

# Take my word for it

THE RIDDLES OF ENGLISH USAGE

## 英语字词用法

(英汉对照)

〔新西兰〕伊恩·戈登 著

姚小平 译



商务印书馆

The Commercial Press

〔新西兰〕威尔逊-豪登出版集团

Wilson & Horton Publications Limited

B & T 霍兰德出版公司

B & T Holland Publications (NZ) Ltd.



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2002 年·北京

## 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

英语字词用法/姚小平译. —北京:商务印书馆, 2002

ISBN 7-100-02841-8

I. 英… II. 姚… III. 英语-词汇-学习参考资料  
料 IV. H313

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(1999)第 07821 号

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YĪNGYǔ ZÍCÍ YÓNGFǎ

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[新西兰]伊恩·戈登 著

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商 务 印 书 馆

(北京王府井大街36号 邮政编码100710)

[新西兰]威尔逊—豪登出版集团 出版

(新西兰奥克兰市里士满路318号)

B&T 霍 兰 德 出 版 公 司

(新西兰奥克兰卢克斯41239号信箱)

商 务 印 书 馆 发 行

北 京 民 族 印 刷 厂 印 刷

ISBN 7-100-02841-8/H·728

2002年4月第1版

开本 787 × 1092 1/32

2002年4月北京第1次印刷

印张 11 1/2

定价: 16.00 元

英 语 字 词 用 法  
TAKE MY WORD FOR IT

英文正文(English Text)

© Wilson & Horton Publications Limited/B & T Holland Publications (NZ)  
Ltd. 1999

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## 鸣 谢

本书中的许多内容曾发表在下列出版物上,谨向它们的出版者致谢:《新西兰知音》;《新科学家》;《柯林斯简明英语词典》的出版者哈帕·柯林斯出版社;《耳语》的出版者海曼出版社(新西兰)。我也感谢那些曾与我通信的读者,正是他们的发问一再迫使我的一些疑难问题上刨根问底。

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to the following, under whose imprint much of what follows has appeared: the *New Zealand Listener*; the *New Scientist*; HarperCollins, publishers of *Collins Concise English Dictionary*; Heinemann (NZ), publisher of *A Word in Your Ear*; and to *my correspondents*, whose queries have frequently forced me to extract the kernel from some very tough nuts.

**Take My Word For It**

## A WORD AT THE OUTSET

One of the hats I wear is labelled "Linguist", linguistics being "the scientific study of language". When I was young we regarded ourselves not as linguists but as comparative philologists, engaged in what is now termed historical linguistics. There are these days not many of this breed of philologists around. The trend has gone towards the scientific study of the language of our own day, to the complete exclusion (in areas like sociolinguistics) of what has happened to language in the past.

I am beginning to wonder if it is not time to cry halt to the idea that historical linguistics is so much dead wood and that descriptive linguistics is where all the shining future lies. The English language is a continuum, not a series of discrete linguistic episodes some of which can be conveniently swept under the carpet. What T. S. Eliot called "the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" will become even more intolerable unless we recognise that the synchronic study of today's vocabulary is not enough. Our words belonged to someone else long before they belonged to us.

Do I detect the beginnings of a linguistic parallel to the principle of relativity? Are we in danger of not knowing what words mean because we have no conception of what they meant? Words come freighted with their history and we need always be aware of the sign:



## 前 言

# 我

头顶的桂冠之一是“语言学家”，所谓语言学，指的是“对语言的科学研究”。在我年轻的时候，我们并不把自己看作语言学家，而是把自己看作比较语文学家，从事的是现在所说的历史语言学。如今，这样的语文学家已经不多了。人们已转向对我们自己时代的语言进行科学的研究，（在像社会语言学这样的领域里）完全排除了语言过去所经历的事情。

我在想，恐怕已经到了大声疾呼以阻止这样一个观念的时候：历史语言学已成朽木，唯独描写语言学才享有光辉灿烂的未来。英语是一个连续体，而不是一系列分散的语言事件，其中有些事件可以随随便便就掩盖起来。除非我们能意识到，仅仅对今天的词汇作共时的研究是不够的，否则，T. S. 艾略特当年所谓“与词和词义进行的难以忍受的搏斗”将变得更加难以忍受。我们的语词在属于我们之前，早就属于另外一些人。

我发现了语言上的相对论原则的起源吗？我们是否面临着这样一个危险：由于对词语过去的意义一无所知，我们便无法了解它们现在的意思？词语带着它们的历史来到我们中间，我们需要始终牢记以下警示：

#### 4 A WORD AT THE OUTSET

##### CAUTION! WORDS AT WORK.

Take a simple word like “morning” . The *Collins Concise English Dictionary* defines morning as “the first part of the day, ending at or about noon”, an admirably scientific piece of observation. That is, so long as the observer is living in the 1990s and the text read is of our own time.

