

## How Words Mean



ONCE GOT INTO a dispute with an Englishwoman over the pronunciation of a word and offered to look it up in the dictionary. The Englishwoman said firmly, "What for? I am English. I was born and brought up in England. The way I speak is English." Such self-assurance about one's own language is not uncommon among the English. In the United States, however, anyone who is willing to quarrel with the dictionary is regarded as either eccentric or mad.

It is widely believed that every word has a correct indisputable meaning and that teachers and books are the supreme authority in matters of meaning and usage. Few people ask by what authority the writers of dictionaries and grammars say what they say.

The task of writing a dictionary begins with reading vast amounts of the literature of the period or subject that the dictionary is to cover. As the editors read, they copy on cards every interesting or rare word, every unusual or peculiar occurrence of a common word, a large number of common words in their ordinary uses, and also the sentences in which each of these words appears, thus:

pail

The dairy *pails* bring home increase of milk

KEATS, *Endymion*

I, 44-45

That is to say, the context of each word is collected, along with the word itself. For a really big job of dictionary-writing, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (usually bound in about twenty-five volumes), millions of such cards are collected, and the task of editing occupies decades. As the cards are collected, they are alphabetized and sorted. When the sorting is completed, there will be anywhere from two or three to several hundred illustrative quotations for each word, each on its card.

To define a word, then, the dictionary editor uses the cards illustrating the word, each representing an actual use of the word by a writer of some literary or historical importance. The editor reads the cards carefully, discards some, rereads the rest, and divides the stack according to what seem to be the several senses of the word. The editor cannot be influenced by an idea of what a given word *ought* to mean, but must work according to what the collected quotations reveal about the word.

The writing of a dictionary, therefore, is not a task of setting up authoritative statements about the "true meanings" of words, but a task of recording, to the best of one's ability, what various words *have meant* to authors

in the distant or immediate past. The <sup>grammar</sup> writer of a dictionary is a historian, not a lawgiver. If, for example, we had been writing a dictionary in 1890, or even as late as 1919, we would have said that the word "broadcast" meant "to scatter" (seed, for example); but we could not have decreed that from 1921 on, the most common meaning of the word should become "to disseminate audible messages, etc., by radio or television transmission." To regard the dictionary as an "authority," therefore, is to credit dictionary writers with gifts of prophecy which they do not possess. In choosing our words when we speak or write, we can be guided by the historical record afforded us by the dictionary, but we cannot be bound by it, because new situations, new experiences, new inventions, new feelings, are always compelling us to give new uses to old words. Looking under a "hood," we should ordinarily have found, five hundred years ago, a monk; today, we find an automobile engine. ✱

### *Verbal and Physical Contexts*

The way dictionary writers arrive at definitions is merely the systematization of the way we all learn the meanings of words, beginning at infancy and continuing for the rest of our lives. Let us say that we have never heard the word "oboe" before, and we overhear a conversation in which the following sentences occur:

He used to be the best *oboe* player in town. . . . Whenever they came to that *oboe* part in the third movement, he used to get very excited. . . . I saw him one day at the music shop, buying a new reed for his *oboe*. . . . He never liked to play the clarinet after he started playing the *oboe*. He said it wasn't as much fun, because it was too easy.

Although the word may be unfamiliar, its meaning becomes clear to us as we listen. After hearing the first sentence, we know that an "oboe" is "played," so that it must be either a game or a musical instrument. With the second sentence, the possibility of its being a game is eliminated. With each succeeding sentence, the possibilities as to what an "oboe" may be are narrowed down until we get a fairly clear idea of what is meant. This is how we learn from verbal context, arriving at a workable definition by understanding one word in relation to the others with which it appears.

But even independently of this, we learn by physical and social context. Let us say that we are playing golf and that we have hit the ball in a certain way with certain unfortunate results, so that our companion says to us, "That's a bad *slice*." He repeats this remark every time our ball fails to go straight. If we are reasonably bright, we learn in a very short time to say, when it happens again, "That's a bad *slice*." On one occasion, however, our friend says to us, "That's not a *slice* this time; that's a *hook*."