

Vulgar and Popular in Johnson, Webster and the OED

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The use of restrictive labels is one of the most subjective features of modern lexicography, and several studies have shown that dictionaries do not always agree in their application of, for example, colloquial and informal. Labels are also a problematic feature of pre-20th century dictionaries, which did not provide lists or explanations of the labels they used. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the development of two labels—vulgar and popular—in Johnson’s (1755) A Dictionary of the English Language, Webster’s (1828) An American Dictionary of the English Language, and the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (1884-1933)—in order to consider how their meanings and connotations have changed, and what their use can tell us about the relative prescriptivism of the three dictionaries.

1. Introduction

The use of restrictive labels is one of the most subjective features of modern lexicography. Monson (1973: 211) writes that it is “not yet an exact science” while Hulbert (1955: 83) suggests that it “is governed by nothing except the judgement of the editor and his advisers: there is no absolute criterion”. Several studies (such as McDavid 1973) have shown that dictionaries do not always agree in their use and application of, for example, *colloquial* and *informal*. Furthermore, the labels themselves can be subject to change of meaning, and are thus a problematic feature of pre-twentieth century dictionaries, which did not provide lists or explanations of the labels they used (Mugglestone 2000: 24). This can cause misunderstandings: for example, when modern critics count the number of words labelled *vulgar* in, say, Johnson, and use the result as an indication of his prescriptivism, they are assuming a present day English understanding of the word *vulgar*, which Johnson did not necessarily intend. The purpose of this paper is to trace the history of two such labels—*vulgar* and *popular*—through the three great formative English dictionaries: Samuel Johnson’s (1755) *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Noah Webster’s (1828) *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, and the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1884-1933). The analysis will focus on how the meanings and connotations of these labels have changed, and what their use can tell us about the relative prescriptivism of the three dictionaries.

2. The meaning of *popular*

2.1. Johnson

Although prescriptive symbols, such as daggers marking obsolete or cant words, were used in pre-Johnsonian dictionaries (see Osselton 2006), it is generally agreed that it was Johnson who started the tradition of restrictive labelling, marking words as *low*, *improper*, *vulgar* and so on (see Allen 1978). This is often used to support the impression of Johnson as the arch-prescriptivist. For example, Barnbrook (2005: 109) argues that

[t]here seems to be clear and incontrovertible evidence in the sheer volume and nature of Johnson’s usage notes that the prescriptivist approach promised in the *Plan* and detailed, though with reservations, in the Preface, informed the construction of the *Dictionary* to a large extent.

However, others argue that Johnson’s prescriptivism was not as extensive as is often believed. Siebert (1986: 486) shows that Johnson was “quite hospitable to neologisms and the colloquial language of his day”, while Hudson (1998: 79) argues that “Johnson made no systematic effort to exclude or even stigmatize ‘low’ terms”.

Johnson's use of *popular*, though, confirms his reputation as a prescriptivist. Despite his unexceptionable definition of the word as "vulgar; plebian" and "suitable to the common people"¹, 31% (8 of 26) of his applications of *popular* as a label are clearly negative. Abbreviations are labelled "popular corruptions" (e.g. *moonshiny* for "moonshining" and *limbeck* for "alembick"), while some "popular" senses, such as *alive* in "the best man alive", are also "ludicrous". More often, though, *popular* is used to indicate a sense which is less precise than the original or "true" meaning. For example:

ANTLER. n.s. Properly the first branches of a stag's horns; but, popularly and generally, any of his branches.

To DISTRACT, v.a. 5. To make mad: properly, by an unsettled and vagrant fancy; but popularly, to make mad in whatever mode. [4th ed.]

LIKE, adv. 3. Likely; probably. A popular use not analogical.

