Prescriptivism and descriptivism in the first, second and third editions of *OED*

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A description and commentary on *OED*'s changing lexicographical practices and contemporary reactions from the early twentieth-century public

Prescriptivism and descriptivism in the first edition of the *OED*

There is a pervasive view, held by academics and educated laypeople alike, that the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a descriptive work. When plans for this great dictionary were first taking shape, the originators made their intentions very clear. Archbishop Trench, delivering the two lectures to the London Philological Society in 1857 which initiated the project, famously stated the axiom that the lexicographer 'is a historian of [the language], not a critic',[1] while the Philological Society's Dictionary Committee announced to its members in a document of 1860 that their job was to list and describe words accurately and disinterestedly:

> The mere merit of a word in an artistic or aesthetic point of view is a consideration, which the Lexicographer cannot for a moment entertain…the literary merit or demerit of any particular writer, like the comparative elegance or inelegance of any given word, is a subject upon which the Lexicographer is bound to be almost indifferent. (Murray, 1977: 195)

Many years later, after the dictionary had been completed, two of the surviving editors, W. A. Craigie and C. T. Onions, explained the descriptive, empirical basis on which the dictionary had been constructed, identifying this descriptivism as the foundation for *OED*'s unrivalled lexicographical authority:

> Its basis is a collection of some five million excerpts from English literature of every period amassed by an army of voluntary readers and the editorial staff. Such a collection of evidence … could form the only possible foundation for the historical treatment of every word and idiom which is the *raison d'être* of the work….
>
> … It is a fact everywhere recognized that the consistent pursuit of this evidence has worked a revolution in the art of lexicography.
>
> (Preface to Murray, 1933)

The same point was made more informally by Craigie in 1934, with particular reference to the notion of 'correctness' in language:

> Some of our predecessors in the science of lexicography thought it was part of their duty to improve the English language. We have got beyond that stage, and consider that if it is to be



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> improved it is not our business to do so, but record it as it was and as it is.
> (*The Periodical*, 15 March, 1934, 26)

But despite these various assertions, and despite *OED*'s academic standing as a work of impartial descriptivism, the editors of the first edition (*OED1*) included a number of judgements, expressions of opinion, and recommendations on language which now appear to us clearly prescriptive, not descriptive.[2] The most obvious indication of this is the use, not infrequent, of a special symbol to indicate what the editors judged to be '*catachrestic* and erroneous uses, confusions, and the like': the paragraph mark [¶]. When they apply this symbol to a word or sense, the editors sometimes explain, in a phrase or sentence, what it is they are objecting to in current (or past) usage. Thus the entry for the verb *avenge*, written by the chief editor of *OED1*, James Murray, includes the following remark:

> ¶Neither in earlier, nor even in modern, usage is the restriction of *avenge* and its derivatives to the idea of just retribution, as distinguished from the malicious retaliation of *revenge*, absolutely observed, although it largely prevails.

Here Murray is distinguishing between how the word is or has been used in practice (i.e., to apply to 'malicious retaliation') – and how, in his view, it *should* be used (i.e., restricted to 'the idea of just retribution'). His phrasing and his application of the paragraph mark constitute a judgement that the broader sense is undesirable, or 'wrong'; yet at the same time he acknowledges that this is a usage which is found, if less frequently, in the evidence of usage both past and present.

There are dozens of other examples where the paragraph mark is similarly applied. (Unfortunately it is not possible to make a complete list, since one cannot search for this symbol electronically.) In many cases, the editors print a number of quotations attesting the 'wrong' usage, even though these quotations give no indication that the sense complained of is problematic or disputed – and despite the fact that they are from exactly the same type of sources elsewhere used to attest unexceptionable usage, such as writers like Richardson, Dickens and many others, or newspapers such as *The Times* (see e.g. the entries for *enormity* and *transpire*).

