

david crystal



**'A joyful journey, full of teasing and word play . . .
delightful' *Publishing News***

WORDS

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David Crystal

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Preface

I can distinctly remember the day I first got interested in words. I think I must have been about three or four—certainly it was well before I went to school. It was in my home town of Holyhead, in North Wales. I was with some other kids, I don't know why, perhaps a playgroup of some kind, and the person looking after us had been calling us 'children', when she wanted to talk to us all. Then at one point she called us 'plant'. 'Nawr plant . . .', she said.

It was, of course, Welsh, though I didn't know it at the time. 'Nawr plant' means 'Now, children'. But I recall being puzzled. I knew what a plant was. It was a green sort of thing that grew in gardens and in pots. Why were we being called green things that grow in pots? I couldn't work it out.

Welsh wasn't the language of our home, so I asked Uncle Joe about it. He was a Welsh speaker. He told me that 'plant' meant 'children'—and then, perhaps sensing an interest, he went on to tell me that my name was 'Dafydd' in Welsh. I took it in avidly. So I had two first names. That sounded interesting. But there was more. 'Dafydd y Garreg Wen', he called me, playfully, glossing it as 'David of the White Rock'. I had no idea who this was, but it sounded wonderful.

Then I went to school, and learned that Dafydd was the hero of an old Welsh folksong. I learned Welsh alongside English, and Welsh English alongside English English. And Irish English too, for this was Holyhead, and Dublin was only sixty-odd miles away. And my mother's side of the family were Irish, so that meant trips to County Wexford, where they spoke strangely. And some there spoke yet another language, which I would later come to know as Gaelic. And in church there was something else, called Latin. Was there no end to this language business?

Words, Words, Words

Sixty-two years later, and I know the study of language, and of languages, has no end. Although all the world's 6,000 or so languages have fascinated me, it is English with which I have had the most intense love-affair, probably because of its literature. And within English, it has been the words, words, words, in their thousands, which have most intrigued me. Words, and especially the way they sound. I don't know why that original sense of childish wonderment never left me, but it didn't. I can still stand open-mouthed in delight at a novel use of a word, just as I did all that time ago.

People love to share their interests with each other, and I am no exception. I read as many books as I can on language, and write them as often as I can. I never travel anywhere without a notebook for jotting down language observations. My office overflows with newspaper cuttings. The digital camera has been a boon for taking a quick shot of an interesting street sign. *International Shoppes* I saw recently at an airport: the modern world curiously juxtaposed against ye olde worlde.

No book on words could ever be comprehensive, but it can at least be representative of what is 'out there'. Language is too huge a subject to be discovered by any one person. Everyone has their own linguistic story to tell, and each story is worth the telling. *Words, Words, Words* is part of my story, a cross-section of my lexical autobiography.

David Crystal

Part I



The universe of words

We map out the universe of words. Chapter 1 explores the mind and motivation of wordsmiths. Why are people so fascinated by words? The answers take us into the distant past and around the globe. Chapter 2 debates the size of this universe. Is it possible to estimate how many words there are in a language? Can we put a figure on the number that exist in English? The total turns out to be remarkably large. Chapter 3 reports on the way children learn vocabulary, and investigates just how many words adults eventually learn. That total also turns out to be remarkably large. Chapter 4 explores the way vocabulary is organized. The apparently simple task of learning a new word makes us reflect on the way we group words into fields of meaning, and draws our

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attention to the central role of definitions in the use of language. Part I then concludes with a bow in the direction of the professional wordsmiths, the lexicographers, whose mission is to boldly go exploring all parts of the universe of words.

1 Wordsmithery

We live in a universe of words, and we know it. We even have names for those who are aware that they live in this universe and who have become mildly or seriously obsessed by it. We call them wordsmiths, word-buffs, wordaholics. We feed their obsession by publishing books of wordgames, putting word-puzzles in newspapers, playing wordgames on radio or television, and setting up word websites. There are now thousands of places on the Internet where they can indulge themselves. World Wide Web was a misnomer. It should have been Word Wide Web.

