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WORDS THAT DIED TWICE

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Abstract: Lexicography has long treated the disappearance of a word sense as a single, datable event: a form falls out of use, editors mark it "obsolete," and the entry closes. This article argues that obsolescence in dictionaries is rarely so tidy, and that many senses undergo a second, administrative death — what this article terms semantic reburial — when dictionaries are revised. A sense may survive for generations in a dormant, labeled state, cited but unused, before a later revision quietly removes, compresses, or relabels it, severing its last visible tie to the living record of the language. This second death is not linguistic but editorial: it results from decisions about space, citation currency, corpus evidence, and audience, rather than from any change in speech itself. Drawing on the editorial history of major historical dictionaries, particularly the Oxford English Dictionary, and on the theoretical literature on lexicographic obsolescence and diachronic semantics, this article develops a framework for distinguishing primary semantic death (loss of use in speech or writing) from secondary, editorial death (loss of representation in reference works). It proposes a typology of reburial practices — excision, subordination, relabeling, and silent merger — and examines the historiographical consequences of each. The article contends that dictionaries are not neutral archives of a language's past but active agents in determining which parts of that past remain visible, and that revision policy therefore deserves the same critical scrutiny historians of the book have long given to canon formation and textual editing. The discussion closes by considering what responsibilities, if any, lexicographers bear toward senses they choose to bury a second time, and what this means for corpus linguists and historians who rely on dictionaries as primary evidence of semantic change.
Keywords: Lexicography, semantic change, obsolescence, dictionary revision, historical linguistics, Oxford English Dictionary, corpus linguistics, metalexicography, diachronic semantics, textual editing.

Introduction

Every dictionary is, among other things, a record of dying. Words and senses enter general use, circulate, narrow, broaden, and eventually fall silent; lexicographers mark this silence with a label — "obsolete," "archaic," "rare" — and move on. This process is usually described as though it happens once: a sense lives, then it dies, then the dictionary notes the death. But the history of major reference works shows a second and less examined pattern. Senses that have already been marked obsolete do not necessarily remain in the record indefinitely. When dictionaries are revised — a process that, for works like the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), can span decades and multiple editorial generations — obsolete senses are themselves vulnerable to removal, compression, or reclassification. A sense that was pronounced dead in one edition can, in effect, be buried a second time in the next.

This article calls that second event semantic reburial: the editorial act of removing, subordinating, or silently merging an already-obsolete sense during dictionary revision, such that its visibility in the reference record is reduced or eliminated independently of any further change in the language itself. The distinction matters because the two deaths have entirely different causes. The first, primary death belongs to the history of the speech community: people stop using a word or sense, for reasons ranging from technological change to taboo avoidance to simple lexical competition. The second, reburial, belongs to the history of the book and the institution: it results

from editorial judgments about space constraints, corpus availability, citation currency, projected audience, and the practical limits of what a revision can accomplish in a given cycle.

Understanding this distinction has consequences beyond lexicographic housekeeping. Corpus linguists and historians of ideas routinely treat dictionary entries as evidence for when a sense was current and when it lapsed. If dictionaries themselves periodically erase or compress the record of already-dead senses, then absence from a later edition cannot be read as evidence about the language; it is, at most, evidence about editorial policy at a particular moment. This article develops a typology of reburial practices, situates them within the broader literature on metalexicography and diachronic semantics, and argues that revision history deserves the same source-critical attention that textual scholars give to manuscript transmission and canon formation.

Literature Review

The theoretical vocabulary for describing semantic death is well developed. Traugott and Dasher's work on semantic change established frameworks for tracking how senses narrow, broaden, or shift register over time, while Blank's typology of motivations for lexical and semantic change remains a standard reference for why senses become obsolete in the first place. Geeraerts's Diachronic Prototype Semantics extended this into a cognitive framework for understanding sense death as part of ordinary polysemous variation rather than as an anomaly requiring separate explanation.

The institutional history of dictionary-making is a distinct but overlapping literature. Charlotte Brewer's scholarship on the editorial history of the OED, along with Lynda Mugglestone's studies of the dictionary's compilation, demonstrate that entries are shaped as much by editorial constraint, ideology, and available evidence as by linguistic fact. Sarah Ogilvie's work on the OED's treatment of loanwords and world Englishes shows explicitly that inclusion and exclusion are editorial acts with historiographical consequences, not passive reflections of usage. Sidney Landau's Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography remains the standard practical account of how revision cycles actually operate, including the space and citation pressures that govern what survives a new edition.

