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## DISCUSSION

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# On the War of the Dictionaries

By Laurence Urdang



MR R. W. BURCHFIELD'S comments about American English in his article, "On That Other Great Dictionary ... and the American Language" [May 1977], remind me of an editor who survived several months on my staff when I was in charge of the preparation of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged Edition*. Revolted by the (admittedly ugly) metaphor, he rejected *basket case* as a slang entry for "quadruple amputee."

As a lexicographer, I should like to address myself to the question implied by Mr Burchfield's comments. Till the *OED* and Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* came along, dictionaries were generally regarded by their compilers as being relatively selective. Both dictionaries changed that; and the work of the lexicographer became—at least as far as the selection of headwords was concerned—an attempt at providing a description of the lexicon of a language. The modern lexicographer, bent on a reasonably accurate description of the lexicon of English (American or British), can no more ignore the occurrence of neologisms, however unpleasant they may be, than can the medical researcher who may be disgusted by leprosy or cancer ignore the pursuit of their treatment and cure. The responsibility of the

LAURENCE URDANG is Editor of "Verbatim, The Language Quarterly"; Managing Editor of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (Unabridged Edition)*; Editor in Chief of "The Random House College Dictionary"; Compiler Editor of "The New York Times Everyday Reader's Dictionary of Misunderstood, Misused, Mispronounced Words"; and Editor of more than 15 other general and specialised dictionaries of English.

lexicographer is to describe. It is not to proscribe, either by omission or by a pattern labelling that reflects his opinion about the style or acceptability of a given word, sense, or usage.

The chief criterion available to the lexicographer in reaching his decision about whether a new word, sense, or usage should be included is frequency. That is, if a word appears quite frequently in use by a substantial number of speakers, it merits more serious consideration than a word found buried in an arcane manuscript gathering dust on a shelf in some obscure scholar's attic. Unfortunately, data about frequency are not always available, so the volume of citations for a given word (and sense) and the media where it has appeared must be judged by the lexicographer. The assessment of the results of his work—that is, whether the published dictionary is "good" or not—depends largely on his judgment of these data; and, just as there are good and better lexicographers, there are good and better dictionaries.

MY QUARREL WITH Mr Burchfield's comments is with his stigmatisation, "the meretricious tendencies in American English", which appears in the closing lines of his article. It is passing curious that a large percentage of the people who write to me praise me for my efforts in "preserving the English language" and that an almost equally large percentage see fit to condemn me for corrupting it. None the less, history shows a similar, old-fashioned view of language change. Usage books of the 19th century condemn just as many stylistic features that are still condemned as they do usages that are today accepted as standard by the most exacting writers of British and American English. Many syntactic constructions of the 19th century are criticised as archaic today. Examination of dictionaries of earlier periods reveals that the lexicon has changed—not only expanded, but changed—and linguists (including lexicographers) regard such change, as well as expansion, to be a natural feature of language.

People tend to be highly opinionated about language, when they have any opinions at all, and those over forty years of age continually bemoan the fact that "they don't use English as 'they' used to. . . ." (This in contrast to those under forty who may be more likely to use *like* in place of *as*.) Those over forty don't use English the way "they" used to, either. In Shakespearean English, *rival* meant "companion" and *nice* meant "precise, exact", a meaning it has today in only specialised contexts like a *nice distinction*.

"Musty old values" were, indeed, a whimsy of Lord Peter's, but it is surprising to find Mr Burchfield agreeing (as he seems to) when he

refers to the “meretricious tendencies in American English.” I have no brief for *Webster’s Third*: for its encyclopedic definitions, for its failure to label the new uses of *disinterested* and *infer*, or for its other shortcomings. My criticism, however, stems from another tenet, namely, that language is a social instrument and that it is as much the responsibility of the lexicographer to record his interpretation of the attitudes of people toward the language as it is to record the language itself.

