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John Pickering's *Vocabulary* (1816) Reconsidered: America's Earliest Philological Exploration of Lexicography

Miyoshi K.

Soka Women's College, Japan

Abstract

John Pickering is the author of the first dictionary of Americanisms, the *Vocabulary, or Collection of Words and Phrases Which have been Supposed to Be Peculiar to the United States of America* (1816). Allen Read, a masterly scholar of Americanisms, regards the dictionary as “an important landmark in the study of the English language in America”, acclaiming Pickering as “one of the most perceptive linguists America has produced”. However, there seems to be the situation that research on the *Vocabulary* has scarcely been done since the 1950's. Then, has research on the *Vocabulary* been exhausted? My answer to the question is “Never in the least”. When browsing through the *Vocabulary*, we can notice Pickering having finely used quite a few reference materials, thus the body of the *Vocabulary* becoming highly scholarly. As far as I can judge, this fact has not been pointed out to date. My intention in this paper is to clarify Pickering's use of English dictionaries out of such materials. To summarize my analysis, Pickering was versed in wide range of English dictionaries, making the fullest use of them for his investigation on the historical background of Americanisms.

Keywords: John Pickering; Americanisms; use of historical dictionaries

1 Introduction

The American lexicographer John Pickering is widely known among authorities on Americanisms for his dictionary published in the 1810's under the title *Vocabulary, or Collection of Words and Phrases Which have been Supposed to Be Peculiar to the United States of America* (1816). George Krapp's *English Language in America* (1925: vol. 1, 376) and Albert Baugh and Thomas Cable's *History of the English Language* (2002: 391 and 394), both of which are indispensable reference books for historical research on English in America, discuss Pickering's *Vocabulary*, their authors recognizing the dictionary as “the first dictionary of Americanisms”.

And, Allen Read (2002: 114), a masterly scholar of Americanisms, acclaiming Pickering as “one of the most perceptive linguists America has produced”, he (1947: 271) also regards the *Vocabulary* as “an important landmark in the study of the English language in America”. In addition, for Henry Mencken (1982: 48), the legendary authority who compiled the historic volume *American Language* (1919-1948), the *Vocabulary* was the “first really competent treatise on the subject [Americanisms]”. Such words of high commendation are quite notable when the fact is taken into account that the *Vocabulary* only treats approximately 600 words.

At the same time, however, in spite of such situations, there is the fact that research on the *Vocabulary* has scarcely been done since the 1950's; for instance, in the case of the journal *American Speech* (1925-), this seems not to have carried any papers which mainly treat the *Vocabulary* since 1957, with Henning Cohen's “Drayton's notes on Pickering's list of Americanisms” (1956) as the last one. In this situation, one very rare exception is Julie Andresen's *Linguistics in America, 1769-1924* which appeared in 1990. This book contains quite a few descriptions about the *Vocabulary*, but, regrettably, offers little discussion on the dictionary from the viewpoint of the history of American lexicography, although the book may be a well-documented study on the history of linguistics.

Two reasons are conceivable for such pretermission of the *Vocabulary*. One is the preconception that research on Pickering's *Vocabulary* has already been exhausted before the 1960's; this may indicate the conception among authorities that the *Vocabulary* is merely the beginning of the lexicography of American English and no more. And the other is the judgment that the *Vocabulary* is essentially not a scholarly dictionary but a conservative and normative one. As to the latter, it has usually been a customary practice for authorities concerned, including Mencken and Baugh and Cable, to cite such passages as the followings which is included in Pickering's “Essay”, an introductory material prefixed to the *Vocabulary*: it:

The preservation of the English language in its purity throughout the United States is an object deserving the attention of every American, who is a friend to the literature and science of his country. (Pickering 1816: 2)

[...] it [the language in the United States] has in so many instances departed from the English standard, that our scholars should lose no time in endeavouring to restore it to its purity, and to prevent future corruption. (Pickering 1816: 17)

