

AUTHORITY AND PERSONALITY IN THE *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*

By CHARLOTTE BREWER

Oxford University

This is a preprint of an Article accepted for publication in *Transactions of the Philological Society* © 2005 The Philological Society.

ABSTRACT

Although the *OED* is generally regarded as an impersonal, objective document of comprehensive authority, it is possible to detect inconsistencies in it which reflect the personalities of the different authors who have compiled it at different times. These inconsistencies are particularly evident in the application of usage labels and comments, which often tell us as much about the lexicographers' own preferences as about usage in any more general sense. They also reflect the public desire, from the late nineteenth-century onwards, that this iconic dictionary should act as a guardian, not just a record, of the English language. These matters are investigated here through an analysis of the usage labels and notes, together with prefatory remarks, in R. W. Burchfield's twentieth-century Supplement to the *OED*. The treatment of Burchfield's material in the second edition of the *OED* is also surveyed, as are the usage labelling and commentary of the current, third edition of the *OED*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *OED* is an overwhelming symbol of scientific and objective scholarship. J. A. H. Murray, the first edition's chief editor, described his dictionary in 1900 as 'permeated . . . through and through with the scientific method of the century', and right from the start, its lexicographers eschewed the personal or idiosyncratic, declaring their aim to

list and describe words accurately and disinterestedly: ‘The mere merit of a word in an artistic or aesthetic point of view is a consideration, which the Lexicographer cannot for a moment entertain . . . the literary merit or demerit of any particular writer, like the comparative elegance or inelegance of any given word, is a subject upon which the Lexicographer is bound to be almost indifferent.’¹

The *OED*’s initiator, R. C. Trench, famously envisaged the dictionary’s job as the construction of an ‘inventory’ of language. ‘It is no task of the maker of it to select the *good* words of the language . . . If he fancies that it is so, and begins to pick and choose, to leave this and to take that, he will at once go astray. . . . He is a historian of [the language], not a critic’.² This did not mean, however, that he might not form a view on the respective value of words and communicate it to his readers. ‘Where he counts words to be needless, affected, pedantic, ill put together, contrary to the genius of the language, there is no objection to his saying so; on the contrary, he may do real service in this way’. And so the lexicographers who worked on the first edition of the *OED* sought, as part of their job, to characterise words by the use of ‘status’ labels and by editorial notes of various kinds. But such characterisation could easily slide into the subjective and idiosyncratic, so that the first edition’s status labels and comments sometimes say more about the lexicographer responsible than about the usage they characterise. Despite acknowledged intentions, such labelling is one of the ways in which subjectivity and personality creep into *OED*, however impersonally authoritative the dictionary may seem. The result is that the *OED* in some respects combines elements from an older dictionary tradition, typified by Johnson, in which the lexicographer acts as *arbiter elegantiae*, even though this tradition would appear to be at odds with the scientific objectivism which its founders espoused.

¹ J. A. H. Murray (1900: 49); K. M. E. Murray (1977: 195), quoting a draft report of the Dictionary Committee written in 1860.

² Trench (1859: 4-5).

The status labels in *OED* are consequently a peculiarly revealing area of study. They provide evidence on the individual judgements, predilections, and biases of the lexicographers behind the *OED*, and therefore allow us to assess the quality of the commentary they provide. The editor-in-chief of the twentieth-century component of *OED*, the distinguished lexicographer R. W. Burchfield, continued to use status labels, as in turn do the current *OED* lexicographers, who are engaged on the first comprehensive revision of the Dictionary. But nowhere in the various editions of the *OED*, up to and including the current online revision, are we provided with a list of status labels, or an explanation of how they are applied and what they mean.³ Nevertheless, it is a reasonable assumption that all the various editors, from Murray onwards, will have had working definitions for all the status labels used, and it is demonstrably the case that first Burchfield, and now the current *OED* team, have retained some of their predecessors' labels, rejected others, and introduced new ones. These decisions—e.g. the current lexicographers' rejection of the label *erroneous*, a term used freely in previous editions of the *OED*—reflect continuities, discontinuities and developments in lexicographical practice and policy which are of historical interest to any student of lexicography, and are moreover important for users to understand. In this article, I look at the ways in which authority and personality intersect and interact in the *OED*, focussing on the use by R. W. Burchfield of labels and comments on correctness and usage.

2. LEXICOGRAPHER AS IMPARTIAL HISTORIAN OR DISCRIMINATING ARBITER? I: 1857 ONWARDS.

³ Some status labels (e.g. *colloq*, *vulg.*) are included in the list of abbreviations printed in the various editions of the *OED* and viewable online; other labels (e.g. *coarse*, *low*), not being abbreviations, are not.

In the first instalment of the *OED* (*a-ant*), published in 1884, Murray set out his aims, rationale, and presentational conventions and practices in a series of pages entitled ‘General Explanations’. These were reprinted as part of the prefatory material to the complete *OED*, issued in 1933, and were subsequently reproduced with little change in the preface to the second edition of 1989.⁴ In the section on ‘Signification’, Murray explained how he used a range of terms to characterise a word, where appropriate, either (i) by subject (as *Mus.* (in Music), *Bot.* (in Botany), etc.), or (2) by *variety* of English, when the word is not current in the standard English of Great Britain, as *U.S.*, *N. Amer.*, *Austral.*, etc., or (3) by *status*. It is the third category, *status*, which interests us here. Murray tells us that status labels are supplied ‘where there is any peculiarity, as *Obs.* (obsolete), *arch.* (archaic or obsolescent), *colloq.* (colloquial), *dial.* (now dialectal . . .).’

Mugglestone (2000) has recently shown how difficult it was for the first edition of the *OED* to maintain consistent standards when applying status labels of one sort or another. Different editors with different personal histories and lexical environments had, not surprisingly, differing views on the currency and obsolescence of individual words. The result was disagreement and inconsistency. Derogatory labels were attached to words current in otherwise acceptable print sources, even when frequency of attestation might have been supposed to have guaranteed their acceptability. Moreover obscene words, together with a host of other undesirables, were judged to be on moral and social, as well as legal grounds, simply inadmissible into the *OED*.⁵ The consequence was that the boldly pioneering aims of the *OED*

⁴ Page numbers to the introductory material of *OED1* vary according to which printing is cited and how it has been bound. The material quoted here is reprinted without alteration by Simpson and Weiner (1989: xxvii).

⁵ *Pace* R. W. Burchfield’s statement (1972-86, vol 4: x-xi, and elsewhere) that in the first edition of *OED* ‘There were no exclusion zones, no censorings, no blindfoldings, except for the absence of two famous four-letter (sexual) words. Dr Murray, his colleagues, and his contributors had dredged up the

fathers, staking out their claim for inclusiveness and for what we would now recognize as descriptivism, proved to be—at any rate in some respects—a dream of poets doomed to wake lexicographers.

But it is unfair to hold the editors of the first edition of the *OED* to account for such inconsistencies. Lexicographers and language commentators since Johnson and earlier have wrestled with the question how to record usage accurately and faithfully without appearing to sanction inaccuracy, solecism, or impropriety by its users. The linguistic and social culture of educated people at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, as in the mid-eighteenth century—if for partially different reasons—meant that straightforward linguistic descriptivism, if there is such a thing, was an almost impossible aim to achieve. On the contrary, there was widespread acceptance of the need for prescriptivism in linguistic matters, not least on account of such recent developments as the spread of English as a world language (one of the consequences of centuries of imperial expansion), wider educational provision (the various Education Acts legislating for state provision of primary and secondary education from 1870 onwards), and universal franchise (complete in 1928, coinciding with the completion of *OED*).

When the dictionary that was to become the *OED* was first proposed, a number of critics objected to its ideal of inclusiveness. J. H. Marsden (1859), writing in the *Edinburgh Review*, believed that ‘one of the most laudable objects an educated man can pursue is to defend [the language] from contamination.’ Consequently he was horrified by the claim made in the Dictionary’s first manifesto, the *Proposal for a Publication of a New English Dictionary by the Philological Society* (1859), that ‘the first requirement of every lexicon, is that it should contain every word occurring in

whole of the accessible vocabulary of English (two words apart) and had done their best to record them systematically in the *OED*.’ For a more accurate account see K. M. E. Murray (1977: 195).

the literature it professes to illustrate'. 'What is this,' he asked, 'but to throw down all barriers and rules, and declare that every form of expression which may have been devised by the humour, the ignorance, or the affectation of any writer, is at once to take rank in the national vocabulary?' He finished his article by saying that when all the materials for this new dictionary had been assembled, then 'there must somewhere lie a power of arbitration. From the moment that the building begins, the republic must give way to a dictator'.