My pronouns are wrong. We call *them* wordsmiths? There is no 'us' and 'them' in the universe of words. We are all wordsmiths. I have never met anyone without an interest in words. For some, it is the words that turn up in a local dialect. Or the curious formations that their children invent. Or the new words they meet when they travel abroad. Or the unusual history of a word's meaning. Or a word they especially like or dislike. Or the meaning of their name, or their child's name, or the name of the place where they live. For most of us, it is all of these things, and much more besides.

Wordsmithery—or lexicology, as linguists call it—is a fascination that demands regular and repeated treatment. There are so many words that no one book or broadcast can deal with everything. And even if, through some magic, it was possible to present an account of all the words in a language today, the book would be out-of-date by tomorrow. Language changes. Words change. Our feelings about words change. And not just over long periods of time. It need only take a day. On 3 October 1957, ask anyone what a 'sputnik' was, and they would have been mystified. A day later, the word was on everyone's lips. These days, of course, the Internet can send a new word around the world in a matter of minutes.

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Ground zero obtained a new global lease of life by the evening of September 11 2001.

Where does this fascination with words come from? Its roots lie deep in the history of the human race. The 'naming of parts' is there from the outset, according to the Genesis story in the Bible: 'and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name'. Nor is this unique to the Bible. Many cultures have a word-myth as part of their origins. Words are perceived as special, magical, sacred—and personal names even more so. In the beginning, it seems everywhere, was the word.

The special role and power of words has been acknowledged throughout history by poets, philosophers, and proverbialists. By Confucius: 'He who does not understand words, cannot understand people'. By Aristophanes: 'Words can give everybody wings'. By Walt Whitman: 'Nothing is more spiritual than words'. And, as if to emphasize the darker side of the word universe, there is Lord Byron's couplet in *Lara*:

Religion—freedom—vengeance—what you will,
A word's enough to raise mankind to kill.

Words: for and against

The paradoxes presented by words are well represented in any selection of the world's proverbs.

Proverbs in favour of words

A word is medicine to the wise. (Telugu)

Words have no boundaries. (Bulgarian)

Words are sounds of the heart. (Chinese)

Words will endure; ways will fall into disuse. (Tamil)

There is nothing one goes to meet with more pleasure than the word. (Rwandan)

A word spoken at the right moment is like a golden apple on a silver dish. (Silesian)

Proverbs against words

Words and feathers are tossed by the wind. (Spanish)

The poison of a word is a word. (Swahili)

Cloth shrinks, words still more. (Russian)

A good word does much, but doesn't fill the fasting. (Norwegian)

Words are but sands; 'tis money buys lands. (Italian)

Words are good, but hens lay eggs. (German)

A recurrent literary theme is the danger of words. Words as misleaders. Words as smokescreens. Words as weapons. They have been compared to drugs and arrows, bullets and cannonballs. They are said to hurt, pierce, stab, sting, and kill. They can, of course, also calm, soothe, and heal. It is the potential force behind words which most impresses the world's writers. And the world's criminals. 'Words are the new weapons', says Elliott Carver, the manipulative media baron in the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies*. But Shakespeare was there first. 'She speaks poniards', says Benedick of Beatrice, 'and every word stabs' (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.1.231).

And yet there is a paradox, for another great theme in literature is the emptiness of words. Words by themselves do nothing. 'What is honour?', asks Falstaff in *Henry IV Part 1* (5.1.133). And he answers himself: 'A word. What is that word, honour? Air.' Words are indeed, at one level, just mouthfuls of air. In *Troilus and Cressida* (3.2.54), Pandarus harangues Troilus for his tentative approach to Cressida: 'Words pay no debts; give her deeds.' And in modern times, the US politician Adlai Stevenson provided a caustic summary: 'Man does not live by words alone, despite the fact that sometimes he has to eat them'.

