

Raving Over Time

by

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Dedication

This essay is dedicated to cultural roots, to paying attention, and to learning to think for yourself.

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caveat lector

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The Lone Raver Writes Again.

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Dawn Wean Ow Hour Gaia Peril

Some time ago, an associate of mine invited me to write an introduction for a presentation, on his website, of his 1856 edition of Bouvier's Law Dictionary. I knew exactly where to begin — 131 years later, in 1987. That year, I received as a gift for Christmas a brand new Webster's Ninth New Collegiate dictionary to add to my small but growing collection of dictionaries. When I opened the gift, I did something that probably only a writer would bother to do. I read the Preface. It turned out to be a good thing because I learned something useful about dictionaries. I learned that they do **not** define the meanings of words.

The associate who wanted me to write the introduction was glowing in his praise of what I had written. Sadly, he didn't want anything nearly so long so he removed much of the material, reducing the length to fit his need. Ah, but I got even. I decided to modify the uncut introduction a little and use it as a Ravings Essay. After a **lot** of rewriting, this essay is the result. Now, back to the lesson that I learned about dictionaries.

The idea that dictionaries don't define the meanings of words is so much at odds with the general misunderstanding of them (dictionaries, not words) that I decided that I'd better be able to defend the statement. So, I dug into my collection of old dictionaries, found my 1987 Webster's Ninth New Collegiate dictionary, blew the dust off of its top, and read the Preface again. Here's an excerpt.

.... As in all Merriam-Webster® dictionaries, the information given is based on the unparalleled collection of citations maintained in the offices of this company. These citations show words used in a wide range of printed sources, and the collection is constantly augmented through the efforts of the editorial staff. Thus, the user of the dictionary may be confident that entries in the Collegiate are based on current as well as older material....

A number of entries for words posing special problems of confused or disputed usage include for the first time brief articles that provide the dictionary user with suitable guidance on the usage in question. The guidance offered is never based merely on received opinion, though opinions are often noted, but typically on both a review of the historical background and a careful evaluation of what citations reveal about actual contemporary practice....
—Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1987, Preface

There's more, of course, but that's enough to show that dictionaries don't define the meanings of words. Rather, they're an attempt to document usage based on contemporary practice. Thus, the meanings of words are determined not by the makers of dictionaries but by contemporary practice and usage. That is, people determine the meanings of words. Dictionaries are a repository of those meanings, not a source of them. Such hasn't always

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been the case, as I discovered when I did a little more research into the history of dictionaries.

The lexicographer was long expected to register only words deemed “good” for literary use, with their “proper” meanings; it was his duty to sift and refine, to decide authoritatively questions of usage, and thus to fix the language as completely as might be possible within the limits determined by the literary taste of his time.... In England the idea of constructing a dictionary upon this principle arose during the second quarter of the 18th century....
—Encyclopædia Britannica, article Dictionary

That philosophy dominated the thinking of lexicographers for quite a while. A statement of an alternate philosophy appeared in 1857.

The first effective protest in England against the supremacy of this literary view was made by Dean (later Archbishop) Trench, in a paper on “Some Deficiencies in Existing English Dictionaries” read before the Philological Society in 1857. “A dictionary,” he said, “according to that idea of it which seems to me alone capable of being logically maintained, is an *inventory of the language*; much more, but this primarily.... It is no task of the maker of it to select the *good* words of the language... The business which he has undertaken is to collect and arrange *all* words, whether good or bad, whether they commend themselves to his judgment or otherwise... *He is an historian of (the language), not a critic.*”....
—Encyclopædia Britannica, article Dictionary

That philosophy hasn’t always been completely dominant. I remember, when young, trying to find “certain words” in the dictionary. They weren’t there. In frustration, I had to do without the definitions. Instead, I had to speculate for myself or, even worse, rely upon the opinions of my equally ignorant young colleagues.

Such ignorance among children isn’t necessarily a trivial thing. I remember the theory professed by one such colleague. I think that we were probably in about the second grade at the time. He had various bits and pieces of the process but he didn’t know how they fit together. He thought that, when it was time for mommy to have a baby, she had to go to a hospital to have sex with the doctor and then he would give her the baby. Another friend wanted me to go home after school and ask my parents if we could fuck. Neither of us knew what the word meant. The only thing that saved me from whatever my parents’ response would have been was my unreliable memory. Such ignorance among children is deplorable. Adults who advocate such ignorance, or who think that children that age aren’t really interested, are even more ignorant than the children.

