Usage, Authority and Stance in the Lexicographic Management of English: *Webster's 3rd, OED, Learner's Dictionaries*

Stefania Nuccorini

Abstract

This paper deals with the concepts of usage, authority and stance in the field of lexicography, with special reference to the first edition of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (W3), the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), and different editions of learner's dictionaries up to the latest ones. The main aim is to compare and assess different dictionary-making policies and their outcomes on the basis of the more or less overt role played by the interpretations and implementations of the above-mentioned concepts of usage, authority and stance and their interconnections with descriptivism and prescriptivism.

Scholarly approaches to the concepts of usage, authority, and stance are presented in section 1 to outline the scientific background to their pervasiveness in dictionary-making policies. The definitions of the words *usage*, *authority* and *stance* given in W3 and in the OED, whose outstanding positions in the lexicographical field are undisputed, are then analysed in section 2. The related definitions of *descriptivism* and *prescriptivism* are compared and their application and instantiation are exemplified by the treatment of *woman question* (as a lexical item) in the OED, as representative of its historical perspective, and of *ain't* in W3, as the symbol of its lexicographic breakthrough (section 3). Section 4 focuses on Learner's Dictionaries and their specific pedagogical role with reference to usage, authority and stance, and on their definitions of *ain't* in different editions, to see if that headword has undergone socio-cultural changes in time. A few concluding remarks are offered in section 5.

Keywords: usage, authority, stance, descriptivism, prescriptivism, lexicography.

> "For last year's words belong to last year's language
> and next year's words await another voice."
>
> (T.S. Eliot *Little Gidding*)

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1. On *usage*, *authority* and *stance* in lexicography: background

Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language (1961) (W3), the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (OED), and Learner's Dictionaries (LDs) are all based on a descriptive approach, which is predominantly based either on citational evidence (in the case of W3 and the OED) or on corpus data (LDs), but they differ considerably in other respects, including the role played by the concepts of usage, authority, and stance in their lexicographical policies[1].

W3[2], "the most controversial dictionary ever published" (Skinner 2012, title page), was intentionally and fully descriptive. Its editor, Philip Gove, recalls "the three cardinal virtues of dictionary making: accuracy, clearness and comprehensiveness". In addition, "without accuracy there could be no appeal to Webster's Third New International as an authority" and "conformity to truth requires a dictionary to state meanings in which words are in fact used, not to give editorial opinion on what their meanings should be" (1961: Preface, 4a). These statements effectively summarize W3's descriptive approach and its implementation.

The OED is defined as "the unsurpassed guide to the meaning, history, and pronunciation of 600,000 thousand words" and as "the definitive record of the English language" (https://public.oed.com/about/). According to Curzan, "if any lexicographic project could be described as fundamentally descriptive in its principles, it is the OED" (2014: 105). Yet, as Mugglestone (2016: 549) shows, behind-the-scenes evidence reminds us that "dictionary-making is a process of interpreting as well as gathering information", thus suggesting, as further discussed in the same article, that ultimately lexicographical description and prescription are not clear-cut antonyms, as will be seen.

Within the common, yet differently presented and applied descriptivist approach, the concepts of usage, authority, and stance

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[1] This article is a much revised and enlarged version of an earlier and differently-focused sub-plenary lecture which the present author gave at the 14th ESSE (European Society for the Study of English) Conference (Brno, Masaryk University, August 29-September 2, 2018).

[2] The adjective *American* in the original title "Dictionary of the American Language" (1828) was dropped in the 1886 edition.

are intertwined. According to Landau, "usage refers to any or all uses of the language, spoken or written", and/or to "the study of good, correct, standard uses of the language", implicitly distinguished from, and opposed to, bad, incorrect, and non-standard uses. It also refers to the study of "any limitation on use" and concerns the attention paid to "why people regard certain usages as good or standard and others as improper or ignorant" (1989: 174), thus pointing to the socio-cultural (and moral) role inherent in the overall concept of usage in lexicography.

Usage, as Fowler wrote in the entry for *that* in the first edition of his *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926), "evolves itself little disturbed by [grammarians'] likes & dislikes". Significantly, the entry *usage* was still present in Fowler's second edition, which was revised by Gowers (1965), while it was no longer included in the third edition, revised by Burchfield (1996). Interestingly, the latter's subtitle is: "The acknowledged authority on English usage"[3]. Authority and usage seem to be contradictory, but they have often kept good lexicographical company, as already hinted at in W3's Preface, and, as will be seen, in the OED treatment of the lexical item *woman question*[4].

Wells (1973: 8) had previously stated that "as speech is prior (temporally and logically) to writing, usage is prior to dictionaries. Lexicographers record usage; they do not invent it. Furthermore, it is not the lexicographer's role to prescribe as to good usage". Yet, the "culturally ingrained notion of the dictionary as the standard of usage", and of the lexicographer "as the guardian of that standard" has continued "with astonishing persistency". The lexicographer and the dictionary can be seen as "the victims of authoritarian attitudes towards English usage" and towards lexicography. One wonders whether lexicographers and dictionaries were and/or are guardians or victims. A change in perspective and a difference in both lexicographers' and users' attitude would be implied.

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[3] Neither the entry for *usage* nor the third edition's subtitle are present in Butterfield's fourth edition (2015), the publication of which, however, was a reminder of the ever-lasting relevance of this particular reference book.

[4] *Woman question*, without the article, is used here to refer to the dictionary entry. 'The Woman Question', with the article and capital letters, refers to the issue of women's rights (see 3.1. below).

