

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Deluxe Audio Edition. Merriam Webster Inc.

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Published on H-USA (April, 1997)

Before I could do anything with this dictionary, I had of course to take the CD out of its box. There was an obvious lid, held down with a little Velcro button, so I opened it, expecting to see the disk or a booklet or something. But no: this was a mere dummy lid, opening up only to a double cardboard page of illustrations and blurb about the dictionary and thesaurus. The actual contents of the box could be reached through a more conventional flap in the side, which I opened to draw out—another cardboard box. Opening this revealed at last the CD in its plastic case. <p> I only mention that because it was the first and last major problem I encountered in using this excellent dictionary and thesaurus. Set up was completely straightforward, and the basic function of looking up words and finding their meanings is simplicity itself. The first screen displays a blank outline of a dictionary entry, with the cursor ready in the “Main Entry” box. If the user wants the thesaurus instead, that is available at the click of one button. Otherwise, as soon as the first letter of the desired “Main Entry” is typed, the appropriate section of the “word wheel” appears, and this gradually homes in on the word as more letters are typed. The required word may be highlighted before typing is complete, when it can be searched for by clicking the “OK” button. The word wheel then disappears, and the complete dictionary entry can be seen. <p> Let us use the word <cite>barbecue</cite> as an example. This is highlighted in the wheel when we have got as far as typing B-A-R-B-E-C. Clicking “OK” gives: <p> Main Entry: 1barbecue Pronunciation: lbar-bi-lkyu Function: transitive verb Inflected Form(s):-cued; -cu.ing Date: 1690 <p> 1 : to roast or broil on a rack over hot coals or on a revolving spit before or over a source of heat 2 : to cook in a highly seasoned vinegar sauce ~ barbecuer noun <p> A very adequate entry, with a clear and concise definition, and useful information about date of first use, inflected forms and so on. According to the help menu, the pho-

netic symbols used are those of the larger Webster dictionaries. I have never been able to understand why just some of these symbols have to differ from those of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Since the IPA is well known to many users, why not just use it all and make life easy for them? As it is, we have to learn several irritatingly different symbols in order to use the pronunciation guide effectively. The use of “e” with a macron to indicate the IPA <cite>i</cite> is particularly confusing. <p> Counteracting this, the audio edition of the dictionary offers audible pronunciations of main entries, which can be heard just by clicking on the blue printed letters. This useful feature only operates with the disk installed in the CD drive: presumably it would take up too much memory space if downloaded onto the hard disk. <p> The most valuable feature of all, I think, is that one can click on any word in a definition and immediately be presented with that word’s dictionary entry. For instance, if we click on the word <cite>broil</cite> in the definition of barbecue, we immediately find: <p> transitive senses : to cook by direct exposure to radiant heat : GRILL intransitive senses : to be subjected to great or oppressive heat broiling in the sun <p> Learners of English will find this especially useful. In just a few seconds we can chase up half a dozen definitions until we are satisfied that we have come to a proper understanding of any entry. <p> If appearance on the screen is not enough, it is very straightforward to print a hard copy of dictionary entries. Yet for some reason, copying to a file can be a time consuming process. Each “field” of the entry—for instance, “function,” “date” and so on in the “barbecue” example above—must be copied and pasted separately. The copying process itself is a bit odd for PC users: instead of highlighting and right clicking, the control button must be pressed while left clicking the mouse at the appropriate “field.” <p> I should mention at this point the “M-W Link,” a feature designed to make the dictionary quick

to use in conjunction with word processing or other text programs. On my PC, the link appears as a button in the current programs bar. I can highlight and copy any word or phrase in a document I am working on, and find its dictionary entry immediately with this link. This is certainly a pretty useful feature, although in practice it often demands rather more key strokes than just retyping the word itself. Near the beginning of this review, I typed the word `<cite>velcro</cite>`, only to receive a complaint from the spell checker. A quick consultation with the dictionary via the M-W Link soon revealed that, as a trademark word, `<cite>Velcro</cite>` requires an initial capital. The spell checker agreed. `<p>` This goes to show that the dictionary is extremely up to date. English learners are likely to find anything they need to look up in modern non-specialist literature. I suppose the definition offered of `<cite>Velcro</cite>` might leave a bit to be desired: `<p>` ~used for a closure consisting of a piece of fabric of small hooks that sticks to a corresponding fabric of small loops `<p>` but then this is hardly the easiest item to define. Perhaps it is the kind of thing which a picture makes easier to understand. There are pictures in the dictionary: some entries display a little camera icon which displays a picture when clicked on, and sometimes there are references to other entries which do have a useful illustration. `<cite>Velcro</cite>` is not one of these. On the other hand, if one looks up `<cite>bill</cite>`, in the sense of “bird’s bill,” a detailed illustration of the various kinds is available (this illustration features in the Velcro-fastened blurb). Similarly, the entry for “periodic table” provides a completely detailed illustration of this classification of the elements. Thus, for some entries there is perhaps an excessively detailed illustration, while for others there is none, even where it would be really helpful. I suspect that the pictures were chosen mainly because of their ready availability. `<p>` `<cite>Bill</cite>` is one of those words with a variety of senses and functions, and the dictionary clearly distinguishes these and makes them easy to find. To go back to the example of `<cite>barbecue</cite>`, the superscript “1” appearing before the main entry signifies that this is a first sense of the word: on the right hand side of the screen we see `<p>` barbecue [1: transitive verb] barbecue [2: noun] `<p>` with the first of these highlighted. If we click on the second, the entry for `<cite>barbecue</cite>` as a noun is shown, with the following definitions: `<p>` 1 : a large animal (as a steer) roasted whole or split over an open fire or a fire in a pit; also : smaller pieces of barbecued meat 2 : a social gathering especially in the open air at which barbecued food is eaten 3 : an often portable fireplace over