I remember when “certain words” finally appeared in the dictionaries. It was during the early 1970’s, during the time that I was an employee of the General Electric Company in San Jose, California. My friend Gloria Ramos rushed into my office one day, absolutely aglow with enthusiasm. “Look!”

she exclaimed, waving a dictionary in front of me and pointing. There, at the end of her trembling finger was one of “those words”. I looked twice. There it was. The word was *fuck*. I was impressed.

She exclaimed in quivering excitement, “I looked for every word I can think of, and they’re ALL THERE!”.

We looked and, sure enough, they were all there. Thus, the philosophy professed by Archbishop Trench in 1857 took a step forward in 1973. It was the Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary for 1973. I went right out and bought one.

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The Power to License is the Power to Destroy

So long as the meanings of words are determined by the people, it isn't surprising that the meanings of words will change from time to time. Examples abound. Consider two definitions of the word *gay*.

gay **1:** happily excited: MERRY **2 a:** BRIGHT, LIVELY **b:** brilliant in color **3:** given to social pleasures: *also:* LICENTIOUS....
 —Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1965

gay **1:** happily excited: MERRY **b:** keenly alive and exuberant: having or inducing high spirits <he turned from a sober traditional style to one more timely and ~> **2 a:** BRIGHT, LIVELY <~ sunny meadows> **b:** brilliant in color **3:** given to social pleasures: *also:* LICENTIOUS **4a:** HOMOSEXUAL **b:** being a socially integrated group oriented toward and concerned with the welfare of the homosexual....
 —Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1973

I don't know precisely when the word acquired its new meaning. However, it appears to have happened sometime within a few years of 1970, either before or after. It certainly happened during a very short span of time.

Not only did the new meaning of *gay* appear suddenly, the change was of more than merely academic interest. Indeed, in certain circumstances it could be of considerable significance not just to etymologists but to ordinary people. Suppose, for example, that sometime during the 1950's the officers of the (allow me to imagine) Sober Institution for Gentle Habitude (SIGH) wrote into its charter a statement prohibiting any member of the Institution from engaging in any form of gay behavior at any SIGH function. All that the SIGH officers had really intended by the anti-gay provision in their charter was that meetings should be conducted with a requisite degree of decorum. Nevertheless, twenty or so years later, SIGH members might find themselves beset by totally unexpected demonstrations, protests, and maybe even lawsuits. Neither SIGH nor its charter had changed. Usage had changed. When that happened, the meaning of the charter was transformed without a single change in its wording.

Another example of changed meaning that I'll mention, because of its political implications, is the word *fascism*. Here are two definitions, spanning a time of about 5 decades.

fascism.... 1. Fascism. 2. any system of government in which property is privately owned, but all industry and business is regulated by a strong national government. *n.*
 —Thorndike Century Senior Dictionary, 1941

fascism.... A system of government marked by centralization of authority under a dictator, stringent socioeconomic controls, suppression of the opposition through terror and censorship, and typically a policy of belligerent nationalism and racism....
 —The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1992

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The first definition is from the era of World War II. It's pretty easy to observe that the definition of fascism then is an exact description of the United States of America today. It's pretty clear that this country won the war and then lost the peace. Today, the United States of America is exactly what Americans fought to defeat, 50 years ago. As Walt Kelly said in 1972, we have seen the enemy and he is us.

What about the second definition? To me, it appears to be an impressive effort to construct a definition containing words that are so different from traditional American values, and with such negative connotations, that it would never occur to anyone to measure America today against the definition. More significant, though, is the implication of the definition with regard to the purpose of dictionaries. It might be, I must admit, that contemporary practice has actually produced the noted change in the usage of the word. It's remotely possible that people really do think of fascism today as it's described in the later definition. However, I think it's more likely that people don't think about fascism at all. Maybe, instead, the lexicographers are toying with the idea of actually defining words themselves in certain specific instances. After all, that was the philosophy back in the 18th century. I wonder if this particular definition might be an effort by the makers of dictionaries to whitewash a government that is, after all, the source of the licenses by which those lexicographers function. We can hope otherwise. However, the power to license is the power to control and the power to control includes the power to destroy. It wouldn't be surprising if the lexicographers are cautious.¹

1 For a more detailed examination of the changes in the meaning of the word *fascism*, see my article *War of Words* on page 2 of the December 1994 issue of the *Frontiersman*.

Incrementalism

The change in the meaning of *gay* happened over a period of time that can easily be measured in months. Most people noticed the change in meaning. The change in the meaning of *fascism* occurred over about 5 decades. It appears that nobody noticed that change. People don't tend to remember much about how things were 50 years ago. However, the change can be discovered by recourse to old dictionaries, which still exist. Imagine how difficult it would be to discover changes in meaning that happen over centuries.

