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"Say It Ain't So!"

What does a lexicographer owe to the language? The critics of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1961) think that a dictionary ought to make it possible for its readers to distinguish good usage from bad and that it ought to maintain useful differentiations in meaning. To some extent the editors of the new edition disagree. The status label "colloquial" has been dropped. The nonsense formation *irregardless* was called erroneous or humorous in the 1958 printing of the second edition, but is called nonstandard in 1961. The much criticized *ain't* was stigmatized as dialect and illiterate in 1958; in 1961, although it was "disapproved by many," it was said to be "used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers." This we doubt. Common speech blurs some distinctions. Common speech has come to use *infer* to mean *imply*, a change reflected in the dictionary without the notation that careful writers do not make this mistake.

So much for ordinary usage. The lexicographer may not pick and choose among scientific words even though he might wish to do so. Bad formations such as *Pleistocene* and *speedometer* are with us to stay and furnish bad examples for analogous coinages. If *speedometer* had been *speed-meter* it would have been English and we might have been spared *ceilometer*, which could have been *cloud-* or *sky-meter*.

But this is by the way. A sample list of 125 new scientific words and popular words generated by science was matched against the dictionary. Of the words (not all of them appear below) that first appeared in the Addenda of the 1958 printing, almost all achieved full status in 1961. Among them are: *afterburner*, *antibiotics* (as drugs), *astronautics* (but *astronaut* was not listed), *analogue computer*, *binding energy*, *blue print* (as a verb), *brain washing*, *chromatography*, *fission* and *fusion* (both in the nuclear sense), *health physics*, *hybrid corn*, *narcoanalysis*, *nuclear reactor*, *operations research*, *pip* (radar), *radioisotope*, *radiation sickness*, *radome*, *tsunami*, and *servomechanism*.

Among the slow bloomers—words that achieved full status only after lingering in the Addenda from 1945 on—are: *actinomycin*, *ballistocardiograph*, *dendrochronology*, *fluorescent lamp*, *Geiger counter*, *gal*, *gramicidin*, *mass number*, *microwave*, *neutrino*, and *radar*.

To find the words that appear for the first time in the 1961 edition is more difficult. Here are a few: *antimatter*, *astronaut*, *astronavigation*, *blastoff*, *digital computer*, *fallout*, *free radical*, *gibberellic acid*, *information theory*, *imprinting* (psychology), *pad* (in the senses of both "launching pad" and "residence"), *radiocarbon*, *radio star*, *satellite* (man-made), *sputnik*, *strontium 90*, and *torr* (for mm-Hg).

It is even more difficult to turn up words that are not listed. Most are of recent coinage or have only recently been used in a new sense. Some are: *avoidance behavior*, *bionics*, *coesite*, *communications satellite*, *cosmonaut*, *optical maser* or *laser* (*maser*, however, does appear), *Mössbauer effect*, *reinforcement* (psychology), *systems approach*, *telegenesis* (biology), and *test ban*.

The editor has paid his debt to science more fully than to general culture. His working rule that accuracy "requires a dictionary to state meanings in terms in which words are in fact used, not to give editorial opinion on what their meanings are" does better for technical terms than for English in general. We hope the next edition will distinguish more sharply and with more discrimination between illiterate and literate usage, both in speech and in writing.—G.DuS.