But shift the observer (as Einstein bids us) and a very different meaning emerges. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) there is an astonishing sentence: “They arrived in Gracechurch Street at noon and spent the morning in shopping”.

The morning? It is no error. “Morning” to Jane Austen did not mean what it means today. Her day was divided up according to meal-times. At her social level breakfast was served at 10.00am and was a leisurely and substantial meal. A few sandwiches or some cold meat was available around mid-day for those who wanted what we (but they did not ) call “lunch”.

The main meal of the day was dinner and the timing of this social get-together depended on a family’s pretensions. For families like the Austens, dinner was on the table by 4.00pm or 5.00pm at the latest. Dinner at 6.30pm was considered very late and only occurred with people “of decided fashion”.

In Jane Austen, any reference to “morning” indicates the hours between 11.00am (when breakfast ended) and “dinner-time”, around 4.00pm to 5.00pm. The result is that we today read with astonishment in an 1840 London newspaper that “M. Liszt will give at Two o’clock on Tuesday morning Recitals on the Pianoforte”. His recitals took place not at the dead hour of 2.00am but in what to us is the early afternoon.

当心！词语在演变。

以“morning”这个词为例。《柯林斯简明英语词典》把这个词定义为“白天的第一部分，在中午时或中午前后结束”。这算得上是一个值得尊重的科学的观察结果。也就是说，只要观察者生活在 20 世纪 90 年代，所读到的文本出自我们自己的时代的话。

但如果换一个观察者（就像爱因斯坦告诉我们的那样），就会产生十分不同的意义。在简·奥斯丁的《傲慢与偏见》（1813）里，有一个令人吃惊的句子：“他们在中午到达格雷斯彻奇街，把上午的时间花在购物上。”

“上午”？这并没有错。对简·奥斯丁来说，“上午”的概念与今天不同。那时候，一天是根据用餐的时间来划分的。在简·奥斯丁所属的那一社会阶层，早餐定在上午十点钟，是一顿从容不迫、十十足足的饭。中午时分，有人愿意的话可以吃一点三明治或冷的肉食，这就是我们所说的“午餐”（可是他们不那么叫）。

一天主要的一顿饭是晚餐，这也是一种社交聚会，时间取决于各个家庭自己的安排。对于奥斯丁那样的家庭，晚餐是在下午四点左右开始，最迟不超过五点。如果在六点半开始，那就被认为很晚了，这样的晚餐只见于“上流社会”的人们中间。

在简·奥斯丁的作品中，凡是说到“上午”，都是指上午十一点（即早餐结束时）和“晚餐时间”（大约下午四点到五点）之间的那段时间。其结果是，今天我们读到 1840 年伦敦的一份报纸时会大吃一惊：“李斯特先生将于星期二上午两点举行钢

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In reading older books one must always be conscious of this different timing of meal-hours and of the naming of parts of the day. As observers we must remember that relativity is not confined to physics. Otherwise we can go wildly astray in our reading of older texts.

In Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) an angry Squire Western locks his love-sick daughter into her bedroom shortly after 10.00am and there she has to remain till she is summoned to "dinner". To a modern reader this sounds like a long, hungry, incarceration. In fact the bedroom door would have been re-opened about 1.30pm, as dinner was on the table in this early 18th-century rural household by 2.00pm. She was merely expected to spend the "morning" in her own room, where she probably would have been in any case. The squire was an angry father but he was no monster.

A careful reader will find confirmation later in the novel: "It being now past three in the morning, or to reckon by the old style, in the afternoon." Fielding, writing in the 1740s, was conscious that the "afternoon" had in his lifetime become the "morning". By Jane Austen's time, the "afternoon" had ceased to exist. When—as frequently happens—some of her women characters pay a "morning call" they would have arrived about the time that we might arrive for a cup of afternoon tea.

Some years ago I presented a series of research papers in French universities. But one university told me they would rather I simply offered a tutorial on one of their set books, Defoe's *Roxana*. It looked a simple assignment. *Robinson Crusoe*, after all, can be read by school-children. My own university classes I left largely to their own devices when it came to Defoe; he could be briefly disposed of as a piece of cake while I pushed on to

琴独奏会。”他的演奏会当然不是在夜深人静的两点钟，而是在我们所说的下午两点钟开始。

在读过去的书时，我们始终要留意这种用餐时间的不同以及一天的各个部分如何称名。作为观察者我们必须记住，相对性并不局限于物理学。否则，我们在读古代文本的时候很容易误入歧途。

在费尔丁的《汤姆·琼斯》(1749)里，愤怒的乡绅韦斯顿在十点钟多一点把他那正害着相思病的女儿关进卧室。她不得不呆在那里，直到有人来叫她吃“晚饭”。在一个现代的读者听起来，这像是一次长时间的饥饿禁闭。事实上，卧室的门大概在下午一点三十分左右就又被打开了，因为在这样一个18世纪初的乡村家庭里，晚餐是在下午两点左右端上桌。女儿只不过是自己的房间里度过了“上午”，如果没有别的事，她本来大概也要呆在那里。这位乡绅是一个怒气冲冲的父亲，但他不是一个恶魔。