What is largely absent from this literature is a sustained treatment of what happens to senses after they have already been labeled obsolete — that is, whether the label itself is a stable endpoint or merely a way station toward eventual removal. This article positions itself at that gap, treating dictionary revision as a second site of semantic death distinct from, and analytically separable from, the original loss of use in the speech community.

Main Body

The case for treating reburial as a distinct phenomenon rests on separating three moments in a sense's life within a dictionary. The first is entry: a sense is attested with sufficient citation to justify inclusion. The second is labeling: usage evidence thins, and editors mark the sense "obsolete," "archaic," or "rare," typically while retaining its citations. The third, and the one this article isolates, is revision: at some later point, the entry is reworked, and the editors must decide what to do with a sense that has already been dormant, in editorial terms, for one or more editorial generations.

Four outcomes are available at this third moment, and they can be organized into a typology.

Excision is the most direct form of reburial: the sense is deleted from the entry entirely, along with its citations. This is rare in the largest historical dictionaries, whose institutional mandate is comprehensiveness, but it is common in smaller derivative works — desk dictionaries, learner's dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries — where space is a hard constraint and the obsolete sense competes directly with senses in current use. A sense excised from a desk dictionary has not necessarily disappeared from the language's documented history, but it has disappeared from the reference work most readers will consult, which functionally reburies it for the general public even while it may survive in a larger historical work.

Subordination is a softer form: the sense remains but is demoted, compressed, or stripped of some of its supporting citations. A sense that once carried three or four illustrative quotations spanning several centuries may, in a revision, retain only the earliest and the latest, with the intervening evidence — evidence that documented the sense's actual currency and range of use — silently dropped. The sense survives nominally but loses the evidentiary texture that let readers judge how alive it had been.

Relabeling changes the sense's diachronic status without removing it: a sense marked "rare" in one edition may be reclassified as "obsolete," or a chronological span may be narrowed as editors decide that later citations were errors, nonce uses, or not sufully independent attestations. This is defensible on evidentiary grounds — corpora improve, and revision is partly about correcting earlier overreach — but it also means that a sense's very "aliveness," as the dictionary records it, is subject to revision even when no new evidence about the sense's actual death has emerged.

Silent merger is the least visible form. Two senses that were once distinguished are collapsed into one during revision, on the judgment that the earlier distinction was too fine-grained or was itself an artifact of insufficient corpus evidence. The result is that the more specific, usually older sense effectively disappears as a discrete entity, absorbed into a broader sense that may not preserve its particular nuance or its citation history.

These four practices share a common structural feature: none of them is prompted by new evidence that the underlying word sense was more or less dead than previously believed. They are prompted by the practical conditions of revision itself — the available page or database budget, the priorities of the editorial team, the state of digitized corpora at the time of revision, and judgments about what a contemporary readership needs. This is precisely what distinguishes reburial from the primary semantic death that lexicography exists to document. The speech community kills a sense once; the dictionary, through its own institutional life cycle, can kill it again, and again, at each subsequent revision.

The consequences are historiographical as much as lexical. A scholar working from a current edition of a dictionary and finding no trace of a given sense may conclude that the sense is either unattested or too marginal to matter, when in fact it may have been fully attested in an earlier edition and simply not carried forward. This is analogous to the problem textual critics face with manuscript transmission, where a reading's absence from a late copy cannot be assumed to reflect its absence from the tradition as a whole; the dictionary, like the manuscript stemma, has its own transmission history, and later "editions" are not simply expansions of earlier ones but selective re-transmissions.

Research Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, comparative-historiographical methodology rather than a corpus-quantitative one, since its object of study is editorial decision-making rather than usage in the speech community. The primary method is diachronic comparison of successive editions and fascicles of major historical dictionaries, principally the first edition of the OED (1884–1928), its Supplements, and the ongoing third edition revision (OED3, begun 1993), supplemented by comparison with revision practice in other long-running historical dictionaries such as the Dictionary of American Regional English and the Middle English Dictionary. Entries were selected purposively rather than randomly, focusing on cases already documented in the metalexicographic literature — particularly by Brewer, Mugglestone, and Ogilvie — as instances where editorial policy, rather than new usage evidence, visibly altered a sense's status between editions.

For each selected entry, the analysis compares the sense inventory, citation set, and diachronic labels across editions, categorizing observed changes according to the four-part typology developed in the Main Body (excision, subordination, relabeling, silent merger). Because full editorial correspondence and internal style-guide documentation are not always publicly available, the analysis relies where possible on published editorial commentary, including the OED's own published

editorial notes and the secondary scholarship documenting internal revision policy, rather than on speculative reconstruction of editors' reasoning.

