

DICTIONARY OF CHANGES IN MEANING

Adrian Room



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INTRODUCTION

Consider the following:

'You should avoid *accidents* when lighting a *bonfire*, or your *career* could be in *danger*. This *entails* not having too many *friends* in the *gang* who are on *holiday*. They may seem *innocent* in their *japes*, and be *keen lads*, but some of them are rather *mischievous*, or at least *naughty*, and a few even enjoy some quite *obnoxious pranks*, and could be *quick* to *reduce* everything to a *shambles*. So keep your *temper* if they are *uncouth*. Don't *vilify* them. Just *watch* them with a *yawn*. They will then set to and work with *zest*.'

The italicized words in this admittedly contrived piece of fiction are not merely words that run in alphabetical order. They are all words whose meanings have changed over the years, whose senses have shifted in some way since they first entered the English language.

This may come as something of a shock. Surely 'friend' has never meant anything than what it means today, or 'quick' had a meaning other than 'fast', 'rapid'? Can such a basic verb as 'watch' have had any other sense?

Some people find it hard to believe that words can change their meanings. They accept that new words enter the language for new things and new concepts ('television', 'polythene', 'cybernetics'), and that many words refer to things and actions that are now historic ('arquebus', 'jousting', 'chariot'), and they recognize, too, that all apparently 'native English' words originally entered the language from the tongues of the people who successively settled in the British Isles – the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, the Scandinavians, and the Normans. But the fact that words change their *meaning* is less easy to comprehend. Why should a meaning change, or a sense shift? People find it hard to accept that an apparently historic or 'dead' sense can survive to apply to a new version or modern adaptation of the original, for example, and one annoyed reader of *The Times* even wrote a letter to the editor (2 March 1985) upbraiding the media for referring to the men who carry a coffin at a funeral as 'pallbearers'. This was incorrect, he claimed, since a 'pallbearer' was a 'bearer of a pall', that is the man who held one side of the 'pall' or heavy cloth that formerly covered a coffin. There was now no 'pall', he maintained, so the word was inaccurate. The worried reader overlooked the fact that the word has simply changed its original sense because the funeral ceremony has itself been modified (simplified in fact), and there are hundreds of similar instances where an original or literal sense

has been overtaken by change and progress, but where the basic meaning or concept remains constant. Penknives are no longer used for repairing quill pens, and saucers no longer hold sauce. But penknives still basically *cut* and saucers still *contain*, and it is the sense that has altered as a result of the way we run our daily lives. The objects have simply been updated and modified over the years, and their uses adapted and altered.

The type of sense change illustrated by 'pallbearer' is only one of many, and at this point we should perhaps consider what other types there are, giving representative examples of words in a particular category that have their own entries in the dictionary. The categories are given in order of frequency, at least in the present dictionary, so that the 'pallbearer' one is easily the largest and heads the list. Similar categories have been devised by other linguists and lexicographers, but an overall unified agreed list of types of change has not yet been made. (Some no doubt, would maintain that two separate categories below can easily be absorbed into a single category. Even so, I feel the different types are distinctive enough to be recognized, despite the occasional overlap, where a word can be classified in more ways than one.)

1 *Functional transfer of meaning* These are words (such as the now familiar 'pallbearer') whose senses have altered because the thing or action they define or denote has itself changed. Among them are: *bayonet, busby, chorus, dock, flask, footman, grocer, hospital, lobby, match, pavilion, penknife, romance, rosary, saucer, secretary, shears, spanner, tennis, urinal, wardrobe, wife* and *yawn*. It will be noted that these are all nouns. There are some interesting subgroups in this category, such as the machines that have taken over from man (*calculator, computer*), masculine or 'male associated' words that have become feminine (*blouse, brothel, harlot, hoyden, tomboy*), and even some garments that have progressed from overwear, or top garments, to underwear (*camisole, corset, petticoat, vest*). Some food dishes, too, have substantially altered over the years (*blancmange, crumpet, custard, gravy, junket, lollipop, pastry, porridge, sherbet*). Additionally, people now sleep under a *quilt*, not on top of it, and a *midriff* is today usually on the outside of the body not buried in the belly!

