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## THE NEW ENGLAND YEOMAN: NOAH WEBSTER AND THE DEFINING OF AMERICAN ENGLISH (1758-1843)

### 1. Introduction

Writing and reflecting on the works of a late eighteenth-century lexicographer today may seem a little unusual and perhaps outdated. Why should linguists and cultural analysts be interested in such a scholar, when so many changes have recently occurred in the English language with the advent of the Internet, digital communication and social media that require our attention? What is the sense nowadays of concentrating our attention on language phenomena and discussions occurred 200 years ago? Shouldn't we worry about the future development of the English language instead of looking back at its origin?

Such rhetorical questions will certainly arouse the offended reaction of most historical linguists.

Indeed, the above assertions are of course intended to be a very simple and overt provocative introduction. I am often asked these types of questions in class, and I find that answering to them gives me the opportunity to introduce my favorite topic, i.e. the development of the English language in the United States.

And indeed the answer partly lies, at least with regards to the topic of the present article, in the fascinating analysis of the so-called "war of words," that harsh debate which occurred after the Declaration of American Independence in some British journals and magazines, such as *The Critical Review*, the *European Magazine* and *London Review*, the *Gentleman's Review* and the *Scots Magazine*, to name just a few. There, book reviews, general articles, and letters to the editors attacked shamelessly all attempts on the American intellectuals' part to claim their acquisition and acknowledgement of an independent and republican culture, not to mention their aim at proclaiming their national sentiment of unity and freedom:

Will the verbal abuse of two or three millions of discontented people, remove their discontents, or convince them that their grievances are imaginary? That they believe them real, will admit of no doubt, when we consider, that men can give no stronger proof of sincerity in any cause, than the hazarding their lives and fortunes in its defence. If the Americans have set us an example of intemperate and unbecoming speech, it is, surely, beneath us to follow it. It is not a tongue-doughty scolding-bout, not a war of words, in which we are unhappily engaged. (*The Scots Magazine* 652)

The definition of the language of the rebels as "intemperate and unbecoming" is definitely mild, compared with what followed, the violent criticism and unrelenting accusation of vulgarism and corruption.

During the following fifty years or so, the war of words<sup>2</sup> – so eagerly denied by the author of the article quoted above – characterized the literary debate between the two nations, and several American men of

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<sup>2</sup> On the so-called 'war of words' see also Stefanelli and Camboni.



letters were the target of such attacks on the British part. One of them was Noah Webster, the lexicographer from Connecticut, whose works on language are the topic of the present article. Already in 1789, when the Constitution of the United States was definitely approved, Webster was predicting the differentiation between the two dialects of English:

Let me add, that whatever predilection the Americans may have for their native European tongues, and particularly the British descendants for the English, yet several circumstances render a future separation of the American tongue from the English, necessary and unavoidable. The vicinity of the European nations, with the uninterrupted communication in peace, and the changes of dominion in war, are gradually assimilating their respective languages. The English with others is suffering continual alterations. America, placed at a distance from those nations, will feel, in a much less degree, the influence of the assimilating causes; at the same time, numerous local causes, such as a new country, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in arts and science, and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe, will introduce new words into the American tongue. These causes will produce, in a course of time, a language in North America, as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German, or from one another: Like remote branches of a tree springing from the same stock; or rays of light, shot from the same center, and diverging from each other, in proportion to their distance from the point of separation. (Webster 1789, 22)

Noah Webster, the author of two dictionaries, a best-selling grammar book, a scholarly analysis of the English language - still considered as the language manifesto of American independence - together with tens of articles and volumes on several scientific, technical and literary topics, is still a neglected, almost unknown protagonist of American cultural independence, a forgotten scholar in the American tradition.



Figure 1

Thus, the present article will aim at shedding some light on this interesting character, while at the same time attempting at giving a hopefully clear idea of what contribution he gave to the defining of American English and to what extent his works on language can still be regarded as a valuable contribution to the creation of America's independent culture.

We will first describe his many talents as a multiple scholar, a typical representative of the American Enlightenment. In the second section we will attempt at giving an overall outline of the language spoken in the United States in the years preceding and following the Declaration of Independence, or at least of what characterized it. This section will be followed by a discussion on Noah Webster's contribution in the definition of American language and culture. To do this, our primary sources will be Webster's four main works on language: *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1785), *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789), together with his two dictionaries, the *Compendious Dictionary* (1806; figure 1) and *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). As secondary sources we will

draw first of all from three biographies of our scholar, the earliest two published in 1953 (H. Warfel) and 1980 (R.M. Rollins), and another, more recent one, published in 2011 by the biographer J. Kendall. The rest of our bibliographical sources will be drawn from various critical works on the development of American English and on the works of Noah Webster. Such publications, together with Noah Webster's productions, have been researched at length during the course of many years, and have been the essential source of inspiration and invaluable contribution to my own work on the American lexicographer, from the 1990s to the present.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Besides a single scholarly volume entirely devoted to Noah Webster (1994a), and some articles on his work (1993, 1994b), the author of the present contribution also published a book on the lexicographer (2005)



## 2. Noah Webster: the Forgotten Multiple Founding Father

Noah Webster (1758-1843) is remembered today mainly for his dictionaries which made him a ‘household name in the US’:

The truth is, Noah Webster himself -- the founder of American lexicography, or dictionary-making -- hasn't actually “said” anything since his death in 1843. The fact that so many people speak of Webster in the present tense while knowing next to nothing about the man sets up an apparent contradiction: Noah Webster is a little-known household name” (Bierma).

