

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Although the English-speaking world has never followed Italy and France in establishing an academy to attempt to control, improve, or maintain the purity of the language, the desire for such an authority, an *ex cathedra* arbiter of "correctness," has been expressed again and again. The most vocal, but by no means the only, seekers after authority in language have been writers, belletrists, and academicians, from John Dryden¹ to Jacques Barzun.² Dryden was not the first to express a sense of need for linguistic authority, nor, quite clearly, is Barzun the last.

Hardly a month goes by without the appearance in a reputable American publication of a plea for authority in usage. Recently, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reprinted a memorandum sent by the president of Hofstra University to administrators and faculty.

A three-member committee has submitted, at my request, the following recommendations to govern university policies in matters of grammar, style, and usage:

(1) All heads of academic and administrative departments are to be held responsible for clear and accurate English in all written material emanating from their units. Each supervisor, at every level, is to be held accountable for grammar, style, usage, punctuation, and spelling as well as the content of all written communications.

(2) To facilitate this process, the president will appoint a "university grammarian" to serve on a consulting basis to those supervisors identified in paragraph one. The consultation will be voluntary. It is also recommended that the grammarian be appointed from among those members of the department of English best qualified to fill such a role.

(3) It is further recommended that each member of the secretarial and stenographic staff be provided with the following books:

(a) Margaret Anderson, [*sic*] *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (based on H. W. Fowler).

(b) Theodore Bernstein, *Watch Your Language*, and Miss Thistlebottom's *Hobgoblins: Taboos, Bugbears, and Outmoded Rules of English Usage*.

(c) William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*.

Each unit, area, and department will also be supplied with *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* and *Writer's Guide and Index to English*, by Porter G. Perrin.³

It is amusing, and not at all unusual in such circumstances, that the memorandum as printed (1) is in error as to the name of the

adapter of Fowler: it is, of course, Margaret Nicholson; (2) specifies the two of Theodore Bernstein's three works on usage which are not appropriate to the designated purpose: the most "useful" for the purpose specified in the memorandum is his *The Careful Writer* discussed in detail later in this study;⁴ and (3) designates for use the one modern desk dictionary which carefully avoids making judgments on word usage. Nevertheless, the memorandum exemplifies the belief that authority in matters of usage is to be found in usage guides and dictionaries.

A month later, *Saturday Review World* published Jean Stafford's lament, "Plight of the American Language," calling for "a new kind of [language] censorship."⁵ After complaining about euphemisms, neologisms, platitudes, clichés, functional shift, semantic extension, vogue words, and what are termed "mongoloid bastards" (*Vietnamize*) and "knock-kneed metaphors" (*haloed with clout*), the article proposes the establishment of a censorship board to police the use of English, the board to be made up of persons "demonstrably literate, precise, immune to the viruses of jargon and whimsey, and severe. . . ." In short, the article proposes an American academy. Such appeals to authority are seen far less frequently in British publications in recent decades, a manifestation perhaps of a greater sense of social — hence linguistic — security among modern Britons.

Dictionaries have from almost the beginning of the history of English lexicography attempted to respond to this desire for authoritarian — if not authoritative — judgments about language. Samuel Johnson, in his *Dictionary*, placed restrictive labels on or otherwise expressed negative judgments about well over a thousand words or uses of words. His practice differed from that of his lexicographical predecessors only in extent and variety.⁶ Johnson had learned in the process of compiling his *Dictionary* the folly of any attempt to hinder language change. In the Preface, he made clear his belief that the opinions of the lexicographer are not likely to impede change.

Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, require that it should fix our language, and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition. With this consequence I will confess that I flattered myself for a while; but now begin to fear that I have indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience can justify.

His fear notwithstanding, he offered strictures on the use of a large number of words and expressions. James H. Sledd and Gwin J. Kolb conclude that Johnson was far more accurate in his understanding than effective in his practice.

An examination of some eight hundred of his comments in the light of the evidence provided by the *OED* reveals that Johnson's condemnation was no death warrant to these and similar expressions, which went their upward, downward, or level ways despite him; and one must conclude that the extent of his influence on the vocabulary of English, as on English grammar, has been overestimated.⁷

Johnson's failure to prevent the use of expressions he disliked has not prevented his successors, particularly in the United States, from attempting to influence usage. American lexicographers, from Noah Webster to William Morris, editor of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*,⁸ have followed the practice of labeling many words or uses of words to indicate a restriction on their use or appropriateness in some circumstances. A notable exception to this generalization, the practice followed in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*⁹ and the abridged dictionaries derived from it, constitutes one aspect of the present study.