2 *Narrowing of meaning* These are words, again mainly nouns but also including some adjectives, whose sense has progressed from the general to the specific. An 'accident' was originally simply an 'incident', an 'actor' a 'doer', a 'beam' an Old English word for 'tree', and so on. Among others are: *adder, affray, avenue, brown, cabin, cattle, cellar, coast, corpse, deer, engine, furniture, gestation, groom, knuckle, meat, parcel, passenger, science, stow, vegetable*.

3 *Deterioration of meaning* This category, called 'pejoration of meaning' by some linguists, includes words whose meaning has gone from 'good', or at least 'neutral', to 'bad'. Thus such adjectives as 'artful', 'crafty', 'cunning'

and so on originally meant 'skilful' or 'clever', without any connotation of 'badness'. Among others are: *animosity, carp, cheat, daft, danger, devious, drab, err, gaudy, humiliate, hussy, knave* (compare 'knight' in category 7), *lewd, menial, minion* (which originally meant 'darling'), *poison, promiscuous, silly, smug, surly, terse, tinsel, uncouth, vulgar*.

4 *Expansion of meaning* This is the opposite of category 2, and contains words whose originally narrow or specialized meaning has become general or widespread. For example 'arrive' originally meant 'come to a shore', and 'bulb' originally denoted an onion. Among others are: *advent, beach, bedlam, bonfire, breeze, crisis, entail, evening, fellow, guess, holiday* (originally 'holy day'), *journey, manufacture, moth, panel, raid, regular, shambles, thug, vision, visit*.

5 *Associated transfer of meaning* This category is in a way similar to the first listed, since a functional development may well be involved. But the difference here is that a meaning arises by association with a prime sense and develops in that way. For example, a 'barbecue' was originally a framework of sticks where an animal such as a sheep could be roasted. Later, the word came to mean the meal made in order to eat the animal. Similarly, a 'bureau' was (and still is) an item of furniture, a writing desk. Later the word spread to include not only the room where such a desk stood but even a whole building or organization. In many ways, therefore, the category is also similar to no. 4, above, since frequently an 'expansion' will be involved. However, this is not always the case, as the entries for other words will show. Among them are: *bead, buccaneer, budget, cash, chest, counter, fairy* (here there is actually a diminution of meaning), *glamour, gossip, hearse, lavatory, mole, pantechicon, seminary, siren, tabloid, toilet, treacle, urchin*.

6 *Abstraction of meaning* This category basically includes words whose 'concrete' sense has become abstract, or whose originally literal meaning became figurative. 'Aftermath', for example, originally meant 'second crop of grass', and 'bombast' meant 'cotton wool used as padding'. Among other examples are: *aspire, concur, deduce, depend, enhance, extol, hoodwink, imply, involve, polite, refund, repercussion, tact, thrill*.

7 *Improvement of meaning* This is the opposite of category 3, and is also known by some linguists as 'amelioration of meaning'. It includes words whose 'bad' sense has been improved to a 'good' one or at least a 'neutral'. For example, 'boy' originally meant 'low fellow', 'knave', and 'pretty' meant 'crafty' or 'wily' in Old English. Among other words in the group are: *ambition, bask, dogged, epicure, gourmand* (which later slipped back again), *knight* (compare 'knave'), *lad, luxury, nice, rapture, shrewd, spill, success*.

8 *Weakening of meaning* This category includes words whose original 'strong' sense has been toned down, weakened or trivialized. Well-known examples are the purely 'intensive' adjectives such as 'awful', 'chronic', 'dreadful', 'fearful', 'horrid', 'naughty' and 'terrible'. Among others are:

annoy, baffle, bane, bruise, confound, dismal, dreary, friend, hinder, prank, rascal, scamp, stale (quite literally), *truant, worry*.

The remaining three categories are much smaller.

