

Peter Martin. *The Dictionary Wars: The American Fight over the English Language*. 2019, xii + 358 pages. ISBN 978-0-691-18891-1. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Price: \$14.61 (Paperback) / \$29.95 (Hardback).

English lexicography broadly encompasses dictionaries of British English, American English, and the varieties of English spoken in other countries (Cowie 2009: 1). Though the evolution of English lexicography owes much to the progression of lexicographic theory and practice in and outside Britain, the exploration of lexicography in other English-speaking countries, for example American lexicography, is conducive to a panoramic vision of English lexicography. Nonetheless, little research has been conducted in this field.

The Dictionary Wars: The American Fight over the English Language, which may be the first thorough investigation of the early period of American lexicography, delves into the history of the fierce competitions among lexicographers and the intermittent national conflicts on the way to making the most authoritative dictionary of American English in the early 19th century. It reflects 'America's progress and struggle with the English language, mediated by the country's ongoing dictionary controversies' (p. ix).

This book consists of 17 chapters in two parts, plus a conclusion, four appendices, some notes and an index. The two parts are organized in sequence from the publication of the first dictionary *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806) by Webster to the appearance of the royal quarto edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1864). The chapters in each part progress in order of time with the story around two main characters – Noah Webster and Joseph Emerson Worcester.

Part One 'Noah Webster's Battles' depicts, in nine chapters, the cultural conflicts between Britain and America as well as the rivalry between Webster and other American lexicographers in their efforts to compile dictionaries of American English. Chapter 1 gives a brief account of the dilemma that Americans faced after political independence from Britain. On the one hand, in order to promote national identity and confidence, there was a growing consciousness that American English should be freed from British English constraints and conventions. On the other hand, most literate and cultured Americans put heavy reliance on Samuel Johnson and his dictionary. Though the practice of 'Americanisms' had suffered acrimonious attacks from Britain, an American dictionary was a must for following the rapid changes in the American language.

Chapter 2 introduces the life of Noah Webster, and the reason why Webster decided to publish his own spelling book. Webster wanted to prevent the corruption of the language from England. It was his belief that the reform in spelling could purify the American language. The publication of his speller in 1783 turned out to be a great success. Webster also contributed to federal copyright protection, resulting in the passing of the Copyright Act in 1790. As a provocative and courageous man, Webster publicly attacked, in his *Disserta-*

tions on the English Language (1789), Samuel Johnson as well as Johnson's dictionary, and maintained that the establishment of a national standard language should be an indispensable part of a complete American cultural revolution.

Chapter 3 recounts how Webster compiled his first dictionary. In 1798, Webster and his family moved to New Haven, where he was determined to compile a dictionary to fulfill his plan for education. By pointing out the errors and ignorance of British grammarians, Webster highlighted the moral role that grammar and lexicography could play in language education. According to him, vulgar words should be omitted, and dictionary definitions should be morally instructive. In 1806, Webster's first dictionary, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, came out. The innovations of the dictionary lie in its recommended spellings, its lexicon containing more than five thousand entry words not in Johnson's dictionary, and its inclusion of several American tables as well as lists for special communities. However, some inconsistencies with respect to spelling and pronunciation were found in the dictionary, which went against Webster's will of pursuing the linguistic uniformity for American English.

Chapter 4 demonstrates Webster's perseverance and concentration on lexicography. It begins with the depiction of the difficulties that Webster encountered. It took him almost ten years to sort out the etymology of the language which was particularly inadequate in preceding dictionaries. Though the German linguists had made some achievements in this field, Webster did not refer to any of them. 'Webster's work in etymology illustrates the extreme isolation and provincialism of American scholarship in the early years of the nineteenth century' (Krapp 1966: 365). Despite attacks, Webster still held the firm belief that Americanisms should be included in a dictionary. In December 1828, Webster's unabridged dictionary, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, was published by Sherman Converse. Though Webster's spelling innovations are controversial, most of them have become the standard in American orthography. Furthermore, Webster's way of defining words distinguishes itself from other dictionaries. Even Murray, the chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, called Webster 'a born definer of words' (Murray 1900: 43).