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENCES between American and British English—proportionately about as many as there are between the modern reflexes of these dialects and the way they were used a hundred years ago. Some go relatively unnoticed, like *toward* vs. *towards*. Others are recognised as cultural, like *bathroom* vs. *water closet, toilet, etc.*, *football* vs. *soccer, etc.* To remark upon the movement of the American language to “a much more strident stage, marked by brash innovation of vocabulary . . . by an abandonment in many quarters of well-formedness for words and sentences, by an invasion . . . by the language of the technologists, by the syrupy double-talk of politicians and strategists, and by unacceptable or non-standard grammar of the speech of certain ethnic minorities”, is to ignore exactly the same movement in British English. It may be marginally true that the writing in British periodicals is more carefully tailored to a smaller literary élite than that in their mass-market American counterparts. But isn’t *gazump* a Bricicism (let alone a British practice)? Isn’t *loo* heard in preference to almost any other term for *toilet* in Britain?

Isn’t the real point that Americans write the way they speak, and Britons affect a writing style distinct from that which they use in speech?

IN A RECENT ARTICLE in *The Times* (20 April 1977), Bernard Levin found some complimentary things to write about *Verbatim*, an American publication. Included in his comment was the following:

“. . . I had a nasty turn on reading the introductory editorial note in the very first issue, which included a horrible bit of if-for-though: *Verbatim*, we were told, would be ‘written in an intelligent (if popular) style. . . .’ But such solecisms are rare. . . .”

Although (*not* “if”) I wrote that, it was written in a deliberately casual style. Yet Mr Levin had apparently caught me in what he considers to be a solecism, and reading it made me nervous.

Upon examination of *OED* Volume V, I found examples (under I, 4, a) of this usage

first attested in *Cursor Mundi* and in Richard Rolle of Hampole. Moreover, the *Supplement* yielded further examples from *New Statesman* (1965) and *Listener* (1967 and 1969). I may not write deathless prose, but I seem to be in the company of some who do.

The issue appears to resolve itself to a matter of personal taste and preference. Surely, Bernard Levin is conceded to be one of the better writers and stylists of our day; and if he execrates if-for-though, then I would accept his criticism, for I am only a poor (American) writer.

Somehow, though, one who has established himself as an *arbiter elegantiarum* in matters of language rarely assumes that responsibility on his own recognisance. More often, he points to the writings of others, usually writers of the past who are acknowledged stylists. But there is scarcely an author of prominence in whose writings cannot be found the solecisms that purists execrate with the greatest vigour: split infinitives can be found in Cather, Wordsworth, Burns, Arnold, Pater, Carlyle, Byron, Macaulay, Mrs Gaskell, Browning, Eliot, Spencer (in *Philosophy of Style*, no less!), Meredith, Hardy, Henry James, Kipling, Shaw, Doyle—shall I stop? Dangling participles are attested in works from Lyly to the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Oxford and Cambridge Review*.

Few if any modern critics of English usage and style have the courage to say, “Here is an example of horrible (or incorrect) English that is horrible (or incorrect) because I say so, and one need look no further for authority.” It is a pity that they don’t, for there is little to support their views in the writings of those whom they would emulate.

THOUGH COMMENT ON GRAMMAR abounds, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find in the past writings of those we respect a sufficiently large body of criticism of vocabulary, especially neologisms, to prove significant. Most of the criticism that we do find dates to the 19th century, contemporary with the spread of literacy and education. However, criticism of English does occur in the 17th century, in particular among those critics who, like Dryden, modelled their English after Latin. It is from such critics that we have the legacy of spurious “rules” like Never-end-a-sentence-with-a-preposition, Never-split-an-infinitive, and others. Such rules are specious for English, however valid they may be for Latin, in which word order precludes ending a sentence with a preposition and the laws of physics, though permitting atom-splitting, cannot reconcile infinitive-splitting.

Shall we continue our lamentations over lamentable style in English, whether the focus

be on grammar or on lexicon? What boots it to ignore the spectrum of change and innovation—condoning the British spellings of *artefact* and *candour* and *anaesthetist* alongside their American counterparts, “allowing” *gazump* into British English but refusing to admit *astromogology* into American, and condemning the use of *like* for *as* or *as if* in all forms of English, notwithstanding its “tradition” in the King James Bible, Shakespeare, and other “acceptable” sources?

It cannot be denied that those of us who affect a higher style view with scorn, if not alarm, the encroachments into the realm of writers made by the quasi-literate, the pseudo-literate, and the hemi-semi-demi-literate. I hold, though, that such encroachments, though somewhat crotchety, have long had their effect on the language through their effect on speech. At bottom, is it not true that the *literati* are really condemning our having taught all those boors to read and write and that, not having undergone the proper rites of passage, these illiterati should never have been admitted to the Inner Temple (if I may destroy a metaphor) where the priests jealously guard the flame of Eternal Language Purity? Should we regard the Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Polish, Pennsylvania, Dutch, Pakistanis, (and so on), differently from the way “English” speakers regarded the Danes and the French?

