WORDS IN TIME
A Social History of the English Vocabulary

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Sources and Abbreviations

This study is, of necessity, heavily dependent on the master-work on semantic change in English, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). For economy of reference, a raised ‘O’ is used (e.g. 1934⁰) to refer to the main *Dictionary* (1883–1928), which was the collaboration of Murray (pre-eminenty), Bradley, Craigie, Onions and Furnivall, ‘with the assistance of many scholars and men of science’. A raised ‘S’ refers to the *OED Supplement* (1972–86), produced by Dr Robert Burchfield and his research team at Oxford. The fourth and last volume, published in 1986, completes what is clearly a worthy sequel to its predecessor, so aptly described by Otto Jespersen as ‘that splendid monument of English scholarship’. This acknowledgement of logophillic dependence is in no way intended to implicate any Oxford lexicographer in the inferences and conclusions which follow.

Other abbreviations used are:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>OE</td>
<td>Old English</td>
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<td>A-S</td>
<td>Anglo-Saxon</td>
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<td>EETS</td>
<td>Early English Text Society</td>
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<td>THES</td>
<td>Times Higher Education Supplement</td>
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<td>COD</td>
<td>Concise Oxford Dictionary</td>
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<td>ODQ</td>
<td>Oxford Dictionary of Quotations</td>
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... until a few years ago – within the memory of men still living – very little use had been made of language itself, that is to say, of the historical forms and meanings of words as interpreters both of the past and of the workings of men’s minds. It has only just begun to dawn on us that in our own language alone, not to speak of its many companions, the past history of humanity is spread out in an imperishable map, just as the history of the mineral earth lies embedded in the layers of its outer crust. But there is this difference between the record of the rocks and the secrets which are hidden in language: whereas the former can only give us a knowledge of outward, dead things – such as forgotten seas and bodily shapes of prehistoric animals and primitive men – language has preserved for us the inner, living history of man’s soul. It reveals the evolution of consciousness.

Owen Barfield

History, in the human sense, is a language not cast backwards.

George Steiner

Language is one of the primary defining qualities of man, both individually and collectively. It surrounds us, moulding our ways of thinking and feeling, from the infant’s cry to the obituary notice. People deprived of language in some way, be they deaf, dumb, illiterate or inarticulate, are essentially handicapped. All kinds of social control, all manner of manipulation, from the ‘hypnotic mendacities of the mass media’ – as George Steiner has memorably called them (1969, p. 261) – to the most potent subliminal propaganda, are achieved through it. People who are normally shrewd will be persuaded by banal advertising copy; those who are normally politically inert or pacifist can be mobilized to die for a slogan. The vehemence of people’s attachment to their language is very apparent in contemporary Belgium, while the violent rejection of
Afrikaans as the language of oppression was made manifest by the schoolchildren of Soweto in 1976.

In all cultures the pre-eminently articulate use of language is praised and honoured. Poets, traditionally the guardians and exhibitors of the word-hoard in its most highly charged form, are invested (even today) with a certain mystique. In ‘primitive’ societies, those in high office employ praise poets, while their equivalents in allegedly more advanced societies employ speech-writers to put on a style which is befitting the leader’s status. In virtually all cultures there is a profound desire to conform to established linguistic usage, and concern over the abuse of language. It is probably not an overstatement to say that in the West the dictionary is consulted more than the Bible or equivalent sacred text.

In this century we live, not simply amidst change, but in the expectation of change. Perhaps, realizing this expectation mentally, we are inclined to realize it in fact. Yet linguistic change has been the norm in English for at least a thousand years: all major commentators on the state of the language have been impressed – usually depressed – by its transience in spelling, in grammar, in syntax and in semantics, aspects which, generally speaking, have been studied in that order.

The past millennium of English history has witnessed huge changes in the social, economic and political structures, as well as in the make-up of the English-speaking peoples. This book is an attempt to correlate the main social and semantic shifts. By taking a panoramic perspective, subtle alterations in the social fabric and in the language, which may be matters of nuance in an individual’s life-span, become arresting and illuminating in their magnitude. Today, for example, cell, office, propaganda and sanction are common secular words with clearly developed scientific, commercial and political denotations or prime meanings. Yet they all have common ecclesiastical origins, cell deriving from the monastic tradition, office from the liturgy, sanction from the imposition of penance and propaganda from the Counter-Reformation. Similarly, there is the phonetic erosion of the name of God (reflecting semantic change) in such forms as goodbye (‘God be with you’), gospel (‘God’s message’) and gossip (‘relation in God’). These and many others reflect in the secularization of their meanings the eclipse of the influence of the Church.

Semantic change is widespread and astonishing in its extent. Even the most intellectually incurious must be prompted to ask how it comes about that lobster and locust are doublets (in origin the same word), as are glamour and grammar, cretin and Christian, zero and cipher, how school has its conceptual roots in ‘leisure’ or how silly once meant ‘blessed’. One easily becomes overwhelmed in the fascinating diversity of the avalanche of verbal evidence which confronts one upon venturing into a large dictionary. Sometimes obscure, tantalizing connections emerge, such as the etymological roots binding giddy to god, whore to caritas, custom and habit to the concept of clothes. Alternatively, a central root term may ramify and mutate to the point that its descendants no longer resemble the parent. The roots of salt (once a valuable commodity, as is evidenced in the phrases ‘the salt of the earth’, to be ‘worth one’s salt’ and so on) have spread and grown into the diverse forms of salary, salad, sauce, saucer, sausage, soil and the verb to souse. Here the root sense of ‘salt’ has virtually disappeared, together with its previous sense of value. In cases like this, it is easy to understand the scepticism behind Voltaire’s witty observation that in etymology the consonants count for little and the vowels count for nothing.

The great storehouse of semantic change in English is the OED, originally the New English Dictionary on Historical Principles (1883–1928). This revealed the existence and traced the development of 414,825 words. To this total the Supplement (1972–86) added approximately 63,000 words. Of this vast number, only a minute proportion are shown to have a single sense which has remained stable throughout the word’s history. In fact, the more common the word, the wider its range of uses, an axiom which G. K. Zipf has corroborated with the alarming statistic that, except for a few core words, ‘different meanings of a word will tend to be equal to the square root of its relative frequency’ (1945, p. 255).

If English had remained a homogeneous language, in the sense that it might be said that German has, the study of semantic change would be a relatively simple affair, since one would be dealing with the same basic word-stock, and analysing the ways in which it has accommodated the various social, political and technical changes which have occurred. The essential semantic trend, one surmises, would be that of generalization, or widening of meaning, as the vocabulary took on more and more shades of meaning. However, such a simple scheme does not obtain, for the vocabulary of English is richly heterogeneous, luxuriant in its profuseness and quirkish in its changes of meaning. Yet it reflects the main social developments of the past thousand years in profound, uncanny and fascinating ways. If all the main historical sources of the early period (for example, 900 to 1300) had been lost, the word-stock itself would remain a remarkably accurate record of those times. In it can be traced the differing linguistic legacies left by a conquering Norman elite, a decimated Celtic minority, a partially successful invasion of Norse rivals, and a series of four major Latin influxes which can
be respectively characterized (in terms of historical period) as basic, religious, bookish and scientific. In the format of linguistic archaeology, the different strata of the Latin borrowings (often ultimately derivable from Greek) could be represented in this fashion:

**Scientific:**
(17th–18th centuries)
nucleus, formula, vertebra, corpuscle, atomic, carnivorous, incubate, aqueous, molecule

**Literary:**
(Renaissance)
democratic, juvenile, sophisticated, aberration, enthusiasm, pernicious, imaginary, allusion, anachronism, dexterity