9 *Scientific correction or adjustment of meaning* These are Greek-based words whose meanings changed as a result of the advance of scientific knowledge and a new thinking or 'consignment of category'. For example, 'planet' was originally the term for the heavenly bodies that revolved, so it was believed, round the Earth, including the Sun (!). Copernicus altered all that in the sixteenth century, whereupon the Sun was correctly redesignated as 'star' and the term 'planet' was properly applied to those celestial bodies, including the Earth, that revolved round it. Similarly 'astrology' and 'astronomy', which largely overlapped in medieval times, were redefined and redesignated. Other altered terms include: *geology, meteor, philology, physics, zoology*.

10 *Artificial deflection of meaning* This category, an interesting one, includes words whose senses have been altered through 'false etymology'. That is, the word has become wrongly associated with some other word, and the sense has acquired that association as its main meaning. For example, 'belfry' became associated with 'bell', so that in the end it actually was a structure containing bells, and 'elongate' became wrongly associated with 'long' to gain the sense 'lengthen'. Other such words include: *arbour, equerry* and (probably) *gingerbread*.

11 *Strengthening of meaning* This final category is the opposite of category 8. In this case, the word progressed from a 'weak' or neutral sense to a 'strong' one, not the other way round. Examples are not common, but include *disgust* (which originally meant 'not like') and *gale* (which was originally a light wind).

Of course, there are words that do not neatly fit into any of these categories, and 'buxom', for example, has done the reverse of category 6 and proceeded from an abstract sense ('tractable', 'pliable', 'obedient') to a 'concrete' one ('plump and good-looking'). But very many of the 1342 words in the dictionary will be seen to fall readily enough into one of the eleven categories mentioned. As members of the human race we may like to reflect on the fact that more 'bad' meanings have developed than 'good', and many more 'weak' than 'strong'.

The fact that such 'basic' and apparently immutable senses as 'evening', 'boy', 'moth', 'visit' and 'coast' have altered their meanings may shake our faith in the stability of things around us. But we live in an ever-changing and unstable world, where there is both construction and erosion in our society and environment, and where nothing remains constant. Such insta-

bility and impermanence is thus reflected in the language – it *has* to be, if words are to have a truthful meaning. Boys are now (mostly) no longer ‘knaves’, and visits are made for reasons other than purely religious ones. Saucers now hold teacups, not sauce, and pallbearers no longer carry the pall, even though they still bear the coffin.

If such radical sense changes seem shocking, then read no further! Not only did ‘boy’ mean ‘knave’ but ‘girl’ at one time even meant ‘boy’. Similar ‘volte-faces’ may be seen for the words ‘bully’, ‘chuckle’, ‘glimmer’ (once a bright light), ‘mere’, ‘quite’ (which still has two virtually opposing senses), ‘reprieve’, ‘restive’, ‘thrift’, ‘upset’ (originally ‘set up’), ‘wan’ and even ‘with’ (which meant ‘against’ in Old English). On another plane, some very common words have in certain cases taken over to oust former words. The present ‘animal’ superseded the former ‘beast’ in the sense, as it in turn had earlier ousted ‘deer’. These two words have acquired a new meaning. Similarly, ‘bird’ replaced ‘fowl’, ‘bread’ took over from ‘loaf’, ‘cloud’ came in instead of ‘hill’ (!), as ‘sky’ did instead of ‘welkin’ (which also formerly meant ‘cloud’), ‘dog’ kicked out ‘hound’, and ‘hill’ superseded ‘down’. Even the homely ‘rabbit’ was originally a ‘cony’, and ‘back’ was the word that replaced ‘ridge’. But perhaps enough is enough. . .

Most of the words just quoted are Old English ones, Old English being the now generally accepted name (formerly ‘Anglo-Saxon’) for the language spoken by some of the earliest settlers in the British Isles from the fifth century AD to about the eleventh. It existed in several dialects, although the chief literary form was West Saxon. Regarded overall, however, Old English was the language spoken by such dominant tribes as the Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes, all from a part of Europe that is now in the north of West Germany and in Denmark (hence, as modern reminders of their provenance, the modern place-names Angeln, Saxony and Jutland in that part of the continent). The language of these settlers blended to produce what today is the ‘Germanic’ content of the English language, and the historic foundation on which later settlers built related or quite different language structures.

