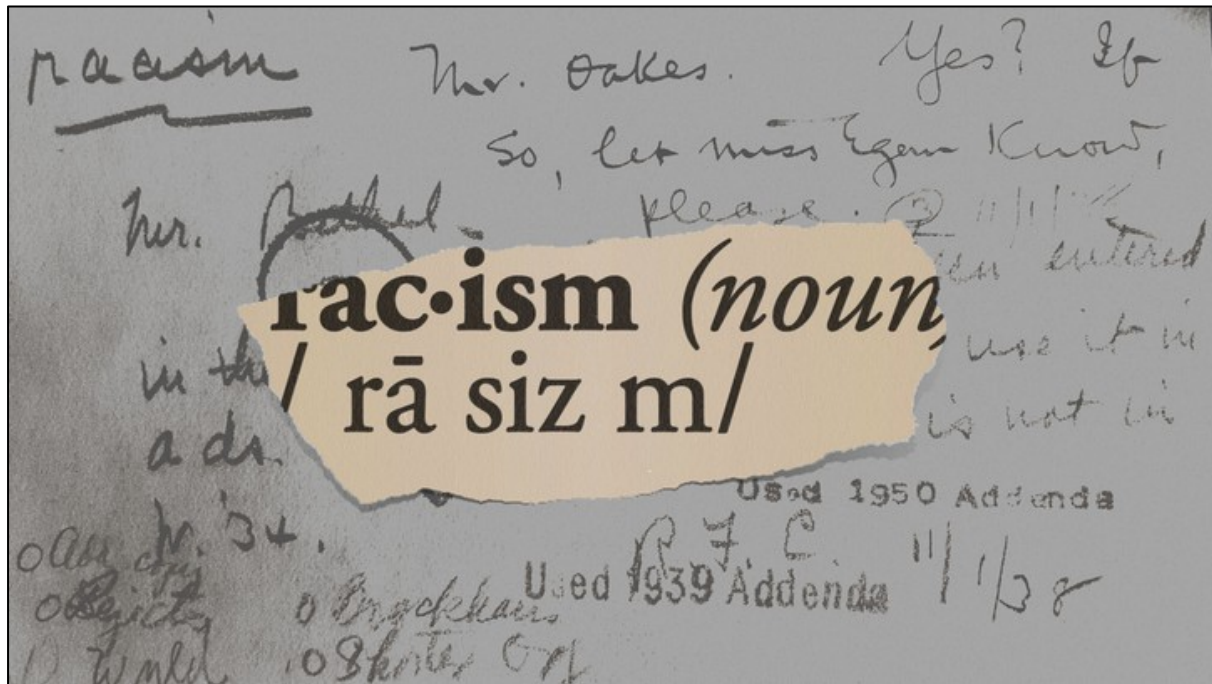


The Evolution of *Racism*

A look at how the word, a surprisingly recent addition to the English lexicon, made its way into the dictionary



A close look at how Merriam-Webster's definition of racism has evolved over time reveals a complex narrative.

By Ben Zimmer
5 September 2020

In June, as Black Lives Matter protests were in full swing after the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, a dictionary definition made headlines. The definition that drew so much attention was the one that *Merriam-Webster* gave for the word *racism*. The news was that the dictionary publisher was going to be revising its entry for the term after hearing from a young Black activist from Missouri, Kennedy Mitchum.

Mitchum had contacted *Merriam-Webster* because she was dissatisfied with what she found when she looked up *racism* in the dictionary's online portal. The first definition given for *racism* was "a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race." As she told CNN at the time, "The way that racism occurs in real life is not just prejudice. It's the systemic racism that is happening for a lot of Black Americans."

The idea that racism could be systemic, and not just a matter of personal prejudice, was actually conveyed in the second definition given by *Merriam-Webster*: "a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles" or "a political or social system founded on racism." Nonetheless, as *Merriam-Webster*'s editor at large, Peter Sokolowski, explained, "the idea of an

asymmetrical power structure” could be expressed more clearly, so the entry was revisited to bring that sense to the fore.

Now the revised entry for *racism* has finally arrived, included in the online update *Merriam-Webster* published yesterday. As promised, the entry underscores some nuances, though the revision is not a complete rewrite. As before, the first definition given relates to personal belief and attitudes. But the revised second definition—“the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another; specifically: white supremacy”—better highlights what Mitchum was looking for. Additionally, the entry is now enriched by illustrative quotations from such writers as Angela Y. Davis, bell hooks, Mariana Calvo, and Imani Perry, and the activist Bree Newsome.

