

Words barely start to describe Webster's impact on the American language

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VANCOUVER — Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, says John M. Morse, the company's president and publisher, is the quintessential democratic document. Its entries vary as society shapes the English language.

It is not only a collection of definitions, he says, but a reflection of society.

"Language is constructed, not just inherited," Morse said Tuesday, when he spoke to a Gaiser Hall audience on "Dictionaries and Democracy: 200 Years of Dictionary Making in America." His visit to Clark College was one of several he is making across the country to mark the 200th anniversary of

Noah Webster's 1806 lexicon, the first to include uniquely American words.

Because language evolves, about 10,000 new words are added to the dictionary once every decade, Morse said. For example, "blog" joined other B words in 2004, five years after it came into common usage.

"Words are coined and phrases catch on," he said. "It happens all the time, the reinvention of language."

So Merriam-Webster employees spend a portion of each workday reading "anything that gives us a sense for what's going on in the language," Morse said.

They look for new words or old words used in new ways. They look

for variations in spelling or capitalization.

After all, in his 1806 "A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language" — about 400 pages with tiny print — Webster changed the British word "humour" to "humor" and "gaol" to "jail." Some of his changes stuck; others, such as "ake" for "ache" and "wimmen" for "women," didn't.

Now, after 10 years of gathering citations, each definition in the dictionary is reviewed against them. Out goes the boring and obsolete, such as "record changer" and "ballistic cardiology," Morse said Tuesday, the day after Webster's 248th birthday.

In comes the new. When the

company concludes a word has established itself in the language, "it's time to put it in the dictionary," Morse said.

Webster would be pleased, Morse figured. Each edition is "based on the legitimacy of language we've all created."

At Webster's death in 1843, George and Charles Merriam acquired the rights to publish his dictionary, Morse said. They created the American dictionary publishing industry when they crammed all the words into one volume and dropped the price, making it more affordable, he said.

Morse's visit just happened to coincide with a dictionary hand-out sponsored by five local Rotary

clubs. This week, all 6,500 third-graders in Clark County will receive their own copies. The clubs bought \$11,000 worth of dictionaries — that's \$1.69 each — for the students from The Dictionary Project, a South Carolina-based nonprofit that has distributed English dictionaries to 4.4 million students worldwide.

"Do we get to take it home," Samuel Hodge, 8, asked his teacher, Toby Ford, during a presentation ceremony at Orchards Elementary. Students will use the dictionaries in school and take them home in the summer, Ford said.

Jesus Bojorquez, also 8, knelt on the gymnasium floor and flipped through the new pages. "It smells good," he said with a smile.