words words words

VOCABULARIES AND DICTIONARIES

Richard R. Lodwig
and
Eugene F Barrett

Words, Words, Words

vocabularies and dictionaries

Revised Second Edition

(Formerly, The Dictionary and the Language)

RICHARD R. LODWIG
Instructor of English
Benson High School, Portland, Oregon

EUGENE F. BARRETT
Coordinator, Communications Division
Cascade Center, Portland Community College
Portland, Oregon

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Preface

This is a book about words and their meanings. It is also a book about the dictionary and about lexicography, the art and science of dictionary making. These topics are unified to provide a comprehensive text for English language studies and for vocabulary development. The three major elements—words, meanings, and the dictionary—form a happy partnership, reinforcing and complementing each other, since one cannot study words and meanings for long without reaching for the dictionary, nor can one learn about the dictionary without becoming involved with words and meanings.

This is not a book of picturesque word origins, nor is it a standard treatment of "dictionary skills"—although both ideas may appear in appropriate places. Instead, it is a word-centered approach to language, an attempt to teach the student about the growth and development of his native tongue. By the time that he has read and worked his way through the text, the student should know a great deal about the English language and may be intellectually excited about what he has discovered. He will certainly realize, perhaps for the first time, that it is a living, growing, changing, exciting language.

The first half of the text is primarily about the words in our language—native words, borrowed words and the historical background of word borrowing, the creation of new words, word meaning, and changes in word meaning.

In the second half of the text the emphasis is upon the diction-

ary, the repository of the English vocabulary—its development, its growth into the modern dictionary with its many specialized forms, modern lexicographical theory and practice, the conflict between modern theory and public attitudes, and the efficient use of the dictionary both for language research and for everyday matters.

Vocabulary development is a major concern in this text. Teachers generally recognize that there is no easy road to vocabulary enrichment, that vocabulary workbooks and other "vocabulary programs" are so artificial and limited in their approaches that they fail to effect significant carry-over after a particular batch of words has been "covered."

We have taken a different approach. Throughout the book the student is given many opportunities for vocabulary enrichment. As he learns about language, he is also shown the variety of methods by which word understanding occurs, and as he does the exercises in the text, he practices these methods. Moreover, since the dictionary is a primary resource, a necessary companion to the text, the student should be an expert user of the dictionary by the time he has finished.

But our most important vocabulary aid is the subject matter of the book itself. Quite frankly, we expect that it will make the student so aware of, so interested in, and so knowledgeable about words that he will look upon them perceptively long after the text is out of print. His vocabulary development will then take care of itself each time he takes up a book.

More exercises have been provided for writing, discussion, and reinforcement of learning than most classes can cover conveniently. We suggest that they be reviewed in advance by the teacher, who can then decide which will be most valuable to use in the available time. The teacher may also want to shorten particular assignments as well.

We recognize that many English classes may not have easy access to abundant reference works, and we have planned our exercises accordingly. We expect, however, that the student will occasionally be able to consult an unabridged dictionary in the classroom or school library, and certainly that each student will have the use in class of a good college-edition desk dictionary. Under ideal conditions, a classroom might contain the following valuable materials to supplement the text:

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1. A classroom set of desk dictionaries. We recommend these as being especially suitable: *Webster's New World Dictionary*, second edition, *The Random House Dictionary*, *The American Heritage Dictionary*, *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, and the *Standard College Dictionary*. For purposes of comparison, at least one copy of each of the titles listed should be available.

2. Two unabridged dictionaries. We recommend *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* and either *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* or Funk and Wagnalls' *The New Standard Dictionary*.

3. *Dictionaries and That Dictionary*, by James Sledd and Wilma R. Ebbitt (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1962). This book reprints many of the reviews which appeared following the publication of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*.

4. *Johnson's Dictionary, A Modern Selection*, by E. L. McAdam, Jr. and George Milne (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963).

5. *Dictionary of American Slang*, by Harold Wentworth and S. B. Flexner (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1967).

6. Two synonym reference books. We recommend *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, by Peter Mark Roget (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1946), and *Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms* (Springfield: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1942).

7. Two books of English usage. We recommend *Current American Usage*, by Margaret Bryant (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1962), and *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, by H. W. Fowler, second edition, revised by Sir Ernest Gowers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). Here is an opportunity to compare American usage with that of our British cousins.

8. Three books which describe the history and development of the language. We suggest *History of the English Language*, by Albert C. Baugh (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1958), *The Development of Modern English*, by Stuart Robertson and Frederic G. Cassidy (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1954), and *The American Language*, by H. L. Mencken, in the one-volume abridged edition by Raven I. McDavid, Jr., with the assistance of David W. Maurer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963).

