

DISGRACED BY MISCARRIAGE:
FOUR AND A HALF CENTURIES OF
LEXICOGRAPHICAL BELLIGERENCE

BY JACK LYNCH

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Pity the lot of the eighteenth-century scholar. Whenever I'm introduced to someone outside academia—when, say, I'm allowed to mingle with decent company at a party—it's just a matter of time before someone asks, "What do you do?" and I'm forced to confess that I teach literature in a university. Most people have the good sense to pretend to look for a spouse or need to refresh a drink, but some feel obliged to make conversation, and so they ask, "And do you specialize in some author?" When I tell them that I work on Samuel Johnson, the conversation is almost always at an end. Still, if layfolk can volunteer anything about Samuel Johnson, it's this: he wrote the first dictionary. Since I've already bored or frightened away most of the people in the room, I usually decide it would be off-puttingly pedantic to correct them, so I nod uncomfortably. It's

no surprise they think Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755, is the first English dictionary—surely nothing so widely reported could be wrong, could it? The only tiny problem with this claim—not a fatal objection, I hope, but one we should address—is the 663 dictionaries published in England before Johnson published his work.

That number comes from the English Short Title Catalogue, a database of every book printed in Britain or in the English language from 1473 through 1800. Most of them, however, don't seem very dictionaryish to us. Many, for instance, are foreign-language or bilingual dictionaries: the first English book with *dictionary* in its title was *The Dictionary of Syr Thomas Eliot Knyght*, which appeared in 1538; it's actually an English-Latin dictionary. Others are polyglot dictionaries, like John Minsheu's staggeringly learned *Guide into Tongues*, which translates into and out of English, Dutch, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Many others aren't "general" dictionaries, but limited to specific fields—the law, gardening, seamanship, that sort of thing. And many early dictionaries are actually what we would call encyclopedias, such as John Harris's *Lexicon Technicum; or, An Universal English Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* or Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. But even if we limit our focus to what linguists call the general monolingual English dictionaries—the ones concerned with defining English words not confined to a single field—Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* is not the 664th English dictionary, but still the 21st.

I have often puzzled over why Johnson's *Dictionary* has been promoted to the first of its kind, despite predecessors that number in the dozens or even hundreds, and I have a few tentative answers. One reason, I suspect, is that most people have no idea how to evaluate a dictionary; many, in fact, never consider the possibility that dictionaries can be better or worse examples of their kind. After all, we're introduced to "the dictionary" as children, the definite article creating a sense of

authority that few lexicographers would be so bold as to claim for themselves. They seem to be impersonal and abstract collections of facts, not works of literature that can be good or bad. If, therefore, an author is supposed to be famous for his or her involvement with a dictionary, it must be the first dictionary, or the biggest dictionary, or some other kind of easily understood superlative—I suspect the very category of “a good dictionary” means nothing to many people.

But it has meant an awful lot to the people who write those dictionaries. One might think lexicographers are a meek and retiring lot, but history shows that they can be surprisingly truculent. Today I would like to describe some of the quarrels that have made the history of English dictionaries so fascinating for almost half a millennium. During that time lexicographers have engaged in countless altercations, and they’ve been known to get nasty—their debates are sometimes little more dignified than knife fights. Johnson himself noted, “Every other authour may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach,” and few even manage that; the usual lot of the dictionary writer is “to be disgraced by miscarriage, or punished for neglect.” Johnson knew that despite his hard work, his book would still contain “a few wild blunders, and risible absurdities,” which would “for a time furnish folly with laughter, and harden ignorance in contempt” (p. 110). After all, every one of his predecessors had been punished for his neglect and ridiculed for his wild blunders. And as it happens, this laughter and contempt constituted one of Edward Bloustein’s collecting interests, and he did a remarkable job in documenting some of the controversies among dictionary makers.