Proscriptive judgements on usage in *OED1* are not always accompanied by the paragraph symbol. Sometimes the censorious comments stand alone, printed in a headnote or other explanatory matter accompanying the definition. Murray evidently deplored recent political usages of the word *caucus*, for example, a word he edited in the late 1880s. In a headnote to the *OED*'s entry, he said that this word had been 'generally misused' in English newspapers since 1878, and 'grotesquely misapplied'. He also had strong views on dropping the initial 'p' in words of Greek origin beginning with *pn-*, *ps-*, and *pt-* (*pneumonia, pseudonym, psyche*, etc.), which he thought 'an unscholarly practice'. Under the *OED* entry for *ps-*, he explained that although silent 'p' was now current practice, he had marked the sounded 'p' in many entries as

> an optional pronunciation which is recommended especially in all words that retain their Greek form (e.g. *psora*, *psyche*), and in scientific terms generally, which have not been *irretrievably mutilated by popular use.* [my italics]

This is a strange statement for a descriptive lexicographer to make about the process of diachronic change – and it contrasts markedly with the liberal views on pronunciation that Murray expressed elsewhere.[3]

Public reaction: *OED1* insufficiently prescriptive

Such prescriptive remarks in *OED1* are few and far between, and the paragraph mark does not readily spring to the eye as one turns over the hundreds of pages in this dictionary. In fact many of the *OED*'s original readers, far from objecting to being told how to use and pronounce words, thought that this revolutionary dictionary was dangerously democratic, and that in giving equal treatment (and hence validity) to all usages, good and bad, it was reneging on its proper responsibilities to the language. The influential *Edinburgh Review*, commenting on the Philological Society's *Proposal* for the new dictionary (1859), asked,

> What is this, but to throw down all barriers and rules, and declare that every form of expression which may have been devised by the humour, the ignorance, or the affectation of any writer, is at once to take rank in the national vocabulary? (Marsden, 1859, 369)

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On the contrary, the reviewer believed, 'one of the most laudable objects an educated man can pursue is to defend [the language] from contamination' (386). The *Times Literary Supplement* took only a slightly more enlightened view in 1928, when the dictionary had been completed and was generally recognized as a great work of descriptive scholarship:

> Those who respect the purity of the language, who try to honour and understand its traditions and its idioms, who feel doubtful whether even so supple an instrument as English can bear without grave deterioration the incessant strain put upon it by modern democracy, will…rejoice that the Dictionary [i.e. the *OED*] has come into being when it has and as it has. The registration of every word and every usage they recognize to be a noble ideal; but they believe that what is now wanted is a standard of good, or at least passable, English, and a criterion to which all writers can apply…Now that the Dictionary is complete there should be ground for hoping that, although it does not set up to be an arbiter, it will nevertheless be more and more resorted to as one. (Brodribb, 1928)

We can see that this reviewer does give due recognition to the descriptive ideal of the *OED*, and even concedes that it is 'noble'. At the same time, however, his love for the language means that he wants to call a halt to descriptivism: from now on, the gates have to be closed to new words, and standards upheld against the pressures of 'democracy' – he is referring to new legislation giving the vote to everyone over 21. Elsewhere in the review, the writer deplores the effect on the English language of the 'newly literate', i.e. those given a voice by recent state Education Acts and by the rise of newspapers.[4]

Others were more critical than this. The novelist A. P. Herbert, who wrote a series of articles on good and bad usage for the humorous periodical *Punch* in the 1930s, found the descriptive ethos both of *OED* and its subsidiary dictionaries intensely irritating. Like the *TLS* reviewer, he understood the requirement for descriptivism, reporting his conversation with 'a distinguished lexicographer' who had told him

> they are 'historians merely, and are no longer in a position to play the Johnson and purge the language'. 'I only wish we could!' says he. But 'if a word has reached the degree of usage within the scope of our particular dictionary, in it must go, however much we may loathe it'. (Herbert, 1935, 46)

Herbert's response was

> I hope…that some virile new lexicographer will arise and make a *Good English Dictionary* [i.e. not a *New English Dictionary*, *OED*'s original title], showing us not only what is said but what is sound (on the lines of Mr Fowler's *Modern English Usage*). (Herbert, 1935, 46)

This may sound like a joke. But at the time Herbert wrote, Oxford University Press (OUP) had precisely such a project in hand. OUP had of course produced the *OED*, which was an immensely expensive and scholarly project, but it had also managed to make money out of word-books too: first with the condensed versions of *OED* produced by the Fowler brothers – the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1911, 1929) and the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (1924) – and secondly with the Fowler usage books, *The King's English* (1906) and *Modern English Usage* (1926). All these works had been extraordinarily well received by the public, and the *Concise* and the *Pocket* (many times reprinted) dominated UK and overseas English language dictionary sales until the 1950s. With the prospect of significant financial reward in mind, along with the apparently inexhaustible public appetite for rulings on usage, the Press had already approached H. W. Fowler in 1925 to suggest he compile 'a great Dictionary of current English on the same excellent lines [as the *Concise*] – a modest thing of some 1500 quarto pages, which would be…a Dictionary of Current English'.[5] One of the distinguishing characteristics of the proposed new dictionary (initially called the 'Quarto', in reference to its expected size) was that it should 'contain, in the extra space, all sorts of information about usage which the narrower limits of C.O.D. and P.O.D. [i.e., the *Concise* and *Pocket* dictionaries] exclude'. Its special innovation was that it was to apply a usage label to virtually every entry. Clearly this project represented a significant departure from the descriptive ethos of the *OED*.