A line of development parallel to that of the dictionaries can be seen in other books purporting to be guides to "correctness" in language. From Bishop Robert Lowth's *English Grammar* (1762), through the many editions of the work of his American counterpart Lindley Murray, *English Grammar* (1795), to the scores of college handbooks and trade publications on usage currently in print, the claim of such works to authoritativeness in matters of usage has continued undiminished. The style of statement has changed from dogmatic to descriptive or pseudo-descriptive, the roster of anathematized locutions has changed somewhat, but the basic pattern remains unaltered. Each such work selects a number of locutions and offers a judgment as to their suitability, with the emphasis most often being on their suitability in writing.

In "The Language of the Cultivated," a brief article published in *College English* in 1956,¹⁰ Austin C. Dobbins showed that college handbooks disagree on the appropriateness in student writing of a number of words and expressions. Among the words on which he found some handbooks in disagreement are

ugly "ill-tempered," *fix* "repair," *complected*, *feature* "give prominence to," all discussed in some detail, and a longer list, not discussed in detail, *bunch*, *claim*, *contact*, *date*, *farther*, *humans*, *lend*, *mad*, *nice*, and *tough*. He found even more obvious confusion and disagreement in the judgments offered by two then widely used dictionaries, *The American College Dictionary*¹¹ and *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*,¹² on the appropriateness of ten words: *boondoggle*, *corny*, *frisk*, *liquidate*, *pinhead*, *bonehead*, *carpetbagger*, *pleb*, *slush fund*, and *snide*. In the ACD, the first five are labeled as slang, and the second five are unlabeled, indicating that they represent established usage. In WNCB, the exact opposite is found: the first five are considered established, and the second five are labeled as slang.

Dobbins' concluding paragraph raises, in broad terms and with reference only to students, the central problem with which the investigation described here is concerned.

Certain words are deemed inappropriate in college compositions. How is the student to recognize these terms which are inappropriate to the highest level of usage and style — inappropriate to the writing of cultivated people? Perhaps the answer is to advise students to study only one handbook, consult one dictionary, listen to one instructor. An alternate suggestion, of course, is for our textbooks more accurately to base their labels on studies of usage.¹³

Dobbins' small-scale study suggests that a problem exists; it does not offer any estimate of the magnitude of the problem. Is the disagreement confined to a rather small set of locutions? Or does it affect many of the usages dealt with in handbooks? How wide is the variation in assessment? Is it minor, differing only in terminology or in some insignificant ways? Or is it so great as to raise serious doubts as to the usefulness of all the judgments printed in the handbooks? Do the handbooks agree or disagree with the dictionaries; if they disagree, to what extent?

In 1973, in an article entitled "Variations in Dictionary Labeling Practices,"¹⁴ Virginia Glenn McDavid demonstrated that inconsistency in labeling practice among dictionaries is more pervasive and is manifested in more complex ways than Dobbins had suggested. McDavid's study is far broader in scope and more sophisticated in technique than that of Dobbins. She studied the treatment in five modern dictionaries of eighty-eight locutions which are reported upon in two scholarly studies¹⁵ of attitudes toward usage. She found the dictionaries in general agree-

ment, although showing wide variation in detail, with each other and with the more recent of the scholarly studies on roughly half the items, but she discovered great variation in dictionary practices in the selection and treatment of usage problems and in the application of restrictive labels of various kinds. The McDavid study both suggested the scope of the present inquiry and provided some of the basic techniques employed. The basis for selection of items in that study, based on inclusion in both the Leonard and Crisp surveys and upon their being of general interest, did not seem adequate for the broader range study envisioned here. What was needed, it seemed, was a larger number of items selected on a basis promising to be more representative of the areas of concern of those most vocal in their support of the need for authoritarianism in usage. Recent lexicographical events provide such a list of items, ready made.