We can begin, for example, with the earliest work in the Bloustein Collection: Thomas Cooper’s *Thesaurus linguæ Romanæ & Britannicæ*—literally, “The Treasure-House of the Roman and British Tongue.” It appeared in 1573, but it nearly didn’t appear at all: one of Cooper’s friends tells us that “this learned man

had a shrew to his wife," Amy, who was, in the words of another friend, "too light for his gravitie." The frivolous Amy, it is said, was once "irreconcilably angrie with him for sitting-up late at night so, compiling his *Dictionarie*." And so, "When he had halfe-donne it," a biographer says, his wife "had the opportunity to gett into his studie, tooke all his paines out in her lap, and threw it into the fire, and burnt it. Well, for all that," the biographer goes on, "the good man had so great a zeale for the advancement of learning, that he began it again."

It would be enlightening to hear Amy's side of the story, but we'll probably never know whether there's anything to this story of a shrewish pyromaniac. We do, however, know that she wasn't the only one who had trouble with her husband's dictionary. After the book came out, the Puritan pamphleteer known as Martin Marprelate began his assault on Cooper, accusing him of plagiarism—of lifting entries without acknowledgment from Thomas Elyot's Latin dictionary, Robert Estienne's French dictionary, and John Frisius's German dictionary. And he was right: Cooper resorted to the kind of pastiche for which teachers today castigate dishonest students who think "research" means cutting and pasting from the World Wide Web.

Marprelate was right, but it's only fair to point out that dictionaries *always* borrow from one another. It has been going on from the very beginning. Take, for example, the work that *does* deserve to be called very first general monolingual English dictionary: Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall*, which appeared in 1604. I wish we could show you the first edition, but this title was beyond even Bloustein's remarkable collecting ability: only two copies are known to exist, and both are at Oxford. But even this—the first real English dictionary—has been accused of plagiarism, odd as it may sound to chastise the first of its kind for being derivative. Around half the headwords in Cawdrey's book were stolen from a table of difficult words in *The English Schole-Maister*, published by Edmund Coote eight years earlier.

Perhaps it's only just that the thief should be thieved in turn, so Cawdrey got his comeuppance when another lexicographer, John Bullokar, stole many of Cawdrey's entries for his *English Expositor*. Cawdrey's son then revised his father's dictionary, and stole entries back from Bullokar. It begins to assume the appearance of a vaudeville routine, as two thieves repeatedly pick each other's pockets for the same wallet.

It may seem funny today, but seventeenth-century tempers often flared. One of the more bloodthirsty lexicographical rivalries began in 1656, when Thomas Blount published the biggest English dictionary to date, *Glossographia*. Two years later there appeared *A New World of English Words*, compiled by Edward Phillips, nephew of the poet John Milton. Phillips's title picks up on some of the excitement of the discovery of the real New World, which was still a comparatively novel subject in 1658—this is before there was a permanent European settlement in New Jersey, when New Brunswick was still an unsettled region known by the unappealing name of Prigmore's Swamp. Phillips, however, soon found himself in an ethical swamp of his own making, because his *New World of English Words* was not as new as he made it out to be—many of the entries were lifted straight out of Blount's *Glossographia*. Blount, unamused, responded with a peevish pamphlet, *A World of Errors Discovered in the New World of Words*. "Must this then be suffered?" Blount asks.

A Gentleman . . . writes a Book, and the Book happens to be acceptable to the World and sell; a Book-seller . . . instantly employs some Mercenary to jumble up another like Book out of this, with some Alterations and Additions, and give it a new Title. . . . Thus it fared with my *Glossographia*, the fruit of above Twenty years spare hours.

Blount insisted that Phillips's dictionary was "extracted

almost wholly out of mine," and insisted that, wherever Phillips added original material, he made it worse. It recalls a putdown often attributed to Samuel Johnson, though not actually by him: "Sir, your book is both good and original. But the parts that are good are not original, and the parts that are original are not good." So when Phillips said that *Candlemas* was "so called (as some think) because about that time they left of [*sic*] burning Candles at Mass," Blount snapped back, "This is so ridiculously absurd, that (*as some think*) none but our Author ever Printed the like." When Phillips said a *Covenant church* is "A Parish Church," Blount scoffed, "It is no Parish Church; as most men, except our Author, know." And so on, through hundreds of entries. Phillips must have smarted when he was smacked by Blount, but he wasn't much improved by the scolding: in later editions he continued to pillage other dictionaries, including some that had criticized his first edition.

