

Contradictions and Regularities in Webster's Works

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Abstract:

Noah Webster believed that a pure, regular and better form of the language existed, usually represented by a former variety that is more appropriate. However, he also believed that British English was not a model for American English because it did not follow "the analogy of the language."¹ Accordingly, he started a search to find the "true principles" of the English language. At that moment, his writings became more descriptive than prescriptive, but, because he was a successful textbook writer, he could not use the same model when he wrote schoolbooks. Consequently, his language analyses and his educational material became contradictory. Moreover, his earlier works and his later works are also inconsistent. This paper investigates the many inconsistencies found in Webster's writings and tries to interpret them under the light of linguistics historiography. The results show that the contradiction in Webster's work originates from his continued development as a language scholar and from his uncertainties arising from the linguistic practices of the time.

Keywords: Analogy of language; contradictions; general usage; language description; Webster

1 The first time that Webster uses and defines "the principles of analogy" is in *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789, 27).

1. Introduction

Because Webster was a textbook writer, a language scholar and a political activist, his life and works have interested scholars in a number of fields. Accordingly, there are many biographical studies that concentrate on Webster's personal life and on his contribution to the characterization of the United States. For example, Scudder (1890) provides a detailed biography of the lexicographer while Partch (1939) explores Webster's corrections and comments in his personal copy of *A Collection of Essays and Fugitiv*² and Shoemaker (1966) details facts about Webster's life and discusses the educational situation before and after the *Spelling Book*. Rollins claims that Webster's motivation for writing the 1828 dictionary was to "counteract social disruption" (1976, 416) and goes on to examine (Rollins 1980) Webster's thoughts on politics, society, culture and religion. Monaghan (1983), meanwhile, delineates Webster's life and looks into the success of the *Spelling Book* and Bynack (1984) analyzes Webster's influences, principally after his conversion to Calvinism. Lepore (2003) inspects Webster's attempts to standardize American spelling and later (2012) explores American traits in Webster's 1828 dictionary. Micklethwait (2005) recounts Webster's life and examines his educational publications. Kendall (2011) describes the life of the author and explores his 1806 and 1828 dictionaries. Cassedy (2014) proposes that Webster's 1828 dictionary gave other people reasons to reflect on the identity of the nation. Fodde (2015) stresses Webster's contribution to the construction of an American identity. Martin (2019) explores the rivalry between Noah Webster and Joseph E. Worcester.

On other occasions, his linguistic achievements are discussed. Reed compares Webster's 1828 dictionary to Johnson's 1799 dictionary and concludes that the former "widened the scope of lexicography" (1962, 105). Shoemaker claims that Webster made an effort to observe and record the usage of his day (1966, 143). Southard explores Webster's observations about language and relates some of them to facts that "are being discovered anew today" (1979, 12). Miyoshi (2008) compares Webster's and Johnson's use of verbal examples in their respective dictionaries. Hallen and Spackman (2010) conclude that Webster has more biblical citations in his dictionary than Johnson included in his.

As a matter of fact, the number of studies that focus on both Webster's personal life and academic works has increased in the last 20 years. That might be a consequence of the growth of studies on theoretical lexicography, historical

2 Webster's spelling and phrases have been transcribed *ipsis litteris* in all cases (names of books, quotes, etc.).

linguistics and history of linguistics (cf. Koerner and Konrad 1999; Fodde 2015) or because the 21st century has seen an increasing interest in issues of globalization and nationalism (cf. Statkus 2019).

From a linguistic point of view, the most important works by the author are: *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (henceforth *An American Dictionary*) (1828) and his *Spelling Book* (*Spelling Book* is the term used to refer to the different editions of the *Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, the *American Spelling Book* and the *Elementary Spelling Book* and whose first edition corresponds to 1783). Webster's *An American Dictionary* was both controversial and influential while his *Spelling Book* was the most popular speller of the 19th century. Webster was, however, not only a language scholar, he was also a political activist who called for strong central government. He was present in Philadelphia at the time of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and called for the ratification of the Constitution. As a nationalist he believed that education could perpetuate the Republic and bring cohesion to the new country. Moreover, he was a member of the Federalist Party and founded, in 1793, the *American Minerva*, a pro-Federalist daily newspaper. As a Federalist he supported the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 and the Hartford Convention, which opposed the War of 1812. Indeed, Fodde (2015, 126) considers "Noah Webster's contribution [on the American enlightenment thought to be] at the same level as Benjamin Franklin's, John Adams's, Thomas Paine's and Thomas Jefferson's."

