

OED to the English Language

You've probably heard by now, or have seen the telltale black armbands on the sleeves of the literati: the once-venerated Oxford English Dictionary has just hit rock bottom with its decision to include the entry "doh" in its latest on-line release. "Doh", for those of you who are still blissfully unaware, is the trademark of the an-noyingly dense cartoon character, Homer Simpson; it is yelped by Homer whenever he makes a stupid mistake, which is often. Chief Editor of the OED, John Simpson (is that a coincidence?) said, "My job is the perfect excuse for watching action films, soaps, quiz programs - where the language is busy right now."

I'm not saying that "doh" doesn't have a place in our culture - surely, the current administration will need any number of terms that mean "I mucked up" - but I am grievously disappointed that the OED would dignify as a word something that was clearly intended to be a nonsense syllable. "Doh" is no more a word than the Bronx cheer. Sadly, I feel another bastion has fallen.

Why do I care? Because I love the English language. (English has a few rivals, but no equals. Spanish is user-friendly and regular; Italian, expressive and musical; but, to my admittedly unqualified ear, everything in those languages sounds the same. French is quite handy if you want to talk ballet, runny cheese, or oral sex, and it has thirteen different ways to say "I surrender"⁰¹. French is invariably lovely, but there are some really ugly concepts for which a pretty word just won't suffice. German, on the other hand, makes even nice things sound unpleasant: a nurse becomes a "krankenschwester", a butterfly is a "schmetterling". If Fritz gets his face slapped for saying, "I love you", it may just be because it's pronounced, no kidding, "ick leeba dick".

Consider, then, English, the Swiss Army Knife of languages^{*21}. Varied and versatile, it contains some 550,000 words, more than three times as many as German, its closest competitor. English is the most democratic of tongues; it has borrowed words from hundreds of languages and dialects, both ancient and modern.

Even non-native speakers acknowledge the clear superiority of English; it is the second language of choice for a billion people across the world. The Spanish-born and Paris-educated writer Salvador de Madariaga waxed ecstatic about the virtues of English perfect that one is tempted to think English words are which acts are meant to have, and all other words are Conrad, born in the Ukraine of Polish parents, didn't 21.

He was fluent in several languages, but only English satisfy him; Conrad chose to publish only in English.



words: "Their fidelity is so the right and proper names pitiable failures." Joseph learn English until he was

was versatile enough to

Our wonderful native tongue is a lush, eclectic garden that has been enhanced over the years with blossoms and fruits that have been grafted and hybridized and cross-pollinated with words from all over the globe. I tend to be a purist, yet I realize language should be dynamic; the language of Chaucer and Shakespeare and Whitman didn't get the way it is by being pure. Vigilance and judgment are crucial, however. New expressions often turn out to be wildflowers; then, again, they may be weeds. "Doh" is a weed that has no place in our garden, and John Simpson (he's paid to be the gardener) should know that.

Dictionaries are descriptive, not prescriptive, but I think there's something inherently wrong with that concept; I feel there's a morality of language that responsible parties such as the OED should try to uphold. The fact that this "doh" thing is making news tells me that I'm not the only one who thinks there's something questionable about it. If I were John Simpson's boss, I would give some thought to why he's watching quiz shows instead of reading books, and I'd wonder whether John's the right man for the job if he can't tell the difference between a nonsense syllable and a word.

The editors of the OED have the sacred duty, indeed, the privilege, of assisting people to use English as clearly and beautifully as possible, but this time, they obviously blew it. My beautiful mother tongue deserves better.

Please cancel my subscription, if I have one.

⁽¹⁾ Thanks, Alan Baltis

⁽²⁾ Ibid

"I can't believe they would put this thing in the f***ing dictionary."