Dictionaries, in other words, have been stealing from one another for a long time, and it continues even now. Today it is considered bad form to lift whole entries out of a rival's dictionary, but everyone looks to the competition for guidance. This approach does have some risks, though—for one, it tends to perpetuate errors. Sometimes they are intentional, part of a long tradition of clever frauds in reference books. One of the best is the last entry in Rupert Hughes's *Music Lovers' Encyclopedia* of 1903, *zzxjoanw*, supposedly a Maori word that means "drum," "fife," and "conclusion." (Never mind that the Maori language does not use the letters *z*, *x*, or *j*.) An even more elaborate fake came in 1975, when the *New Columbia Encyclopedia* included a long entry on the distinguished American fountain designer Lillian Virginia Mountweazel, who had achieved some fame with *Flags Up!*, a collection of photographs of rural American mailboxes. Ms. Mountweazel, alas, met a premature end, dying in an explosion while she was researching an article for *Combustibles* magazine. Although Mountweazel was nothing

more than an inside joke among the encyclopedia's authors, she is said to have appeared in other encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries—proof that other editors have just pilfered from the *New Columbia*. The term *mountweazel* is sometimes used to refer to these mischievous entries inserted in reference books.

Not all the perpetuated blunders, though, are witty mountweazels; the habit of raiding earlier dictionaries tends to preserve words that have never been used by real people, especially the daunting terms called “inkhorn” words—these were the favorites of all the early dictionary writers. The author of a popular biography of Samuel Johnson from 1946 asks, “Who, before Johnson, . . . had excited the admiring curiosity of readers by such wonderful and lovely words as Opatate and Otacoustick, Emunctories, Genethliacks and Ubication?” But pretty much *everyone* before Johnson had included “wonderful and lovely words” like those. Consider Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall*: with just 2,500 entries, it covers only a tiny fraction of the entire English vocabulary, and that fraction comprises mostly the oddballs like *festination*, *foraminated*, and *frigify*. It makes sense, of course, that the earliest dictionaries would concern themselves with the words that people didn't know, especially at a time when the English vocabulary was increasing quickly. It stands to reason that readers needed to keep track of new coinages, so “hard” words were at the center of many of the dictionaries of the seventeenth century.

Of course, Johnson's *Dictionary* contains many of these hard words, and for word lovers they can be delightful. There you'll find *nidification*, meaning “the act of building nests,” and *gemelliparous*, “bearing twins.” Scrabble players will delight in words like *ophiophagous* (“Serpent-eating”), *galericulate* (“Covered as with a hat”), or *decacuminated* (“Having the top cut off”). But Johnson was not entirely comfortable with them: “I am not always certain,” he said, “that they are read in any book but the works of lexicographers” (preface, pp. 87–88). He was right.

Consider the word *naulage*, which appears in nearly a hundred books in the eighteenth century alone. The problem is that every one of those books is a dictionary. They all tell us that *naulage* means the fee paid to carry freight by sea, but there's no indication the word was ever used even by those paid to carry freight by sea.

This leads us to one of the biggest ways in which the lexicography of the eighteenth century differs from that of the seventeenth. Johnson has a reputation for being fond of complicated Latinate diction; the critic Archibald Campbell twitted him in a work titled *Lexiphanes*, in which Johnson appears spouting sentences like this: "Expulse hereditary aggregates and agglomerated asperities which may obumbrate your intellectual luminaries with the clouds of obscurity." For all its gusto, however, Campbell's charge is a bum rap; Johnson's real labor in the *Dictionary* was not including words like *obumbrate* but words like *cat* and *hat* and *mat*. He knew that few people needed a dictionary for such words: "It seems of no great use," he said,

to set down the words *horse, dog, cat, willow, alder, daisy, rose*, and a thousand others, of which it will be hard to give an explanation not more obscure than the word itself. Yet it is to be considered, that if the names of animals be inserted, we must admit those which are more known, as well as those with which we are, by accident, less acquainted; and if they are all rejected, how will the reader be relieved from difficulties produced by allusions to the crocodile, the chamæleon, the ichneumon, and the hyæna?

