

Prescriptivism and Usage. Spring 2004. Some reference sources.

### **Dictionaries.**

The top of the line in English dictionaries is the gigantic *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, published by – surprise – Oxford Univ. Press); the OED's entries are organized historically, with word uses traced from early appearances in English, and with many citations.

Of the unabridged dictionaries that don't attempt the coverage of the OED, my recommendation is *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (WNI3, a Merriam-Webster publication, edited by Philip Gove), despite the fact that it's of some vintage now – it was published in 1968 – and the fact that it was widely savaged by reviewers when it came out, as the work of evil descriptive linguists with no standards.

For a dictionary of manageable size, I'd recommend the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (AHD, published by Houghton Mifflin), now in its 4th edition (2000); the AHD concerns itself primarily with the modern language, and is sensitive to usage questions.

There are also excellent big dictionaries of American regional English (DARE, the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, published by Harvard Univ. Press) and of American slang (what was originally RHHDAS, *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, edited by Jonathan E. Lighter, now just HDAS, Random House having bowed out of the project), but these are multi-volume projects that are only partly completed. DARE is published part-way through the letter S, in the fourth of five projected volumes (1985, 1991, 1996, 2002, with the editorship moving from Frederic G. Cassidy to Joan Houston Hall over this period). Only two volumes of HDAS (1994, 1997), through O, are out. There are several large one-volume idiom dictionaries, though none as authoritative in their field as DARE or HDAS are in theirs.

### **About the OED.**

What came to be called the *Oxford English Dictionary* had its first fascicle published in 1884. A full first edition appeared in 1928, with a Supplement in 1933 and a four-volume Supplement in 1972-86. All the previous material was assembled into a full second edition in 1989. A third edition (or Revised Edition) is currently in progress on-line; it's not clear whether it will ever be published in hard copy. Some books on the OED:

Mugglestone, Lynda (ed.). 2000. *Lexicography and the OED: Pioneers in the untrodden forest*. Oxford: O U P.

Murray, K.M. Elisabeth. 1977. *Caught in the web of words: James Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary*. New Haven: Yale U P.

Willinsky, John. 1994. *Empire of words: The reign of the OED*. Princeton NJ: Princeton U P.

Winchester, Simon. 1998. *The professor and the madman: A tale of murder, insanity, and the making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. NY: HarperCollins.

- 2003. The meaning of everything: The story of the Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: O U P.

### **About WNI3.**

Morton, Herbert C. 1994. The story of *Webster's Third*: Philip Gove's controversial dictionary and its critics. Cambridge: C U P.

Sledd, James H. & Wilma R. Ebbitt. 1962. Dictionaries and *that* dictionary: A casebook on the aims of lexicographers and the targets of reviewers. Chicago IL: Scott, Foresman.

### **Scholarly reference grammars.**

As for grammars, the gold standard is now :

Huddleston, Rodney & Geoffrey K. Pullum. 2002. Cambridge Grammar of the English Language. Cambridge: C U P. (CGEL) [almost 1900 action-packed pages]

But note the limits of this work: as Huddleston & Pullum say in their introduction (p. 2), the volume is "a synchronic, descriptive grammar of general-purpose, present-day, international Standard English." They then go on to discuss each of these limitations (synchronic, descriptive, grammar, general-purpose, present-day, international, and standard) in some detail.

CGEL supersedes the previous ponderous one-volume authority:

Quirk, Randolph; Sidney Greenbaum; Geoffrey Leech; & Jan Svartvik. 1985. A comprehensive grammar of the English language. London: Longman.

The great monument of scholarly reference grammars is:

Jespersen, Otto. 1909-49. A modern English grammar on historical principles. [7 volumes] London: Allen & Unwin.

(though between 1909 and 1985 quite a few multi-volume scholarly reference grammars were published, by Curme, Kruisinga, Poutsma, and Sweet, in particular. And in more recent years there have been a number of more compact reference grammars, by Greenbaum, Huddleston, Leech, and Svartvik, separately or in concert.)

A recent entry into this field that considers spoken as well as written English and relies heavily on corpus studies is:

Biber, Douglas; Stig Johansson; Geoffrey Leech; Susan Conrad; & Edward Finegan. 1999. Longman grammar of spoken and written English. Harlow, Essex: Longman.