

Oxford English Dictionary News

SERIES 2 NUMBER 27
DECEMBER 2003

Editorial

Of the two articles in this issue of *OED News*, one raises (and answers) questions which I suspect most people will never have thought of asking, while the other almost answers a question that everyone on the *OED* seems to get asked at some point. Our Artist in Residence, Abigail Reynolds, has begun to examine the Dictionary in new ways; her conversation with Philip Durkin suggests that her residency may yield unforeseen insights into our work.

By contrast, the question "what's your favourite word?" is one which (in my experience) most lexicographers are tired of being asked. (A straw poll of my *OED* colleagues produced a fine selection — including *buttle*, *checkmate*, *chocolate*, *delphinestrian*, *discombobulated*, *gazebo*, *lucubrate*, *mumpsimus*, *persiflage*, *serendipity*, *sister*, and *twiffler* — but the most common

response was "I don't have one.") Earlier this year, during the celebrations surrounding the 75th anniversary of the completion of the First Edition of the *OED*, John Simpson was persuaded to choose ten good candidates; I hope readers of *OED News* will enjoy his entertaining and thought-provoking selection.

Peter Gilliver, Newsletter Editor and Associate Editor, *OED*

CONTENTS

1. The *OED's* Artist in Residence

Abigail Reynolds in conversation with etymologist Philip Durkin

2. Words of choice

The *OED's* Chief Editor makes his selection

3. Appeals

Can you help with these words?

4. Interesting antedatings

More words that are older than you might think

5. Quotable quotes

Another interesting selection of quotations from the *OED* and its files

The *OED's* Artist in Residence: a conversation with Abigail Reynolds

For the academic year 2003-04 the *OED* has for the first time an Artist in Residence, Abigail Reynolds. Up until the summer of 2004 Abigail is planning to spend two days per week in the *OED* offices, talking to members of the Dictionary staff, and developing her ideas.

She is no stranger to taking an innovative approach to data: her acclaimed work *Mount Fear: South London* takes the figures for knife crime in an area of London and translates them into the topography of a mountain range, sculpted in cardboard and rising over head height. During the autumn of 2003 it was installed in the Oxford offices of OUP, outside the staff restaurant, where it proved a very lively stimulus for lunchtime conversation. For her work with the *OED* Abigail is interested in reflecting the Dictionary as a changing and developing resource which is the result of a huge

amount of research by individuals, rather than as a fixed authority. The results should be exciting, and it is planned that the project will culminate in an exhibition in October 2004. It is also hoped to have a linked series of speaker meetings during the year.

Abigail read English at Oxford and subsequently completed an MA in fine art at Goldsmiths' College, London. She lives and works in London, and lectures at Chelsea College of Art and Design. Her time with the *OED* is being funded by the Leverhulme Trust. In October she discussed





Mount Fear: Statistics for Crimes with Offensive Weapon South London 2001-2, installed at the Prospects National Drawing Prize exhibition, Brick Lane, London 2003

her work and ideas with the *OED*'s Principal Etymologist, Philip Durkin.

PD: Abigail, I know that some years ago you did some work for the Dictionary, verifying quotations in early printed books, so you definitely have a feel already for the way that *OED* work tends to involve precise detail in dealing with sometimes very out-of-the-way sources. Was that what initially put you in mind of the *OED* for a residency?

AR: Yes, that was in 1996 — when I thought of myself as an English Literature graduate rather than a visual artist. The experience of trawling pre-1530s manuscripts for an elusive first citation made a deep impression on me. Without that personal experience I'd still think of the Dictionary as a book rather than the enormous living research project that it is. Maybe the only way to change that common perception would be to re-brand as 'the Dictionary project'! The most compelling aspect of the *OED* for me is that it is so excessive. A concise dictionary is meant to be useful to the general current reader, but the *OED* is in a sense very impractical, because it's so excessive.

PD: So far we've had just a couple of weeks of the *OED* residency, but I'm aware that in that time you've already had some very interesting and stimulating conversations with various members of the *OED* team. What in particular stands out from the dialogue that you've had so far?

