

Passages Websters Timeline History 1899 1991

Passages in Webster's Dictionaries: A Timeline from 1899 to 1991

The evolution of Webster's dictionaries, particularly the inclusion and alteration of passages within their pages, provides a fascinating glimpse into the changing social, cultural, and linguistic landscapes of the 20th century. This article will explore the significant shifts in the treatment of passages – including illustrative quotations, example sentences, and etymological citations – within Webster's dictionaries between 1899 and 1991. We'll delve into the editorial choices, the reflection of societal changes, and the impact these changes had on how dictionaries were used and perceived. This analysis will touch upon key aspects such as *dictionary usage*, *lexical changes*, and the

impact of *sociolinguistic shifts*.

The Early 20th Century: A Formal Approach (1899-1930s)

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw Webster's dictionaries characterized by a formal, even prescriptive, approach to language. Passages in editions from this era, such as the 1913 Webster's Revised Unabridged

Dictionary, often emphasized literary examples from established authors, reflecting a reverence for classical and canonical literature. The selection of passages aimed to illustrate proper usage and reinforce established norms of grammar and style. These passages acted as models of correct English, offering clear examples of grammatical structures and vocabulary use. The *etymology* of words also held prominence, with extensive passages detailing word origins and historical development. This focus reflects a prevailing belief in the importance of linguistic purity and the preservation of traditional forms.

The Influence of Literary Canon

The selection of passages was heavily influenced by the literary canon of the time. Shakespeare, Milton, and other

established authors frequently provided illustrative quotations, reinforcing their cultural authority and shaping the dictionary's perception of “correct” language. This approach, while contributing to the dictionary's scholarly reputation, also arguably limited its representation of diverse voices and evolving linguistic patterns.

Mid-Century Changes: Embracing Modernity (1940s-1960s)

The mid-20th century witnessed a gradual shift in the approach to passages within Webster's dictionaries. The post-war era brought with it an increased focus on colloquialisms and everyday language. While literary examples still held a place, dictionaries began incorporating passages reflecting the evolving vernacular, reflecting the changes in *dictionary usage* within a more diverse and dynamic society. This change signaled a move away from purely prescriptive models towards a more descriptive approach, acknowledging the dynamism of language and its adaptation to social contexts.

The Rise of Colloquialisms and Informal Language

Dictionaries from this period, such as the second edition of Webster's New International Dictionary (1934), while still upholding standards of formal English, started incorporating more examples of informal language and colloquial expressions. This reflected a growing acceptance of linguistic diversity and a recognition that a dictionary should accurately represent the way language is actually used, not just how it **should** be used. This shift is evident in the inclusion of passages taken from contemporary novels, short stories, and even journalistic writings.

Late 20th Century: A Descriptive Approach (1970s-1991)

By the 1970s and 1980s, Webster's dictionaries embraced a fully descriptive approach. The focus shifted decisively toward representing the actual usage of language across various social contexts and registers. Passages in these later editions often came from a broader range of sources, reflecting the diversity of American English and showcasing regional variations. The emphasis on **lexical changes** became crucial, with dictionaries meticulously documenting the evolution of vocabulary and the emergence of new words and expressions. This shift

reflected a greater understanding of language as a constantly evolving entity.

Reflecting Linguistic Diversity

This period saw the increased inclusion of passages reflecting linguistic diversity across different ethnic and cultural groups. The dictionary's role expanded beyond simply defining words to also acknowledging and representing the multifaceted nature of American English. The increased awareness of sociolinguistic factors—such as dialectal variations and social class—shaped the selection and inclusion of passages.

The Impact of Technological Advancements

The period between 1899 and 1991 also witnessed significant technological advancements impacting the creation and dissemination of dictionaries. The transition from manual typesetting to computerized typesetting significantly altered the editorial process and the sheer volume of data that could be incorporated. This allowed for more comprehensive inclusion of passages and a more detailed analysis of linguistic patterns, ultimately

enriching the user's experience and contributing to a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the language.

Conclusion

The evolution of passages in Webster's dictionaries from 1899 to 1991 mirrors broader societal and linguistic changes. The journey from a predominantly prescriptive approach focused on a limited literary canon to a descriptive approach embracing linguistic diversity and reflecting the reality of language use represents a significant shift in lexicographical practice. This evolution highlights the dynamic nature of language and its adaptation to social contexts, emphasizing the importance of ongoing research and adaptation in the creation of dictionaries that accurately and comprehensively represent the language they aim to describe.

FAQ

Q1: How did the selection criteria for passages change over time?

A1: Initially, passages were primarily chosen from established literary works to illustrate proper usage. Over time, the criteria broadened to include contemporary literature, colloquialisms, and examples from diverse sources, reflecting a shift from a prescriptive to a descriptive approach.

Q2: What is the significance of the shift from prescriptive to descriptive lexicography?

A2: The shift reflects a change in understanding language itself. A prescriptive approach focuses on enforcing rules, while a descriptive approach aims to accurately document how language is actually used, acknowledging its dynamism and variation.

Q3: How did technological advancements influence the inclusion of passages in Webster's dictionaries?