In this regard, Richard Bailey's “National and regional dictionaries of English” (2009: vol I, 279-301) which comprises one chapter of *The Oxford History of English Lexicography* (2009) edited by A. P. Cowie, a standard book of reference for researchers on English lexicography, is symbolical. Bailey, in this chapter, divides the section related to the history of the dictionary of Americanisms into two parts; one is for the discussion of the generalities of American lexicography and the other for the treatment of “scholarly dictionaries of Americanisms”. He discusses Pickering's *Vocabulary* exclusively

in the former, using the latter for the treatment of William Craigie's *Dictionary of Americanisms* (1938-1942) and Mitford Mathews's *Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles* (1951). Besides, Bailey quotes Pickering's statement in his letter from Read's work, which is "John Pickering [...] wrote to his father from London: 'I find we use several words in America [...] for which there is no authority' [quoted by Read 2002: 16]". There will be no denying that this passage written by Pickering himself strengthens the notion that he is a conservative purist in terms of the use of the language.

Then, has research on Pickering's *Vocabulary* actually thoroughly been done, leaving no room for further research? And, is the *Vocabulary* such strongly subjectively-based and lacking in objectivity? My answer to both of these questions is "Never in the least". This is because there is a decisive vacuum in research on the *Vocabulary* until today. That is, in the volume *Milestones in the History of English in America* (2002), which is the collection of Read's papers, Read refers to Pickering in eight pages, but we cannot see any mention in them concerning the point of what reference materials Pickering used to compile the *Vocabulary*. And in Mencken's fourth edition of the *American Language* (1982), which is an abridged edition annotated by Raven McDavid, where descriptions about the *Vocabulary* are seen in thirty-six pages in all, we see Mencken cite dozens of entries in the dictionary, but can hardly ever find his discussion on Pickering's reference materials for the *Vocabulary*; concerning this point, there is a possibility that McDavid may have deleted Mencken's reference to such materials, but if this is the case, it will corroborate the fact that McDavid did not attach importance to them, with having the notion that the dictionary is essentially subjectively-oriented.

Actually, however, when browsing through 113 entries in the *Vocabulary* whose head-words and head-phrases begin with the letters *J, K, L, M, N, O* and *P*, which comprise approximate 18 % of all entries in the dictionary, we can notice Pickering having used well more than 60 reference materials, in which dictionaries, state papers, periodicals, private letters and the records of lectures and sermons are included. And, concerning these reference materials, Pickering is found to have used them quite finely, thus the body of the *Vocabulary* being highly scholarly and even philological for such materials; I here use the term "philological" based on Tom McArthur's definition of "philology" in his *Oxford Companion of the English Language* (1992: 768): "the study of language, literature, and even national culture". As far as I can judge, this fact seems to have been thoroughly passed over in research on Pickering's *Vocabulary*.

Then, after the preamble so far, my intention in this paper is to clarify Pickering's use of dictionaries out of his reference materials within the range of the 113 entries I have mentioned. In order for this purpose to be fulfilled, I will divide my analysis into four sections. They are "dictionaries consulted by Pickering" (Section 2), "his ways of using dictionaries" (Section 3), "his reference to Webster's and Johnson's dictionaries" (Section 4) and "his comparative observation of dictionaries" (Section 5). Out of these four, the result of analysis in the section "dictionaries consulted by Pickering" is to be a basis of analysis in other three sections.

2 Dictionaries Consulted by Pickering

If we are to seek to know what dictionaries Pickering referred to in the compilation process of his *Vocabulary*, the fact comes to be perceived that he used 18 dictionaries by 14 lexicographers within the range of my scope, performing this practice 84 times in 47 entries, which account for 41.6 % of the 113 of my scope. This situation is as shown in the "Table 1" below; here, the editions of the dictionaries, when they are specified, are based on Pickering's indications, and I also specify the frequency of his reference to each of the dictionaries, as well, which is the result of my analysis.