However, during his lifetime he was very famous, especially after the publication of the *American Spelling Book*, in 1783, which remained a best-seller for many decades. During the years following his death he continued to be remembered among the great Americans of his time. In 1878 a distinguished historian, Edward Charles Lester, attributed Webster a worthy position in his America’s “Trinity of Fame:”

He has done more for us than Alfred did for England, or Cadmus for Greece. His books have educated four generations. They are forever multiplying his innumerable army of thinkers, who will transmit his name from age to age. Only two men have stood on this soil of the New World, whose fame is so sure to last – Columbus its Discoverer, and Washington its Saviour. Webster is, and will be, its great Teacher. And these three will make our Trinity of Fame. (Micklethwait 9)

Yet, as his best-selling book lost favor and stopped being bought by the thousands, the name of Noah Webster started being forgotten. By 1942 most Americans were convinced that his cousin Daniel Webster, a distinguished US senator, had written the dictionary (Kendall 7). Indeed, he is frequently mentioned as a brand name when a definition is quoted, but little is known about his works, his life and his contribution to America’s independent culture.

On the contrary, Noah Webster (figure 2) was among the protagonists of his historical and remarkable period. And although most works on the American enlightenment thought do not consider Noah Webster’s contribution at the same level as Benjamin Franklin’s, John Adams’s, Thomas Paine’s and Thomas Jefferson’s, his ideas on scientific progress, religious and human toleration, republicanism and experimental political organization were equally strong, popular and consequential.

Similarly to Benjamin Franklin, with whom he was in very good terms, Webster was the typical representative of the enlightened and learned polymath. The following are some of his achievements.

He can be considered as the Father of American copyright law (Kendall 89), for his life-long campaign to win protection of his writings in times when piracy was extremely common and writers had no guarantee of being protected. Thanks to Webster’s obsessive effort and commitment, in 1790 the American Congress passed the first federal copyright law, which granted 14 years of protection. Connecticut, Webster’s home State, had already approved the first state copyright law in 1782.

Moreover, he definitely had a flair for marketing. Because his main preoccupation was economic, at least at the beginning of his career, and he was in constant need of money, the sales of his books were his only means of making a living. Thus, he was keen on promoting them, touring the counties and neighboring states on horseback to sell and get contracts for his books:

Webster turned out to be a natural at self-promotion: after all, talking (or writing) himself up was his way of being in the world. The first book printed in the new United States of America would benefit from the publicity tools that later became the staples of the publishing industry, including blurbs from prominent people (many of which Webster wrote themselves), pre-publication buzz, heated media controversy and the book tour. (Kendall 86)

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for the Rosen Publishing Group’s PowerPlus Books (now PowerKids Press), specialized in children’s publications. See also Fodde 2002.



In less-literary, more scientific fields, Webster is remembered as the first American historian of epidemic diseases for his pioneering research on yellow fever:

In the 18th century calling a disease epidemic was only a way of distinguishing something relatively uncommon from the daily incidence of often deadly infectious diseases. Noah Webster noted an influenza epidemic in 1793 and in part through his efforts, the country's first medical and scientific magazine, *The Medical Repository*, began publishing with its major interest in fever epidemics around the country. In an early publication Webster collected essays on fevers in New York, New Haven and rural Massachusetts. Webster began embracing the classical notion that epidemics were caused by "the epidemic constitution of the atmosphere," which Webster soon postulated "could maintain the current state of ill health for another fifty years." (Arnebeck 3)

As we have tried to show, his interests were many. However, most of all, he was enthusiastic about the political agenda of the new nation. In a period in which the political debate was so important and influential in the historical developments of the newly born United States of America, participation in the state legislatures was essential. Noah Webster served several terms in the state legislatures of both Connecticut and Massachusetts, and was a well-respected representative, whose opinion and judgement were often sought after. In a letter written to his wife Rebecca he recounted of an invitation received from the House of Representatives to give a lecture on the English Language. There he admits that his address was well received, and also that Mr. Adams was in the audience.<sup>4</sup>

His strong interest in the political issues of the new nation, made him also quite assertive and knowledgeable in the social problems of American citizens. One of his favorite pastimes was the monitoring and counting of houses and churches of the Connecticut towns he visited, not to mention the number of deaths (Kendal 239-40). This led to his effective contribution to the compiling of America's first census in 1790, which confirmed the population of the United States at nearly 4 million people<sup>5</sup>.