H. W. Fowler himself had worked extensively on *OED* for many years – he had based his own dictionaries on it, and he also contributed to another abridgement of *OED*, the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*. Throughout this time (as attested by abundant correspondence in the OUP archives) he was in constant contact with OUP and its lexicographers, not least as a member of and contributor to the Oxford-based *Society for Pure English*, of which Murray

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and his co-editors of *OED*, along with the OUP publishers, were all members. Strange though it seems to us now, all these men, with the possible exception of Onions (see below), seem to have been more or less comfortable with an intellectual culture which felt able to square opinionated judgements on usage with an academic commitment to descriptivism. The same ambivalence can be found in scholarly reviewers of *Modern English Usage*, who often recommended the book while excoriating it on linguistic grounds: the philologist Kemp Malone, for example, berated Fowler for his grammatical ignorance but finished by saying, 'Grammarian and layman alike ought to have [*MEU*] on their shelves, and if they fail to find it highly enjoyable and highly stimulating, there is something wrong with them.'[6]

For many years afterwards, up to the late 1950s, the Quarto dictionary planned by OUP (and expected by them to rival the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* in what they called 'greatness') was worked on both by Fowler himself (who died in 1933) and a string of successors. Sadly, it encountered a series of problems and was eventually aborted – but that is another story.[7]

Omission of 'rude' words and restriction of quotation sources: covert prescriptivism in *OED1* and its first Supplement

At least one other critic of *OED1* took a different line from the prescriptivists. This was the linguist A. S. C. Ross, who later became famous as the originator of the terms *U* and *non-U*, thus initiating (or rather perpetuating) a long-standing debate on the social significance of various items of vocabulary (whether it truly was down-market to say *serviette* rather than *napkin*, *mirror* rather than *glass*, *sick* rather than *ill*, etc.).[8] By contrast with the *TLS* and others, Ross thought that the *OED* had not been inclusive enough, and in 1934 he wrote a review of the 1933 *OED* Supplement pointing out that 'there appears to have been a definite policy of omission' of 'obscene', or as he called them, 'mumfordish'[9] words in the parent work, the *OED* itself, which had not been rectified in the Supplement:

> …it certainly seems regrettable that the perpetuation of a Victorian prudishness (inacceptable in philology beyond all other subjects) should have been allowed to lead to the omission of some of the commonest words in the English language (e.g. *cunt** 'female sex-organs'; 'the curse'* 'menstrual period'; *to fuck** 'to have intercourse with'; *roger** = *fuck*). (Ross, 1934, 129 n.1)

Omission is a covert form of linguistic prescriptivism, and we can see that leaving out 'rude' words from *OED* is motivated by notions of propriety and social nicety akin to those informing the disapproving comments on inelegance and misuse already discussed. There were of course strong legal, as well as social, reasons for omitting such vocabulary. In 1922, James Joyce's *Ulysses* had to be published in Paris rather than in Ireland or the UK for fear of prosecution, and it was not until after the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial in 1960 that UK publishers could be sure that printing this vocabulary would not lay them open to legal proceedings as well as complaints from the general public. But it is clear that the omission of some terms, e.g. the sexual sense of *lesbian*, was motivated by factors other than legality. Archival documents testify that the *OED* lexicographers and publishers had a significant argument over whether to include the sexual definition of this word in the 1933 Supplement to *OED*. Finally they decided against it, though not without a struggle. When one of the two chief editors of the Supplement, C. T. Onions, found that his colleague Craigie was proposing to omit the sexual sense, he wrote to the head of OUP, R. W. Chapman, to protest that such omission would be against his 'lexicographical conscience': 'Lesbianism is no doubt a very disagreeable thing, but the word is in regular use, & no serious Supplement to our work should omit it' (in fact, the word is attested as early as 1732, and had been in the news over recent years owing to court cases and debates on sexual legislation).[10] The publishers, however, supported Craigie. Chapman told Onions that 'he had better not interfere if C[raigie] has really made up his mind', although he thought it 'very silly to omit it. The thing is important enough in all conscience, if common report (in e.g. New York) is to be trusted. C[raigie] is capable of not knowing what it is!'[11] The sexual definition for *lesbian* was therefore left out of the 1933 Supplement,[12] apparently because, as these remarks show, the publishers felt that the sensibilities of their chief lexicographer were more important than *OED*'s scholarly commitment to descriptivism – although as quoted above, Craigie's publicly stated view was that it