细心的读者在这部小说的后面会发现这样一个说法：“现在已过了上午三点钟，或根据旧法计算，是下午三点钟”。这话费尔丁是在18世纪40年代写的，他意识到了在他那时候“下午”已经成了“上午”。而到了简·奥斯丁的时候，“下午”已经不存在了。她笔下的一些女性人物常常“在上午拜访”某人，但她们到达的时间大概是在我们到别人家喝下午茶的时候。

一些年前，我曾在法国的大学里讲解我的一系列研究性论文。但有一所大学告诉我，他们宁愿我就他们的现成书本之一提供个别指导。这本书就是笛福的《罗克善娜》。这看起来像是一项很简单的任务。不管怎么说，他的《鲁宾逊漂流记》是学

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analyse the subtleties of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

But French students cannot treat their set texts as a piece of cake. They are expected to scrutinise them under a high-power microscope. In dutiful preparation, I brought out my own high-power microscope and examined every single word of *Roxana* as if it were the text of Sophocles. I now wonder what do children really get from *Robinson Crusoe*? *Roxana* drove me, on one page out of every four, to the historical sections of the *Oxford English Dictionary* to extract the real meaning. Defoe is a piece of cake — but only if you read with the eye and not with the mind, and that is no way to treat a finely crafted piece of writing. Words matter. When they were written matters too. Shift the observer and you shift what is observed.

At this point, I am about to renounce all but the minimum linguistic terminology. What follows in this book had its origin not in research papers but in bread-and-butter articles written in various periodicals in response to many lively correspondents. I have a profound respect for “the common reader”. He (and, more often, she) frequently came up with queries that turned out to be real challenges.

This book touches on some of the ways in which words work, have worked and will continue to work in the future in a living language.

Ian A. Gordon

January 1997

龄儿童可以读的。在我自己的大学里，在讲到笛福时我一般让学生们自己去理解；笛福可以很轻松地对付过去，而对于斯顿的《屈里斯坦·先迪》，我就要花力气分析它的精细微妙之处。

但是，对法国学生来说，处理这样的现成文本却并非易事。他们得把文本放在高倍显微镜下细细地察看。于是我也尽心尽职地作了准备，拿出我自己的高倍显微镜，仔细检查了《罗克善娜》的每一个词，就好像它是索福克勒斯的文本。我真感到纳闷，孩子们从《鲁宾逊漂流记》里到底学到了什么？《罗克善娜》的每四页里，就有一页驱使我到《牛津英语词典》的历史部分中搜取真正的意义。笛福确实很容易对付，但只有当你用眼睛而不是用脑子读的时候才是这样，可这并不是对待一件构思精妙的作品所应有的方式。词语很有讲究，写下来的词语同样也有讲究。一旦调换了观察者，所观察到的东西也就不一样了。

说到这里，我想说我准备只使用最低限度的语言学术语。本书所述的内容并非源于研究性论文，而是源自发表在各种期刊上的通俗文章，它们是为回答许多热情洋溢的读者来信而写的。我对“一般读者”充满了敬意。他们（而更多的情况下是她们）提出的疑问对我来说常常成为真正的挑战。

本书讨论了词语在一种活语言里的某些作用方式，包括词语过去和现在的作用方式，以及未来继续会有作用的方式。

伊恩·戈登

1997年1月

“奇怪的是，不遵守交通规则你就不能安全驾车，但你不必知道任何规则，就可以流利地讲和写你自己的语言。”

“Saucepan”是一种长柄平底锅，它跟“sauce”即酱汁有关系吗？在什么地方你会在下午“晨访”某人？“Dead easy”是“绝对容易”的意思，可“dead”的这个意思是怎么来的呢？“Dear”是个毫无意义的小词，为什么最后通牒总是以它开始？

伊恩·戈登教授曾经是《新西兰知音》的语言专栏作家，他一生都在探索英语，从事有关英语的著述。本书是他的第二部生动活泼的散文集，收入了他本人最喜欢的一些短文，它们曾刊登在《新西兰知音》、《新科学家》以及中国的一份英语杂志的专栏上。在书中，他带领读者到世界上最动荡多变的活语言中做了一次迷人的旅行。他用机智的妙语和敏锐的学识探索了词语的起源，推考了它们的发展方向；同时，他也解决了一些语法争端，并且把某些关于所谓“正确”英语的观念纠正了过来。

《英语字词用法》对于严肃认真的英语专业学生和业余英语爱好者都是一本必读书。

ISBN 7-100-02841-8



9 787100 028417 >

ISBN 7-100-02841-8/H · 728

定价：16.00 元



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