**Religious:**
(6th–7th centuries)
mass, monk, nun, bishop, abbot, minster, apostle, pope, altar, hymn, angel, devil

**Basic:**
(Continental borrowings)
street, mile, butter, cheese, wine, inch, ounce, pound, kitchen, plum, cup, dish, mint (both senses)

While most standard histories of the language distinguish these four stages of classical borrowing, the enormous influx of technical terminology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in effect constitutes a Fifth Borrowing. Examples would be *allopathic, floculation, otokinolaryngology, chthononosology, sphygmomanometer* and *zomotherapy*. These forms, unlike the early Latin and Greek borrowings, maintain their native inflections and spelling conventions to the point that they appear quite alien to English speakers. They also have a propensity to agglutination, as in the (admittedly facetious) word *pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovulcanacitis*. As one goes back to the 'deep strata' of the early Roman and Christian borrowings, so a phonetic assimilation is evident: inch, devil and bishop have the sound and the appearance of English words, since their distinctive Classical inflections (in Latin uncia, Greek diábolos and episkopos) have been eroded or distorted; this is not true of the later borrowings nucleus and pernicious. Some of these ancient invaders have worked their way right to the core of the language: they are ill is, etymologically speaking, pure Norse. Others have been halted on, or ousted to, the outer perimeters of obscurity and nicety.

Of the original Anglo-Saxon word-hoard which has survived – about one-third of the vocabulary, it is estimated by Herbert Kozioł (1937, p. 8) – many central terms have been supplanted or changed out of recognition. It seems extraordinary, for example, that the Old English words for uncle, nephew, body, skin, face, take, breakfast, vegetables, fruit, money, number, war, touch, window and furniture should have been ousted from the vocabulary entirely, or survive only in remote, recondite caches. (For example, OE *nimban* ‘to take’ became underworld slang before becoming obsolete, now surviving only in *nimble* and *numb*, while Dr Johnson tells us that *came* (‘uncle’) was ‘still used in the wilder parts of Staffordshire.’) Similarly, the updating of the forms and meanings of major terms from Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry produces some strange results: by such means it might be said that Beowulf took *lust* (A-S lust, ‘pleasure’, ‘joy’) in *dreary* (A-S dreorig, ‘bloodstained’) battle, was *moody* (A-S modig, ‘brave’, ‘spirited’), rode a *mare* (A-S meark, ‘a steed’), *yelped* (A-S gielpan, ‘to boast or challenge’), *faced* his enemies (A-S fesian, ‘to put to flight’), fought a *worm* (A-S wyrm, ‘a dragon’) and then *cringed* (A-S cringan, ‘to die, fall in battle’). The once-proud words of his poet now present a sorry figure. On a more mundane level are the semantic changes of A-S *deor* from ‘animal’ to ‘deer’, *fugol* from ‘bird’ to ‘fowl’, *wambe* from ‘stomach’ to ‘womb’, *steorfan* from ‘die’ to ‘starve’, *mete* from ‘food’ to ‘meat’, *spillan* from ‘destroy’ to ‘spill’, *sellan* from ‘give’ to ‘sell’ and *stol* from lofty ‘throne’ to humble, fundamental ‘stool’. Here one notices that in each case the broad, general sense has been lost, for a loan-word has usually insinuated itself as the central term of the word-field. The native term has consequently become narrower in meaning and frequently lost status, as the Beowulf sample indicates.

By contrast, Norman terms, reflecting the prestige of their speakers, became the vocabulary of the upper echelons of society: *crown*, *court*, *parliament*, *army*, *castle*, *mansion*, *costume*, *gown*, *ermine*, *beauty*, *banquet*, *beast*, *art* and a host of technical terms (discussed in chapter 2) all attest to their sophistication and stylishness. A telling sociolinguistic example resides in the nomenclature of meat: the animal on the hoof, supervised by the Saxon shepherd, hireling or hand, carries the Saxon term of *calf*, *cow*, *sheep*, *deer*, *boar* and *pig*, until served up at the Norman lord’s table, culminarily transformed to *Norman veal*, *beef*, *mutton*, *venison*, *brawn*, *pork*, *ham* and *gammon*. They are cooked, furthermore, in the Norman terms of *roast*, *boil*, *broil* or *fry*.1

There emerges a clear sociolinguistic connection between the social status or function of a speech-community and the register or tone of the verbal legacy left by it. It is also clear that English has not been a pure language for over a thousand years: it was, even in the Middle Ages, what Daniel Defoe satirically styled in *The True-Born Englishman* (1701): ‘Your Roman-Saxon-Danish-Norman English’ (l. 139).
Of the many changed assumptions, the many altered forms of society which separate us from the traditional pattern of medieval life, the erosion of feudalism, and its assumptions of inherited hierarchy and unequal birthright, is obviously the most important. In this process capitalism clearly played a significant role, for money was initially used to commute feudal debts of labour and then developed into what we call the credit system, liberating free enterprise, whereby individual initiative was encouraged. The Church, though meritocratic in some of its practices, was a generally conservative and repressive institution. As society became secularized, so the notion of equality developed into a general assumption and then a right. In related developments, democracy and freedom of thought gained slow acceptance. In addition, print and the electronic media gave rise to the possibilities of mass propaganda and dissent, education and advertising.

These developments were gradual, related, and had one thing in common: they encouraged mobility and freedom, in thought, in people, in money and, above all, in words. The mobility of key concepts and their semantic correlates is everywhere apparent. The rational discourse of science, for example, in which the mind can go wherever logical proof and empirical data take it, replaced the older mode of received lore, bound by tradition, authority, dogma and taboo. Consequently the word science itself changes from its medieval sense of ‘learning’, denoting a traditional body of knowledge known by rote, to its modern sense of a method of exploration, a technique for discovery and discrimination. Since the Renaissance there has been an enormous proliferation of what are called ‘the sciences’, particularly the natural sciences. These are now generally referred to as ‘the exact sciences’, to distinguish them from the more recent and more theoretical or hypothetical disciplines of political science, sociology and psychology.

The liberating capacity of money to commute feudal obligations and its use as a mode of legitimate acquisition is reflected in the semantic shifts of key terms, such as purchase, finance and fortune, discussed in chapter 3. The earliest senses of purchase involve taking by force; the emergence of our modern sense of ‘acquisition by payment’ took place only about four centuries ago. Finance has moved from its plain etymological sense of ‘end’ or ‘ending’ and ‘settlement of a debt’ (still evident in fine) to the modern, entrepreneurial meaning of ‘borrowing money at interest’, with quite different associations of initiating a transaction. Perhaps the most striking evidence of the liberating effect of the power of money is to be found in the word fortune. Its earlier conception was of a force which dominated human life, familiar in the great medieval symbol of the Wheel of Fortune; around 1600 emerges the sense of ‘an amount of wealth’ which, being made by shrewdness or sagacity, allows man to control his own life. In a related development, security from the ordinary vicissitudes of human existence, by means of securities and insurance policies, has been one of the promotions of capitalism. However security, now signifying not only a good, but a virtual right in advanced Western capitalist society, was originally a ‘bad’ word meaning ‘a culpable absence of anxiety, carelessness’.

The capitalist ethos of conspicuous consumption has likewise had its semantic correlates. Prominent amongst these is luxury, which has as its earliest dominant sense (from the fourteenth century) that of ‘lust, lasciviousness or generally sinful self-indulgence’. Though it has not yet lost all its pejorative associations, luxury has ameliorated as the concept of ‘the good life’ has changed from the ascetic model of the Middle Ages to the hedonistic imperatives of modern times.