Chapter 5 reveals how the octavo abridgement of Webster's 1828 quarto was made. With the rapid development in printing and expansion in middle-class readership, both Webster and Converse felt it necessary to abridge the 1828 quarto into a compact octavo edition which would be more suitable for average users. However, Webster himself did not want to get involved in this work. Converse decided to invite Joseph Emerson Worcester, who was famous for his scholarship in the revision of the Todd-Johnson dictionary, to undertake the labor. Under the persuasion of Converse and Goodrich, Worcester finally accepted their invitation. Worcester suggested that some modifications in Webster's quarto should be made, such as the omission of the spelling oddities, the alphabetical order of words according to conventional spelling, and the shortening of definitions.

Chapter 6 briefly describes how Goodrich, his son-in-law, took over the

copyright of the octavo abridgement. As expected, the publication of the one-volume octavo in 1829 was a success. However, the revisions in spelling, pronunciation and definitions made Webster extremely angry because he thought all these would damage his image as America's premier authority on the English language. As a result, Webster decided to sell the copyright of the octavo to Goodrich. After receiving both the copyright and the plates in 1833, Goodrich found a new publisher – the Whites – who would retain exclusive publishing rights for the ensuing twenty-four years.

Chapter 7 shows the contest between Webster and Lyman Cobb with their spelling books. As a young schoolteacher, Cobb published his own speller adopting Walker's system of pronunciation in 1821. Cobb anonymously launched several rounds of attacks on Webster by pointing out that Webster failed to achieve consistency in spelling and pronunciation between his spelling books and dictionaries. In response, Webster reiterated that his goal was to purify the American language and unify the United States. The so-called 'spelling wars' between them for the first time made the Americans aware of the irreconcilable spelling differences between America and Britain.

In Chapter 8, 'The "Common Thief"', the author vividly depicts the fierce competition in dictionary compilation between Webster and Worcester. Worcester's *A Comprehensive Pronouncing and Explanatory Dictionary of the English Language* (1830), which was widely accepted, posed a formidable challenge to Webster. The merits of Worcester's dictionary lie in its utilitarian values with a lower price, concise definitions, and emphasis on pronunciation with various citations from 18th century orthoepists. However, Webster claimed that such treatment of pronunciation was a retrogression – it opposed his mission for a uniform language. By listing several areas where he thought Worcester had committed fatal mistakes, Webster brought the dispute to the general public. To make the dispute more furious, Webster published an article in a newspaper charging Worcester with plagiarism from his dictionary. This article 'marks the first time the quarrels between the two men had broken out into a public forum' (p. 131), which can be seen as the start of the dictionary wars. In the next few years, several rounds of attacks proceeded between the two lexicographers. According to the author, the quarrel is connected, to some extent, with their personalities. While Webster is a radical language reformer, who was inclined to maintain his exclusive status as a leading lexicographer in America, Worcester was a modest conservative, who strongly believed that the linguistic custom or prevalent usage should never be violated. However, the dictionary wars helped to raise the American consciousness for the significant role that lexicographers were beginning to play in American society.

Chapter 9 briefly introduces Webster's last dictionary and some comments on his work. Because of his worry of being overcome in the competition, Webster decided to publish a new dictionary by making all the revisions and corrections needed in his first quarto dictionary. While continuing his anti-British theme, he still refused to retreat from his mission to purify the American lan-

guage and promote linguistic reform. With the help of Goodrich, Webster's second dictionary *An American Dictionary of the English Language* or the royal octavo was published in 1841. However, except for the additional words, there is no big difference between this royal quarto and the first quarto. Webster died in 1843. His patriotism to America, devotion to lexicography, and innovations in linguistic reform have made him widely recognized and won him much credit.

Part Two 'The Merriams at War' describes, in eight chapters, the language wars for supremacy after Webster's death. In Chapter 10, 'Taking Webster out of Webster', the author makes a detailed analysis of the strife among Webster's family members and the new move taken by the Merriam brothers. Misunderstandings and resentments existed among Webster's sons-in-law in respect of the executorship of Webster's estate. As the dominant executor, William Ellsworth decided to find a purchaser for Webster's unsold sheets with the expectation of challenging Worcester's new dictionary. It was the brothers Charles and George Merriam who finally bought those sheets. Gifted with a printing business and being highly aware of the profit that the name 'Webster' would bring about, the Merriams wanted to publish a new edition of the royal octavo immediately. Goodrich was once again recommended as the editor, and he demanded that the new Merriam edition should be coordinated with revisions of the other Webster dictionaries. Finally, an agreement was reached that the revisions of the Merriam edition and the Goodrich-Worcester octavo should be kept in step with each other with regard to spelling, pronunciation, definitions, and etymology. A massive project as it sounds, 'Goodrich's plan made possible the thorough housecleaning required throughout Webster's lexicography' (p. 177).