Derwent Coleridge (second son of the poet) told the Philological Society much the same in a paper he read to them on May 10th 1860. 'What I conceive to be the higher functions of the Lexicographer have been to some extent disclaimed, and his office regarded as not possessing any judicial or regulative authority,' he warned his audience, which included his own nephew, Herbert Coleridge, one of the authors of the Society's *Proposal*, and the first editor of the new dictionary. A Lexicographer, the elder man felt, 'must not merely produce authorities'—i.e. evidence, but 'he must adjudicate, settling each point, as it occurs, under the guidance of his own observation, or more commonly of that life-long, unconscious induction, which amounts in a highly-cultivated native speaker'. In short, 'The office of a Dictionary . . . is eminently regulative—regulative in effect, though declarative in form. It separates the spurious from the genuine, either silently, in the way of exclusion . . . or by careful obelism.'⁶ In making his case, Derwent Coleridge pointed to the extensive and continuing influence of Johnson as a guide to style and usage as well as meaning (Coleridge had 'noticed a newly-bound copy of Johnson's dictionary' on Lord Macaulay's desk a few months before his death, and been told by the great man that

⁶D. Coleridge (1860: 155-56). Coleridge's usage here is the only example in *OED* of the noun *obelism*, defined as 'the action of marking as spurious'. Marking a word or passage with an obelus or obelisk was a traditional way for grammarians or textual critics to condemn it as spurious or corrupt.

he ‘used it to keep his diction up to the classic standard, and to prevent himself from slipping into spurious modernisms’).

The same writers who urged discrimination on the lexicographers also pointed out that ‘in the extremities of this wide empire the purity and precision of the language itself are likely to be corrupted and lost’, and that ‘already, in the United States, in Australia, and in the Western colonies, the vernacular tongue of the people differs widely from the standard of the mother country; and the current literature of the day, being chiefly in the form of newspapers, tends rather to debase than to raise the style of diction’.⁷

In some contexts, the first *OED* lexicographers themselves unhesitatingly acknowledged the need for censorship and discrimination. Trench’s enormously popular little books on words, originally published before the *OED* was first thought of, and reprinted many times during its long compilation, repeatedly urge the connection between language and morality, emphasising that, in the German writer and philologist Friedrich Schlegel’s words, ‘the care of the national language’ is ‘at all times a sacred trust and a most important privilege of the higher orders of society’, and that ‘every man of education should make it the object of his unceasing concern, to preserve his language pure and entire’.⁸ Derwent Coleridge’s nephew Herbert reneged on his earlier principles of inclusiveness by asking the Philological Society to approve his relegation of ‘literary fungi’—the *hapax legomena* of writers like Skelton and Nashe—to a separate section of the Dictionary (the Society refused), while Huck

⁷ Marsden (1859: 376). The same view is found in another critic of *OED*’s preparedness to record ‘corruption’ of the “‘well of English undefiled’”: see Reeve (1889: 349).

⁸ Trench (1851 and 1855). The quotation from Schlegel appears in lecture 1 of *English Past and Present*, and is taken from one of Schlegel’s own lectures (no. 10) on the history of literature, *Geschichte der Alten und Neuen Literatur* (delivered in Vienna in 1812, and published in German in 1815), translated by J. G. Lockhart (1818, vol II: 58) By the 1860s, when the Philological Society’s *Proposal* was being discussed, these views had trickled down to best-selling publications such as George Washington Moon’s *The Dean’s English* (1865), where it is quoted on the first page of the preface. The connection between a language and its culture had been urged at least as early as 1771; see Aarsleff (1983: 144).

Gibbs and many of the other editors recorded their objections to numerous individual words and usages in the mountains of letters surviving in the *OED* archives and the Bodleian Library.⁹

3. LEXICOGRAPHER AS IMPARTIAL HISTORIAN OR DISCRIMINATING ARBITER? II: 1928 ONWARDS.

Sixty-odd years later, on the *OED*'s completion in 1928, these issues were still current. *OED* was the great recorder of the English language and hence the repository of its culture. But it must also, critics felt, act as its guardian. As influential usage of the English language proliferated both geographically and socially—then as before the consequence of imperialism on the one hand, and increasing education and democracy on the other—it became more and more important to put a brake on change and to ward off corruption.

To celebrate *OED*'s successful conclusion after seventy years of lexicographical toil, the *Times Literary Supplement* published a leading article on 'Our Dictionary', describing it as 'that monumental and inalienable public possession'. The author, C. W. Brodribb (1878-1945), a classicist on the staff of the *Times* who regularly reviewed for the *TLS*, reported with comfortable approval 'the great principle that a dictionary must be a register of all words for which literary usage, good or bad, common or rare, could be cited', and quoted Trench's call in 1857 for 'a *sageneuein*, a drawing as with a swoop-net over the whole extent of English literature . . . until all the innumerable words lurking unnoticed in every corner [are] brought into an all-embracing *panagron*'. Trench's reference (as he explained) had

⁹ See H. Coleridge (1860), and for apposite quotations from *OED* archives, K. M. E. Murray (1977: chapter X), and Mugglestone (2000).

been to a story in Herodotus about Persian invaders hunting out the inhabitants of islands they sought to occupy, going through the territory ‘with the drag-net – a process in which men join hands and make a chain right across the island from north to south . . . hunting everyone out’.¹⁰ *sageneuein*, Herodotus’s word quoted by Trench and Brodribb, means ‘to take fish or hunt with a drag-net’; Brodribb may have been recollecting the related noun *sagene* (‘net’), used in a crucially different context, in Matthew 13.47ff: ‘the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind’. In this instance, all were gathered up as in Herodotus’s example, but the good fish were kept and the bad thrown away: likewise ‘the angels shall come forth and sever the wicked from the just, And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth’ (Matt. 13. 49-50). Severing the wicked from the just was Brodribb’s aim also. He completed his article with a peroration linking privilege, class, education—and democracy—with the use and misuse of language, hoping that, now that *OED* had gathered all words together, it would authoritatively stem the flood of change and corruption by rejecting unsuitable usage in future:

The year of final delivery [of the *OED*] coincides with the grant of universal franchise; but at bottom the Dictionary bears the stamp of the last age of privilege. The mass of it was got together before the newly literate received their charter to treat the language as they pleased in hourly print. . . . Those who respect the purity of the language, who try to honour and understand its traditions and its idioms, who feel doubtful whether even so supple an instrument as English can bear without grave deterioration the incessant strain

¹⁰ Trench (1859: 69-70); Herodotus *Histories* 3. 149 (De Selincourt, 1996: 333).

put upon it by modern democracy, will rather rejoice that the Dictionary has come into being when it has and as it has. The registration of every word and every usage they recognize to be a noble ideal; but they believe that what is now wanted is a standard of good, or at least passable, English, and a criterion to which all writers can apply as soon as education begins to turn cocksureness into diffidence. Now that the Dictionary is complete there should be ground for hoping that, although it does not set up to be an arbiter, it will nevertheless be more and more resorted to as one. (Brodrigg 1928: 277-278).

Brodrigg evidently felt that, in the wake of educational and democratic reform, the English language was at risk from the mangled usage of these ‘newly literate’. Consequently, now that the swoop-net had done its job, it was vital to distinguish between verbal sheep and goats. As Marsden had put it, ‘the republic must give way to a dictator’. Brodrigg’s hostility to current neologisms, borrowings, and changes, and his failure to consider whether English’s present suppleness and richness might not be in part due to its hospitality to such usages in the past—although then too they were often seen as corruptions and malformations—echo the views of eighteenth-century language regulators as well as his immediate nineteenth-century predecessors, and can be found in many other early twentieth-century commentators. He wants the undifferentiating inclusiveness of the *OED*, in principle acceptable, to cease from now on, so that the usage of the newly enfranchised (insufficiently educated to be trusted to use language properly) may, if necessary, be barred entrance.¹¹

¹¹ Cf. Lord Chesterfield’s almost identical remarks in the first of his two open letters of support and advocacy for Johnson’s dictionary, published 28 November 1754: ‘The time for discrimination seems to be now come. Toleration, adoption and naturalization have run their lengths. Good order and authority are now necessary’ (reprinted Bolton 1966: 126), and the collection of readings in Crowley (1991).