As democracy has replaced the older notion of hierarchy (literally, ‘a sacred order’), so related key terms have shifted. Democracy itself and politician, both originally very unfavourable terms, have since achieved differing degrees of acceptability. Contrariwise, aristocracy had as its original, etymological sense ‘rule by the best’, a meaning which would hardly be popular now. As elites have become viewed with suspicion and envy, so elite itself has deteriorated.

Put simply, the alternative to the medieval model of hierarchy is that of competition. Though such competition (vividly described by Hobbes) does away with previously entrenched privilege, the resulting meritocracy is likely to reflect inequalities of ability or resources, thereby ultimately producing oligarchies. This study is therefore also concerned with the various establishments, institutions and oligarchies which have grown up in the post-medieval world, and their semantic effects. For all of these developments have linguistic consequences, some more direct than others.

While central value-terms have shifted in concert with the ethics of society, the developing media have also had widespread effects on the language. The development of printing initially provided a measure of stability for the language, but this was largely confined to the formal aspects, for print emphasized the regional and individual anomalies of manuscript spelling, accelerating their removal. Since most of the early presses were in the South-East, which was also an area of financial and cultural dominance, so the East Midland, later the London, dialect
began to predominate. However, printing fundamentally and irreversibly altered the balance of power which had hitherto existed between hearers and speakers, or readers and writers. In an oral situation the hearer may intervene to concur, elucidate, protest or refuse what is being said. The meanings of words, though not necessarily precise, cannot with impunity be juggled with since the potentially censorious presence of the hearer is immediate. The balance of power between what G. K. Zipf (1949, pp. 19–20) has termed ‘the auditor’s economy’ and ‘the speaker’s economy’ is thus preserved by the dynamic of the situation.

There is, in consequence, an organic link between ‘meaning’ and speech-community, so long as the language is oral. This link, weakened by writing, is broken entirely by the invention of printing, which enables all sorts of liberties to be taken with the meanings of words by those in control of the press. And it is only through access to the press – not always a viable possibility – that these agreed meanings can be restored.

As power has been extended to a variety of interests, first through capitalism, and then through democracy, so oligarchies – both political and economic – have been able to manipulate words in their favour. In totalitarian regimes they have virtually absolute control over the semantic description of society and individuals. In democratic societies the result may be called logocracy, or the ‘war of words’. This is the natural semantic consequence of dispute over such ‘essentially contested concepts’ as democracy, freedom, justice, equality and so on (Gallie, 1964, p. 157). It also derives from the competition for some market or spending-power, the semantic result being linguistic capitalism, or the appropriation of words as brand-names or boosters in the verbal selling package of advertising copy. As the fourth chapter of this study will attempt to elucidate, there is an impressive promptitude with which the press in England and on the Continent was harnessed to the requirements of authoritarian propaganda, religious controversy and commercial advertising.

Consequently, in terms of the conflict of speech economies, the alternatives are either the controlled semantic market of totalitarianism, or the free market, with all its inevitable fluctuations and instability. Here various oligarchical sublanguages, such as the jargons of tabloidese, adspreek, computerese, newsspeak and doubletalk all compete in a state of general linguistic anarchy.

By and large, the right of politicians, businessmen, journalists and copywriters to appropriate or manipulate language (the communal product and possession of the speech-community) is not now seriously questioned. It is tacitly assumed, in fact, that the language of advertising and politics need not have the same standards of responsibility, honesty and literality as would be expected to apply to statements between individuals. These altered assumptions have been subsumed into what Lord Acton called so memorably ‘the atmosphere of accredited mendacity’ (1973, p. 20).

There has developed in recent times an awareness that language contains assumed ideologies or ‘compacted doctrines’, as William Empson has called them (1977, p. 21). Some, like conspicuous consumption or civil disobedience, are the illuminating coinages of individuals (in these instances, Veblen in 1899 and Thoreau in 1866). Others, like free enterprise, capitalism, profits, democracy and exploitation, evolve slowly through the state of communal flux before acquiring a political tone which has become first emotive and then militant.

The awareness of the ideological content or assumptions in such language has made the definition of certain semantic areas concerning race and politics a very sensitive issue. In consequence, some pressure has been brought to bear on dictionaries to restrict the currency given to opprobrious racial terminology. As chapter 8 seeks to show, xenophobia is a deeply embedded linguistic feature. Its long, ugly history suggests, in fact, that it is an ingrained sociolinguistic habit of prejudice which is more likely to be eradicated by rational exposure than by attempted suppression.

KINDS OF SEMANTIC CHANGE

At this point some definition is needed of what is meant by ‘semantic change’ in this study. The concept covers three basic aspects. First, and most obviously, it concerns a change of meaning undergone by an individual word in the course of time. Secondly, it involves lexical change, meaning the addition of new words (via invasion, borrowing or technical innovation) or the obsolescence of archaism in a given word-field. Thirdly it involves register, a fairly recent term denoting the special word-choice appropriate to a given social situation or literary context.

Semantic changes are seldom simple and abrupt. Typically they are slow elisions between senses which are established and those which are coming into being. Sometimes they involve erosions of the phonetic form of the word as well, as in the case of the interesting word silly, illustrated in figure 1.1.

Of the first category of semantic change there are many varieties. Words may undergo generalization, that is, take on a broader range of meanings. Box in Anglo-Saxon times referred to a container made of
box-wood, normally for the safe-keeping of something precious, such as ointment or jewelry. (A *box at the opera* is a facetious extension of this notion.) Technological change – a frequent catalyst of semantic change – has evolved multifarious boxes, no longer even commonly made of wood, and seldom containing anything precious: that role has been assumed by *casket* or *chest*. Metaphorical extension, shown in the generalization of *pilot* and *ship* from contexts of sea, via air to space, is a frequent reflection of technical change. Metaphors, once no longer recognized as figurative, become ‘dead’, as in flower-berd, blind corner and dead metaphor itself. The language is full of these imaginative extensions of meaning. Contrariwise, *engine* has undergone the opposite shift of *specialization* or narrowing, from its broad medieval sense of ‘mechanical contrivance’ (often of war and torture but still surviving in its old general sense in cotton gin) to the modern meaning of ‘a mechanical source of power’, a specialization occasioned by Watt’s invention of the steam engine. (The whole technology of steam has given rise to many terms and idioms, some of which still thrive.) Reluctance to accept metaphorical change and unwillingness to cut loose from etymology can be important factors in the acceptance of semantic change. When Freud was doing the research for his *Studies in Hysteria* he had to overcome considerable resistance from his clinical colleagues, who were firmly inclined to the belief that, since *hysteria* was derived from the Greek word for a womb, male hysteria was as much a contradiction in terms as a male hysterectomy.

Certain areas of the vocabulary perennially generate specialization. As the explicit terms for sexual activity became unacceptable and then taboo, numerous general latinized words were drawn into the ‘semantic vacuum’. Among them were *rape* (1482), *consummation* (1530), *seduce* (1560), *erection* (1594), *copulation* (1632), *intimacy* (1676), *orgasm* (1684), *intercourse* (1798), *climax* (1918), *ejaculation* (1927) and *interfere* (1948). (Seduce was originally a feudal term, meaning to ‘poach’ labour from another man’s service, while interfere is in origin an equine term for a horse’s front legs striking against each other.) However, the oldest sense of *provocative* is ‘sexually enticing’ (as in ‘she wore a provocative, body-hugging dress’). Hoccleve (a contemporary and imitator of Chaucer) has an interesting passage from c.1412: ‘Ere receyuen ecke prouocayues Tengendre hem luste’ (‘They also consume aphrodisiacs to induce lust’).

