

All About "Ms." -- An Interview with Alma Graham

by Dure Jo Gillikin, Retired Teacher Representative

In 1972, Alma Graham became the first lexicographer to put the courtesy title "Ms." into a dictionary. To find out how and why this term originated, how it was popularized, and how it should be used, I asked her the following set of questions.

Who originated the term "Ms." as a courtesy title? When and why was it first used?

The eleventh edition of Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary gives the date of origin as 1949. I remember reading--perhaps in the first issue of *Ms. Magazine*--that "Ms." was first used in the 1940s by people who prepared mailing labels for magazines and advertisements. With many women working outside the home during World War II, taking over jobs traditionally done by men, a female householder's marital status couldn't simply be assumed. Since "Mr.," the abbreviation for "Master," didn't reveal marital status, the bulk mailers blended "Miss" and "Mrs.," the two abbreviations for "Mistress," into a shorter form parallel to Mr.: Ms. So it seems that the origin of Ms. was purely commercial. (I'd hoped to be able to research this further on a Google search; but all I turned up was multiple sclerosis and Mississippi.) Those who say that Ms. is an abbreviation of nothing are simply ignorant of etymology.

How successful is the use of Ms. now, and why? How is Ms. correctly used?

Given the widespread acceptance and use of Ms. now, it's funny to remember the resistance we encountered in the 1970s. A. M. Rosenthal--who exerted editorial power over *The New York Times* throughout the '70s and served as executive editor from 1977 to 1986--forbade the use of Ms. during his tenure. Israel Shenker managed to sneak it past him, though, when he was a *Times* columnist. In

the early '70s, when I was associate editor of the American Heritage Dictionary, Shenker interviewed me for a piece he was writing on trademarks. He quoted me as follows: "I want to see the day when I can write Jell-O with a lower-case letter," said Ms. Graham (who boasts that she was the first to put Ms. into a dictionary.) If Ms. Graham will be good enough to consult the Random House Dictionary, she will find the gelatinous answer to a maiden's prayers, jello in letters small but firm." Daring as Shenker was at the time, he couldn't resist getting my marital status in there with "maiden."

Ms. Magazine, first published in 1972, was instrumental in popularizing Ms. Ultimately, it was widely adopted because it filled a real need in the language. More and more, as women claimed careers of their own, many resisted being labeled according to whether or not they were married. Originally used only when marital status was unknown, Ms. came to be used when such status was considered irrelevant. Some mistakenly thought it was to be used if a woman was divorced, but the whole point of Ms. is that it says nothing about a woman's marital status. The biggest faux pas is using it before a man's name as a substitute for Mrs., as in Ms. Frank Mitchell. Ms. should always be followed by a woman's name: first and last or last name only, as in Ms. Jo Gillikin, Ms. Gillikin. Informally, it may be followed by a woman's first name only, as in Ms. Jo.

How did the title Ms. get into the dictionary? Israel Shenker said you boasted you were the first to put it in.

That's right. Actually, many people are involved in the decision to put a new word into a dictionary. There are the citation readers who scan publications for new words and new senses of existing words. Then come the editors who determine when a word has come into general circulation. Finally, a lexicographer has to define it based on the contexts in which it appears. *The American Heritage School Dictionary*, published in 1972, was the first dictionary to include the title Ms. Our usage editor, Bruce Bohle, came to me one day and said he thought the term was in sufficiently wide use to be entered. We discussed the fact that a standard pronunciation had not yet been agreed upon, so we covered that in a note. I defined *Ms.* as "An abbreviation used as a title of courtesy before a woman's last name or before her given name and last name, whether she is married or not." The note observed that "Ms. has yet to find an agreed pronunciation: (mis), (miz), and simply (em es) seem to be the possibilities." Of course, usage soon determined that it would be pronounced (miz). Our dictionary broke new ground in eliminating the sexist stereotypes that we found throughout the schoolbooks of the 1960s, a process I described in "The Making of a Nonsexist Dictionary," which appeared in *Ms. Magazine* in December 1973 and was reprinted in *ETC. A Review of General Semantics* in 1974.

That was very informative. Thank you.

Thank *you* for asking, Ms. Gillikin.