Users' attitudes are indeed relevant. Curzan affirms that "it is usually eye-opening for students, even at the college level, to question dictionaries, to focus on them as authored works, as cultural products, as fallible enterprises" (2000: 91): this statement indeed combines lexicographers' and users' roles. A student of Curzan's noted: "I had never considered how a dictionary is not really a timeless, objective description of the lexicon of a language" (2000: 95). Language does indeed change. In addition, "dictionaries only succeed because of an act of faith on the part of their users, and that act of faith is dependent on those users believing their dictionaries both authoritative and beyond subjectivity" (Green 1996 [no page no.], cit. in Curzan, 2000: 94).

These two points are ultimately paired, from different but converging standpoints, when taking into consideration lexicographers' and users' roles and attitudes, that is, on the one hand, lexicographers' stance toward the dictionary-making process, and, on the other hand, users' attitude towards the product and its authority. Lexicographers make decisions and they (inevitably) take a stance, and users are supposed to interpret the dictionary contents. Some tension between these positions, which might be more or less consciously perceived, is part of the interplay involving the perspective from which usage, authority, and stance are viewed by the lexicographers and by users.

Monolingual dictionaries have traditionally been regarded as scholarly records of the language: they offer meaning interpretations in the form of definitions. According to Hanks, "one of the devices used by society to impose uniformity of meaning and usage is the dictionary" (1979: 38). As further strengthened by Stamper, dictionary companies "had no problem setting themselves up as an authority on life", though "actual human lexicographers would rather hide under their desks than be reckoned culture makers" (2017: 248). However, users, especially learners, are often unaware of (more or less) principled lexicographic approaches, despite their ultimate role of consumers and stakeholders, in marketing terms.

2. Definitions of *usage*, *authority* and *stance* in W3 and in the OED

Appropriately selected W3 and OED definitions of *usage*, *authority*

and *stance* and relevant citations will be presented and commented on in the following paragraphs[5].

W3 presents quotations in parentheses as run-ons with no dates. The OED always records the date of each quotation[6].

Usage:
W3: **1:** Usage. habitual or **customary** practice **or use**. **a:** (1) **principles and rules** grew up entirely on the basis of usage; (sometimes re-enforced by judicial decision). (2) uniform, certain, reasonable practice. Compare CUSTOM, **PRESCRIPTION**.
c: the way in which words and phrases are actually used (as in a particular form or sense) generally or among a community or group of persons; **customary use of language**. (like all grammarians he professed to base his work on actual usage; in fact, however, … he gave his approval only to such constructions as met his rigid notions of logic and propriety – G. H. Genzmer)
OED: **7. a** The established or **customary manner of using a language**; the way in which an item of vocabulary, syntax, or grammar is normally used**,** esp. by a specified group or in a particular domain or region.
b. An instance of such **language use;** a word, phrase, construction, etc., used in a particular or characteristic way by a group, in a region, etc.

In W3, usage, despite its being paired with actual use, is also connected with "principles and rules" and with "prescription": the quotation exemplifies an authoritarian and biased approach. The concept of authority has indeed been analysed in juxtaposition to that of bias and its role, especially by McArthur (1995) and by Algeo (1995), as will be seen. However, W3's approach remains descriptive in as far as it reports on different senses of usage without any endorsement. Strangely, in the entry for *use* there is no hint at "use of language", and *usage* is not present in the list of synonyms of *use* at the end of the entry. Conversely, the OED's definition 2d of *use* reads: "employment of a language, words, etc., for the purpose of communication".

[5] The definitions of *usage*, *authority*, and *stance* in LDs will be presented in section 4.
[6] Original characters are faithfully reproduced, but for the purpose of the present analysis bold type is used here to emphasize key words and expressions, whether used in definitions or in added phrases in square brackets, since italics, which usually convey emphasis, are used differently in the two dictionaries.

Authority:
W3: **1: a:** a citation (as from a book) used in defense or support of one's actions, opinions, or beliefs […]
c: An individual (as a specialist in a given field) who is the **source of conclusive statements** or testimony: one who is cited or appealed to as an expert whose **opinion deserves acceptance**;
3: a: power to influence thought and opinion: intellectual influence (Voltaire).
OED:
I. An authoritative piece of writing.
1. A book, passage, etc., **accepted as a source** of reliable information or evidence, *esp.* one used to settle a question or matter in dispute; an **authoritative book**, passage, etc. Now chiefly with *for* and overlapping with sense 7.
1992 *Rhetorica* 10 194 **This dictionary is the authority** for the orthography of the edition.
III. Power to influence action, opinion, or belief, or a party possessing it.
5. a. **Power to influence** the opinions of others, esp. because of one's recognized knowledge or scholarship; **authoritative opinion**; acknowledged expertise.
7. A person whose opinion or testimony is **accepted as true**; the author of an accepted opinion or statement; a person with extensive or specialized knowledge *on* (also *upon*) a particular subject; an expert.

It seems that in many ways the definitions, and especially the OED 1992 quotation, clearly apply to the role of lexicographers as experts and, as a consequence, their opinions are "true" or, in W3's words, "deserve acceptance".

Stance:
W3: **3 b:** Intellectual or emotional **attitude;** general standpoint (**moralizing** and self-interested stances were compatible – David Riesman)
OED: **1. e.** *fig.* An **attitude** adopted in relation to a particular object of contemplation; a **policy**, 'posture'.
1960 *Amer. Speech* 35 215 An 'unlinguistic' stance is evidenced in the view that some variants embody language 'corruption'.