Some terms, having become too explicit, are avoided and replaced. *Occupy* acquired a sexual sense from the fifteenth century, recorded in this amusing passage from the universal historian, Ranulf Higden: ‘Men
of Lacedemonia... fatigate and wery thro the compleynesse of their wifes becenge at home, made a decrde and ordnauncers before the scholde occupye mony men, thankenge the newmbre to be encreasede by that. The last quotation is from 1660, and the OED comments: ‘The diseuse of this verb in the 17th and most of the 18th c. is notorious. This avoidance seems to be due to its vulgar employment in sense 8 [under discussion]; cf. 1597 SHAKS. 2 Henry IV, II iv 161: “Gods light these villaines wil make the word as odious as the word occupy, which was an excellent good worde before it was il sorted.” Conversation took on its sexual specialization from c.1511, and the set phrase for adultery, criminal conversation, often abbreviated to crim. con., is recorded from c.1770. The offence was abolished in 1857. Intrigue soon took on the sense of ‘amorous liaison’; there is a topical reference from 1668. The equally Gallic origins of liaison itself (initially a cookery term for the thickening of sauces) no doubt helped it follow suit after a most opposite first reference in Byron to ‘a chaste liaison’ in 1821. Affair has always maintained a discreet vagueness.

Amelioration, whereby a word takes on favourable connotations, and deterioration whereby it takes on pejorative associations, are often telling indications of social change. There is a particularly pregnant category ably defined by C.S. Lewis as ‘the moralization of status words’ (1960, pp. 21–3), discussed fully in chapter 2. By this process terms originally denoting status and class slowly acquired moral connotations, favourable and otherwise, evitative of the moral conduct commonly attributed to that class. Hence villein, a medieval serf, and Anglo-Saxon cœorl, still lower in the hierarchy, deteriorated to villain and charlist, while noble and gentle, predictably, rose in moral connotation. In more recent times, the steady amelioration of ambitious and aggressive reveals a change in attitude towards those who seek advancement or ‘success’ in a highly competitive fashion.

Value-terms and ethos-terms reflect social acceptability or stricture, with consequent amelioration or deterioration. The amelioration of luxury and democracy, and deterioration of aristocracy, have already been mentioned. Propaganda was acceptable as an institution for the buttressing of faith during the Counter-Reformation; the term deteriorated once the cynical abuse of credibility was applied in the service of the modern state. With the spread of education, literacy and learning acquired greater value; consequently terms like lown (Anglo-Saxon lewed, meaning ‘of the laity, uneducated’) deteriorated sharply, a process seen in our times in the strongly stigmatic associations of ‘illiterate’ and ‘uneducated’.

These social determinants of semantic change refute a prevailing generalization most strongly put by Barber: ‘Human nature being what it is, deterioration is commoner than amelioration: we are only too prone to believe the worst of anybody, and this is reflected in the way our words change’ (1964, p. 251). This ‘doctrine of deterioration’ (to which Margaret Schlauch, Stephen Ullmann and Anthony Burgess all subscribe in varying degrees), has a dubious psycholinguistic basis, in that it does not explain how the deteriorated words acquired ‘good’ senses in the first place. Furthermore, it takes the form of a circular argument, being an explanation for an assumed psychological process for which the only evidence is the fact to be explained.

One of the few genuinely psycholinguistic changes would seem to be the ‘law of procrastination’, whereby words that used to mean ‘immediately’ (such as A-S sona, now soon, A-S anon and Elizabethan English presently) have all come in time to mean ‘in a little while’. Of a different order, but possibly revealing, are the dishonest senses which have accumulated around forge, counterfeit, shred (documents) and bug (listen in to covertly – which has yielded a new sense to bugger). These all suggest that criminal propensity is not slow to take advantage of technical innovation.

Other kinds of semantic change are less obviously related to societal developments. There is, for instance, the trend of emotive intensification, whereby formidable, classically derived words such as phenomenal, categorical, sensational and diametrical are used in emotive, emphatic ways. (Dr Johnson, clearly aware of this process, used the condemning adjective ‘ludicrous’ of such affected eighteenth-century uses as desparately and abominably: of the latter he remarked: ‘In low and ludicrous language, it is a term of loose and indeterminate censure’.) Yet ‘phenomenal achievements’ and ‘sensational developments’ are still very much the order of the day. Smaller, native terms, such as little, tiny, great and big are used in similar emotive fashion, exemplified in ‘one of those noisy little men’, from Disraeli’s Vivian Gray (1827).

There are curiosities, such as the shift to opposite, evidenced in man (originally in Anglo-Saxon ‘dark’, now ‘pale’), fast (originally ‘fixed’ or ‘firmly’, now ‘rapidly’) and obnoxious (literally ‘prone to harm’), but now commonly ‘unpleasant’). Garble has become a curious example of its own modern meaning, since in Renaissance times it meant not to confuse, but ‘to sift out the garble (the refuse of spices) from the spice itself’. Batch originally meant ‘to repair’. Less severe sources of confusion in phonetic development are stark, which in stark naked should be start naked, literally ‘tail naked’ and ye as a misreading of Anglo-Saxon
be, later the, now surviving in such pseudo-archaisms as ye olde tea shoppe. A stranger instance is sneeze, a misreading of Anglo-Saxon sneasan, which should have rendered the historically improbable (but phonetically much more exciting) form sneyze.

These changes can be assumed to have been gradual evolutions within the speech-community. More serious are the trends of verbicide or weakening and distortion. Verbicide was coined in 1898 by Oliver Wendell Holmes, though C. S. Lewis gave the word a recent currency in Studies in Words (1960, p. 7). It seems no coincidence that the term should have originated in the period of mass-circulation newspapers with their sensationalist copy and their extravagantly worded advertisements colloquially, but evocatively, called puffs. By this process words such as tremendous, monstrous, ghastly and many others are applied indiscriminately, through fashionable affectation, to a variety of trivia. (They have become deflated, while phenomenal, categorical, etc., have been inflated.) Terrific has, in the whirligig of time, become a word of approval. Much verbicide seems to be an upper-class affectation. One cannot imagine coal-miners or crofters or shepherds complaining about ‘ghastly weather’ or praising a ‘divine party’. Within this area of exaggeration Johnson detected a particular syndrome of feminine affectation. These instances he simply condemned as ‘women’s words’. Frightful, he noted, was a cant word among women for anything unpleasing; flirtation in the sense of a quick sprightly motion is similarly categorized, while horrid is designated as ‘women’s cant’ for ‘shocking, offensive, unpleasing’. The echoes can still be heard in fashionable suburbs, although the mode can certainly no longer be termed a feminine speciality.7

Verbicide may be committed collectively, fashionably or individually. In recent times it has moved beyond harmless personal exaggeration to various forms of organized commercial and political deceit. It is a form of distortion deriving clearly from liberties taken with the prime meanings of words by those in control of some medium. Thus one finds in advertising language such shop-worn examples as ‘miracle product’, ‘dream house’, ‘magic cleanser’ or ‘luxury margarine’, while political adjectives show a similar combination of emotion and imprecision, as in fascist, democratic, bourgeois and reactionary. The problem with verbicide is that words no longer die: having been drained of their vitality, they are sustained by press circulation in a state of suspended animation. Rather than being buried in a ‘graveyard of murdered words’ (Lewis, 1960, p. 228), they become zombies.

Finally, there is euphemism, which, being a linguistic indicator of a variety of taboos, is more revealing of certain cultural and psychological determinants than other trends. Euphemism, reflecting these taboos, is concerned principally with certain socially sensitive areas such as sex, race, illness, financial collapse, poverty, mental incapacity of various sorts, death, excretion and swearing. In the last-mentioned category, one can observe that the ‘openness’ of medieval religious swearing (so apparent in Chaucer) was curtailed in literary forms by Puritan injunctions against Profanity on the Stage. In time the taboo has relaxed, but left us with the curious mutilations and suppressions of the name of God, such as sounds (God’s wounds) and gosh, a ‘mincing pronunciation of GOD’, as the OED terms it.