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was imperative for *OED* to record language as it was actually used. (The 1933 Supplement did however include the term *homosexual* for the first time in the *OED*'s history, an inconsistency highlighted by the fact that male homosexuality – to which the term *homosexuality* normally refers, although technically it includes lesbianism too – was then a criminal offence in Britain, while lesbianism had (and has) never been criminalised.)[13] Such individual vagaries apart, however, Craigie and Onions seem to have agreed they should avoid overt prescriptivism: no trace of the paragraph mark appears in the pages of their Supplement.

Another feature of covert prescriptivism in *OED1* was its choice of quotation sources. At the time the first edition was compiled there was a prevailing cultural belief that language had been formed by the works of great writers (literary, historical, philosophical, religious), and it was to these sources that the editors and volunteers instinctively turned when seeking evidence for usage in constructing their dictionary. Colloquial, slang, domestic and everyday sources were by no means neglected, but they were represented in far smaller numbers. As we have seen, *OED*'s method is reliant on the objective use of quotation evidence. Restrictions in the sources from which the quotations were taken will inevitably have affected the reliability and comprehensiveness of the dictionary's judgements – and this non-descriptive characteristic of the *OED* is neglected by linguists at their peril.[14] Anna Wierzbicka, for example, in her recent book *Language in Society* (2006), sets out 'to investigate English as a historically shaped universe of meaning and to reveal English's cultural underpinnings and their implications for the modern world', and she time and again turns to quotations from the *OED* to supply historical evidence for her arguments. The same is true of many linguists seeking to investigate syntactical and semantic developments in historical English: now that the *OED* is electronically searchable, it is irresistible to make use of this extraordinarily rich resource, with its two million quotations (or, in *OED2*, two and a half million) drawn from so many sources from 1150 to the present day, to examine, say, the comparative increases in use of different prefixes or suffixes, or the relative lexical productivity of different periods of the language. But all evidence from the *OED* must be treated with great care: much of it represents the culturally determined choices of Victorian and Edwardian lexicographers and readers, and is therefore only in a limited way representative of historical usage more generally.[15]

Changes in policy in the second *OED Supplement*, edited by R. W. Burchfield (1972–86)[16]

In 1957, OUP decided that it was time to produce another Supplement to the *OED,* and appointed R. W. Burchfield to the task. His job was carefully defined by the publishers, who were fearful of taking on a financial burden of the sort they had borne over seventy years in funding the creation of *OED1*: Burchfield was to restrict himself to seeking out and recording new words and senses which had entered the language since the first edition, and was not for a moment to contemplate revising the original work (although he might supply pre-20th-century vocabulary, still current, that had been omitted by *OED*). Burchfield had very different ideas from his predecessors about what was appropriate in descriptive lexicography. He greatly increased the range of quotation sources, and he was unequivocal about the need to depart from what I have called the covert prescriptivism of the first edition, especially the exclusion of vocabulary referring to sexual and bodily functions. Such words all, or mostly, went into the *OED* for the first time in his four-volume Supplement (published between 1972 and 1986), fully supported by quotations and etymologies – which in many instances had long been on file in the *OED* offices. (Burchfield was not entirely consistent here, but this seems to have been unintentional, not deliberate).

He took a similarly descriptive attitude to racist and other sorts of offensive vocabulary. Over the years since the first edition of *OED* had been published, there had grown up a much stronger public awareness of the unacceptability of certain terms, for example those relating to the word *Jew*. From the 1920s onwards, members of the public had complained to OUP that the *OED*'s definitions were undesirable because they perpetuated, and appeared to sanction, the offensive usages of this term. Both publishers and lexicographers had consistently taken the view that, since *OED* was a descriptive dictionary, it could not suppress or censor historical evidence and it was

