

OUR LANGUAGE

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The fascination of words

Words have fascinated man ever since he began to use them, and the current interest in words - often a very profound and informed interest - is shared by all sorts of people, not merely those who trade in or are preoccupied with words. Quite apart from all their utilitarian purposes, words are intrinsically a source of fun, pleasure, diversion and curiosity.

One of their chief fascinations is their history - their place of origin, the manner in which their meanings have changed over the years. A "gentleman", for instance, was originally a person of noble birth, mild and refined in manner and behaviour who was registered with the authorities as such.

Now he is merely a man who wishes to use a public lavatory, or who is addressed collectively by someone making a speech. In the past you could become a gentleman (should you so have wished - as did Shakespeare) by acquiring sufficient land, property and public esteem, and by registering your crest and motto, suitably vetted and approved, with the proper heraldic authorities.

A century ago in England, a "republican" was someone who wanted to abolish Queen Victoria and the monarchy, and establish instead a country governed by all the people who would then become "democrats". The words republican and democrat were thus synonymous, a fact which causes many a raised American eyebrow.

English is so amenable in its vocabulary that we can accept that one and the same word can simultaneously convey diametrically opposed meanings. Washable ink, for example, is ink which, if spilt on your shirt, can easily be washed out. Washable paint is quite the opposite, and no amount of soap and water will remove it.

Some words have lost their original meanings almost entirely. "Silly" once meant merely ignorant, like silly sheep. "Nice" has today become one of those blanket words for anything not exactly offensive: a nice day, nice hat, nice word, nice manners.

In the distant past its meaning was much narrower and more precise. It meant wanton, then coy, then fussy, hard to please; then done with care and precision, accurate, as in something "nicely judged". We have come a long way from the original meaning which in Latin implied "knowing nothing" - hence ignorant and foolish.

One of my favourite words as far as meaning goes is "California", which conjures up images of luxurious villas, film studios, endless beaches, prolific orchards crammed with figs, and some quite acceptable wines. The word itself actually means "hot oven", a fact which the travel agents try to keep mum about. Very nice of them really, especially for the ladies and gentlemen of the hot oven state.

Examples of horse sense

"I know two things about the horse - And one of them is rather coarse!"

So wrote Hilaire Belloc, and I am willing to bet he wasn't thinking of the word *chivalry* when that little poem sprang from his pen.

Most people know enough about words to realise that not only their meanings are of interest. Their origins - what is termed their etymology - is of considerable interest and value, since a word's history - its *curriculum vitae* so to speak - can tell us much about what happened in days gone by.

If we go back in time, we find that *chivalry* originates from the Latin *caballus*, meaning a nag or hack. *Chivalry* came to us through French (*cheval* being the French for horse) and its first use in English dates from the start of the fourteenth century - a period in European history marked by its courtly behaviour and the rise of a cult of feminism, particularly in religion. In French, *chevalrie* meant originally the ability to manage a horse in combat, and since those who rode horses in battle were nobly born, the word came to mean also the kind of refined, courtly and elegant behaviour one expected from those who went into battle on horseback - gentlemen, in fact.

Later, it completely lost its horsey connotations and came to signify simply courtesy or honourable conduct - the kind of behaviour that prompted you to hold doors open for ladies, walk on the outside of the pavement to prevent the ladies' clothes from being spattered with mud thrown up by passing vehicles, and stand up when your elders and betters - not merely females - entered the room. Regrettably, many aspects of such chivalrous behaviour are now on the wane; some have vanished entirely, perhaps because of the many women who, being more equal than men, no longer require doors to be opened or hats to be doffed in their honour.

The man who practised such *chivalry* was, of course, a *chevalier* (which simply meant, in French, a horseman) - in fact, a knight. He belonged to a unit of *calvalry* and ultimately, some of them behaved in *cavalier* fashion. Cavalier behaviour now means something arrogant, swashbuckling, overbearing and careless of people's feelings - characteristics which a true chevalier would have considered abhorrent.

Many other words are linked to chivalry and its Latin origin: *cavalcade* is one. Originally it meant a parade of horses and their riders; now, thanks to Noel Coward and the music halls, all that has changed radically. The Spanish for gentlemen is *caballeros*, a word you will find inscribed above countless loos in the Iberian Peninsula. *Caballeros* has been subjected to the same degenerative and erosive processes as our *gentlemen*. Opera buffs will recall that *Cavalleria Rusticana* means *Rustic Chivalry*.