After independence, Noah Webster stresses that it is time for the introduction of new social and political practices because the new nation has inherited many problems from the mother country. Additionally, because of the instability of the first years of the Early Republic (1776-1861) and in the face of the consequences of the French Revolution (1789-1799), Webster becomes worried about the future of the nation. He is determined to improve the character of its citizens through education so that the nation remains politically stable. To this end, Webster considers his speller and his dictionaries to be his contribution to the success of the republic.

The studies that focus on Webster's personal life hold that he was arrogant and may have even suffered from what is now called obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (Kendall 2011). Many of the studies that focus on his academic ideas state that his views were eccentric and inconsistent (Micklethwait 2005). Indeed, Webster's ideas are undoubtedly contradictory over time. His project to standardize the English language is based on some predominant misconceptions of his time which originate in a prescriptive approach to language. However, he condemns the English grammars of his time because they rely on Latin rules, which are different from the rules of the English language and he therefore claims that a detailed description of the English language is needed.

It is at this point that he develops ideas that could be considered contradictory to his initial proposal. One is represented by his assertion that a “phrase” may only be labeled as correct after analyzing how it fits into the structure of the English language. Another is that British English is not a model for American English because it is not correct according to, what he calls, “the analogy of the language.” Eventually, Webster acknowledges that a living language cannot be standardized, but continues his search for the “true principles” of the English language. Consequently, his writings become incongruent.

This current examination acknowledges that Webster may have been a difficult person, although it does not focus on his personal eccentricities. The objective of this research is in line with history-writing that tries to “contribute to a better understanding and appreciation of the history of ideas” (Koerner and Konrad 1999, 13) and that helps “delineate the development of western linguistic thought” (30). As such, it explores the inconsistencies in Webster’s works, seeking to complement Southard’s (1979) study, which claims that the contradictions are the result of Webster’s “growth as a language scholar” (15).

To accomplish its objectives, the article first presents Webster’s criticism of the grammars of the day, using as primary sources: *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1784, 1800), *Dissertations on the English Language* (henceforth *Dissertations*) (1789), *A Philosophical and Practical Grammar of the English Language* (1807b), *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1817), *An Improved Grammar of the English Language* (henceforth *Improved Grammar*) (1833) and *Observations on Language, and on Errors of Classbooks* (1839). Next, the article will concentrate on Webster’s proposed changes and examine the following works: his speller (1793, 1800), *Dissertations* (1789), *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806), *An American Dictionary* (1828), *Improved Grammar* (1833) and *A Collection of Papers on Political, Literary, and Moral Subjects* (1843). The following section will examine the inconsistencies from a linguistic point of view and a summary of earlier studies will be presented, namely Southard (1979), Lepore (2003 and 2012) and Fodde (2015) and the origin of the inconsistencies will be investigated. The present work specifically intends to follow and, at the same time, complement these four studies.

2. Webster’s ideas and works

2.1 Weaknesses of Grammar Books in the 18th century

Between 1789 and 1793, Webster encourages national development in all fields—politics, education and language (Rollins 1980, 69). Since Webster believes that the future of the nation relies on the uniformity of language, his main

objective becomes forging national bonds in the United States through language standardization (1789, 20). His nationalist ideas stem from the Enlightenment in Germany, which encouraged the search for a national character in terms of what is popular and colloquial in a nation (Bynack 1984, 105). As such, his plan of action includes promoting a standard language that is pure and emphasizes the cultural uniqueness of the country. Webster's proposals are therefore limited by his nationalism and by 18th-century prescriptivism, which advocated that there are "correct" versions and "incorrect" versions of a language.

Designing a pure and regular form of a language would appear a prescriptive aspiration. However, Webster repeatedly criticizes grammarians because they prescribe rules based on Latin grammar. Moreover, Webster's search leads him to conclude that a specific segment may only be labeled as correct after analyzing how it fits the "analogy of the language", which is anything but prescriptive. Standardizing language and finding the "analogies of language" are, in effect, conflicting ideas that may be interpreted as uncertainties or inconsistencies, but they may also be attributed to a discrepancy between his nationalistic ideas—which required language standardization—and his scientific attitude towards the study of language. As such, his writings reproduce the instabilities that arise from trying to describe language and, at the same time, trying to provide a standard for the nation.