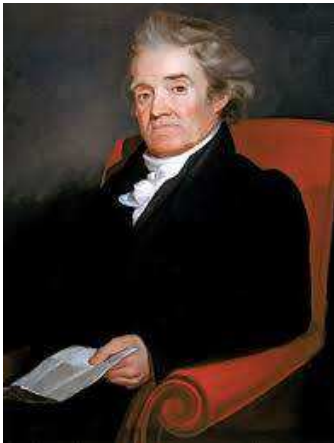


Figure 2

Among his concerns towards the improvement and betterment of his citizens we should not fail to remember his contribution to the creation of the earliest forms of worker's compensation and unemployment insurance.

To continue with Webster's interests and commitments, during the greater part of the 1790s he founded the *American Minerva*, New York City's first daily newspaper (later known as the *Commercial Advertiser*) - eight years before Alexander Hamilton (First Secretary of the Treasury) started *The New York Post* - and edited it for four years, writing many articles and editorials. He also published the semi-weekly publication, *The Herald, A Gazette for the country* (later known as *The New York Spectator*). Noah actively directed these papers until 1798. Both were organs of the Federalist Party, which at that time was made up of those men who supported the Federalist administrations of George Washington and John Adams (Warfel 223-239).

In matters of social policy, Noah Webster promoted female education and public schools and helped to establish Amherst College in 1821.

However, as stated earlier, despite such commitment and fervor in the advancement and promotion of American society, it was his phenomenally popular *American Spelling Book* that gave him fame. Thanks to this booklet, he was given the epithet of "schoolmaster to America" (Warfel). This enormously influential spelling and reading book, written for schoolchildren and first published in 1783, outsold every book in the 19th century except the Bible.

He was a passionate politician. In his political writings he championed the adoption of the Federal Constitution, guaranteeing a strong central government, to control the power and the secessionist ambitions

<sup>4</sup> "Letter of Noah Webster to His Wife Rebecca," Washington, January 4, 1831, New York Public Library Collection, Original Letter -- *Noah Webster Manuscript*.

<sup>5</sup> See

[https://www.census.gov/history/www/through\\_the\\_decades/overview/1790.html](https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/overview/1790.html). Last visited 02/21/2015.





of the states. Among other things, he argued that the Constitution should include universal compulsory education and abolish slavery. In fact, he helped found the Connecticut Society for the Abolition of Slavery in 1791, though he later refused to fully support the abolitionist cause.<sup>6</sup>

He was enthusiastically and admiringly in favor of George Washington's leadership. His dictionaries would be full of references to the First President of the United States.

Besides his utter admiration, he was in good terms with him and often went to Mount Vernon to visit and offer his advice on various matters. During one of this visits, at the age of 27, he had the temerity to criticize his host at a dinner party for looking to Scotland for a tutor for his step-grandchildren, instead of finding an American, homegrown scholar: "What would European nations think of this country if, after the exhibition of great talents and achievements in the war of independence, we should send to Europe for men to teach the first rudiments of learning?" (Kendall 4). Here, the young Webster is showing signs of his proud passion and beliefs for the cultural and political independence of the new-born nation from Great Britain. These signs will be expressed obsessively and authoritatively during the years to follow.

We have tried to briefly outline Noah Webster's accomplishments which can explain the reasons why he fully deserves to be acknowledged among the great intellectuals of his time. Yet, we cannot fail to admit that, despite these accomplishments, Webster was also notably dislikable and disliked. And this appears to be one of the reasons for the loss of fame after his death. He was considered as an arrogant, humorless, pompous and self-assured man: "an incurable lunatic," "a spiteful viper," "an irascible and stubborn fellow." "Tactless, vain and arrogant" (Warfel xliii) were the most current adjectives referred to him. Henry Louis Mencken calls him "a pedantic and rather choleric fellow" (9). He alienated and insulted his friends, his political allies and potential professional contacts. Not even Shakespeare was exempt from his criticism: "His language is full of errors," he dared to write (Kendall 287).

According to his latest biographer, Joshua Kendall, Noah Webster suffered from what we now call obsessive-compulsive personality disorder: "Saddled with nearly crippling interpersonal anxiety from childhood, he had difficulty connecting with other people" (Kendall 8). As we stated above, he had an extraordinary, almost monomaniacal attention for details and facts he found absorbingly interesting (number of houses, dead people, etc.). Yet, such critical view and opinion appears to be influenced by a very contemporary perspective. If we consider instead the enormous daily effort and fatigue that a lexicographer of that time had to endure, we may be more prone to justify such peculiar and dislikeable traits of his character. As the President-elect of American Dialect Society claims, "The skills required to do this kind of linguistic work have their costs" (Sheidlower).

