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Developing vocabulary:
A multicultural, multifaceted, multimodal affair

Rodney Martin

Vocabulary is the raw material of communication, and the English language today has the world's largest word lode to be mined. Helping children to increase their vocabulary is a fundamentally important part of education, and can be one of the most interesting and engaging subjects in the curriculum.

RESEARCH AND THE EARLY YEARS

Everyone has both a passive and an active vocabulary – the former being the words we know and the latter being the words we actually use. Vocabularies differ in terms of listening, reading, speaking and writing. People usually know many more words than they regularly use in their speech and even more so in their writing. According to the ‘use it or lose it’ maxim, it is important to reinforce and expand students’ active vocabulary in speaking and writing.

Speech is an early indicator of a child’s knowledge of the meaning and use of words. Recording the words spoken by children acquiring language gives some insight into the remarkable growth of their vocabulary. A study in the 1980s revealed that between the ages of six months and 18 months, depending on their ability and environment, most children build a spoken vocabulary of about 50 words.¹



Longitudinal research on vocabulary growth among children ranging socio-economically from professional to impoverished families showed that the early years are crucial in establishing patterns of learning. Not only did children from lower socio-economic status (SES) families develop smaller vocabularies than those of higher SES families, but as years progressed, they acquired new words at a slower rate.¹

Before children reach school age, there is already a wide variance in the extent or limits of their vocabularies. To address this disparity school intervention programs need to give attention not only to vocabulary knowledge, but also the ways in which children are engaged in the learning experience. In particular, the experiences need to be both cognitive (exploring, becoming aware, categorising and reflecting on experiences) and behavioural (expanding the ways in which children see and select new opportunities for learning).

The challenge is to expand a child's vocabulary development in the number of words known and used, the rate at which they acquire new words and how they learn.

THE ENGLISH LEXICON

lexicographer *n.* a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.
*Samuel Johnson*³

A lot has changed about language, etymology and learning since Johnson's dictionary in 1755. Oral and written vocabulary development in early childhood, primary and the middle years can now be explored, not as a drudge, but as proactive explorations of discovery.

“Modern English is the Wal-Mart of languages: convenient, huge, hard to avoid, superficially friendly, and devouring all rivals in its eagerness to expand.” *Mark Abley*

Old English

Even the word *English* has a history.

English When the Romans left England, peoples called Jutes, Angles, Saxons and Friesians from places now known as Denmark and north-western Germany invaded the country in the 400s and 500s. The peninsula and associated islands of north-west Denmark is curved like a fishhook. An ancient Germanic word for fishhook was *angle*, so the people called themselves the *Angles*. The native Celts at first called these invaders *Saxons*. By the year 601, so many Angles had settled, the invaders were generally called *Angli* and the country was called *Anglia*. Anglia later became *Engle land* (the land of the Engles) and the language was called *Englisc* (*sc* was pronounced /sh/).

Related words: *angle* (geometry), *angler*, *angling*, *Anglican* (church), *anglicise*, *Anglo*, *Anglophile*, *Anglo-Saxon*⁴

In turn, the Anglo-Saxons were invaded by the Vikings. Naturally, they invaded the language as well by adding to its lexicon. Here is one example:



The last great invasion took place in 1066 with the Norman conquest of the Anglo-Saxon King Alfred. As a result, the French-speaking Normans were a dominant force and French was the language of power for the next 300 years. The Old English lexicon was

decimated, but fortunately saw a revival, albeit in a much changed form, around 1300 when the monarchs and authorities reverted to the language of the populace. By this time, Norman French had left its considerable mark. An excellent example of this is the existence of English words today that name an animal, coupled with other words that name the meat that is eaten from that animal.