Ash, John, <i>The New and Complete Dictionary</i> (1775 edition): 4 times in 4 entries.	Pegge, Samuel, <i>A Supplement to the Provincial Glossary of Francis Grose</i> : 4 times in 4 entries.
Bailey, Nathan, his dictionary (1721 edition) (title not specified): once.	Perry, William, <i>The Royal Standard Dictionary</i> (1755 edition): once.
-----, his dictionary (1727 edition) (title not specified): once.	-----, <i>The Royal Standard Dictionary</i> (1805 edition): once.
-----, his dictionary (1730 edition) (title not specified): once.	Ray, John, <i>South and East Country Words</i> : 3 times in 3 entries.
Barclay, James, <i>A Complete and Universal English Dictionary</i> (1774 edition): once.	Rees, Abraham, <i>The Cyclopaedia, or Universal Dictionary of Arts and Literature</i> : once.
Entick, John, <i>The New Spelling Dictionary</i> (1764 edition) : once.	Sheridan, Thomas, <i>A General Dictionary of the English Language</i> (1780 edition): 3 times in 2 entries.
-----, <i>The New Spelling Dictionary</i> (1795 edition): once.	Walker, John, <i>A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language</i> (1791 edition): 2 times in 2 entries.
Grose, Francis, <i>A Provincial Glossary</i> : 7 times in 7 entries.	Webster, Noah, <i>A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language</i> : 22 times in 20 entries.
Johnson, Samuel, <i>A Dictionary of the English Language</i> : 18 times in 18 entries.	
Mason, George, <i>A Supplement to Johnson's English Dictionary</i> : 4 times in 4 entries.	

Table 1: List of Dictionaries Consulted by Pickering.

From an overall perspective, for the present, we may say that the table also reflects the extensive knowledge of Pickering's, a figure in the 1810's America, concerning dictionaries in two respects. One is that he referred to dictionaries of pronunciation, of spelling, of dialects and of arts and literature, along with the general type of dictionary, which may suggest his command of using various types of dictionaries in a highly appropriate way. The other is that he referred to the

different editions of one dictionary, as seen in the cases of the dictionaries of John Entick's and William Perry's, which signifies the fact that his interest extended to the development of dictionaries. In addition to these two points, it is also to be noted that Pickering referred to Noah Webster's and Samuel Johnson's dictionaries quite frequently as compared to other dictionaries. These points are included in those about which I intend to expound in the following sections, with examples cited from the *Vocabulary* and the provision of another table.

3 His Ways of Using Dictionaries

I hope I have successfully revealed the generalities of Pickering's use of dictionaries with the use of the "Table 1" in the previous section. Then, in what ways did he use the 18 dictionaries which I pointed out? As to this point, he used the dictionaries in three ways, which I will discuss below one by one.

Firstly, he referred to dictionaries 45 times out of the 84, which I mentioned in the previous section, as well, to determine whether or not a specific word is treated in them and, when such a word is treated, to show whether or not its specific meaning is treated. The following is one example of this case:

(1) From the entry on **meadow**: "[...] it [*meadow*]" is defined by *Bailey* – 'Pasture land yielding grass, hay,' and *Sheridan* (who is followed by *Walker*) also defines it – 'a rich posture ground, from which hay is made.'"

This example may also be regarded as reflecting Pickering's close perusal of each dictionary which he referred to. That is, he, in this example, compares the dictionaries of Nathan Bailey's, Thomas Sheridan's and John Walker's; as to such a situation, I will expound in Section 5 later.

Secondly, he cites the views of lexicographers 31 times regarding the use of words, like the following:

(2) From the entry on **to narrate**: "Walker [...] thus defend the word [*narrate*]: As it is derived from the Latin *narro*, and has a specific meaning to distinguish it from every other word, it ought to be considered as a necessary part of the language."

In this example, it may be worthy of note, as well, that the *Vocabulary*, a dictionary of Americanisms, even makes reference to Latin through Walker's dictionary.

And thirdly, with regard to the remaining 8 cases (84 - 45 - 31), Pickering used dictionaries in the way in which the first and second ways are combined, as the following instance shows:

(3) From the entry on **kedje**: "*Grose* defines it [*kedje*], 'brisk, lively' and says it is used in the *South*."