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bound to record 'the facts of the language'.[17] In the late 1960s, a notorious law suit was brought against OUP (by Marcus Shloimovitz, a businessman from Salford) to challenge this position; throughout the ensuing, very public, controversy, Burchfield fully supported the Press's policy of descriptivism, though not without considerable personal cost: he was deluged with unpleasant correspondence from anti-Semitic as well as pro-Semitic pressure groups, and received a death-threat. In his Supplement, he continued to list and define racist and other objectionable words and senses, although in the majority of these cases he introduced an important new policy in *OED* and attached a descriptive label, such as 'derogatory' or 'offensive' (see his revised entry for *Jew* s.v.2a, which includes a brief historical account of the word prepared by the medieval historian J. M. Wallace-Hadrill).[18]

Where proprieties of correctness were concerned, however, Burchfield took a rather different view. In the preface to the third volume of his Supplement (1982: v), he recounted how

> During the 1970s the markedly [sic] linguistic descriptivism of the post-war years was to some extent brought into question. Infelicities of language, whether in the spoken or the written word, were identified and assailed by a great many people who seemed to believe that the English language itself was in a period of decline.

Reporting recent discussions of language usage in the national and international press, and also in the UK House of Lords, 'in the course of which eloquent voices were raised against the use of modish words like *ongoing*, *relevant* and *viable*', Burchfield commented,

> One legacy of these great debates is that here and there in the present volume I have found myself adding my own opinions about the acceptability of certain words or meanings in educated use. Users of the dictionary may or may not find these editorial comments diverting: they have been added (adapting a statement by John Ray in 1691) 'as oil to preserve the mucilage from inspissation'. (vi)

Like Murray's remarks on '*ps-*', this is a surprising statement for a descriptive linguist to make, and it is possible that Burchfield's views on usage had in some way been influenced by the work on which he was also engaged at the same time as editing the *OED* Supplement, a third edition of *Fowler's Modern English Usage*.

Burchfield's 'own opinions', or usage comments (which are predominantly to be found in the third and fourth volumes of the Supplement, but also occur earlier) were of different kinds, and identified in different ways. Some, but not all, were attributed to 'Ed'; some were accompanied with the proscriptive paragraph mark (¶; enthusiastically reinstated by Burchfield notwithstanding its earlier lapse from use in the 1933 Supplement); some were enclosed within brackets, and some printed in a different, smaller typeface. The following examples give an idea of their nature and scope:

- *agenda* (treated as a singular noun): 'a use now increasingly found but avoided by careful writers'
- *insinuendo:* 'a tasteless word'
- *media* (treated as a singular noun): 'erron[eous]'
- *opinionnaire:* 'of doubtful usefulness'
- *permanentize:* 'of little value and rarely found in serious writing'
- *prioritize:* 'a word that at present sits uneasily in the language'
- *redundantize:* 'fortunately rare'
- *regretfully:* 'a regrettable use'
- *supportative:* 'an unnecessary formation'.

Some of these are statements of a personal opinion which is, perhaps, inappropriately expressed in this context (e.g. s.v. *insinuendo*), while others give a more dispassionate judgement which has a value for historians of language, since it identifies the attitudes of particular language users to particular usages (e.g. s.v. *agenda* or *prioritize*). It could certainly be argued that, given Burchfield's own experience and standing as a lexicographer of the *OED* over decades, all his comments have historical interest and value.

Interestingly, the quotation evidence which Burchfield prints to substantiate his definitions rarely backs up his comments, and in some cases runs counter to them. Under *agenda*, for instance, none of the five quotations (dated between 1907 and 1963, and all from respectable sources – i.e. not obviously 'careless' ones) gives any sense that treating this form as singular is disputed or controversial or 'tasteless'. The same is true for all the other terms listed here except for *prioritize,* where two of the quotations print the verb in inverted commas to indicate there is some issue of propriety at stake in its usage. Under *media*, Burchfield prints a quotation (1966) from the

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famous novelist and critic Kingsley Amis which reads 'The treatment of *media* as a singular noun... is spreading into the upper cultural strata.' This makes his comment that such treatment is 'erroneous' – in a dictionary published in 1976 – look particularly odd. The *OED* is a dictionary whose authority is based on its unparalleled collection of evidence of real usage. Where does Burchfield's judgement come from if not from his quotations?