If the exotic crocodile-killing mongoose known as an ichneumon is to be allowed in, he says, it's only fair that the cat should get to go in too. Besides, dictionaries do more than give definitions—they explain pronunciations, they give etymologies,

and so on. Maybe no one will ever need to look up *cat*, he admits, but “it is rather to be wished that many readers should find more than they expect, than that one should miss what he might hope to find.”

In opening the *Dictionary* to common words, Johnson was continuing a trend that had been going on for several decades. The earliest dictionaries, remember, were concerned exclusively with inkhorn terms, but as the decades went by they became more inclusive. In 1702 John Kersey’s *New English Dictionary* advertised itself as “A Compleat Collection Of the Most Proper and Significant Words, Commonly used in the Language.” Kersey’s definitions are skimpy, sometimes hardly definitions at all, like “*Ake*, as, my head akes,” or “*An Apron*, for a Woman, &c.” But most of his 28,000 entries had never appeared in an English dictionary before. And Johnson’s most important predecessor, Nathan Bailey, continued the tradition in his *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* in 1721 and his *Dictionarium Britannicum* in 1730. Lexicographers had at last begun paying attention to real words.

This is a more important development than it may seem. For a real challenge, try writing a definition for a word like *take*. The first thing you’ll discover is a strong temptation to use a word to define itself. “*Take* means when you take something”—no, that won’t do. Let’s try to be more precise: “*Take* is when you take possession”—no again. (Mind you, even Johnson committed this blunder a few times. He unhelpfully defines the word *defluxion* as “a defluxion,” although he then clarifies it by adding, “a flowing down.”) But even if you don’t include the word in its own definition, you’re still likely to define word A using word B, and then define word B using word A, making for circular definitions. In fact, circularity is ultimately unavoidable: a dictionary’s job is to define each word in terms of other words, which are defined in terms of more words, words, words. Repeating them is inevitable. That is to say, *all* dictionary

definitions are circular, at least in the long run. Johnson recognized this problem in the preface to his *Dictionary*. "To interpret a language by itself," he said, "is very difficult. . . . To explain, requires the use of terms less abstruse than that which is to be explained, and such terms cannot always be found" (preface, pp. 88–89). So we're often forced to define simple words that everyone knows in terms of complex words that fewer people know, as when Johnson famously defines *cough* as "A convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity." "The easiest word," Johnson explains, "whatever it be, can never be translated into one more easy" (p. 93).

Still, though it may be difficult, it is not impossible to come up with a definition that's not immediately circular. So for *take*, let's try something like "to assume the possession of." It's a good start, but we're not finished yet. If we say that something *takes* three hours, we don't mean that it "assumes the possession of three hours," except perhaps in a very metaphorical sense. So we should probably have another sense of *take*—we can call it number 2—with a definition like "to occupy a period of time." But *taking your time* is different still, and will need another definition: there's number 3. You can *take a bus*, you can *take comfort*, and you can *take a nap*. *Taking a bath* and *taking a vacation*—these probably need separate entries too. What about *taking a break*, or *taking a lap* around a field, or *taking something for granted*? And sometimes we have to make judgment calls. Should *taking a drink* and *taking medicine* be treated as one sense—say, "to consume"—or should we distinguish them with two definitions? (Note that when you *take a bite*, you're not "consuming" a bite.) What about *taking tea*, which seems subtly different from *taking a drink*, or *taking milk* with your tea—can we lump them into a more general sense, or does each one need its own definition? What started out as a simple exercise has expanded to fill pages. And there is nothing special about *take*; many of our most common verbs behave the same way. Suppose,

a few hours after you *get up*, you *get bored*—so you decide to *get out* of the house and *get some sun*. But soon you *get thirsty* and *get yourself down* to a local bar. There, alas, you *get drunk*, which causes you to *get some ideas* about *getting lucky*—but if you *get caught* by her husband, you'll have to try to *get out of town* lest you *get beaten up*. Then you'll need to *get to a doctor* to *get treated*, after which friends will send you *get-well cards* until you *get to go home*. Get it? Now try writing a definition of *get* that covers all these senses and the dozens of others I haven't mentioned. Defining the inkhorn terms that filled the seventeenth-century dictionaries is trivial compared to providing useful definitions of words every English speaker already knows.

