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approved by the word-shop staff. The committee decides the destiny of a word that will either elect it to a position in the living lexicon of the language or remand it to the executioner.

Such a committee, made up of residents of many lands, is somewhat difficult to assemble even once in a decade for a complete revision of the dictionary, when the words that have failed to do much work in the meanwhile are deleted or declared antiquated.

In the interim spanning each decennial reconstruction the sole power of this committee on admissions is vested in the ex-officio chairman of that body, our managing editor, Dr. Frank H. Vizetelly. As dean of American lexicographers, through thirty-five years of service he has made the acquaintance of more than 500,000 words, a record probably unequaled by any other living person. Offer this master of vocables a word for interpretation, and synonyms will pour from his mind like pearls from a severed necklace string. It is a smart word, indeed, that can pass his blue pencil without proper warrant. Yet his paramount concern always in passing upon new words is whether they will be acceptable in the homes of the nation, for which a dictionary is primarily designed.

To gain a place in the dictionary, a word must express a thought, or new variance of a thought, that is not in the compendium already. As the language grows, this test becomes more and more exacting, finally resolving itself into the necessity of a new word practically performing the work of two other words now in our speech.

Another certificate demanded of new words is the reputation of the person who vouches for them. Under whose authentication do they demand a place in our speech? One utterance of a new word by the President of the United States will speed it into the dictionary, where a thousand repetitions by a nonentity will fail. Next, orators and writers of seasoned popularity are the best indorsers for words that entertain hopes for longevity.

Furthermore, a word must be pure to enter the dictionary nowadays. Vulgarities and barbarisms are elbowed aside. In fact, many scientific terms in so orthodox a vocabulary as that of the physical researcher tainted by a tendency toward the obscene are barred from the standard dictionaries. Such are relegated to the technical glossaries of the psychoanalyst.

Absolute Accuracy Always

But the lexicographer doesn't make the language in any sense; he merely records the best of it, that which is used or usable. Neither can speakers or authors force new vehicles of speech into the language; not even the President.

The language is made by that mythical person—the man in the street. It is to him that the committee of admissions turns when preparing its final balloting. Popularity is the ultimate test for the entrance into the dictionary of a reputable word.

A vocable lacking any semblance of style or pedigree can attain first rank among the immortal members of the language if it is acclaimed by the voice of the mass. The word may be but a passing fancy; but this position, if attained, is unalterable for the present, no matter how much the gownsman or speech purist may protest. The majority rules in lexicography, and popular acclaim is final. In essence, a dictionary is designed to enable who so desires, with its aid, to understand all classic and current literature of the English language.

During this entire registration of a word for our speech there is one slogan seared into the minds of the staff—Absolute Accuracy. This is inviolable, because the dictionary is the master proof chart; from it all other users of words take its edicts without question. The world's foremost specialists on every subject are consulted on each moot point. Human errors are reduced to a minimum.



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But catching and pedigreeing words, once the dictionary is made, is insignificant almost compared to creating such a compendium from blank paper. This later work is merely watching the parade go by, awarding palms to the new recruits; an endless task, but pleasant.

It is not many years since our word shop lacked the gentle manner that marks its stride today. The hum of intense activity sounded around the clock each week day for four long years in the original process of gathering together the heritage of knowledge that the many centuries have passed on to us.

Indeed, it is a far cry from poor old Samuel Johnson, stewing away in his wretched little house off Fleet Street, working almost single-handed at his labors of making a dictionary, then only 50,000 words, to a staff of 380 experts and more than 500 specialized scholars and readers dissecting 100,000 volumes in the building of a modern dictionary. Such was our shop then. Really, it wasn't a shop; it was a fact foundry.

A Census of English Words

The transition is that a dictionary is no longer a mere word book; it is a skeleton of human knowledge. No other earthly book contains so much enlightenment compressed for instant use, as ready to answer the little child's simple question as the perplexing problems of an adult. It contains every subject of human interest from sea, sky and land. With simplicity and condensation as a keystone, it is an oracle to which all classes of people may take thousands of questions that arise in their business, professional or social life. In brief, the modern dictionary is no less than a hundred lexicons of information.