Here, Pickering's use of Francis Grose's dictionary (*A Provincial Dictionary*) also gives a glimpse of his interest in dialects; it may also be noted that he is objective here, making no critical remarks about the use of the dialect (*kedje*), whose similar situation is observable here and there in the *Vocabulary*.

Such are the three basic ways of Pickering's use of dictionaries, and it may be said that we can confirm the fact that the *Vocabulary* is basically a dictionary of language, rather than an encyclopedic which lays emphasis on explanation about things.

4 His Reference to Webster's and Johnson's Dictionaries

Next, the "Table 1" in Section 2 shows that Pickering most often referred to Noah Webster's *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806) and Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (edition not specified); as to the former, we should note that Pickering's *Vocabulary* was published twelve years before Webster's renowned *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). To be specific, Pickering referred to Webster's *Compendious* 22 times in all in 20 entries and Johnson's *Dictionary* 18 times in all in 18 entries, both within the range of my scope. It can be known how often Pickering referred to the two dictionaries when we recognize the fact that his reference to the third most frequently cited dictionary, namely Francis Grose's *Provincial Glossary* (edition not specified), is limited to 7 times in all in 7 entries.

This can be regarded as the evidence of the fact that Pickering attached special importance to the treatment of Webster's *Compendious* and Johnson's *Dictionary*. In this situation, if we are to clarify Pickering's reference to dictionaries in his *Vocabulary*, a close analysis of his use of the two dictionaries will be unavoidable. I will, in the following, examine how he treated Webster's *Compendious* and Johnson's *Dictionary* in this order.

4.1 His Reference to Webster's *Compendious Dictionary*

As to his reference to Webster's *Compendious*, in order to know how intently Pickering read the dictionary, the beginning of the entry on **prayerless** in the *Vocabulary* is suggestive, which is the following:

(4) "Not praying, not using prayers." *Webst. Dict.* I have never known this word to be used here [America] [...].

Without closely perusing the *Compendious*, he could not have said like this. If I cite one more similar example, Pickering says the following in the entry on **lengthy**:

(5) Mr. *Webster* has admitted it [*lengthy*] into his dictionary; but (as need hardly be remarked) it is not in any of the *English* ones.

The situation is the same not only about the aspect of words as seen in the examples above but also about that of meanings. That is, we can see such examples as the following, which is from the entry on **location**:

(6) “The act of designating or surveying and bounding land; the tract so designated.” *Webst.* This substantive [noun] is in the English dictionaries, but not in this sense.

In this way, Pickering actually cites words and meanings peculiarly treated in Webster’s *Compendious* in 8 entries out of the relevant 20. They are entries on **kentle**, **lengthy**, **location**, **noticeable**, **to packet**, **to parade**, **prairie** and **prayerless**. In most cases, Pickering is critical about Webster, as inferred from the three examples above.

4.2 His Reference to Johnson’s *Dictionary*

Similarly to the case of Webster’s *Compendious*, Pickering is thought to have been considerably familiar with the contents of Johnson’s *Dictionary* in respect of its information on the language; this is significant in America at the beginning of the 1800’s, as I will mention at the end of this sub-section. The following passage from the entry on **to progress** in the *Vocabulary* is one example which shows how closely Pickering perused Johnson’s *Dictionary*:

(7) It is true that some authorities may be found for it [*progress*] in English writers, and it is accordingly in *Johnson’s* and other dictionaries; but *Johnson* has noted it as “*not used*.” It seems also, that the accent was formerly placed on the *first* syllable, and not (as we pronounce it) on the last [...].

This entry also suggests the possibility that Pickering had even noticed the fact that Johnson placed an accent mark in the relevant entry-word; although it is not certain which edition of Johnson’s *Dictionary* Pickering referred to, we can see that the entry-word is written as “*To Pro’gress*” in its first edition (1755).

In regard to pronunciation, Pickering, in the entry on **perk**, provides the following information on its relevant word, as well, using Johnson’s *Dictionary*:

(8) It [*perk*] is used in the interior of *New England*; and is commonly pronounced *pearck*, (the *ea* as in *pear*) just as it is written in the passage which Dr. Johnson quotes from *Spenser*.