These two apparently contradictory impulses—towards inclusiveness and descriptivism on the one hand, selection and prescriptivism on the other—continued to inform *OED* lexicography during the twentieth century. The assemblage of vast quantities of objective data, in pursuance of the scientific method so prized by Murray and his fellow editors, remained central to the *OED* enterprise. But as Marsden and Derwent Coleridge had earlier argued, regulating this material responsibly was also part of the job. The paradox was, and is, that the dictionary’s unimpeachable authority would appear to derive from its impartial (impersonal) comprehensiveness, rather than from its exercise of discriminating (personal) judgement. As observed by Anne McDermott (1996), in a discussion of Johnson’s dictionary that identifies the oppositional relationship between authority on the one hand and authorship on the other, ‘Dictionaries have . . . an authority which might be compromised if we knew that they had an “author” who could be named and who had biographically ascertainable character traits. Where authorship obtrudes in this kind of text some measure of objectivity or authority is sacrificed’.

4. R.W.BURCHFIELD: DESCRIPTIVIST OR PRESCRIPTIVIST?

R. W. Burchfield, the editor of the main twentieth-century Supplement to *OED*, acknowledged the danger of such sacrifice when he remarked that ‘This is a very impersonal age and one has to conceal one’s personal contributions very cleverly indeed’.¹² His contribution to the *OED* continued the tradition of dispassionate objective description, the massive accumulation of minutely observed and accurately recorded data on language, with the aim of setting down a full and impartial account. But the portion of *OED* for which he was responsible—the four Supplement volumes

¹² Discussion following delivery of his paper, ‘Aspects of short-term historical lexicography’, in W. Pijnenburg and Tollenaere, 1980: 280. I am grateful to John Considine for this reference.

published between 1972 and 1986, amounting to 5,732 pages and containing approximately 69,000 entries—like its predecessors incorporated a number of usage labels and comments which tended towards subjective rather than objective judgement. A few of these (discussed below) went further than anything to be found in *OEDI*. Avowedly personal views on usage are presented in Burchfield's Prefaces to his four volumes, and sporadically identifiable in various of his status labels and editorial comments, nearly all of which have been preserved in the second edition of the *OED* published in 1989.¹³ In this respect, Burchfield far more than any other *OED* lexicographer, either before or since, would appear to carry the torch for discrimination and arbitration, and follow in the steps of Derwent Coleridge, Marsden, Brodribb, and countless other commentators on language and usage from the seventeenth century to the present day.

However, the matter is more complex than this would suggest. It is only in just over 30 cases that Burchfield explicitly expresses personal and/or idiosyncratic views through his choice of labels or usage comments, in other words in only a tiny fraction of the entries that he wrote, supervised, or added to in all (though it is possible to communicate a personal and/or idiosyncratic view by omitting comment, as Burchfield also does, where it might have been expected, for example on words such as *ongoing*, or *Paki*, on which see further below). Moreover, while the comments in these cases imply an authoritarian, prescriptivist stance, there is a wealth of evidence that Burchfield's views and practices were quite the opposite. (This apparent paradox is matched by his undertaking to revise that icon of prescriptivism, Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, for a second edition. In some respects he outraged reviewers by his permissiveness—one reader suggested that 'Burchfield's wildly

¹³ This edition was, of course, a reprinting rather than a reworking of previously published Dictionary material. It is described by its co-compiler John Simpson (2000) as 'essentially an unrevised conflation of the texts previously published in the First Edition and the Supplements of 1972-86'.

descriptionist perversions of the classic prescriptivist masterpiece have assured him a definite place in Hell’—but in others he enthusiastically embraced the role of *arbiter elegantiae*).¹⁴

We can see the development of Burchfield’s views in the successive prefaces to the four volumes of his Supplement. In the first (1972), he is relatively clipped and impersonal, but in the second (1976) he becomes more expansive, quoting the New Zealand novelist Janet Frame on treating words “as if they were people-- beautiful, delinquent, degenerate, regal”, and explaining that ‘My colleagues and I are no exceptions to the general rule’. However, he insisted, while they did not ‘personally approve of all the words and phrases that are recorded in this dictionary nor necessarily condone their use by others’, nevertheless, ‘in our function as “marshallers of words”, we have set them all down as objectively as possible to form a permanent record of the language of our time, the useful and the neutral, those that are decorous and well-formed, beside those that are controversial, tasteless, or worse’.¹⁵ Burchfield continued this more personal vein in the Preface to volume 3 (1982), where he noted the recent prescriptivist backlash to the ‘markedly [sic] linguistic descriptivism of the post-war years’, and commented that ‘One small legacy of these great debates is that here and there in the present volume I have found myself adding my own opinions about the acceptability of certain words or meanings in educated use. Users of the dictionary may or may not find these editorial comments diverting: they have been added (adapting a statement by John Ray in 1691) “as oil to preserve the mucilage from inspissation”’ (see *OED* s.v. *inspissation*).

¹⁴ Quoted from Burchfield’s obituary in *The Telegraph*, 6 July 2004. Burchfield authoritatively prescribes on a range of usage matters, notably pronunciation and spelling.

¹⁵ These remarks are perhaps a defence of his inclusion of obscene words in the *OED* for the first time; see Burchfield (1972).

In Volume 4 (1986: x-xi), Burchfield set out his views more explicitly than before, explaining his passion for and commitment to historical and literary investigation of language by adducing ‘a small measure of autobiography’.¹⁶ He described how his own research on the late-twelfth-century text *Ormulum*, and his teaching of the language of ‘writers like Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, and many others’ to Oxford undergraduates, had convinced him of the importance of such texts for understanding the development and nature of the English vocabulary. He strongly criticized the practices of ‘scholars with shovels intent on burying the linguistic past and most of the literary past and present . . . those who believe that synchronic means “theoretically sound” and diachronic “theoretically suspect”’, who never quoted ‘from the language of even our greatest living writers’. Such procedures ‘leave one looking at a language with one’s eyes partly blindfolded.’

As these remarks make clear, in differentiating his lexicographical method from that of present-day linguistics, Burchfield appealed to standards of judgement (his personal history, ‘our greatest living writers’) which are not objective or even fully articulated. Flagging up the personal and subjective in this way would appear to vitiate the impersonal and objective character of the *OED*. It is also strikingly at odds with the determined and principled descriptivism Burchfield practised in other respects, as we shall see in section 6 below. Happily, however, as indicated above, the overwhelming bulk of Burchfield’s Supplement follows firmly in the path of the

¹⁶ Interested readers may find further engaging personal information—for example the small item carried in his New Zealand local newspaper reporting his appointment as editor of the *OED* Supplement, or the vagaries and strictures he encountered when taking up the job and enduring his first day at the office, in the various essays collected in Burchfield (1989). It is possible that the defensive character of Burchfield’s Preface to Volume 4 was motivated by the unprecedentedly hostile review of Volume 3 by Roy Harris (1982), then professor of Linguistics at Oxford University, which elicited a strongly worded rejoinder from Burchfield and a vigorous series of letters from other correspondents. Some scholars had criticised aspects of the earlier volumes in journal reviews, but in ways less outspoken and less public. See Strang (1974 and 1977), Samuels (1983), Stein (1983), Baker (1988). Stein’s review notes the personal statements in Burchfield’s prefaces, and the inconsistency of labelling, which I deal with here.

first edition and rarely digresses into the personal and idiosyncratic. Such digressions as do occur are to be found in his editorial labels and comments on usage and correctness.