Webster describes a "pure language" as having no foreign influence. He insists that to find America's "pure language" it is necessary to investigate the origin of the English language. For instance, he claims that the "confusion in spelling" happened during the Norman conquest, but that, by tracing the primitive spelling of words, it is possible to purify the language (1817, iv-v). Also, he suggests that the omission of <h> is a foreign corruption because, in America, it is not known among the unmixed descendants of the English (1789, 122). He declares that the people of America, particularly those of English descent, speak the "most pure English" because they hardly use foreign words and because their English is like that of Shakespeare, Addison and Chaucer (1789, 288; 1800, v). He claims that "mistakes are sometimes adopted by compilers of dictionaries, who copy from former works without investigating the origin of the words" (1839, 15).

Attributing "errors" in grammars and dictionaries to a lack of research regarding the language in question is a constant in Webster. In his *Dissertations* he observes that "it is astonishing to see how long and how stupidly English grammarians have followed the Latin grammars" (1789, 220). He claims that the most challenging task for advocates of pure English is to restrain the influence of men who are "learned in Greek and Latin, but are ignorant of their own tongue" (1789, ix). He criticizes the fact that because the English language is not agreeable to Latin rules, "some Latin student began to suspect it is bad

English” (1789, 284-287). Consequently, he concludes that grammarians have not described what the English language *is*, but what it *ought to be* according to *their* rules (1789, viii-ix, 37; 1800, v).

English grammars are wrong, he says, because they are opposed to national practice; because they break the regular construction of the language and because they oblige a nation to change their general customs (1789, 169). Grammars are defective because the principles they establish admit no controversy and because they are not based on the history of the English language (Webster 1807b, 28). For instance, Webster condemns Lowth’s grammar because it criticizes more phrases of “good” English, than it corrects those “of bad” English (1789, 287), and because it considers genuine English as “improper” or “obsolete” (1833, 175). He describes Dilworth’s grammar as “a mere Latin Grammar, very indifferently translated” (1784, 3). He criticizes Johnson’s writing style because it is a mixture of Latin and English (1789, 32) and holds that “neither Lowth nor Johnson understood the Saxon or Primitive English, without which no man can compile a real English Grammar” (1807b, 28). In fact, in his opinion, no grammar, except Priestley’s, explains “the real idioms of the language as found in Addison’s works” (Webster 1789, 287). In a later work, however, he acknowledges that both, Lowth and Priestley improved grammars, but “some important discoveries have been made in the origin of words and in the construction of sentences which have not been introduced into any grammar published in Great Britain at least as far as my knowledge extends” (1833, 3).

Webster’s proposal, in 1789, is to follow Horne Tooke, author of the *Diversions of Purley*, because Tooke provides an etymological analysis of the Saxon origin of English “particles” (1789, 182). Another author that he believes should be observed is Kenrick, whilst also observing that the opinions of the “learned authors” are respectable but should not be considered as decisive (1789, 38). In fact, he mentions, that grammarians do not adhere to their own rules, that the authors who wrote correctly in the English language were guided by their own intuition (1833, 149) and that the pronunciation of the higher classes in England is regulated by usage, not by books (1839, 17).

2.2. *Correcting Mistakes in the Grammars*

Webster declares that his objective is to examine the language to correct defective rules in grammar books (Webster and Warfel 1953, 372). A proper grammar should “ascertain the national practice” (Webster 1789, 204; Webster 1800, v), separate the “local” from the “general custom” of speaking and recommend that which is general or conforms to “the analogies of the language” (Webster 1789, ix). In fact, it is not correct to impose as a standard something which is not

common to most "ranks" (Webster 1789). Certainly, correct language should be based on "universal undisputed practice" and on the "principles of analogy" because "the practice of a nation, when universal or ancient, has the authority of law and implies mutual and general consent" (Webster 1789, 24-28). In fact, shaping English through either Latin or arbitrary rules is incorrect because rules are in fact formed through practice (Webster 1789, vii), meaning, then, that it is practice that determines what English really is (Webster 1789, 204). Mainly, language is a "democratical state" and nobody has the right to reject a variety or "dictate to a nation the rules of speaking, with the same imperiousness as a tyrant gives laws to his vassals" (Webster 1789 ix, 204).

After 1806, Webster abandons the idea of standardizing English when he acknowledges that a living language is not stable (Shoemaker 1966, 252-253) and assumes that standardization is not possible. Nevertheless, he continues to see the necessity of establishing uniformity in spelling and pronunciation "as far as a living language would admit" (Webster and Warfel 1953, 413). Furthermore, his proposals that "the principles of language" are an authority "superior to the arbitrary decisions of any man or class of men" (1789, 25) and that "usage constitutes the correctness of the phrase" (1833, 178) endure. Actually, Camboni (1987, 113) mentions that "the rules of the language itself, and the general practice of the nation" are often reformulated in Webster's work as "the rules of analogy" and "general custom."