The Anglo-Saxons raised or hunted...	The Normans ordered...	Today we have...
sheep	<i>mouton</i>	mutton
cow	<i>boef</i>	beef
calf	<i>vel</i>	veal
pig	<i>porc</i>	pork
deer	<i>veneson</i>	venison
fowl (chicken)	<i>poulet</i>	poultry

ETYMOLOGY

Etymology enables vocabulary expansion by introducing words that are relatives or derivations. For example, Latin *portatio* ‘carrying’ is the basis of many English words in the modern form of *port*.

comport, deport, deportment, disport, export, import, portable, porter, portfolio, portly, portmanteau, report, transport

Words develop multifaceted meanings and functions through usage in various settings and contexts, especially in periods of great technological change. Practical classroom strategies can include the use of etymology to trace not only the origins of word meanings and functions, but also their spelling, which explains some of the idiosyncrasies of English orthography, such as the troublesome *gh*.

In Old English, *might* was spelled *miht* or *myht*. After 1066, the French-speaking Normans applied their spelling and changed the *h* to *gh* – *might* – but the *gh* was not pronounced.

The French also added a *g* to a group of Old English words ending with the letter *h* – *genoh* ‘enough’, *ruh* ‘rough’, *theah* ‘though’, *thoht* ‘thought’, *thurh* ‘through, thorough’. Sometimes the *gh* is sounded as /f/ and sometimes it is silent.⁴

Changing meanings

Words change in meaning according to whim and metaphorical usage of the speakers. Sometimes these changes, over time, take a word to meanings that are unrecognisable from its beginning.

nice *adj.* Accurate in judgment to minute exactness; superfluously exact. It is often used to express a culpable delicacy. *Samuel Johnson*³

Since 1755, and much against Johnson’s sentiment regarding its ‘culpable delicacy’, the word *nice* has lost its meaning of exactness, except when we refer to something being a ‘nice fit’. But that change pales to insignificance compared to the word *silly*.

silly OE (c.899) *gesǣlig* ‘happy, innocent’; c.1200 *selie* ‘blessed’ (blessed Virgin; c.1300 ‘weak, unfortunate’; c. 1550 ‘foolish, lacking sense’.

No doubt some people today would take great exception to the Virgin Mary being referred to as ‘silly’, so be prepared with your etymological explanation.

Additional meanings for old words

Examples of modern changes of significance include:

gay “Boys and girls come out to play, happy and gay the Laxette way!” (1950s)

mobile *n.* suspended artwork or objects that move with the breeze (1970s-80s)

social networking *vb.* belonging to various social and work groups, clubs, etc (1980s-90s)

hack *vb.* to cut, notch or chop irregularly with heavy blows

THE -NYMS

Multi-spellings for the same sound, multi-sounds and functions for the same spelling, multi-meanings for the same word, words made from parts of other words, multi-words for the same meaning, opposite meanings for the same word, similar meanings for different words – there are names for each of these phenomena and they usually end with *-onyma*, Greek for ‘name’.

acronym *n.* a word formed from the letters (usu. initial) of other words (*scuba* self-contained **u**nderwater **b**reathing **a**pparatus)

Modern communications, eg, texting, have bred a habit of acronyms being formed from phrases

LOL (laugh out loud)

or even sentences

WYSIWYG (What you see is what you get.)

antonym *n.* a word with the opposite meaning to another word (*big – small*)

How many antonyms are there for **big**?

small, little, tiny, petite, elfin, minute, diminutive, slender, thin, narrow, minor, ...

contronym *n.* a word that has meanings that are opposite (*cleave* 1. To join together; 2. To split). Contronyms/contronyms effectively contradict themselves.

Others to think about: *barrack* (cheer/jeer), *bolt*, *clip*, *collaborator*, *corker*, *custom*, *dust*, *fast*, *left*, *oversight*, *quantum*, *ravel*, *rent*, *screen*

eponym *n.* a word derived from the name of a person or people

Each of these words has a fascinating tale behind it: *sandwich, vandal, biro, Ferris wheel, bloomers, cardigan, grog, wellingtons, man Friday, Luddite, harlequin*

Eponyms show children that individuals of all kinds can become immortalised – part of the English lexicon. Could they?

heteronym *n.* a word with the same spelling as another but a different sound and meaning/function. (*reject, reject; read*)

How many others can you list?

absent, conduct, conflict, console, consort, construct, content, contest, contract, convert, convict, desert, digest, entrance, excuse, export, graduate, import, incense, intern, intimate, minute, number, object, perfect, permit, present, produce, project, protest, rebel, record, refuse, relay, sewer, subject, suspect, tear, transfer, transport ...

homonym *n.* a word alike in sound to another and often in spelling, but different in meaning. (*see, sea; bare, bear*) Homonyms are the fodder for puns.