The much shorter entries for *stance* in both dictionaries[7] are not less indicative of their (potential) contribution to the analysis of

[7] With regard to the OED, it should be noted that the entry for *stance* "has not yet been revised in OED Third Edition" (s.v. *stance*, 'Entry history').

the definitions presented in section 4. The shared use of "attitude", and the presence of the words "moralizing" and "policy" are also revealing.

3. Prescriptivism and descriptivism

As already hinted at, in the entry for *usage* in W3 there is a cross-reference to *prescription*. Though the loosely appropriate definitions of *prescription* in both dictionaries are rather similar in that they refer to "laying down" or "setting down rules", the definitions for *prescriptive* and *descriptive* are more relevant. In particular, in the entry for *prescriptive*, the references to "usage", and especially two quotations, one in W3 and one in the OED, are much more to the point, given their authors' personalities, A.S. Hornby and O. Jespersen respectively.

Prescriptive:
W3: 1: laying down rules or directions: giving precise instructions (traditional grammarians gave prescriptive rules of usage – A.S. Hornby)
3. established by tradition or **usage**
OED: 1a. That prescribes or directs; giving definite, precise directions or instructions. In later use frequently *spec.*: that lays down **rules of usage** in language or grammar.
1933 O. Jespersen *Essent. Eng. Gram.* i. 19 Of greater value, however, than this prescriptive grammar is a purely *descriptive* grammar.

The last quotation inevitably implies looking up the relevant definitions in the entry for *descriptive* in both dictionaries.

Descriptive
W3: 2.b factually grounded or informative, rather than **normative, prescriptive** …
4: characterized by or connected with description of the structure of a language at a particular time, usu. with rigorous exclusion of historical and comparative judgments (linguistics, grammar, study)
OED: 2b. *spec.* That describes the way **language is used**, **without prescribing rules or referring to norms of correctness**. Contrasted with **prescriptive, normative**.
1962 U. Weinreich in F. W. Householder & S. Saporta *Probl. Lexicogr.* 43 **Lexicography** as a **descriptive** (rather than a normative) **discipline** must also take the criterion of interpersonality seriously.

1993 *N.Y. Times Mag.* 22 Aug. 14/2 After primly resisting the onslaught of American common usage on *looks like*, the BBC goes squishily descriptive on beginning sentences with conjunctions.

Both dictionaries clearly recall the (supposed) relation of antonymy between *prescriptive* and *descriptive*. Once more two OED quotations are quite revealing, not only in lexicographical terms, as the former shows, but also, as the latter suggests, in a cross-Atlantic, tongue-in-cheek, anti-BBC perspective. This sounds somewhat surprising, given the OED British-English realm, but, to its credit, it also represents a consistently descriptive approach.

There is no entry for *prescriptivism* in W3. OED definitions do not add to the background overview of the basic issues here presented, while the following quotation, from an American publication, speaks for itself, and is significant both intrinsically and in connection with the OED general descriptive policy: "1976 *Amer. Speech 1973* 48 264 Prescriptivism is wrong, the reader is told again". This sounds like a definitive remark, but it is actually meant to describe how the word *prescriptivism* is used.

Descriptivism is included in both dictionaries. W3 and OED definitions are very similar: the former reads "advocacy or use of the methods of descriptive linguistics"; the latter "the practice or advocacy of descriptive linguistics" with the following further specification: "in contrast to historical, comparative, or (esp. in later use) theoretical linguistics"[8].

To sum up, it is worth pointing to the fact that Burchfield, in the entry for *prescriptivism* in his own already quoted edition of *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1996) (where notably there is no entry for *descriptivism*) remarks that the focus is on "language as it is used rather than on how experts say that it should be used", and that "there is no clear boundary between the doctrines of prescriptivism and those of descriptivism, much more an attitude of mind". The word *attitude* is clearly connected with the definitions of *stance* reported above, but what is worth noting

[8] One of the two quotations is worth reporting: "1949 *Language* 25 62 The views are entirely traditional with respect to such phenomena as umlaut and breaking, and there is no trace of descriptivism, structuralism, or other heresies"; the last word seems significant.

is that as "doctrines" both prescriptivism and descriptivism at least reveal and share some mutual need to identify themselves in opposition to each other. Trask (1999: 48), conversely, remarks that "descriptivism is a central tenet of what we regard as a scientific approach to the study of language: the very first requirement in any scientific investigation is to get the facts right". He further adds that "objecting to it ["what the overwhelming majority of native English-speakers, educated or not, routinely say"] is a little like objecting to the law of gravity, since denying the facts is a hopeless way of going about things". This statement shifts the descriptivism-prescriptivism contest from a matter of more or less ideological stance to a fact-based approach. The question of the arbitrariness and of the non-well-foundedness of prescriptivism has been addressed by Curzan (2014: 173-174): there are cases, for example when prescriptive rules tend to eliminate discriminatory language, in which prescriptivism is not "wrong" (to use the same word as in the OED quotation). Its goals are as valid as those of descriptivism, especially when they share solid socio-cultural foundations, with special reference to the "politically-responsive" type of prescriptivism (2014: 177).