Despite such negative and peculiar qualities, Noah Webster definitely helped to shape American culture. He fought strongly in favor of the political and cultural independence of America from Britain and for a united American nation, free of factional battles among the states. In 1783, at the age of 25, he wrote:

"America must be as independent in literature as she is in politics, as famous for arts as for arms; and it is not impossible that a person of my youth may have some influence in exciting a spirit of literary industry." (Warfel 3-4)

In the early years of his political involvement, he was deeply concerned with the need for America to adopt a strong central government which should link together the thirteen separate states and help to acknowledge the local interest as a national one. The Federal Government should represent the balance between freedom and stability. But a Federal Government was not sufficient to prevent the mistakes and rebellions of selfish individual interests. A recognition of America's common past, common

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<sup>6</sup> "Slavery is a great sin and a general calamity – but it is not *our* sin, though it may prove to be a terrible calamity to us in the north. But we cannot legally interfere with the South on this subject. /../ To come north to preach and thus disturb *our* peace, when we can legally do nothing to effect this object, is, in my view, highly criminal and the preachers of abolitionism deserve the penitentiary" ("Letter from lexicographer Noah Webster, originator of Webster's dictionary, to his daughter Eliza on the subject of abolitionism," March 18th 1837)



language and ideas, was at the basis of a stable and successful government. The concept of national education and national culture came back to help Webster overcome the possible faults of men. As early as 1787 he proclaimed his faith on a national culture as the source of political stability. In the title of an essay written in 1787 he used the word "manners" to signify the human mode of expressing ideas and putting them into practice. Americans not only needed to build up a single common language and culture, but Webster felt that his people needed to develop a new, American way of expressing their thoughts and putting them into practice. A customary way of thinking that was to become peculiarly American. Not only culture and language but also the elements which composed them, ideas and thoughts, had to have a common national configuration to become the basis of a national strong independent government (Webster 1787, 1790).

The next chapter will give a general outlook on the state of the language spoken in the United States during Webster's time.

### 3. The defining of American English

The final decades of the seventeenth century marked the beginning of a widespread public awareness and consciousness of language change, and also a large-scale discussion about the English language. Some examples of the later manifestations have been given in the introduction of this article with reference to the 'war of words' which spread in the years following the American independence. It was a period of prescription, improvement, refinement and fixing of the language. The grammarians became the official arbiters of language. Calls for an academy of English language had been made by prestigious writers such as John Dryden (1664), Daniel Defoe (1697) and Jonathan Swift (1712), but the project never took off. In the United States, Noah Webster's attempt to found the Philological Society of New York failed in 1788. The same was true for John Adams who, in 1790, promoted in Congress the foundation of an *American Academy of Language and Belles Lettres*, "to correct, enrich and refine" the language.

The eighteenth-century prescriptive grammatical tradition was based on reason, analogy, propriety, and correctness. The correct spelling and pronunciation of words became a distinctive feature of the upper classes from the so-called 'vulgar' ones<sup>7</sup>. According to the view of most grammarians and lexicographers of the time, what was considered 'right' was based on the study of Latin. Forms not found in Latin grammar were condemned as bad, incorrect, and inaccurate. Any alternative form of expression was rejected and stigmatized. Consequently, some scholars argue that standardization can be also regarded as an ideology, because it was motivated by social and political necessities, and describe "standard language as an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent" (J. Milroy & L. Milroy 19). Nonetheless, by the end of the eighteenth century, a certain standard variety of English was fully established, "when influential dictionaries, grammars, and pronunciation manuals had 'institutionalized' the variety, and it had begun to be taught routinely in schools" (Crystal 419). English champions of prescriptivism, such as Samuel Johnson and Robert Lowth, believed in keeping the language fixed and under control:

Throughout history the aim of standardization has been 'to fix and embalm' the structural properties of the language in a uniform state and prevent structural change. (Milroy 14)

The spread of English in the American territory contributed to loosen such process of fixation of the English language. Already at the time of the Declaration, the English language spoken in the colonies had a distinctive character: the term 'Americanism' was coined by a Scotsman, J. Witherspoon in 1781, who later became the president of Princeton College:

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that the modern sense and primary meaning of the word "vulgar," i.e. "coarse, uncultured, lacking sophistication and good taste," dates back from the mid-17th century, the period under consideration. Before then, the term respected its original derivation, from the Latin *vulgus*, i.e. 'the common people', hence its meaning, of/from the common people.  
<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/vulgar>. Last visited 2/20/2015.



.... by which I understand an use of phrases or terms, or a construction of sentences, even among persons of rank and education, different from the use of the same terms or phrases, or the construction of similar sentences in Great-Britain. It does not follow, from a man's using these, that he is ignorant, or his discourse upon the whole inelegant; nay, it does not follow in every case, that the terms or phrases used are worse in themselves, but merely that they are of American and not of English growth. The word Americanism, which I have coined for the purpose, is exactly similar in its formation and signification to the word Scotticism. (Mathews 17)

In his papers on the language spoken in the new nation, published in 1781 in Philadelphia's *Weekly Advertiser*, he noticed that in America the uneducated people, or 'vulgar', as he calls them, spoke better than their British counterparts, "for a very obvious reason, viz. that being much more unsettled, and moving frequently from place to place, they are not so liable to local peculiarities either in accent or phraseology. There is a greater difference in dialect between one county and another in Britain, than there is between one state and another in America" (Mathews 16).