Why did the park ranger quit?

He couldn't bear repeating the bear facts.

Create a **poor/paw/pour/pore** joke.

Why can't dogs write? They are paw typists.

synonym *n.* a word with the same or similar meaning to another word (*big – large*)

- Children can maintain their own thesaurus in a word file.
- Word play: how many synonyms (words/phrases) can you find for **lovely**.

Synonyms give writers:

- precise meanings (shades of meaning) for particular occasions
- choice that prevents clumsy repetition

toponym *n.* a word derived from the name of a place (*bedlam, babbel/babble, spartan, magenta, milliner, denim, ...*)

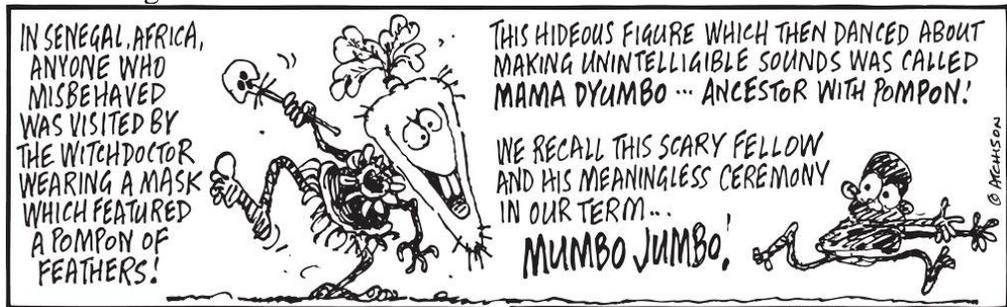
Toponyms are part of developing in students a fascination with words.

BORROWING WORDS

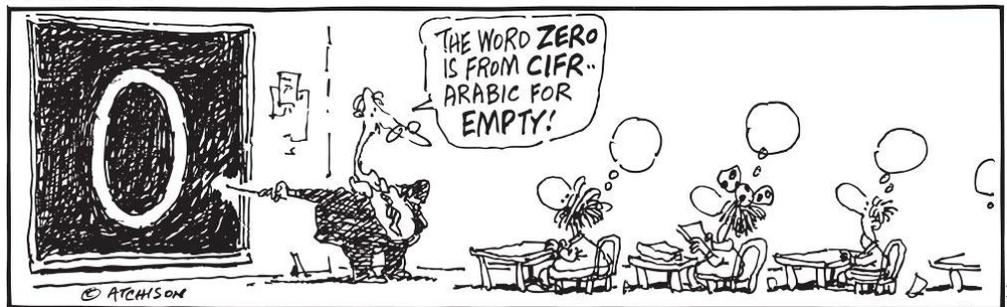
A language or a Creole?

The English lexicon is the ultimate in multiculturalism. Words from many languages and cultures have been adopted and adapted, so much so that some linguists consider it could be regarded as a Creole.⁵ Here is a short selection of examples from around the world.

From Senegal:



From Arabic:



From Sanskrit:



From Nahuatl:

chocolate In the 1500s, Spanish invaders entering Aztec lands discovered an Aztec drink called *xocolatl*, made with cocoa beans, honey, chilli, vanilla and herbs mixed with water. The word came from two Nahuatl words *xococ* 'bitter' and *atl* 'water'. The Spanish called it *chocolate* and took it back to Spain, but they changed the recipe and added sugar. Because cocoa beans were rare, they kept it a secret. About 100 years later, the French royals discovered the secret. They called it *chocolat*. In the early 1600s, the drink became known in England. It was spelled various ways, including *jocolatte*, but later *chocolate*, as in the Spanish spelling. Chocolate was produced as a solid sweet as well as a drink. ⁴