RICHARD R. LODWIG
EUGENE F. BARRETT

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1

Words

Polonius: *What do you read, my lord?*
Hamlet: *Words, words, words.*

1. What Is a Word?

What is a word? A difficult question. Charlton Laird, an eminent scholar and expert on language, says that even the lexicographer (dictionary maker) has a difficult time deciding: ". . . although he assumes he must organize his book on the basis of words, he does not know what a word is, and nobody at this date will tell him." Even experts, suggests Laird, do not agree on all points of definition.

Many people tend to think of a word in visual terms, that is, as a meaningful group of letters printed or written horizontally across a piece of paper. Such a casual conception, of course, is little more than a reflection of the millions of words which roll off printing presses and into our consciousness on pages of newspapers, magazines, and books.

But it is also true as well that serious students of language have long considered the word *as written* to be their chief concern. For the etymologist, the historian of words, it is almost his only concern. (As for the *spoken* language, it is of interest to him only insofar as changes in word forms have been brought about in the past by changing patterns of speech.) For the philologist, as a student of language in literature, the spoken word is in the last analysis spoken only in print and is thus inseparable from the written word. Even linguists, scholars who deal with the spoken word in

all its aspects, have traditionally depended on the written word as primary source material for defining the essential meanings of words.

There is an increasingly prominent school of linguists, however, who insist that if one wants to have the last word about words—their current *real* meaning and significance—the study of the spoken word is vastly more important than the study of the written. Children learn to master the sounds of a language, its basic grammatical structure and an elementary vocabulary, long before they learn to write. And historically, the spoken word comes first. The earliest evidence of writing dates back only about six thousand years, but estimates of how long man has been speaking one language or another range from fifty thousand to several hundred thousand years.

What is a word, then, as defined in terms of spoken language? Linguists talk about a word in the following scientific ways:

1. It is a sound or combination of sounds which we make voluntarily with our vocal equipment. (One could argue about whether the words one says after hitting a thumb with a hammer are voluntarily or involuntarily induced.) Not every language uses exactly the same set of sounds to form words. In English, the units of sounds, called "phonemes," are made up of twenty-four consonants and nine vowels. When linguists symbolize these sounds in writing, they use a special phonemic alphabet that has a different symbol for each phoneme. These symbols are written between slanting lines, in the following fashion, to let the reader know that they do not indicate merely letters:

/æ/ (the vowel in *black, mat, bang*)
/ŝ/ (the first sound in *shirt* and the last in *flash*)
/ey/ (the diphthong in *say, hate, same*)
/ə/ (the vowel called schwa, in *run, flood,* and both syllables of *among*)
/ŋ/ (the last consonant sound in *running*)
/j/ (the first sound in *jazz* and the last in *bridge*)

Since our regular twenty-six-letter alphabet is insufficient to cover each of the thirty-three phonemes with a separate symbol, one can see why a phonemic alphabet is necessary if sounds are to be recorded accurately.

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In addition to the thirty-three phonemes, three other sound characteristics of our language have been identified: stress, pitch, and juncture. Stress has to do with the degree of loudness, or accent, which is given to certain words or parts of words. Pitch refers to voice tones, which may range from high to low in a typical utterance. Juncture has to do with the pauses between speech sounds and at the end of utterances and also with the things that happen to the voice tones at those times. As a simple illustration, notice how these characteristics help clarify the meaning of the following sentences when they are spoken aloud:

I want some whitewall paint (paint for my tires)
I want some white wall paint (paint for my living room)

In writing, the space or lack of it between *white* and *wall* helps us understand what is intended. In speech, our use of stress, pitch, and juncture does the job. Some linguists classify stress, pitch, and juncture into twelve levels and characteristics. These "suprasegmental phonemes," as they are called, have also been assigned special visual symbols.

Phonemes, which are the smallest working units of sound *per se*, build up into morphemes, which are the smallest working units of meaningful sound. A morpheme is composed of one or more phonemes. For example:

Morphemes, or meaning units	*Phonemes, or pure sound units*	
I	/ay/	(one unit)
hat	/hæt/	(three units)
gem	/jem/	(three units)
sludge	/sləj/	(four units)

A morpheme may be a complete word (*boy*); it may be a word form such as an affix (*-able, in-, -hood*); or it may be a combining form (*bio-, geo-, ped-*). Sometimes its significance is only grammatical. Notice:

girl (one morpheme) girls (two morphemes, *girl* and the affix *-s*)