As swearing has moved away from a religious focus to that of bodily functions, so there have emerged the suppressed forms of shibbet (for shit), blooming (for bloody) and flaming (amongst others) for fucking. Today these taboos are self-consciously violated by many who wish to assert their independence from or rejection of ‘decent’ bourgeois society. This rejection of the taboo was a feature of the American Flower Children of the 1960s and the Skinheads of contemporary Britain.

Within the same broad cultural group there can be different taboos. For instance, mother-fucker, virtually unheard of in the UK, is a common demotic usage in the US, particularly in the street argot of blacks, among whom it can be used with the familiar, friendly tone of Australian bastard. Yet cock, which is commonly heard in all classes of speech in the UK, has traditionally been edited out, studiously (or unconsciously), from much American parlance. Consequently cockroach emerges in the emasculated form roach, faucet displaces cock in all senses of tap, and rooster does service for cockrel, although the associations of ‘cocks’ have been well established at least as far back as the late fourteenth century lyric ‘I have a gentle cock’.8 However, with the recent liberation from taboos on swearing, cock-teaser, a common American student usage for a flirtatious but ultimately ‘unbeddable’ woman, and cock-sucker, a damned fellatio term for a toadying, servile underling, have gained considerable currency.

Euphemisms can also be contrived by vested interests for public consumption. Some of the more recent socially conditioned euphemisms are industrial action for ‘strike’, recession for ‘depression’, and – in the fruitful area of the semantic disguise of violence and war – explosive device for ‘bomb’, operation for ‘campaign’, liquidation for ‘murder’, strategic weapon for ‘nuclear missile’ and incident for any unpleasant occurrence, social, political or military.

Taboo areas of discourse can, paradoxically, attract the opposite
mode, which is the less well known process of dysphemism. Here meaning is directly, even crudely, conveyed with a shocking lack of nicety which deliberately violates the taboo. In the semantics of dying, to pass away, to pass on and the many variations of a journey to the great unknown comprise the standard euphemisms, while to push up daisies is a dysphemism. Both varieties proliferate in underworld argots.

Older meanings are frequently preserved in phrases by impacted fossilization: ‘by virtue [strength] of the fact’, ‘fondly [foolishly] imagine’, ‘one man’s meat [food] is another man’s poison’ and ‘God speed [give you success]’ are examples.

The second category of semantic change involves lexical change, more simply, the obsolescence of old words and the introduction of new words, via borrowing or invention. Recent acquisitions are ombudsmen (1915), very current from the mid 1960s, anti-missile missile (1956), video (1958), video nasty (1983) and laser (1964). Such terms, often a direct reflection of some technical advance, have been categorized as witness words by Georges Matoré. Sometimes words are borrowed twice. For example satellite dates originally from c. 1548 as an attendant on an important person, but remained a rarity (unincluded in Johnson’s Dictionary of 1755) until the launching of the Russian Sputnik in 1957.

Obviously, not all technical words are reliable witnesses: railway is first recorded in 1776 (Act 16 of George III), but the first railway (Stockton to Darlington) was opened nearly fifty years later (1825). Clearly, the first recorded use of contraception (1880) did not herald the start of a practice to which there are oblique references as far back as the Ancrene Riwle [The Rule for Nuns] in the twelfth century. The same time-lag may be assumed to apply in the cases of sadism (1880), masochism (1893) and security blanket (1956). Forms like WASP (1964), blue-collar (1956) and yuppie (1984) are sociological formulations rather than reflections of social change. Words can, of course, refer to mythical entities, as in unicorn and, more bizarrely, sootiekin: ‘an imaginary kind of afterbirth formerly attributed to Dutch women.’ It would be naive to attribute democracy in even the vaguest modern sense to ancient Greece, on the semantic evidence alone, since women and slaves did not have the vote. This error is not very different from supposing that baseball must have been a highly developed skill at Northanger Abbey because the word occurs in chapter 1 of Jane Austen’s novel of that name. Some words become obsolete for clear social or technical reasons, for example, vambrace, rebrace, crinet and paystral, medieval terms for armour. Others pass out of usage for no obvious reason. Examples are wittol, ‘a contented or conniving cuckold’, swive, ‘to copulate’ (fl. c. 1386–c. 1884),

gimcrack, ‘showy but worthless’, and cant, ‘sophistic hypocrisy’, all of which continue to thrive in fact if not in word.

Thirdly, ‘semantic change’ involves shifts in social connotation or register. These more subtle changes in verbal appropriateness to varying contexts are most apparent, and most illuminatingly discussed, via the relationship of particular words to others in the same field, rather than solely through the relationship of the word to some referent or concept. Register, a fairly recent linguistic term recorded only from c. 1956, refers principally to language variation according to social role or social situation, especially to the degree of formality in the language employed. Eliza Doolittle’s cockney ejaculation ‘Not bloody likely!’ in Shaw’s Pygmalion) was a notorious violation of the register (and the accent) appropriate to Edwardian polite society. The excitement of the popular press over Princess Anne’s curt suggestion (c. 1982) that they should ‘Naff off!’ derives from the same breach of linguistic etiquette. By contrast, Queen Victoria’s staid response, ‘We are not amused’, was appropriate to her role and the times, even in a diary entry.

What is remarkable in English is the way that the basic contrast in register between formal and informal usage can be transposed exactly into the historical evolution of the language. Most of the informal usage derives from the Anglo-Saxon and Norse element, while most of the formal usage emanates from the Norman French, Latin and Greek input. Thus, the following piece of enticing copy is pure Saxon: ‘Warm, rich and full of golden-goodness, Fido dog food will give your furry friend health, strength and get-up-and-go.’ Because Anglo-Saxon forms the core of the language, it is impossible to form, even facetiously, full statements exclusively comprising the other registers, but the following examples (with borrowings from French, Latin and Greek in bold) will serve: ‘The Consul-General of France cordially invites you to attend a reception in honour of . . . ’; ‘the patient is experiencing a potentially fatal haemorrhage situation’ (‘the patient is bleeding to death’). Dickens sharply defined one functional difference between registers in his characteristically witty essay ‘Saxon-English’ in Household Words in 1858: ‘When a man has anything of his own to say, and is really in earnest that it should be understood, he does not usually make cavalry regiments of his sentences, and seek abroad for sesquipedalian words.’

Although the degree of formality is traditionally the aspect most stressed in discussion of register, this emphasis is essentially limiting. Register can also be demonstrated via numerous alternatives in word-choice: old or new; concrete or abstract; blunt (or sharp) as against
polite or refined; direct or vague; literary or recherché as against slang or demotic; provocative or annoying as against humorous or bland.

The familiar characterization (alluded to by Dickens) that high register terms are polysyllabic, while low register terms are commonly short, is essentially true. This is seen most simply in evolutionary terms by ME physiognomy becoming phiz c.1688, subsequently fiza; ME lunatic becoming vulgar loony c.1872; fanatic becoming fan (US) c.1889; Renaissance obstreperous becoming stroppy c.1951 and so on. The process of attrition is continuous, as is evident in bus, taxi, bi (sexual), demo, porno and many others.

Registers can most clearly be understood through semantic fields containing those words or meanings which cohere around a particular concept, topic or thing. Fields dealing with scientific and technical areas are necessarily specific and specialized. Others may contain no specific terms, being composed entirely of general words with particular nuances which relate to the field in question. For example, body, fruit, sugar, dry, character, nose, palate, noble, bouquet and finish seem to be an agglomeration of generalized physical and abstract terms: they have all, however, acquired specific meanings which have combined and evolved to make up the connoisseur’s quaint and slightly precious terminology of wine.