5. BURCHFIELD'S *IPSE DIXITS* AND THEIR TREATMENT BY *OED2*

As we have seen, Burchfield announced the introduction of editorial *ipse dixits* as a new feature of the *OED* in the third volume (*O-Scz*, published in 1982) of his Supplement, when he was half way through the alphabet. At the time the volumes were originally published, it was impossible to identify these special comments except by reading through the 2,988 pages of the two final volumes of the Supplement consecutively. Even then it was not a straightforward matter, as they were inconsistently presented. Some were attributed (to 'Ed'—although this is not a term appearing in Burchfield's list of abbreviations), but some were not; some condemnatory comments were accompanied with the paragraph mark (¶) used by Murray to indicate 'catachrestic or erroneous' usage, but some were not; some were enclosed within brackets, and some printed in a different, smaller typeface, but again some were not. And despite Burchfield's implication that editorial comments of this nature were a new departure in volume 3, a few could also be found in the two earlier volumes of his Supplement.

In 1989, three years after the completion of Burchfield's Supplement, Oxford University Press brought out a composite version of *OED*, the so-called second edition of the Dictionary (*OED2*), which electronically merged the original edition, completed in 1928, with the material in Burchfield's four volumes. As part of this complex technological process, constituent elements of the Dictionary entries were given electronic tags. This revolutionized subsequent consultation of the *OED*, since

it enabled a wide range of electronic searches—for first citations, quotations of particular authors, quotations in particular date ranges, and so on—which had hitherto been impossible.¹⁷ *OED2* was published on CD Rom in 1992 (and subsequently in improved CD versions in 1999 and 2002) and brought online in March 2000, thus conveying the *OED* to a much wider readership than ever before. The accuracy and consistency of the electronification of the Dictionary are in general of an extraordinarily high order, nevertheless Burchfield's individualistic status labels and comments were variably treated by the *OED2* compilers. Some were tagged 'R.W.B', for R. W. Burchfield (again, not a term appearing in any list of abbreviations), some were reproduced without a tag, and some were dropped in *OED2* altogether.

In substance, too, as well as presentation, Burchfield's remarks vary. The accompanying table (Table 1), which is not comprehensive, gives an idea of their varying characteristics.¹⁸ The table lists the words on which Burchfield's comments appear (column I), and charts their presentation in the Supplement (columns II and III), as well as indicating the quotation support which Burchfield provided to illustrate the usages (IV), and the treatment of all this material by the *OED2* compilers (V). My aim is to facilitate comparison and contrast between modes of presentation, the substance or character of the various comments, and the variations in editorial method between Burchfield and *OED2*. It will be seen that the majority of comments relate to issues of 'correctness'.

¹⁷ For an account of the history of the *OED* and the consequences of its computerisation, see Brewer (2004).

¹⁸ It is difficult to devise ways of searching the electronic versions of *OED* which will turn up editorial comments and proscriptions. For example, it is not possible to search for the paragraph symbol ¶, which usually indicates that a word or usage is 'erroneous or catachrestic' (see Murray (1884), reprinted in Simpson and Weiner (1989: xxix). Since the terminology Burchfield uses is varied, and since not all his comments are tagged 'Ed' (or 'R.W.B'), one has to guess at words likely to occur in comments, search the 'definitions text' for them, and then read through the results and eliminate the irrelevant ones. This is time-consuming and may yield little useful material.

There are a number of puzzles here, mostly to do with the relation between the quotations Burchfield publishes and the comment he makes on the usage. What should such a relationship be? The *OED*, as has often been recognized, was unique in the use it made of quotations, assembled by the editors on a vast scale (upwards of five million for the first edition). ‘From these and from further researches for which they provide a starting-point, the history of each word is deduced and exhibited’. The quotations were thus not so much illustrative as constitutive of meaning, as indicated by accounts given of ‘Dr. Murray [being] discovered walking in the midst of the senses spread out over his drawing-room carpet!’, in his attempt to construct appropriate definitions from the raw material of quotations which lay like snow on the floor.¹⁹

The function of the quotations actually printed, selected from the far greater number studied by the lexicographers, is to substantiate the editorial analysis of meaning and connotation. But where words are cited from sources which use language in ways thought regrettable by the lexicographers, problems arise. The evidence, on which the editorial judgement supposedly relies, might seem to point in one direction, while the editorial comment itself points in another. The more marked the comment, the more marked the discrepancy.

We can see divergence of this sort in about half of the examples where Burchfield uses a note or label to indicate that a word is in some way unacceptable. Thus the usage of *agenda* as a singular noun, said to be avoided by careful writers, is illustrated by quotations drawn from sources and contexts that do not strike one as

¹⁹ Quotations respectively from J. A. H. Murray (1900: 47) and the description by C. T. Onions (1928: 16) of the process of definition writing; the comparison to snow comes from K. M. E. Murray (1977: 298). Cf. Henry Sweet: ‘The essential groundwork is a full body of citations’ (K. M. E. Murray 1977: 344), and Murray (1884), reprinted in Simpson and Weiner (1989: xxix): ‘To a great extent the *explanations* of the meanings, or definitions, have been framed anew upon a study of all the quotations for each word collected for this work, of which those printed form only a small part’.

particularly ‘careless’—for example the 1907 *N.U.T.* Conference Agenda, or the 1963 *Times Review of Industry*. The same is true for Burchfield’s comments (or labels) on *data, disinterested, hopefully, infer, miniscule, opinionnaire, post, pre, prestigious, pristine, regretfully, scenario, supportative*. In all or most of these cases, Burchfield quotes from sources elsewhere cited to substantiate acceptable usage—such as broadsheet newspapers, reputable journals, novels, etc. In the case of *data* (used in plural form with a singular construction), he quotes evidence that specifically disavows the implications of the paragraph mark (indicating ‘catachrestic or erroneous’ usage) which he assigns it: the 1965 quotation states that ‘. . . by general usage *data* is now accepted as a singular collective noun’. Such discrepancy between quoted evidence and editorial judgement is redolent of the prescriptivist position of Derwent Coleridge, Marsden, Brodribb and others that a lexicographer ‘must not merely produce authorities’—i.e. evidence of usage, but ‘must adjudicate’ each point ‘under the guidance of his own observation’.

Absence of quotation support—or printing quotations which do not substantiate the editorial comment but instead provide evidence that the usage was unexceptionable—vitiates Burchfield’s (or the *OED*’s) authority by making it appear idiosyncratic and biased, and out of touch with the linguistic facts he is purportedly describing. Where does his judgement come from if not from his quoted evidence? It is as if the lexicographer has turned his back on the duty, identified by Trench, to be historian rather than critic.

To some extent, the *OED2* compilers seem to recognize this implication of partiality by choosing, in their combined edition of 1989, to replace the occasional attribution ‘Ed’ with ‘R. W. B.’—and moreover supplying ‘R. W. B.’ in two of the 15 instances where Burchfield himself did not sign his comment (on *regretfully* and

spastic).²⁰ It is possible that the second edition editors thought that such comments reflected an individual's view of the usages they described—of interest and importance, certainly, given that the individual in question was of lexicographical stature—but in some way to be set apart from the dispassionate authority of the Dictionary. More personality tends to suggest less authority.

The effect of this re-attribution is to distance the *OED2* editors from most of the more outspoken of Burchfield's individualistic comments, notably 'of doubtful usefulness' (*opinionnaire*), 'of little value and rarely found in serious writing' (*permanentize*), 'usu. found in contexts where [*alternative word*] would be equally appropriate and more agreeable' (*pre*), 'fortunately rare' (*redundantize*), 'a regrettable use' (*regretfully*), 'an unnecessary formation' (*supportative*).

Their policy is not apparently consistent, however. Of the 34 instances of labelling or comment listed in Table 1, they decided to jettison only two: the condemnation of *agenda* used in the singular, and the comment on *prioritise* ('A word that at present sits uneasily in the English language').²¹ In rejecting these, they brought the *OED* in line with other contemporary dictionaries.²² On the other hand, they retain the proscription of *data* as a singular noun, despite numerous attestations to its acceptability in other dictionaries²³—and even, as we've seen, in one of *OED*'s

²⁰ The single occasion on which 'Ed', as an attribution to a comment on usage, is carried forward into the second edition, for *post*, must be an error—especially as the matching comment on *pre* is attributed to *R. W. B.* Otherwise 'Ed.' is only twice retained by the *OED2* compilers, s.v. *do* n.¹ and *ribbit*, both referring to private letters to the Editor providing anecdotal evidence for antedatings.

