



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 08 March 2020
Gods Words - Words

Words change meaning all the time and over time, often in ways that might surprise us. We sometimes notice these changes of meaning but often these changes have taken so long to occur that we may be oblivious to the prior meanings of the words we use.

We can split our discussion into four main parts. Firstly, the **definition of words** – we'll discuss some examples to get us thinking differently about the meanings of words we may or may not be familiar with. I'd then like us to consider our **faith language** and talk about the meanings of the faith-related words we like or don't like to use and why that might be. After all, the meaning of these faith-related words will have different importance to all of us. Next, we'll consider the language ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament and think how different definitions of **Jesus' words** might change our understanding of his message. Recognising that the words we read will be different depending on the translation we use (as discussed in our last session), how much importance do we place upon Jesus' words? Finally, I'd like us to consider whether **our words** should be equally radical, culturally challenging and transformative.

The Definition of Words

In our last session we discussed the challenges that translating text from its original language into our own poses. It's therefore good to recognise that despite us all speaking the same language, there is a possibility that we all understand what is said, and the words we use, differently. Despite the editors of dictionaries best efforts there is unlikely to be one universally accepted definition of any given word across a group who speak the same language; however there are generally accepted definitions for words amongst certain communities and that's what we'll be considering tonight.

Words have been changing their meaning, sometimes radically, for as long as people have been using them. This process is known as semantic change, semantic shift, lexical change or semantic progression (to name just a few!). Language constantly evolves so there will always be the creation or consolidation of new words as people continue to vocalise them. But are you aware of any of the following twelve words changing definitions? Can you suggest the current and previous meanings for the following words?

NICE
SILLY
AWFUL
FATHOM
CLUE
NAUGHTY

DECIMATE
SPINSTER
BATCHELOR
EGREGIOUS
QUELL
MEAT

NICE

- Previously - silly, foolish or simple (from the Latin word for ignorant).
- Currently - a compliment, usually pleasant or agreeable.

SILLY

- Previously - things worthy or blessed with worthiness (in approximately 1200) before developing to mean those who were weak or to be pitied at the end of the 13th century. In 1570 it meant anyone lacking in reason or those who were feeble minded.
- Currently - those who are foolish.

AWFUL

- Previously – things worthy of awe (including God), respect or reverential fear (awful and awesome used to be synonyms).
- Currently – bad or frightful.

FATHOM

- Previously – to encircle with one’s arms.
- Currently – to understand after much thought.
- How - outstretched arms were a measurement, specifically one fathom. Once this measure is established you can use a fathom line to measure the depth of water, so now it metaphorically becomes ‘getting to the bottom of something’.

CLUE

- Previously – ball of yarn.
- Currently – evidence to solve things.
- How – imagine threading your way through a maze . . .

NAUGHTY

- Previously – you had naught or nowt (approximately 1300s) before being defined as evil or immoral (in the 1400s) and later reverting back to mean worth nothing.
- Currently – badly behaved mainly relating to children (from the late 17th century).

DECIMATE

- Previously – to kill 1 in every 10.
- Currently – to remove a large portion.

SPINSTER

- Previously – a woman who spun as her legal occupation.
- Currently – an unmarried woman.

BATCHELOR

- Previously – a young knight.
- Currently – an unmarried man (and also one who has achieved the lowest rank of a university education – BA or BSc)

EGREGIOUS

- Previously – a good thing, distinguished or eminent.
- Currently – conspicuously bad.

QUELL

- Previously – to kill.
- Currently – to subdue.

MEAT

- Previously – solid food of any kind (hence sweetmeat becoming just sweet).
- Currently – specifically animal flesh.

These examples show that there is often a narrowing or broadening of meaning across time – an intuitive and transformative shift – but there can also be a distant or opposite meaning ascribed to words by different groups over time. Words can have duplicate meanings, especially across communities and languages.

[Translation continues to pose challenges. German comedian Henning Wehn highlights the limitations of Google translate (other translation apps are available) since it translates the common German phrase “I don’t care at all” into “This is me totally sausage” in English].

