


SPREADING
THE WORD



Merriam-Webster's main man talks about dictionary's 200 years in America

By **TRICIA JONES**
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It took less time for America to cast off British rule than to declare linguistic independence. But when Noah Webster ousted the "u" from "colour" and "flavour," and recognized "hickory" and "skunk" as words, the United States gained its first homegrown dictionary.

That was 200 years ago. Now Merriam-Webster is celebrating the bicentennial of what company president and publisher John M. Morse calls "the quintessential democratic document" — the first dictionary to reflect the culture and vocabulary of the American people.

Morse is on a nationwide speaking tour about the ancestor of today's Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition. He'll stop by Clark College on Tuesday to talk about the history of the lexicon, and about how the company carries out the mission of Noah Webster to this day. He had these thoughts to share from his office in Springfield, Mass. Questions and answers have been edited for space and clarity.

revised?
Every 10 years, we review the Collegiate Dictionary from cover to cover. We re-read every single entry and compare it with new evidence being collected.

The American Revolution was 30 years old by the time the first Webster's dictionary came out. What happened in 1806 to prompt its publication?

It's better to ask, "What happened in 1800?" because that's the year Noah Webster announced in newspapers his intention to create a series of dictionaries. The answer is the country was immersed in crisis in those early years of the republic. The year 1800 marked one of the most bitterly fought elections of all time; it was referred to as a second American Revolution. So here is Noah Webster, with I think a deep concern and love for his country, coupled with deep concern that it may be falling apart at the seams. I think he writes not just as a scholarly exercise, but as a politically committed patriot. What he says is a dictionary can actually speak to the great issues of the day. This new country has its own American English, and we as Americans created this collectively as a group, and it's something we can all rally around and be proud of. It can educate young men and women to take their roles as citizens.

I believe he thinks it will help unify the country. And I think he saw it as a way to inspire people to behave better.

What were people using before "A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language?"

Before 1806, there were no real dictionaries published in this country. There had been some attempts, but they weren't particularly successful.

The reference to the first American dictionary as "the quintessential democratic document" — what does that mean?

Dictionary-makers don't invent the words in the dictionary. What editors do is spend portions of their days reading books, magazines, newspapers, art catalogs and corporate annual reports to get a sense of what words are used in the language right now. So a dictionary is a report on the collective decisions being made by the English-speaking community.

How often is the dictionary



John M. Morse
Merriam-Webster's president and publisher

What causes a word to be dropped?

Lack of evidence that it continues to be used in frequently read sources.

What would you say about the American relationship to language?

The first word that comes to mind is playful. We know language is constructed, and we love to play with it. Also, I think Americans like their language informal, with its sleeves rolled up.

If you could collar the Noah Webster of 1806 on the street, what would you ask him?

If I'm right (as to) why he's writing the dictionary. It would surprise people how forward-thinking he is, writing in his preface that change and variation are natural to language. You could still get into a bar fight over those issues.

Word association

Merriam-Webster's president and publisher, John M. Morse, agreed to indulge us in a word-association exercise. Here are his responses:

Literature:

Language

Best-seller:

Dictionary

Potboiler:

No response

Stodgy:

Lexicographers aren't

Trendy:

Same as above

Illiterate:

Tragedy

Revolutionary:

Noah

Wordy:

Also Noah

Precise:

Definition

Sloppy:

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dictionary.

That was 20
Webster is called
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M. Morse called

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If you go

■ **What:** "Dictionaries and Democracy: 200 Years of Dictionary Making in America," a presentation by John M. Morse, Merriam-Webster president and publisher.

■ **When:** Noon to 1 p.m. Tuesday.

■ **Where:** Gaiser Hall Student Center, Clark College, 1800 E. McLoughlin Blvd., Vancouver.

■ **Cost:** Free.

■ **Information:** Call 360-992-2261.

Did you know?

■ Clark County's five Rotary clubs have joined together to provide 6,500 dictionaries, enough for every third-grader in the county, to be distributed this week.

■ Noah Webster was born 248 years ago today in West Hartford, Conn.