

Notes for address at the launch of *The Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary*

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[Given at the official launch of the *Thesaurus* on Thursday, 22 October 2009, Western Infirmary Lecture Theatre, University of Glasgow]

Study of the English Language is usually regarded as threefold – the closed systems of Phonology and Grammar, and the open system of Lexis (vocabulary), which, because it has to embrace every single concept and object capable of being listed in a dictionary, is open to continual additions. I assume that is the reason why, compared with phonology and grammar, lexis is, as it were, the Cinderella of our studies, lacking any full and detailed treatment of its history.

I was early attracted to the subject when, in the course of my work on Middle English dialects, I came across the work of the French dialectologists (especially Gilliéron), who showed that, when distinctions become blurred by sound-change, replacements are needed. Similarly, if a word changes in meaning, speakers then have to find a replacement for its older meaning.*

It was phenomena like those that raised in my mind the much larger question – why do words die out and how are they replaced? My problem was that, although the OED would give me a full history, with quotations, and dates, of each word, it couldn't tell me what choices of equivalent words had existed for speakers in the past, when they were avoiding some words and favouring others. This is because all the vast knowledge contained in the OED is, as it were, LOCKED UP in the alphabetical order dictated by a dictionary, and it only very rarely supplies you with any synonyms, or related words. YET it has to be the relevant lexical systems operating in past periods which we need to know about: from what set of words did speakers of a particular era choose their replacements?

It was at this point that I realised the size of the task. It would need, for each concept or object, all the words ever used for it, with their dates, so that we could tell which system in the past they had belonged to. To make just that single list, one would need to work through the whole OED (and Anglo-Saxon dictionaries) to establish the other words for that concept or object in given past periods.

Natural Conclusion: Do all the concepts and objects at once. In other words – the huge project we embarked on – A HISTORICAL THESAURUS – which starts from the meanings and gives you all their forms – the exact opposite of a dictionary, which starts from the WORDS in alphabetical order.

Now, I have to admit that this thesaurus, on its own, can't always give a direct answer to the questions I was asking. If not, it shows us where to look, and it is to the OED that we then have to return, and look up the history of each word of our new-found group of synonyms or quasi-synonyms, and search for hints on why the speakers of those past ages made the choices they did. If those hints don't yield much, we still know more about the history of that particular concept or object than before. And this, after all, is what we expect of research – the old adage ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER. If it won't answer all the questions I began by asking, it has led to something much bigger.

I began by saying that, of the three main areas of linguistic study LEXIS and its history was the most obvious GAP, and that gap has now been filled by a more detailed history than I could ever have hoped for, and it is all of you, in your various ways, who have provided it.

*Marginal notes appear in text at this point, with illustrative examples:

“SHE; THEY, THOUGH; SILLY; TRADE; SHIT/SHUT; HEAT/HATE, MEAL/MALE} /e:/ > /i:/ to differentiate”