When Mitchum’s appeal to *Merriam-Webster* attracted news coverage in June, many commentators portrayed the story in broad strokes as “the dictionary gets woke.” Depending on one’s political perspective, that might be seen as either a laudable step in the path to progressive enlightenment or as a capitulation to the forces of political correctness. But a closer look at how *Merriam-Webster*’s definition of *racism* has evolved over time reveals a much more complex narrative.

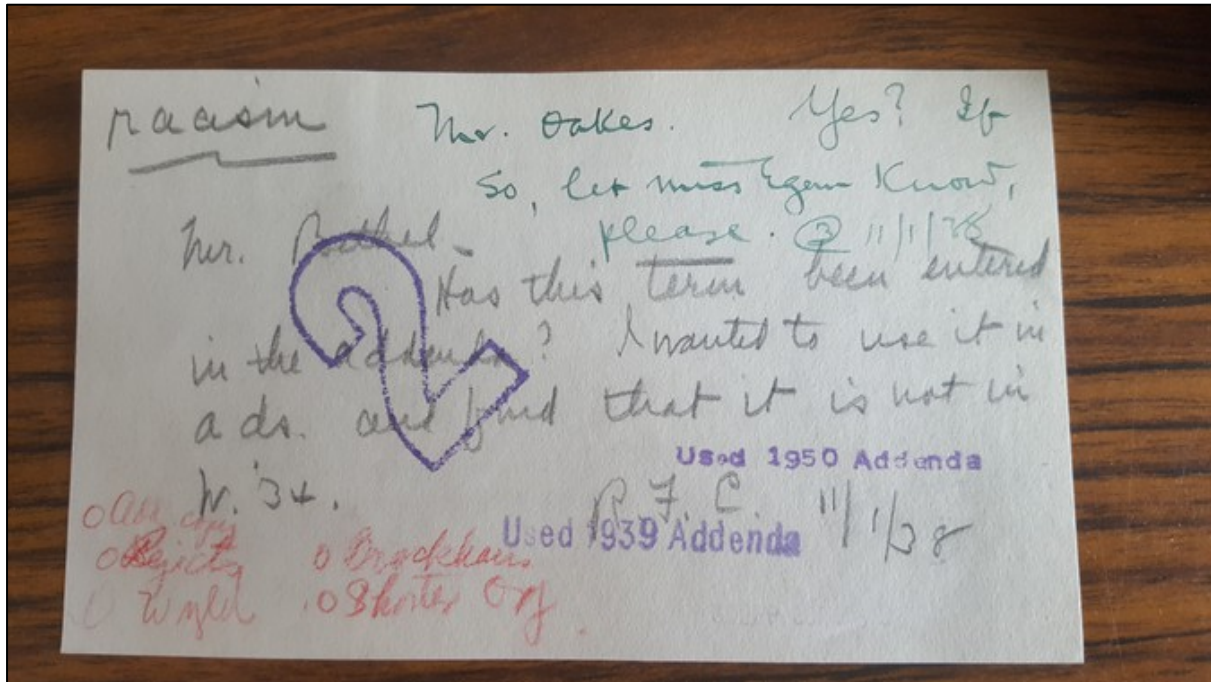
Racism and *racist* are surprisingly recent additions to the English lexicon. You won’t find those words in the writings of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Abraham Lincoln. While the *Oxford English Dictionary* currently dates *racism* in English to 1903 and *racist* to 1919, the terms were still rarely used in the early decades of the 20th century. The pioneering civil-rights activist and journalist Ida B. Wells, for instance, instead used phrases like *race hatred* and *race prejudice* in her memoir, *Crusade for Justice*, which she began writing in 1928 but left unfinished when she died three years later.

When *Merriam-Webster* published the second edition of its unabridged *New International Dictionary*, in 1934, *racism* was nowhere to be found. The editors did include another, related term, which was more popular at the time: *racialism*, defined as “racial characteristics, tendencies, prejudices, or the like; spec., race hatred.” But *racism* was not yet on the radar of the lexicographers diligently at work at *Merriam-Webster*’s Springfield, Massachusetts, office.