COINING WORDS

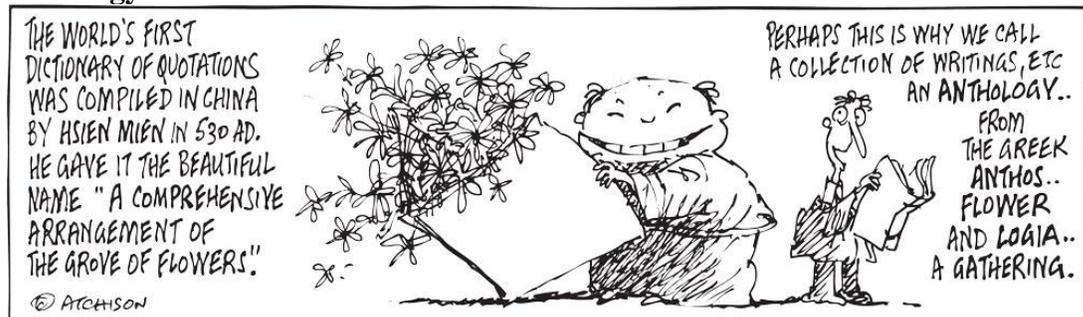
The bewildering influx of new coinages emanating from a seemingly unstoppable tsunami of multimodal devices for consuming text is a threat to some and an opportunity to others. It is an exciting opportunity to foster a love of words and their fascinating lives as the basic ingredients of our ability to express ourselves. It also means that anybody has

the prospect of coining a new word or use of a word that might reach general acceptance. Vocabulary is democratic!

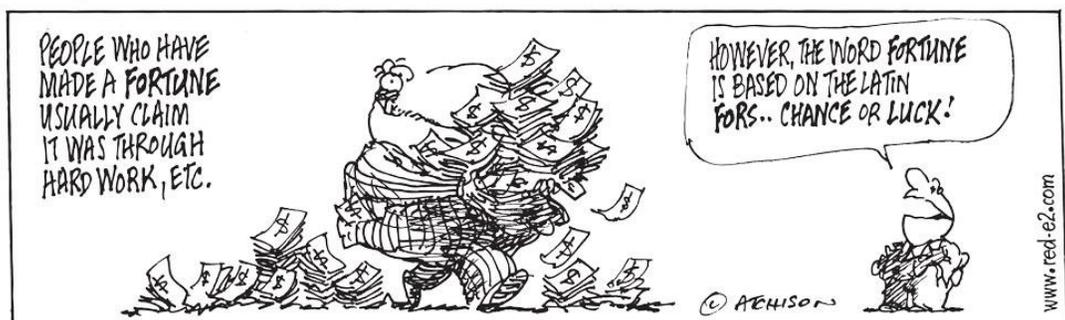
Greek & Latin words

When English needed a word, artists (eg, Shakespeare) and academics were not shy of taking them from other languages. The classic languages of Greek and Latin were commonly plundered.

anthology



fortune



One benefit of familiarity with Latin and Greek derivations is that students are better equipped to deduce the meaning of unknown words. For example:

theo- (god) **-logy** (study of) **bio-** (life) **auto-** (self) **-cracy** (rule)-**graphy** (writing) **geo-** (earth) **tele-** (distant) **apo-** (away from) **biblio-** (book) **a-** (not)

- What is the meaning of biology, biography, atheist, autobiography, geology, typography, telegraph, telescope, microscope, autograph, autocracy, etc.
- Equally, we can deduce Latin/Greek meanings from derivations. What might the Latin word **nauta** mean? (*astronaut, cosmonaut, aeronautical, nautical*) [sailor]

Accidents, jokes & inventions

Words can be invented by anyone, and this often occurs unintentionally. The students of any school, like delegates at a conference, create words (slang or jargon) that become popular and understood among that group.

Sometimes these words find such popularity that they become part of the English lexicon. Here are a few examples of accidents, jokes and inventions that gained a place in our dictionaries.