Webster states that every segment that fits or follows the structure of the English language is an analogy. Analogies should be discovered by examining the language and "immemorial usage" (Webster 1789, 38). Occurrences will be labeled as correct if they match these models, and as corruptions if they do not. Webster explains that deviations from the "analogy of language" are corruptions that many times originated when the nations were "barbarous" (1800, v). He considers every addition to the anomalies of the language to be a corruption while every reduction is an improvement (1793, 75-76).

Universal practice is "a rule of propriety." However, when there is variation, analogy should be applied to resolve the issue (Webster 1789, viii). From this perspective, Webster concludes, in 1789, that the English spoken by the upper-classes in England and the stage English in London theaters are not models for American English because they represent corruptions—though he would later change his mind—his argument resting on the fact that these varieties do not represent all the speakers of the English language (1789, 28).

In some other cases, he says, deviations from analogy become the universal practice and, consequently, the standard of propriety (1789, 25). In these cases, speakers need to learn the rules through practice (Webster 1789, 98). Additionally, he alerts us to the fact that, "the English practice is an authority; but considering

the force of custom and the caprice of fashion, their practice must be as liable to changes and to errors, as the practice of a well educated yeomanry, who are governed by habits and not easily led astray by novelty” (1789, 129-130).

Webster continues to develop the ideas of “analogy of language” and “universal practice” until, in 1833, he reaches a definition of syntax: it is the true mode of constructing sentences. Also, he remarks that a rule is an established form of construction and that an exception to a rule is the deviation from the common construction (1833, 6). Furthermore, he states that grammar is

the science that treats the natural connection between ideas, and words and develops the principles which are common to all languages. These principles are not arbitrary, nor subject to change, but fixed and permanent; being founded on facts, and distinctions established by nature. The grammar of a particular language is a system of general principles, derived from natural distinctions of words and of particular rules, deduced from the customary forms of speech, in the nation using that language. These usages are mostly arbitrary, or of accidental origin; but when they become common to a nation, they are to be considered as established, and received as rules of the highest authority (Webster 1833, 7).

The first part of the definition —“grammar is the science that treats the natural connection between ideas, and words and develops the principles which are common to all languages. These principles are not arbitrary, nor subject to change, but fixed and permanent” (Webster 1833, 7)—could be roughly associated with the present-day concept of Universal Grammar. This notion has its foundations in the ideas of the 18th-century linguistic philosophers who made attempts to uncover the origin of language and develop a general theory of linguistic universals. They believed that it was possible to abstract a universal grammar from the arbitrary differences between languages. Nevertheless, Webster does not see language as innate. He, as a Calvinist, assumes that language was given to humans by God and that it has rules that cannot be manipulated (Webster 1828).

On the other hand, the second part of the definition introduces the idea that particular grammars rely on “customary forms of speech [...] in the nation using that language.” This idea adheres to an emergent perspective of language, emergentism being a philosophical idea that has recently been applied to language acquisition. According to emergentist theories of language, linguistic representations reflect patterns of language usage. Consequently, from an emergent perspective, language acquisition and learning rely on the amount and type of language input.

Nevertheless, Webster’s conception of grammar is settled. His concern, from this point on, is to find the “true principles” of the English language by

examining how the language is used—a practice he had been encouraging since 1789. Remarkably, Webster reaches a conception of language that prevails now and is certainly advanced for the time. According to Bynack:

unlike his predecessors, who approached linguistics from the point of view of the Cambridge Platonists' philosophical idealism, and unlike their materialist rivals in eighteenth-century linguistics, Webster did not treat language as a human construct, an artificial system of conventions fabricated to express truths that are external to language and that have to be grasped by non-linguistic faculties appropriate to their ideal or material location. He insisted instead that language is a natural phenomenon that has been present since the Creation (Bynack 1984, 112).