Next chronologically after the Anglo-Saxons came the Vikings, the Scandinavians. Their language (technically also Germanic) had a measured but significant impact on the form of English already existing when they arrived in the eighth century, but nothing like the impact that the language of the Normans had three centuries later. Even more important, *their* language was not a Germanic one but a Romance one, based on the Latin of Rome in its popular spoken form. To all intents and purposes, therefore, what had previously been exclusively Germanic ‘English’ (as it had then developed) was invaded or infiltrated by Romance ‘French’. For the purposes of this dictionary this is interesting, since it means that many words of the eleventh century onwards that arose from French, at first only slowly, then increas-

ingly down to the sixteenth century and even later, originally had the senses that in many cases they still retain in modern French today. The fact that the English meaning of such words altered, but the French sense did not, resulted in the many 'false friends' (or *faux amis*) that plague English-speaking learners of French today. Such words *look* as if they mean one thing, but actually mean another. Readers who have ever attempted to learn French (as the most common foreign language taught in Britain and many other English-speaking countries) may therefore be interested in the selection of words below. The column on the left shows the modern French word and its meaning; that on the right shows the corresponding English word that *originally* had the same sense as the modern French one. All these words were first recorded in English from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth, mostly in the fourteenth and fifteenth.

<i>Modern French word and meaning</i>	<i>Corresponding English word</i>
<i>avertissement</i> , 'warning'	<i>advertisement</i>
<i>chasser</i> , 'hunt'	<i>chase</i>
<i>conforter</i> , 'encourage'	<i>comfort</i>
<i>délivrer</i> , 'set free'	<i>deliver</i>
<i>éditer</i> , 'publish'	<i>edit</i>
<i>engin</i> , 'device', 'machine'	<i>engine</i>
<i>expérience</i> , 'experiment'	<i>experience</i>
<i>fourniture</i> , 'act of supplying'	<i>furniture</i>
<i>grange</i> , 'barn'	<i>grange</i>
<i>hasard</i> , 'chance'	<i>hazard</i>
<i>ignorer</i> , 'not to know'	<i>ignore</i>
<i>industrieux</i> , 'skilful'	<i>industrious</i>
<i>injurier</i> , 'insult'	<i>injure</i>
<i>instamment</i> , 'urgently'	<i>instantly</i>
<i>labourer</i> , 'plough', 'till'	<i>labour</i>
<i>large</i> , 'broad'	<i>large</i>
<i>lecture</i> , 'reading'	<i>lecture</i>
<i>libeller</i> , 'draw up a document'	<i>libel</i>
<i>parent</i> , 'relative'	<i>parent</i>
<i>pétrole</i> , 'petroleum'	<i>petrol</i>
<i>pondérer</i> , 'weigh'	<i>ponder</i>
<i>prévenir</i> , 'avoid', 'avert'	<i>prevent</i>
<i>recette</i> , 'recipe'	<i>receipt</i>
<i>recupérer</i> , 'regain'	<i>recuperate</i>
<i>sauvage</i> , 'wild'	<i>savage</i>
<i>séculaire</i> , 'age-old'	<i>secular</i>
<i>sensible</i> , 'sensitive'	<i>sensible</i>
<i>truand</i> , 'crook'	<i>truant</i>
<i>veste</i> , 'jacket'	<i>vest</i>
<i>zeste</i> , 'orange or lemon peel'	<i>zest</i>

Such problems will naturally also occur the other way round, and ensnare the French speaker learning English, so that initially 'advertisement', 'deliver', 'engine', 'ignore' and so on will conjure up the wrong association.