Chapter 11 illustrates the strategies that the Merriams took in competing against Worcester and his dictionary. In 1846, Worcester published his *Universal and Critical Dictionary of the English Language*, the most outstanding feature of which is its complete inclusion of the vocabulary in use. This dictionary was produced in a context where 'words were no longer the concern chiefly of the learned and social elite' (p. 182). Having realized the threat from Worcester, the Merriams began to look for evidence of Worcester's alleged thefts. They asked William Webster to search the words that Worcester borrowed from Webster's dictionaries, and called on Noah Porter to launch an attack against Worcester. Their goal was to disparage Worcester and advertise their forthcoming dictionary. The one-volume Goodrich-Merriam quarto edition of the *American Dictionary* was published in 1847. This new edition stands for a significant turning-point in the history of Webster dictionaries: the innovations proposed by Webster were excluded; and the function of an American dictionary was redefined: 'to help people from all walks of life understand how to speak and write the language' (p. 193).

Chapter 12 discloses in detail the publishers' intrigues in the dictionary market. The story begins with Worcester's discovery of his name appearing with that of Webster in his 1846 dictionary published in London in 1851. In fact,

it was the London publisher Henry G. Bohn's deliberate mistake by changing the title to better promote the dictionary. Then the Merriams took advantage of this fraud and spearheaded attacks on Worcester again. Despite Worcester's struggle urging Converse and Goodrich to clarify the matter, he eventually failed. On the one hand, this fraud reflects that 'publishers tend to make exaggerated, unsubstantiated, and even false claims about their dictionaries either in the history of lexicography or in modern business practice' (Landau 2009: 197). On the other hand, it is through this kind of conflict that the publishers could achieve their goal of attracting the attention of the American public to the dictionaries.

In Chapter 13, 'Converse's Complaint', the author briefly covers Converse's involvement in the dictionary wars between the Merriams and Worcester. As the publisher of the Goodrich-Worcester octavo dictionary, Converse accepted Worcester's invitation to set the record straight. However, he ended by failing to gain even Goodrich's support.

Chapter 14 continues the account of the rivalry between the Merriams and Worcester. In 1854, Worcester's new publisher Swan, who was a mason turned schoolteacher and a school textbook publisher, initiated a comprehensive rebuttal of the Merriams. According to Swan, the fatal flaw of Webster's dictionary was his spelling innovations, which would perplex schoolchildren. The involvement of schoolchildren into this debate raised the tone of the controversy because it was the age of child education. In spite of the great improvements that the Goodrich-Merriam quarto edition had made, the Merriams were aware of their weaknesses, particularly Webster's orthography. Therefore, the Merriams had to seek the endorsement from public figures. However, most leading authors and distinguished men of letters favored Worcester.

Chapter 15 underscores the topic of 'standard language' in the dictionary wars. In a reply to the Merriams' attack, Swan cited William Cullen Bryant's criticism on Webster's alleged nationalism, and argued that 'the English language was an apolitical heritage and should be adapted to the realities of American life' (p. 236). Then the debate began centering on the 'American standard'. In 1855, Worcester's octavo, *A Pronouncing, Explanatory and Synonymous Dictionary of the English Language*, was published, in which he put forward his own understanding of 'standard', namely that the standard lies in the present usage of a literate and well-bred society.

Chapter 16 shows another influential dictionary made by Worcester. During their preparations for the new quarto, Worcester's publishers had inadvertently spilled the beans. Their innovations of including woodcut illustrations had been borrowed by the Merriams, who published the Pictorial Edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1859. Whatever strategies the Merriams took to win over the market, Worcester's magnum opus, the two-volume, unabridged quarto, turned out to be a triumph. In the preface to the dictionary, he stated his principal tenets in lexicon compilation. Worcester died in 1865 and his battles finally came to an end.