A semantic field may be represented diagrammatically, using the disposition of differing registers in the schematic fashion of figure 1.2. Some fields are predominantly ‘bottom-heavy’, as is that of drunkenness.

**Figure 1.2** Registers in a semantic field

**Figure 1.3** The semantic field of mad
Apart from the elevated terms *inebriated* and *intoxicated*, there are dozens of low register dysphemisms, shown in this brief sample confined to words beginning with the letter 's': *slammed*, *sloshed*, *smashed*, *slew*, *stewed*, and *screwed*. Other fields are largely 'top-heavy', for instance that to do with poverty, which abounds in such elevated euphemisms as *indigent*, *impecunious*, *destitute*, *distressed*, *financially underprivileged*, and *modest income*. That of synonyms for *mad* (figure 1.3) is nicely balanced.

George Steiner's epigraph to this chapter, 'History... is a language net cast backwards', is seminal in various ways. As has been mentioned, word-fields of synonyms in English tend to separate broadly into a hierarchical patterning of registers, one which reflects the historical development of the language to an uncanny degree. Thus, one will usually find that the primary, basic or neutral word (such as *house*, *food* or *clothes*) will be Anglo-Saxon, forming the foundation on which a vast lexical superstructure of refinement and nuance is built, mainly from the registers of French, Latin and Greek. Norse terms will commonly be of the same, basic register as the Anglo-Saxon, as is evidenced in *window*, *sky*, *law*, *cast*, *odd* and *leg*. The Norman French terms will usually have associations of rank, courtliness and refinement, while the Latin and Greek will frequently have connotations of learning, science and abstraction. One can illustrate this stratification of registers by the collocation of synonyms such as *ask*, *question* and *interrogate*; *rise*, *mount* and *ascend*; *leech*, *doctor* and *physician*. (In each of these trios, the order is Anglo-Saxon; Norman French; Latin/Greek.) An equally pointed contrast is seen in these Saxon and Latin pairings: *catty* and *feline*; *dogy* and *canine*; *horsy* and *equine*; *piggish* and *porcine*. Contrasting registers can often be a source of facetious word-play: *skipping* can be transposed into 'bipedal saltatorial locomotion'; native register can be made to appear equally alien in forms like *ungetatable* and *unputdownable*. Playing off differing word-stocks against each other can also create powerful rhetorical and satirical effects, as Shakespeare and Chaucer intuitively realized. The essence of the mock-heroic is the studious misapplication of register to role, memorably described by C. S. Lewis as having Juno speak like a fishwife or having a fishwife speak like Juno. As we shall see, the lower registers are not always secure: the *dandilion*, with its splendid heraldic etymology of *dent de lion* ('lion's tooth'), was in earlier times known by the grosser name of *pissabed*, on account of its diuretic properties. *Turd-bird*, 'a provincial name for Richardson's Skua', is equally uncertain, for the same reason. *Guts* was acceptable in Sir Philip Sidney's translation of the *Psalms* (1580), and the author of the *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300) wrote of Samson taking a *nap*.
**Introduction: Words and Social Change**

The analysis of linguistic change in more recent times, when English has become an international language and is being used in many manipulable ways, has always seemed to me a matter of urgency inexplicably ignored by major studies. Once printing and the electronic media break the organic link between language and society, words can be created, exterminated, warped and manipulated semantically by a group of vested interests or even a single person.

Furthermore, the distinction between `legitimate' or `correct' usage and `unacceptable' usage has become harder to verify, particularly with the growth of metalanguages, idiolects and major dialects and variants of English, notably American English. The infiltration of American vogue-words, idiom and syntax has been perhaps the most important modern influence on English. Indeed, a discussion of modern English can hardly ignore terms of technical vigour and progress, as well as a whole register of vibrant demotic idiom (comprising, for instance, cool, neat, smart, mean, with it, dumb, upright, rip-off, wild, weird and out of sight). Here communication through wide, vague, emotive use is usually gained at the expense of the precision which the words have traditionally maintained.

Some are not as new as might be supposed. *Hump* ("a fashionable word for copulation"), *pig* ("a police officer"), *pad* ("base"), *screw* ("to copulate") and *freak out* are imbeded words datable to the eighteenth century. Of the last there is a nonce-use in Cledon's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749): 'She had had her freak out [orgasm]. . . .' Whether the recent transatlantic infiltration has been an enriching or an impoverishing influence on English remains a matter of dispute.

**The Study of Semantics**

It might be said, sharply but not unfairly, that the study of language has moved from the smallest unit, sound, and progressed to the largest, syntax, with treatments of meaning becoming increasingly obscure. *Semantics* is, consequently, a comparatively new word in the language. Michel Bréal coined it in the title of his pioneering study, *La Sémantique*, in 1895, about 75 years after the revolutionary discoveries by the brothers Grimm, Bopp,
Rask et al. of sound-shifts in the evolution of the Indo-European languages. Bréal sought a word which was scientific, stable and thus suitable for the analysis of ‘the science of meaning’. Though Bréal used the word ‘law’ frequently of language, he was scornful of the proposition that there could be ‘tendencies of words’: ‘Nothing could be more chimerical,’ he asserted. ‘How should words have tendencies? Nevertheless, we hear of a pejorative tendency, of a tendency to deteriorate, etc.’ (1964, p. 99).

Saussure in 1915 was largely in agreement, though from different bases of argument. He insisted on ‘the arbitrary nature of the sign’, and on the primacy of the ‘ synchronic aspect of the language (its continuing system) rather than the ‘diachronic’ aspect (its historical evolution). Divorcing language from its social roots, he affirmed that it was ‘a self-contained whole and a principle of classification’ (1966, p. 9). To some extent, Saussure was reacting against the contemporary emphasis on historical studies which searched for language laws and organic patterns of development. Of course, in quoting anything from Saussure’s Course, one has to concede that the text might be more the synthesis and overstatement of his students Bally and Sechehaye than the transcript of the master’s voice. Thus, the final statement, ‘The true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself’ (1966, p. 232), which has proved so influential, was an addition of the disciples. Saussure elsewhere concedes that ‘Language has an individual side and a social side, and one cannot conceive of one without the other’ (Leroy, 1967, p. 53).

Since ‘meaning’ is essentially a shared, plural or social notion (the alternative being literal idiocy, the incapacity to relate or communicate rationally), a more fruitful approach is to relate language to the mores and values of its society. Works by Gustav Stern in 1921 and Hans Sperber in 1922 discussed in Ullmann (1957, pp. 254–5) sought to formulate certain ‘laws’ of semantic development. Out of this enterprise evolved the study of specific ‘lexical fields’ or ‘semantic fields’, a concept which seems to have been introduced in 1924. Jost Trier, ‘the chief architect of the field theory’, as Ullmann calls him, published his major study into the linguistic field (‘ sprachliche Zwischenwelt’) in 1931, an approach followed by Georges Matoré from 1933 into broader ‘fields of ideas’ (‘ champs notionelles ’). Matoré also refined the vocabulary by making a useful (but not absolute) distinction between ‘witness words’ (‘ mots-témoins ’) reflecting material progress, and ‘key words’ (‘ mots-clés ’) reflecting ethical change (1953, pp. 65–8). The richest study of this kind in English is still Owen Barfield’s History in English Words of 1926, revised 1954, 1962 and 1985. Other studies delineating word-histories in a social context were C. S. Lewis’s Studies in Words of 1960, which dealt with a narrower canvas, Raymond Williams’s more ideological collection, Keywords (1976), monographs on a single word, such as Charles Barber’s The Idea of Honour in English Drama (1590–1700) (1957), and Susie Tucker’s Enthusiasm (1972). Normative or prescriptive studies and structural–theoretical analyses have been more numerous, in the UK and the US, respectively. They will be covered in the Conclusion (chapter 9).