So when does a new word become real? Who officially decides? When did we all last look up a word in the dictionary, whether a physical book or a digital version? Have any of us ever actually looked to see who edited that dictionary? Who are the people which decide whether a word makes it? We might think “I’ll look it up in the dictionary” but there is no one dictionary; there are many and they are not all the same. Dictionaries are human creations and are not timeless. We often critically analyse many literary texts but we don’t often approach the dictionary in this critical way. The reality is that dictionary editors are just trying to catch up with what words we are using, whether new words or words re-imagined and applied with evolving definitions. Dictionary editors and members of usage panels effectively watch what is said and written, then try to guess which of these ‘new’ words will stick so they gamble to appear cutting edge by catching the words that will make it.

[The usage notes found in dictionaries are decided upon and constructed by members of usage panels which vote according to what they see and hear people writing and saying, primarily to define troublesome words whose meanings often change.]

[Amusing anecdote: Whilst researching this topic I learnt that there are award ceremonies for words including categories such as ‘word of the year’ and ‘most creative word’ voted on by national dialect societies, academics and dictionary editors. One recent winner was the word ‘multislacking’ defined as the act of having multiple windows open on your screen in order to look like you are working when you are actually wasting time on the internet.]

The words we use in our daily spoken and written language come and go in prominence; language can be understood to be a living thing. Do we find these changes annoying or fun? It’s not surprising that complaints are a huge part of the history of the changing definitions of words. After all we are usually quicker to complain than we are to congratulate. We should therefore accept that there will always be changes in the application and understanding of words in our language. Maybe we should be less swayed by our opinions and instead embrace the life of words since creativity enables language to be both re-made and remain robust.

Words get into dictionaries because we use them and continue to use them. There is no objective dictionary authority or final arbiter out there, there is only us – people who choose to use words and ascribe certain meanings to these words. If a group of people are using a word and know what it means then it is a real word.

Just for interest I’ve included a list of some of the newest words which were added to the Oxford English Dictionary in October 2019. 650 words, sub-entries, senses and additions to revised entries were added at this time but here are just a few:

- Lightsabre – in Star Wars a weapon resembling a sword with a destructive light beam instead of a blade
- Jedi – in Star Wars a member of an order of heroic and skilled warrior monks who can harness mystical power known as The Force.
- The Force – in Star Wars a mystical universal energy field.

- Poke – Hawaiian sliced or cubed marinated raw fish or seafood.
- Arancini – Italian balls of rice stuffed with a savoury filling and covered in breadcrumbs.
- Cobb salad – a salad consisting of lettuce, diced chicken or turkey, bacon, hard boiled eggs, tomatoes, avocado and blue cheese.
- Wedge salad – a salad consisting of a wedge of iceberg lettuce served with various toppings but usually a blue cheese dressing and bacon.
- Chillax – to calm down and relax.
- Sumfin – something.
- Whatevs – an indication that the speaker is disinclined to engage with or indifferent to the matter at hand.
- Simple – used to indicate that something is very simple or straightforward to do (advertising works!).
- Fake News – news that conveys or incorporates false, fabricated or deliberately misleading information, or that is characterised as or accused of doing so.
- Nomophobia – anxiety about having no access to a mobile phone or mobile phone services.
- Nomophobic – suffering from anxiety about having no access to a mobile phone or mobile phone services.
- Promposal – an invitation to be someone’s date to a school prom, especially one which is elaborately done and then shared with others on social media.
- Converso – a convert from Judaism to Christianity.
- Hanging – hung-over.
- Steaming – extremely or incapably drunk (chiefly Scottish).
- MLE – Multicultural London English, a variety of English spoken mainly by young people in the multicultural neighbourhoods of inner-city London.
- Tailgater – a person who hosts or attends a party where food and drink are served at the tailgate of a motor vehicle before a sports event.
- Marmite – that polarises opinions by provoking either strongly positive or strongly negative reactions rather than indifference.

Faith Language

The last session confirmed for us that the words we ascribe to God and Jesus do change! But are these changes restricted to the problems of translation or do they evolve and change like the words we’ve discussed?

Firstly, we’ll list some of the faith words we know and then discuss the definitions we may have for these words. For example:

Christian	Lord of God
Prayer	Scripture
Worship	God’s will
Faith	The way
Believe	Intercession
Truth	Doctrine
Sin	Bless / Blessings
God	The Trinity
Holy Spirit	Vicar / Minister / Priest / Rector / Pastor
Bible	Liturgy

Words supplied by the group for discussion:

Service

Sin

Saved

God

Prayer

Communion

Redemption

Worship

Ablution

Holy

Transgression

Grace

Saints

Amen

Repent

Unction

Angel

Sacred

- It is natural for there to be words only used within certain communities – in this instance a faith or religious one. But how can these words be meaningful to those outside of this community?
- Do these words have different meanings to those in or out of this community?
- Have religious words become synonymous with fundamentalism or extremity within a secular context?
- Are these living words - do they evolve and continue to be re-defined or are they static?
- Have these words changed over time?
- Do they have different definitions for different faith or religious communities, or even for smaller groups within a religious community?
- Does this give these faith words more or less significance?