Morphemes which can function by themselves as words are called *free*, as with *baseball* or *hideout*, each of which is composed of two free morphemes. Those which have meaning when connected

only to another morpheme are called *bound,* as with the *-or* suffix of *actor* or the *intra-* prefix in *intramural.*

2. A second major characteristic of a word is that it is symbolic: it stands for something else. Each of the world's cultures has come to agree that certain sounds will represent certain objects, happenings, or ideas. The symbolic connection is almost always arbitrary; in other words, there is no logical relationship between the sound which stands for a thing or idea and the actual thing or idea itself. We don't call a bull a *bull,* for example, because either the sound or structure of the four letters that make up the word just automatically suggests the animal in question. It is only a symbolic connection, and the word for a bull might just as reasonably be *lub* or *ulb* if we all agreed that it should be. In Spanish, remember, it's *toro;* in German, it's *Stier.* (Those few words whose sound *does* suggest their sense are called "onomatopoetic" or "echoic" words, imitative sounds such as *buzz* and *tinkle.*)

Words are enormously flexible in function. They can symbolize something right before our eyes in the immediate here and now. They can also symbolize something not present, not seen, and not in immediate experience. They allow us to talk about something which now exists only in our mind, something which has happened in the past, or something which may happen in the future. In these respects human language differs from the call system of animals, who make and respond only to a limited kind and number of sounds, relating only to an immediate and limited situation. As one linguist has observed, a dog can be taught to bark when it is time for his dinner to be placed in front of him, but he can never talk about what he had for dinner the night before.

3. A third major characteristic of a word has to do with its *function;* it helps human beings interact culturally with one another —which is another way of saying "communicate." Words do much more than promote the exchange of information and ideas. As members of society we need words for all our life activities: to show affection, anger, pleasure, fear, and all the other emotions; to persuade others; to make a living; to change our institutions; to uphold law and order; to build dams; to make friends—in short, to operate

normally in terms of our own culture. Without words there could be no culture; they are the glue that holds a society together.

Words help us fulfill the social need of talking together. Often the fact that we are saying *something* is more important than *what* we say. When we meet, we say "How do you do?" without really expecting a physical report; we say "It's a nice day" without wishing really to engage in a meteorological discussion. These customary polite exchanges are a kind of indirect communication. They say, in effect: "I'm being friendly. I anticipate that you will be the same." Thus, words are part of the face we wear when we meet the world.

4. Finally, words are part of the large communication system we call language. A word is partly dependent for meaning upon its use in that larger context. To know a word is to know it in several ways: first, to recognize its sound in the stream of speech; second, to recognize the accumulated experiences with which the sound is associated; third, to recognize its function in a sentence or utterance as it works grammatically with other words.

The instant recognition of word sounds becomes an unconscious mechanical function as one learns to use a language. The instant recognition of meanings is a bit trickier, since one must automatically consider the context of each word in its sentence or utterance, not just the word by itself. *Bull*, for instance, may suggest any one of a number of things, depending upon one's own personal experience of the various meanings the word has previously acquired—the papal bull that is signed by a Pope, the bull that chased Paul Newman in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the prizefighter in the ring "bulling" his opponent into the ropes, or even the interjection one may snort when told something obviously untrue. In other words, the word *bull* needs other words with it to give it context and pin its meaning down.

A word receives some of its meaning as it fills grammatical slots in a sentence: as subject (The bull chased him), as object (He signed the bull), as verb (Let's bull our way into the line), and as modifier (We had a bull session). It should also be noted that some words—prepositions like *by*, *at*, *of*; conjunctions like *and*, *but*; and so forth—are almost impossible to assign any meaning to without talking about their sentence function.

2. Pronunciation

Pronunciation is flexible. Not only do different speakers pronounce the same word in various ways (*nausea: nô'shə, nô'zi ə, nô'zhə*, etc.), but even a single speaker may give the same word two different pronunciations: "He puts a quarter in the *cigarette'* machine [accent on the last syllable] but didn't get any *cig'arettes* [accent on the first syllable]." Pronunciation may vary from person to person, situation to situation, or place to place for several reasons. For one thing, each person has his own "idiolect," or personal way of speaking, and it varies in subtle ways from every other individual's speech. Norman Hoss, an editor of *The American Heritage Dictionary*, maintains that if analysis were pressed far enough it could be shown that no two Americans speak exactly alike. As a matter of fact, the existence of voiceprints seems to reinforce his statement. Voiceprints are distinctive patterns of wavy lines and whorls which are recorded on a device activated by the human voice. Like fingerprints, they can be used for identification purposes and are even beginning to be accepted as evidence in certain courts of law.