which meat and fish are roasted `<p>` There is also the following etymology: `<p>` American Spanish barbacoa framework for supporting meat over a fire, probably from Taino `<p>` The concise etymologies are excellent, especially for a dictionary of this size. I should mention here that the dictionary is not in any way bowdlerised, as so many are: learners will have no difficulty in finding the various four letter words of modern writing together with adequate definitions. `<p>` The use of the thesaurus is best made clear with an example. Looking up the word `<cite>grit</cite>` in the dictionary gives the following definitions: `<p>` 1 a : SAND, GRAVEL b : a hard sharp granule (as of sand); also : material (as many abrasives) composed of such granules 2 : any of several sandstones 3 a : the structure of a stone that adapts it to grinding b : the size of abrasive particles usually expressed as their mesh 4 : firmness of mind or spirit : unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger 5 capitalized : a Liberal in Canadian politics `<p>` If we now click on the thesaurus button, the following appears: `<p>` Synonyms FORTITUDE, backbone, guts, intestinal fortitude, moxie, nerve, sand, spunk Contrasted Words faltering, hesitation, vacillation, wavering Antonyms faintheartedness `<p>` Clearly the thesaurus has picked up the fourth sense of `<cite>grit</cite>`, “firmness of mind or spirit,” the one of course which has most synonyms, contrasted words and antonyms. Although it lacks the vastness and organisation of Roget, the thesaurus is really handy for anyone in the throes of composition at the word processor. Once again it proves invaluable to the learner of English, for as well as suggesting useful synonyms and related words, any of these may be clicked on to take one to its own thesaurus entry, from where it is at most one click away from the dictionary definition, as the thesaurus itself contains many of its own definitions. The thesaurus can also be accessed directly, and there is a word wheel of items which appear in it. `<p>` As one more example of the thesaurus, let us consider the following excellent entry for `<cite>absentminded</cite>`: `<p>` Synonyms ABSTRACTED, absent, bemused, distrait, faraway, inconscient, lost, preoccupied Related Word unnoticed, unobserving, unperceiving, unseeing; heedless, inattentive. Idioms lost in thought. Contrasted Words alert; aware Antonyms wide-awake `<p>` There is plenty of material here for both native speaker and learner. `<p>` The dictionary also has an “Advanced Search” option available, in which such information as quotations from particular authors used in the dictionary and rhymes for particular items can be found. Quotations from authors generally seem to concern just the use of a word in a particular sense, rather than being chosen for any aes-

thetic value. For instance, I found a quotation from H.G. Wells in the entry for *horror*:

1 a : painful and intense fear, dread, or dismay “astonishment giving place to horror on the faces of the people about me” – H.G. Wells b : intense aversion or repugnance

 Of course such examples are useful for learners of English, even if they do not typify the full wit and wisdom of the authors concerned. Just at random, I tried the rhyme search for *moon*, and was rewarded with hundreds of possibilities. I was interested to notice the Scottish place name *Scone* among them: it seemed surprising in an American dictionary. Yet there seem to be a fair number of place names with entries. Looking up *Scone*, in the dictionary gives:

locality E Scotland NE of Perth population 3713

 I wonder just how much credence we can place in that final “3”? Anyway, the Scottish pronunciation, rhyming with *moon* is given. In fact, examples of usages and occasionally pronunciations and spellings other than the American are frequent in the dictionary, greatly extending its value. A Canadian use of the word *grit* can be observed in the example given above. American usage always takes precedence, however, so students of other varieties of English should beware. For instance,

the word *hateful* has the following definitions:

1 : full of hate : MALICIOUS 2 : deserving of or arousing hate

 The first of those does not occur in British English. Obviously the dictionary exemplifies American usage, and after that occasionally mentions any additional uses in other varieties of English. Of course it is not to be blamed for this: the user must take note. All the alternative pronunciations given of words other than place names are American, as far as I can ascertain. There are other goodies to be found in the Advanced Search option: “crosswords” to suggest words of which only a few letters are known, and the probably rather less useful; “cryptograms” to suggest, for instance, that *ifmmp* might be a subtly coded version of *hello*, among several hundred other possibilities. In fact, there is plenty to keep the curious dabbler busy for many more hours than I have to finish this review. To sum up, then, I think this is an ideal desktop-using desktop in the computer sense—dictionary for everybody, from litrateur to learner, who is dealing with the English language. Now that this review is finished, the dictionary and thesaurus will be remaining on my hard disk, well worth their weight in bytes.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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Citation: Ian C. Stirk. Review of , *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Deluxe Audio Edition*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. April, 1997.

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