Generally speaking, the analysis of the relation between prescriptivism and descriptivism should not be based only on binary parameters, such as good/bad, correct/incorrect. Significantly, according to Curzan "we are not at the end of the era of prescriptivism", as shown, for example, by Word Grammar Checkers (2014: 5), as they daily remind most of us. Curzan (2014: 4) adds that "if we imagine a living language as a river, constantly in motion, prescriptivism is often framed as the attempt to construct […] dams and embankments […] that attempt to (re)direct the flow of the river", and "it becomes easier to see how prescriptivism may be able to affect how the language changes". Thus, prescriptive language efforts "must be accounted for to understand the patterns of the river's movement – or, of a language's development over time". Though this statement predominantly concerns the role prescriptivism has had in the history of English in order to fix or stabilize it, it must be noted that a language could be described as being composed of several rivers and that "the art of lexicography involves *wrestling* with the continuous evolution of language" (Schuessler, 2017: C2) [my emphasis] rather than *a priori* contrasting it.

From another standpoint, but still based on a comparison, descriptivism, as R. L. Greene says[9], "is like common law which works on precedent and accumulates slowly over time. Prescriptivism is an authoritarian version of code law, which says precedent be damned: if the rule book says this is the law, that's that". Sometimes a rather judgmental stance might back different positions, based on different and differently perceived social considerations, which might be based on, or give rise to, different types of bias.

According to Algeo, there are "national biases in works published on both sides of the Atlantic", "since the dictionaries of each nation are designed to serve the interests of that nation" (1995: 205).

In light of the above-reported comments, *woman question* and *ain't* were selected as sample cases in order to analyse the editorial reasons behind the former's exclusion from the OED up to 1986, and the latter's inclusion in W3 for the first time with no label[10]. The analysis centres around Mugglestone's (2013) historical reconstruction of the treatment of *woman question* in the OED, while for W3 analysis regards the role *ain't* played in both its policy and reception. Both cases show how ideology, stance and, ultimately, bias (might) affect lexicographic treatment.

3.1. *Woman question* in the OED

Mugglestone deals with the representation of gender in different editions of the OED. Her article "explores the cross-currents of dominant ideologies, definitions, editorial omissions" with special reference to the lexical item *woman question*, which was clearly connected with the Woman Question movement and the words used to describe it. *Woman question* was "not represented at all in the first edition of the OED" (2013: 39). Interestingly, "the relevant section appeared in the final fascicle of the dictionary in 1928, the year in which women were finally given the right to vote on equal terms with men", but *woman question* "had been considered, and then rejected, for inclusion during the process of editing"[11], and

[9] See https://www.thoughtco.com/descriptivism-language-term-1690441

[10] In the second edition (1934), *ain't* was labelled *Dial. or Illit.* https://archive.org/details/webstersnewinteroounse/page/n97/mode/2up/search/ain't

[11] As Brewer notes with reference to items from the OED's first edition and its

"consigned to material deemed 'Superfluous', that is not needed or required; unnecessary, needless, uncalled-for". As a result, "only in 1986 would 'woman question' receive representation within a dictionary widely proclaimed as an 'inventory' of all English words" (2013: 40-41-42), that is in the fourth volume of the Supplements, edited by Robert Burchfield, with the following definition:

woman question (with *the*; also with capital initials) the issue of women's rights, esp. as a matter of political controversy in the 19th cent.

This definition is significant in an era in which gender, language, and social change were prominent in public debate. Out of the four OED quotations, the first and the fourth are worth reporting, partly because of their respective dates, and partly because of the types of publications they come from and the ideological and connotative issues involved:

1833 *1st Ann. Rep. New-Eng. Anti-slavery Soc.* 31 Among the incidents alluded to has been a discussion upon what has been technically called 'the woman question';

2003 *Community Care* (Nexis) 6 Mar. 22 She has come back to politics clearly marked, on the woman question at least, as a politician of principle and commitment.

While the year 1833 seems to mark the birth date of 'the woman question' as a technical expression, thus almost a century earlier than the decision not to include it in the OED's first edition, the quotation from 2003 shows the political relevance it has acquired. Yet, the fight for political representation has never actually ended and "the dictionary, like the Woman Question itself, remains a product of discourse and historical contingency in which hegemonic models can affect language and culture alike" (Mugglestone, 2013: 63).

1933 Supplement, "omission is a covert form of linguistic prescriptivism" (2010: 27). The author also discusses examples of what the "editors judged to be *catachrestic* and erroneous uses, confusions, and the like" (2010: 25), which were indicated, by the paragraph mark [¶], and which would "now appear as prescriptive, not descriptive".

In this connection, it is worth mentioning an event that testifies to the historical relevance of the Woman Question and to its lexicographical treatment. The excellent 2018 Bodleian Library exhibition on "Sappho to Suffrage: Women who dared … to do the unexpected" highlighted different steps in women's long journey leading to emancipation, representation and the right to vote, and the extent to which words mattered. For example, suffrage activists were often described as suffragettes, if they adopted military tactics; or as suffragists, if they were non-militant, or constitutional. These distinctions are exactly those recorded in the OED, which labels 'suffragette' as "chiefly British" and "now historical", and highlights the "direct action" of suffragettes as opposed to suffragists "who campaigned through peaceful measures". Thus, quite unexpectedly the two words are given as synonyms in the following definition:

woman suffragist n. an advocate of or campaigner for women's suffrage; *spec.* a woman who seeks to achieve women's suffrage through organized protest; a **suffragette**.

