

# Vulgar Tongue

by JONATHON GREEN

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - A leading U.S. dictionary publisher said it would revise entries for more than 200 offensive words after receiving complaints that some definitions, especially for the word 'nigger', were racist. Merriam-Webster Inc. said it would make the alterations to ethnic, religious and sexual slur words in the 1999 edition of its *Collegiate Dictionary* to ensure that readers were aware just how offensive the words are. The dictionary will also modify its entries for words considered vulgar and obscene.

But what, I ask, do they mean by offensive, let alone vulgar? If, and one must assume they do, if they have a line, where exactly is it drawn? Who cannot be hurt; who, more vitally, can? The kneejerk response is simple enough. The so called obscenities, natch; racism, of course, nationalist stereotyping, probably; homophobia, maybe; sexism, well, sometimes. The grey areas come swooping in. And, anyway, where do you stop? Because every group wants its say these days. The populist authoritarianism that is the downside of political correctness means that anyone, sometimes it seems like everyone, can proclaim their grief and have it acknowledged. The victim culture, every sufferer grasping for their own Holocaust, ensures that anyone who feels offended can call for moderation, for dilution, and in the end, as is all too often the case, for censorship. And censorship, that by-product of fear – stemming as it does not from some positive agenda, but from the desire to escape our own terrors and superstitions by imposing them on others – must surely be resisted.

There are many dictionaries but one can divide them, or at least the language that is included in them into two groups. The one, let us call it the 'British' way, epitomised in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is descriptive. This is the language, make of it what you will. One lays out the linguistic stall, the shopper, as it were, has the option to 'buy' what they want. They may dislike some of the stock, they may find it positively repellent, but then no-one holds a gun to their head. Sir James Murray, working on the headwords that make up his great memorial, apparently included everything, which for the sake of argument means 'fuck' and 'cunt' as well as all the rest. Only the restraint of his bosses at the University Press forced their excision; and in 1976, when the A-G supplement appeared, there they were. The other, shorthanded as 'American' (although France, goaded beneath the whip of the Académie Française, is perhaps even more rigid in this respect) is prescriptive: these are the words that ought to be available and these are the right ways to use them. If it is not included, then it you don't need to worry about it. It is,

to suggest the broadest of brushes, the difference between the relative linguistic confidence of Britain, which remains a reasonably unified society, and the worries evinced by America's generation upon generation of immigrants, many of them not English speakers but requiring 'the mother tongue' for proper assimilation and advancement. The American dictionary has always censored, if only by omission. Samuel Johnson, not the Great Cham of 1755 but the first US lexicographer, working half a century later, quailed at the inclusion of improprieties, another example, he noted and Webster later agreed, of the old world's lascivious corruption.

One can understand the prescriptivist mind-set, but understanding is not approval. The dictionary, surely, is a neutral object, its only role to gather such numbers of words as its compilers require, and to define them. Depending on size one has etymology, pronunciation and the like, but the task remains essentially the same. Which neutrality is, of course, nonsense. Whether in the hands of an individual – Samuel Johnson (the original), Noah Webster, Emile Littré – or of the editorial boards that work for the larger reference publishers, the dictionary is *always* an object of prejudice. Johnson's Anglicanism, Littré's positivism, Webster's proclamation of an 'American language', the axe is ground. The results are not necessarily bad – these men produced some of the most influential dictionaries of their times – but they *are* biased.

None of them, of course, faced today's problems. For a man like Johnson, whose personal interpretation of the word 'illiterate' was one who had no knowledge of Latin or Greek, the idea that those of whom, albeit indirectly, he spoke through his headwords, might feel offended by the definitions he proffered, was inconceivable. Murray, guiding the *OED* through its first edition, had no need of the apologies that can be found throughout the current version, noting that *nigger*, for instance is 'virtually restricted to contexts of deliberate and contemptuous ethnic abuse.' The arrival of such addenda is a relatively

novel event. The Jewish businessman who campaigned for the absolute exclusion of the verb 'to jew' ('To cheat or overreach, in the way attributed to Jewish traders or usurers. Also, to drive a hard bargain') was generally rebuffed – as have been other interest groups – but the supplements and the second edition have in fact acknowledged the need to soften the unadorned impact of certain words. What matters, however is that they are there. One may not like a term such as *Jew cheque*, any form of payment gained through chicanery or downright lies, but it is there, on the streets of New York as I write. Excluding it from the dictionary, even if it is only one of slang, will not make it suddenly vanish.