This approach has clear limitations. It cannot establish how frequently reburial occurs across the dictionary as a whole, since systematic entry-by-entry comparison across full editions is beyond the scope of a single study and would require dictionary-internal data not uniformly available to outside researchers. The methodology is therefore illustrative and typological rather than statistical, intended to establish the phenomenon's existence and categorize its forms rather than to quantify its prevalence.

Results

The comparative analysis confirms that all four reburial types identified in the Main Body are attested in the editorial history of major historical dictionaries, though with different frequency and visibility. Subordination and relabeling are the most commonly documented forms in the secondary literature on OED revision, consistent with the dictionary's institutional commitment to comprehensiveness, which makes outright excision comparatively rare in the historical OED itself but far more common in its derivative desk and concise editions. Silent merger is the least visible in the published record precisely because it leaves no obvious trace in the surface structure of the revised entry — a merged sense simply appears as a single, broader entry, and its prior division is recoverable only by consulting the earlier edition directly.

A recurring pattern across the examined cases is that reburial is more likely to affect senses that were already marked "rare" or "obsolete" with a thin citation base, since these are the senses most vulnerable to being judged, in a later revision, as not worth the editorial and spatial cost of retention. This creates a compounding effect: senses closest to primary death are also the senses most exposed to secondary, editorial death, meaning that the least-documented parts of the language's past are systematically the least likely to survive successive rounds of revision.

The analysis also finds that reburial is unevenly distributed across derivative and flagship editions of the same dictionary family. Flagship historical editions, whose institutional identity depends on comprehensiveness, show reburial mainly through subordination and relabeling; derivative desk and pocket editions, constrained by fixed page budgets, show it overwhelmingly through excision.

Discussion

These findings suggest that "obsolete" is best understood not as an endpoint but as a probationary status within the dictionary's own institutional life, one that leaves a sense more exposed, rather than protected, at the next revision. This has a direct bearing on how corpus linguists and historians use dictionaries as evidence. A sense's absence from a current edition is frequently treated as equivalent to its absence from the historical record of the language, but the results here indicate that the two are not equivalent: absence from a current edition may reflect editorial triage at a specific revision rather than any linguistic fact about the sense's actual currency or demise.

This has implications for how dictionaries should be cited in historical and philological scholarship. Citing "the OED" without edition or revision date obscures precisely the kind of reburial documented here, since different editions may present materially different sense inventories for the same headword. Best practice, consistent with the source-criticism norms already standard in textual scholarship, would require scholars to cite the specific edition or revision consulted and, where a sense's obsolescence status is analytically important, to check it against the earliest available edition rather than assuming continuity across revisions.

The findings also raise a normative question about lexicographic responsibility. If dictionaries are, as this article argues, active agents in determining which parts of the language's past remain visible, then decisions to bury a sense a second time are not merely practical but historiographically consequential, analogous to decisions by textual editors about which manuscript readings to relegate

to an apparatus or omit altogether. This does not mean every dictionary must preserve every obsolete sense in perpetuity — comprehensiveness has real costs — but it does suggest that revision policies affecting already-obsolete senses deserve the same transparency and documentation that editorial policies for new senses already receive.

Conclusion

This article has argued that dictionary revision is not simply a process of updating a language's record to reflect ongoing change, but is itself capable of producing a second, distinct kind of semantic death. Where the first death belongs to the speech community — the gradual falling away of a word or sense from ordinary use — the second belongs to the institution: the editorial decision, made under real constraints of space, evidence, and audience, to excise, subordinate, relabel, or silently merge a sense that has already been marked obsolete. Calling this process semantic reburial makes visible a distinction that is otherwise easy to overlook, precisely because both deaths converge on the same outcome — a sense's disappearance from view — while arising from entirely different causes.

The typology developed here, comprising excision, subordination, relabeling, and silent merger, is offered as a starting point rather than an exhaustive classification. Future work with greater access to internal editorial archives and style-guide documentation could refine these categories, establish their relative frequency across a full dictionary rather than a purposive sample, and extend the framework to bilingual and non-English historical dictionaries, where different institutional pressures — smaller editorial teams, different funding models, different relationships to a standardizing state — might produce different reburial patterns altogether.

The broader implication is methodological. Dictionaries function, for much of historical linguistics and the history of ideas, as de facto primary sources for when a word or sense was alive. This article suggests that such use requires the same source-critical caution long applied to manuscripts and printed editions: a later dictionary is not a simple superset of an earlier one, and its silences cannot automatically be read as evidence about the language rather than evidence about the archive. Recognizing semantic reburial as a distinct editorial phenomenon does not diminish the achievement of comprehensive historical lexicography; it simply asks that the dictionary itself be read, on occasion, with the same critical eye that lexicographers have long trained on the language it describes.

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