If there is an original language—that was given to humankind by God—Webster wants to find it and describe it. Consequently, on many occasions, he is descriptive. For instance, to explain “the true construction of the English language,” he analyzes many sentences and suggests that the same needs to be done with other languages (1833, 177). He claims that “the primitive language of the English nation” is the Saxon and, for that reason, all the rules of inflection and most of the rules of construction are Saxon (1789, 62). In the case of the “subjunctive form,” he holds that it exists only in books because “people in practice pay no regard to it” (1843, 354). As for connectives, he states that it is often false that they combine similar modes, tenses, and cases. His argument relies on the fact that “He lives temperately and he has long lived temperately” is a common “phrase” insists that “He is rich, but not respectable” is more common than “He is rich, but he is not respectable” (1833, 146-147). In addition, he describes that many participles “have become mere attributes as in writing paper; looking glass; spelling or pronouncing dictionary” (1833, 130). He observes that “in popular language, two negatives are used for one negation” which he considers an example of vulgar but “not incorrect language” and condemns those that “with a view to philosophical correctness, have rejected the use” (1833, 135). In fact, according to his explanations the use of two negatives would be derived from Saxon—meaning it is an example of pure language. In the case of irregular plurals, he argues that “the common practice in English is to form words in the plural number by adding s or es,” although nouns like “oxen” exist because usage permits, even though they are deviations (Webster 1843, 372). In his argumentation in favor of “to” at the end of sentences, he claims that it is correct to separate the preposition from its object. However, he holds that it is inelegant to make the distance too big as in Locke’s “of a space or number, which, in a constant and endless enlarging progression, it can in thought never attain to” (1833, 136). Also, he explains that

“plenty, as an attribute, has not yet been recognized by critics; but critics do not make language, nor can they reject what a nation has made” and since *plenty* is constantly used as an adjective in colloquial language, and is used by “the best writers”, “to cavil at this usage [...] is as idle as it is impertinent” (1833, 117). To explain the use of “who” as an interrogative—which he considers “an apparent deviation from regular construction”—he mentions that the use is both colloquial and “that of the best authors” (1833, 136).

On other occasions, mostly in his earlier writings, Webster is prescriptive. For example, he claims that the pronunciations ‘feerce’ (fierce), ‘peerce’ (pierce), ‘teerce’ (tierce) are not correct because they are “not fashionable on the English theater” (1789, 125) and argues that the pronunciation in England and in New England is ‘ferce,’ ‘perce,’ ‘terce.’ And consequently, this is the correct pronunciation. In many editions of his *Spelling Book*, he indicates that the correct pronunciation as ‘hinder,’ ‘seldom,’ ‘lantern,’ ‘spirit,’ not ‘hender,’ ‘sildom,’ ‘lantorn,’ and ‘sperrit.’ Also, he claims that the use of ‘should’ instead of ‘would’ in “If he were on earth, he should be a priest” is improper and not good English (1843, 341).

2.3 Analysis of Webster’s Inconsistencies

As has already been mentioned, Webster made “observations about language that are being discovered anew today,” although his linguistic ideas were not influential (Southard 1979, 12). As factors that contributed to Webster’s lack of influence on the study of language, Southard mentions his contentious personality, the inconsistency in his political and linguistic works, his claims that the language of the “yeomanry” should be taken as the “model” for American English and the fact that his claims were ahead of his time. However, the same author highlights that Webster identified “many qualities of what has become the American language” (21) and that he “made a number of theoretical, if not pedagogical, observations about language that have recently come to be accepted by linguists” (18). To reach those conclusions, Southard examines the *Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1787), *Dissertations* (1789), the *Philosophical and Practical Grammar of the English Language* (1807b) and *An American Dictionary*, along with letters written by Webster.

Lepore (2003), a historian, traces Webster’s life and comments on his complicated personality. She also discusses his attempt to standardize spelling and his belief that the new country needed a national government and a national language. Moreover, she comments on the opposition that *An American Dictionary* faced. Later, Lepore (2012) details the dictionary-making process and analyzes *An American Dictionary*. She discusses the influence that Webster’s conversion to Calvinism had on the dictionary, maintaining that in *An American Dictionary*

Webster explained words with reference to American people and places, but that he listed few Americanisms. She describes Webster as a moody person who always looked for trouble wherever he went.

Fodde (2015) analyzes Webster's contribution to the definition of the American language and culture by looking into *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1785), *Dissertations* (1789), *A Compendious Dictionary* (1806) and *An American Dictionary*. She too describes Webster's many accomplishments, concluding that "Noah Webster influenced the characterization and Americanization of the language spoken in America, thanks to his orthography reform, insistence on syllable respect, and on the principle of analogy" (2015 126).