The study of language is one of the most testing of disciplines. At one extreme stands the chimerical chessboard or grid of scientific system, exact but inhuman, produced by the lust for order Bacon so peremptorily described: ‘The human understanding is of its own nature prone to suppose the existence of more order and regularity in the world than it finds’ (Novum Organum, XLIV). At the other extreme stands the distorting mirror of impressionism or solipsism, human but confused: ‘The human understanding is moved by those things most which strike and enter the mind simultaneously and suddenly, and so fill the imagination; and then it feigns and supposes all other things to be somehow, though it cannot see how, similar to those things by which it is surrounded’ (Novum Organum, XLVII).

The mode of approach used in this study is a combination of the atomistic, philological study of individual words, combining their case-histories with those of similar background or meaning, but not losing sight of the social determinants of the language, nor its overall system. The assumed relationship between semantic change and social change is that of a flexible symbiosis. This is not a question-begging formulation, since the problem of cause and effect in semantic matters produces different solutions according to time and field. For example, computer and transistor are semantic effects of technical change, whereas the terminologies of psychology and politics indicate the causes and also record the effects of change. The symbiotic model thus obviously involves choice on the part of the investigator in both overall shape and detail of his construct, the semantic field. Nor is this choice wrong; for, as Bacon asserted in his own model for scientific enquiry, what is needed is ‘not the method of an ant, which merely collects and uses, nor yet that of a spider, which spins cobwebs out of its own substance, but that of a bee, which transforms and digests the material it gathers by a power of its own’ (Novum Organum, XCV). The problems are considerable. One needs to simplify and schematize, without crudifying, tracing major tides and currents while being aware of eddies and waves. Furthermore, as Geoffrey Leech has observed (1974, p. vii), ‘a writer on semantics has to try to play many parts (not only linguist, but philosopher, anthropologist, psychologist, even perhaps social reformer and literary critic).’
The sources of evidence are not uniformly reliable. Language in its spoken forms is so protean, elusive and full of creative and idiomatic quirks that it often evades grammatical analysis and historical placement. For instance, the origins of to be done in or to be done (cheated, swindled) cannot be positively located in time, while to do famously can, fortunately, be traced to an unusual source, Shakespeare's Coriolanus (1608). Colloquialisms are hard to pin down precisely, since context commonly governs meaning. The COD defines chuffed confusingly as 'pleased; displeased', while the exclamation shit can convey anger, pleasure, surprise, disappointment, astonishment and resignation. Consequently, this study is predominantly concerned with dictionary definitions and lexicographical locations in time, even though it must be conceded that the dictionary, as we understand this term, has been in existence for little more than two centuries.

Developing Bacon's metaphor of the bee, it goes without saying that the semantic data should be collected and categorized by the most fastidious, punctilious alveary. Like any other researcher or enthusiast in the field, I have been almost entirely reliant on the labours of Murray, Bradley, Craigie, Onions, Furnivall, their heirs and successors, and their numerous sub-editors, contributors and assistants. Owen Barfield, who has contributed in such an imaginative and illuminating fashion to the study of semantic fields, has paid just tribute to the greatest achievement of English lexicographical scholarship, the OED: 'The immense debt which the foregoing pages owe to the Oxford English Dictionary is, I hope, too obvious from the text to need further emphasis. Without access to that unrivalled monument of imaginative scholarship, a great deal of this book could never have been even attempted' (1954, p. 216).

To Barfield's acknowledgement must now be added one appropriate to the Supplement (1972-86). In the half-century or so which has elapsed since the publication of the main work, there have been major changes in both the lexis and the assumptions underlying lexicography. Technological progress has produced a stupefying proliferation of technical terms. Of greater daily relevance has been the clear diminution of verbal taboos and the growth of the allied assumption that dictionaries should be descriptive, recording all usage, and not simply the polite, literate forms. Dr Robert Burchfield and his editorial team at Oxford have incorporated in the Supplement an alarmingly thorough coverage of the new technical language, and - equally important - a judicious record of demotic English, an area which, it must be acknowledged, was not fully treated by their predecessors.

The Supplement makes good a deficiency in the main work, one which went further than Burchfield's description as simply 'the absence of two famous four-letter (sexual) words'. Murray, for all his robust individualism, still felt constrained by the practice evident as far back as Caxton (and mentioned in chapter 4), of censoring 'rude' words in print. The stratification of registers, so marked in relation to 'bodily functions', had over the centuries become a set pattern, with the 'low' (commonly, but not exclusively, Anglo-Saxon) word hovering beyond the pale of respectability, but usually being displaced by more 'polite' or euphemistic French or Latin variants, some of them, like fellatio and cunnilingus, resorting totally to 'the decent obscurity of a learned language'. The broad schematic arrangement of the major terms in figure 1.5, with words of Romance origin in bold type, illustrates the point fairly clearly. It also gives the lie to the popular notion that the 'four-letter-words' are exclusively Anglo-Saxon, and shows that one of the commonest euphemistic formulas, to sleep with, was established in the remotest period of the language. The scheme necessarily involves crudification: for instance, make love, originally make love to, moves through a prolonged 'seduction', so to speak, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before explicit coitus is

**Figure 1.5** The semantic field of 'rude' words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anglo-Saxon</th>
<th>Middle English</th>
<th>Renaissance</th>
<th>Augustan</th>
<th>Victorian</th>
<th>Modern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shit(n)</td>
<td>turd</td>
<td>ordure</td>
<td>excrement</td>
<td>crap*</td>
<td>defecation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>piss(v)</td>
<td>urine</td>
<td>micturate*</td>
<td>screw</td>
<td>pce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sleep with</td>
<td>swive</td>
<td>fuck*</td>
<td>copulate</td>
<td>make love</td>
<td>bonk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pollution</td>
<td>frig*</td>
<td>onanism</td>
<td>screw</td>
<td>self-abuse</td>
<td>wank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arse</td>
<td>bum*</td>
<td>fundament</td>
<td>anus</td>
<td>bottom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>posterior(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cunt thing*</td>
<td>coney</td>
<td>pudendum</td>
<td>twat*</td>
<td>vagina</td>
<td>quim*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weapon†</td>
<td>cock</td>
<td>yard tool</td>
<td>prick</td>
<td>penis</td>
<td>(privy)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

- **Bold** type indicates Romance origin
- * Origin uncertain
- † The sense is incorrect as well as the form (OED)
- 1 Frig overlapped with fuck in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries
- 2 Thing has served for both male and female genitalia since Middle English
- 4 OE weaponsd ('weaponed' or 'armed') has the basic sense of 'male' in many compounds including gender in children and plants
attained. I have not included the new 'liberated' term, self-pleasuring, designed to supplant the old, guilt-suffused, punitive words for masturbation, like self-abuse (still used in the COD).

