

Ben Zimmer

THE EVOLVING DEFINITION OF „RACISM“ AND ITS TRAIL OF TEXT-ARTIFACTS

Abstract In 2020, Merriam-Webster announced that it would be updating the entry for “racism” in its online dictionary, partially in response to the critique of a young Black activist, Kennedy Mitchum. The revised entry foregrounded “systemic oppression” and “white supremacy,” further elucidating the significance of institutionalized racism, beyond what Camara Phyllis Jones has called “personally mediated” or “internalized” racism. While news coverage of the revision tended to portray the story as “the dictionary gets woke,” the history of how “racism” has been defined reveals a much more complex narrative. That narrative dates back to 1938 when lexicographers at Merriam-Webster first considered adding the word to its dictionaries, at a time when “racism” was chiefly associated with the policies of Nazi Germany. The publisher’s archives contain documentation of the in-house discussions about “racism” among editors at the time, in the form of handwritten slips with notes back and forth about how to define the word. The slips reveal the decision-making process that began when assistant editor Rose Frances Egan noticed that “racism” was missing from the second edition of the unabridged New International Dictionary, published in 1934. Egan’s discovery, made while she was preparing Webster’s Dictionary of Synonyms, set in motion an editorial chain of events resulting in the addition of “racism” to the Addenda section of the 1939 printing of the New Unabridged, a first for any major English dictionary. By analyzing the materiality of extant “text-artifacts,” to borrow a term from Michael Silverstein, we can better understand how the seemingly monolithic authority of “the dictionary” in fact consists of a series of editorial judgments by lexicographers at work. The practice of defining “racism” can be seen as emerging from a kind of communicative interplay, with each generation bringing its own discursive tools to the effort of framing and contesting the word’s definition.

Keywords Digital lexical systems; faceted search; vocabulary organization in dictionaries, forms of representation in digital lexicography

Contact information

Ben Zimmer

Linguist, lexicographer and language columnist, New York
bgzimmer@gmail.com