When documents remain in use for long periods of time, then changes in the usage of the words in the documents guarantee that the meaning of the documents will change. The imaginary SIGH charter was a whimsical example of the effect of such a change over 20 years. However, real documents in the real world can have enormous authority over people's lives. Changes in the meaning of such documents, when those changes go unrecognized or uncorrected, can cause a lot of damage. A good example is the King James Version of the Holy Bible. That matter is addressed in the Preface to the 1962 edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible. Remember, that commentary regarding the King James Version is taken not from some secular critic but from a different version of the Holy Bible itself. Remember also that, in spite of the availability of more recent versions, the King James Version remains to this day among the most popular translations of the Holy Bible, fueling the passions particularly of the fundamentalist Christians.

A major reason for revision of the King James Version, which is valid for both the Old Testament and the New Testament, is the change since 1611 in English usage....

The King James Version uses the word "let" in the sense of "hinder," "prevent" to mean "precede," "allow" in the sense of "approve," "communicate" for "share," "conversation" for "conduct," "comprehend" for "overcome," "ghost" for "spirit," "wealth" for "well-being," "allege" for "prove," "demand" for "ask," "take no thought" for "be not anxious," "purchase a good degree" for "gain a good standing," etc. The Greek word for "immediately" is translated in the King James Version not only by "immediately" and "straightway" but also by the terms "anon," "by and by," and "presently." There are more than three hundred such English words which are used in the King James Version in a sense substantially different from that which they now convey. It not only does the King James translators no honor, but it is quite unfair to them and to the truth which they understood and expressed, to retain these words which now convey meanings they did not intend.

—from the Preface to the 1962 edition
of the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible

It's also an abomination (to use a good ol' Bible Thumper word) to teach people that such a document is the Inspired, Unchanging, Eternal Word of God and then to use that document as the justification for intimidation, repres-

sion, subjugation, torture, and murder, all in the name of God — common behavior of many so-called Christians for many centuries.

I'll concede that dictionaries continue to show older meanings. As it said in the Preface to the 1987 version of the Webster dictionary, quoted earlier, "the user of the dictionary may be confident that entries in the Collegiate are based on current as well as older material". However, there are limits to how long a meaning will stay in a dictionary. The King James Version of the Holy Bible, just mentioned, is a good example. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary is worthless as a means to understand the King James Version of the Bible.

When authoritative documents remain in effect for long periods of time, then it becomes increasingly difficult to understand the intent of the writers. Such difficulty can be more relevant in secular documents than in holy ones when secular governments have more control over people's lives than that exercised by religious authorities.

In this country, at this time, the most relevant example of such a document is the Constitution for the United States of America. Regarding the Constitution, we're fortunate in that, unlike the Holy Bible, the originally intended meanings can be determined without us having to learn ancient Greek or Hebrew. We can, instead, use dictionaries contemporary with the Constitution, or at least nearly so. By discovering the meanings of the words at a time when the Constitution was written we can hope to discover the original intentions of the writers. That brings this essay full circle and back to Bouvier's Law dictionary.

Granted, the Constitution was written between February and September of 1787. However, dictionaries from 1787 are scarce so we use the earliest dictionaries that we can find. In my case, that has been Bouvier's 1889 edition. My associate, the one who prompted this essay, is fortunate enough to have an edition from 1856.

It's been 215 years since the Constitution was written. It was 351 years between the time when the King James Version of the Holy Bible was new and the time of the publication of the Revised Standard version that I referenced. The Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible documents the significant changes in usage of the words in the King James Version from 1611 until 1962. So far as I'm aware, nobody has yet written a "Revised Standard Version" of the Constitution. There have been amendments, but not revisions. Therefore, the original text remains unmodified. Understanding the Constitution has been made even more difficult by the amendment process because

the meanings of the words in the amendments are from different times than the meanings of the words in the original text. Such mixed vintage is a good argument in favor of revising constitutions and against merely adding amendments.

The fact is that I don't know what meanings have changed in the U.S. Constitution and what meanings haven't. However, if the changes that occurred in the meanings of words in the Holy Bible happened in 351 years, and if changes in the language are linear with time (possibly a bold assumption), then we might expect changes in the meanings of words in the Constitution to be about 61% as significant as those in the King James Version of the Holy Bible. Thus, I think that we should expect substantial changes in the understanding of the Constitution since it was written. Like dust collecting, the changes are likely to go unnoticed for a while. Nevertheless, they will be reflected in every aspect of political activity in this country. Every branch of government will behave differently and every individual will be affected.

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Seek, and Ye Shall Find

If such changes are happening, then we might find evidence of them in the law dictionaries. By now, it shouldn't be any surprise that I have an example. Consider this definition of the word *identification*.