Indeed, the language generally spoken in America had already been praised for its uniformity and so-called unadulteration by the many British travelers visiting the colonies. The following quotation is taken from the letters written between 1769 and 1777 by William Eddis, an employee of the British Customs Office in Annapolis:

.... in Maryland, and throughout the adjacent provinces, it is worthy of observation, that a striking similarity of speech universally prevails; and it is strictly true, that the pronunciation of the generality of the people has an accuracy and elegance, that cannot fail of gratifying the most judicious ear.

The colonists are composed of adventurers, not only from every district of Great Britain and Ireland, but from almost every other European government, where the principles of liberty and commerce have operated with spirit and efficacy. Is it not, therefore, reasonable to suppose, that the English language must be greatly corrupted by such a strange intermixture of various nations? The reverse is, however, true. The language of the immediate descendants of such a promiscuous ancestry is perfectly uniform, and unadulterated; nor has it borrowed any provincial, or national accent, from its British or foreign parentage.... This uniformity of language prevails not only on the coast, where Europeans form a considerable mass of the people, but likewise in the interior parts, where population has made but slow advances; and where opportunities seldom occur to derive any great advantages from an intercourse with intelligent strangers. (Eddis, June 8, 1770)

The recurrent use by both Witherspoon and Eddis of such attributes as uniformity, accuracy, and respect of tradition, for the language they heard, can be referred to that technical linguistic phenomenon known as colonial lagging.

By colonial lagging it is generally meant that form of language conservatism whereby colonial varieties of a language change less than the varieties spoken in the mother country. Thus, some British pronunciations and usages "froze" when they arrived in America, while they continued to evolve in Britain itself. Perhaps, the best-known example of such phenomenon is the American use of *gotten* which has long since faded from use in Britain. Also, we can mention such "Americanisms" as *fall* for the British *autumn*, *trash* for *rubbish*, *hog* for *pig*, *sick* for *ill*, *guess* for *think*, and *loan* for *lend*. America kept several words (such as *burly*, *greenhorn*, *talented* and *scant*) that had been largely dropped in Britain (although some have since been recovered), and words like *lumber* and *lot* soon acquired their specific American meanings.<sup>8</sup>

The admiration for the so-called uniformity of American English was soon to be accompanied and mostly substituted by fierce criticism for those words which were thought to be mere inventions or corruptions:

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<sup>8</sup> It is to be noted that for some scholars the notion of colonial lag is regarded as an excessive simplification. Any dialect is expected to change significantly over a long period: "The view that a colony is somehow inherently more conservative in its linguistic usage than its mother country.... Is a considerable oversimplification" (Crystal 425).



*Belittle!* What an expression! It may be an elegant one in Virginia, and even perfectly intelligible; but for our part, all we can do is to *guess* at its meaning. For shame, Mr. Jefferson! (*European Magazine and London Review*, 1787)

This famous attack is perpetrated against Thomas Jefferson who was guilty of having used the term *belittle*, a new American coinage indeed, in 1781. It is also worth mentioning that the word *guess*, emphasized by the editors in the same quotation, was also considered a barbarous Americanism.<sup>9</sup>

The uniformity of the American variety, which was praised by the British observers, was of the utmost importance for the American scholars fighting for the cultural independence of the new nation. Noah Webster was a champion in the defense of language uniformity as he was convinced that uniformity would promote and encourage national unity:

...a national language is a band of national union. Every engine should be employed to render the people of this country national; to call their attachments home to their own country; and to inspire them with the pride of national character. .... Now is the time and this is the country, in which we may expect success, in attempting changes favorable to language, science and government....Let us seize the present moment, and establish a national language, as well as a national government (Webster 1789, 393-398)

As we mentioned in our introduction, the rising of a variety of English in the American territory, different from the British one, started the so-called war of words on the part of British observers. One of the main targets of such accusations and harsh criticism was certainly Noah Webster and his publications, which by that time included *American Spelling Book* (1783) and *Dissertations on the English language* (1789). The two works are now regarded as a sort of linguistic manifesto for the new nation. Together with Webster's two dictionaries, they can be considered as some of the best examples of language ideology construction in the United States. The next section will be devoted to the presentation of those works.

#### 4. Noah Webster's Contribution and the Rhetoric of the New England Yeoman



Figure 3

Noah Webster was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1758. "A quintessential Yankee" (Sheidlower 1), he came from a deep-rooted and modest American family. His father was a descendant of John Webster, governor of Connecticut, and his mother of William Bradford of Plymouth Colony. Plymouth, as is well known, was one of the earliest and most successful colonies founded in the new land in 1620, together with Jamestown.

His father mortgaged his farm, including this farmhouse, for Noah to attend Yale. He was a young Yalee from the age of 16 to 19 (1775-1778) and a member of the Yale Army squad. In 1775, as a freshman member of the Yale militia, he escorted General Washington when he took command of the Continental Army near New Haven (Kendall 2).

Yale University of the time was not exactly the bulwark of modern education it is nowadays, and could hardly compete with the British counterparts of Oxford and Cambridge, in terms of structure and prestige. Founded in 1701, it consisted of only three buildings and each class was attended by no fewer than 40 students.