After Johnson, English lexicography became increasingly concerned with the entire language in all its complexity. Johnson's prodigious labor meant his was to become the first *standard* dictionary—the first to be authoritative, the first to settle arguments. No earlier English lexicographer achieved a comparable position in British culture. Before his book came out, there's little evidence that curious lay readers turned to a dictionary when they had questions about usage. I invoked the phrase "*the dictionary*," a notion that became common only after Johnson. When Henry Tilney questions Catherine Morland's use of the word *nicest* in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Eleanor warns, "You had better change it as soon as you can, or we shall be overpowered with Johnson." No earlier name had the power to strike terror into the hearts of linguistic evildoers.

Plenty of critics hoped to knock Johnson off his pedestal. The cranky and eccentric linguist John Horne Tooke, for instance, called Johnson's *Dictionary* "the most imperfect and faulty, and the least valuable of any of his productions," adding that Johnson himself "possessed not one single requisite for the undertaking." His protégé Charles Richardson wrote a big and influential lexicon in the 1830s, and he was clear about his distaste for his most distinguished predecessor: "No man," he wrote, "can

possibly succeed in compiling a truly valuable Dictionary of the English language, unless he entirely desert the steps of Johnson." But Horne Tooke and Richardson never achieved the kind of authority they thought was their due, not least because Horne Tooke's theories were eccentric. As one lexicologist puts it, Richardson "was impressed with the notion that, in a dictionary, definitions are unnecessary . . . and he proceeded to carry this into effect by making a dictionary without definitions." Small wonder, then, that Richardson is not a household name. But another lexicographer who liked to pick on Johnson has managed to eclipse even Johnson's fame—his name, in fact, is the American shorthand for "dictionary" itself. Noah Webster, our nation's first great lexicographer, prepared the ground for his own work by finding his competitor's book "extremely imperfect and full of error." "Not a single page of Johnson's *Dictionary*," he griped, "is correct."

Webster's objections to Johnson are partly linguistic but largely political. Webster was born in 1758, three years after Johnson's *Dictionary* first came out, and he came of age during the Revolutionary generation in America—he was in Philadelphia in 1787 as the Constitution was being written. And at a time when American cultural identity was still in its infancy, Webster was determined to make the case for his fledgling nation. American culture had little to boast about in Webster's day. As late as 1820 the English essayist Sydney Smith could complain that Americans were a "self-adulating race" who had done nothing useful, and he demanded to know, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue? What does the world yet owe to American physicians or surgeons?" And so on, through a long list of pointed questions to which most Americans had no good answer. Webster, though, was an early believer in his national culture, and he was convinced that his language books could help to shape the country's identity.

Look, then, at the titles of those books: in rapid succession came the *American Spelling Book* in 1783, the *American Grammar* in 1784, and the *American Reader* in 1785. That repeated word *American* in the titles is significant—it's the American tongue he's promoting, not the language of the nation America had just defeated. And when he turned his attention to a full-scale dictionary, it should be no surprise that Webster had little patience for Johnson, one of the most infamous Tories on the planet. The curmudgeonly Englishman once admitted that he was "willing to love all mankind, *except an American*," and he called the rebellious colonists "a race of convicts, [who] ought to be thankful for anything we allow them short of hanging." So when, in 1828—just three years after Queen's College became Rutgers College—Webster published his full-length dictionary, he simply took Johnson's title, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, and ostentatiously inserted the word *American* at the beginning: *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. Out went many quotations from Milton and Spenser, to be replaced by words of wisdom from Franklin and Washington. Webster sought to revise Johnson's language to make it suitable to his own nation, and we owe to him most of the spellings labeled "chiefly American" in modern dictionaries: he kicked the *u* out of *colour*, reversed the *r* and *e* in *theatre*, and traded the baffling *ugh* for an *f* in *draught*. He also added a slew of distinctively American words to the English lexicon—*tomato*, *squash*, *prairie*, *moose*—and German and Dutch words that were current among English speakers in Pennsylvania and New York, like *noodle*, *boss*, and *cookie*.