This investigation follows, to a certain extent, the four studies above but adds to them by also investigating Webster's inconsistencies (rather than his contributions), by examining the influence that the historical context had on his ideas, and by tracing the development of his linguistic thought. The inconsistencies in Webster can be attributed to the fact that, as a textbook writer, he needs to author books that are "conservative enough to appeal to the masses" (Southard 1979, 15). Indeed, Webster is aware of the need to provide the upper classes with prescriptive rules since they had become overly concerned about their linguistic proficiency, but realizes that his publications are often rejected. In a letter to John Pickering in 1816, Webster states that he recognizes an "unfriendly disposition manifested" towards him "by men of high standing in the republic of letters" (Webster and Warfel 1953, 341). He even mentions that before giving his point of view, he needs to rigorously consider his claims because he knows that his words will be the object of scrutiny. Therefore, if Webster wants to maintain a successful career as a textbook author, he cannot be too innovative. Probably, for this reason, "in none of the many fields of endeavor [...] did he show his uncertainty and inconsistency more clearly than in his completion of grammars" (Shoemaker 1966, 128).

The inconsistencies in Webster's writings are also the result of a critical spirit that was permanently seeking to understand how language functions and of Webster's unconventional linguistic ideas (Southard 1979). Significantly, Webster always maintained this critical attitude. For example, he mentions that after his *Spelling Book* was published, he was surprised to discover new principles which "proved that many of the rules of our grammars and some of my own are not well-founded" (Webster and Warfel 1953, 262). He also declares that the differences between versions of his *Spelling Book* are not errors—as some reviewers were alleging—but rather that the later publications are "intended to correct the former ones" (Webster and Warfel 1953, 416-429). As a matter of fact, Partch (1939) reports that Webster's personal copy of *A Collection of Essays and Fugitiv Writings* (1790) is full of corrections and comments he made in 1838—most of them critical of his earlier ideas.

A permanent contradiction in his writings refers to the use of examples from the “best” authors. Webster had recommended against using them because many times the “eminent writer” may be a source of innumerable errors (1789, 168). Regardless of that, he mentions that his *Spelling Book* brings “examples from the best authorities” (1784, 4-6) and in 1789, he holds that his *Dissertations* are “framed upon a plan similar to those of the best lexicographers and grammarians in the British nation” (1789, x).

To confirm whether Webster in his later years still relies on “the best authorities,” this study investigated the frequently quoted sources in his *Improved Grammar* (1833), classifying them into three categories—British, American and biblical (see Table 1, 2 and 3 below). The number of times each author or work is cited is given in the tables.

TABLE 1. British sources mentioned in the *Improved Grammar* (1833).

Source	Date of birth/death	Times mentioned
John Locke	1632 1704	56
Alexander Pope	1688 1744	25
The Rambler	1750 1752	21
John Milton	1608 1674	21
Samuel Johnson	1709 1784	20
R. Lowth	1710 1787	14
G. Campbell	1719 1796	14
W. Enfield	1741 1797	13
F. Bacon	1561 1626	12
J. J. Barthelemy	1716 1795	10
W. J. Mickle	1735 1788	9
J. Thomson	1700 1748	7
J. Dryden	1631 1700	6
E. Darwin	1731 1802	6
W. Shakespeare	1564 1616	6
David Hume	1711 1776	6
William Cowper	1731 1800	5
John Hoole	1727 1803	4
Jonathan Swift	1667 1745	3
J. Addison	1672 1719	1

Webster had claimed, in 1789, that “the English language in its purity may be found in the best authors from Chaucer to the present time” (1789, 38). Table 1 (above) shows, however, that Webster does not cite Chaucer in his *Improved Grammar*, but he does mention Shakespeare, who he had characterized as a man of little learning and whose use of popular language is of “the grossest improprieties” (1807a, 10). Additionally, even though in 1807, he had described the 17th century writers as “versed in the learned languages” but having “neither taste nor a correct knowledge of English” (1807a, 8), they are frequently quoted in 1833. Actually, of the frequently mentioned British authors, nine could be considered his contemporaries while seven are from the 16th and 17th centuries (Addison, Bacon, Dryden, Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, Swift).

Furthermore, of the contemporary authors listed in Table 1, only six are exponents of the English language: Samuel Johnson, R. Lowth, G. Campbell, E. Darwin, W. Cowper and W. Enfield. Surprisingly, Webster had argued that Johnson's dictionary was not a model of correct English because he frequently quoted Shakespeare, whose language is “full of errors.” Also, he had claimed that although Johnson quoted from acceptable authors like Newton, Locke, Milton, Dryden, Addison, Swift and Pope, there is also an “injudicious selection of authorities” (1807).