Attendees had to spend most of their Saturdays chopping the wood to heat their rooms. Library books were rented and not lent (Kendall 29). All in all, a very meager university life which nonetheless granted Webster the education and acquaintances he needed to gain financial independence from his family.

As graduation present from his father in 1778 he received an 8-dollar bill of the Continental currency with the following words: "Take this; you must now seek your living. I can do no more for you" (Warfel 35).

<sup>9</sup> The online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=belittle>. Last visited 2/20/2015.





Indeed, money was Noah's constant preoccupation, and because of this he started to feel afflicted and depressed. He sought to practice law in various towns, until he was admitted to the bar in 1781. However, with the Revolutionary War still ongoing, he could not find employment as a lawyer. He started teaching in local schools and founded his own in Goshen, New York. It was during this period that he became acquainted with the education system and the state of the schools in the colonies, and decided to devote his studies on these subjects. The publication of *American Spelling Book* (figure 3) in 1783 was the direct effect of such reasoning and study. In Webster's idea the spelling book ought to be the first part of a 3-volume work, the *Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (published entirely in 1785), which would also include a Grammar and a Reader. The *Spelling Book*, also known as *The Elementary Spelling Book*, *The Speller*, and *The Blue-Backed Speller* (due to its light blue cover) soon became one of the greatest best sellers in the United States, second only to the Bible, with 404 editions published by his death and 100 million copies sold by the end of the century. It was still in print in 1975 (Rollins 35).

*The Speller* granted Webster both fame and wealth. Its royalty of a half-cent per copy was enough to sustain Webster in his other literary goals.

*The American Spelling Book* is considered Webster's linguistic manifesto, a sort of "linguistic declaration of independence" (Kendall 82):

It is the business of Americans to select the wisdom of all nations, as the basis of her constitutions, - to avoid their errors, - to prevent the introduction of foreign vices and corruptions and check the career of her own, - improve the sciences, - to diffuse an uniformity and purity of language, - to add superior dignity to this infant Empire and to human nature. (Webster 1783, 3)

The core of Webster's argument is centered on his criticism of British grammarians who presented English as an ancient language, applying to it the rules of Greek and Latin. He consequently argues about the lack of grammar books giving rules to English not based on the ancient languages.

His *Speller*, instead, can be considered a user-friendly method of instruction, designed for an American audience. It was organized to be easily taught to students, and it progressed by age. Collecting information from his own experiences as a teacher, Webster believed that any spelling book designed for schoolchildren should be simple, and gave a methodical presentation of words and rules of spelling and pronunciation. He believed students learned most readily when they were presented with complex problems broken down into their component parts. Consequently, he thought that each part should be mastered before moving to the next.

*The Grammatical Institutions*, a three-volume work which came to be known as *The Federal School-book*, contained some fundamental principles of instruction and codification of the English language, as exemplified below:

- The spoken language should reflect "the general practice of the nation." The practice of speaking a language was to be the starting point of any given grammar. Scholars could not constrain language into rules made up by themselves or derived from another language. The front page of each of the three volumes reported Cicero's maxim: *Usus Est Norma Loquendi* (general custom is the rule of speaking). Thus, grammatical rules should follow language use.
- Language uniformity should be reached through the value and respect of syllables, thus introducing a major characterization of American speech, i.e. the retention of secondary stress. In fact, his method of reading words aloud, letter by letter, and then syllable by syllable – which gave rise to that popular American contest known as the spelling-bee – was to be largely employed by the later generations of school instructors, and helped retain the principle of secondary stress, which British English had lost. It also contributed to give a certain flair and distinction to American speech. He introduced tables to group words according to their length and difficult pronunciation, and included others derived from foreign languages "to shew their true pronunciation in a distinct column" (1783, 11).
- The volumes made constant reference to American context in the definitions, poems and speeches which were quoted as examples. Webster included lists of all states and main towns, and the history



and geography of the United States. For the first time American children had a school reference book about their own country.

- Although the grammatical institute did not introduce any spelling change, we find a minor, yet significant alteration: "... the speller is where Americans first learned to pronounce the twenty-sixth letter of the alphabet *zee*, rather than *zed*" (Kendall 86).

With the publication of the *Grammatical Institute* in 1785 Webster acquired great fame and began sustaining himself, though the small income coming from its royalties made writing and lecturing his constant means of economic independence. The essay *Dissertations on the English Language*, published in 1789, was conceived mainly for that purpose. The book collected his lectures on language delivered during his long journey to Boston, Philadelphia, and the Southern states. It can be considered as the first book on American language, a sort of political manifesto, Webster's most radical attempt at encouraging American society to think about an independent culture of their own. It is also his most outspoken justification for the existence of a national American language, where the spoken and written forms have a natural correspondence, a means of expression of an independent American culture. It represents Webster's vision of America, a country which needs "to acquire national customs, habits and language, as well as government" (179).