Talk of spades and spades

One of the signs that body tissue is alive and well is its ability to repel water. We can apply similar tests to languages - particularly English - one of the most useful being its propensity to keep augmenting the meaning of words.

It can do this in several ways, for instance, by adding bits - prefixes, suffixes, other root elements and the like - to produce words like photospectroscopy, dephlogisticated, counterclockwise. Yesterday, pseudo-parenthetical may not have existed; it does now! It's really quite easy to manufacture such compounds.

Existing words can be given new shades of meaning which, not so long ago, would not have been understood in their new guises. For example, the whole spectrum of words in the same semantic area, like fairy, pansy, gay, queen, queer, is a comparatively recent addition to the language. Slang, jargon and idiomatic usage continually augment the language we use and enhance our ability to convey meaning. Particularly in sexual matters, English is rich in all manner of euphemisms, a testimony to the influence of prudish, puritanical and bowdlerising minds on our thinking.

One of my most fascinating books of reference is *A Dictionary of Euphemisms* by Neaman and Silver, a veritable treasurehouse of alternative expressions for a variety of situations and human activities. No one will fail to be surprised by the multiplicity of choices available to the English-speaker.

Euphemisms ("mild or indirect terms for blunt and direct ones") certainly play a valuable role in our social dealings. In avoiding

hurting the feelings of others we are, after all, merely treating them as we should wish to be treated ourselves.

But we can overstep the bounds and become too prudish, and make ourselves ridiculous in consequence. Putting frills round the legs of the piano - as was done in some Victorian households - merely exposes the pruriency of the mind behind the act.

"Do you want to go to the lavatory?" is infinitely preferable to "Do you desire comfort stations?" or other such circumlocutory enquiries about visiting the necessary house. "My uncle died" is more acceptable than "He has breathed his last" or "He has answered the final summons."

I do, however, draw the line at certain soft options to denote aggressive or violent behaviour. Sports commentators refer to "aggro" or "a little bit of how's your father" to mean that one "sportsman" has slugged an opponent in the teeth with his clenched fist, or ground his studded boot-heel into someone's kidneys.

At a higher hierarchical level we have, to our everlasting shame, a whole vocabulary of intellectual, sleight-of-brain terms to disguise very nasty behaviour indeed. Napalm sounds quite emollient, provided you are on the donating end. Pre-emptive strikes, border incidents, collateral damage, neutralising - and its even nastier companion, termination with extreme prejudice - beastly though they be, pale into almost respectable gentility compared with a clean bomb.

Perhaps if we referred to such matters in blunter terminology we should become less inclined to spend so much money on our second strike capability.

Words are known by the company they keep

Consider the following and then say precisely what has gone wrong:

He embezzled Escom of R6,7 million.
Teacher will then say some statements.

He is eager in assisting the doctor.
We shall make the refreshments.

You probably had little difficulty in amending each of those statements and producing a more acceptable form of English. But of the four, only two exhibit what can be classified as grammatical errors: the first and the third.

The first would be better phrased with a more suitable preposition and an altered word order: "He embezzled R6,7 million from Escom." The third needs an infinitive rather than a participle: "He is eager to assist the doctor."

The other two are faulty, not through poor grammar but because they disobey the lexical demands of English usage. *Lexis* can be defined as the body of unwritten laws which govern the association of words. For example, we can refer to new potatoes, fresh lettuces, young carrots but not young potatoes, or new lettuces.

Young milk, new meat are not acceptable, though fresh milk and fresh fish are. A new baby, a young baby, and a fresh baby are not the same animal. Nor are a new lecturer, a young lecturer and a fresh lecturer.

Refer to statements two and four and you will see what is lexically wrong. In two, we don't "say statements" in English; we *make* or *issue* them. In four, we don't "make refreshments", we *offer* or *provide* them.

Faulty lexis is one of the commonest errors in South African English, and virtually every news bulletin on the radio or TV will throw up examples. Foreigners have special difficulty with English idioms, for synonyms and approximations are not enough. You won't get by with "She was low in the mouth", "He grew warm under his shirt" or "We refused to foot the line."

All those are close to the real thing, but far enough off to be typical non-English mistakes which; amusing though they may be, can often cause confusion and much embarrassment.

Such lexical errors in idioms can be rectified by reference to a good dictionary. The others are more difficult to put right or avoid, since only extensive dictionaries like the Shorter Oxford or Larger, show a word's correct lexis by illustrating its usage with quotations. A particularly arresting example of non-lexis occurs in a book which was published in Bombay:

"They were continually going ahead of the Milky Way along under Heaven, with General Burke their commander in their front, and Gunga Din their servant in their behind."

