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Dictionaries take lead in redefining modern marriage

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Now that Massachusetts has legalized same-sex "marriage," will major dictionaries expand their definitions of the word "marriage" itself?

The answer is simple: They already have.

Advocates of traditional marriage who once relied on dictionary definitions to bolster their case for the preservation of "one man-one woman" marriage might have to cite another authority.

Boston-based Houghton Mifflin, publisher of the American Heritage Dictionary, added a "same sex" clause to its definition of marriage in 2000.

"A union between two persons having the customary but usually not the legal force of marriage," the addition -- or "sub sense" -- states.

"But we'll be altering that in the future to reflect the Massachusetts decision," editor Joe Pickett said.

"There have been a lot of changes in the defining of family terms in the past 15 years," Mr. Pickett continued. "A family is not necessarily a 'nuclear' family anymore. We've also had to re-examine definitions influenced by reproductive technology and accommodate the different possibilities of 'mother' and 'father.' It's an interesting time."

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) retooled "marriage" in 2001.

"It's not so much a redefinition, because our definition did not specify marriage had to be between a man and woman in the first place," said editor Jesse Sheidlower from OED's New York

headquarters.

Indeed, the OED defines marriage as, "The condition of being a husband or wife; the relation between persons married to each other; matrimony."

But the entry includes a note that explains: "The term is now sometimes used with reference to long-term relationships between partners of the same sex."

References to same-sex "marriage" also can be found in the Oxford dictionary under the "gay" and "homosexual" entries.

Merriam-Webster -- publisher of the nation's best-selling desk dictionary -- expanded its definition of marriage last July, with the publication of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Edition.

The definition now includes the phrase: "The state of being united to a person of the same sex in a relationship like that of a traditional marriage."

In previous volumes, the publisher defined marriage as "the state of, or relation between, a man and a woman who have become husband and wife." This particular passage often has been cited word-for-word in sermons or editorials in favor of traditional marriage in recent years.

"Some writers have felt adding the phrase 'according to Webster's' is sufficient to justify their case, and we are flattered by that," Merriam-Webster spokesman Arthur Bicknell said.

He explained that watchful dictionary editors must parse new words or slang in contemporary culture, but they also must monitor "existing words with a new sense," basing their judgment on "reading and marking" -- tracking new uses of a word from current sources such as newspapers or television.

"We look for the full breadth of its usage and to provide our readers with accurate information about current usage patterns," he said.

After adding a same-sex phrase to their definition of marriage, the Massachusetts-based company issued a statement:

"This new sense of the word 'marriage' has demonstrated frequent and consistent use in a broad spectrum of carefully edited publications and has appeared in writings on the subject by proponents and opponents alike."

The publisher chose mission over moralizing, however.

The statement continued: "We often hear from people who believe that we are promoting (or failing to promote) a particular social or political agenda when we make choices about which words to include in the dictionary and how those words should be defined. We hear such criticism from all parts of the political spectrum. We're genuinely sorry when an entry in one of our dictionaries is found to be offensive or upsetting, but we can't allow such considerations to deflect us from our primary job as lexicographers, which is to create a painstakingly accurate and comprehensive record of the English language."

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