That all changed thanks to a perceptive observation by one member of the editorial staff named Rose Frances Egan. Egan, a graduate of Syracuse and Columbia who studied the history of aesthetics, came on board as an assistant editor for the second edition of the *New International Dictionary*. She was also tasked with writing entries for *Webster’s Dictionary of Synonyms*, which she worked on for several years before its first edition was published in 1942.

A handwritten slip tucked away in *Merriam-Webster*’s archive tells the story. (Before the advent of email, interoffice communication among the editors in Springfield would typically be carried out by exchanging notes on pink slips of paper, still known affectionately as “the pinks.”) This particular slip, dated November 1, 1938, was written by Egan, who asked a fellow editor, John P. Bethel, about the status of the

word *racism*. “Has this term been entered in the Addenda?” Egan asked Bethel. “I wanted to use it in a ds. and found that it is not in W. 34.”



Egan's note to Morse on November 1,

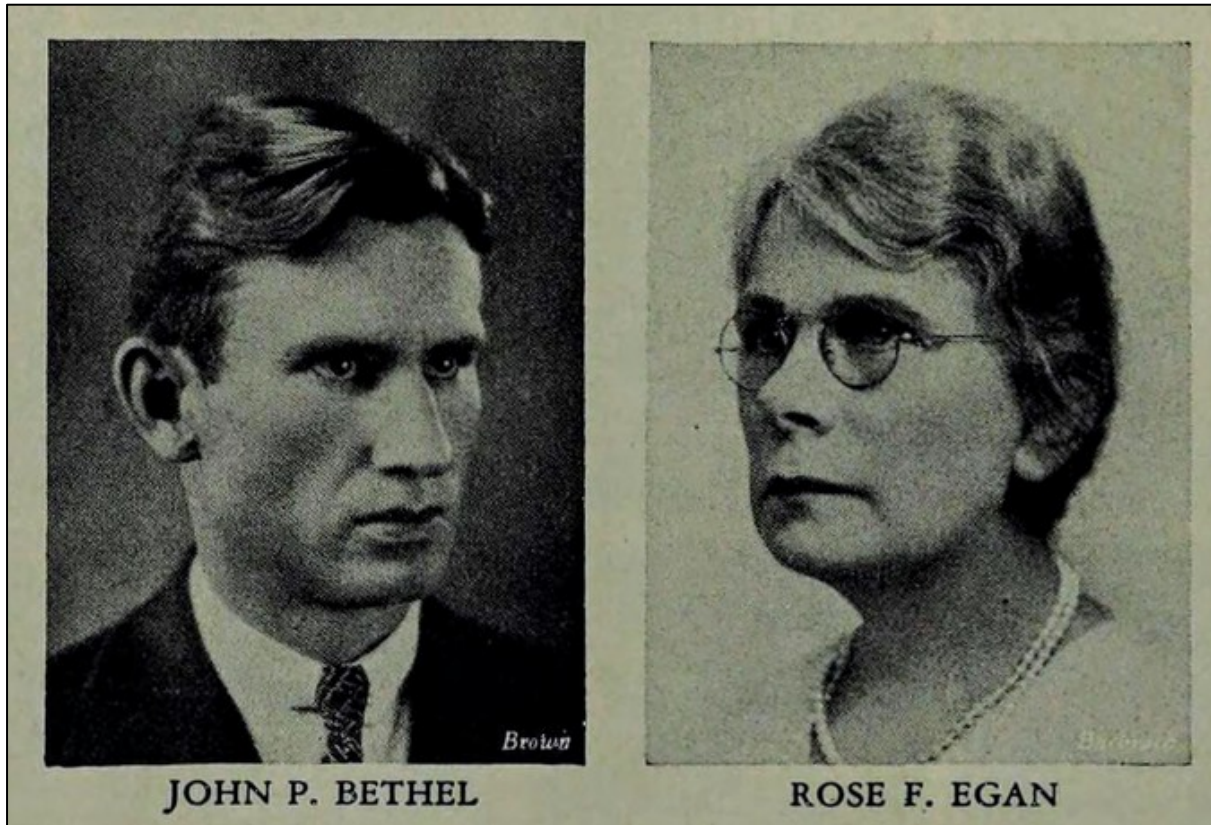
John Morse, a former president and publisher at *Merriam-Webster*, guided me through the obscure in-house notations on the slip with the eagerness of an Egyptologist deciphering the Rosetta Stone. Egan knew that there was no *racism* entry in the 1934 *Webster's New International* but was inquiring whether it was slated for future printings as part of the Addenda, the section in the front of the dictionary for new words that came to the editors' attention too late for inclusion in the main text.