The "proper" referent of *antler* is the stag's first branches, so the "popular" semantic extension of the word to refer to any branches is, it is implied, improper. The etymology of *distract* is the Latin *distrahere* "pull asunder", so Johnson indicates that one should only use *distract* to mean "make mad" if it is the kind of madness related to this original meaning; the popular generalisation is less proper. *Like* as an adverb is "not analogical", presumably because adverbs take an *-ly* ending by analogy. These comments rest on Johnson's belief that correct or "proper" usage should follow principles of logic, etymology and analogy (see Hudson 1998). Such attitudes are revealed in several of Johnson's comments in the *Preface*, for example that "[m]ost men think indistinctly, and therefore cannot write with exactness" (1755: 36) and that "illiterate writers... not knowing the original import of words, will use them with colloquial licentiousness... and forget propriety" (*ibid.* 39). It is clear that when Johnson used the label *popular* he often meant it to indicate improper semantic extensions which did not accord with the "original import of words".

2.2. Webster

Webster's debt to Johnson is well-known: Sledd and Kolb (1955: 198) note that "in the first ten pages of the letter *C*, Webster cites Johnson by name more than twenty times and sometimes uses him without citation, taking over entry-words, definitions, authorities, and etymologies", while Reed (1962: 97) remarks that "[t]he striking similarity of many of the definitions is immediately apparent". Wells (1973: 91-2) suggests that this also applies to his use of restrictive labels, claiming that "Webster generally follows Johnson's editorial practice in expressing critical opinion". However, Webster is actually quite innovative in his use of *popular*, which he applies far more often than Johnson. He usually uses it neutrally: only 12% (28 of 240) of its appearances collocate with negative labels such as *improper* and *inelegant*². Furthermore, Webster develops the specific use of *popular* to mean "non-technical". In nearly a quarter its occurrences (56 of 240) one sense is labelled *popular*, and another has a field label such as *botany* or *geometry*, as in the following examples:

AUTUMN, n. Astronomically, it begins at the equinox, when the sun enters libra, and ends at the winter solstice; but in popular language autumn comprises September, October and November.

BERRY, n..... This botanical definition includes the orange and other like fruits. But in popular language, *berry* extends only to the smaller fruits, as strawberry, gooseberry, &c., containing seeds or granules.

CIRCLE, n. 1. In *geometry*, a plane figure comprehended by a single curve line, called its circumference... 2. In *popular use*, the line that comprehends the figure, the plane or surface comprehended, and the whole body or solid matter of a round substance, are denominated a circle.

¹ All data from Johnson's *Dictionary* are from the CD-ROM version of the first (1755) and fourth (1773) editions (McDermott 1996). Differences between the two editions are noted if relevant.

² Data have been taken from both the CD-ROM and the online version. Neither yields perfect results: the CD-ROM can only be searched as a PDF file, which occasionally misses occurrences of the word being searched, while the online version omits some material. It is hoped that, by searching both these sources, a complete, or nearly complete, set of data has been retrieved.

PEBBLESTONE, n. In *popular usage*, a roundish stone of any kind from the size of a nut to that of a man's head. In a *philosophical sense*, minerals distinguished from flints by their variety of colors...

In addition, many technical terms, especially names of plants, are supplemented with their popular equivalent; for example *bistort* is “[a] plant, a species of *polygonum*... In popular language, it is called *snake-weed*”. Given that one of Webster’s most significant contributions to lexicography was his inclusion of technical vocabulary (Micklethwaite 2000: 186), it is not surprising that he developed this use of *popular*. Occasionally he expresses the distinction between popular and technical usage in a negative way: for example *physic* is “[i]n *popular language*, a medicine that purges; a purge; a cathartic” but “[i]n technical and elegant language this sense is not used”. However, such instances are rare, and Webster develops a more neutral use of *popular* than was found in Johnson.

