

Reviews

CHOOSING A DICTIONARY

The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language: International Edition, 1973

In an age of cross-word puzzles, word-games and spelling bees, dictionaries have assumed an importance in community life which they could not have enjoyed in preceding centuries. I am constantly asked to recommend a good (meaning comprehensive as well as portable) single-volume dictionary for everyday use. The recent multiplication of encyclopaedic dictionaries, suitably illustrated, provides the answer. A dictionary for the modern reader must contain as much information about material things and current ideas as it provides etymologies, pronunciations and definitions of words. And this kind of knowledge can only be supplied by limiting the history of words and excluding the more obvious examples of use; such data are indispensable mainly to the language specialist. In this Dictionary examples are reserved for instances where it is necessary to clarify a point (see *till* and *until* on p. 1345).

In fulfilling manifold purposes, the 1550 pages of *Heritage Illustrated Dictionary*, edited by William Morris, and published by McGraw-Hill, are a commendable achievement, crowded with word-lore. The Dictionary is computer-composed, and the list of editors, contributors and consultants runs to six pages. Seldom has a publisher assembled so prestigious a panel of scholars to arrange the heterogeneous material, explain the language, and demonstrate its operation. The needs of philologists and language historians are met in a dozen concise prefatory articles and appendices, and the book ends with a valuable table of Indo-European roots proper to that family of languages.

What is particularly recommended is the up-to-date approach to questions of grammar and usage. Those rule-bound verbal moralists, who believe only in right and wrong, should read the introductory article on 'Usage' by the linguist, Morris Bishop. He enunciates boldly the principle that 'spoken language is *the* language'. This may, he admits, arouse indignation among the 'highly educated'; but grammatical pronouncements are not like the laws of the Medes and the Persians. No language is able to tolerate fixity. A number of common expressions were therefore

submitted to the Usage Panel for opinions, and in only one instance was there unanimous disapproval. Bishop sensibly concluded that there is 'no absolute standard of rightness By our choices we make usage, good or bad. Let us then try [he pleads] to make good choices'.

Richard Ohmann provides an instructive preface on 'Grammar and Meaning'. *Generative* grammar of the structural linguists 'attempts a neutral description of the way members of a speech community actually talk'. Descriptive grammars, in the past, have examined the speech or writing of educated people; but generative grammar, devised by Noam Chomsky, seeks to understand language as a branch of human psychology. The upshot is that individual reporting of the same event may take many different forms, each equally valid. Thus the so-called passive voice is nothing more than a structural *transformation*. *Generative, transformational* grammar is seen as a modern approach by those who regard speech as a sociological phenomenon. This Dictionary does not shrink from including discussions on many points of grammar and usage, and this is a significant innovation.

The first page of each letter of the alphabet is headed by an illustrated orthographical history of the symbol, another novelty. And there are other important inclusions, such as abbreviations, biographical personalities, currency values, geographical names, tables of geological time, maps, musical notations, and Roman numerals. An illuminating explanation of colour definitions is provided on p. 263. Indexing and references are so well devised that nothing is difficult to find. There is considerable virtue in embodying these sources of knowledge in one corpus, and sparing the curious the fruitless search for facts concealed under abstract classifications.

Anyone who imagines the schedule of Indo-European roots as a supererogation should study some of its ramifications. On p. 1521, for instance, *cannabis* (hemp) and *canvas* are shown to be derived, through Greek, from the same source. Phonological laws explain the transformation of the former to *hemp*, the Germanic form of the word.

Marginal illustrations in *The Heritage Dictionary* are of splendid clarity, and are not confined to pictures (see, for instance, *abracadabra* and *Acropolis* on pages 4 and 14). The spelling of words is in the accepted American orthography (e.g. *center* and *color*); but this, in a closely knit world, is an advantage. The trans-Atlantic influence upon English is so pervasive that it is well to know whence forms such as *thru* and *thusly* are derived, and that the different names, *elevator* and *lift*, are given to the same utility.

The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary seems to me a work of reference that up-to-date libraries, schools, offices and families can hardly be without.

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A CHALLENGING HISTORY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

English Grammatical Categories, and the Tradition to 1800 by Ian Michael, Cambridge University Press, 1970, is a painstaking account of research, which examines critically the fundamentals, as well as the confusions, of the tradition. Dr Michael shows how unstable the parts of speech have always been, one weakness being their reliance on definition. Inflexional Latin grammar was inappropriately used as a model for English, a basically uninflected language, as the author shows by examination of 272 grammars written before 1800. More than half of these had not previously been studied.

Part I is concerned with the Greek and Latin sources of the tradition found in Aristotle and the Stoic scholars by the 2nd century B.C. In the next century the principles of grammar initiated by Dionysius Thrax, the Thracian who worked in Alexandria, were dictated by the need for system and order, to enable Greek to be taught to foreigners. But no language that has made its mark in the world was the product of scientific thinking alone.

Adaptations of the Middle Ages followed the pioneering work of the African-born grammarian, Priscian, about 500 A.D. Dr. Michael suggests that Priscian, Thomas of Erfurt, and Lily's Latin grammar exercised considerable influence on English grammatical theory during the English Renaissance. The principal linguistic directions, as early as the time of Chaucer, were the literary, the logical and the speculative; but the discipline of early grammarians was never reduced to a straight-jacket; rather, grammarians sought to find the relationship between words and things. The expressed aims of a *grammaticus* were to teach correct speaking, the significance of words and the proper interpretation of literature. Thomas of Erfurt wrote in the fourteenth century: 'the syntactical function of a word is a part of its meaning'. Priscian had forestalled him by suggesting that 'the parts of speech cannot be distinguished from each other, unless we have regard to their individual capacities for expressing meaning'. The formal and semantic criteria of words, however, became neglected when the grammatical categories were defined, largely by their accidentals.