In 1961, a group of journalists, belletrists, and academicians representative of the forces in American life and letters which most openly and vocally insist upon authoritarianism in usage arose in clamorous concert at the publication of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*. The furor over the decision by the editors to decrease greatly the application of restrictive labels and eliminate entirely the use of the label *colloquial* has been reported in detail. Raven I. McDavid, Jr., in "*False Scents and Cold Trails: the Pre-publication Criticism of the Merriam Third*,"¹⁶ traced responses to early announcements of the forthcoming work. In a longer, as yet unpublished, paper prepared at the request of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., now the publishers of W3, he "reviewed the reviews" of the dictionary.¹⁷ An excellent collection of reprints of reviews of W3, both favorable and unfavorable, has been published by James Sledd and Wilma R. Ebbitt in *Dictionaries and That Dictionary*.¹⁸

As a part of his introductory essay for *Current Trends in Linguistics, Number 10*, Raven McDavid pungently characterizes the response to the publication of W3: ". . . since to the average American a dictionary (especially one the size of Webster 1961) is — like that other best-seller, the Bible — something to be revered, however little consulted and understood, it was easy for insecure journalists and *belle-lettristes* to establish a hostile climate of opinion long before the work was formally published.

It is still anathema among many of the literary gentry; furthermore, its alleged permissiveness has induced timidity or down-right backlash among the editors of subsequent competing works."¹⁹ The most avowedly backlash or anti-W3 dictionary is the AHD. Its publishers actually attempted to purchase the Merriam-Webster Company with the avowed purpose of suppressing the dictionary;²⁰ failing in that effort, the American Heritage Publishing Company designated William Morris to prepare a new dictionary which would restore "responsible" authoritarianism to American lexicography.

When Morris and the other editors of AHD began the task of manifesting their "deep sense of responsibility as custodians of the American language" by adding to their work "the essential element of guidance, that sensible guidance toward grace and precision which intelligent people seek in a dictionary,"²¹ they chose a method for doing so which, though not original in a broader sense, was original in application to the development of status judgments in a dictionary. They decided to seek the best advice of those they deemed the best authorities for cultivated usage, "those professional speakers and writers who have demonstrated their sensitiveness to the language and their power to wield it effectively and beautifully."²² The editors selected a Usage Panel of 105 persons who met their criteria, including, not by accident I believe, a number of those who had been most outspoken in condemning what they regarded as the unbridled permissiveness and abrogation of authority of W3.

To this Panel, the AHD editors submitted for judgment an extensive list of words or expressions deemed of questionable acceptability. Altogether, there are 502 Usage Notes in AHD, but Usage Panel opinion is reported in only 226 of those notes. Almost always, the report of Panel judgment consists of a percentage of the Panel approving or disapproving the locution in question. The note at *anxious* reads, "The example *anxious to see your new car* is unacceptable in writing to 72% of the Usage Panel, but acceptable in speech to 63%."²³

Because the 226 usage notes in which AHD Usage Panel opinions are reported deal with locutions deemed deserving of question if not condemnation by editors devoted to providing guidance in usage to the modern speaker and writer of American English, and because the judgments or opinions reported are

those of individuals who care, perhaps passionately, for elegance and precision in language, the items dealt with in those notes have been selected as suitable for the study of contemporary practice. Those items are used as the basis for the present study of variations in treatment of usage matters and in judgments about individual locutions in a selected list of recent and contemporary American dictionaries, usage guides, and studies of usage. No notes in the list deal with pronunciation, and only two deal with spelling. They are concerned with problems in diction, grammar (both syntax and morphology), word formation, and idiom.

The Master List

The locutions whose treatment is analyzed are presented in the *Master List*, Appendix 1. Figure 1 contains three sample entries from the *Master List*. Each locution is identified by the entry word under which it is discussed in AHD. The "problem" use of each locution is specified as precisely as possible, sometimes by a definition or by an indication of the structure or part of speech use to which an objection is made or implied; most often a brief example or context is provided. Following specification of the questioned use appears the label applied to that usage, if any, by the AHD. Next is a two-letter symbol indicating the classification or category of problem into which the locution has been placed in this study. In the example in Figure 1, the "above" problem is one of *Functional Shift*, the "ain't" problem has been classified as *Grammar*, subclassified as *verb*, and "alibi" is classified as a *Diction* problem, *extension* of meaning. A complete key to these symbols is provided in the "Explanation of Symbols" to the *Master List*.

above (b): as n, "read the —"			Fs	A44
W2 A	RD A	Kr N	Co N	
W3 A	RC A	Le N	Be N	
C7 A	N1 A	Ev N	Fo R commer	
C8 A	N2 A	Ni R avoid	Cr N	
	SC A	Br A	Pe R avoid	
ain't (a): "Ain't I?"			NS Gv	R99w, R84s
W2 R* di/il	RD R* ns US	Kr R low co	Co R uneduc	