What it really comes down to is a matter of personal taste, and Mr Burchfield’s acceptance of *catharism* for (or is it *in*) a dictionary contrasts with his rejection of *astromogology* purely on personal grounds. I neither would nor could deny Mr Burchfield his right to a personal opinion; and I might add that, *personally*, I do not necessarily disagree with him. I am shocked, however, to see such views expressed in an article in which he has taken his professional pen in hand; and my comments are no less evoked by a modicum of nationalistic pride.

In short, though only a poor writer, I am dismayed to discover “‘musty old values’ ” applied to “meretricious tendencies in American English” by one who, as a scholar, should maintain himself aloof from such excursions. Perhaps the *spivs*, *drones*, *Paki-bashers*, *skinheads* and other members of the British-English speaking world ought to have their say, too.

## A Reply

I CAN SYMPATHISE a little (but not too much) with my old friend Larry Urdang’s “nationalistic pride” even though it has little to do with lexi-

cography. I also agree, and have never disagreed, with a number of other points in his letter, including the necessity of treating well-established neologisms (*astromogology* is not such a word) in dictionaries, however badly formed they are, and particularly on the general, but not inviolable, principle of recording the vocabulary of a language in dictionaries in a descriptive manner.

Nevertheless, descriptivism must be tempered by common sense. For example, I have yet to see a dictionary of current English that records “seperate” and “crucifixion” as acceptable variants of *separate* and *crucifixion* even though Oxford undergraduates (the only ones whose essays I see) quite frequently use these erroneous forms. Moreover, the smaller the dictionary the more prescriptive it must become because reduction means choice, and variants, informal uses, strange spellings, uses regarded by many people as misuses, and so on, are necessarily excluded to allow the undisputed words and meanings to fit into the restricted space.

My main point seems to have eluded Mr Urdang: namely, that the absence of any agreed standard form of American English, and the amazing range of usage in the United States was for the first time adequately reported in a major general American dictionary in 1961, and journalists and writers reacted as if they had been struck by a tornado. They had not hitherto had a chance to see what lay concealed in Pandora’s box. From that point onward the English that a foreigner (*e.g.* a German or Japanese) must learn if he wants to master American English—with its growing proportion of words and constructions from Black Vernacular, Yiddish, Pennsylvania Dutch, and so on—became more difficult. Meanwhile Britain, with its more homogeneous population (the children of immigrants from the West Indies, Pakistan, etc., are using the same regional forms of English as their white fellow-countrymen), and its recognisable educated standard form, remains a difficult model for any foreigner to study, but not nearly as difficult as that which is now emerging in America.

Perhaps my word *meretricious* (“showily and falsely attractive”) could have been bettered. I must leave that to others. The issue is not one of “correctness” against “incorrectness”, as *that* battle is perpetual in all English-speaking areas. It is about the extraordinary diversity and complexity of some of the main sources of vocabulary and grammar in the United States as compared with those in the gentler traditions of Britain.

**R. W. Burchfield**

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## LETTERS

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### The Jesus Debate

ENCOUNTER is to be congratulated for airing the views (April 1977) of scholars on aspects of Christianity often relegated to obscure journals. At the same time it seems to me that Hyam Maccoby's rejoinder, though refreshingly combative, contains at least two misleading ideas, the result of his struggle to conscript a Jewish personality, and a militant but apocalyptic one at that, into the Jesus character.

Though the latter (or Passion) part of the Gospels depicts a Jesus who seems to have died for a Jewish cause almost with Pharisee support, the introductory ministry section shows an anti-Jewish and anti-Pharisee Jesus. Because Maccoby does not synthesise these contradictory blocks of tradition, as Christian theology usually does, into a single narrative phenomenon, but prefers to reject the anti-Pharisaism as unhistorical, the crucifixion account becomes for him the real identity-card of Jesus, that is to say, the key to his anti-Roman insurgency. The trouble here is, no hard or even plausible evidence has ever been produced to show that Jesus was engaged in anti-Roman sedition of any kind, apocalyptic or otherwise, a point made with almost stunning frequency by Christians supported by a Talmudic tradition suggesting that the Jews themselves executed Jesus. For this reason there is perhaps no honourable way of re-theologising Jesus's relationship with the Pharisees in order to improve it. The old theological checks and imbalances are back.