We can also see Pickering’s description as the following in the entry on **obnoxious**, this time concerning the meaning of the word:

(9) The English formerly used *obnoxious* in the sense of *liable* or *subject to*; and *Johnson* accordingly explains each of these words by the others.

From an overall viewpoint, Pickering, within the range of my scope, referred to Johnson’s *Dictionary* in these entries of his *Vocabulary*: **to jeopardize**, **jeopardy**, **jockeying**, **leanto or lean-to**, **to legislate**, **meadow**, **mean for means**, **mission**, **muggy**, **to narrate**, **navigation**, **near for to or at**, **to notice**, **to notify**, **obnoxious**, **to peak or peek**, **plenty for plentiful** and **to progress**.

It will be notable that all references in such entries concern the substantial contents of Johnson’s *Dictionary*; there had probably been no one or very few persons in America who had perused Johnson’s *Dictionary* so closely from the perspective of the use of the language before Pickering. Concerning the point, it is widely known among authorities on historical English lexicography that in the 1950’s, well more than one hundred years after Pickering’s *Vocabulary*, James Sledd and Gwin Kolb published the epoch-making work *Dr. Johnson’s Dictionary: Essays in the Biography of a Book* (1955). However, even this work, as the word “*biography*” in its subtitle indicates, refers mainly to the historical background of the *Dictionary* and little to its contents; for this reason, the book was to be sternly criticized by William Wimsatt (1956: 308) that it is “*shaped somewhat like a doughnut, the hole being the Dictionary itself*”. Therefore, once again, Pickering’s perusal of Johnson’s *Dictionary* from a linguistic viewpoint may be regarded as notable when we think of the fact that he was an American at the very beginning of the 1800’s.

(If I may add a few words to the above, it will be a basic knowledge and common agreement among authorities on the history of American lexicography that Webster’s *Compendious* only gives very brief definitions for entry words, never providing any lexicographical information, which can be seen if we riffle through the small dictionary. In this sense, it is far from probable, as well as probably absurd to think, that the *Compendious* might have exerted essential influence on the *Vocabulary*. Rather, it may be thinkable that Webster was influenced from the *Vocabulary* in the compilation process of the *American Dictionary* to be published twelve years later.)

5 His Comparative Observation of Dictionaries

Thus far, I have mainly analyzed Pickering’s use of each individual dictionary, laying emphasis on his treatment of Noah Webster’s *Compendious* and Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*. However, Pickering’s use of dictionaries is not limited to such a sphere. Although I touched upon this point briefly in Section 3, significant is the fact that he quite frequently compared the dictionaries, especially focusing on the contents of Webster’s and Johnson’s. For example, the entry on **jeopardize** reads the following:

(10) It [*jeopardize*] is doubtless a corruption of the ancient verb *jeopard* [...]. But even the verb *to jeopard*, which is in all the dictionaries, Dr. *Johnson* says, is “*obsolete*”; *Ash* says, it is “*not much used*”; and *Barclay*, that it is “*used only in Divinity*”. It is hardly necessary to remark, that *to jeopardize* is not in any of the dictionaries.

In this example, Pickering compares the contents of the dictionaries of Johnson’s, John Ash’s and James Barclay. And we can see the following passage in the entry on **to legislate**:

(11) *Walker* has inserted it [*legislate*] in his dictionary, but (as he remarks) it is “*neither in Johnson nor Sheridan*,” nor is it in *Mason’s Supplement to Johnson*. It was noticed, however, several years ago in *Entick’s dictionary*, (edition 1795);

and, more lately, in an edition of *Sheridan*, “corrected” and improved by Salmon;” and also in the octavo edition of *Perry’s* dictionary, published in 1805. Mr. Webster adopts it from *Entick*.