W3 R* in/speech	RC R* ns US	Le R D/I	Be R il
C7 R* in/speech	N1 R* co	Ev R	Fo N
C8 R* in/speech	N2 R* co	Ni R il	Cr R N/N
	SC R* ns	Br R ns	Pe R
alibi (a): as n, "any excuse"			IN Dx A41w
W2 R co	RD R* US in	Kr R ∞	Co A
W3 A	RC R US in	Le N	Be R casual
C7 A	N1 R co	Ev N	Fo N
C8 A	N2 R co	Ni R sl	Cr N
	SC R Us in	Br N	Pe N

Fig. 1. — Sample Entries from the *Master List*

At the extreme right of the top line of each entry, the vote of the AHD Usage Panel is recorded, as reported in AHD. An *A* preceding the percentage figure means that the percentage accepting or approving the questioned usage is reported; an *R* means the percentage disapproving or recommending restriction on the usage is reported. A *w* following the percentage figure indicates that the vote refers specifically to the use of the questioned locution in writing only, an *s* that it refers to use in speech only. If no letter appears, the medium of expression is not specified in AHD. In the example *ain't* (a) in Figure 1, 99 percent of the Usage Panel disapprove of or recommend restriction of the usage in writing, 84 percent in speech.

In the columns below each entry, two-character abbreviations identify the nine other dictionaries and the ten usage guides and studies. Immediately following the abbreviation for each work is one letter indicating the response of that work to the locution in question: *N* means *Not Treated* — either the word is not entered at all or, if it is, the specific problem in usage is not referred to; *A* means *Accepted* — in the dictionaries either entered without comment or discussed and approved, in the usage books the latter only; *R* means *Restricted* — either assigned a restrictive label or discussed and recommended to be completely avoided or limited to use in certain contexts.

For dictionaries only, an asterisk (*) following the letter *A* or *R* indicates that the item is discussed in a usage note or synonymy rather than or in addition to being assigned a restrictive label. If a restrictive label is applied, an abbreviation for that label follows. Two-letter abbreviations, lower case and without peri-

ods, are used for the standard restrictive labels. In the case of the usage books, because the vocabulary of condemnation or restriction is so varied, one-word characterizations of the "reason" offered for restriction are supplied when appropriate.

In the Leonard and Crisp studies, as items are rated in a different way, pairs of single capital letters separated by a slash indicate evaluations by linguists and by the whole group surveyed. The letters stand for the following: *E*—*Established*, *D*—*Disputable*, *I*—*Illiterate* (in Leonard only), *N*—*Nonstandard* (in Crisp only). Thus E/D means the item was adjudged *Established* by linguists but *Disputable* by the whole group.

This condensation of a large amount of information into a rather tight format aids in the making of rapid comparisons of treatment of each item in the various works studied. Obviously, however, much detail is lost in the process, but it would be impossible to include all that the twenty dictionaries, usage guides, and studies say about all 318 items; to do so would require a volume several times as large as the present one. Fortunately, all of the works but one, the Crisp dissertation, which is available only in microform or reproduction, are widely available and can be consulted by the reader desiring additional information.

In the discussions which follow, locutions are referred to by the key word under which they occur in the *Master List*. When more than one locution is referred to under a single entry word, each is indicated by a letter in parentheses — (a), (b), etc. In Figure 1, "Ain't I?" is elsewhere referred to as *ain't* (a). Another use voted upon under *ain't* is "It ain't likely," referred to as *ain't* (b).

The Plan of the Study

The discussion of modern practice in the treatment of usage is presented in four parts. In Chapter 2, after a resume of the background and claims of authoritativeness and completeness of the AHD, procedures used in arriving at judgments on usage are described, the selection of items is discussed, the choice of Panel members is analyzed, editorial treatment of Panel opinions is described, and an analysis is made of Panel opinions. Finally, a conclusion is drawn as to the value of those opinions as a guide to usage.

Chapter 3 analyzes treatment in nine other American dictionaries of the items on which AHD Usage Panel votes are reported. Each dictionary is described and characterized individually, and the treatment of each item in each dictionary and in all nine is analyzed, with judgments compared with those expressed in AHD. In Chapter 4, the same process is repeated for ten usage guides and studies.

The concluding chapter analyzes treatment of all the locutions in the entire group of works, taken as a whole, and draws final conclusions as to objectivity, reliability, and authoritativeness in the treatment of usage. After a discussion of the relative efficacy of opinion as compared to studies of actual use of language in the determination of the appropriateness of a given locution to a given context, opinion is found to be a less than satisfactory guide, and a proposal is made for a more reliable method of deriving judgments about usage.