Although Webster mentions Samuel Johnson twenty times, twelve of the instances correspond to quotes and eight to criticism of his ideas. At the same time, Webster quotes from *The Rambler*, a magazine written in essay form that focused on moral issues. Of the two hundred and eight essays that were published in *The Rambler*, only four were not written by Samuel Johnson. That is, by quoting from *The Rambler*, Webster is quoting texts that had been sanctioned or written by Johnson since he was the editor of this literary magazine.

Mickle, Hoole and Barthelemy are translators. The quotes from Mickle are mostly from the *Lusiad*. It is curious that he chooses three translators to quote from. Is it possible that he does not notice that a translation from another language would require, at least in the case of *Lusiad*, which is in verse, to ‘adapt’ the syntax of the English language? Webster is very critical of the translations of *The Bible*, so it is odd that he uses translations as examples.

Besides, the number of citations from Locke, Bacon, Hume and Anacharsis evidence that Webster chooses the examples not only for their grammatical adequacy, but also because of their philosophical value (see Table 1). Actually, the name J. J. Barthelemy is not even mentioned when Webster quotes from the Greek philosopher Anacharsis, indicating that knowing who made the translation is not relevant to him. His focus on philosophical value, rather than linguistic value, is even more evident when we consider his comment that Bacon uses words that are obsolete: if the words are obsolete, why quote from him?

The large number of British authors contrasts with the small number of American authors mentioned (see Table 2 below). He cites only Miller, Dwight, Trumbull and *Selfridge's trial*. There are three citations from *Life of Washington*, but there are no quotes from him. That is, of the twenty authors listed as distinguished American authors in the Preface to his *An American Dictionary* (below), he only cites Dwight and Trumbull.

At the same time, of the eleven English authors listed in the Preface to the 1828 dictionary, he cites only five in 1833: Addison, Cowper, Dryden, Milton and Thomson. Coincidentally, not even in his 1828 dictionary did he follow his own resolution, which reads:

I do not indeed expect to add celebrity to the names of Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jay, Madison, Marshall, Ramsay, Dwight, Smith, Trumbull, Hamilton, Belknap, Ames, Mason, Kent, Hare, Silliman, Cleaveland, Walsh, Irving, and many other Americans distinguished by their writings or by their science; but it is with pride and satisfaction, that I can place them, as authorities, on the same page with those of Boyle, Hooker, Milton, Dryden, Addison, Ray, Milner, Cowper, Davy, Thomson and Jameson. (Webster 1828, 2)

These findings are in line with Miyoshi's conclusion that "citations from American authors in Webster's Dictionary are quite rare, and far smaller in number than those from English authors such as Dryden, Pope, Milton, Addison, etc." (2008, 80). According to Miyoshi, the most cited sources under the letter *L* in Webster's 1828 dictionary are *The Bible*, Dryden, Shakespeare, Pope, Milton, Addison, Locke, Swift, and Bacon, in that order of frequency (2008, 78). That is, under letter *L* in Webster's 1828 dictionary *The Bible* is the most cited source. According to Hallen and Spackman (2010), under letter *S*, Webster cited 378 (three hundred seventy-eight) different sources, *The Bible* being the third most cited.

TABLE 2. American sources mentioned in the *Improved Grammar* (1833).

Source	Date of birth/death	Times mentioned
Trial of Thomas O. Selfridge for killing Charles Austin	1806	10
Samuel Miller	1769 1850	2
Theodore Dwight	1796 1866	1
John Trumbull	1756 1843	1

In 1833, Webster mentions *The Bible* more than he mentions American authors (see Table 3 below). Surprisingly—or maybe not—Webster frequently comments that the common version of the scriptures is not a model or standard of “pure English” because it presents many examples that are “contrary to established usage” (1839, 11-13). Among the many problems he identifies is “uncorrected popular language” and the use of words that are rude and unrefined (1843, 341).

As such, his preference for quoting from *The Bible* in both 1828 and 1833 can only be explained by his belief that religion is fundamental for cultural and political continuation (Hallen and Spackman 2010, 1; Rollins 1976, 418). Moreover, considering that he frequently cites from philosophical works, it becomes evident that Webster selected his examples not only for linguistic reasons, but also on the basis of their moral value, or, as Snyder puts it, his “writing never divorced the intellectual and the moral” (2002, 13).

TABLE 3. Books mentioned from *The Bible* in the *Improved Grammar* (1833).