Here, in this short entry, six dictionaries are compared: John Walker’s, George Mason’s, John Entick’s, Thomas Sheridan’s, William Perry’s and Webster’s. Besides, this passage, which shows an aspect of the development of English dictionaries, may even be said that it reflects how intently Pickering did research on lexicography with a keen interest. This fact is not only seen in two examples above. He performed similar practice in 18 entries out of the 47 where dictionaries are referred to in my scope. The following is the table which indicates whose dictionaries Pickering compared in each of the 18 entries.

jog: Bailey and Grose	muggy: Pegge and Johnson
to jeopardize: Ash, Barclay and Johnson	to narrate: Johnson and Walker
kedje: Grose and Ray	to notice: Ash and Mason
knoll: Grose and Ray	obnoxious: Ash and Johnson
leanto or lean-to: Mason, Pegge, Johnson and Webster	packet: Webster and other English lexicographers
to legislate: Entick, Mason, Perry, Sheridan, Walker and Webster	to peak or to peek: Johnson and Webster
liability: Entick and Mason	perk: Johnson and Webster
meadow: Bailey, Johnson and Sheridan	plenty for plentiful: Ash and Johnson
	poorly: Ash, Pegge and Webster
	punk: Ash, Bailey and Webster

Table 2: Pickering’s Comparison of Dictionaries.

In the entries cited in this “Table 2”, we can clearly see a method of comparative lexicography. When Reinhard Hartmann and Gregory James’s *Dictionary of Lexicography* (1998) is referred to, this fact seems to back up the probability that Pickering’s *Vocabulary* is highly “philological”, whose notion I mentioned in the introductory section. However, the entry on **philology** in Hartmann and James’s dictionary, although it apparently focuses on words or grammatical constructions from different languages in different periods, reads thus: “A branch of linguistics concerned with the comparative-historical perspective in language study. The principles of philology have led to the development of historical lexicography and comparative lexicography”. If we base ourselves on Hartmann and James’s explanation here, there will be little problem if we position Pickering as one forerunner of researchers in comparative lexicography in America, his *Vocabulary* being probably the first philological work there, at the same time.

6 Conclusion

I, in Section 4, quoted a phrase from William Wimsatt’s review of James Sledd and Gwin Kolb’s book on Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*: “shaped somewhat like a doughnut, the hole being the *Dictionary* itself”. This phrase may also be applicable to research on Pickering’s *Vocabulary* until today. If this is the case, the substantial contents of the *Vocabulary* have been made light of for two centuries since its publication. Besides, we should be reminded of the fact that it is often the case with a historical dictionary that the contents of its prefixed material are greatly incompatible with the contents of its bodies, the former not giving a glimpse of the latter. In the case of the *Vocabulary*, we can hardly surmise its substantial contents, which is scholarly, scientific and descriptive, from Pickering’s “Essay” prefixed to it, whose contents is quite the opposite and strongly conservative and didactic.

Besides, it may be noted here, incidentally, that, as far as the contents of my scope is concerned, we can scarcely find didactic or prescriptive remarks in the *Vocabulary* as to the use of the language, despite the fact that it introduces, for instance, quite a few regional dialects with reference to dictionaries.

To summarize my analysis in this paper, Pickering was versed in the characteristics of wide range of English dictionaries, making the fullest possible use of them for his scientific research on the historical background of Americanisms. This will be regarded as highly notable in the 1810’s America.

It was half a century after Pickering’s *Vocabulary* that the first complete history of English lexicography, Henry Wheatley’s “Chronological notices of the dictionaries of the English language” (1865) appeared, but this work seems to still only tenuously go into the contents of each dictionary treated. As for Pickering, he did research on various dictionaries, closely perusing their contents, not only as a theoretician but also as a practitioner of compiling a dictionary. If we are to seek a predecessor of Pickering, it will be difficult to find any English lexicographer with the only exception of Samuel Johnson, who thoughtfully used various types of dictionaries, including the dictionaries of etymology, encyclopaedic dictionaries, as well as the general type of dictionary. In this sense, apart from the types of dictionaries they compiled, Pickering may be regarded as a successor to Johnson in respect of the way of using dictionaries.

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