²¹ *OED2* also omit Burchfield's comment on *jet-boat*, but as this is not a judgement on usage I exclude it from present consideration.

²² E.g., for *agenda*, *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (editions of 1976 and 1982), *The Longman Dictionary of the English Language* (1984), *The Penguin Dictionary of Troublesome Words* (1984), *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1984); and for *agenda* and *prioritise*, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1987), and the 1990 edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

²³ The 1976 *Concise Oxford Dictionary* records the usage without comment, the 1982 edition marks it 'D' (= 'disputed usage'), while the 1990 edition states that 'the singular form is strictly *datum*'. The other dictionaries listed in note 23 above explain that usage is contested while supporting or recommending the treatment of *data* as singular.

own cited quotations. And they preserve the unattributed, although highly eccentric, comments on *prestigious* and *pristine*.²⁴

A different problem arises over Burchfield's use of temporal adverbs, or other indicators of historical time, in his editorial comments, although these were scarcely of his own making. Instances in our sample include 'is widely considered to be incorrect' (*infer*), 'many prefer to use' (*prestigious*), 'at present sits uneasily' (*prioritise*), 'now increasingly common, are regarded with disfavour' (*pristine*), 'doubtful acceptability at present' (*sanction*). Further examples of temporal references can easily be found in the first edition of *OED*, as when W. A. Craigie, the editor of the fascicle *n-nywe* (published 1908), writes that dropping the 'g' at the end of words like *reading* and *writing* 'may sometimes be heard even from educated speakers' (s.v. *N*). Reference to current time is always risky in a dictionary which hopes for more than an ephemeral existence. In the case of *OEDI*, the problem was exacerbated by the *OED*'s taking 44 years to appear from the first fascicle to the last. It is now far more exacerbated by *OED2* (published 1989) and the online *OED* (2000 onwards) reproducing such material without any distinction between the editorial comment provided by the first editors between 1884 and 1928, and that provided by Burchfield between 1972 and 1986. Dictionary users seeking to interpret such editorial guidance must delve back through the various printed editions of the Dictionary to check whether it applies to the year 1884, or 2004, or somewhere in

²⁴ For *prestigious*, the 1976, 1982 and 1990 editions of the *Concise*, together with the 1987 *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, record the sense 'having prestige etc.' without adverse comment (in the case of the last dictionary this is the only sense recorded). The 1984 *Longman Dictionary of the English Language* and the 1984 *Penguin Dictionary of Troublesome Words* point out that there is potential confusion with the earlier sense of *prestigious* ('of or marked by illusion, conjuring or trickery') but recommend current rather than etymological usage. The potential ambiguity is presumably the (unstated) reason for Burchfield's objection to the current sense of *prestigious*. All but two of these dictionaries record without comment the sense 'brand new, newly-made' for *pristine*; the *Longman Dictionary of the English Language* notes that 'some people dislike [this use] but it is becoming increasingly common', while the 1990 *Concise* marks it '*disputed*' (perhaps in the wake of the publication of Burchfield's views in the 1982 volume of the Supplement?)

between. The revision of *OED* currently underway, *OED3*, largely avoids such problems since it completely rewrites the definitional material in the Dictionary, and supplies a date for its own entries: but its progress through the alphabet is such that the new, dated entries form only a small fraction of the whole (at the time of writing, June 2004, they have covered the alphabet range *M-orature*).²⁵

6. THE CASE FOR *IPSE DIXITS*; BURCHFIELD'S LABELLING OF RACIST AND OBSCENE TERMS

What is the case for *ipse dixits* of this sort, with or without temporal indicators? It is undeniable that Burchfield's views on language usage are both valuable and interesting, given his authoritative position as twentieth-century editor of the world's greatest English language dictionary, and his consequently vast linguistic experience. And it is easy to imagine that many users will welcome the guidance he provides, despite its being at odds with the descriptive function of the *OED*. Some of his comments—for example those on *hopefully*, *infer*, and elsewhere—express views which were and/or are widely held by the 'careful writers' he refers to s.v. *agenda* (a term employed twice elsewhere in the *OED*, s.vv. *coco* and *only*), whom we can assume to comprise a well-educated stratum of the British public who regularly read or publish in relatively upmarket sources. But it is difficult to define such a stratum satisfactorily, and its members are unlikely to agree on all aspects of usage. After the 1961 publication of *Websters Third New International Dictionary*, and the storm of anger against its alleged failure to provide sufficient warning against a large range of controversial vocabulary, many dictionaries began to provide comparable sorts of information in different ways. The Random House dictionary, for example, reported

²⁵It should be noted that *OED Online* (<http://www.oed.com/>) can be accessed by individual and institutional subscribers only. For more information on the various editions and versions of *OED*, see Brewer (2005).

the views of a ‘usage panel’ of one hundred or so professional writers or men and women of letters, while other dictionaries resort to usage notes or boxes of one type or another, drawing on various sorts of collective knowledge or judgements on language to distinguish a line, albeit wavering and blurred, between error on the one hand and acceptable usage on the other.²⁶

But editorial comment on usage is not a straightforward issue. As we have seen, Burchfield’s various treatments are inconsistently presented in the Supplement, and inconsistently reproduced in *OED2*. Moreover, there are many words that would seem equally deserving of comment but go without it. Burchfield’s Preface to the 3rd volume of the Supplement, in which he announces his ‘new’ policy of introducing ‘oil’ into the *OED* to avoid ‘inspissation’, refers to debates in the House of Lords ‘in the course of which eloquent voices were raised against the use of modish words like *ongoing*, *relevant* and *viable*’. But no warning of any sort, not even a neutral comment, appears in Burchfield’s treatment of these three words in the Supplement itself. Nor do the plentiful quotations with which he illustrates their use indicate the basis for judging these words to be in any way problematic. And it is easy to find a significant number of similarly unlabelled words or usages in his Supplement which are by contrast proscribed or disapproved of by contemporary sources.²⁷ The same problem occurred in the first edition, as well: many words or usages objected to or disputed by one of the editors eventually appeared without warning or descriptive label (e.g. *accommodated*, *accidented*, *accouche*, *accoucheuse*; see K. M. E. Murray 1978: 196). Words objected to in the interim between the first (1933) and second

²⁶ See further Sledd and Ebbitt (1962) and Morton (1994). The *Random House Dictionary* (1966) and the *Houghton Mifflin American Heritage Dictionary* (1969) were among the first to provide generous quantities of information, of various sorts, on the register and acceptability of the words they define; see Nunberg (1990) and Norri (2000).

²⁷ E.g., *parameter*, *envision*, *prior to*, *decimate*, and many others. Similarly, one can find many examples of eccentric or unusual neologisms which Burchfield records in the Supplement without comment: e.g. the verb *romantic* (2 quotations only, from 1969 and 1972).

(1972-86) Supplement were particularly likely to escape labelling: thus *finalise* and *alright*, both virulently attacked by commentators on language in the 1950s and 1960s, are unmarked by Burchfield.²⁸ Perhaps more significantly, the tone of some of Burchfield's comments departs from that of careful descriptiveness (at least in appearance) adhered to elsewhere in the *OED*, ranging from the testy (as in 'an unnecessary formation') through the subjective ('a word that at present sits uneasily in the language') to the apparently joky ('a regrettable use', said of *regretfully*).

At the heart of this issue is the inevitability of language change, and the equally inevitable resistance by some users to that change. Both these things have been regularly noted and debated from at least as early as Horace onwards (his remark *usus / quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi*, in *Ars Poetica*, 11. 71-72, although originally a reference to a controversy about whether words were formed by 'analogy' or by 'anomaly,' by nature or convention, was much quoted by writers on language in the eighteenth century). In ways often difficult to predict, the sense or spelling or pronunciation or usage of a word will shift and alter over time. It then becomes a matter of individual judgement as to whether such changes are to be described as errors, as facts of usage to be resisted, or as unobjectionable new features which can be accepted without demur or disquiet. As already indicated, the consequent problems for lexicographers were outlined and explored in some detail by Johnson in his *Plan* and *Preface* and have consistently dogged lexicography ever since. Now that the *OED* is electronically searchable, we can analyse its editors' lexicographical practice in respect to usage issues, as to a range of others, and observe the many, unavoidable, inconsistencies involved in the making of a dictionary by hand—

inconsistencies which often seem to reflect purely personal preferences, and thus to

²⁸ These words were among those caught up in the North American debate on usage and lexicography following the publication of *Websters Third*.

detract from the dictionary's ostensible authority. Even had the lexicographers themselves been aware of these inconsistencies (as they may well have been), it would have been impossible to correct them once volumes had appeared in print.

