The role of dictionaries in language change

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Annotation

Language is dynamic, constantly evolving to reflect the needs, values, and experiences of its speakers. In this context, dictionaries hold a unique role—not only as reference tools but also as gatekeepers, influencers, and mirrors of linguistic change. Over time, the approach to compiling dictionaries has shifted, and today, dictionaries not only reflect changes in language but often play a role in shaping them. This article explores how dictionaries document language change, legitimize new vocabulary, and affect the pace and acceptance of linguistic innovation.

Key words:a prescriptive to a descriptive approach,authentic snapshot of contemporary language,slang, regional dialects, and colloquial expressions, "selfie," "emoji," "gig economy," and "mansplaining","literally,"

The modern concept of a dictionary as a reference tool for the "correct" use of language traces back to early lexicographers who aimed to standardize language. Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language (1755) and Noah Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language (1828) are two famous examples of this approach. Johnson's dictionary, one of the earliest comprehensive English dictionaries, aimed to capture the "best" English of his time. His definitions often reflected his views on propriety and taste, and he intentionally left out slang and colloquial terms.

Similarly, Webster's dictionary was designed to establish a distinct American English that broke away from British conventions. His work set standards for American spelling, grammar, and usage. Early dictionaries like these were prescriptive, aiming to tell people

how language should be used and promoting language stability. The approach had a normative effect on language, reinforcing a fixed set of vocabulary and rules. In the 20th century, lexicography began shifting from a prescriptive to a descriptive approach. Modern dictionaries, such as those by Oxford and Merriam-Webster, focus on documenting how people actually use language rather than prescribing strict rules. Lexicographers now observe real-world usage patterns, social trends, and new words to make updates that reflect language as it is spoken and written by its users.For example, Merriam-Webster uses data from newspapers, books, online forums, and other sources to analyze which words are being used and how often. The shift to description over prescription allows dictionaries to reflect a more authentic snapshot of contemporary language. This inclusive approach means that previously marginalized language forms—such as slang, regional dialects, and colloquial expressions—are now more likely to be included, adding a broader perspective on the language as it changes.

One of the primary roles of dictionaries is to act as historical records of language change. They capture shifts in vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, and meaning over time. This function has become more dynamic as language evolves rapidly due to global communication, technological advancements, and social changes.For instance, dictionaries have included words like "selfie," "emoji," "gig economy," and "mansplaining" in recent years to reflect new concepts and technology-driven vocabulary. Such additions indicate how our lives are impacted by digital culture and social movements. Moreover, existing words often evolve in meaning. Take the word "literally," which once strictly meant "in a literal manner" but has come to be used for emphasis in hyperbolic contexts. Dictionaries now reflect both meanings, acknowledging how usage shifts over time.

Nowadays,dictionaries not only record changes but can also accelerate them by validating new words and usages. Once a word appears in a dictionary, it gains a sense of legitimacy that may lead to more widespread acceptance. For instance, "they" as a singular pronoun was controversial for many years, even though it had a long history of informal use. With its official inclusion in dictionaries, "they" became a recognized option for gender-neutral language, reinforcing its acceptance in mainstream communication.Apart from that words associated with social and cultural issues gain credibility through dictionary inclusion, further normalizing their use. Terms like "woke," "intersectionality," and "cisgender," once limited to academic or activist circles, are now widely recognized. Their dictionary presence reinforces social movements and reflects shifts in public awareness. In this way, dictionaries

become active participants in social discourse, influencing public understanding and language change.

In our modern life,digital age has revolutionized how dictionaries document language change. Traditional print dictionaries had long publication cycles, making it difficult to keep pace with rapidly changing language. However, online dictionaries and language databases like Merriam-Webster's online version, Urban Dictionary, and other crowdsourced platforms now provide real-time updates. This agility means that emerging slang, technical jargon, and cultural terms can be added almost immediately.

Urban Dictionary, in particular, showcases the fluid nature of language by allowing users to submit new terms and definitions. While not a formal source, it demonstrates how technology can democratize language recording, giving ordinary people a say in what should be documented. Such platforms allow people to contribute to language evolution, reflecting the growing influence of online culture on linguistic change.Not all new words or usages make it into dictionaries. Lexicographers carefully consider criteria such as frequency, longevity, and societal impact. Words must often appear across a variety of sources and contexts to be deemed significant enough for inclusion. This selective process raises questions about whether dictionaries are gatekeepers, allowing certain changes while filtering out others.

To illustrate, dictionary editors may decide to include words that gain widespread media exposure, like "unfriend" or "fake news." However, certain slang terms or ephemeral expressions may be left out if they are deemed too niche or temporary. This editorial discretion suggests that dictionaries influence language by choosing which words and meanings are "worthy" of documentation, impacting which aspects of language change are formally recognized.As language continues to evolve at an unprecedented pace, the role of dictionaries will undoubtedly adapt. Social media, global communication, and AI-driven language models have made language more fluid than ever. In this landscape, traditional dictionaries may need to embrace more rapid, flexible update models or incorporate user-driven insights to stay relevant.

Dictionaries serve as both mirrors and molders of language. They document linguistic shifts, validate new vocabulary, and sometimes even drive change by legitimizing evolving usage. As our language landscape becomes more connected and faster-paced, dictionaries will need to continue adapting. The balance between preserving linguistic heritage and embracing innovation reflects the complex, evolving role dictionaries play in language change.

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