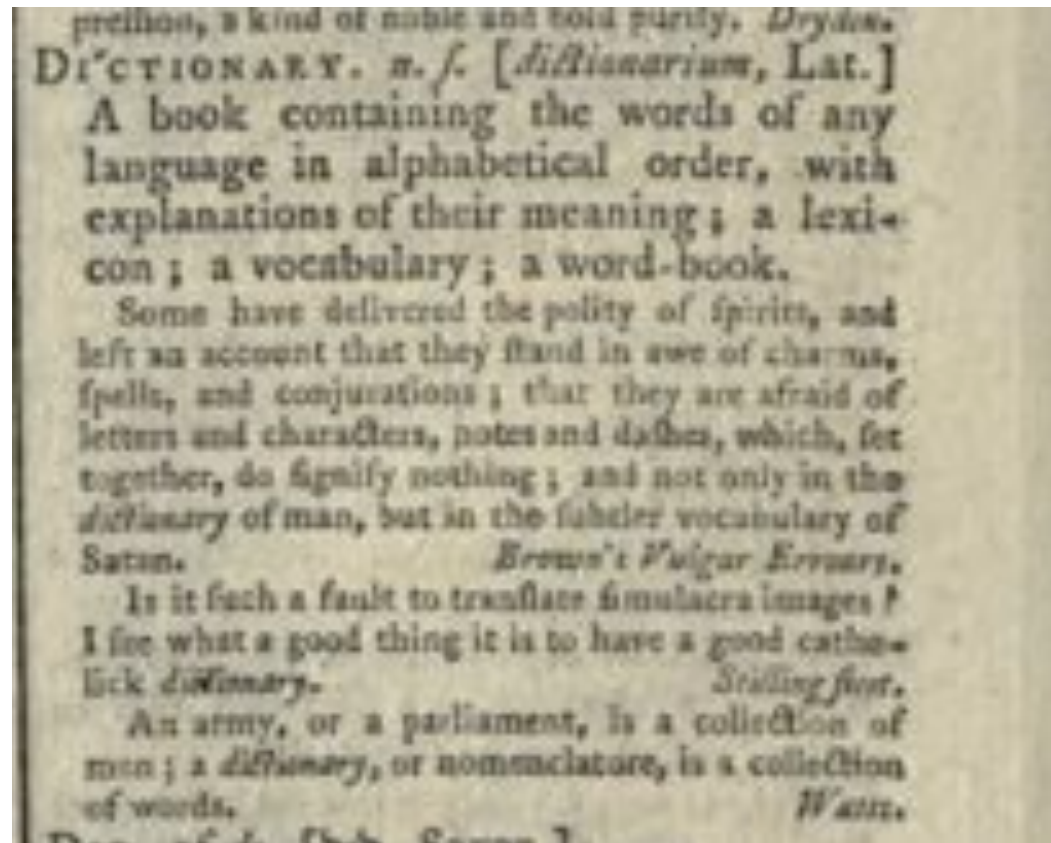






# Features of Johnson's Dictionary

Meanings illustrated by citations from English writers:  
"The book written by books"







# The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

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Weakness of genus-differential definitions

**disappointed** MW: defeated in expectation or hope



# The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

---

Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

**disappointed** MW: defeated in expectation or hope

**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen



# The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

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Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

**disappointed** MW: defeated in expectation or hope

**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen

And you want it to happen



# The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

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Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

**Disappointed** MW: defeated in expectation or hope

**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen

And you want it to happen

And when the time comes for it to happen



# The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

---

Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

**disappointed** MW: defeated in expectation or hope

**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen

And you want it to happen

And when the time comes for it to happen

It doesn't happen



# The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

---

Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

**Disappointed** MW: defeated in expectation or hope

**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen

And you want it to happen

And when the time comes for it to happen

It doesn't happen

And you feel bad



# The Methodology of Lexicography

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Method for isolation & circumscription of relevant precedents (identification of “the language” in terms of public discourse)

Method for isolating and abstracting contributions of individual words to interpretation, independent of both linguistic and extralinguistic contexts

Method of reducing use of word to a "mechanical" rule that determines correct application of word.



# The Symbolic Function of the Dictionary

LexisNexis(TM) Academic - Document List - Netscape

http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/doclist?\_m=4b565940c6ab272709a32cc2df1a97Y3&vchp=

LexisNexis Home Sources How Do I? Site Map What's New Help

Search Terms: according to webster's

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Document List Expanded List KWIC Full