To assemble this gigantic mass of data, the specialized readers were assigned to specific subjects, as medicine, law, biology, horticulture, more than 300 differentiae, to extract all recorded facts on that particular topic. More than 2,000,000 quotations resulted from this survey which formed the basis for interpreting the delicate shadings of our language that have been passed on to us. Forty expert word definers were busy for forty-eight months rending and compressing these variations of meaning. Each definition in turn was passed upon by the most reputable expert to which it could be referred. Then an art-department scoured the world for 7000 illustrations for some of the objects described, which words to date have been unable fully to portray, to produce a complete mental image of them.

It may be of passing interest to note that more than 275,000,000 typographical symbols were used in this Herculean task, and that these tons of metal are always kept set up that the dictionary may be quickly

rendered up-to-date by the inclusion of the new words which have been accepted into fellowship in the language.

How many words are there in the language? No one has yet been able to capture them all; that is, from the catacombs of speech and the current mintings too. Doctor Murray and his successors at Oxford University have been laboring upon this all-embracing plan since 1879, with its completion yet in the future.

However, it is no flight of fancy to state that there are between 1,000,000 and 1,250,000 words in our language today. At least two-fifths of these are ultrascientific terms used only in the recesses of a laboratory; they are not to be found in standard dictionaries. Many other words are obsolete or antiquated.

Dictionaries have guided thought since about 1100 B. C., when Pa-Out-She, a Chinese scholar, compiled the first lexicon of a language of which we have a record. Greek, Roman, Arabic, down through the ages, usually there have been dictionaries; but Yankee lexicographers have outstripped all forerunners for size and content.

The American dictionary of today contains very nearly half a million terms.

Of this mammoth list of words doing duty in our speech, how many do you use? The paucity may astound you. The Russell Sage Foundation decided to answer this question and analyzed 380,000 words written by 2500 different persons in seventy-five communities. Of this material diagnosed more than two-thirds consisted of personal and business correspondence.

Final results showed that the fifty commonest words used, together with their repetitions, constitute more than half of the words we use in writing. The ten commonest, as might be surmised, are "the," "and," "of," "to," "I," "a," "in," "that," "you" and "for," in the order named. Further tabulations revealed that the 300 commonest words constitute three-fourths of our communications, and nine-tenths of our writing is done with 1000 words.

How Many Words Do You Use?

If this is the average used, how many words do you understand when confronted with them? It has been facetiously stated that a woman has a vocabulary of only 800 words, but an enormous turnover. Perhaps tests such as this noted have a tendency to belittle our vocable powers.

In the opinion of our chief, Doctor Vizetelly, who is recognized as a past master of word lore, a child of six years has twice as many understandable terms in its mind as the 800 quota assigned to the fair sex by the humorists. An adult with a small range of information, he states, can understand not less than 3000. A business man, a skilled technician or mechanic, can muster not less than 8000 to 10,000 vocables, and a college graduate has a command of upward of 20,000 words.

With these limited vocabularies, which are such a small ratio of the great store of words available, we are beset at times by an incapacity to understand the thoughts expressed by others in speech or in print. Failure to appreciate a single word, though it happens to be in a native tongue, may dull the perception of an entire idea.

So day by day we gather the new words to post them in the dictionary that English-speaking people may understand other English-speaking people; that the planter from Georgia and the banker from Chicago may comprehend the boy from the Bowery or the antiquarian.

Of course we can't be expected to interpret the chatter of the cockney to a Scotsman or the negro drawl to an Australian plainsman; the dictionary would needs be a phonograph. But if there's a word, which is in reality a thought, of general or even infrequent currency that you don't understand, that you can spell correctly, you will find the most compact and enlightening interpretation obtainable by looking it up in the dictionary.

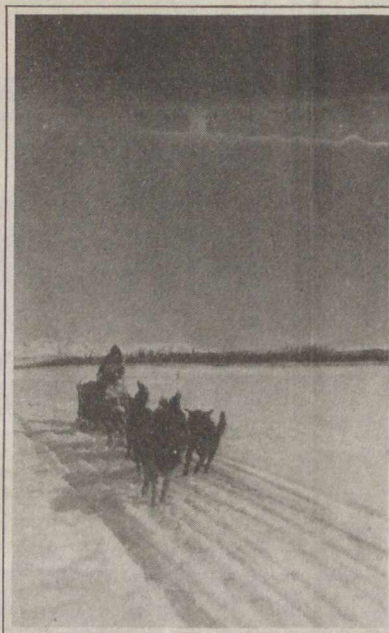


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A Dog Team Traveling Down the Kuskokwim River on 7-Foot-Thick Ice, 200 Miles From the Benngala, at Napimute, Alaska