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Dissertations* lies in Webster's appreciation of the New England speech, which he believes to be the most correct and representative of the entire United States. The local speech of the inhabitants of this region is the chosen model because it

has been in the situation of an island: during 160 years, the people, except in a few commercial towns, have not been exposed to any of the causes which effect great changes in language and manners. (108)

Webster's rhetoric of the New England yeoman originates from this consideration. The New England island, whose manners and language have been preserved, is to Webster the holder of those peculiar "traits of national character" which will be part of America's national features. The manner of speaking of New Englanders is a reflection of their democratic way of living:

On examining the language and comparing the practice of speaking among the yeomanry of this country, with the style of Shakespeare or Addison, I am constrained to declare that the people of America, in particular the English descendants, speak the most *pure English* now known in the world. / .../ There is no Dictionary yet published in Great Britain, in which so many of the analogies of the language and the just rules of pronunciation are preserved, as in the common practice of the well informed Americans, who have never consulted any foreign standard (Webster 1789, 288-290).

The New England yeomen possesses a manner of speaking which is the reflection of their democratic way of living. Compared to the people from the South, they address other people with attention and kindness, their disposition "marks a state of equality." The fact that they do not possess many slaves or servants forces them to speak without any "tone of authority and decision" (106). Thus, he is the holder of the national peculiar linguistic traits which, to Webster, will become the core of America's national language (Fodde 1994, 38). The New England yeoman, speaker of a local English and representative of a local culture, becomes instead, in Webster's rhetoric, the depository of America's national characteristics<sup>10</sup>.

Webster's years following the *Dissertations* were spent between his political commitments and his work as a magazine editor and writer. Nonetheless, his profound belief in the reform of the orthography and in

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<sup>10</sup> "The Puritan and the Yankee were the two halves of the New England whole, and to overlook or underestimate the contributions of either to the common life is grossly to misinterpret the spirit and character of primitive New England. The Puritan was a combination of the old world, created by the rugged idealism of the English Reformation; the Yankee was a product of native conditions, created by practical economics" (Parrington 3-4).



language uniformity continued to be present in all his works and thoughts. The preface to the *Dissertations* had included an essay on spelling reform, “with Dr. Franklin’s arguments on that subject,” as the full title of the collection reported.

The *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1806, gave Webster the perfect opportunity to introduce his bold ideas on spelling and vocabulary.

The full range of spelling proposals published in the *Compendious* included:

- Omission of all superfluous and silent letters in order to “lessen the trouble of writing, and much more, of learning the language and ... render the pronunciation uniform...” *bred, hed, giv, brest, ment, definit, honor, ake, fether, iland, theater.*
- Substitution of a character with a certain definite sound for one that is more vague and indeterminate: *meen, neer, speek, laf, dawter, plow, tuf, blud.*
- Addition of a diacritic to the same letter pronounced differently, i.e. the allophones in **although** and **thought**.
- Consonant changes: -z for -s in verbs endings (*advertize, analyze*); replacing -ce by -se (*offense, defense*); dropping of final -k (*musick, physick* – already occurring in Britain):

In omitting *u* in *honor* and a few words of that class I have pursued a common practice in this country, authorized by the principle of uniformity and by etymology. (1806, *Introduction*)

It has been acknowledged, in fact, that some of those spelling variants had been present in the New England records of the seventeenth century (Mathews 63).

The *Compendious Dictionary* cost one dollar and fifty cents and included 40.000 words. Webster added 5.000 new scientific terms from diverse fields including chemistry, mineralogy and botany. The text resembled a contemporary thesaurus because most entries consisted of just one or two quick definitions. For example, he defined “author” as “one who makes or causes, a writer.”

With the *Compendious*, Webster also introduced the use of a consulting dictionary, “particularly suitable to students, merchants and travelers,” as the title page reported. In this respect, it was a revolutionary endeavor in that it not only added thousands of words of daily usage to the previous lexicons, but it also inserted new information into the traditional supplementary tables: his beloved lists of post offices, population figures and a brief chronological history of the world.

After the publication of the *Compendious*, many readers were shocked. Webster had Americanized the British spellings in Samuel Johnson’s undisputed dictionary, changing words like *defence* and *honour* into *defense* and *honor*, and dropping the -k from *musick*. He had included new American words like *subsidize* and *caucus*, and left out some ancient British forms:

John Quincy Adams, the future president, was shocked by the ‘local vulgarisms’, and doubted that Harvard, of which he was a trustee, would ever endorse such a radical ‘departure from the English language.’ (Cohen 2006)

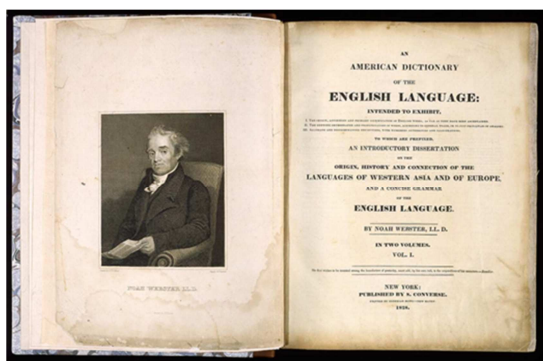


Figure 4

The year following the publication of the *Compendious*, until 1828, Noah Webster started working on the compilation of a larger, more ambitious dictionary. This great endeavor would include the highest number of words (70.000) and a study of etymology, “the origin, affinities and primary signification of English words,” as the title page said. *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (figure 4) was finally published in 1828. During the course of his research, he stopped for 10 years after compiling the first 2 letters of the alphabet to write a *Synopsis on the Affinities of Fifty Languages*, which was never published. By that time he had mastered 20 foreign languages, including Sanskrit and some



Celtic dialects. He was very much devoted to this study for which he disregarded many other contemporary works on etymology. In fact, although he pointed out the influence of Anglo-Saxon on modern English, he did not consider its historical relations with the Indo-European languages.

