

That's Correct

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I've noticed that when I do expert work on the meanings of words, courts and attorneys tend to be less impressed with my qualification as a professor of linguistics than with my august -- and let it be said, largely empty -- credential as chair of the usage panel of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. That's understandable enough. Linguistics is still an obscure science to most people, but the Dictionary is an authority that no one dares gainsay, as evidence that singular definite article, an honor we otherwise reserve for divinely inspired texts like the Bible and the Periodic Table.

Still, even dictionaries make mistakes. The recently published *Encarta World English Dictionary* came in for critical ridicule when it misspelled some words and managed to identify General George Meade as a soldier of the Revolutionary War. And a 1990 edition of the French *Larousse* made a more alarming error when it identified some highly poisonous wild mushrooms as harmless, which necessitated an embarrassing public recall. You think of Doctor Johnson's response when a woman asked him how he could define *pastern* as "the knee of a horse": "Ignorance, Madam, pure ignorance."

But sometimes a dictionary's errors and oversights have less to do with editorial carelessness than with the prejudices that lexicographers inherit from their age. The point came home to me a few years ago when I agreed to serve as an expert witness for several well-known American Indians who had brought a petition in the Patent and Trademark Office to cancel the mark of the Washington Redskins, on the grounds that the Lanham Act doesn't permit the registration of marks that are "disparaging."

We put together a thick dossier to show that *redskin* was used as a derogatory term when the trademark was registered in 1965 and remained one afterwards. We included print citations for the word going back to the nineteenth century, like a passage from the 1910 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that described the word as not being in good repute. We did online searches to show that the modern press uses *redskin* in reference to Indians only as an example of a racial epithet or in campy references to old movies -- you don't find newspaper articles that say "Redskin Jay Silverheels was honored last night."

We even made a compilation video of clips that documented the disparaging use of *redskin* in movie Westerns, like the scene from the 1956 film *Mohawk* that had a character identified as an "Indian hater" referring to "dirty, mean, ignorant, slinkin' redskin skunks."

It was an imposing body of evidence, if I say so myself, and one of exactly the same kind that lexicographers rely on when they assign usage labels to racial epithets and similar words. And yet none of the dictionaries published up to the time of the registration gave any indication that *redskin* was a disparaging word. It wasn't until 1967 that any American dictionary tagged the word as offensive, and dictionaries were still being published well into the 1980's that included no label at all for the term.

Not surprisingly, the team's attorneys and experts made a great deal of this. Obviously, they said, the compilers of dictionaries published up to 1965 had decided that the word *redskin* was not offensive, unlike other terms, like *nigger* and *kike*, which they had set off with warning labels. And if more recent dictionaries all label the word as offensive or disparaging, the respondents said, that was only because they were subject to "sociopolitical pressures" from the "political correctness movement."

In the end, the Patent and Trademark Office wasn't persuaded by that argument; in April, 1999, it ordered the cancellation of the Washington Redskins' trademark, holding that "the word 'redskin(s)' . . . may disparage Native Americans." (The case is currently under appeal.) And in fact the absence of usage labels for *redskin* from those pre-1967 dictionaries is itself a kind of evidence for the way people thought about Indians -- or rather, didn't think about them much at all.

Dictionaries are steeped in the attitudes of their times. When Merriam-Webster's monumental *Third International* appeared in 1961, for example, it included no usage labels for words like *fag*, *queer*, or *fairy* as applied to homosexuals. That doesn't mean that the editors didn't realize that those terms were disparaging -- of course they were -- but only that, like most other straight Americans of the period, they didn't see anything particularly *wrong* in disparaging homosexuals. Nor was anyone troubled at the time by the *Third's* definition of *broad* simply as a slang synonym for "woman" or of *wetback* simply as "a Mexican who enters the US illegally," with no indication that either word was pejorative.

So it wasn't surprising that the *Third* didn't label *redskin* as offensive, either. It wasn't until later in the sixties that mainstream Americans would begin to reconsider the way they talked about Indians, owing partly to the influence of revisionist westerns like *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here*, where only the villains used *redskin* in earnest.

On a few occasions, dictionary treatments of politically loaded items have provoked a public reaction. For a long time, for example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* and some of the shorter dictionaries derived from it gave a sense for the noun *Jew* as "unscrupulous usurer or borrower" and defined the verb *to jew* as "to cheat," without indicating that either use was derogatory. (In a show of evenhandedness, the dictionaries also included no usage label for their definition of *Jesuit* as "a deceitful person.") It was only when Jewish groups objected that the dictionary began to add usage labels to the entries for *Jew* in the 1930's. And Oxford ran afoul of political sensibilities again in 1976, when a new edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defined *Palestinian* as "a person seeking to displace Israelis from Palestine." Arab groups protested, and with good grounds (imagine a dictionary defining *Democrat* as "a person seeking to displace George W. Bush from the White House"). After some temporizing, Oxford wisely agreed to change the entry to the neutral description "native or inhabitant of Palestine."

For the most part, though, lexicographers didn't require any direct urging to change their treatment of words like *fag*, *wetback*, and *redskin*. By the 1970's and 1980's, a lot of Americans were beginning to realize that those words didn't have a place in polite discussion. And lexicographers began to realize their responsibility to alert users to the pitfalls of using such words in a thoughtless way.

For some people, of course, all of this seems like political correctness run amok. And it's undeniable that a few dictionaries have been overly fastidious in dealing with words that might give offense. One modern dictionary (not the *American Heritage*, I'm happy to say) includes a note at *crone* to warn the reader that the word is "an offensive term that deliberately insults a woman's age, appearance, and temperament." That's going a little too far: you want to be careful about describing someone as a crone, of course, but that doesn't mean we ought to get rid of the word itself, the way we might want to do with some of the epithets that are still rattling around in the closets of the language. On the whole, though, an exaggerated deference to people's sensibilities is preferable to the

callous disregard for them that used to be the rule. And after all, "correctness" is not a notion that dictionaries should have to be wary of.