Book	Times mentioned
Matthews	17
Numbers	17
Genesis	15
Acts	12
Corinthians	11
Bible	9
Romans	9
Luke	8
Psalms	4
Exodus	3

Nevertheless, when referring to the citations in Webster's 1828 dictionary, it is important to consider that he made use of Johnson's citations (see Hallen and Spackman 2010; Meirelles 2021; Miyoshi 2008; Reed 1962). For this reason, it is possible that the citations in the dictionary do not strictly reflect Webster's preferences. Yet, when the most cited sources in 1828 are compared to those cited in 1833, it becomes evident that they are the same. *The Bible* is the most cited source in 1833 with more than a hundred and five quotes (see Table 3). Some authors, like Addison, who were frequently cited in 1828 are only cited once in 1833, while others—like Locke, who was the seventh most cited in

1828—are very frequently cited in 1833, where he is the most cited author. That is, even though the prevalence of authors changes from one work to the other, Webster does not exclude the sources he used in 1828. Incidentally, American authors are never preferred in either.

It can be seen, then, that the many inconsistencies detected in Webster's works arise from four circumstances. First, his nationalism called for a standard language, or, at least, a language common to the American nation. Yet, as a language scholar, he had concluded that it is pedantic for grammars to provide unrealistic language models and therefore his political view and his linguistic ideas pulled in different ways. Second, he was not able to implement his linguistic ideas in his textbooks. He was a successful writer who could not risk his reputation in order to promote in his textbooks ideas he knew would not be accepted. Third, his growth as a language scholar resulted in him developing and improving his ideas over time. Consequently, his initial works and the last writings sometimes go in different directions. Lastly, he was very critical, not only of the work of others, but of his own. Accordingly, he frequently revised and corrected his ideas.

Many of the observations of the present study have already been listed by other authors. It might be said that this work resembles that of Southard (1979), but the present analysis in fact adds to it by presenting and comparing data from Webster's works, by considering his ideas from both a historical and a linguistic perspective, by trying to follow the progression of Webster's ideas over time and by trying to understand the motive behind the inconsistencies.

The present investigation also adds to Lepore (2003, 2012) in that it concentrates on Webster's linguistics ideas, rather than on historical events or on Webster's life or personal traits. Besides, the examination also complements Fodde's (2015) investigation because it analyzes Webster's contradictions, not only his contributions or accomplishments.

3. Conclusion

Webster, at first, encourages language standardization as part of his plan to promote national unity. At the time, his idea of a standard requires a model of "pure English", which could not be the English spoken in England. His solution is to search for the "true principles" in the English spoken by ordinary people since he believes that practice defines the rules of the English language, grammarians will not be able to dictate rules. He therefore abandons the idea of a standard English language (Shoemaker 1966, 252; Monaghan 1983, 124), but his proposal that English is regulated by "the general use" and "the analogy of language" persists. With time, he develops a roughly descriptive scheme to explain "the true construction of the English language" (1807b) that gives more attention to the popular use of

language. However, when writing his speller and his school material, Webster faces a dilemma because he cannot upset his readers by introducing novel ideas.

Hence Webster tries to be descriptive but follows the models current at the time, which are prescriptive. Specifically, the need to support his claims with citations from “the best authors” originated in traditional grammar. Significantly, Webster many times condemns Johnson and Lowth, who are considered “champions of prescriptivism” (Fodde 2015, 129), but other times he cites from them. Particularly, Webster exhibits convictions that are in line with the prescriptive grammatical tradition of the 18th century—reason, analogy, propriety and correctness (Fodde 2015, 129).

All things considered, four elements are always present in Webster's work through the years: reference to “the analogy of language,” reference to “the general practice,” criticism of grammar books and the citation of relevant sources. It is true that there is an oscillation between a prescriptive and a descriptive approach to language studies, but he eventually becomes mostly descriptive. Towards the end, his beliefs become more appropriate to an empirical view of language according to which knowledge comes primarily from experience. That approach to the study of language also emphasizes the need for evidence and the need to test hypotheses against observations. Principally, Webster succeeds in giving a definition of grammar that is somewhat modern and in considering the use of common people when describing language. In fact, Southard claims that Webster's linguistic ideas were innovative for the time (1979, 12). However, they have been ignored because of two factors: inconsistencies in his works and statements that were too radical for the time (1979, 12-14).

The present study may have implications in future research. First, it signals that for a better contribution to the development of the history of linguistics, “historians of linguistics must also be linguists” (Koerner and Konrad 1999). Second, it shows that the author's conflicting personality and the inconsistencies in his work often received more attention than his constant claims, i.e., his claims that it is necessary to separate what is “local” from what is “general,” that rules are formed by practice, and, mainly, that the “analogies” and the “true principles” of language should be the focus of language studies.

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