While *woman question* is not present in W3, *suffragette*, *suffragist* and *woman suffragist* are. They are defined along the same lines as in the OED ("a woman who militantly advocates suffrage for her own sex"; "one who advocates an extension of suffrage (as to women)"; and "an advocate of woman suffrage").

On a totally different level, the recent petition to the OED to eliminate discriminating phrases and definitions of *woman*[12] seems to disregard the historical and descriptivist principle on which the OED is based, and perhaps unconsciously supports a prescriptive attitude. However, it shows that some tension between dictionary makers and dictionary users is perceived, and that issues of stance and bias are at stake. As Zgusta put it, dictionaries are "part and parcel of culture, its product and expression" (1989: 77), and since "it's the buyer who holds the trumps" (Hausmann, 1989: 100), it would be appropriate to raise the user's dictionary culture. Various socio-linguistic factors can indeed influence "not only the lexicographer's stances, but also the public's and the critics' attitudes" (Zgusta, 1989:

[12] See https://www.change.org/p/change-oxford-dictionary-s-sexist-definition-of-woman (last accessed January 2020).

74). In this respect, reactions to the publication of W3 in 1961 are to be placed against its editor's "populist gestures" (Skinner, 2012: 250), as especially documented and exemplified by the entry *ain't*, which is considered emblematic of W3's descriptivism and of the controversies that followed its publication.

3.2. *Ain't* in Webster's 3rd

According to Gove, W3's editor, "the job of a dictionary was to illuminate standard meaning and usage" (Skinner, 2012: 207)[13]. 'Standard' was indeed one of the only five usage labels used in W3, alongside 'substandard', 'slang', 'obsolete' and 'archaic', as part of the dictionary's descriptivist policy. To Gove, W3's major claim was that "it faithfully recorded the standard language of its time" (Skinner, 2012: 13).

In that respect "W3 marked a change in people's way of living"; while championing descriptivism, at the same time it was called "the Voice of Authority" (Stamper, 2017: 246), in a somehow contradictory way. As Skinner remarks, considering Gove and his dictionary as "some kind of all-knowing authority on language was inimical to his most basic beliefs" (2012: 250). Interestingly, Merriam-Webster (W3's publishing house) "used 'The Voice of Authority' in its marketing materials well into the 1990s", and that "made the connection between the dictionary, usage and morality crystal-clear" (Stamper, 2017: 246). Indeed prescriptivism was associated with "best practices" and thus it had to be "good": as a consequence, its opposite, i.e. descriptivism, had perforce to be "bad" (Stamper, 2017: 36-37). A critic said: "good and bad, right and wrong, correct and incorrect no longer exist" (Skinner, 2012: 256).

In the entry *ain't*, initially described as "prob. contr. of *are not*, *is not*, *am not* & *have not*", after a few examples, the following definition of *ain't*, standing for 'am not', is unlabelled:

1.c: am not – though disapproved by many and more common in less

[13] Skinner's account of Gove's and of W3 editorial board's policies and decisions is mostly based on the in-house *Black Books*, which include "technical memoranda that had to be reviewed again and again" and "which under no circumstance were to leave the building" (Skinner, 2012: 200).

educated speech, used orally in most parts of the US by many educated speakers esp in the phrase 'ain't I'.

Significantly, in definition 2., the use of *ain't* for 'have not' is labelled "substand". The stylistic label 'substand', for substandard, according to W3's 'Explanatory Notes' section, "indicates status conforming to a pattern of linguistic usage that exists throughout the American language community but differs in choice of word or form from that of the prestige group in that community" (1961: 17). Alongside usage, the key reference is to existence in the language as a basic criterion for inclusion.

The definition in 1.c attracted much criticism, to the point that *ain't*, as used in "I'm right about that, ain't I", was singled out as a key example whose acceptance was to be assessed by a group of "very vocal critics" of W3 (Stamper, 2017: 186-187); only sixteen percent of them allowed it in speech. Conversely, according to other witnesses, "the English language had become less formal since 1934" and Gove specifically described the use of *ain't* by "cultivated speakers" (Skinner, 2012: 11).

One element has been criticized even by the supporters of descriptivist choices in W3: as Skinner says, Gove, by dropping the use of judgmental categories such as "colloquial" in favour of no label or of "substandard", "had made it harder for dictionary users to know what W3 was saying", and the entry *ain't* itself "had resulted in an oddly worded, ambiguous-sounding treatment for the most famous example of a vulgar, illiterate word in the English language" (2012: 250).

It is significant that *ain't* is not a headword in the OED. Results of the quick-search option show the following: "ain't in be" and "ain't in have". Nonetheless *ain't* is not recorded at the beginning of either entry among the negative contracted forms of *be* or *have*. Significantly, however, *ain't* is used in 1424 quotations and in the full text of 1174 headwords. In particular, "I ain't", standing for both 'am not' and 'have not', is used in 224 entries for a total of 339 occurrences. The oldest quotation goes back to 1819, and the latest to 2013, with a timeline peak in the second half of the twentieth century.

As far as *ain't* is concerned, it seems that in both W3 and the OED, the "onus" of judgment, "is shifted from the lexicographer to the

dictionary user and to the people" (Zgusta, 1989: 76). Significantly, the interplay between dictionary makers and dictionary users is at the heart of LDs' *raison d'être*, and the relation between usage and correctness is also highly relevant.