Like every other lexicographer, Webster fought his own battles over plagiarism, particularly with his rival Joseph Worcester. But the Webster empire eventually provided the most striking example of another kind of lexicographical grudge match, with which I'd like to finish my talk today. It has to do with the kind of authority dictionaries claim for themselves. Even now,

"Webster's" now means "*the* dictionary" in this country and, like "Johnson's" in England, it's been used as a standard for "correct" English usage. Webster was glad for that kind of power, Johnson less so—even though much of the world was eager for him to adjudicate language disputes, he insisted that a lexicographer should "not form, but register the language" (preface, p. 102). Even if Johnson was uncomfortable being a linguistic legislator, many of his readers wanted someone who'd settle disputes once and for all.

This raises one of the perennial debates among people who discuss the language: whether it's the job of commentators to be *prescriptive* or *descriptive*—to declare how the language should be or to describe the way it is. The prescriptivists are determined to police the unruly English language; the descriptivists resent living in their police state. A product bearing Webster's name became the battleground for the most high-profile of the twentieth century's dictionary wars, and it was about exactly this question of whether dictionaries should be prescriptive or descriptive. When *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* came out in 1961, it prompted a lexicographical firestorm unlike any before. In the words of novelist David Foster Wallace, "You can think of *Webster's Third* as sort of the Fort Sumter of the contemporary Usage Wars."

Webster's Third was one of the first high-profile dictionaries to adopt a thoroughly descriptive policy—they refused to declare usages right or wrong, and simply recorded prevailing trends. Adored by some as the first serious attempt to embody modern linguistics in a reference book, it was excoriated by others as a bastion of do-as-you-please permissiveness, sanctioning slang like *ain't*, authorizing solecisms like *infer* to mean *imply*, and giving quarter to profanity for the first time. On one side the editor, Philip Gove, insisted, "A dictionary should have no traffic with . . . artificial notions of correctness or superiority." On the other, the *Atlantic* magazine offered this harangue: "The anxiously

awaited work that was to have crowned cisatlantic linguistic scholarship with a particular glory turns out to be a scandal and a disaster." The assaults on Gove and his team used words like *travesty*, *crime*, *disgrace*, and *appalling*; metaphors like "sacking the citadel" were common. You might almost think you're reading about war criminals or child molesters, rather than makers of dictionaries. Lexicographical passions run high.

Every one of these battles—over plagiarism, over accuracy, over nationalism, over prescription and description—can be found in the world of dictionaries today, 450 years after the English language was first treated in dictionaries. The fights may even be more bitter now than they were back then, if for no other reason than because the number of dictionaries has exploded. I began this talk by noting that 664 books with "dictionary" in the title were published from 1470 to 1755, but the pace has picked up. We're now living in an age of tremendous lexicographical diversity—libraries are filled with topical dictionaries, biographical dictionaries, scientific dictionaries, medical dictionaries; dictionaries of spelling, pronunciation, and usage, dictionaries of proverbs, dictionaries of slang, dictionaries of Old and Middle English, dictionaries of Yiddishisms, and dictionaries in and out of every language you can think of. A search of OCLC's WorldCat library database tells me that 244 dictionaries bear a copyright date of 2007—and we're just thirty-seven days into the year.

It is because those battles are still unfinished that old dictionaries are so illuminating. We live in an age when novelty sells dictionaries: the web page for the most recent *American Heritage Dictionary* bears a big banner reading, "Newly Revised," the eleventh edition of the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate* boasts fully 100,000 changes from the tenth edition, and editors are tripping over one another in the race to be the first to record terms like *bird flu* and *blogosphere*. It may therefore seem pointless to collect old dictionaries, which have all the appeal of fifty-

year-old phone books. If you turn to Blount or Cooper for *truthiness* or *Sudoku* you're going to be disappointed, and Johnson had barely heard of the steam engine, to say nothing of the search engine. Petty squabbles among these dictionary makers seem even more pointless. But they're the ones who shaped the language we share today—a language now 1,500 years old, spoken by more than a billion people. And these quarrels—not only the learned disquisitions, but even the most petulant and childish spats—demonstrate how much English has mattered to those charged with the task of cataloging it. If our language matters to us, we can do worse than looking back at how these debates were carried out. In the end, it's for the insight into our own living language that we should be grateful to Edward Bloustein and his family; they've given us the chance to see the English language anew.