Despite such flaws, the 1828 dictionary will always be remembered as the last one-man enterprise in the history of lexicography, before team editing and historical linguistics monographs. Surrounded by the dictionaries of more than twenty languages on his writing desk, he worked hard during his old age to include words accessible to businessmen and farmers, scholars and laymen.

Although the influence of Johnson's dictionary can be easily traced in his major dictionary (Reed 98), Webster replaced antiquated definitions and introduced thousands of new words from the industry, science and technology: *nitric*, *phosphorescent*, *planetarium*, *sulphate*, *sulphuric*. Moreover, he added words of common usage which Johnson had omitted: *consignee*, *consignor*, *iceberg*, *malpractice*, *maltreatment*, *explode*, *magnetize*, *revolutionize*. He also included several terms unique to American English: *squash*, *moose*, *levee*, *prairie* and *skunk*.

Webster's *Dictionary* confirmed many of the spelling changes adopted in the *Compendious* twenty years earlier. For example, the ending *-ize* was extended to most verbs and the spelling of *defense*, *offense* and *pretense* were confirmed, together with *center* for *centre* and *meter* for *metre*, which are all well established in the United States now. Similarly, Webster's uniform use of the ending *-or* is well fortified in America in words such as *honor*, *error*, *candor*, ecc., but has not become popular in Great Britain. Meanwhile, he abandoned such spellings as *lepard*, *croud*, *lettice*, *soop*.

However, it was in their styles of compilation and of definition that the two lexicographers especially differed. Webster cited quotations merely from American authors or from the Bible, and refused to quote 16<sup>th</sup> century British authors whom he believed were unintelligible. Johnson chose elegant quotations, while Webster preferred the uneconomical and blunt device of the profuse and discriminating definitions, in sharp contrast with the concision showed in the *Compendious*. Webster's entries are aimed at clarifying the meaning and any semantic difference.

Here is the example given by W. Reed of Webster's and Johnson's definition of the word lion:

Johnson: "The fiercest and most magnanimous of four-footed beasts."

Webster: "A Quadruped of the genus *Felis*, very strong, fierce and rapacious. The largest lions are eight or nine feet in length. The male has a thick head, beset with long bushy hair of a yellowish color. The lion is a native of Africa and the warm climates of Asia. His aspect is noble, his gait stately, and his roar tremendous." (104)

## 5. Conclusions

By the time of Webster's major works on language teaching and orthography reform, one could no longer refer simply to the English language. A distinction needed to be made between American English and British English. The latter, in this respect, was also born in 1776, together with American English. Before then, there existed only one English, "there was simply English" (Cassidy and Hall 184).

A country so vast and so distant from Great Britain, with many other languages being spoken besides English, and so many different cultures from the Anglo-American one, was simply destined to develop a distinct variety of English.

Meanwhile, British literature and culture continued to be read in the United States and regarded as models of style and reference by most. In fact, the literary tradition of American authors and literature fully developed only in the mid-nineteenth century. By 1800 the most famous writers in America, such as Hawthorne, Melville, Poe and Whitman, were not even born: "and American literature, when it eventually emerged, did not begin to be studied in US schools until the twentieth century" (Crystal 425).

With this in mind, the famous quote about American and British English being "divided by a common language," still of uncertain attribution, appears eloquent and truthful.<sup>11</sup> Despite Webster's spelling and phonological reforms, despite the difference in lexical usage and new coinages, despite the influence of

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<sup>11</sup> The popular quote has been attributed to both Oscar Wilde (*The Counterville Ghost*, 1887) and George Bernard Shaw (*Reader's Digest*, November 1942, but not found in his published works).





other cultures, of other languages and dialects – last but not least the African-American one – the base of the language remained approximately the same.

Noah Webster's influenced the characterization and Americanization of the language spoken in America, thanks to his orthography reform, insistence on syllable respect, and on the principle of analogy.

And despite the harsh criticism he received by most of his contemporaries, Webster's works were ultimately accepted as the standard for America.

A 'born definer of words' he succeeded in unifying forever a very ethnically diverse nation, with his ideology of a common language and culture, as he had predicted:

In this country it is desirable that inquiries should be free and opinion unshackled. North America is destined to be the seat of a people more numerous, probably, than any nation now existing with the same vernacular language, unless we except some Asiatic nations (1798, 3)

His passionate endeavor and relentless devotion to the American cause, gave an enormous contribution in the construction of the American identity.

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