When Egan said she wanted to use it in a “ds.,” that was short for *discriminated synonym*, the term of art for the items considered in the entries of the *Dictionary of Synonyms* that Egan was hard at work drafting. Any word used in a secondary work like the synonym dictionary, according to *Merriam-Webster* policy, should also be found in the flagship unabridged dictionary.

Sure enough, when the *Dictionary of Synonyms* was first published a few years later, it included an entry with the word *racism* in it. A paragraph teasing apart the differences between the words *citizen*, *subject*, and *national* included this sentence: “There is also a tendency to prefer *national* to *subject* or *citizen* in some countries where the sovereign power is not clearly vested in a monarch or ruler or in the people, or where theories of racism prevail.”

Egan likely had in mind Nazi Germany's anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws, passed in 1935, which stripped Jews of their citizenship while they remained subjects of the Reich. Indeed, when the word *racism* appeared in print in the late 1930s (still vying with *racialism* as the preferred term), it was most frequently in the context of European fascism under Hitler and Mussolini, with one definition drafted by the *Merriam-Webster* editors referring to “totalitarian ideology” and another to “the Nazi assumption of Teutonic superiority and attendant anti-Semitism.” Just a week

after Egan made her inquiry about *racism* in 1938, German Jews were viciously attacked in the Nazi pogrom known as Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass.



JOHN P. BETHEL

ROSE F. EGAN

A few weeks later, the activist Jesuit priest Father John LaFarge Jr. spoke out against racism (newspaper accounts at the time gave the still-novel term scare quotes), warning that the destructive forces of racism were gaining ground not just in Europe but in the United States as well. Speaking at a dinner sponsored by the Catholic Interracial Council, LaFarge explicitly called out American racism against “Negroes, foreigners, and Jews.”

Even if most Americans were unfamiliar with the word *racism* being applied to American life, doctrines of white supremacy in the country were, of course, widespread and pernicious at the time. Racist tracts such as Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) provided cover for segregation and anti-immigration laws in the U.S., and indeed served as inspiration to Hitler for the Nazis’ own racist policies.

When the entry was finally printed in the unabridged dictionary’s 1939 Addenda, the Nazi references were removed; the definition instead spoke more broadly of an “assumption of inherent racial superiority or the purity and superiority of certain races, and consequent discrimination against other races.”

Still, American readers consulting that dictionary entry would have immediately thought of the Nazi regime, and not necessarily homegrown racism of the kind Father LaFarge was warning about. But over time, *Merriam-Webster’s* definition of *racism* was further de-Nazified, as postwar Americans became cognizant of racial injustices against Black people and other marginalized groups on the home front.

Egan's realization in 1938 that *racism* was missing from *Merriam-Webster's* dictionaries was, as Morse puts it, proof of her keen "lexicographical self-awareness." "This was at a time when the word was becoming natural to use, but a flag went up: Is it in the dictionary?" Morse told me. "It's a great 'aha' moment in the history of the English language, and we should celebrate Rose Egan for it."

And while *Merriam-Webster's* entry for *racism* was no doubt in need of a change when Kennedy Mitchum appropriately called it out earlier this summer, the dictionary's efforts to grapple with the term, ever since Egan first noticed it was in need of defining, are worth considering. When the *racism* entry came due for an overhaul in the third edition of the *New International* in 1961, for instance, Editor in Chief Philip B. Gove and his staff determined that *racism*, by then no longer so associated with Nazi ideology, primarily referred to personal beliefs about racial superiority.

But they made room for a second sense allowing that *racism* could also relate to institutional forces embedding implicit bigotry more broadly in society. And a third numbered sense defined it more succinctly as "racial prejudice or discrimination." In fact, it was this 1961 definition that Mitchum would have seen when she consulted *Merriam-Webster's* online dictionary in June. The legacy of past editions meant that the entry was so broadly construed that it did not seem particularly applicable to systemic racism as experienced by Black Americans.

Laying out the semantics of the word has always been a balancing act between what scholars on race like Camara Phyllis Jones have identified as "institutionalized" racism on the one hand and "personally mediated" or "internalized" racism on the other. With the institutionalized side of racism coming to the fore in the current discourse, dictionaries need to reflect that change of emphasis. Definitions are never set in stone, and the twists and turns of how *racism* has been defined illustrate how the meanings of such contentious terms are always subject to reevaluation and contestation.