Additionally, we have the aesthetic dimension. Words have been compared to gems, leaves, flowers, sunbeams, lamps, thunder. One of the best ever descriptions of the beauty of words was made by the novelist Rose Macaulay in 1935, in her essay on 'Writing' in *Personal Pleasures*:

Words, those precious gems of queer shape and gay colours, sharp angles and soft contours, shades of meaning laid one over the other

The universe of words

down history, so that for those far back one must delve among the lost and lovely litter that strews the centuries. They arrange themselves in the most elegant odd patterns; they sound the strangest sweet euphonious notes; they flute and sing and taber, and disappear, like apparitions, with a curious perfume and a most melodious twang.

Perhaps it is the paradoxical love-hate relationship we have with words which adds to their fascination. Or perhaps it is their schizophrenic character, so tangible in writing and so evanescent in speech. How are we to handle entities which have such multiple personalities? Do we let them control us or do we try to control them? Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, in a famous quotation from chapter 6 of *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), was in no doubt:

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make a word mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'

So how do we become 'masters of words'?

My answer is simple: by studying them. Words are a bit like children: we need to know how to look after them and when to let them look after themselves; when to be proud of them, and when to be worried about them. To do all that, we need to find out as much as we can about them. We need to know which are the dangerous words, because they mislead or confuse—what are sometimes called 'weasel words'. We need to know which words are ambiguous, which are loaded, which are clear. We need to know how words change their meanings and uses, and why. We need to understand the communicative properties of words, so that we can exploit them to our advantage. Above all, we need to be able to describe, comprehensively and objectively, the universe of words, and the way people live in it. In short, we need to become lexicologists.

Lexicology is the study of words, and this book is about lexicology. To be more precise, it is chiefly about the lexicology of English—the

language which has the largest and most diverse wordstock of any of the world's languages because of its global spread and—as we shall see in chapter 8—the welcoming attitude displayed by its speakers towards the foreign words they encounter. Although I shall make some references to other languages, there is more than enough to do concentrating on English.

404 Error

Everyone logged on to the Internet will have encountered this message sooner or later. A 'four-oh-four' error. It tells you that your browser has made a faulty request to a server, typically because a page or site no longer exists. But why 404? The expression derives from the 'file not found' message sent out as a response to a faulty enquiry by staff at CERN, in Switzerland—the place where the World Wide Web was devised. The members of staff worked out of room 404.

Extended uses of the word soon followed, especially in the spoken language of the computer fraternity. As an adjective, applied to humans, it came to mean 'confused, blank, uncertain':

You've got a 404 look on your face
(or 'stupid, uninformed, clueless').

You'll never get an answer from that 404 headcase
(or 'unavailable, not around').

Jane's 404 (i.e. not at her desk).

And as a verb, it began to mean 'make no progress':

I'm 404-ing on that new code.

The error message continues to appear on our screens, so we cannot ignore it. We can therefore expect more uses to emerge, as time goes by. And to see it in dictionaries. (It has already been logged for inclusion by the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)

The universe of words

Just as zoology is the study of all animals, so lexicology is the study of all words. That means, in the case of English, the words of all dialects and styles, whoever uses them and wherever they live. Over 1,500 million people use English around the world, in all kinds of varied and unpredictable lexical ways. Part of the joy of lexicology is to discover this unpredictability, region by region, in much the same way as an unexpected colour or fragrance delights us as we round a corner in a botanical garden. To study only the vocabulary of the variety known as standard English would be to miss out on many wonders of the lexical world. Some of the most interesting things that happen to words are to be found in the dialects and slang that make up non-standard English.

There is a danger in word-books. It is easy to slip into a style which presents long lists, of the kind: 'English has borrowed many words from French, and here are twenty-six of them, from A to Z.' Lists can be useful, but they are not the best way into a language's lexicon. Rather, we need to focus on general patterns and trends, such as the importance of diversity, change, creativity, and play in the way words are used. But if you are a true wordsmith, you will not be satisfied even with general themes. You will want to investigate individual word-stories. The real fascination of lexicology lies in the exploration of individual cases. Behind each name in the telephone directory is a unique person, any one of whose life stories is—as Dr Johnson once remarked—well worth the telling. It is the same with the biography of words.