Further problems with Burchfield's usage comments arise when one examines them for consistency. As we have seen him describe, *ongoing*, *relevant* and *viable* were all the object of criticism from language purists in the 1970s. But no notice of such criticism appears on these three words in Burchfield's Supplement. Nor does he record many of the other objections made to new words and senses over the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (e.g. the verbs *audition*, or *finalize*).[19]

The Second (1989) and Third (2000–) Editions of *OED*

Burchfield's work on the Supplement was completed in 1986. OUP had already begun the process of translating both the Supplement and its parent dictionary, the first edition of the *OED*, into electronic form, and only three years later, in 1989, they were able to re-issue the combined result in a new version, which they described as a 'second edition' (*OED2*). This splendid twenty-volume edition is the only version of *OED* currently in print, and it is also available on CD and online. However, it is not a new edition in the normal sense of the word: it is simply a merging together of the first edition of *OED* with Burchfield's Supplement, with almost no changes beyond the addition of 5,000 new words or senses. The greater part of *OED2* is thus exactly the same as *OED1*, and represents the state of scholarship over the years of the first edition's compilation (1884–1928) rather than that contemporary with the second edition itself (1989). But it does seem that the two editors of *OED2*, John Simpson and Edmund Weiner, tried, so far as they could, to tackle Burchfield's usage labels and comments. Some (but not all) were dropped, and some (but not all) of those attributed to 'Ed.' had their attribution changed to 'R.W.B.' (though this term was not explained in the list of abbreviations!). Evidently, given the speed with which the second edition appeared, it was not possible to review and improve the policy on usage labels in any consistent way.[20]

The same is not true for the third and current edition of *OED* (*OED3*). This is the magnificently ambitious (and enormously expensive, though privately funded) enterprise which is now well underway in Oxford, again under the leadership of Simpson and Weiner. For the first time, the *OED* is being systematically revised throughout its entirety. In order to avoid cutting their teeth on the first edition's treatment of A – on which the 19th-century lexicographers had cut *their* teeth – the revisers began in the middle of the alphabet, at the letter M, and they have been releasing their new material online, in successive quarterly tranches, since 2000. Their work takes two forms: first, slow and steady revision of each old entry (they have recently reached the letter R), and second, new words and corrections from across the alphabet.

This means that they are encountering, with some frequency, words and senses in the language on which usage comments have appeared in the past, or on which such comments are appropriate now. So far, the revisers at work on *OED3* have published a Preface to their new edition (online at http://www.oed.com/about/oed3-preface/) but have supplied no detailed account of their lexicographical method, nor information about how they are treating either usage labels (or labels of any kind), or issues of usage and correctness.[21] By looking up words and senses serendipitously, however, we can work out what they are doing, and have a guess at why. The most striking feature of *OED3*'s treatment of usage and correctness is that it has ceased to use the paragraph mark to identify 'erroneous and catachrestic' usage – and correspondingly, it has ceased to make negative judgements when describing usage. This is an important and welcome change: for the first time, *OED* is truly living up to its claim to be an historian of the language rather than a critic of it.

But what is the new *OED* doing to provide information on contested usage – that is, how is it tackling the issue of correctness now that it has stopped saying that some usages are, by implication, wrong or misguided? The answer is that *OED3* is still providing usage information and comment, but it is doing so in a different way. Under *prioritize*, for example, the revised entry (draft dated December 2007)

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reports Burchfield's view: 'Described in *OED Suppl.* (1982) as "a word that at present sits uneasily in the language"', and the revisers have managed to find an earlier quotation, from 1954, which antedates Burchfield's first quotation of 1973. The revisers have also added later quotations, and they have changed the layout of the entry so as to make the grammatical variations with which the verb is used (i.e. transitively and intransitively) more clear. In this way *OED3* has contextualised Burchfield's judgement without discarding it. There must be many more examples of this sort of change: it is evidently an improvement.[22]

As one browses online the thousands of new items in *OED3*, it is also possible to find examples of fuller and more dedicated treatment of issues of usage, descriptivism and prescriptivism. Interestingly, this treatment develops a technique vestigially present in the first edition of *OED,* and slightly more in evidence in Burchfield's Supplement: namely, printing, at the beginning of an entry for a contested usage, a reference or a note citing discussion of the problem in sources such as newspapers or word-books (e.g. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*). Murray employed this method on at least two occasions in *OED1* (and almost certainly more often; it is difficult to search systematically for examples). First, under *oblivious* in the sense 'unaware or unconscious', which he edited in 1904, and which he firmly labels '*erron[eous]*' (attaching a paragraph mark), he cited in support of his judgement the *Daily News* of 18 April 1899 (p. 6). If one looks up a copy of this newspaper, one discovers an article lambasting this sense as 'the result of ignorance of Latin', while deploring the fact that it is encountered 'every day' (of course, this indicates that Murray's label was not a descriptive one). In the second instance, under *reliable* sense 1a ('That may be relied upon; in which reliance or confidence may be put; trustworthy, safe, sure'), Murray supplied a full note on usage:

