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Massimo Sturiale
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(eds)

English Words in Time

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English Words in Time: An Introduction

Giovanni Iamartino - Massimo Sturiale

The idea of approaching the study of English vocabulary, from both a diachronic and a synchronic perspective, was at the core of the colloquium "Words in Time" organised and hosted by the University of Catania (site of Ragusa) back in 2008. The title and theme of the colloquium patently took inspiration from, and were meant as a sort of tribute to, Geoffrey Hughes's seminal book *Words in Time. A Social History of the English Vocabulary*, which had first been published exactly twenty years before. And seminal Hughes's book was, because its content and approach influenced the way research on English historical lexicology was pursued, in Italy as much as elsewhere. More conferences and ensuing publications followed, but the organizers of the Ragusa meeting still believed that the papers read there had made a notable contribution to the study of 'English words in time', and should be published. Not long ago, then, the original contributors to the colloquium were asked to revise their papers for publication, and new essays were added in order to give the volume a coherent shape. In particular, it was thought right and opportune to widen the perspective of historical lexicology and lexicography to include some samples of a sociolinguistic approach to the study of present-day English and its role as a global language.

The history of English lexis very much resembles a never-ending theatrical play where, in the unstable ever-changing relationship between words and reality, words end up shaping reality. With this metaphor in mind, the chapters in the volume were organized in a coherent whole and are here presented as making up a three-act play, duly introduced by a prologue.

As any good prologue is meant to do, Lynda Mugglestone's chapter on *"The Illusions of History": English Words in Time and the OED* gives readers a much-needed historical perspective on the development of English lexis: words are the 'property' of each succeeding generation of speakers, but at the same time they are what lexicographers want or, at least, mean them to be. This is also true of the OED, although Mugglestone makes it clear that no

preceding English dictionary had displayed the same meticulous engagement with time and change which the entries of the OED systematically revealed. However, by evaluating and discussing on the various steps and stages – diligently, historically framed – that characterised the making of the OED, Mugglestone argues how lexicographers contribute towards recording history through words.

The high drama of English words starts in the early modern period, when English writers became quite aware of the inadequacies of the English lexical store for all sorts of use the language was being put to; at the same time, though, they were proudly conscious of the leading role their nation had come to perform on the European stage. This contrast was particularly felt by translators, and this is the reason why Act I in our book is entitled "Translation and the Making of Words" and focuses on two key moments in the cultural and linguistic history of early modern England, i.e. the Renaissance and the mid-17th century development of experimental science.

Carmela Nocera, moving from her analysis of George Pettie's translation (1581) of Stefano Guazzo's *La Civile Conversazione*, comments on how translators in Elizabethan England created new words by importing them from foreign texts or by giving existing words new meanings. Nocera's chapter points out, for example, how CIVIL underwent a significant semantic change, while CONVERSATION and its various related lexical forms reveal the wide range of meanings they had and took on in the 16th-century.

Lexical accuracy – that is to say the reduction of polysemy, ambiguity and vagueness – and the availability of 'terms of art' were instead what scientific English was aiming at, as is shown by Giovanni Iamartino in his analysis of lexical innovations in the English translation of William Harvey's *De Motu Cordis*. Originally written in Latin for an international readership and published in 1628, Harvey's epoch-making treatise was translated into English in 1653 for a new generation of scientists and doctors that were increasingly using the vernacular language for the promotion of experimental science. English scientific terminology in the 17th and 18th centuries, then, was closely linked to the scientific discoveries of those days, and translators were instrumental in its development.

The late modern period is Act II in the drama of English words: after the 'hurlyburly' of the earlier times, when English finally won the battle for its acceptance as the medium of communication for all kinds of uses, codifying and promoting a standard language became of primary importance. The book section entitled "Orthoepists, Lexicographers and the Codification of English Words" focuses on two aspects of word usage that most defy accurate and objective description, that is to say pronunciation and synonymy.

Joan Beal investigates the issues of codification and prescription in 18th-century pronouncing dictionaries. At that time, norms of pronunciation started being implemented and made available to a larger portion of the population; thus, clear and explicit guides to the pronunciation of every word in the lexicon were provided together with indication of correct and incorrect usage. The codification of the 'best' pronunciation model began, though leaving a legacy of linguistic insecurity.

Massimo Sturiale focuses on another typically 18th-century lexicographic genre, that is to say dictionaries of synonymy. William Perry – already known to the public for his 1775 pronouncing dictionary and his 1795 bilingual English-French dictionary, together with other pedagogical works – further contributed to the codification of the English language by 'synonymising' Samuel Johnson's dictionary. Sturiale points out that Perry was able to improve on the work of his great predecessor, as far synonymy and pronunciation were concerned. He did use Johnson's wordlist and material, but he was also able to contribute something new to the description/codification of the English language.

Dramatic in more than one sense of the word is the recent and current development of the English language worldwide. Hence, Act III of *English Words in Time* focuses on "Present-day Perspectives: English in the Global Society".

This book section opens with Iain Halliday's chapter on the word SOCIETY and its derivative SOCIAL, the linguistic history of which had been dealt with by Hughes in *Words in Time*. Halliday discusses how these words have been used in a mainly British context since 1988, and highlights the semantic ambivalence in their use. The author also points out that a major problem with words in time is that as we study them we are inevitably out of their

times, and out of the times of the people who have used those words through history.

Francesca Vigo argues that, for a social history of the English vocabulary to be complete and updated, the presence and use of words of English origin worldwide should be included. The author mainly focuses on the Italian context and presents her research carried out on data gathered from the corpus of the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. Her results suggest that there are many reasons why an English word may enter the Italian language and, once adopted, it may be adapted to perform new linguistic and communicative functions, more often than not in an unpredictable, creative way.

Giuliana Russo investigates word-formation processes in the language of Computer-Mediated Communication. She demonstrates that the process of shortening is the most productive word-formation strategy in Internet English. A representative corpus of Internet terms was created from C- and L-entries in the online dictionary *NetLingo*[@]. The productivity of word-formation patterns was tested against a framework of analysis based on Algeo's (1991) taxonomy and compared to data from dictionaries of new standard English words based on the same framework. The data suggest that the Internet is not disrupting the English language – quite the reverse, it is contributing to its creativity.

Creativity and inclusiveness, indeed, seem to be the most salient features of English lexis and its history. This was very clear to John Florio, the champion of the Italian language in Renaissance England, who – in chapter 27 of his *Firste Fruites* (1578) – described English as follows:

> Certis if you wyl beleeve me, it doth not like me at al, because it is a language confused, bepeesed with many tongues: it taketh many words of the latine, and mo from the French, and mo from the Italian, and many mo from the Duitch, some also from the Greeke, and from the Britaine, so that if every language had his owne words againe, there woulde but a fewe remaine for English men, and yet every day they adde.

When Florio passed this judgment on the English language, Elizabethan translators and writers had been struggling to cope with

new communicative needs and widen the English lexis. Conditioned by his sense of belonging to a superior culture and literary tradition, Florio did not understand this. Nor was he far-sighted when, in the same chapter, defined English as “a language that wyl do you good in England but passe Dover, it is worth nothing”.

Since then, as the chapters in this book have shown, English words have come on stage — indeed, they have taken centre stage, and do not seem to be going to leave it very soon.