

Impact case study (REF3b)

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| Institution: University of Glasgow |
| Unit of Assessment: Unit of Assessment: D29 – English Language and Literature |
| Title of case study: Compilation and publication of <i>Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary</i> |
| 1. Summary of the impact |

The *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (HT), the result of 44 years of research, was published in 2009 to widespread critical acclaim. It has been described as ‘perhaps the single most significant tool ever devised for investigating semantic, social, and intellectual history’ (Randolph Quirk). It has so far generated an income of £1.6 million from global sales, bringing economic benefit to both the publisher and the wider publishing sector. Cultural enrichment has been delivered through the integration of the Thesaurus into the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) website, opening it up to the c.1.5 million visitors per year who use the OED online. Notable user groups from outwith linguistics include novelists, poets, broadcasters and historians.

2. Underpinning research

The HT consists of the recorded vocabulary of English virtually in its entirety from c.700 AD to the present, arranged into a comprehensive semantic framework. It therefore allows a reader to understand not only which words were available to discuss any particular concept at any given moment in the history of English, but also the full range and variety of words available to English speakers at that moment. The framework itself also provides a comprehensive survey of all the things, concepts and ideas that have been recorded in the last millennium of English. Consisting of over 797,000 words and 236,000 conceptual categories, the HT is unique, both in its coverage and in its method. Approximately 85 percent of the HT was produced in the period 1993-2012; publication in 2009 was the culmination of 44 years of editorial work. The majority of published research on the HT has been undertaken in the period after 2008, as this was the first stage at which the final data was ready to be analysed by scholars.

In more detail, the classification of the HT arranges entries in a comprehensive semantic hierarchy according to each attested sense of a word. Each individual synonym is presented in chronological order according to the first recorded date of the word's use in English, with earliest synonyms given first. The three primary divisions of the HT reflect the main activities and preoccupations of users of the language:

1. the external world,
2. the mental world, and
3. the social world.

These in turn are divided into 354 major categories, such as *Food and Drink*, *Thought*, or *War*. Further categories and subcategories then follow, moving from the most general ideas to the most specific, and the semantic categories and subcategories are headed by phrases which define them and link to preceding sections.

Each word sense is therefore precisely entered into its place in this comprehensive hierarchy of meaning, according to its meaning and date, and is accessible either by browsing at any level of the hierarchy, or by looking up a particular word in its alphabetical place via the Index. The Index

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itself lists nearly one million references and ensures a comprehensive look-up and accessibility of the full text.

Conceived in the 1960s by Michael Samuels, then Professor of English Language at the University of Glasgow (Glasgow 1959-1990), the HT project was directed by Samuels and, following his retirement, completed by his successor Christian Kay (Glasgow 1969-2005, currently Honorary Professorial Research Fellow). Its other editors are Jane Roberts (1961-68, subsequently University College Dublin and King's College London) and Irené Wotherspoon (Glasgow 1969-2008). Over 40 staff at the University of Glasgow carried out the research required for the work between 1965 and 2009, mainly in categorising the contents of various dictionaries (including the whole of the second edition of the *OED*) into the conceptual structure of the HT. Kay continues to direct the project with Marc Alexander (Glasgow 2006-) as her deputy, and its current associate directors are Jeremy Smith (Glasgow 1979-), Carole Hough (Glasgow 1995-), and Wendy Anderson (Glasgow 2004-), with computing manager Flora Edmonds (Glasgow 1985-). While the vast majority of the project was carried out at Glasgow, some limited research was undertaken at King's College London on the Old English materials under Jane Roberts, following her move there.

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| 3. References to the research |
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- Roberts, Jane and Christian Kay with Lynne Grundy. 1995. *A Thesaurus of Old English*. (= *King's College London Medieval Studies XI*.) Second edition, 2000. Amsterdam: Rodopi. ISBN 9789042015630 [available from HEI or [link to online version](#)]
- Kay, Christian. 2000. 'Historical semantics and historical lexicography: will the twain ever meet?', in *Lexicology, Semantics and Lexicography in English Historical Linguistics: Selected Papers from the Fourth G.L. Brook Symposium*, ed. by Julie Coleman and Christian Kay. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 53-68. ISBN 9781556199721 [available from HEI]
- Kay, Christian J. and Irené A. W. Wotherspoon. 2002. 'Turning the dictionary inside out: some issues in the compilation of a historical thesaurus', in *A Changing World of Words: Studies in English historical semantics and lexis*, ed. by Javier E. Diaz Vera. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 109-135. ISBN 9789042013308 [available from HEI]
- O'Hare, Cerwyss. 2004. 'Folk Classification in the HTE Plants Category', in Kay and Smith, eds, 179-191. in *Categorization in the History of English*, ed. by Christian Kay and Jeremy Smith. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 59-69. ISBN 9781588116192 [available from HEI]
- Kay, Christian and Irené Wotherspoon. 2005. 'Semantic relationships in the Historical Thesaurus of English'. *Lexicographica* 21 (Specia), 47-57. ISSN 0175-6206 [available from HEI]
- Kay, Christian. 2011. 'Developing the Historical Thesaurus of the OED', in *Current Methods in Historical Semantics*, ed. by Kathryn Allan and Justyna Robinson. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 41-58. ISBN: 9783110252903 [available from HEI]

Key grants since 1993:

- Kay, Smith and Horobin, 'Lexical Searches for the Arts and Humanities': AHRB ICT Strategy Fund (2005-6) £67,176
- Kay, 'Historical Thesaurus of English: the Final Stages': Arts and Humanities Research Board/Council (2000-3) £266,403
- Kay, 'The Historical Thesaurus of English': Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland (1998) £30,000
- Kay, 'Historical Thesaurus of English: the Final Phase': Leverhulme Trust (1994/97) £160,410

4. Details of the impact

As a major new resource for the English language, the impact of the HT has been widespread in preserving our linguistic heritage and presenting it to the general public, contributing to the economy via the publishing industry, and becoming an authoritative resource for both international academia and non-academic writers, especially historical novelists.