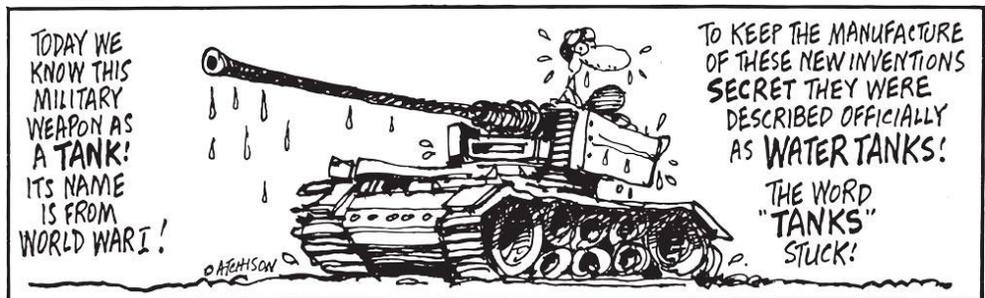
blurb *n.* first used as a joke by a US author, Gelett Burgess, in a fake jacket for his new book. On the jacket, he invented Miss Belinda Blurb who said wonderful things about his book. ⁴

google a form of *googol* 1940 (reputedly suggested by US mathematician Edward Kasmer's 9-year-old nephew)

movie 1914 US popular shortened form of *moving pictures*. Also *cinema* 1909 from French. Also *film* 1905 UK, Australia. Culturally, *movie* is tending to displace the other words for motion picture.

OK *adj. vb.* from a humorous spelling *orl korrekt* 'all correct' in the USA; it became an acronym *OK* and was later used as a political slogan 'You're OK with Old Kinderhook'. *OK* has become the most internationally used English word. ⁴

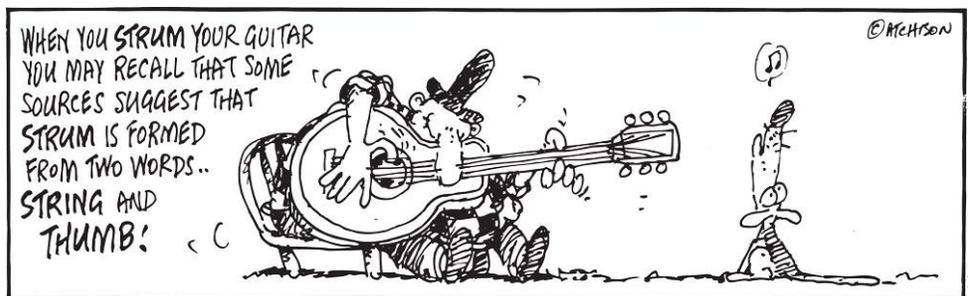
tank



T-shirt *n.* first used by F Scott Fitzgerald (1920) from the shape of the shirt.

Portmanteau words

strum



galumph

- Define this word
- List other words that end with *-umph*.
- List words that begin with *gal-*.

One, two! One, two! And through and through
 The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
 He left it dead, and with its head
 He went galumphing back.

The word *galumphing* (gallop + triumphant) was first used by Lewis Carroll in his poem *Jabberwocky*.⁶

Modern portmanteau coinages include:

blog (web + log)

breathalyser (breath + analyse)

email (electronic mail)

emoticon (emotion + icon)

netiquette (internet + etiquette)⁴

SILENT LETTERS

Etymology usually provides an explanation for the silent letters in English. There are some regular orthographic patterns with silent letters, but etymology is the only information base that makes sense of these traps for young writers.

khaki is from Urdu *khaki* ‘dusty’, a form of the word *khak* ‘dust, earth’. The Indian army uniforms were this colour in the middle of the 1800s for camouflage. At the end of the 1800s, the British army also used this colour for their uniforms in the South African wars. The word kept its Urdu spelling translated into English script, but the pronunciation was altered slightly and the letter *h* became silent.⁴

mortgage In the late 1300s, the English borrowed Old French *morgage* ‘money borrowed by pledging a property’ (Latin *mort* ‘dead’ + *gage* ‘pledge’). If the borrower did not repay the money, then the lender took the property. However, if the loan was repaid, then the pledge ‘died’ or no longer existed. In the 1500s, scholars and writers who knew Latin *mort*, put the letter *t* into *morage* – so it was spelled *mortgage*; but people kept the French pronunciation without the *t*, giving English another silent letter.⁴

MULTIMODAL MEANS

Access to information on vocabulary is at an all-time high. Modalities incorporated in the functions of digital products vary from basic eBook format to fully interactive works.