> In current use only from about 1850, and at first perhaps more frequent in American works, but from 1855 freely employed by British writers, though often protested against as an innovation or an Americanism. The formation has been objected to (as by Worcester['s dictionary] in 1860) on the ground of irregularity, but has analogies in *available*, *dependable*, *dispensable*, *laughable* (Webster['s 'Unabridged' dictionary] 1864). The question has been fully discussed by F[itzedward] Hall in his work *On English Adjectives in -able*, *with special reference to Reliable.* ([London]1877)

By contrast with Murray's terse annotation of *oblivious*, this is a much happier treatment of contested usage: the lexicographer surveys both historical evidence and word-books, reports the case for and against the usage, and offers judicious comment. I have found four examples of this sort of note in Burchfield's Supplement too, all referring to Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1926) as an authority: under *idyll* and *lasso* (in both cases, commenting on pronunciation), and under *questionnaire* (commenting on usage and pronunciation) and *Scotch* (commenting on usage alone).[23]

OED3 has taken this method a considerable step further. Whereas Burchfield referred to Fowler's *Modern English Usage* only four times in the Supplement, *OED3* has done so eleven times, over a much smaller alphabet range (the revision has to date, September 2008, covered about a quarter of the dictionary).[24] In many of these instances the revisers have investigated and quoted from further sources, whether other dictionaries, or books and authorities on usage (e.g. *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, 1989) or pronunciation (e.g. E. J. Dobson's *English Pronunciation 1500–1700*). Under *questionnaire*, for example, they adduce the fourth edition (1937) of Daniel Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary* in order to narrow down the date at which the anglicised pronunciation of the word had begun to replace the French one.

As we have seen, the *OED*'s claim to be 'the definitive record of the language' (to quote the front page of its website) is made on the basis of its collection of quotation evidence: hence the need to reproduce a representative range of this evidence, so that we can see how it gives rise to the scholarly judgements made by the lexicographers and then adopted (with much gratitude) by the rest of us. So far it is clear that, in general, *OED3* is tackling issues of usage and correctness with informed impartiality – and in particular, by quoting so generously from word-books as well as from more general usage, it is able to report prescriptiveness without endorsing it. That is, it is being descriptive about prescriptivism. As work on this new edition continues, we will be able to see more evidence of how it is treating contentious terms. And we can also hope that the lexicographers will publish a full account of

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their editorial policy on usage labels, usage comments, and quotation choices. ■