A3: Technological advancements like computerized typesetting enabled the inclusion of a larger volume of passages, allowing for more comprehensive coverage of linguistic variations and a more nuanced portrayal of language use.

Q4: Did the inclusion of more colloquialisms and informal language change the perceived authority of

Webster's dictionaries?

A4: While some might have initially viewed the inclusion of colloquialisms as a lowering of standards, it ultimately strengthened the dictionary's authority by making it a more accurate and useful reflection of actual language use.

Q5: How did the changing societal attitudes towards language diversity impact the selection of passages?

A5: Growing awareness of linguistic diversity led to the inclusion of passages representing different dialects, ethnicities, and social classes, enriching the dictionary's scope and reflecting a more inclusive understanding of language.

Q6: How can one analyze the changes in passages to understand the evolution of American English?

A6: Comparing passages across different editions of Webster's dictionaries reveals shifts in vocabulary, grammar, and style, providing insights into the evolution of American English throughout the 20th century. Analyzing the sources of these passages further illuminates evolving social and cultural trends.

Q7: What are the implications of these changes for contemporary lexicography?

A7: The evolution of passages in Webster's dictionaries serves as a valuable case study for contemporary lexicographers, emphasizing the importance of descriptive methodologies, acknowledging linguistic diversity, and employing technological advancements to create comprehensive and accurate language resources.

Q8: Are there any criticisms of the changes in the approach to passages in Webster's dictionaries?

A8: Some might criticize the move toward inclusivity as potentially leading to a dilution of standards or a lack of clear guidance on preferred usage. However, the descriptive approach prioritizes accurate representation over prescriptive judgment, aiming to capture the richness and diversity of the language.

Charting the Evolution of Webster's Passages: A Timeline from 1899 to 1991

Webster's dictionaries have long been pillars in the world of lexicography, offering not just definitions but a window into the changing landscape of the English language. This article delves into the engrossing history of Webster's passages, specifically focusing on the period between 1899 and 1991 – a time of immense societal transformation that profoundly impacted the dictionary's make-up. We'll explore key milestones, underscoring the obstacles and achievements that shaped these iconic reference works.

The late 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a period of unprecedented linguistic development. New words appeared at an rapid rate, driven by technological advancements, social changes, and global interaction. Webster's, as a major player in the field, had to adjust to these changes, reflecting them within its pages.

1899 – 1934: The Era of Refinement

The turn of the 20th century found Webster's dictionaries already established, but far from static. This era focused on honing existing entries and including new vocabulary related to emerging technologies like automobiles and electricity. The emphasis was on accuracy and providing complete definitions. This period also saw the continued improvement of the dictionary's editorial processes,

leading to more harmonious standards of entry formation. Think of this phase as the foundation upon which future editions would be built.

1934 – 1961: Navigating the Uncertain Waters of War and Change

The mid-20th century presented numerous difficulties to lexicographers. World War II and its aftermath brought about a flood of new terminology relating to military affairs, science, and technology. Beyond the obvious wartime lexicon, the post-war boom led to the inclusion of words reflecting the growth of consumerism, suburban living, and the burgeoning Civil Rights struggle. This period highlights the dictionary's function as a dynamic record of societal development.

1961 – 1991: The Age of Development and Specialization

This era witnessed a significant expansion in the scope and depth of Webster's dictionaries. The arrival of the computer age brought about new demands for exact definitions and the insertion of technical jargon. Furthermore, the increasing focus on regional dialects and variations in English led to a more nuanced approach to lexicography, aiming to represent the diversity of the

language. We see the beginnings of specialized dictionaries, catering to specific fields and user requirements.

The period from 1899 to 1991 marks a significant chapter in the ongoing story of Webster's dictionaries. These decades witnessed a consistent effort to reflect the changing nature of the English language, adapting to both technological and social changes. The dictionaries became more than simple lists of words; they became valuable tools for understanding the cultural and historical background within which language operates.

Practical Benefits and Implementation Strategies:

Studying this historical timeline offers invaluable insights into linguistic change, offering a deeper understanding of how language reflects and shapes societal evolutions.

Researchers, educators, and writers can utilize this knowledge to enhance their understanding of word usage and the delicate aspects of meaning over time.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):

Q1: What significant technological advances impacted Webster's dictionaries during this period?

A1: The invention and widespread adoption of the typewriter, followed by the computer, significantly impacted the editorial processes, allowing for greater efficiency and accuracy in compiling and editing entries.

Q2: How did societal changes influence the content of Webster's dictionaries?

A2: Major social events like World War II and the Civil Rights Movement directly impacted the inclusion of new vocabulary, reflecting the current social and political discourse.

Q3: How did the approach to lexicography change during this time?

A3: The approach moved from a primarily descriptive model to a more analytical and nuanced one, accounting for regional variations and evolving usage patterns.

Q4: What is the lasting legacy of this period on Webster's dictionaries?

A4: This period established a foundation for the modern Webster's dictionary, demonstrating its ongoing ability to adapt to the ever-evolving landscape of the English language and its usage.

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