2.3. OED

A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, or the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as it was eventually known, was conceived as a scientific, objective work. It is often assumed that this is what it became; for example, Cassidy (2003: 266) claims that the OED editors “avoided Johnson’s prescriptive labels” and instead used an “objective pattern of labeling”. Mugglestone’s recent work on the first edition of the OED has shown, however, that the different editors were not as objective as is often assumed, and did in fact label words as *vulgar*, *erroneous*, *corrupt* and so on, depending on their own preferences (Mugglestone 2000, 2005). In its use of *popular*, though, the OED is quite objective, and follows Webster in using it to mean “non-technical”. For the present project, because of the size of the OED, occurrences of *popular* as a label were searched within the letters B, edited by James Murray, and G, edited by Henry Bradley³. In these letters, over 50 of the 80 uses of *popular* as a label mark alternatives to scientific names for plants and animals, as in the following examples:

BALD-COOT Popular name for the Coot (*Fulica atra*), from its pure white wide frontal plate, destitute of feathers.

GILL n1. In scientific use the term *gills* is applied only to the branchial lamellæ attached to the gill-arches: in popular language the word denotes the whole breathing apparatus, including the gill-covers.

GOLDEN a. golden-cup, a popular name of various species of *Ranunculus*, *Caltha*, *Trollius*...

Only twice is *popular* used negatively in the sample under analysis: *benzoin* is “[a]lso called by popular corruption BENJAMIN” and *bar sinister* is a “popular, but erroneous phrase”.

3. The meaning of *vulgar*

3.1. Johnson

In 1755, *vulgar* did not have the modern meanings “offensive” and “obscene”. Johnson defines it as:

1. Plebeian; suiting to the common people; practised among the common people.
2. Mean; low; being of the common rate.

These first two senses reveal the dichotomous nature of *vulgar* for Johnson: on the one hand, it simply means “common”; on the other, it has connotations of lowness. As a label in his *Dictionary*, it does occasionally collocate with a negative label: for example, *take in* meaning “cheat” is a “low vulgar phrase” and *scout* meaning “ridicule” is “unauthorised, and vulgar”. But on the whole it is used neutrally: less than a quarter (5 of 24) instances are clearly negative. Furthermore, it is once used positively: because the etymology of the word *craunch* meaning

³ Throughout this paper, OED refers to the first edition. As there is no way of searching the first edition, I searched the online version (Simpson 2000-) of the second edition and then manually checked results against the first (Murray *et al.* 1884-1933). This method would obviously miss any instances where labels were used in the first edition and then removed in the second. However, I have been assured that this is negligible risk, since most changes to the second edition were additions rather than changes or deletions (James McCracken, p.c.).

“crush in the mouth” is the Dutch *schrantsen*, Johnson writes that “the vulgar say more properly *to scraunch*”. It seems, then, that just because Johnson marked a word as used by the “common people” he did not necessarily consider it improper. Indeed, Johnson writes in his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765: 156) that the most “settled” style of speech is to be found in “the common intercourse of life”, whereas the “polite” (i.e. the upper classes) in their “modish innovations”, tend to “forsake the vulgar, when the vulgar is right”. For Johnson, then, *vulgar* is a more positive label than *popular*.

3.2. Webster

Webster’s understanding of *vulgar* is also ambivalent. On the one hand he claims that “vulgar words... [which] are the terms used by the common people of a country, are as genuine and legitimate, as those used by the poet and the historian” (1817: 10) and that “[i]n general, vulgar words are the oldest and best authorized in the language” (1828). On the other hand, in the introduction to his dictionary he reassures the reader that he has “not gone quite so far as Johnson and Todd have done, in admitting vulgar words. Some of them are too low to deserve notice” (1828). His definition of *vulgar* is telling: whereas Johnson’s first sense was “suited to the common people”, Webster’s is (my italics) “[p]ertaining to the common *unlettered* people”, suggesting an association between vulgarity and illiteracy. Furthermore, Webster’s definition of *popular* includes a note that marks *popular* as the neutral, and *vulgar* as the negative word:

Popular, at least in the United States, is not synonymous with *vulgar*; the latter being applied to the lower classes of people, the illiterate and low bred; the former is applied to all classes, or to the body of the people, including a great portion at least of well educated citizens.