2 Wordhoards

The Anglo-Saxon poet-singers used to talk of their ‘wordhoard’. They were thinking of the collection of words they held in their head, which they could draw upon when they were performing. Heroes have wordhoards too. Beowulf, at one point in the great Anglo-Saxon epic (line 259), *wordhord anleac*—‘unlocked his wordhoard’—and makes a speech. We do the same today. Inside each brain is a wordhoard, always changing, always growing. In fact, three-quarters of the human race have *two* wordhoards: we call such people ‘bilingual’. Some have three or more. There seem to be no limits, other than those imposed by time, opportunity, and motivation, to the number of language and dialect vocabularies we can learn.

Of course, no one person knows the entire vocabulary of a language. That is a composite, comprising the wordhoards of each of us as individuals, and reflecting our regional, social, and professional backgrounds. There is a large number of words that everyone knows, but these are far outnumbered by the words that only a relatively few people know—such as all the technical terms of chemistry, law, engineering, medicine, and sumo wrestling. Four-fifths of the vocabulary of English has a highly restricted circulation. Most of it, like the bulk of an iceberg, lies beneath the surface of everyday usage, unseen and unnoticed by all but specialists—and passing lexicologists.

So, how large is the lexicon? One of the most popular questions lexicologists get asked is ‘how many words are there in English?’ It seems like a question which should have a very simple answer, but it turns out to be surprisingly difficult to arrive at even an approximate figure—for any language. If we go on a short lexiquest, we soon see why.

We can begin the journey by looking at a dictionary or two. What figure would we come up with if we counted the words listed in the largest

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dictionaries? *The Oxford English Dictionary* (usually referred to as 'the OED') had over 500,000 entries in its 1992 edition. *The Third New Webster International* ('W3', for short), the largest American dictionary, had over 450,000 entries when it was published in 1961. Although both dictionaries have grown since, that sounds as if there are around half a million words in English.

But if we were to compare the listings in these two huge works, we would find that they were not the same. The OED, for example, contains a large number of entries from earlier periods in the history of the language, which are outside the remit of W3. American dictionaries include more names of people and places. And the two works take different views about the range of dialect or technical terms they include. I once looked at all the words beginning with *sa-* in the OED and W3, and found that only about a third of them were in both books. Other samples produced similar results. So, if we were to make a 'superdictionary' by combining the lexicons contained in the two dictionaries, it rather looks as if our total would point steadily towards a million.

But our numerical lexiquest does not stop there. I have on my shelves a dictionary of the English used in South Africa. I have another of the English used in Jamaica. The first has over 3,000 entries; the second has around 15,000. Most of the words do not appear in either the OED or W3—or, for that matter, in any of the other dictionaries you would find routinely in a British or American bookstore. There is no reason why they should. Words which are used only in South Africa are presumably of limited interest to people living elsewhere. But they are nonetheless a part of the English language. And when we take into account all the parts of the world where English is spoken, and think of all the regional vocabulary encountered there (see chapter 14), we can sense immediately that this dimension will add hundreds of thousands more words to our language total.

We are well over a million now, yet still other lexical horizons are in view. What, to begin with, are we to do with all the abbreviations made up of initial letters—the *acronyms* of the language? Do these count as words?

Comparing lexicons

Here is a small sample from the beginning of letter S, derived from W3 and the OED. Of the twenty words shown, only five are in both works.