4. Learner's dictionaries

To establish a connection with the W3 and OED definitions of *usage*, *authority* and *stance*, and to analyse their treatment of *ain't*, different, equally far apart (whenever possible), print editions of LDs have been used, namely (in alphabetical order): *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (CIDE) 1995 and *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (CALD) 2013[14]; *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (COBUILD)[15] 1995 and *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* 2014; *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE) 1995 and 2014; *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (MEDAL) 2002 and 2007[16]; *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (OALD) 2000 and 2015.

The following selected, relevant definitions of *usage*, *authority* (as a person) and *stance* are taken from the above-mentioned latest editions:

Usage
CALD (2013): the way a particular word in a language, or a language in general, is used.
COBUILD (2014): usage is the way in which words are actually used in particular contexts, especially with regard to their meanings.
LDOCE (2014): the way that words are used in a language.
MEDAL (2007): LINGUISTICS the way that words are used by people when they speak and write their language.
OALD (2015): the way in which words are used in a language.

[14] CIDE has been named CALD since 2003 (2nd edn). For ease of reference CALD will be used in the present article to refer to both editions unless CIDE is expressly mentioned.
[15] The acronym COBUILD stands for Collins Birmingham University International Language Database.
[16] 2007 is the date of the last print edition of MEDAL, since then available online only as *Macmillan Dictionary* (MD).

Authority
CALD (2013): an expert on a subject.
COBUILD (2014): if someone has authority, they have a quality which makes other people take notice of what they say.
LDOCE (2014): Someone who knows a lot about a subject and whose knowledge and opinions are highly respected.
MEDAL (2007): someone who is considered an expert in a particular subject.
OALD (2015): a person with special knowledge

Stance
CALD (2013): the ability to influence other people and make them respect you, especially because you are confident or have a lot of knowledge.
COBUILD (2014): Your stance on a particular matter is your attitude to it.
LDOCE (2014): An opinion that is stated publicly.
MEDAL (2007): an attitude or view about an issue that you state clearly.
OALD (2015): the opinions that somebody has about something and expresses publicly.

Apart from the basic, common descriptivist approach, LDs' totally different lexicographical nature from W3 and the OED consistently shows in the self-evident definitions reported above. While the definitions of *usage* are substantially analogous, those of *authority* look less so: in particular COBUILD and MEDAL mention the role of "other people" and of *being* "*considered* an expert" (emphasis mine), rather than being an expert (CALD), or a person with special knowledge (OALD). LDOCE combines the two aspects. The definitions of *stance* seem to draw a line between attitude and opinion. Interestingly, and to the point, "opinion" is never used in the W3 and OED definitions of *stance*, while it is used in those of *authority*.

The role played by usage, authority and stance in LDs is highly relevant with reference to language change, to correctness, and to descriptivism and prescriptivism. Even though "the primary *fundamentum divisionis* [between standard-descriptive dictionaries and prescriptive ones] is the compiler's attitude towards linguistic change", which is most difficult "for the lexicographer to cope with" (Zgusta, 1989: 70), with regard to English lexicography the descriptivism/prescriptivism line also concerns the status of English as a foreign language and as an international language. It is worth

quoting the following words by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2008, cit. in Mair, 2016: 18): "English is much more than a language: it is a bridge across borders and cultures, a source of unity in a rapidly changing world"; and as Mair adds, "the study of human languages in the spirit of linguistic descriptivism has been one of the great democratic enterprises of the past two centuries of scholarship in the humanities" (2016: 18). At the same time, some aspects of prescriptivism have had an almost inevitable role in lexicography, and notably, as Mugglestone put it (2016: 546-547) "descriptive and prescriptive can co-exist in a single work (and, indeed, at times within a single entry)". Mugglestone clearly analyses and unveils the contiguity, and the interplay, rather than the oppositeness, of the two approaches with reference to the "authority of evidence" and "the authority of the lexicographer", and to the "conjunction of evidence and interpretation" (2016: 547-548, 552). Users' perceptions, dominant linguistic ideologies, and, ultimately, inclusion or omission are connected: inclusion is "seen as a prescriptive act of legitimization" and is paired with "sanction and acceptability"; omission "can be interpreted as proscriptive silencing" (2016: 553).

In the field of English as a foreign language, the concepts of usage, authority, stance, and the interrelated aspects of culture, ideology, and meaning (re)presentation are supposed to be especially relevant in corpus-based LDs, in which descriptivism provides yet another perspective, the lexicographer's interpretation of evidence is paramount, and also prescription acquires a specific role.

Corpus data, which offers a picture of usage, that is "the democracy of words" (Mugglestone, 2016: 553), is not neutral *per se*. According to Moon, "a kind of traditionalist anglocentric monocultural world-view is evident in corpus data" and this leads to "a near-insoluble problem": should an explanation in a learner's dictionary (should lexicographers) present that view, "thus promoting a particular ideological stance? Should an apologist usage note be added? Should there be instead a broader, multicultural, universalist, non-elitist explanation, even at the expense of misrepresenting what the English word is actually used to mean, what mindset it reflects?" (2014: 91). As Mugglestone put it, "the conjunction of evidence and interpretation is key" (2016: 552). Moon specifies that "ideology is where dictionaries collide

with the social world", above all in connection with the role of lexis, "an unstable and mutable role, in naming and othering" (2014: 85). Among the lexical items representing, *inter alia*, the semantic fields of ethnocentricity (*civilized*, *migrant*), gender and sexuality (*boy*, *girl*, *gender*), and age/ageism (*middle-aged, yoof*), which Moon analyses both in corpora and in LDs, a significant example concerns the following note (see Pinnavaia, this volume) added to the entry *girl* in MEDAL (2007):

> Words that may cause offence: girl.
> People sometimes say **girl** to refer to a young adult woman, but this use may cause offence. Avoid using **girl** if it would seem wrong to use **boy** about a young man of the same age. Do not use **girl** about an adult woman.