Regional dialects account for many obvious variations in pronunciation. It is easy to recognize, for example, that many people in the New England area put an *r* sound at the end of words like *idea* but leave it out of words like *far*, *park*, and *four*. Or that some New Yorkers start the second word of *Long Island* with a hard g sound (*lôn gī'land*) and put a second syllable in *film* (*fil'əm*).

One of the more important variations in pronunciation happens when words are run together in the stream of speech. One thing that can occur was shown in the example above with *cigarette*: the grammatical position of a word in an utterance may change its syllable stress. A few words in the language always change stress from noun to verb use: *progress'* (*v.*) and *prog'ress* (*n.*), *reject'* (*v.*) and *re'ject* (*n.*), and so forth.

Other things happen also as words follow one another rapidly in speech. Their pronunciation is influenced to some degree by three characteristics previously mentioned: stress, pitch, and juncture. Depending upon particular speech patterns, sounds normally heard when the word is said in isolation may change their values

or even disappear as they merge with the sounds which precede or follow them. For instance, when spoken by themselves, or very slowly and deliberately, the italicized words in the following sentences would approximate most of the sounds represented by their spellings:

See *you bye and bye.*
I *could have* gone yesterday.
They believe in *law and order.*
I *used to* like spinach.
What are you going to do now?
How would you like to eat dinner now?

But in the normal context of speech the pronunciations for many people would be closer to this:

See *ya bye n bye.*
I *could uv* gone yesterday.
They believe in *law n order.*
I *use ta* like spinach.
What cha gonna do now?
How ja like ta eat dinner now?

Even finer distinctions can be made. For instance, a subtle blending takes place in the sounds represented by the *w's, t's* and *m's* when combinations like *how would, can't take,* and *I'm making* occur in the stream of speech.

Many writers have fun in print with examples of pronunciation like those above, implying that because the sounds do not conform to the spelling of the written language they are necessarily sloppy speech. But they forget, or do not know, that speech and writing are two separate systems and each has its own special characteristics. There is no law, grammatical or otherwise, that says the sounds of speech must conform to spelling rules; actually, it would be more logical to reverse the order, since writing is a representation of the spoken word, and not vice versa. True, there are always individual variations in speech, depending upon the personal background of the speaker and the formality or informality of the situation. Naturally, when speaking formally or before an audience, pronunciation may be more deliberate, and hence closer to the way the word is said in isolation. But nearly everyone, including the best-educated speakers, follows normal patterns like "could uv

gone" and "law n order" in relaxed speech. Note how the pronunciation entries in *Webster's New World Dictionary, Second Edition* take these variations into account:

and (ənd, n, 'n, 'm; *stressed,* and)
have (hav, həv, əv; *before "to,"* haf)
de- (di, də; with some slight stress, dē)

An interesting but minor phenomenon is "spelling pronunciation." It is possible to overreact or to react mistakenly to the spelling of a word and give it a pronunciation it does not have normally in speech (like sounding the *l* in *salmon*). If enough people do this, of course, the pronunciation becomes acceptable and eventually supersedes the old pronunciation or exists side by side with it. *Soldier* used to be pronounced with the *l* silent (*so'jur*), but in time the *l* became voiced, probably because people kept seeing it so often in print. For a more modern example of a spelling pronunciation, consider how you pronounce the work *tsk* when you read it. (*Tsk* is the repeated sucking or clicking noise made by the tongue and teeth to express disapproval or sympathy.) If you pronounce it as *tisk* or *tusk*, as many do when reading it in print, it's because the written symbols have been inadequate to convey the clicking sound it actually represents, so a new spelling pronunciation has been created.

What is good pronunciation? It should be intelligible, natural, and unobtrusive; that is, it should not call attention to itself. One can speak too fast and slur sounds until whole sentences become unrecognizable. When that happens one is speaking "Slurvian," a foreign dialect as far as standard speech is concerned.

On the other hand it is possible to be over-correct, especially if one is unduly influenced by the printed symbol. Some radio and TV announcers read their copy as though they want each letter in a word to have its "true" hearing. Note these examples which have been collected from the airwaves: *əprē'sē āt* instead of *əprē'shē āt*, *i'syoo* instead of *ish'oo*, *nā'tyoor* instead of *nā'chər*, *ed'yoo kāt* instead of *ej'yoo kāt*, *kwes'tē yən* (three syllables) instead of *kwes' chən*, *wur'ənt* (two syllables) instead of *wurnt*, and likewise *ar'ənt* instead of *arnt*. Pronunciations like these call attention to themselves and are more apt to sound amusing than impressive.

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