Jesus Words

When we think about the words ascribed to Jesus, which words stick out for each of us? For me it's often the provocative words that stand out the most. I recall stories of when Jesus challenged the social, cultural, religious and political rules of his day. Maybe that says more about me than anything else . . . but what words do we 'remember' Jesus using? We'll look at two phrases which have stuck in more detail now and consider the impact these words might have had upon those who heard them and what impact they have on us today. Both examples are idioms – phrases that have a non-literal meaning but are good examples of how the words used have changing definitions. Their definitions have changed over time and depending upon the groups within which they were spoken or read.

In contemporary English language the phrase 'turn the other cheek' is defined as to refrain from retaliating when one has been attacked or insulted. This phrase originates from the Bible – specifically part of the sermon on the mount as found in Matthew 5:39 "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (NIV). However, in its day some scholars believe that this instruction from Jesus encouraged subversion of an authority figure. If as a servant your master wanted to discipline you it would be common for them to slap you on the cheek using the back of their hand. If the servant then turned their head around so that their other cheek was turned towards their master, this would force their master to strike them again using the palm of their hand. Culturally to strike someone with the palm of your hand indicated that they were equal to you in social status or social hierarchy. Hence to turn the other cheek challenged the inequitable relationship between master and servant.

Similarly, the phrase 'go the extra mile' is well known in our contemporary English language and means to make a special extra effort to achieve something, to go above and beyond what is expected. This too came from the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:41 "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (NIV). If you read this

passage in a literal manner it is likely that you'll come to the understanding that this parable is indeed about helping others more than they ask or expect. However, some scholars believe that in its historical context this passage had a message that subverted Roman colonial authority. According to Roman law, a Roman soldier could order a civilian to assist them in carrying heavy loads. Roman roads were marked with mile markers and the law stated a civilian could be ordered to carry a load for no more than one mile. The instruction to go the extra mile therefore challenged the prevailing authority because it would place the Roman soldier in a difficult position where the civilian was effectively working illegally and the consequence of this was that the Roman soldier could be punished. Note that in both examples the words ascribed to Jesus are subversive but similar to a non-violent protest.

- Should we therefore be open-minded to change our understanding of Jesus message using the previous definitions of these phrases?

Our Words

My desire to look into this topic came out of an Ilkley Literature Festival event where an Israeli academic truly believed that gender could be the new left-handedness; ie, in the near future gender would no longer be an issue which was primarily considered and used to assess, judge or discriminate between individuals, their abilities or potential. I found her sincere belief that this could happen within her lifetime mind-blowing and so challenged myself to see if I too could live this out, soon realising that it would primarily affect my choice of words [I realise I have failed to remove gender from this text – it's still something I am working on, apologies]. It also made me think of Jesus – someone who I understand to have been a person that consistently blew the minds of those listening to him. Jesus used words to make people see that change was not only possible but necessary, with his sincere and unwavering belief that things within his culture and society could be changed and should be different. This is a cornerstone of my faith outworking; it isn't just about my actions – it is about my words.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never break me" – this traditional English rhyme was first attributed to The Christian Recorder in March 1862 as a defence against verbal bullying. But I've always been sceptical of its truth and throughout my life the words people have said to me are more memorable than the physical injuries I may have endured. So why is it that words are so powerful? I think it's because they cause a response within the listener, and if this response is extreme then it can have a lasting effect: "They may forget what you said but they will never forget how you made them feel" (Carl W Buehner - an official in the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints). In fact, the words themselves may be forgotten in time but the meaning of those words and how that made the receiver of those words respond, whether emotionally or intellectually, is significant.

- Should our choice of words change because of our beliefs?
- Do the words we use change in definition because of our faith?
- How can we forge change through our choice of words?
- Can we change the definition of words to engender this change or do we need to create new words?
- Can our faith language become ground-breaking, cutting edge and radical?
- Can we follow Jesus' example and turn the definition of words on their heads to be revolutionary?