<u>Word</u>	<u>In W3?</u>	<u>In OED?</u>
saba	yes	no
sabadilla	yes	yes
sabadillia	no	yes
sabadilline	no	yes
sabadine	yes	yes
sabadinine	yes	no
sabaeen	yes	yes
sabahdaur	no	yes
sabai grass	yes	no
sabaism	no	yes
sabakha	yes	no
sabal	yes	yes
sabalo	yes	yes
sabalote	yes	no
sabal palmetto	yes	no
sabana	yes	no
sabaoth	no	yes
sabarcane	no	yes
sabate	no	yes
sabatia	no	yes

You can do this exercise yourself, using any two dictionaries of roughly the same size. It is a good way of learning about their strengths and biases.

The universe of words

If I say *The BBC and CNN both reported the story*, may I say that there are eight words in this sentence? The point seems uncontentious. The fact that I've said *BBC* rather than *British Broadcasting Corporation* is almost incidental—more to do with linguistic energy-saving than anything else. Three syllables roll off the tongue, or pen, or keyboard more smoothly than nine.

But there are a lot of acronyms in English. The *Gale Acronyms, Initialisms and Abbreviations Dictionary* contains well over half a million entries, and is by no means a complete guide. They go from such items as AAAA (standing for the American Association of Advertising Agencies and over a dozen other organizations) to ZZZZ (an abbreviation used in aviation code, referring to unknown elements in a flight plan). In a recent edition, there were over 200 entries for the acronym PA alone. Including all these in our wordhoard would make it grow significantly towards two million.

And there is more. What about all the names of people and places in the English-speaking world—the 'proper names', as grammars call them. Should we include in our wordhoard for English such items as *Liverpool* and *Himalayas* and *Darth Vader*? Here, the instinct is to say no. These entities exist outside of language, in the sense that no one language 'owns' them. *Darth Vader* is *Darth Vader*, albeit in differing pronunciations, in English, French, Swahili, and Chinese. No one would ever include such words in a language total. If we wanted to find out what *Darth Vader* 'meant', we would look him up in an encyclopedia, not in a dictionary. And the same goes for *Liverpool* and the *Himalayas*. An old music-hall joke makes the point:

Bill: I say, I say, I say, I can speak French.

Ben: I didn't know you could speak French. Let me hear you speak French.

Bill: Paris, Marseilles, Nice, Charles de Gaulle . . .

But if we are to exclude these names, why do I say 'there is more'? Because quite a few proper names take on a more general meaning; and

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these we *would* want to include in our wordhoard total. Think of *Whitehall* and the *White House*—both proper names of places. There is nothing linguistically interesting about the street and the building, as such, but if I were to say *Several unusual signals have come out of Whitehall this week*, something different is happening. I do not mean that we have seen blue traffic lights at the junction of Whitehall and Trafalgar Square. Rather, by Whitehall I am referring to the presence of the Civil Service, which has some of its central offices along the street. Likewise, personal names can convey general associations: *That's a very Alf Garnett kind of remark*, someone might say after hearing a racist comment.

How many proper names are there which work in this way? Nobody knows. The names vary greatly from country to country. The Alf Garnett remark would be intelligible in the UK, where people are likely to remember the TV sitcom 'Till Death Us Do Part', which introduced us to this character. By contrast, the allusion would mean very little in the US. The equivalent personage there is Archie Bunker, a character from the 1970s TV series 'All in the Family'. Similarly, the seedy sexual connotations which attach to *Soho* in London do not travel along with the name. There is no corresponding set of associations surrounding the district of *SoHo* in New York City. And the sentences one might say about *King's Cross* in London do not transfer to *King's Cross* in Sydney—or of course vice versa.

Our lexiquest is not over yet. There are, I am reliably informed, over a million species of insects and other tiny animals so far identified in our world. Each has a name. Admittedly, the name might be in Latin, or in a loanword approximation to Latin, but that does not stop me speaking or writing the following English sentence: *Araneae, Acari, and Scorpiones are included in the class Arachnida*. Or, in more popular language: 'spiders, ticks and mites, and scorpions are included in the class of arachnids.' There are as many names for things as there are things which have been discovered, whether we are talking about botanical species or chemical compounds. We must not exclude these from our total. The beauty of language is that it allows us to talk about anything we want to.