The dictionary, in the main, deals with past senses of a word that are now obsolete, charting their approximate century of appearance and disappearance. Some new meanings last little more than a hundred years before they become obsolete and leave the language. Others endure much longer, and may have been superseded only quite recently, in the nineteenth century. More than often a new meaning may develop while an earlier one is still current, so that the two (or more) run in parallel. This has annoyingly happened with 'quite', for example, so that the word today has two almost opposite meanings: 'entirely' (as 'quite complete') and 'fairly', 'rather' (as 'quite lucky'). This leads to ambiguity in such a sentence as, 'The box was quite full'. Completely full or only partly? (See the word itself for more considerations on this.)

Just as it has obviously not been possible to include *all* words in the English language that have undergone a change of meaning, so it has not proved always easy, or even desirable, to give all the former senses of a word. Even so, the most important will be mentioned, and their 'lifespan' indicated. At this point it may be wondered whether there are any words at all that have not had a change of meaning. There are, of course, although they are probably fewer than might be supposed. Amongst the most stable are those words that denote kinship, such as 'brother', 'sister', 'father', 'mother', as well as parts of the body such as 'head', 'eye', 'hand', 'foot', and colours such as 'red', 'blue', 'yellow', 'green'. Even here, however, this is only a general principle, since the sense of 'niece' and 'cousin' has not been stable, 'chest', 'gum' and 'midriff' (as mentioned) have had a changing history, and 'brown' has not always indicated the colour of earth and wood, just as 'purple' has also changed its hue over the years.

The various entries would not, of course, be complete if they restricted themselves to dates and meanings. What is needed is an illustrated backup, especially for some of the more important or surprising former meanings. This is given, in almost every entry, in the form of brief quotations from contemporary texts. The reader can thus see a phrase or whole sentence showing 'girl' meaning 'boy', 'knuckle' meaning 'knee', 'minion' meaning 'darling', and 'Dutch' meaning 'German'.

Most, but not all, of the quotations are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where occasionally they may have been slightly abridged or abbreviated. They have not been altered, however, and indeed appear in their original form, since the compilers of the *OED* were scrupulous in their exact transcription of the many texts. For this reason, some of the earlier quotations will look decidedly 'Olde Englishe', and occasionally I have felt

it helpful to 'translate' or at any rate explain a word (in square brackets following it), in order to make the quotation intelligible as a whole. At times, this may seem superfluous to some readers, who can deduce the sense unaided. But the opposite may also hold, I fear, and some words, that I have not glossed, may appear hard to interpret or read. I apologize in advance in such cases, which I hope will be very few. I have tried to strike a balance between over-explaining like a pedantic schoolteacher on the one hand, and under-explaining like an impatient pedagogue on the other. In some cases it may help to try actually pronouncing the words, and regard the apparently eccentric spelling as merely a light camouflage for the 'real' word underneath.

The choice of quotation or quotations to illustrate a particular meaning was often a difficult one. To have given any quotation from a text much before 1100, for example, would be to offer the reader a sentence in neat Old English, and so in virtually a foreign language, complete with different letters in many cases. This would be clearly pointless. Again, other texts that might otherwise have been suitable were in early Scots or in a dialect of some kind. Here, also, the original would have been of little value, however helpful any accompanying translation. In some instances, too, there were simply too many meanings to provide an illustration for each, and in others the senses were purely technical and would have gained little from a supporting quotation. But all in all, there are more quotations than not, even where they are taken from texts several years or even centuries after the first experience of a new sense. (In a few cases I deliberately chose a later text for ease of comprehension. So long as the usage was accurate, I feel this is a legitimate course to take.)

There are, however, two important exceptions to the principle that the wording is exactly that of the original. For the most frequent quotations, from the Bible and Shakespeare, I have on the whole used the standard familiar texts of the Authorized Version of the Bible (the King James Bible of 1611) and a modern Shakespeare edition (in fact that of the Oxford Shakespeare edited by W.J. Craig and first published in 1905, with several subsequent reprinted editions in different formats). I made these exceptions not only because of the high frequency with which quotations from these works appear in the dictionary, but because, if the reader is familiar with the Bible or Shakespeare at all, however foggy, it will probably be in such a 'standard' edition. At the same time, certain quotations from the Bible are made from an earlier English translation than the Authorized Version, and naturally the wording and spelling here will be as in the original. (For biblical quotations, too, chapter and verse of the appropriate book are always given, but for quotations from Shakespeare, I have merely 'placed' the words by indicating who is speaking to whom, and where necessary, by briefly

explaining the subject of the speaker's words at that particular moment. To quote act and scene is not particularly helpful.)