The note contains useful information related to one of the aspects of language awareness (namely "avoiding offence", already present in MEDAL 2002), which are inbuilt in the concept of learning a foreign language and which are presented in *ad hoc* pages. Special attention is given to the language used to talk about sensitive topics, as is the case of 'girl'. The way the note is worded is a mixture of description-explanation of how 'people' sometimes use *girl*; of advice, based on a comparison with *boy*; and of caution, overtly presented in a prescriptive way[17].

It is worth noting that "descriptive advice – almost an oxymoron – about the acceptability of a word or construction is based solely on usage. If a word or expression is not found in careful or formal speech or writing, good descriptive practice requires the reporting of this information" (Sheidlower, 1996: no page no.). Moon indeed remarks that "not all anglophone adult women feel so strongly about the words, and may even prefer to be called a girl, or lady, rather than woman, according to situational context" (2014: 96), thus adding another point of view whose presentation in dictionaries would be problematic. According to Moon, "comparisons between historical and current dictionaries show the extent of social change" (2014: 97). Interestingly, in MD online the following example in the entry *wife* seems to speak for itself in terms of both language change and

[17] MD online records "a female adult, especially a young one. This use is considered offensive by many women".

acceptability: "in April she became the proud parent of twins with her wife Alex".

Similarly, Stamper, in the chapter in her book significantly entitled "On Authority and the Dictionary", recalls that "prior to 1990s 'marriage' was, relatively speaking, seldom modified by words like 'gay', 'straight', 'heterosexual', 'homosexual' or 'same-sex'. But by 2000 all these words were common modifiers of the word 'marriage'"; soon after, the first of these, 'gay', and the last, 'same-sex', were the top two most frequently used ones (2017: 234). Stamper also comments on the use of a dictionary definition of *marriage* in only one relevant court case[18] and comes to the conclusion that "the image of dictionary usage as heuristic and authoritative is little more than a mirage" (2016: 153), despite Gove's grounded opinion of W3's image as an authority to appeal to, as already mentioned in Section 1. above.

Though *ain't* has no bearing on gender, sexuality, or marriage, changes in its usage, if present, and in its treatment in the above-mentioned editions of LDs would add to the coexistence of descriptivism and prescriptivism and shed more light on the lexicographic relations between usage, authority and stance. Notably, *ain't* is a headword in all the LDs here analysed.

CIDE 1995 *not standard* am not, is not, are not, has not, have not. "Is Terry here?" "No, he ain't coming to work today" "Can I have a fag?" "No, I ain't got none left".
CALD 2013 *NOT STANDARD*. am not, is not, are not, has not, have not. *He ain't going.* "Can I have a fag?" "No, I ain't got none left"[19].

COBUILD 1995. **Ain't** is used in some dialects of English instead of 'am not', 'aren't', 'isn't', 'haven't' and 'hasn't'. "Well, it's obvious, ain't it?" "I ain't got kids, but I have to pay towards the school".
COBUILD 2014. people sometimes use **ain't** instead of 'am not', 'aren't', 'isn't', 'haven't' and 'hasn't'. Some people consider this use to be incorrect. [dialect, spoken]. "Well, it's obvious, ain't it?", "I ain't got kids, but I have to pay towards the school".

[18] This is connected with the aside in W3's definition of *usage* above: "(sometimes re-enforced by judicial decision)".
[19] CIDE 1995 and CALD 2003 also both record the saying "if it ain't broke, don't fix it".

LDOCE 1995. *spoken*, a short form of 'am not', 'is not', 'are not', 'has not', or 'have not', that many people think is incorrect.
LDOCE 2014. a short form of 'am not', 'is not', 'are not', 'has not', or 'have not', that many people think is incorrect.

MEDAL 2002. *Spoken*, a way of saying 'am not', 'is not', 'are not', 'has not', or 'have not'. Many people consider 'ain't' to be incorrect.
MEDAL 2007. a way of saying 'am not', 'is not', 'are not', 'has not', or 'have not'. Many people consider 'ain't' to be incorrect

OALD 2000. *short form* (*non-standard* or *humorous*). **1** am not/is not/are not: *Things ain't what they used to be*. **2** has not/have not. *I ain't got no money*.
OALD 2015. *short form* (*non-standard* or *humorous*). **1** am not/is not/are not: *Things ain't what they used to be*. **2** has not/have not. *I ain't got no money*.

It is worth noting that in the different editions of CALD, LDOCE, MEDAL, and OALD, there is no substantial change in the presentation of *ain't*. Conversely, there is a clear shift in the onus to form a judgment from a lexicographer's statement in COBUILD 1995 ("**ain't** is used ...") to people's "choice", which other "people" consider to be incorrect, in COBUILD 2014: the latter's descriptive approach might sound like a caveat more than a piece of advice. Unidentified 'people' were also referred to by Landau (see section 1.) and especially by Zgusta (see 3.2).