Stand-alone platforms

eBooks on CD and CD ROM are becoming more common. Most dictionaries and other reference works are becoming available in these formats. For example:

Macquarie, Oxford, Britannica, etc dictionaries and encyclopedias
Atchison ‘Word for Word’ cartoons on etymology²

The downside of standalone platforms is that, like printed reference books, they become out of date after time and users need to purchase updates.

Online platforms

Online products are usually subscriber-based and so have annual renewal costs. The upside is that they can be updated at any time, and the publishers and authors have an interest in keeping them so.

Internet resources

Information on word histories is available through numerous free internet websites. Usually they are written for adult use but at least teachers have access to this information. One example is www.etymonline.com.

Student use of multimodal text

Some ideas for student use of multimodal text in learning vocabulary include:

Creating their own cartoons to explain the meaning or history of words and storing them in a database or computer file for personal retrieval and use or for presentation to an audience.

Recording their own presentations as video clips on ‘fascinating words’ or ‘word of the day’. This might include vocal presentation plus text on a whiteboard and drawings to illustrate a point. Ideas might include:

- The various meanings of a word
- The history of a word
- Related words

Depending on the level of technology on the school website, the video clips might become a feature.

AN AFFAIRE DE COEUR

How do we endear young learners to words? Why should we?

Hart and Risley found in their longitudinal study that children with large vocabularies not only began school with a vocabulary larger than their peers, but the gap increased throughout their educational life.¹ This was because their home environment not only exposed them to many more words and expanded their cognitive experiences, but also affirmed learning behaviours – the ways words are explored. This included minimisation of corrective dialogue in favour of maximising ways to explore words.

The subject of words has all the ingredients necessary for dramatic presentation, play, curiosity and amazement of a student audience.

- The history of words involves life and death struggles for dominance of words over competitors. For example, which Old English words survived the onslaught of French during the 300 years following the Norman Conquest? Consider Churchill’s 1941 Dunkirk speech:

“We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields, and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender!”

Try saying that without using Old English words.

- English words have a great potential for word play.
 - Find a word with a silent letter for each letter of the alphabet.
 - What is the longest 1-syllable word you can find?
 - How many words mean *big*? *Small*? *Nice*? *Pretty*?
 - How many different sounds can you find for the letter or letter strings:
 - -u-
 - -oo-
 - ough
 - -ea-
 - There is only one word in English that has 3 consecutive double letters.
 - There is only one word in English that ends with the letters *-mt*.
 - How many words end with the letter string *-gry*?
 - Find 5 words that contain all 5 vowels (a, e, i, o, u) once each in that order.
 - Find 2 words with the vowels once each in reverse alphabetical order.
 - Which word has the most consecutive vowels?
- Appeal to the collector syndrome in many children.
 - Keep your own thesaurus, spelling dictionary, word history and dictionary. Create word files for each and save words in alphabetical order as you discover them. Use your personal dictionaries and word banks when you write.
- Sign up to the daily linguaphile site www.wordsmith.org/awad/ for a daily newsletter on words.

Teachers have the potential to influence children’s attitude to words. The love of words is infectious if it is presented as an exciting, exhilarating experience. Children have different ‘hot buttons’ so a variety of approaches is probably most likely to succeed more than a single method repeated. But the English lexicon is an amazing story of survival from near extinction to becoming the world’s first global language. This story is the subject of many successful books and TV series. So there is no reason why it shouldn’t be a crowd pleaser in the classroom.

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