More lexis at work

The great linguist Noam Chomsky coined the sentence "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously" to show that you can construct an English sentence to an acceptable pattern, and with no "grammatical" mistakes, but which is lexical nonsense. We just don't know how things can be both colourless and green, or how ideas can sleep and so on.

Much of the vocabulary of English can be associated only with some - not all - of the rest. We don't normally talk about lemony books or iron paper or magnifying cigarettes or playing soap. These are obvious examples.

A word like "inaugurate" also has its own lexis, that is those words with which it can associate. We are limited first, by what or who can inaugurate, and second, by what can be inaugurated. News bulletins are rich sources of lexical aberration as in: "The government has inaugurated a trade treaty with Mozambique" or "The Minister inaugurated a new dam yesterday". Further examples are: "Parking discs convey immunity to cars on the campus"; "Most businesses receive a social obligation for community support"; "The Trust was formulated for philanthropic aims" and "The weather office prophesied a sharp rise in temperature". You will no doubt be able to put all those sentences into more acceptable English.

In literature - especially in poetry - we are allowed to break these laws of lexical association for a specific reason of effect. For instance, Wilfred Owen talks about "fatuous sunbeams". Now the

lexis of "fatuous" is confined to words dealing with human behaviour or activity: we can have a fatuous smile, a fatuous idea, scheme, hope, act, suggestion, plan, and so on, all of them implying a degree of stupid imbecility. But fatuous sunbeams? Only in the context of Owen's poem *Futility* does the startling effect of faulty and unique association make its devastating point.

When Macbeth talks about "this petty pace", he juxtaposes two words which normally cannot be together. "Petty" has several meanings in English, the commonest being "small-minded, contemptible". Thus we talk about a petty action, a petty remark. Petty meaning small (from the French *petit*) has few literal uses in English apart from petty cash, petty officer or petty sessions, and even here petty is not used entirely literally. What then is a "petty pace"? A small step for Macbeth or a large contemptible one for all mankind? We shall have to revert to the context and *think* - which is precisely why Shakespeare departs from lexical normality. Breaking lexical conventions with a deliberate purpose jacks up good literature into something much more than ordinary writing.

Some compound verbs

Many of the characteristics of English, which make it such a gloriously flexible vehicle for thought and expression are also responsible for some of the difficulties experienced by those learning it as a first or second language.

Among these characteristics is the almost limitless freedom English allows us to build onto simple verbs with various particles and thus concoct new shades of meaning, often far removed from the verb's significance. Take a simple verb like "make". By itself it means construct or fashion. We can make a bookcase or a chair. Change the concept slightly and we can make a cake or a pudding. Add a metaphorical element and we can make faces, or nuisances of ourselves or hay while the sun shines.

When we add particles to "make" then the whole ballgame (as they say) alters. We can make do with something; we can make up a bed or a foursome, though make-up takes on a different meaning entirely if we are referring to doctoring one's natural looks. We

can make for Mafikeng, make over our possessions to someone. Notice that in these compounds, the original meaning of make in the sense of manufacturing or constructing, seems to have been left far behind.

Look at the verb "turn" and its various compounds. We can turn in, turn out, turn down, turn off, over or up, around or about; we can turn to someone in a moment of need, or into something different. Very few of these compounds suggest anything to do with rotation.

Cast your eye over these compounds of the verb "look" - and notice the wide spectrum of meanings conveyed:

look up to - respect;
look up - refer to;
look out - be on your guard;
look into - enquire into, attend to;
look for - seek or search;
look over - examine, inspect;
look to - expect;
look forward to - eagerly anticipate;
look back - reminisce;
look down on - despise;
look in - pay a quick visit.

Notice too that different meanings are conveyed when the verb and the particle are reversed: look out is not the same as outlook; to look over does not mean to overlook.

It's usually the simpler, monosyllabic verbs that offer themselves most readily for conversion into compounds. See how many different particles you can attach to the following, and then examine the wide variety of meanings conveyed: do, go, sit, pull, put, pay, set.

Another complication arising with such verbs as turn and look are the many metaphorical uses to which we put them. Turning grey or nasty or fifty-five has nothing to do with rotation. "You don't look ninety" and "They look suspicious" add further difficulties for

the learner. Who exactly is doing the *looking*? Who *looks* fifty-five/ or suspicious? Certainly not the subjects of those sentences.

Who'd be an English teacher - or do I mean teacher of English?