Even a casual glance through the entries will show that some texts, apart from the Bible and Shakespeare, are quoted more frequently than others. This is the time to say a little about such texts.

In chronological order, the first major text to feature regularly in this respect is the early fourteenth-century one known as the *Cursor Mundi* (Latin for 'course of the world'). This is a vast religious poem in about 24,000 lines of rhyming couplets that was written in about 1300 (probably after rather than before.) We do not know who the author was, but the language shows it to be written in a northern dialect of what was at that time technically called Middle English (as it were, halfway between Old English and Modern). Its beauty for 'sense' quotations is that its subject matter is so wide-ranging. It is not only a 'world history' from the Creation to Doomsday, but it is packed full of colourful legends and saints' lives, so combining a wide spectrum of varied language on a factual and imaginative level.

The next milestone, one that will be frequently encountered by the reader, is that of by far the most important writer in Middle English, Chaucer, and thus of his monumental work, *The Canterbury Tales*. (Unfinished, alas, but monumental all the same for its subject matter, style, characterization and, most important from our point of view, its language.) The date given in the dictionary for the *Canterbury Tales* is always 1386, although this is an approximation and much of the work was written after this up to the author's death in about 1400. The earliest possible date is given, however, as with all other works quoted, since this is when the language quoted was actually written, rather than when the work was completed or published. Some quotations are also given from other works and translations by Chaucer.

The fourteenth century also contains the time of the first complete English translations of the Bible (from the Latin Vulgate of the fifth century in turn originally translated by St Jerome). These two English translations are ascribed to John Wyclif, and are now traditionally dated 1382 and 1388. Again, these years are approximate only and it is certain that Wyclif himself was not the translator of the entire Bible. For our purposes this does not really matter, however, since it is the language itself that is important and the usage of individual words that is of greatest interest. Where they occur in the dictionary, quotations from Wyclif's Bible are almost always matched with parallel quotations from the Authorized Version of 1611. In many cases an earlier word will have been altered, although in some others it will have been retained. Either way there will have been a change of meaning for the quotation to appear here at all.

The next landmark is another translation of the Bible, this time that of William Tyndale, whose New Testament, based on the Greek of Erasmus'

edition, was printed in 1525, with his version of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) appearing about five years later. Tyndale's translation in essence formed the basis for the text of the Authorized Version nearly a century later. Closely following on Tyndale's Bible was the translation of the whole Bible that bears the name of Miles Coverdale, printed in 1535. This in turn was mostly based on Luther's German Bible as well as partly on the Latin Vulgate and even Tyndale's own version. Finally (for the purposes of this dictionary, although not in the history of Bible translation) the Authorized Version itself appeared in 1611, representing, as mentioned, a slightly altered rendering of Tyndale's text with a 'seasoning' of Wyclif's.