In the dictionary itself, *vulgar* often stands alone without indication of the intended meaning. Sometimes, as in Johnson, the implication is positive: for example, *blubber* meaning “bubble” is “a common vulgar word, but legitimate”. In several cases, however, Webster forgets his own claim that vulgar words are the “best authorized in the language” and uses the label in a derogatory sense. For example, *grutch* for “grudge” is “now vulgar, and not to be used”, while *worser* is “a vulgar word, and not used in good writing or speaking”. In these instances, he is clearly using *vulgar* in his sense “low; unrefined”. In proportion to the total occurrences of *vulgar* as a label, though, such comments are quite few: only 9% (22 of 249) of Webster’s uses of *vulgar* are clearly censorious. Perhaps more revealing are the cases where Webster, as a sign of approval, labels words as *not* vulgar, as in the following examples:

FLIPPANTNESS, n. fluency of speech; volubility of tongue; flippancy. [This is not a low, vulgar word, but well authorized and peculiarly expressive.]

TRICK, n. 7. A particular habit or manner; as, he has a trick of drumming with his fingers, or a trick of frowning. [This word is in common use in America, and by no means vulgar.]

WHERE, adv. 1. At which place or places. 2. At or in what place. 3. At the place in which. 4. Whither; to what place, or from what place. [These uses of *where* are common, and the first cannot be condemned as vulgar.]

The definitions for *trick* and *where* are particularly telling: if these senses are “common” but “not vulgar”, then *vulgar* cannot mean “common”; it clearly means “low”. In these instances, Webster evidently understands *vulgar* as a negative label.

3.3. OED

The definition for *vulgar* in the OED still does not include the sense “obscene”. Relevant senses are:

5. Common or customary in respect of the use or understanding of language, words, or ideas.

13. Having a common and offensively mean character; coarsely commonplace; lacking in refinement or good taste; uncultured, ill-bred. d. Of language, etc.

Thus, as in Johnson and Webster, *vulgar* in the OED could have both a neutral and a pejorative sense. In practice, the 48 uses of *vulgar* as a label in B and G mark a range of usages: abbreviations such as *baccy* “tobacco”, pronunciations such as *gal* “girl”, senses such as *breeding* “parentage”, and alternative grammatical uses such as *have got to* “have to”.

The pejorative intention of the label is occasionally clear. *Sparrow-grass* (*grass*, n1. 10) is “a corrupt form of ASPARAGUS. Now *vulgar*” while the use of *gent* for “gentleman” is “now only vulgar.... its use came to be regarded as a mark of low breeding”. The negative forms of

be—ar'n't, a'n't and so on—are labelled as “colloquial and vulgar”, and also given the catachrestic label ¶ (*be*, v. 1d). These account for only 6% of the occurrences of *vulgar*; a low figure, but higher than the negative uses of *popular* in the OED.

Interestingly, *vulgar* often labels words which refer to bodily parts or functions—*behind* (“posterior”), *belch*, *bog-house*, *bog-shop*, *gobble-gut*, *greedy-guts* and *gut* (noun and verb)—so perhaps the sense “obscene” was beginning to develop, even though it was not included in the definition.

4. Conclusion

Vulgar and *popular* were both defined by Johnson, Webster and the OED as relating to “the common people”. However, when used as labels, they took on quite different connotations. *Popular* usually implied imprecision and impropriety when used by Johnson, but it was subsequently used more neutrally to mean “non-technical” by Webster and the OED editors. *Vulgar*, which Johnson used more neutrally, or even positively, than he did *popular*, was used ambivalently by Webster, as “legitimate” and “authorized” on the one hand, and “low” and “illiterate” on the other. By the time the *OED* was written at the end of the nineteenth century, the meaning of *vulgar* was still unsettled, although the sense “obscene” seemed to be developing. When looking at dictionary labelling practices of the past, then, it is important to be aware of the meanings and implications of the labels employed. Furthermore, distinctions that tend to be made between the prescriptivism of Johnson and Webster and the objectivity of the OED are not as clear-cut as is often assumed, and one can occasionally observe editorial subjectivity behind the neutral mask of the OED.

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