



## Chapter 1: The vocabulary as a historical repository

### 1. Introduction

- By exploring the evolution of English vocabulary, one can find:
  - a.) **fossils**, in which the culture of the past is stored
  - b.) **vital organisations**, responsive to the pressure of the present
- Words are almost everywhere. They surround us in a myriad multiplicity. The questions are: Where do they come from? How do they arrive in different categories like ancient and new, or common and rare?
- **Sir James Murray** (editor of the OED on Historical Principles)  
→ used the image of the vocabulary being like a galaxy to articulate the problem of the large amount of words.
- 1. The *dictionary*  
→ encourages us to consider words as individuals  
→ imposes a misleading equality
- 2. The *comprehensive dictionary*  
→ complicate things by bringing in the historical dimension
- Words belong to families and nations

### Murray's lexical configuration

- English vocabulary contains a central mass of words
- The common words are linked with other words, which are: less entitled to this appellation and more and more distinctive.
- “The English language has a well defined centre, but no discernible circumference” (quotation by Murray, 1884)
- framework how one can divide the different categories words
- establishes a fundamental hierarchy of usage
- Murray's diagram was used in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1993)

### 2. Register

- A particular variety of diction or choice of word appropriate to a given social situation or literary concept
- The core concept of a particular choice is traditional
- Register is based on the classical notion of decorum
- Typically conceived on an hierarchical scale
- The main emphasis is put on differing degrees of formality  
→ Criteria of formality:  
Sex, Age, Status, Intimacy
- Register reflects the role of a speaker in a particular context
- Register shows a variety of alternatives
- M.A.K. Halliday → refined the concept of register  
→ he distinguished between:
  1. termed dialects → language variety of the user
  2. termed registers → variety required by the situation  
→ he further distinguished between.
  1. registers according to field (subject, matter)
  2. registers according to mode (speech...)
  3. registers according to manner (social relat.)
- **Roget's Thesaurus** (1852) → works from concepts to words and phrases collected into semantic fields
- **Roget** → pioneer in English lexicology (the Study of the Structure of the vocabulary)
- **Murray** → part of the lexicography (the writing of dictionaries)
- Synonyms → only few exact synonyms exist
- Dialect → the traditional meaning of a regional form of speech and a class usage  
→ often replaced by variety because of the negative connotations



### 3. **The three word-stocks**

- English language does not originate in one language
- structure of the vocabulary reflects the history of the English speaking people
- The three Word – Stocks are the dominant features of the English vocabulary
- Basic roots and core vocabulary are from.
  1. **The Anglo Saxon** (Old English)  
(brought to England by the Angles, Saxons and Jutes in the fifth century  
Two further additions from Europe:
  2. **Norman – French**  
(Romance element; comes from the conquering Norman-French people, who took control of the land in 1066)
  3. **Latin & Greek**  
(Classical element, an abstract and technical vocabulary – accumulated by authors and scholars in medieval times)

## **Historical Overview A Roadmap through the Past**

### **a) the multiple influences on the English language**

- Celts derived the ancient language of Britain
- 44 B.C. Britain suffered from a full-scale Roman invasion
- 410 A.D. Roman Legions were withdrawn, Britain became power-vacuum (Angles, Saxons, Jutes)
- 597 A.D. dissemination of Christianity introduced words of Latin scholarship
- late 8<sup>th</sup> Century Vikings slaughtered the Anglo-Saxons, King Alfred had to cede about half of England to them (introduced Old Norse, a Germanic language related to Old English)
- 1066 Norman Conquest, complete alien language became language of power for about 3 Centuries, influx of a dominant foreign language caused Middle English (developed c. 1100 – 1500)
- in the course of the Middle English period came the Latin and Greek influence from classical learning, specific or technical language
- by the end of the Late Middle English period the vocabulary had acquired 3 registers reflecting the differing status of compound elements, being
  - Germanic base of common basic words
  - courtly formal register from Norman French
  - intellectual and abstract register for Latin and Greek
- late 15<sup>th</sup> C. invention of printing, two contrary influences on the language (enrichment or corruption of the language)
- Renaissance saw a great efflorescence in the growth of the language as a literary and dramatic instrument
- Early Modern English (1500 – 1700) saw an important change in the global status of the English language (colonial power), many word borrowings from the so-called “new world”

### **b) words as mobile forms**

- important developments within the language itself
- fundamental change in the development of English grammar has been in the direction of simplification of the form (reduction of inflections)

I <u>love</u> you.	(love=verb)
<u>Love</u> is a many-splendour'd thing.	(love=noun)
Isolde drank the <u>love</u> potion.	(love=adjective)

former: lufie, lufa, lufe

- development of those “free forms”, could be used in all sorts of new ways (e.g. many parts of the human body like eye, arm or foot were used as verbs; process called conversion)