AR: People from every area of the Dictionary have very generously been explaining the structure of the revision process and their personal enthusiasms to me. To give a very concrete example; your lexicographical colleague Jeremy Marshall has a background in zoology, so I asked him to take me through the taxonomy of a single entry. It took us three hours to thrash out the logic of the entry for *lime* and by extrapolation the organizing principles of the Dictionary which create a very elastic but accessible structure. Of course the *OED* doesn't have to be organized in the way it is. Any structuring principle will make some aspects of language more visible than others.

To continue the zoological metaphor, there are 300,000 known species of beetle. Most readers will recognize

only a handful of beetles but the Natural History Museum records each one and arranges them in meaningful patterns, showing how they came to take the form that they do through generations of slight modifications. This process of evolution is analogous to the historical data for each word. Establishing the phylogeny of beetles, as with all species, is problematic. Superficial similarities can mask completely divergent ancestry. Zoological classification is therefore constantly being reappraised — rather like the current revision of the *OED* corpus; revising the etymology of a word can reveal hidden links between superficially similar words.

PD: That really strikes a chord with me, because just recently I've been working on a cluster of words whose historical relationships with one another only partially line up with their semantic relationships in modern English. *Ordain*, *ordination*, *ordinance*, and *ordnance* are all related etymologically, in a way which becomes fairly obvious when you look at their history, but if you don't know that history you probably wouldn't imagine that there was any relationship between the name of an Ordnance Survey map and the the verb *ordain*.

The Dictionary puts all of these words into (fairly arbitrary but simple) alphabetical order, according to how they are spelt today, and tells you what they mean today, but it also tells you how each word was spelt in the past, and how its range of meanings has changed and developed over time. In addition, in the etymology you are able to trace each word back to French and beyond to Latin, and you are also able to see which senses in English have models or parallels in these languages, and which ones are new to English. When you do this, really interesting patterns emerge, and you see that (summarizing wildly) *ordnance* 'artillery' is originally just a

Mount Fear: Statistics for Violent Crime East London 2002-3, installed at Wharf Road, London, as part of New Contemporaries 2003



Many modern terms appear for the first time in the December 2003 *OED Online* update, some of which are older than you might think, including

brand loyalty (1934), **bicycle messenger** (1893), **gluten-free** (1927), and **image consultant** (1962).

The newsletter of the *Oxford English Dictionary*

sense development (interestingly confined to English) of *ordnance*, but this has come to be associated with a particular variant form of ordnance with the middle vowel elided, and which in course of time has come to be perceived as an entirely separate word, with no obvious relationship to *ordnance* or to *ordain*, *ordination*, etc., unless you happen to know the history.

All of this is there in the Dictionary waiting to be pieced together, and in the new edition we're certainly doing as much as we can to present it as clearly and simply as we can, but beyond a certain point we have to leave it to readers to trace the connections between words for themselves, which is why I find it so exciting that you are having the chance to look at all of these questions from a new perspective.

AR: These re-structurings are really interesting because the way in which a word is categorized dictates its use and therefore actually changes it in practice. Linguistic mutations are happening all the time, to an extent where one might think it absolutely futile for the *OED* to attempt to map language at all, a task as doomed as an attempt to record and categorize all snowflakes (which, fabulously enough, is underway).

PD: Finally, I know that it is really early days as yet, but how do you see the results of this project turning out?

AR: The Leverhulme Trust funding focuses on the process of thinking and doing rather than on a specific end result, but I could illustrate my working methods with a current work, *Mount Fear*. Here a form has been generated from pure information. It's simply a rendering of a huge number of complex events and information provided by the police. The model could be used as an effective tool in working out how to get across London at minimal risk, but really it functions as an imaginative space. I like to work with the way experiences are structured — as the structure implies a way of seeing also mapping and recording something factual.

I'd like the residency to be a catalyst for dialogue, bringing together different disciplines and ways of thinking about and representing the world we inhabit in all its many aspects. What's really exceptional about visual art is that it's a very undisciplined discipline. It really can exceptionally transgress boundaries, not only in what it can speak about, but what things it can bring together and what form it can take. Of course Art does have a very focused type of discourse, but it has the potential to be very disruptive. Part of my residency will be to bring together speakers from different areas with some of the lexicographers here to bring out different facets of the *OED*'s work that are relevant to very contemporary issues.

