

# *The Historical Thesaurus: A celebration*

Jeremy J. Smith

---

[Given at the fiftieth anniversary of the *Thesaurus* on Thursday, 15th January 2015, Wolfson Medical Building, University of Glasgow]

1. It is a great honour for me to have been invited to make these few opening remarks at today's lecture in honour of the 50th anniversary of the *Historical Thesaurus* project. In 1964, when Michael Samuels made his famous announcement to the Philological Society, I was nine, and I'm sorry to say that the *Thesaurus* was not really then on my horizon. Indeed my own involvement with the *Thesaurus* is essentially that of a deeply interested bystander – a crucial point to make, in that I am in the physical presence of two of its great authors, Christian Kay and Irene Wotherspoon, and of course Michael's spiritual presence. The *Thesaurus*, however, has been Glasgow's flagship research project throughout my time here, i.e. since 1979, and as a pupil of the fourth author, the legendary Jane Roberts, and thus aware of the *Thesaurus* since I started as an undergraduate at King's College London in 1973, I may perhaps be allowed to act at least as an informed witness as to its significance.

2. Many of us in this room were also *witnesses, observers, spectators, onlookers, beholders, watchers* at what turned out to be Michael Samuels's last lecture, given at the launch of the print edition, and will recall his thoughts on the genesis of the project. The full text of his speech appears on the *Thesaurus* website, but for those of you unlucky enough not to have been there, here is a relevant quotation:

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

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

"It is at this point that I realised the size of the task. It would need, for each concept or object, all the words ever used for it, with their dates, so that we could tell which system in the past they had belonged to. To make just that single list, one would need to work

through the whole OED (and Anglo-Saxon dictionaries) to establish the other words for that concept or object in given past periods.”

3. The result of this vision was of course the *Historical Thesaurus*: the notional classification of the complete historical lexicon of the English language as recorded in the OED, enabling scholars to trace the shifting lexicological structure of the language at different points of time in its history (insofar, of course, as written records permit). Thus it enabled us to solve the problems Michael identified, and indeed much of the work currently under way here in Glasgow – and indeed elsewhere, as part of our cunning plan to ‘plant’ Glasgow graduates in various institutions around the world. It gives me huge pleasure to welcome home (if I may put it like that) several folk here today.

4. But the *Thesaurus*, like all works of such undeniably world-leading significance, rigour and originality – whoops, I know that that particular awful triad will be worryingly familiar to any of us who have had the doubtful (?) privilege of wrestling with the recently-completed REF exercise – has further outcomes that were less explicitly anticipated, I fancy, at the time of its conception (although with visionaries such as Michael Samuels you could never be sure; one of his particular conversational tics was the expression ‘I’ve always thought...’, followed by some acute comment on the matter under discussion, and the slightly worrying thing for those of us with pretensions to scholarly leadership is that I suspect the expression was literally true). But even Michael, I think, could not have anticipated the full implications of the digital revolution, and the possibilities that revolution offered and offers for the study of the seeming-chaotic complexities of natural languages through time and space. Christian Kay, of course, visionary classifier and linguistic theorist extraordinaire, perceived such implications early, and the AHRC-funded *Mapping Metaphor* and *SAMUELS* projects, led by Wendy and Marc and their teams, are only (sorry, *only* isn’t the right word) two such successors engaging with the possibilities of the digital revolution; others I know are under way or in the pipeline elsewhere. I might also flag Susan Rennie’s *Pilot Historical Thesaurus of Scots*, also AHRC-funded, that will extend the methodologies and insights of HT-OED in an exciting new direction. And of course the *Thesaurus* itself began as such a ‘spin-off’ project; it is published as the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary*, linked to the OED website.

5. But to say that the *Thesaurus* is a spin-off is emphatically not to reduce its clear status as research world-leading in originality, significance and rigour (whoops, there I go again). Even giants, to modify that ancient cliché, stand upon other giants’ shoulders (indeed, it’s giants all the way down). As everyone present here today knows, the OED itself originated as an exercise in the new philology of the nineteenth century, whose institutional basis in Britain can be dated to the forming of the Philological Society of London in 1842 but whose intellectual foundations are to be found in empirical, Enlightenment thinking. As one of the Society’s most distinguished presidents, Alexander Ellis, stated in 1873, comments on the origin of language –

always a concern in the philosophical tradition – were “out of the field of philology proper”:

“We have to investigate what *is*, we have to discover, if possible, the invariable unconditional relations under which language, *as we observe it*, forms, develops, changes, or at least to construct an empirical statement of definite linguistic relations, and ascertain how far that statement obtains in individual cases. Real language, the go-between of man and man, is a totally different organism from philosophical language, the misty ill-understood exponent of sharp metaphysical distinctions. Our work is with the former. We shall do more by tracing the historical growth of one single work-a-day tongue, than by filling wastepaper baskets with reams of paper covered with speculation on the origin of all tongues” (cited Aarsleff 1983: 230).

Ellis's is the language of empiricism, not speculation, and he is here echoing something all philologists would agree with.

6. Such notions, which find echoes in the writings of the great philologists such as Jones or Grimm, underpinned the OED. Amongst the earlier members of the Society was Richard Chevenix Trench, whose 1857 address, “On some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries”, published in 1860, is generally acknowledged as the first step in the creation of what was then the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. According to Trench, this dictionary was to be “an historical monument, the history of a nation contemplated from one point of view” (cited Aarsleff 1983: 261). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (hence OED), as it was eventually called, is thus the outcome of an empirical philological tradition focusing on etymology, with its roots in the British Enlightenment. And as everyone here knows, that tradition was especially strong in – indeed arguably it derived from – the great Scottish intellectual traditions to be found in the great Scottish universities, and that is why the fact that the *Thesaurus* started in Glasgow is not just something of which we can be proud but also something that at this moment seems especially apt, given that we are welcoming a colleague from Edinburgh, our mighty Enlightened sister-institution. We are all truly delighted that Professor Bettelou Los, the distinguished holder of the Forbes Chair in succession to Michael's great friend and mentor Angus McIntosh, will give the Samuels lecture on this auspicious day.

7. I've heard the *Thesaurus* described as a colossal monument of scholarship. However, *monument*, a word which sits in a semantic field which also includes *memorial, shrine, tombstone, mausoleum, headstone, cenotaph*, is hardly the right word. Certainly it is a *testament, record, token, reminder, remembrance* and *memento* to and of the visionary scholarship of Michael Samuels, but, like the OED, it is a dynamic resource, whose significance is still being absorbed by the scholarly world, and enabling a huge range of interventions across numerous disciplines. The *Thesaurus*, especially in its electronic form, allows scholars to address the big, significant ‘why?’ questions, as Michael flagged, and – to quote him one more time – ‘ONE THING LEADS

TO ANOTHER'; the *Thesaurus* also allows for new insights across a whole range of disciplines, enabling a new approach to cultural history.

8. The *Thesaurus*, it seems to me, is thus the resource which fits the *moment, time, juncture, Zeitgeist*, allowing for a quite nuanced form of historical study which takes on board the digital revolution yet engages with shifting cultural contexts.

9. Thank you.