
Safire had been a member of the DSNA since 1983, and he was unabashed in his lexicophilia. “I like dictionaries,” he put it plainly in his introduction to the 2007 edition of The New York Times Guide to Essential Knowledge. “You may know my byline as that of a recovering vituperative right-wing scandalmonger. But I’m also a lifelong language maven lapping up lexicography (and apparently afflicted with alliteration).”


In the introduction to the third edition, Safire credited two main inspirations. The first was Eric Partridge, whose lone authorship of the Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English (1961) convinced him that he too could undertake a one-man dictionary project, despite lacking a scholarly background. As Safire recalled in a 2008 interview I conducted with him for the Visual Thesaurus website, “Samuel Johnson did one, Noah Webster did one, and Eric Partridge did one. Why can’t I try?”

The second inspirational force singled out by Safire was Fred Cassidy, founding editor of the Dictionary of American Regional English. Safire called DARE “the most exciting new linguistic project in the twentieth century,” and indeed he was a strong supporter of the dictionary throughout its history. In an early “On Language” column, in November 1979, he exulted in the way that the regionalisms of DARE illustrated “the color and excitement in our migrating, changing language.”

Safire gave much-needed exposure to DARE, and he also valued the contributions of other American lexicographers, with whom he would consult when researching the finer points of English usage and etymology. Though he often came under fire from linguistic scholars for oversights in his analysis, he readily deferred to experts who corrected him. He was, after all, merely a “maven,” with the Yiddish-derived self-effacement that the term implied. “When someone says ‘I am a maven,’” he explained in a 1985 column, “a note of self-mockery is added, as if to say ‘and if I’m not such an expert, sue me.’” For his humor, warmth, and intellectual openness, the maven will be sorely missed.