

## **A College Professor's Dictionary**

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LIS 520 - Assignment 1

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Davidson, Mark. *Right Wrong, and Risky. A Dictionary of Today's American English Usage*.  
New York: WW Norton, 2006.

"People who use dictionaries only as spell checkers are missing out on other important dictionary services." (p. 200) They are missing out on smart commentaries, informative background stories, and contemporary examples if they do not use Davidson's book. I recommend the book to those who are interested in the English language, but not for those who are looking for a beefed up spellchecker only, because the book is not exhaustive in that regard. Its specific goal was "to produce a usage dictionary that is grounded in scholarship and professional experience--and accessible, even entertaining, for the general reader." (p. 16) This goal has been achieved by creating a tome that reads like a professor's accumulated notes from his teaching career. It reads like that because it is exactly that. It is strong on stories and explanations, but weaker on academic details.

Davidson and the book publisher have strong but mixed credentials. The author has taught at top universities (UCLA and University of Southern California) and has been an active communicator in both print and electronic media for decades. His high command of American English comes through in the style and content of the writing of this book. His biography

mentions several times that he was a Sackett Scholar. This may be a significant scholarship within the Journalism world, but a quick search did not reveal it as one of the more prestigious ones. The fact that this is the highest academic recognition Davidson can show tells us that he was not the most recognized scholar. This does not devalue his work, just informs us that while he was a professor at prominent universities he was not a preeminent scholar in his field.

WW Norton, the publisher, is well known for its industry standard anthologies of literature. That series is published by the college book branch of the publishing house. They also have a professional book branch, focusing on psychotherapy and design. However, the majority of their books, including the dictionary we are examining, are published by the third, general interest branch. Norton is a reputable publisher of high-quality non-fiction books. However their forte is not in the dictionary field. For example they published only one other dictionary of English: "The Endangered English Dictionary: Bodacious Words Your Dictionary Forgot." Considering this and the legendary status of Norton's literature anthologies it becomes clear that their focus is on literary qualities of the genre rather than reference. Therefore their dictionary is enjoyable to read, but is not exhaustive of all the possibilities that a dictionary could provide.

When we look at the question of authority from the point of view of what sources were used Davidson's work is rich and convincing. He lists over 200 sources, almost all of them dictionaries, reference books, or guides and all of them seem reputable. The sources can be found at the end of the book in a list format. He also names the sources at the specific entries, albeit does not cite them properly. For most entries he consults two to three sources. Occasionally his entry ends up feeling like a secondary source, created by the synthesis of primary sources.

The book's title specifies the scope of the work, although not precisely enough. It attempts to cover contemporary usage of the English language in the United States. It includes

potentially problematic idioms met by the author in the ten-year period (while the work was in the making) ending in 2005. It correctly analyses the usage of such modern terms as "email", but has a wider selection of terms that have been around for long. The word "American" from the title in the vernacular refers to the United States and that is the scope of the book's subject. However the author acknowledges this usage "historically rankled Latin Americans and Canadians." (p. 66)

One wonders whether the works of multiple authors and/or editors could provide a wider coverage for this kind of dictionaries. Davidson has a more varied experience than most of us, having worked in academia and journalism, but he was still just one person who may not encounter all possible scenarios. His selection is skewed towards his environment, Southern California. I believe if the book would have been coedited by people who regularly interact with others from different social strata and geographical areas of the country, the range of the entries would have been more inclusive of all-American English usage. Davidson's explicit goal was to create a book "that would help students in [his] writing classes." (p. 16) He masterfully accomplished that goal, but his narrow focus limited the product's functionality.

The book also remained in limbo between being prescriptive and descriptive. From the title one would suspect that the author has recommendations of which terms are right, wrong or risky. However, he also says that he "does not promote the myth that correct usage exists." (p. 15) While he is trying to maintain a balance between the two modalities he ends up being more regulatory than explanatory. Torn between the two options he always opts for "offering risk-free solutions." (p. 15) I believe it would have been a stronger book if he had acknowledged this intention more explicitly and would have not tried to depict the book as descriptive as well.

I did not find the information on (or any reference to it) how many entries the book has. I estimate that on average, each of the 532 pages of the main section of the dictionary has five entries. The approximate total of 2,500 headwords is comparable to the 2,300 entries of "Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage", but not to the 51,000 entries of the "The Oxford Dictionary and English Usage Guide."

A drawback is the lack of non-lexical entries. Today's English usage includes acronyms, abbreviations, signs and symbols. Including them and possibly more resources in an appendix would have made an excellent addition to the volume.

The entries are purported to follow a straightforward alphabetical order. Some of the multiple choice entries are properly referenced. For example "farther or further" can be found under farther, but readers going to "further" will find the reference to the first entry. Other similar entries on the other hand are listed only at one location. Do not look for the "incapable or unable" question under "unable", because you will not find it. This inconsistency could have been corrected with more effort spent on indexing. As a matter of fact, indices and other reference tools are missing from the volume altogether. Academic style cross references are missing too, although the author occasionally and informally refers to other entries in the book.

A strength of the book is that the lengths of the entries vary between two lines and two pages. Davidson can be succinct and to the point, but he is more at home where he lets his spirits and words roam. His anecdotes, explanations, and examples are the high points of the book. He treats his readers to an enjoyable narrative tone. The entries cover the usage of both written and oral English. Initially it was confusing, because I thought set out to cover only written English. However, once I became aware that was not the case I realized that the lack of pronunciation

guide for the items related to spoken English caused my confusion. I consider it an unfortunate omission.

I could not decipher the logic of the ordering for those words that have multiple entries, such as "like". They do not seem to follow historical or frequency rules. I was also disturbed by the informal nature of the headings of the entries. The headword or idiom to be explained was put in a context that often took an extra second or two to understand. The cutesy puzzles gave pause and sometimes only became clear after reading the whole entry. This is a useful tool for an educator, who wants the students to learn the idiom, because it makes the item more memorable. However, it hinders and may alienate the casual user, because this feature reduces the speed an entry can be processed cognitively. For example, when discussing the term "impeachment" Davidson's boldfaced heading reads "impeach is just the beginning." (p. 312) To "palindrome" he adds "is not a sports arena." (p. 402) In my opinion such puns and humorous tidbits contribute nothing to the definition or understanding of the entry.

While the boldfacing of headwords is consistent throughout, their italicization and punctuation is not. Usually, but not always, the word or words in question are both boldfaced and italicized and the rest of the main expression is boldfaced only. However because of the aforementioned tendency of trying to create a context for the expression in question this gets confusing and sporadically one has to go back and read the heading several times to figure out the intended subject. Similarly, the use of closing question marks at the end of the headings of multiple choice entries is consistent, but the interjected colons and semicolons are not.

Despite these shortcomings, the book's format makes for a pleasurable, leisurely read. The sufficient space between lines and entries, the 12 point serif font, the adequate margins around the text and the contrast between the unbleached, off-white color of the paper and the

black ink are all restful for the eye. On the very top of the left pages the first word on the page is reprinted, while the very top of the right we see the last of that page. This element eases navigation. I feel illustrations and images would have benefited the publication, particularly, when the textual example drawn by the author describes a cartoon. It would have been more interesting and effective to actually show the cartoon itself. I suspect it was not done so because of the budgetary aspects of using copyrighted materials.

In spite of my critical observations, I took pleasure in perusing the text. As long as the reader understands that this should not be relied upon as an exhaustive academic resource, they can enjoy and use it for what it is: an enhancing tool for achieving English proficiency, a cultural and historical context for improving one's vocabulary, and finally valuable edutainment.