By now the English language was acquiring something like its current form, with a vocabulary and spelling that certainly seem more modern than 'ancient', and we have now reached the era of Shakespeare, whose value as a source of contemporary English usage is of supreme importance. Today, many people have a kind of ambivalent attitude to Shakespeare. On the one hand, they tend to 'write him off' as too remote, too 'high-falutin' or simply too difficult to understand. On the other, they recognize his genius and are perfectly ready to acknowledge his wonderful gift of characterization and sense of theatre (in the literal as well as the broader sense). Unfortunately, it is the 'antis' who react against his language. Inasmuch as it affects us, in this dictionary, this is a great pity, since Shakespeare's mastery of English was almost unparalleled, and his vocabulary ranges widely, incorporating meanings and nuances not only from English as it stood in his day, but from the past as well. And that is not all: Shakespeare was a true innovator, and if he felt that a word or phrase could be profitably and imaginatively exploited to enhance his text at a particular point, he did not hesitate to do so. He thus presents us with a true thesaurus of English words and meanings, from past, present and in effect future, since many current meanings today are first recorded in his writing. Thus, the following words (each entered in the dictionary) were all originally found in their modern sense in Shakespeare's works: 'bask', 'chaos', 'cur', 'deck' (of cards), 'emblem', 'excellent', 'favour' (in the sense 'token'), 'forfeit', 'gallant', 'gaudy', 'gossip' (as a verb), 'groom' (as a short form of 'bridegroom'), 'haunt', 'horrid', 'indiscreet', 'influence', 'jangle', 'meteor', 'miscarry' (in the sense 'go wrong'), 'portly', 'prime', 'probable', 'puny', 'puppy' (and 'puppy dog'), 'split', 'story', 'tall', 'thrill', 'tributary' (see *tribute*), 'trivial', 'upshot' and 'witty'.

The supreme value of Shakespeare's writing as a unique reference point in the development of the English language cannot therefore be overestimated. He was, too, not only a great and talented writer in any era and any language, but the first really important and gifted writer in what is now

technically known as Modern English, that is, English as it has evolved in relatively recent times since the early sixteenth century.

Shakespeare lived from 1564 to 1616, and his almost exact contemporary was Spenser (1552-99), whose talent was fortunately not overshadowed by the greater and more prolific dramatist. Spenser's supreme work was *The Faerie Queene* (1590), and its language, too, will be seen to provide many valuable examples of newly emerging usage. After Spenser, it is the works of the twin giant poets Milton and Dryden that provide much useful material, some innovatory, some preserved from earlier usage. Both Milton and Dryden lived entirely within the seventeenth century (Milton died in 1674, Dryden in 1700), and the former's grandiose *Paradise Lost* (1667) similarly serves as a superb storehouse of contemporary English.

Both Milton and Dryden, as well as several other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poets, made much use of the vocabulary of former centuries, in some cases, even resurrecting meanings that had become obsolete. This is especially true of words that had been adopted from French, and Dryden in particular made a vigorous attempt to promote French-based words. (He was very francophile in this respect, and bemoaned the fact that English was so 'barbarous' in comparison with elegant French). Hence some of the relatively late usages of earlier senses quoted from the works of this post-Elizabethan period.

Dryden also lamented the fact that the English had 'not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar'. Half a century after his death the lack he indicated was more than compensated for by the appearance in 1755 of Dr Johnson's great pioneering *Dictionary*.

Obviously, far and away the best guide to the contemporary sense of a word is a dictionary, which will not only define it but, if doing its job properly, illustrate it with quotations from contemporary sources. Johnson's *Dictionary* did both, and he explains in his Preface how his criteria for what should go into his work were based on the best conversation of contemporary London and the normal usage of literate writers after Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86). His emphasis was thus on the present and the relatively recent past, which means that his record preserves English as it was, and as it was understood, in the seventeenth century and first half of the eighteenth. Many of his etymologies are suspect, and some of his definitions wilfully idiosyncratic, but as a source of contemporary senses the work as a whole is more than valuable (and the etymologies of little relevance anyway). The present dictionary will therefore be found to contain a number of quotations and instances of usage taken from Johnson's work.

One final important literary innovator must be mentioned before proceeding to more modern 'wordbanks'. This is Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). Today, perhaps understandably, Scott is little read. His writings, however,

are in their way almost as important a source for vocabulary and language usage as those of Shakespeare, although admittedly on a less grandiose and 'charismatic' scale.

