

Dictionary Defined Slur?

After witnessing the diatribe by Bob Costas on NBC's Sunday Night Football against the name of the Washington Redskins, I was a bit shocked. First thing that I found troublesome was the fact that Costas defended almost every other professional sports team that used American Indian imagery, meaning that has not heard the activists whom he was representing. Second was the research that went into his rant. Costas admitted the extent of his research was to look the word up in five dictionaries. Did he speak with anyone claiming to be offended? Did he speak with any American Indians that support and take pride in the name? Did he speak with anyone at all? If he did, he wasn't saying. Now we do know that shortly before his rant, NBC inked a lucrative boxing deal with Oneida Inc. but I'm sure that's just a coincidence. All this made me wonder what made the dictionaries ALL amend their definitions.

The word was universally defined as a synonym for the American Indian until the early 1980's. What happened to turn this harmless synonym into a word now labeled by the majority of dictionaries as "usually offensive"? So I decided to contact editors of the three dictionaries with which I am familiar though, I will admit, I am ignorant as to the dictionaries Mr. Costas consulted in his exhaustive research. The publications I contacted are The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the American Heritage Dictionary, and Merriam-Webster's Dictionary and I will go through the responses.

The first one to respond was OED. The response was short and sweet writing that they do not respond to individual requests concerning words or definitions. So not much help there.

I then heard from Steve Kleinedler, the executive editor of the American Heritage Dictionary. The first edition of the dictionary which was published in 1969 defined Redskin as:

Informal A North American Indian.

It was not until the second (college) edition that Redskin was amended to read:
Offensive Slang: A North American Indian

Mr. Kleinedler was not there at the time the second edition was published so could not specifically say when or why the change was made. He speculated that the change occurred in the late 1970's when "work began in earnest on the second edition." I then inquired what causes a definition to be changed in general and received this response:

"Decisions such as these come about by analyzing how the term is used in the media (magazines, newspapers, television, radio) in edited sources. (Nowadays we also analyze online media, of course.) When usage issues are involved, we also look at a variety of style guides (*New York Times*, *AP*, *MLA*, *Chicago Manual*, *Washington Post*, just to name a few.) If style guides shift in a certain direction, we will follow that shift."

Almost every publication that was named has waged war on the Redskins name for some reason or another. So why are these publications redefining the meanings of our

vocabulary? That is a question for the dictionaries. I would think that a newspaper should get the definition of a word from the dictionary not vice versa.

Finally, I received , what I found, to be the most enlightening information from Mr. Peter Sokolowski, Editor at Merriam-Webster's. Mr. Sokolowski originally pointed me to an article that appeared in Mother Jones (MJ) that gave the history of the definition. According to the MJ article the label "often contemptuous" first appears in 1898, the first collegiate edition. This type of label then disappears until 1961 when the word is labeled as "—usually taken to be offensive." Through some research, however, I found that the 1961 edition contained no such label. I then asked Mr. Sokolowski, who was the main source for this article, to explain the discrepancy and received this response:

"The "usu. taken to be offensive" label in the Unabridged was added in the 1981 copyright revision of the 1961 principal copyright. This was my mistake, as my desk copy of this book was printed after 1981."

So it turns out that label was not changed until 1981 which begs the question "was the 1898 edition amended upon subsequent printings as well?" MJ was notified of this mistake in their article yet no change has been made as of this writing. I wrote back to Mr. Sokolowski explaining that though the MJ article (incorrectly) shows the evolution of the word it states no explanation as to why a definition is amended. Mr. Sokolowski then pointed me to the Corpus of Contemporary American English as reasoning behind such a change. At the time I looked, the corpus had 168 references to the term "Redskin" which break down as:

- 168 examples of Redskin
- 136 refer to the Washington team
- 19 used as a synonym for an American Indian
- 11 concerning the legal battle over the team's name
- 1 inconclusive due to context
- 1 to a redskin potato

So out of 168 examples, there was only 1 that might have been offensive. Even if one adds the 11 concerning the legal battle it hardly justifies the label of usually offensive. Unmoved by my analysis, Mr. Sokolowski sent several examples of historical writing obtained from the OED. In every example cited, redskin was used as a synonym for an American Indian. He then cited two articles published by Geoffrey Nunberg, linguist at USC Berkeley:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000029.html>
<http://people.ischool.berkeley.edu/~nunberg/redskin.html>

I found these to be extremely suspect. Not only do the articles read more like opinion pieces than linguistic research, they were written by the man who voluntarily testified for Suzan Shown Harjo against the Washington Redskins. The problem with Nunberg's work is he continually states that Redskins evolved into a pejorative term without providing any

evidence whatsoever. I remarked to Mr. Sokolowski that I found it interesting that he cited the Nunberg articles over the extensive research of Dr. Ives Goddard, head linguist for the Smithsonian:

His <http://anthropology.si.edu/goddard/redskin.pdf> response was:

“You're quite right that Goddard is essential to the pre-20th century history of the word. I think the essential bit from his article is that the word's pejorative understanding is subsequent to the period he covers in so much depth, and that is very interesting.”

Yet no one has been able to provide any evidence of Redskin evolving into a pejorative term. If one asks Suzan Harjo, she will say that it is because her history is an oral history, meaning she requires no proof to back up any of her claims.

So what have we learned?

We know that the dictionaries started amending the definition in the early 1980's. It's important to note that Suzan Harjo claims she started her crusade against American Indian imagery in sports in the early to mid 1970's. It's also important to know that Mrs. Harjo also waged a much more successful war on the word “squaw.” So it is reasonable to assume that the dictionaries amended these definitions under mounting pressure from Mrs. Harjo who at the time was a rising American Indian attorney and activist.

We also know, that despite overwhelming evidence that the “usually offensive” label Webster's added to the term redskin is unwarranted, Mr. Sokolowski, or anyone else, has any intention of amending the definition.

We now know that there are an elite few choosing how our words are defined, what is to offend, and what is to be socially acceptable.

The real test now comes. Just last week, May 19 2016, the Washington Post released a poll that confirmed the results of the 2004 Annenberg poll. 90% of American Indians have no problem with the team being named Redskins. Only 9% of American Indians are offended. So will the dictionary editors continue to cling to their false narrative? Or will they do what's right and amend the definition to really reflect the times in which we live?