Thus *OED*'s first editor, Murray, was similarly inconsistent in his appeal to usage (though arguably less so than Burchfield). One can apply the electronic search tools on *OED* in various ways to turn up his castigation of 'many writers' for using the word *caracole* 'without any clear notion of its meaning', 'erroneously' identifying *carousel* with *carousal*, 'confusing' the spelling of *borrow* with *borough* (s.v. *borrow*, n.), on the one hand, while on the other hand deferring to their usage on such matters as omission of the medial *e* in the spelling of words like *unmistakable*, *unmistakeable* (and cf. similar remarks s.v. *first* a 2e, *firstly*, *glade* n², *gothic* a 3b, *lapse* v, *motion* n 1c, where Murray acknowledges varying usage as authoritative or at least acceptable).

But the problem is greater than that of inconsistency and incompleteness, whether or not, as now, easily identifiable. The *OED*'s claim to authority based on historical evidence, impartially assembled, conflicts with the sometimes avowedly individualistic nature of Burchfield's proscriptions: it is inappropriate for the historian to act as a critic. Burchfield himself was a passionate defender of the comprehensiveness and openmindedness of *OED*, arguing with force and courage that obscene and racist words should be included in the *OED*, and—in the same preface which advertised his *ipse dixits*—defending liberalism in language matters.²⁹ Thus 'The English language is alive and well, in the right hands,' he declared.

Expressions like *right on* and *hopefully* bring out the worst and the best in men and women. They stand as emblems of social and political

²⁹ See Burchfield (1972), which explains the *OED*'s decision, under his leadership, to publish four-letter words for the first time. Burchfield provided another vigorous and pithy defence of fearlessly descriptive lexicography in 'The Turn of the Screw: Ethnic Vocabulary and Dictionaries', originally published in 1978 (and reprinted in Burchfield (1989)), where he describes various intimidatory attempts to censor dictionary definitions and inclusions (e.g. of racist vocabulary).

divisions within our society. These and other elements lying strewn in the disputed territory of our language are at any given time not numerous but are charged with a significance that goes beyond the mere linguistic. [Despite these remarks, Burchfield does not indicate the ‘emblematic’ status of either term in the body of his dictionary. *right on* is labelled ‘*US slang* . . . Freq. in Black English in the U.S.’; *hopefully* is said to be ‘avoided by many writers’.] If you are tempted to fulminate against them, or to feel uneasy about them, bear in mind that the English language has been in the hands of linguistic conservatives and linguistic radicals for more than a thousand years and that, far from bleeding to death from past crudities and past wounds, it can be used with majesty and power, free from all fault, by our greatest writers (Burchfield 1972-86, vol III: v, quoting Burchfield 1981: 17).

On the one hand he puts up the barriers, just as Marsden *et al* advised; on the other he defends varied usage by pointing out that such variation has contributed to the language’s present richness. (Though his appeal to the standard set by ‘our greatest writers’ poses more questions than it answers. Do they, whoever they are, *by definition* use language ‘free from fault’—or does language when used by our greatest writers somehow undergo transmutation, so that in their usage ‘faults’ become acceptable?)³⁰

However, Burchfield’s treatment of racist and obscene words is uneven too.

He later pointed out that he had had little to guide him in this respect. ‘Notes on

³⁰ Burchfield constantly appeals to literature as a standard of usage, seeing it as the apotheosis of language in a way much more usual fifty years ago than it is now. See Burchfield 1972-86, vol IV: x-xi, and Burchfield 1989: x-xiii, and compare his ubiquitous citations from contemporary novelists and poets in his version of Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* (Burchfield 1996).

ethnically sensitive vocabulary and usage notes such as mine on **miniscule* [sic] and on *hopefully* are now routine in all major English dictionaries,’ he wrote (1988: 52). ‘They were very rare in the heady days of the 1960s and early 1970s’. (This seems to have been more true of the UK than the US, where as mentioned above the *Websters Third* controversy had prompted dictionaries to include much more information on usage than previously).

Although it was no part of his brief to correct original *OED* material, Burchfield chose in some instances, but not others, to comment on an unacceptable racist usage. In 1907, the *OEDI* editor W. A. Craigie had labelled *nigger* as ‘colloq. and usu. contemptuous’. Burchfield adds the note ‘except in Black English vernacular, where it remains common, now virtually restricted to contexts of deliberate and contemptuous ethnic abuse,’ and this is preserved without alteration in *OED2*. Similarly, he adds a warning label to the use of *nig* to mean *nigger*: ‘now only in derogatory use’, which Craigie had left unlabelled, defining it only as an abbreviation of *nigger*, and a warning note to the original *OEDI* definition of *dago*, telling us that it is ‘now a disparaging term for any foreigner’. But many other *OEDI* racist definitions, labels, and usages, unexceptionable at the time they were written, remained in the Dictionary unaltered (see e.g. *hubbub*, *interlocutor*, *savage*, etc.).

Burchfield also added a number of racist words and usages to *OED*, though he seems never to have settled on a standard procedure of identifying them as such. It is difficult to know, in these cases, whether the variation in marking is due to perceived differences of status in the terms, or lack of editorial tidiness. Sometimes he uses definition alone (*nig-nog* is unlabelled but defined as ‘A coarsely abusive term for a Negro’); sometimes label alone (*coon* is labelled ‘*slang*. (Derog.)’ but defined simply as ‘a Negro’). In rather more cases, he labels the word simply ‘slang’, but indicates

its offensiveness in the definition (as with *kike*, defined as ‘A vulgarly offensive name for a Jew’; *wog*, defined as ‘A vulgarly offensive name for a foreigner, esp. one of Arab extraction’). Sometimes the warning or comment appears as a note separate from both label and definition (as, for *honky*, ‘Disparaging in all applications’; *wop* ‘Now considered *offensive*’).

Remarkably, however, Burchfield gives no indication in his treatment of *Paki*, another of his additions, that the word is an offensive racist slur. It is labelled ‘slang’, and defined as ‘A Pakistani, *spec.* an immigrant from Pakistan’. The 12 quotations (1964-77), many of which illustrate attributive and combinative uses such as ‘Paki-bashing’ (defined by Burchfield as ‘wanton physical assault on or other violence directed against Pakistani immigrants’), give fair indication of its derogatory connotations, but it is not clear why Burchfield does not assign the term a label or definition that identifies its racist status, especially since this is provided in other contemporary dictionaries (e.g. *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary*, 1983; *Collins English Dictionary*, 1986; *Longman Dictionary of the English Language*, 1984; though not the 1982 edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*).