### c) Modern English: establishing the lexicon

- in an attempt to formalize the language, the first dictionaries were created (most famous: Samuel Johnson in 1755)
- creation of the OED from 1884 – 1928

## Semantics and Lexis

### a) keywords and phrases

- apart from variations of register, there are terms for geographical features or place-name elements
- a range from basic words for everyday communication to crucial keywords and phrases (f.e. “for king and country”) which encapsulates certain ethical notions (compacted doctrines)
- semantics: study of meaning, complex matter which involves relationships, between words of similar meaning, we differ between:
  - reference: relationship between language and world
  - sense: relationship between words of similar meanings

### b) antonyms and hyponyms

- apart from synonyms there are also antonyms, such as
  - light/ darkness
  - heat/ cold
  - summer/ winter
- one category denies the other, no third possibility (at least in the most cases)
- several ways how creation of negatives developed (antonymic pair *talented/ untalented* complemented by double negative *not untalented* )
- pseudo – antonyms (*uncouth* but no *couth*)
- hyponyms:
  - crimson
  - + color
  - +red

## Usage and Dictionary

### a) meaning of words

How do we know what words mean?

- two models that tell us the meaning of a word, usage and dictionary definitions
- meanings are conventional, according to global, regional and social contexts
- early users of language were for the most part illiterate, it was all about the spoken word
- isolated speech-communities have their own vocabulary
- Words in American and British English have often different meanings; e.g. pants, trailer
- to the members of these various speech-communities, their particular usage is predominant, and if they are illiterate, their meaning is for them the only meaning
- in modern society (internet, telephone), most people belong to more than one speech-community
- these people use different language conventions at work, at home, and with the various social and professional sets to which they may belong

### b) uses and abuses of etymology

*Etymology* - is the study of the origin of words: it derives from the Greek word *Etymos*, which means 'true'

- there are two contradictory processes at work in the relationship between etymology and meaning
  1. a gradual erosion of the original link, semantic change, which means that words tend to move steadily away from their original meanings
- one example for an erosion of the link between etymology and meaning is the word *Goodbye*, which derived from the phrase *God be with you*



2. is the desire to revive the link, to get words 'to make sense' with their past, which has various consequences, affecting not just semantic change, but almost everything to do with semantics  
- people prefer memorable or logical origins of words, and they even invent them if they do not exist; *the story of the Earl of Sandwich*

- but most words have dull, obvious or unclear origins

### c) folk etymology

- folk etymologies are collective and spontaneous, e.g. *woman*: origin lies in A-S *wifmann*, which transliterates as 'wife-man';

*Jerusalem artichoke* has nothing to do with Jerusalem, but it is so called through a distortion of Italian *girasole* (sun-flower)

- words are changed to something recognizable or probable

### d) doublets

- doublets derive from a common origin: e.g. *cretin* and *Christian*

- in other cases the root word can ramify and mutate to the point that the descendants no longer resemble the parents

- in the 18th century serious lexicography started to evolve

- the assumption developed that 'proper' words, like 'good' families, came from clearly defined origins like Latin, Greek, Germanic

- if they did not these words were regarded as linguistic bastards

### e) problems of definition

- the dictionary seeks to give clear meanings and origins of words

- but the dictionary is not entirely satisfactory, it is sometimes not able to define the true meaning and origin of a word

- sometimes words like *mermaid* is defined even if there is no factual referents

- emotive terms are a big problem for dictionaries

*chuffed* is just defined as 'Pleased; displeased', the simple word *shit!* is described more detailed

- many dictionary definitions depend on other dictionary definitions which is a serious problem

- older dictionaries tended to assume a written standard; the more recent, being increasingly based on corpora of usage, incorporate spoken idioms and a great variety of oral usage

## Semantics

Semantics derived from the Greek word *sema*, 'a sign' and *semaino*, 'to mean'

- changes of meaning undergone by words over time

<i>wan</i>	A-S <i>wann</i> , 'dark'
<i>worm</i>	A-S <i>wyrm</i> , 'dragon'
<i>free</i>	A-S <i>freo</i> , 'noble'
<i>fiend</i>	A-S <i>feond</i> , 'enemy'

- as a consequence of the Norman Conquest many Anglo-Saxon words were replaced by French words

*Uncle* replaced A-S *sweostorsunu* 'sister's son'

- these replacements caused semantic changes

*starve* = to die, A-S *steorfan*

*die* (Old Norse *deyja*) displaced *starve* as to die

*starve* still exists today but has a different meaning

- the changing structure of vocabulary lie in between 'witness words', that reflect material progress

*witness words from recent decades: sputnik, video, laser*

, and 'key words', which reflect on the ethnical change

*gentilehomme: rake, beau, fop, dandy, yuppie*