Documents 1 - 25 of 599

Tag for delivery Clear

Sorted by Date

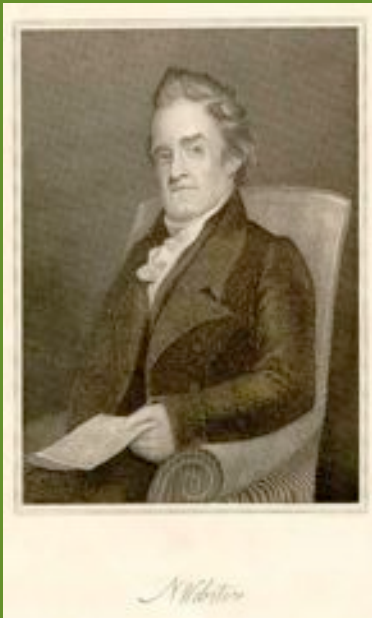
Sort by: Relevance

1. St. Petersburg Times, March 3, 2003 Monday, CITRUS TIMES; Pg. 2, 1344 words, Board's sudden opposition to toll road reveals favoritism
2. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, February 9, 2003 Sunday, TWO STAR EDITION, Pg. B-7, 800 words, TOP OF THE CHARTS; TWENTY-FOUR YEARS OF CONSISTENT ADVICE FOR WRITERS





# The Americanization of the Dictionary



Noah Webster

You have corrected the dangerous doctrines of European powers, correct now the languages you have imported... The American language will thus be as distinct as the government, free from all the follies of unphilosophical fashion, and resting upon truth as its only regulator. William Thornton, 1793.

From the changes in civil policy, manners, arts of life, and other circumstances attending the settlement of English colonies in America, most of the language of heraldry, hawking, hunting, and especially that of the old feudal and hierarchical establishments of England will become utterly extinct in this country; much of it already forms part of the neglected rubbish of antiquity. Noah Webster, 1806



# The Americanization of the Dictionary



Cf Webster's Spelling reforms: *honor*, *theater*, etc., but also *tung*, *iz*...

"A capital advantage of this [spelling] reform in these States would be, that it would make a difference between the English orthography and the American.... I am confident that such an event is an object of vast political consequence."



# Development of the Dictionary



1857-1928: Preparation of the OED; historical record of the entire language...

**Abbreviate** (ăbrĭ-vĭ-ĕt), *v.*, also 5-7 *abbreviate*. [*f.* ABBREVIATE *ppl. a.*; or on the analogy of *vbs.* so formed; see -ATE. A direct representative of L. *abbreviāre*; as ABRIDGE, and the obs. ABBREV, represent it indirectly, through OFr. *abregier* and mid. Fr. *abrévier*. Like the latter, *abbreviate*, was often spelt *a-breviate* in 5-7.] To make shorter, shorten, cut short in any way.

1530 PALSGR., *Lahevryat*: I make a thyngeshorte, *Teabreye*. 1565 BACON *Essays* xiv. 99 (1862) But it is one Thing to Abbreviate by Contracting. Another by Cutting off.

† *l. trans.* To make a discourse shorter by omitting details and preserving the substance; to abridge, condense. *Obs.*

c 1450 *Chester PL* l. 2 (Sh. Soc.) This matter he abbreviated into plays twenty-four. 1598 GREENE *Comy catching* iii. 16 The queene abbreviated her discourse. 1637 RALEIGH *Mahomet* 34 Abbreviated out of two Arabique writers translated into Spanish. 1678 MANLEY *Interpreter* prefl. I have omitted several Matters . . . contracted and abbreviated Others.

† *b.* To make an abstract or brief of, to epitomize. *Obs.*

c 1450 Trevisa *Higden's Polycr.* l. 21 (Rolls Ser.) Trogus Pompeius, in lrys x<sup>th</sup> iii. bookes, allemoste of alle the storyes of the worlde, whom Iustinus his disciple did abbreviate. 1603 FLORES *Montaigne* (1634) 627 To reade, to note, and to abbreviate Polibius. 1668-9 *The Kingdomes Weekly Intelligence* Jan. 16 to 23 The high court of Justice did this day sit again concerning the trial of the King. The charge was brought in and abbreviated.

† *c. Math.* To reduce (a fraction) to lower terms. *Obs.*

1796 *Mathem. Dict.* l. 2 To abbreviate fractions in arithmetic and algebra, is to lessen proportionally their terms, or the numerator and denominator.



James  
Murray



# Political Significance of the OED

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We could scarcely have a lesson on the growth of our English tongue, we could scarcely follow upon one of its significant words, without having unawares a lesson in English history as well, without not merely falling upon some curious fact illustrative of our national life, but learning also how the great heart which is beating at the centre of that life, was being gradually shaped and moulded.

Richard Chevenix Trench



# The Popular Dictionary

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Isaac Funk

[The dictionary] is the national key to human knowledge. ... It behooves all those who are concerned in the education of the young to place this book on the same plane as the churchmen of old placed the English Bible. The dictionary should be placed on a lectern in every school throughout the land. Frank Vizetelly, 1898



# Readings for 2/28

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Thompson, E.P. 1967. “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism.” *Past & Present* 38 (Dec): 56-97.

Fisher, George, acceptant. 1748. *The American Instructor: or, Young Man’s Best Companion* .... Philadelphia.

Read: the Title Page and “Advice to a Young Tradesman, Written By an Old One” (pp 375-377).