In Chapter 17, 'The Merriams Triumphant: "Worcester! Worcester! All Change for Webster!'", the author deals with the realization of the royal quarto edition published by the Merriams. Though faced with the economic depression caused by the Civil War, the Merriams still decided to forge ahead. They armed their working team with thirty professors, scientists, and general assistants. With their joint efforts, the royal quarto edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language* came out in 1864. With a comprehensive revision in etymology, spelling, pronunciation, and definition, this dictionary proved to be a great success. Also, it marks the ending of the American dictionary wars during the first half of the 19th century.

In the concluding section, the author expresses his own views on the dictionary wars: neither Webster nor Worcester is the real winner. However, their influence on American language and culture will last forever. The real winners, in the author's view, are the Merriams, the newspapers, and the American people. As for the Merriam brothers, they had taken the lion's share in the dictionary market and earned themselves a fortune. As for the newspapers, they had become center stage during the dictionary wars. As for the American people, their knowledge of the issues apposite to the language and the dictionaries made them the real beneficiaries.

The back matter contains four appendices. Appendix A, 'The "Webster" Brand', briefly introduces another dictionary conflict related to the brand name 'Webster'. By 1909, the name 'Webster' had become a genericized trademark for any American dictionary and a symbol of quality for American readers. Appendix B, 'Four Centuries of Selected Dictionaries of the English Language', presents a list of selected general-purpose or monolingual dictionaries of the English language from the 17th to the 20th century. The dictionaries are arranged chronologically, and each entry comprises the publication date, the editor(s), and the dictionary title or a description of the dictionary. Appendix C, 'Publishing Terms', gives a brief explanation of publishing terms. These terms, each followed by a definition, are alphabetically listed. Appendix D, 'The Spelling Bee at Angels' quotes a poem narrated by Truthful James. It is about a spelling match, an American educational innovation. This part may be regarded as a supplement to American lexicography.

As the first publication to unveil the early period of American lexicography, *The Dictionary Wars* exhibits several merits.

Firstly, unlike other books dealing with similar topics that give a very rough and general introduction to the whole history of lexicography in a given country (e.g., Cowie 2009; Considine 2019), this book pays specific attention to a particular period of lexicography in America, which is bound to provide a more in-depth account of how American lexicography has developed and what makes it what it is today (cf. Zhang and Xu 2020). Secondly, this book is characterized by its impressive breadth of research, including the fields of education, law, religion, and publishing. All these were interconnected and had a role to play in accelerating the American cultural revolution, particularly by

promoting American dictionaries. In this way, the author spotlights the social nature of language as well as its multifaceted influence on the production of dictionaries. Thirdly, despite the large number of dramatic and complex personal stories in the book, the author manages to re-create the historical events and set the record straight through an impartial and objective description. As the author expresses it: 'In an extended, complicated, and comprehensive conflict such as this, lasting some thirty-five years, there were many victories and defeats for all the main participants along the way' (p. 288). Finally, the title of the book and of each chapter, such as 'The Dictionary Wars', 'Tea and Copyright' and 'The "Common Thief"' which suggest lively stories behind them, are eye-catching and will arouse readers' interest as well as increasing the readability of the book.

Admittedly, apart from the strengths mentioned above, there are still some possibilities for improvement of the book. To begin with, the author could have drawn more on other lexicographic resources so as to better illustrate how American lexicography influences and is influenced by lexicographic theory and practice from other countries. Except for the brief reference to the etymological discoveries by German linguists, the resources the author turns to are basically limited to British lexicography. Another minor criticism is the neglect of an introduction to lexicographic theories that guide dictionary-making. Though the focus of this book is on lexicographic practice, it is still necessary to refer to the framework on which a given dictionary is based. In addition, it would be more reader-friendly if the author had made a systematic comparison of the major dictionaries mentioned in this book, through which readers will acquire a better understanding of the development of American lexicography. Except for some brief explanations of the features of the dictionaries, the author did not make any diachronic or synchronic comparison between the leading American lexicographers and their dictionaries.

Overall, despite the minor criticisms raised above, *The Dictionary Wars* deserves recognition. It is a valuable resource for the study of English lexicography as a whole as well as for American literature and communication. The book takes readers on a linguistic journey into American dictionaries from the early 1800s to the late 1860s, into the cultural wars in which America's colleges, libraries, newspapers, religious groups, and state legislatures actively engaged, and into a business world where publishers all vied for dictionary supremacy. *The Dictionary Wars* has set a good example for an accurate and thorough assessment of the evolution of lexicography.

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