For more information about Abigail Reynolds and her work see her web page at: <http://abigailreynolds.com/>

Words of choice: John Simpson's selection of words with unusual origins

I've always wondered why the producers of *Call my Bluff* have never asked any of the *OED*'s editors to appear on the programme. Maybe they think we will know all of the answers. Well, I can assure them we don't — especially as they choose the most out-of-the-way and curious words, and *then* often present them in historically accurate but rather irregular spellings which obscure their true origin.



But language isn't all about the obscure. Lexicographers don't have 'favourite' words, but here are a few old chestnuts which are both common (for the most part) and have a story to tell.

1. curfew derives from Old French *couvre-feu*, which means literally 'cover the fire'. It goes back to a medieval regulation whereby all fires had to be extinguished at a particular time, which was indicated by the ringing of a bell. The word was retained for the ringing of a night bell at a fixed time even after the

original purpose was lost in the mists of time. The modern use dates from the early 19th century.

2. to be hoist by one's own petard contains two linguistic 'fossils', one apparent and one less so. A petard was a medieval bomb used to blow up gates, walls, and the like when you were breaching fortifications. Its preservation in this idiom is due to Shakespeare, who says in *Hamlet*: "'Tis the sport to haue the enginer Hoist with his owne petar." The verb *hoist* is also a sort of linguistic fossil. It didn't exist in its own right originally,

Words and phrases covered in the December 2003 OED Online update could help you to...

...nourish a Nordic noble with noodles and nougat... ...nonplus a nitwit with novel nuances and nonsense...

...nod one's noggin at noon in nostalgic nirvana... ...notice no noisy nitrogen nuclei...

but comes from an obsolete *hoise*, a verb meaning 'to raise' (of which 'hoist' represented the past tense). Like some other verbs (for example *graff*, which became *graft*), the past participle gradually came to be taken as the verb itself, and the original verb *hoise* died out.

3. gossip is a very old word, but it has only existed in its modern pejorative sense of 'idle talk, rumour' since the early 19th century. It's formed on Old English *god* + *sib* 'related' (compare 'sibling'), and originally had positive connotations, referring to a baptismal sponsor or godparent. From this it came to mean a family friend, especially a woman's female friend (thus, in one mid-16th century quotation, a woman 'is to her Gossypes gone to make mery'), and from thence to a woman given to idle chatter of the sort female friends were alleged to make together. The rest is, well, history.

4. hobbit — J. R. R. Tolkien modestly claimed not to have coined this word, although the Supplement to the OED credited him with the invention of it in the absence of further evidence. It seems, however, that Tolkien was right to be cautious. It has since turned up in one of those 19th-century folklore journals, in a list of long-forgotten words for fairy-folk or little people. It seems likely that Tolkien, with his interest in folklore, read this and subconsciously registered the name, reviving it many years later in his most famous character. [Editor's note: Although revision of the OED's entry for *hobbit* will of course take this evidence for earlier use into account, it does not yet appear in the online version of the entry.] Other names of fictional creatures have been more consciously coined by their creators. According to the *Radio Times* (30 December 1972) the word *Dalek* was coined in 1963 by Terry Nation, the writer of the first series of *Dr Who*, "who named them after an encyclopaedia volume covering 'da-lek'."

5. dunce is a word which, like many others, has more or less completely reversed its meaning. It is originally found (from the early 16th century) as 'Duns man', a disciple or follower of the philosopher and theologian Duns Scotus. A Duns man was a sophisticated thinker, a subtle reasoner — hence, in time, a hairsplitting, cavilling sophist. From here it was a short step to a 'Duns' as one who had studied too much and dulled his wits, a dull pedant; and, by extension, a dull-witted, stupid person. A complete change of meaning in five easy steps!

6. bastard — early evidence of commitment phobia? The word *bastard*, from old French, literally means 'fils de bast', 'bast (pack-saddle) child', the 'bast' being the pack-saddle slept on by muleteers — itinerants who, unlike members of more stable communities, could plant their

seed and leave with impunity. The suffix *-ard* was a pejorative one (compare 'sluggard', 'drunkard', etc.), signifying someone who does something discreditable — an addition which tells us much about the status of the muleteer's child. Curiously, the words *bastard* and *batman* are cousins, both deriving from Old French *bast*, modern French *bât* 'pack-saddle' — a 'bat-man' originally being the man in charge of the cavalry bat-horse or pack-horse.

