

American Dictionaries of English – Noah Webster

‘As an independent nation our honour requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government. 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 is on the decline’.

Noah Webster

Webster's Dictionary is the title given to the common type of English language dictionaries in the United States. It is derived from American lexicographer Noah Webster and in the United States, the phrase Webster's has become a genericized trademark for dictionaries.

19th- and early 20th-century editions

Noah Webster was a schoolmaster, lawyer, lecturer, journalist, crusader for copyright legislation. He was also the author of immensely popular readers and spelling books for schools. He entered the lexicographic scene in 1806 with the publication of his first dictionary ‘*A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*’. It was a modest, small-sized dictionary of some 400 pages, the first dictionary of any significance produced by an American. It had 37 000 entries, including 5 000 words that Webster claimed were not included in any other English dictionary. In this dictionary Webster set out a wide range of reforms, particularly in spelling. He introduced features that would be a hallmark of future editions, **center** rather than **centre**, **theater** rather than **theatre**, **honor** rather than **honour**, **program** rather than **programme**, etc. He also included technical terms from the arts and sciences in the dictionary rather than confining it to literary words only. The Dictionary contained an extensive back matter, with tables of currencies used in different countries, weights and measures ancient and modern, a history of the world, divisions of time, the Jewish, Greek and Roman calendars, the number of inhabitants in the USA, remarkable events and discoveries, etc. This was to become part of the American lexicographic tradition. Noah Webster spent the next two decades working to expand his dictionary.

The true beginning of American lexicography was the publication of an ‘*American Dictionary of the English Language*’ published in 1828, when Noah Webster, who had worked on the project for 28 years, was already 70. It was the first dictionary to use the word *American* in its title. It came in two volumes, with about 1 600 pages and about 70,000 entries.

Webster wanted to produce a distinctively American dictionary, and said in his *Preface* that he wanted to illustrate usage by quoting only from American literature. He did quote Franklin, Washington, Adams, Madison, etc.

An American Dictionary was immensely successful, selling almost as well in Britain as in the USA. The second edition appeared in 1841, corrected and enlarged with 5 000 new words, when Webster was over 80. Webster edited the Revised Edition with the help of his son, William G. Webster. The dictionary was sent to Queen Victoria with a message 'Our common language is one of the ties that bind the two nations together; I hope the works I have executed will manifest to the British nation that the Americans are not willing to suffer it to degenerate on this side of the Atlantic'.

Upon Webster's death in 1843, the unsold books and all rights to the copyright and name 'Webster' were purchased by brothers **George and Charles Merriam**, who then hired Webster's son-in-law Chauncey A. Goodrich, a professor at Yale College, to oversee revisions. Hence appears the double name **Merriam-Webster**.

Webster's International Dictionary

Webster's International Dictionary was an expansion of the American, published in 1890 and contained 175,000 entries. The name was changed because the publisher wished to reflect the wide authority the work had throughout the English-speaking world and that it was no longer solely an "American" dictionary. The dictionary was published with a Supplement in 1900, which added 25,000 entries.

The Merriam Company issued a complete revision in 1909, Webster's New International Dictionary, edited by William Torey Harris and F. Sturges Allen. Vastly expanded, it covered over 400,000 entries. Notable improvement was made in the treatment and number of discriminated synonyms, comparisons of subtle shades of meaning.

Also added was a twenty-page chart comparing the Webster's pronunciations with those offered by six other major dictionaries.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary

After about a decade of preparation, G. & C. Merriam issued the entirely new Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged (commonly known as Webster's Third, or W3) in September 1961. It was edited by Philip Babcock Gove and

contained more than 450,000 entries. It included more than 50,000 new entries and as many new senses for entries carried over from previous editions. The book was printed by the Riverside Press in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The first edition had 2,726 large pages, weighed thirteen and one-half pounds (6 kg), and originally sold for \$47.50. The changes were the most radical in the history of the Unabridged. Although it was an unprecedented masterwork of scholarship, it was met by many with disappointment and criticism.

Criticism

Webster's Third was heavily criticized for its "permissiveness" and its refusal to take a position on what was "good" English, critics comparing it unfavorably with the Second Edition. As Herbert Morton put it, "Webster's Second was more than respected. It was accepted as the ultimate authority on meaning and usage and its preeminence was virtually unchallenged in the United States. It did not provoke controversies, it settled them." Critics charged that the dictionary was reluctant to defend standard English, for example entirely eliminating the labels "colloquial", "correct", "incorrect", "proper", "improper", "erroneous", "humorous", "jocular", "poetic", and "contemptuous", among others.

Revisions and updates

Since the 1961 publication of the Third, Merriam-Webster has reprinted the main text of the dictionary with only minor corrections. To add new words, they created an Addenda Section in 1966, included in the front matter, which was expanded in 1971, 1976, 1981, 1986, 1993, and 2002. However, the rate of additions has been much slower than it had been throughout the previous hundred years.

Following the purchase of Merriam-Webster by Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. in 1964, a three-volume version was issued for many years as a supplement to the encyclopedia. At the end of volume three, this edition included the Britannica World Language Dictionary, 474 pages of translations between English and French, German, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, and Yiddish. Although the time between new editions previously ranged between nineteen and twenty-seven years, after forty-seven years (as of 2008), Merriam-Webster has not revealed any plans to publish a Fourth New International edition of the Unabridged.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

Merriam-Webster introduced its Collegiate Dictionary in 1898 and the series is now in its 11th edition. Following the publication of Webster's International in 1890, two Collegiate editions were issued as abridgements of each of their Unabridged editions.

With the 9th edition (published in 1985), the Collegiate adopted changes which distinguish it as a separate entity rather than merely an abridgement of the Third New International (the main text of which has remained virtually unrevised since 1961). Some proper names were returned to the word list, including names of Knights of the Round Table. The most notable change was the inclusion of the date of the first known citation of each word, to document its entry into the English language. The 11th edition includes over 225,000 definitions, and over 165,000 entries. This dictionary is preferred as a source "for general matters of spelling" by the influential The Chicago Manual of Style, which is followed by many book publishers and magazines in the United States.

Online editions

The latest edition of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary can be searched online at the company's website. The updated Third New International is available online by subscription. The 1828 edition can be searched online at the Cornerstone Baptist Temple website and at 1828.sorabji.com.

Both the 1828 edition and the 1913 edition are available online in searchable format.

On the whole, the nineteenth century was a prosperous time for American lexicography. British dictionaries of the same period have been mostly forgotten, because they were too much under the influence of Johnson to be innovative, but American dictionaries flourished, and established a tradition that was different from the British tradition on which they were originally based. Rather than tools for the well educated to read their literature or enjoy sharing their culture with their peers, American dictionaries were all-purpose guides and reference works accessible to American citizens of all classes and all levels of education.