Identification. Proof of identity. The proving that a person, subject, or article before the court is the very same that he or it is alleged, charged, or reputed to be; as where a witness recognizes the prisoner as the same person whom he saw committing the crime; or where handwriting, stolen goods, counterfeit coin, etc., are recognized as the same which once passed under the observation of the person identifying them. See also **Authentication; Line-up; Mug book**

The requirement of identification as a condition precedent to admissibility [*sic*] is satisfied by evidence sufficient to support a finding that the matter in question is what its proponent claims. Fed.Evid.R. 901.

See also **Authentication; Eyewitness identification; Label; Lineup; Voiceprint.**
 —Black's Law Dictionary, 1979

Now, compare that to the earlier definition provided in Bouvier's Law Dictionary in 1889.

Oops. There isn't an entry for *identification* in the 1889 edition of Bouvier's Law Dictionary. The implications are at least interesting. Apparently identification, the way that we think of it today, wasn't an issue in 1889. I can't help but wonder if there might have been a presumption of innocence then. Maybe people weren't required to provide ID as a prerequisite to everything. Maybe they were presumed to be whoever they said that they were.

OK, we can't compare the change in the meaning of *identification* between 1889 and 1979. Let's try another example. Consider corporations, which have existed for a looooong time.

In 1889, Bouvier's Law Dictionary listed eight different kinds of corporations.² In 1979, Black's Law Dictionary listed over 20 different kinds of corporations³ and five different ways of classifying them.⁴ The definition of corporation in Black's Law Dictionary is 2432 words long, as counted by my word processor. The length of the definition in Bouvier's Law Dictionary is

2 Aggregate corporations, civil corporations, ecclesiastical corporations, eleemosynary corporations, lay corporations, private corporations, public corporations, and sole corporations.

3 Business corporations, brother-sister corporations, civil corporations, close corporations, closely held corporations, corporations de facto, corporations de jure, collapsible corporations, corporations sole, eleemosynary corporations, joint venture corporations, migratory corporations, moneyed corporations, municipal corporations, public-service corporations, non-stock corporations, not-for-profit corporations, professional corporations, quasi corporations, quasi public corporations, Subchapter S corporations, spiritual corporations, trading corporations, and tramp corporations.

4 Public or private, ecclesiastical or lay, aggregate or sole, domestic or foreign, subsidiary or parent.

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1020 words long, similarly counted. In only 90 years, the number of kinds of corporations defined has more than doubled, as has the number of words needed to define *corporation*. One thing that I've noticed about Black's Law Dictionary is that, sometimes, the definitions given therein (or at least portions of those definitions) are word-for-word duplicates of the definitions from Bouvier's Law Dictionary. That doesn't seem to be the case with corporations. Simplicity is indeed a lost art. I also happen to believe that complexity is a sign of incompetence.

News Peek

I think I've written enough now to make my point about changes in the usage of words. It's evident that documents must be understood in terms of the meanings the words had at the times when the documents were written. I've given some evidence that, at least in the case of law dictionaries, things might be getting increasingly complex instead of simpler. So what? Here's my opinion.

Since we can't roll back the contemporary practice and usage of words, we need at the very least to become proficient in the meanings of words as they were understood at the time when the documents were written. Otherwise, we can't understand the documents. The problem, of course, is that most people won't do it. Instead, they'll end up relying on some sort of priesthood, be it sacred or secular. That exalted clique will eventually become the masters of those that they pretend to serve.⁵ Therefore, some other solution to the problem of the changing usage of words is needed.

Suppose that we simply discard authoritative documents periodically and write new ones. That would certainly insure that the documents reflected contemporary usage. However, that can be a difficult thing to do. By the time that the need for such a change is widely recognized, all activities that might lead to it are either illegal or securely regulated. Such has been the case in this country for a long, long time.

At the very least, an occasional comparison of the meanings of words, as in the case of *fascism*, might alert us that it's time for a change. If men died 50 years ago to save something that isn't even a memory anymore, if the country has become the very thing that those men fought to defeat, then the result is intolerable. It's time for a change.

I believe that it's been time for a change since about 1790. You, of course, might select a different date. However, the important fact now is that the change is long overdue. The longer we wait the more difficult it will be to do it. If we wait long enough, then we might not be able to do it at all.

Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought-crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten.... Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller. —1984, Chapter One, Section V
by George Orwell

⁵ Have you noticed the similarity in appearance and behavior between judges and members of the clergy? Have you noticed the subservience that people are expected to exhibit toward them? Doesn't it seem that the courts are behaving a lot like a religion? Beware!

If you'd like to read the next essay in this series,
then ask for *Born to Rave*.

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