7. alarm. Like many English terms which have been compressed or elided, this word was once two words. It comes via Old French from Italian *all'arme!* 'to arms!', a call summoning men to arms, or the name of such a call or summons. The variant *alarum* evolved through the prolonging of the *r* in the final syllable of the call to arms, and this itself was also shortened to *larum*.

8. to curry favour is a common idiom which embraces two linguistic 'fossils' as well as a cultural misunderstanding. The 'currying' here does not refer to the addition of spices to a dish but to the act of rubbing down a horse with a brush or comb. The idiom derives from the French *estriller fauvel*, 'to curry the chestnut horse', the horse in question, Fauvel, being a character in the French tale the *Roman de Fauvel* (1310). In the story Fauvel, like Reynard the Fox, represents hypocrisy and duplicity. In English the unfamiliar 'Fauvel' was gradually replaced by the similar-sounding 'favour' in an idiom that came to mean 'to seek to win favour, to ingratiate oneself'. As is the case with many fossilized idioms, the fact that the transformation of 'Favel' to 'favour' made nonsense of the verb *curry* in the context did nothing to deter usage.

9. In to be the apple of someone's eye 'apple' refers to the pupil of the eye (so called because it was thought to be globular in shape) or, in extended use, the iris or eyeball. In 1600 Chapman, in his translation of Homer's *Iliad*, wrote gorily "The dart did undergore His eye-lid, by his eye's dear roots, & out the apple fell." We no longer use apple in this sense but we've retained the phrase to mean something which is cherished with the highest regard.

10. The Guardian — think about the names of newspapers. *The Observer* observes (events — or offers observations?), the *Guardian* guards (morals?), the *Daily Mail* represented a daily delivery of news, as if brought post-haste straight to you on the mail coach. The names typically come from a bygone age, but they are still felt appropriate in today's society.

John Simpson, Chief Editor, OED

A version of this article first appeared at guardian.co.uk/books in June 2003.

Appeals

Words or phrases which appear on the Appeals List are those currently being drafted or revised for the *OED* for which the documentary evidence is incomplete. Often these are slang or colloquial items which cannot be researched in specialist texts and are most likely to be found by a general reader in non-specialized or popular literature.

Usually the appeal is for an earlier example than our current earliest (e.g. 'antedate 1970' for a word for which our earliest example comes from 1970), but sometimes the appeal is for an interdating where there is a large gap in the *OED*'s quotation evidence (e.g. 'interdate 1589-1910'). Occasionally we ask for a postdating (e.g. 'postdate 1875'), if an editor feels that an item being

revised is still current but has failed to find any recent examples through the usual avenues of research.

Please note: it is generally safe to assume that examples found by searching the Web, using search engines such as Google, will have already been considered by *OED* editors.

one-bar (a.: applied to an electric fire) antedate 1962
panifiable (a.: capable of being made into bread) postdate 1849
pani puri (n.: Indian dish of filled cakes) antedate 1987
panna cotta (n.: Italian dessert) antedate 1989
pastlessness (n.) antedate 1977
pig-ugly (a.) antedate 1983

Please send submissions to oed3@oup.com

Interesting antedatings

Revision of the entries in the December 2003 *OED Online* update has revealed an earlier origin than previously known for many words, including:

nit-picking (antedated to 1961 from 1970)
noblewoman (c1230 from 1575)
no can do (1868 from 1914)

noisy (1609 from 1693)
nonagon (1639 from 1688)
non-alcoholic (1857 from 1907)
Norwegian (1555 from 1605)
novelte (1780 from 1814)
noxious (a1500 from 1612)
nucleus (1668 from 1704)

Quotable quotes

Thought-provoking snippets from the *OED* quotation files:

a sign of things to come?...

1750 S. Johnson *Rambler*, The computer..believes that he is marked out to reach the utmost verge of human existence.

...it's all relative...

1931 *Arch. Otolaryngol.*, The term agranulocytosis has come into the literature because of its brevity.

...and the last word in good taste...

1970 N. Bogner *Making Love*, A first edition of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, a moving-in present from his mother, really gave it class.

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