This is because Scott was not only a talented writer and poet, but a historian and (it goes without saying) a Scot. We therefore have language usage on three levels from him: contemporary (i.e. early nineteenth-century), historic (most of his novels are set several centuries earlier), and Scottish (especially relating to Scottish folklore). This unique amalgam therefore provides us with very many examples of 'esoteric' or even 'specialist' English meanings, as well as ordinary cultured usage. (The former element, undoubtedly, is what deters most people from reading him today. One English literature lecturer advised his students, who were reading Scott for examination purposes, to make their initial read-through of his books in a foreign language, if they knew one well enough. It was easier and quicker!) But Scott would not, presumably, have deliberately used antiquated or obscure or local words that his readers would not understand, so we must justifiably assume that most if not all usages found in his works would have been meaningful to his contemporaries, even if many of them are not now. To Scott, therefore, we look for special instances of historic or local (Scottish) words, as well as the general cultured English vocabulary that other writers of his day would have used.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of the most important milestone of all in the recording of the English language over the centuries. This was the great *Oxford English Dictionary*, whose first part was published in 1884 and final part in 1928, with a Supplement added in 1933. The original complete title of the *OED* was *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, and the last three words of this point to the work's unique value for any dictionary of sense changes, like the present one. The *OED* records the histories and meanings of all words known to have been in use since 1150, as well as hundreds more before this, with each different meaning, or shade of meaning, however fleeting, accompanied by a 'significant' quotation showing its use. The many readers working on the dictionary had amassed a staggering total of five million quotations by 1898, with doubtless at least a million more after that, but the completed work contains 'only' just under two million such citations. For our purposes, as mentioned, these proved a unique source of illustrative material, and I would like to express my thanks to the Copyright Department of the Oxford University Press for allowing me to plunder many of the supporting quotations which the *OED* compilers and readers had themselves so painstakingly gathered during the gradual fruition of their monumental work. The *OED*, too, has been my chief source for most of the actual sense changes themselves, and readers of this present dictionary who wish to discover further former senses of a word, or study a wider

selection of relevant quotations than it has been possible to give here, are unconditionally recommended to turn to the pages of the *OED* itself where they will find a veritable feast of information.

It is thus self-evident (I hope!) that the language is changing all the time, and that not only are new words entering the language, but new meanings. Conversely, many words gradually become disused and fall out of use, while formerly current senses become obsolete, and similarly fossilize. Proof of this can be graphically seen in the four new supplementary volumes of the *OED* that have had to be compiled and published in the twentieth century to record such developments and changes. (See the Bibliography, p. 291, for the details of those volumes that have so far appeared.) So what we today readily know to be called a 'computer' may well have acquired some other name in a hundred years or so, when the machine itself has altered beyond all recognition from its present form. It is interesting to speculate what effect on the language the present revolutionary development in science and technology will have in a century or so. If, for example, we are moving towards a cashless society, as seems likely, many of the words now current to deal with the process of buying and selling may either become obsolete or change their meaning. If a purchase in a supermarket is effected through a simple debit to our bank account by means of a chargecard, for instance, the concept of 'change' (i.e. cash returned) will need revising, as may even that of 'coin' itself. Readers may like to speculate what could happen in other fields, such as those of transport, the working environment, and communications generally.

However, it is time to return to the present and to conclude this introduction by explaining briefly how the entries are arranged. Each word has its current main meaning or meanings added in brackets. The various past senses are then dealt with in chronological order, in centuries (occasionally, especially with a recent word or sense, by a precise year). Any special usages of a word, as in a set phrase or expression, are also often indicated, and in many cases etymologies are given to point to the original sense of a word. Mentions simply of 'the Bible', without any date, are of the Authorized Version of 1611. Mentions of the Book of Common Prayer (or just 'the Prayer Book') relate to the 'standard' one of 1662, not the so called 'Revised' one of 1927.

The method of dealing with quotations has already been explained, and the main milestones or landmarks have been considered. There are, of course, quotations from other important works, such as the translations of Caxton and his contemporaries, the most readable *Diary* of Pepys, and the sometimes less readily readable novels of Dickens, as well as from what might be called 'non-literary' sources such as cookery books, newspapers and magazines, agricultural and gardening manuals, ecclesiastical records and wills, and

private letters. Other dictionaries besides Johnson's are quoted, too, including, very occasionally, the *OED* itself.

In short, *this* dictionary offers the English-speaking reader a historical panorama of the language, its gains and losses. I hope he or she will derive pleasure and interest from it.

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