When published in late 2009, the print version of the HT received widespread and enthusiastic coverage in the general media as well as critical acclaim from such prominent figures as Melvyn Bragg, Philip Pullman, David Wooton, Alexander McCall Smith, Sir Roy Strong and Barbara Kingsolver. In the press, reviews and editorials appeared in *The Times* (6/7/09 and 23/10/09), *The New York Times* (8/01/10), *The Daily Telegraph* (23/8/09), *The Guardian* (19/12/09), *The Sunday Times* (01/11/09), *The Daily Record* (11/8/09), *The Literary Review* (5/11/09) and *The Daily Mail* (13/7/09), reaching an estimated audience of 6.5 million people worldwide, with discussions, interviews and features on BBC News, Radio 4, Radio 3, and other stations across the UK, Australia (ABC Radio Perth 21/7/09 and 11/5/10, Melbourne 13/8/09) and the USA (WNYC 3/9/09 and 5/10/09). *The Guardian* praised the HT's 'general and rich application, as the reader can trace the evolution of concepts and attitudes over centuries'.

The HT was named Book of the Year in *The Guardian* and *The Times Literary Supplement* – publications that reach a combined readership of c.345,000 – and it received the Saltire Society Research Book of the Year Award in 2009, recognising the contribution of both the underpinning research and the published work to the knowledge and understanding of Scotland and the Scots.

The worldwide media impact led to unexpectedly rapid sales, with the first print run of 4,000 selling out within two months, necessitating an urgent reprint for Christmas 2009. At the time of writing, the print HT is currently in its fourth print run in three years, with sales revenues amounting to approximately £1.6 million – an exceptional figure for a reference volume of this type, confirming the significant contribution it has made to the economic prosperity of the publishing sector.

In 2010 the HT was integrated with the online *Oxford English Dictionary* to create one accessible resource for anyone looking for information on any word. The integrated OED site currently has over 6 million visits per year, and HT data is tightly integrated into each results page delivered by the site. Since this integration, the online OED acts as an authoritative and accessible resource for novelists and poets, particularly writers of historical fiction. As a consequence, the HT's popularity has spread among this demographic by word of mouth, notably through creative writing blogs and forums. A typical use of it is explained by the Hugo prize-winning novelist [Mary Robinette Kowal](#). [Setting out to write a fantasy](#) set in 1815, Kowal wanted to make sure it was clean of any anachronisms. She therefore created her own dictionary, drawn entirely from the works of Jane Austen, and used this as the spell check application programme for her novel. Whenever the programme flagged a word as not having been used by Austen, Kowal writes, 'I looked it up in the OED to double-check the meaning and the earliest citation. If the word didn't work, then I used the OED's historical thesaurus to find a period appropriate synonym'. Similarly, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Geraldine Brooks is quoted in a 2010 [newspaper interview](#) as saying that her 'go-to resource is the amazing Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary', described in the interview as 'a 4000-page book that is the stuff of dreams for a historical writer'. The celebrated

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children's author Philip Pullman concurs: 'I can hardly imagine any reference book more valuable for the historical novelist'.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- Link to: [Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary](#)
- Email from OED confirming usage numbers (available from HEI)

Selected examples of the extensive media coverage:

- BBC Magazine Article, 8 July 2009 ([link](#))
- The Times, 6 July 2009, "as English is the richest language, so this mighty publication is its treasury" (available from HEI) and The Times, 23 October 2009, "a rich compendium" (available from HEI)
- The Sunday Times, 1 November 2009, "this magnificent, 4,000-page treasure chest, a permanent monument to the anarchic energy, good humour and generosity of our language" (available from HEI)
- The Telegraph, 23 August 2009, "A masterpiece worth waiting 40 years for; "the definitive thesaurus" ([link](#))
- The Daily Mail, 13 July 2009, "a rare treasure... imported into British cultural life" ([link](#))
- The New York Times, 8 January 2010, "historians, sociologists, philosophers and literary critics will soon wonder how they got by for so long without it... indispensable" ([link](#))
- The Guardian, 19 December 2009, "Book of the Year", ([link](#))

Selected examples of use online, particularly in blogs outwith academia, include the following (hard copies also available from HEI):

- <http://writing.wisc.edu/blog/?p=895>
- <http://www.maryrobinettekowal.com/journal/words-i-couldnt-use-in-glamour-in-glass>
- <http://david-crystal.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/on-bottom.htm!>
- <http://emmaneale.wordpress.com/2011/08/29/the-press-of-language>