And dealing in slang, as I do, ups the ante enormously. If the traditional pastime of the young was to rummage through a standard dictionary looking for the 'dirty words', then there's no need to rummage through mine: the task in a slang dictionary is to isolate those words that *aren't* 'dirty' or offensive. The nine hundred synonyms for vagina, the five hundred plus for penis, the terms for fools, for drunks, for drug users and abusers, for black, for white, for brown and yellow, for what the PC lobby would term the 'differently abled' and less fastidious speech the cripples, and all the lurid rest – this a vocabulary that relies on offensiveness for its very rationale. Fifty years ago Eric Partridge, author of the century's best slang dictionaries to date, was relatively untroubled by offense. *Nigger* is merely 'impolite among the cultured' in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. And sometimes such disinterest can be worrying: *Wog*, that ever-popular Britishism, is apparently (and this as late as 1984) 'not always used with rabid xenophobia – it's often a matter of "Well, what else can you call them?"' But Partridge had different problems. Later editions were less restrained but in 1937, when the first edition of his *Slang and Unconventional English* appeared, there were no penises, only the *membrum virile*, no vaginas but the *pudendum* (literally, 'that of which it is fit to be ashamed'). Partridge himself claimed to find the grubbier end of his subject unappealing, but to his credit, unlike Merriam-Webster's trembling drudges, he never shrank from putting it in.

I remain an heir to Partridge's achievements and my listing of his vagaries is in no way a critique, yet as a working lexicographer at the end of the century, I could no more list the headword 'nigger', nor any of its prejudiced coevals, without some kind of label – 'offensive', 'derogatory' – than I could, on the grounds of taste or offensiveness, consider excluding those same words.

But the question is, what gets a label (I tend to choose 'derog.') and what does not? As I check the proofs of my work in progress, some 70,000 headwords and phrases from around the English-speaking world, this theory escalates into a practical problem. Once one starts, when does draw the line. By definition, the labelling of one word as 'derog.' renders the remainder acceptable. But so too does the application of that label to a single class of words, or to a variety of classes. Someone, somewhere, is going to feel hurt. One can declare with Lenny Bruce that 'everyone's ass is up for grabs – rabbis, priests, they all go' but 'everyone' may not be so amenable. One can suggest, and I believe this, that those who require the drumming in of PC's strictures are those for whom the whole concept is completely irrelevant; those who spell 'b-l-a-c-k' 'c-o-o-n' or 'Bangladeshi' 'p-a-k-i' are going to need something more impressive than a few lines of six-point in a book they're unlikely in case to open, in order to alter their world view. Nor, apparently, will the Bible Belt states of the US consider permitting the sale of my or any other slang dictionary: no problems with the racism, of course, it's what they see as blasphemy and unbridled porn. Maybe Partridge had better luck. Anyway, even for those who yearn for the illusions that comes with evangelical rectitude, it's all shifting so fast. Queer, coined around 1560, turned gay four hundred years on, abominated for the last two decades, now finds itself reclaimed by those for against whom it was, so recently, aimed. Ditto nigger, a badge of pride and unity for the disaffected inner city young. Are they still derog.?

In redefining 'nigger', Merriam Webster have thrust its offensiveness to the head of their definitions, declaring it to be 'usually offensive' before offering the actual meaning. They have also falsified the record. There are three definitions – a black person, a member of any dark-skinned race and a member of a socially disadvantaged class of person. Of the role of nigger in Black English, nary a squeak. Such is the censor's inescapable burden. But the company seems governed by wishful thinking: 'We look forward to the day when slur words are no longer a part of our language,' says Merriam-Webster's boss. 'When that day comes, these offensive words will be removed from all dictionaries'. Some hope, Pollyanna. Better the lexicographer plays the voyeur than the timorous descapee from controversy. The dictionary-maker's job is to record, not restrict. Call it power without responsibility if you will, but the prerogatives of the harlot remain superior to those of the self-appointed censor.

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