Examples are not given in LDOCE and in MEDAL. Minor differences concern one of the examples in CIDE and in CALD respectively. One of the examples in CALD and one in OALD include a double negative, but no note is added. In the entry for *double negative* OALD specifies that "this use is not considered correct in standard English", thus adopting an indirect way to give advice through the uncommitted, passive voice. One wonders, though, if learners would ever look up *double negative*. Admittedly, the label 'not standard' (or 'non-standard') is consistently repeated in CALD and in OALD, which also adds 'humorous'. As for other labels, interestingly 'spoken' is present in LDOCE 1995 and in MEDAL 2002, but not in their respective 2014 and 2007 editions (neither is it in MD online), whereas it is present, together with 'dialect', in COBUILD 2014, but not in COBUILD 1995. In that edition the word 'dialect' is present too, not as a label, but as part of the information about the use of *ain't*.

Most significantly, despite the fact that all dictionaries record that *ain't* also stands for 'am not', no example includes it. This is a specific point in W3, which refers to it as "used orally", though "disapproved by many": 'many' are not any better identified, but they seem to be different people than the "many educated speakers" who use it (see 3.1). Conversely, LDs' examples include *ain't* for 'have not', which W3 labels substandard.

5. Concluding remarks

Based on the analysis presented in the preceding sections, it seems, in particular, that pure lexicographical descriptivism does not exist and that lexicographical prescriptivism is not entirely wrong. Descriptive is not really opposed to prescriptive. The role of language change is paramount, and so is the relation between usage, authority and stance, which affects both the dictionary-making process and users' more or less aware and informed dictionary use.

There has been tension between different approaches, between editors and critics, between lexicographers and users. The general aim is twofold: to produce better dictionaries, which should be "more complete and accurate" and "easier to use" (Béjoint, 2010: 258); and to help users improve their reference skills. The latter task is much more difficult to handle and accomplish, since it implies basic aspects of the educational field, of the school system, and the awareness of the role dictionaries might play in the process of learning in general, and more specifically, of learning a foreign language.

The words 'filtering' and 'compromise' seem relevant in order to resolve at least the tension between different approaches and stances, since, as Moon says with special reference to online dictionaries, there is "potential for the filtering of world views, re-presentation rather than representation, in ways that may not seem desirable to us, here with our western perspectives and our own filtered views" (2014: 102). Earlier on, Hanks had said that "a dictionary explanation is no more than a compromise with the impossible, a desperate attempt to state the unstateable" (1987: 135), which somehow 'states' where the problems, and the attempts to solve them, lie.

Issues concerning decision-making processes, the selection, presentation, up-to-dateness, and improvement of entries are

connatural to lexicography, and from the initial stage to the final product they inevitably involve some form of management, which is more or less openly present in different types of dictionaries, such as W3, the OED, and LDs. According to Mugglestone, dictionaries are often seen as a form of "linguistic government" and entries as "edicts to be obeyed" (2016: 549). 'Management' refers to the efforts made to combine often conflicting views and to the ability to reach set targets in terms of type of dictionary and of envisaged users.

LDs are a good testing ground to show how usage, authority and stance do co-exist, provided language policies are clearly adopted and as clearly adapted to learners' needs. The latest editions of the Big Five, as CALD, COBUILD, LDOCE, MEDAL, and OALD are referred to, are corpus-based and have adopted an overall descriptive approach, an as transparent as possible metalanguage, and user-friendly, learning-oriented presentation modes, which include: the use of a (controlled) defining vocabulary; a specific style of definitions (often in the form of sentences); plenty of (more or less filtered or occasionally edited) examples; usage notes; illustrations; colours; and other graphic and linguistic means. They give advice on usage. If deemed necessary, they even overtly proscribe some forms: for example, CALD and LDOCE use explicit graphics or language such as "we discussed the plans for the wedding. ~~We discussed about the plans for the wedding~~", or "Don't say 'do a mistake'. Say **make** a **mistake**". LDs tend to offer information about usage as a unifying model, as the result of appropriate cross-fertilization, but usually not in a prescriptive way. Their lexicographic treatment aims to faithfully represent corpus-based or corpus-driven usage, and, at the same time, to avoid intentionally promoting a particular ideological stance, bearing in mind that both choices are crucial in dictionaries which aim at giving appropriate information to foreign learners of English.

The role of users is also paramount: as Curzan says, "when students are taught to examine dictionaries, they learn to question lexicographic authority and, in so doing, become authorities themselves about language and how it is used" (2000: 99). This is seldom the case with LDs, given the knowledge gap between learners of English as a foreign language and native speakers, but it reinforces the role of purposeful training in dictionary use in order to get the most out of lexicographic products, to compare and criticize them, and to acquire knowledge of and about a language.

As a final consideration, it is worth remembering that "no dictionary, however descriptive, can include all words and meanings", at least no print dictionary, for many reasons including "pressures of space" and "the costs of editing" (Mugglestone, 2016: 552). From this point of view, there is massive potential in online dictionaries, though the management of English (or rather of Englishes, given their flourishing uses) in terms of usage, authority and stance is not a matter of space or costs. Rather, as Sinclair wrote in the Introduction to the first edition of COBUILD (1987: xx) with reference to correct/incorrect features, "it is now time to accept that the balance of usage is in favour of stylistic freedom". This "brings up the question of usage and authority" and, one might add, of stance. Authority must be "backed by usage", and usage should not be "merely an unedited record of what people say and write", bearing in mind that lexicographers take "thousands of decisions which contain an element of subjective judgment", that is some type of stance, and that, to paraphrase the epigraph to this contribution, new year's words constantly await another lexicographic voice.

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