

Anchor Baby: A Term Redefined as a Slur

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What does the term “anchor baby” mean? If you were to look it up in the American Heritage Dictionary, you would find a new definition since last week.

The term was among some 10,000 new words and phrases in the fifth edition of the dictionary, published in November. It was defined as: “A child born to a noncitizen mother in a country that grants automatic citizenship to children born on its soil, especially such a child born to parents seeking to secure eventual citizenship for themselves and often other members of their family.”

But when Steve Kleinedler, the executive editor of the dictionary, read that definition during a radio interview last month, it troubled Mary Giovagnoli, the director of the [Immigration](#) [1] Policy Center, a pro-immigration research group in Washington.

The once-obscure term has been used frequently in the recent debate over whether to change the Constitution to deny automatic American citizenship to children born in this country to illegal immigrant parents.

Last Friday morning, Ms. Giovagnoli posted an angry item on [the center’s blog](#) [2], saying the dictionary “masks the poisonous and derogatory nature of the term, a term which demeans both parent and child.” Her item soared into the blogosphere. By Friday afternoon, Mr. Kleinedler had called Ms. Giovagnoli.

His editors huddled over the weekend, and on Monday a [new definition](#) [3] of “anchor baby” was posted on the dictionary’s Web site. It started with “offensive,” in italics: “Used as a disparaging term for a child born to a noncitizen mother in a country that grants automatic citizenship to children born on its soil, especially when the child’s birthplace is thought to have been chosen in order to improve the mother’s or other relatives’ chances of securing eventual citizenship.”

In a statement on Thursday, Mr. Kleinedler said the dictionary had rectified an error. “The term is now treated similarly to how the dictionary treats a wide range of slurs,” he said.

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