Burchfield’s treatment of many of these words, including *Paki*, is reproduced unchanged by the *OED2* compilers. They did make some slight alterations on (anti-) racist grounds to *OED1* and Supplement material, however. *darky* (sense 3) had been defined in *OED1* as ‘a negro, a blacky’, labelled *colloq.*, and left unchanged by Burchfield. The *OED2* compilers adjusted the definition and added a usage note: ‘A Black, esp. a Southern U.S. Black (usu. considered patronizing or mildly offensive). Similarly, *blacky*, labelled *colloq.* in *OED1* and defined ‘a black, a negro’, had been let stand by Burchfield but the *OED2* compilers stepped in to comment ‘Now *Hist.* or *derogatory.*’ (The possibility of describing a racist usage as ‘historical’ sets up a

potentially useful distinction between racist usages which, say 100 years ago, were unremarked and unremarkable in their time, and those which because they are contemporary are unacceptable). *bohunk*, labelled by Burchfield only as ‘N. Amer. Slang’, is in *OED2* said to be ‘a derogatory term’; on the other hand *bogtrotter*, untreated by Burchfield, is left also unidentified as a racist term by *OED2*.³¹

7. CONCLUSION

In sum, Burchfield’s treatment of racist, offensive, and stylistically contentious terms is inconsistent. Such inconsistency was inevitable, given the conditions under which he compiled the Supplement—dealing with 69,000 entries, around 527,000 quotations, and 5,732 pages, all assembled by hand, and published over a period of twenty-five years. The personal and individual character of his dictionary may be the consequence of the unique place Burchfield occupies among *OED* lexicographers. Compared with Murray, Bradley, Craigie, and Onions of *OED1*, and Simpson and Weiner of *OED2* and *OED3*, Burchfield has had the freest hand, and the greatest opportunity to express his personal views in the Dictionary, thus allowing for such inconsistencies—and possible vitiation of authority—to proceed unchecked. Murray was constantly harried by the Oxford University Press Delegates, who made many significant editorial decisions, often in despite of Murray’s own wishes and beliefs, and swiftly installed first Bradley and then Craigie and Onions both to speed Murray’s work and to provide editorial checks and balances. By 1925, when Bradley died and Craigie and Onions took on full charge, the Delegates’ direct influence on

³¹ Burchfield’s omission of a label from *bohunk* must have been an error. In 1970 he had singled out *bohunk*, along with *kike* and *wog*, as examples of words offensive to national or racial groups which he intended to include in his Supplement (Tollenaere 1971: 126).

the project had waned but the lexicographers were kept firmly in line by the Secretary to the Press, R. W. Chapman, and his deputy Kenneth Sisam. Both these men were distinguished and erudite scholars, well qualified to criticise, advise and supervise the lexicographical labours under their charge; the surviving papers in the *OED* archive—many of them office memos flying day after day between the publishers and the lexicographers—give ample evidence of their watchful and energetic attempts to influence and intervene in all aspects of the *OED*'s compilation and production (sometimes to the irritation, fury or discomfort of the lexicographers, but often to their warm thanks and gratitude).

Burchfield, by contrast, operated on his own. As the pyramid diagram in the introduction to his Supplement (Burchfield 1972-86, vol 1: xvi) makes clear, 'all material' was brought together and revised 'by the Editor' alone. Although scores of voluntary and many paid assistants worked under him, he had sole control over editorial policy and execution, and the publishers seemed to have intervened very little, if at all, in the editorial process.³² His astonishing efficiency in managing the editorial processes involved in compiling the Supplement, and his stickler-like punctuality in producing reports and up-dates for the publishers—all preserved in the *OED* archives—are sufficient explanation for their reciprocally light hand in managing him. The contrast between the anguished travails of both lexicographers and publishers in bringing to light the first edition (1928) and first supplement (1933) of the *OED* could not be greater. No doubt this partly explains why Burchfield felt able to include entries such as *Rogernomics*: 'The economic policies of the Hon. Roger Douglas (b. 1937), N.Z. Minister of Finance from 1984-8', or supply the note

³² Burchfield (1989, chapter 1) describes various disagreements with linguistic and lexicographical experts over his editorial policy when he submitted a sample of his proposed method for review in January 1963, but it seems he was able to pursue his chosen policies of including literary quotations and combinatorial forms pretty much as he wished.

‘known to editor’ instead of a quotation for the first date (1964) given to *jet-boat*, or print comments such as those on *zibib*: ‘Pronounced (ˈzɪbɪb) by N.Z. servicemen in Egypt in the 1939-45 war.—Ed.’, or on *pikelet*: ‘Known personally to me in N.Z. in the 1920s.—Ed.’, as well as others discussed above. Rightly or wrongly, it is tempting to attribute the characteristics of Burchfield’s dictionary to Burchfield himself—and those characteristics on occasion extend beyond his sporadic fondness for usage comments, in particular to his enthusiasm for a pantheon of literary authors often linguistically eccentric, such as Joyce, Auden, Kipling, T. S. Eliot, and others, as sources for quotations.³³

When challenged by A. J. Aitken at a conference in 1980—‘I would like to ask Mr. Burchfield this question: what are your principles?’, Burchfield freely acknowledged that ‘in the end the judgments are subjective’. After some further discussion he described one of the problems:

there is a factor which I call staff resistance and that is that the assistants who work with me on a dictionary frequently hold very different opinions about inclusion from those which I hold myself. I am afraid that I become at that moment terribly autocratic and simply say that it is going to be such and proceed. And then I don’t lie awake at nights wondering about the conclusions but simply press on. But one finds for example that my staff (I don’t know about anyone else’s) have a genuine horror of poets. I love poetry and poetical use has been poured into the Supplement, because it is my own preference compared with that of my colleagues. But it does not mean that from day to day one’s entire group of advisers agree with what the editor does. The personal element, I think, in dictionaries is still extremely important. The

³³ For more on Burchfield’s literary sources, in particular his different treatment of male and female authors, see Baigent, Brewer and Larminie (2005) and Brewer (2005).

generations to come will have to blame the wrong choices on the personality or the preferences, the place of birth and the personal experiences of the general editor, but I see no option but to proceed in that manner (Pijnenburg and de Tollenaere 1980: 282).

Such frank acknowledgement of subjectivity is both attractive and disconcerting. Perhaps the most striking thing about Burchfield's tendency towards individualistic comment and editorial choice (of whatever sort) in the Supplement is that it is as slight as it is, given the enormous amount of material he dealt with to produce his work. It is also remarkable that *OED2*, produced with the advantage of electronic aids, was quite as inconsistent as Burchfield himself when dealing with the manifestations of his individualism, and could make no more than sporadic attempts to curb or discipline it—though no doubt this was in part due to the speed with which this edition was compiled.

In a valuable article published recently, Juhani Norri commented that of the ten dictionaries whose labelling practices she surveyed to see how they treated a selection of 145 terms of negative (i.e. derogatory, offensive, etc.) connotation, 'the most replete terminology . . . is that of *OED*, the introduction to which contains a plea for the systemization, as well as the modernization, of the labelling system' (Norri 2000: 92). But in fact the 'plea' to which she refers is merely part of a short list of desiderata for the new edition which the compilers provide at the end of their prefatory material, in an acknowledgement that the second edition of *OED* as it stands is not fully satisfactory. 'The usage and subject labels should be made fully consistent and modernised,' they say (Simpson and Weiner 1989: lvi). One reason why the terminology is 'replete'—i.e. contains many varying terms—is that it was written by

many different hands over a long period. A useful adjunct to Norri's view on *OED* is that of Richard Bailey, who commented in 1980 (at the same conference as that attended by Aitken and Burchfield) that 'Labelling is the least scientific and most artistic part of the lexicographer's task. We cannot form a judgement of usage on the basis of the character of the speaker (whether real or fictional) or the speech setting or, for most dictionaries, the frequency of a sense or form in the corpus. Status labels arise from a judgment about usage rather than a judgment about meaning, and hence emerge from the lexicographer's sense of the language' (Pijnenburg and de Tollenaere 1980: 310).