Notes

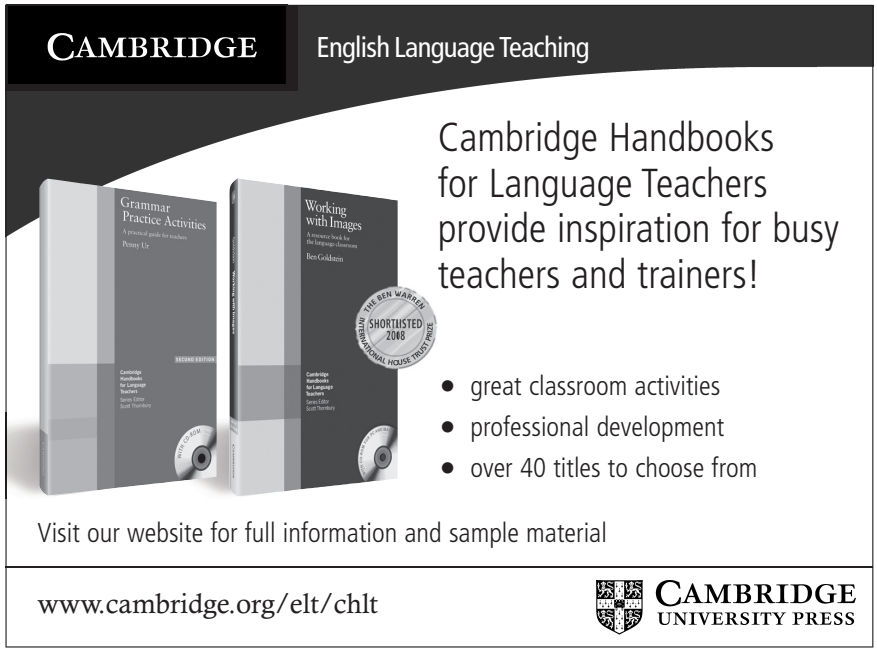
1 Trench, 1860 (1857), 5.
2 For previous discussion see Mugglestone, 2000a, 2000b, 2005, Brewer, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, and cf. Beal, 2008.
3 See Brewer, 2007a; MacMahon, 1985. H. W. Fowler, in both *The King's English* (1906) and *Modern English Usage* (1926), supported Murray's position, though Gowers in his 1965 revision of this work stated '*ps-* is a long way off from victory; the normal pronunciation is still *s-*'. Burchfield's third edition of Fowler (1996) confirmed that Murray's hopes for *ps-* had come to nothing and that all English words beginning thus 'are now pronounced with initial /s/, not /ps/'.
4 Recent years had seen the growth of a new kind of popular press (*Daily Mail* 1896, *Daily Mirror* 1903, *Daily Sketch* 1909), but newspaper language had been routinely objected to for many years previously (e.g. Marsden, 1859: 376; cf. Brewer, 2007b: 117–19 and nn. 73–5).
5 Letter of 27 November 1925 from K. Sisam to H. W. Fowler, OUP archives (OUPA/SOED/1925). I am grateful to the Secretary to the Delegates of OUP for permission to quote from its archives.
6 Malone, 1927; cf. Fijn van Draat, 1928–9.
7 Brewer, 2008.
8 Ross, 1954, brought to the attention of the general public in Mitford and Ross, 1956.
9 After the ISLE 2008 workshop, at which the original version of the present paper was delivered, this baffling word was intensively discussed on the linguistic web-site Language Log and elsewhere, though without satisfactory resolution (in the eyes of the present writer at least); see http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=719.
10 See e.g. *The Times*, 5 June, 1918, 4; *The Times*, 5 August, 1921, 12.
11 See Brewer, 2007b: 49–50.
12 It finally entered *OED* in Burchfield's Supplement (see below) in 1976 (first usage dated 1890).
13 For an authoritative account of British law on sexual crimes and practices, see Honoré (1978).
14 For further discussion and research, see Brewer, 2005–.
15 The *OED*'s restriction of its quotation sources to printed material (including modern editions of Middle English and Old English works) is an additional limitation, unavoidable but often disregarded, on its representation of the English language.
16 Burchfield's second Supplement subsumed the work of the first Supplement (Brewer, 2007b, chapters 6–7).
17 Thus Kenneth Sisam, then Assistant Secretary to the Delegates of OUP, exchanged letters with one of his colleagues on 10 Sept 1941 to say 'our editors are concerned with the facts of language, not with the moral background of the facts, or any kind of propaganda: they haven't the slightest anti-Semite tendencies. The plain issue for them is: does Jew occur (among other meanings) in the sense "person of Hebrew race; (transf., colloq.) extortionate usurer, driver of hard bargains"? One has only to look at *O.E.D.* under Jew, paragraph 2, to see that it does. A lexicographer must not leave his readers in the lurch every time anything distasteful to himself, or to some of them, turns up. Otherwise his dictionary will be of no use.' (10 Sept, 1941, memo headed C.O.D. to H. Milford, OUP Archives LOGE 000331 Box LG48.)
18 It is unattributed in the Supplement, but the evidence for its authorship is in the OUP archives.
19 Herbert (1934) objects to *audition*, while *finalize* was execrated by critics of Webster's *Third International Dictionary* (see Sledd and Ebbitt,1962).
20 See further Brewer, 2007b: 213–29.
21 See further Brewer, 2007b: 237–57.
22 Not all of *OED3*'s changes appear to be improvements. The new entry (draft revision dated Dec. 2007) for *oblivious* in the sense 'unaware, unconscious' (see next paragraph) has removed not only Murray's paragraph mark but also his label 'erroneous' (which Burchfield, in his Supplement, had modified to 'formerly regarded as erroneous'). It also drops the reference to the *Daily News* article of 1899. It does not report that this usage continued to be condemned in the first (1926) and second (1965) editions of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, nor that during the course of the 20th century – as Burchfield explains in his 1996 edition of Fowler – it became firmly established in educated usage.
23 Burchfield adduced the 1965 Gowers revision of Fowler under *Scotch*.
24 The first or third edition of Fowler is cited in *OED3* (as searched 15 September 2008) under rewritten or new entries for *electrocute*, *gay*, *masterful, medicine, metamorphosis, mitigate, normalcy, often, other,* and *questionnaire*. However, Fowler is not cited under *oblivious* – see note 22 above.

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