

Lines TO your LocSec

Dear Ms. Fitzgerald:

While I doubt it very much, I seriously hope that I am not the only person that writes to you this month to disagree about your column (July 2001). And being that I fear that this will not be the case, I am going to disagree in the most vehement fashion possible. I was frankly outraged. It left me with little doubt why most people seem to consider Mensans arrogant and overly-intellectual; not to mention that I found your personal attacks against the editor of the OED particularly damning.

Let me be to the point. The Oxford English Dictionary *is* a descriptivist dictionary (which you also do not seem to respect, never mind approve of) that traces the vocabulary of English from its earliest times to the present. It includes words that have not been used in a millennium. It includes words that lasted not even a century, but that have a place in the history of English-language usage. "Doh" did not-and let me stress this--did *not* get added to the dictionary because Homer Simpson's character uses it. If that was the only place the OED's editor had heard it, you would be correct in criticizing his adding it to the record of English vocabulary. However, this word is used by people who don't even watch *the Simpsons*, in everyday conversations, and that is why it was added, and why it deserved to be added. You may object to the addition of what you call a "nonsense syllable" to the OED, but let me remind you of other "nonsense syllables" you are likely to find in the OED: *pst, hm, huh, duh, shh, agh, eek, oops, ouch, ick, ahah, ha, phew, um*. Should we also be excising these words from the dictionary as well? What makes these better words than "doh"? And I can tell you that, having translated Ancient Greek, which in its time was like English is today, those little exclamatory "nonsense syllables" can make all the difference in a translation of a text. A couple centuries from now, someone examining the English of today is likely to find here or there in period prose this exclamation, and when they drag out their OED and find "archaic" written next to it, we can all be happy, but this hypothetical future reader is going to be even happier to find some context for this reading, rather than just "exclamation, meaning and source unknown."

Besides being dead wrong about the inclusion of "doh", I also would have to fault you for the manner in which you attempted to argue your outrage. Your personal attacks against John Simpson, the editor of the OED, were egregious enough, but I was most thoroughly offended by your desire to elevate English to some pristine and "sacred" pedestal. Speakers of English are *not* speakers of French. We neither want, nor require, a body watching over us telling us what our language may or may not look like. This is surely the way to stagnation and death. As a lover of English, and a student of linguistics, I am particularly appalled by your appeal to a "morality of language". *What?* English does not need you to defend it. English is the way it is because of its flexibility, being welcome to new vocabulary, and eliminating after time, words it no longer deems necessary. Those of us who don't like "doh" personally-and I include myself among them-can choose to simply avoid using it, and hope that in time, others will get over this linguistic fad as well. Just because it has been added to the OED, does not mean we have to tolerate the word in formal writing, nor does it suddenly qualify as "Standard English", not any more than the other "nonsense syllables" I cited above. John Simpson is not really paid to be the gardener. *We* are the gardeners--we, not merely the educated and brilliant, but we, the masses, we, all the speakers of English. John Simpson's job is to describe what we are doing, and he has done his job well in this case.

And to top it all off, what ever happened to having a sense of humor about these things? I mean, do you *really* think that this silly, stupid "nonsense syllable" is going to undermine the

beauty and wonder (to borrow your tone) of the other 550,000 words that are far more thoroughly entrenched in the language? Give me a break!

Betsy McCall
August 2001