How can lexicographers present their 'sense of the language', something apparently intuitive, and therefore individual and personal, while at the same time preserving objective authority? The *OED3* revisers—the substantial team of lexicographers, under the editorship of John Simpson, now at work on the first thorough revision of *OED* since its initial publication—have attempted solutions very different from Burchfield's, all of whose usage notes they have so far jettisoned. On the words in the portion of the alphabet they have treated to date (at the time of writing, *m-orature*), they have produced a number of notes which depart from Burchfield's idiosyncratic approach while providing the sort of information on issues of correctness that dictionary users often crave, and which judiciously reflect and report a range of usage issues. Their practice is no doubt influenced by current practice in contemporary dictionaries (not least Oxford's own *New Oxford Dictionary of English*), but the *OED* has the peculiar additional advantage of its range of quotations over the history of a word's use, which uniquely inform and substantiate the editors' views. These place any remarks on usage in a historical perspective, illuminating comments such as the editors make on *masterful* sense 2 (in the sense

‘masterly’): ‘Use in this sense, which seems to have declined somewhat during the 19th cent., has been criticized in usage guides, app. starting with H. W. Fowler Dict. Mod. Eng. Usage (1926) 344’ (quotations from 1425-1988). Their note on *media* as a singular noun is another good example of how to treat matters of correctness and usage. The *OED3* revisers write that ‘The use of *media* with singular concord and as a singular form with a plural in *-s* have both been regarded by some as non-standard and objectionable’, and quote the Kingsley Amis remark reproduced in Table 1; they define the word however as ‘the main means of mass communication, *esp.* newspapers, radio, and television, regarded collectively; the reporters, journalists, etc., working for organizations engaged in such communication. Also, as a count noun: a particular means of mass communication.’ The treatment of *nigger* appears equally exemplary: additional quotations both ante- and post-date previous *OED* evidence, enabling a semantic re-analysis of the word accompanied by usage comments which are clearly congruous with the quotations rather than at odds with them.³⁴

This is a significant and valuable development of Murray’s policy on status labels, outlined in section 2 above. It reflects the far greater importance that the editors of *OED3* attach to methodological self-consciousness and consistency. As will be clear to anyone who consults the newly revised section of the *OED*, the Third Edition has adopted an editorial approach quite distinct from that of Burchfield. Far more than its predecessors (whatever they claimed), the new edition describes rather than prescribes usage. The most significant changes must, surely, be the avoidance of the terms ‘erroneous’ and ‘catachrestic’ already referred to, which Murray and Burchfield had employed to stigmatise objectionable usages, and the decision not to use the paragraph mark as an indicator of incorrect usage.

³⁴ Further examples of new usage notes in the revised alphabet range *M-orature* can be found *s.v.* *miniscule*, *nite*, and *opinionnaire* (nos. 9-11 on Table 1).

It is to be hoped that the new editors will take their methodological self-consciousness one step forward and provide a full account of their labelling and descriptive policy, listing and explaining their various armouries of labels, usage comments, and abbreviations. In this way, they will move towards a resolution of the lexicographical stand-off between authority and personality. By providing the detailed information we need to understand how they have applied their personal knowledge and experience to the usage they have surveyed, they will enable us to accept their judgement as authoritative.

Charlotte Brewer

Hertford College

Oxford OX1 3BW

charlotte.brewer@hertford.ox.ac.uk

List of references.

AARSLEFF, HANS, 1983. *The Study of Language in England 1780-1860*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2nd edition.

BAIGENT, ELIZABETH, BREWER, CHARLOTTE & LARMINIE, VIVIENNE, 2005. 'Women and the Archive: The Representation of Gender in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*', *Archives* (Journal of the British Records Association) (forthcoming).

BAKER, PETER, 1988. Review of *A Supplement to the OED*, vol 4. *Notes and Queries* 233, 148-53.

BOLTON, W. F., 1966. *The English Language: Essays by English and American Men of Letters 1490-1839*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- BREWER, CHARLOTTE, 2004. 'The Electronification of the *Oxford English Dictionary*', *Dictionaries* 25, 1-43.
- BREWER, CHARLOTTE, 2005. *Examining the OED*. URL: <<http://oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk>> [accessed 13 July 2005]
- BRODRIBB, C. W., 1928. 'Our Dictionary', *Times Literary Supplement*, 277-278.
- BURCHFIELD, R. W., 1972. 'Four-letter words and the *OED*', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1233.
- BURCHFIELD, R. W., 1972-86. *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, 4 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- BURCHFIELD, R. W., 1981. *The Spoken Language as an Art Form: an Autobiographical Approach*, New York: English-Speaking Union.
- BURCHFIELD, R. W., 1989. *Unlocking the Language*, London: Faber & Faber.
- BURCHFIELD, R. W., 1996. *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- BURCHFIELD, R. W., & AARSLEFF, HANS, 1988. *The Oxford English Dictionary and the State of the Language*, Washington: Library of Congress.
- COLERIDGE, DERWENT, 1860. 'Observations on the Plan of the Society's Proposed New English Dictionary'. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1860-1, 152-168.
- COLERIDGE, HERBERT, 1860. 'On the Exclusion of Certain Words from A Dictionary', *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1860-61, 37-43.
- CROWLEY, TONY, 1991. *Proper English? Readings in Language, History and Cultural Identity*, London and New York: Routledge.
- HARRIS, ROY, 1982. 'The History Men'. *Times Literary Supplement*, 935-6.
- LOCKHART, J. G., 1818. *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern. From the German of Frederick Schlegel*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 2 volumes.

- MARSDEN, J. H., 1859. Review of Philological Society's *Proposal*. *Edinburgh Review* 109, 365-386.
- MCDERMOTT, ANNE, 1996. 'The Intertextual Web of Johnson's *Dictionary* and the Concept of Authorship'. URL: <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/chwp/mcdermot/>> [accessed 13 July 2005].
- MOON, GEORGE WASHINGTON, 1865. *The Dean's English*, London: Hatchard & Co., 4th ed.
- MORTON, HERBERT C., 1994. *The story of Webster's Third: Philip Gove's Controversial dictionary and its Critics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MUGGLESTONE, LYNDA, 2000. 'Labels Reconsidered: Objectivity and the *OED*', *Dictionaries* 21, 22-37.
- MURRAY, J. A. H., 1884. 'General Explanations', in Introduction to MURRAY, J. A. H., BRADLEY, H., CRAIGIE, W. A., & ONIONS, C. T. (eds), *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884-1928, 10 volumes.
- MURRAY, J. A. H., 1900. 'The Evolution of English lexicography', Romanes lecture, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- MURRAY, K.M.E., 1977. *Caught in the Web of Words*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- NORRI, J., 2000. 'Labelling of Derogatory Words in some British and American Dictionaries', *International Journal of Lexicography* 13, 71-106.
- NUNBERG, GEOFFREY, 1990. 'What the Usage Panel Thinks', in RICKS, CHRISTOPHER, & MICHAELS, LEONARD (eds), *The State of the Language*, London: Faber and Faber, 467-482.
- PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY, 1859. *Proposal for a Publication of a New English Dictionary by the Philological Society*, London: Trübner & Co.

- ONIONS, C. T., 1928. 'The making of the Dictionary', *The Periodical* XIII, 1-19.
- PIJNENBURG, W., & TOLLENAERE, F. DE (eds), 1980. *Proceedings of the Second International Round Table Conference on Historical Lexicography*, Dordrecht, Holland, and Cinnaminson, N.J: Foris Publications.
- REEVE, HENRY, 1889. Review of *N.E.D.* *Edinburgh Review* 169, 328-350.
- SAMUELS, M. H., 1983. Review of *A Supplement to the OED*, vol 3. *Notes and Queries* 228, 483-7.
- SELINCOURT, A. DE, transl., 1996. Herodotus, *The Histories*, revised by MARINCOLA, JOHN, London: Harmondsworth (Penguin Classics).
- SIMPSON, JOHN, 2000. *Preface to the Third Edition [of the Oxford English Dictionary]*, <http://oed.com/about/oed3-preface/#general>
- SIMPSON, JOHN, & WEINER, EDMUND, 1989. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- SLEDD, JAMES, & EBBIT, WILMA R., 1962. *Dictionaries and that Dictionary: a Casebook on the Aims of Lexicographers and the Targets of Reviewers*, Chicago: Scott Foresman.
- STEIN, GABRIELE, 1983. Review of *A Supplement to the OED*, vol 3. *Anglia* 101, 468-75
- STRANG, BARBARA, 1974. Review of *A Supplement to the OED*, vol 1. *Notes and Queries* 219, 2-13
- STRANG, BARBARA, 1977. Review of *A Supplement to the OED*, vol 2. *Notes and Queries* 222, 388-99.
- TOLLENAERE, F. DE, 1971. 'La Table Ronde des dictionnaires historiques', *Cahiers de Lexicologie* 19, 116-128.

TRENCH, R. C., 1851. *The Study of Words: Five Lectures*, London: John W. Parker & Son.

TRENCH, R. C., 1855. *English Past and Present: Five Lectures*, London: John W. Parker & Son.

TRENCH, R. C., *On Some Deficiencies in Our English Dictionaries*, London: John W. Parker & Son, 2nd rev edn.