Second, to explain away the manifestly un-Jewish attributes of Jesus's character, admittedly salted with Pharisee qualities, Maccoby asserts the former to be late accretions. But significant Christian research (as Dr Sandmel points out) is seeking to establish that the un-Jewish features were present at the start, and there seem to be grounds for believing this may be true.

Moreover, Maccoby's contention, on the other hand, that "the deification of Jesus [is] seen to have originated *later* than the lifetime of Jesus" is betrayed by the fact that the apotheosised Jesus appears in the very earliest known Christian documents, the letters of Paul, and although these may have been later than "Jesus's lifetime" as, in any case, all known Christian documents are purported to be, they are nevertheless our first glimpse into the new tradition. Speculation as to what lies behind the record does not bring us closer to the allegedly informing events.

Maccoby's concluding paragraph dramatises the difficulties of his approach. To concretise the Jesus figure he refers to Luke 22 : 36 seemingly depicting a Jesus resorting to violent means, and draws a parallel with Gideon. But this is an impossible assessment because the Gospel carefully and pointedly discloses the utter failure of violence, while the manifest purpose of Jesus in advising his disciples to arm themselves is not to fight but to enable Jesus to label the Messiah as a transgressor. Neither this nor Jesus's injunction "*No more of this*" (Luke 22 : 51)

in relation to violence suggests a Jewish militant. In fact the oracularly anti-insurgent nature of the entire document far from reflecting Jewish sentiment has an imperial Roman flavour.

For this reason Maccoby's call for a more forthright approach on the Christian debate is to be welcomed.

NIEL HIRSCHSON

*Johannesburg  
South Africa*

THE EVIDENCE THAT Jesus was engaged in "anti-Roman sedition" is:

(1) he claimed to be the Messiah, or King of the Jews, an offence against the Roman Occupation of Judaea; (2) the *aitia*, or charge, affixed to his cross was that he claimed to be King of the Jews; (3) the very fact that he was crucified is strong evidence, crucifixion being specifically the Roman punishment for sedition; (4) the Roman Occupation of Judaea (contrary to the white-washing depiction of it in the Gospels) was cruel in the extreme, as we know from Josephus and other sources, and to remain indifferent to it would have been exactly on a par with remaining indifferent to the Nazi Occupation of Europe; (5) the alleged reasons for Jewish religious antagonism to Jesus all turn out, on examination, to be without basis in the Judaism of Jesus's time, which leaves Jesus's death unexplained unless he fell foul of Rome.

Mr Hirschson points to obvious features of the Gospel narrative, such as the portrayal of Jesus as a pacifist. But when a narrative is full of contradictions, it is permissible to look below the surface. It is no refutation of an attempt to read between the lines to point to the obvious surface features, as if to suggest that these have been overlooked. Mr Hirschson's division of the Gospels into an early block (anti-Jewish) and a late block (pro-Jewish) is entirely without merit. Contradictions exist throughout; and, if anything, the later portion is the more anti-Jewish.

The letters of Paul were written 20-25 years after the death of Jesus, quite time enough for distortions of his doctrine to have arisen. How long did it take for Karl Marx's doctrine to become distorted?

The Talmudic passage saying that the Jews executed Jesus is a late (300 AD) response to Christian propaganda. No authentic Jewish account of Jesus's life-story exists. Jesus was regarded as just another failed Messiah, and he was forgotten by the Jews until the success of Christianity necessitated some reaction.

As for my "struggle to conscript a Jewish personality" for Jesus, what was Jesus if not Jewish? Chinese?

As for Mr Hirschson's explanation of the Two Swords incident, it is taken from a theory by Robert Graves, and it is far from "manifest."

HYAM MACCOBY

*London*

### Mosley Defends

THE REPLY of your correspondent R to my letter raises interesting questions. Does he not confuse cause and effect? The cause of the great changes in Russia, Italy and Germany was clearly economic. The "other factors" which he notes, such as the "influence of individuals", were clearly effects. What happens after