Curiously, the taboo was not rigorously observed in the OED. Readers could be thoroughly informed on masturbation and the extraordinary history of bugger, covered in chapter 8. But fuck was excluded, though a place was found for windfucker, also known as a fuckwind, more politely a windhover or kestrel. While Hopkins celebrated the windhover, George Chapman could use windfucker in the Preface to his Iliad, without embarrassment. Cunt was similarly excluded, though the underground euphemism coney (pronounced and often spelt cunny in earlier times) was fully revealed and illustrated by jauntily verses such as: 'All my Delight is a Cunny in the Night' (1720). The pronunciation altered, the Dictionary speculates, through 'a desire to avoid certain vulgar associations with the word [unprinted] in the cunny form'. Condom was excluded (one of the voluntary readers felt that it was 'too utterly obscene' for inclusion), although it was well documented in the eighteenth century, as can be seen from the witty entry from Francis Groce's A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue (1785) reproduced as figure 4.2. (It was principally the AIDS panic of the mid 1980s which abruptly brought condom out of linguistic hiding and into general parlance.) Twat was, however, included, the reader being informed that it was 'low' and directed to Nathaniel Bailey's definition of 1727, in Latin. Perhaps the funniest reading in the OED is the observation that the word was 'erroneously used by Browning under the impression that it denoted part of a nun's attire'.

One consequence of this communal and traditional censorship was that the thriving low-life sexual histories of spend, debt, come, die and swink (an archaic word for 'to labour') were largely obliterated. In Chaucer's Canterbury Tales the Wife of Bath's studied inversion of the marriage contract (as set out in her Prologue) uses these traditional financial and feudal terms with quite explicit sexual meanings. Come is amusingly recorded in a saucy lyric of the mid-seventeenth century: 'Then off he came, & blush'd for shame, soe soon as that he had endit.' Die certainly has a similar sexual innuendo in many Elizabethan contexts, for instance in Cleopatra's question of mock-astonishment concerning Antony's Roman wife: 'Can Fulvia die?' With many 'indecent' or 'obscene' words being driven out of use, hosts of risqué euphemisms or code-words took their place. Most of these remained unexplained by the OED, and were decoded by Eric Partridge in his pioneering study of 1947, Shakespeare's Bawdy. The Supplement, in covering many of these omissions, has made the Dictionary a comprehensive record of what Wordsworth termed 'the language of ordinary men'.

EVOLUTION OR DEGENERATION?

As has been stressed already, printing made words mobile. They no longer moved in the slow flux of the speech-community, but travelled at speed across continents in books. They were pressed into service, made to plead the causes of the Reformation, of nationalism, of commercial and political interest. Prime meanings could be warped and registers mixed to achieve the desired effects of emotion, rationality or anaesthesia. The following chapters trace these developments in greater detail.

Today it is fashionable to see language change as virtually inevitable, a fact of life, and consequently to decry criticism of this fact and to pour scorn on those who disapprove of such changes. Such an attitude may seem rational and realistic, but it is important to distinguish between changes which are natural, evolutionary and symbiotic with social changes, and those which are artificially contrived or cynically imposed by an oligarchy. In this study I have sought to demonstrate the techniques and motives of vested interests which seek to bend language to their own purposes. I do not claim neutrality nor the 'massive impartiality' which Raymond Williams attributes (with some irony) to the OED (1976, p. 16). Language is a vital source, not only of communication, but of trust between people. If the tone of what follows is not always measured, it is because I believe that in vital areas of our social existence the contractual obligations of shared meanings have too often been abused.

The great Italian thinker Giambattista Vico distinguished, in his characteristically triadic style, three kinds of language, corresponding to his formulation of the Three Ages: that of gods, that of heroes and that of men (Vico, 1948, pp. 306–7). In analysing a particular segment of his cyclical theory of history, Vico is tracing a decline in civilization, a lost potency of language. In his brilliant insight, language changes, as society develops, from being initially hieratic, numinous or sacred, then poetic or rhetorical, then conventional or trivial. The theme of decay or decline was common in eighteenth-century historiography. Johnson gave out the general law that 'Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration'; Pope had articulated similar, but local, concern in 1728:

Our sons their fathers' failing language see,
And such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be.

Essay on Criticism, II. 482–3
Alternatively, how valid is Otto Jespersen's optimistic, Victorian view of English showing, like Chinese, 'a progressive tendency towards a more perfect structure'? Which theory adequately accommodates modern mass jargons? Reflecting the *anomie* or normlessness which Durkheim diagnosed as the distinctive malaise of modern society, these seem to represent the furthest remove from philosophical 'realism', in which words are regarded as the symbolic reflections of eternally stable, archetypal ideas. They show, instead, the chaotic nominalism shrewdly observed by Hobbes in what is often regarded as the first of the modern books, *The Leviathan* (1651): 'Words are wise men's counters; they do but reckon with them; but they are the money of fools' (part I, chapter 4). Nevertheless, the study of most verbal currency, no matter how debased or manipulated, is revealing.

NOTES

1 See, however, Robert Burchfield (1983), p. 18, where he argues that this 'enduring myth' is 'no more than a half-truth', on the grounds that *veal*, *beef*, *venison*, *pork* and *mutton* could mean in earlier times the animal as well as the flesh. This does not really affect the marked split in the nomenclature, which makes the field a frequent example in standard works.


3 Zipf argues that, theoretically, the ideal *speaker's economy* would consist of a few general-purpose words, while the ideal *auditor's economy* would consist of a vast, precise vocabulary.

4 The term, though rare, is recorded from 1569.


6 The following categorization is an updated version of broadly similar treatments found in the standard histories of the language, such as Simeon Potter (1963), ch. 9 and C. L. Barber (1964), ch. 14.

7 Lewis is surely right when he says that 'the greatest cause of verbcide is the fact that most people are obviously far more anxious to express their approval and disapproval of things than to describe them' (1960, p. 7).

8 This apparent barnyard poem reaches an obviously phallic consummation:

   And every night he percheth him
   In mine ladye's chamber.

9 Three useful discussions on register are to be found in G. L. Brook (1973), pp. 81–121, Philip Howard (1984), pp. 1–22 and Martin Joos (1961).

10 Their skilful exploitation of contrasting registers is dealt with more fully in chapters 2 and 4.


12 This view was put with vehement chauvinism a century ago by E. A. Freeman (1875–9), vol. V, p. 547: 'This abiding corruption of our language I believe to be the one result of the Norman Conquest which has been purely evil.' Orwell (1958) favours the Saxon element in the language over the French and Latin (in a more temperate fashion) in his essay 'Politics and the English Language'.

13 The quotations are from Francis Grose's most entertaining *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785), of which there is a sample reproduced as figure 4.2.

14 This brief survey of the earlier research in the field is not intended to be comprehensive, but simply to lead up to the use of the field approach. An interesting early formulation was that of Hans Sperber in 1922: 'If at a certain time a complex of ideas is so strongly charged with feeling that it causes one word to extend its sphere and change its meaning, we may confidently expect that other words belonging to the same emotional complex will also shift their meaning.' (Quoted in Ullmann (1957), p. 254.)

15 Preface to vol. IV, p. x. See also his discussion, 'Four-letter words and the OED', *TLS*, 13 October 1972, p. 1233.

16 Quoted in a letter from Arthur Hugh Clough to F. J. Child in 1854 concerning how thoroughly to gloss Chaucer's bawdy tales in a proposed edition.

17 From p. 195 of Murray's biography, *Caught in the Web of Words*, by his granddaughter, K. M. Elisabeth Murray (1977). In her discussion of the whole problem, she regards Murray as being 'forced to omit' the offending words by 'contemporary opinion'.

18 This accords with the advice of Dr J. S. Farmer (who became involved in a lawsuit for breach of contract when his publishers refused to publish obscene words).

19 See especially ll. 130–2, where she asks how

   That man shal yelde to his wyf her dette. . . .
   If he ne used his sely instrument?

In ll. 201–2 she recalls nostalgically:

   As help me God, I laughe when I thynke
   How pitously a-nght I made hem swyne!

20 Hugh Rawson's *A Dictionary of Euphemisms* (1981) treats this area of the lexicon fairly comprehensively.