



OED | Oxford English Dictionary
Case studies and OED features



The Oxford English Dictionary

The *OED* enables users to gain richer insights into the complexities and impact of the English language across diverse research disciplines.

Here we explore some of the *OED*'s features and hear from some of the academics who have used them to enable their research, as well as sharing tips for getting started.

A historical record of English

The *OED* is a historical dictionary and it forms a record of all the core words and meanings in English over more than 1,000 years, from Old English to the present day, and includes many obsolete and historical terms. Meanings are ordered chronologically in the *OED*, according to when they were first recorded in English, so that senses with the earliest evidence of usage appear first and more recent senses appear further down the entry.

If you're interested in how the English language has developed over time or want to dig deeper into its origins or variations around the world, then the *OED* is the definitive resource.

“Thanks to its high-quality material, the OED API allowed us to develop an algorithm to connect words and meanings in historical times.”

Dr Barbara McGillivray
Lecturer in Digital Humanities
and Cultural Computation,
King's College London



Case study: re-examining the language of business and marketing

Lara Eastburn holds a PhD in French Literature & Linguistics (Emory University) the creator and manager of the One Word project

After over a decade in digital marketing, I find myself wondering why so many businesses are relying on language so overused it appears emptied of personality, of meaning? As a marketer, I perceived this puzzle as urgent and crucial to my own work. As a linguist, I knew exactly where to start investigating.

Because I suspected that something was fundamentally changing in the ways the vocabularies of business and marketing were being used, **an ordinary dictionary wasn't going to cut it.** I needed to examine linguistic change itself in commerce and industry.

So I turned first to the *OED* as a historical dictionary, though it feels insufficient to call it that. More accurately, the *OED* preserves a crucial log of the meanings we English-speaking humans have ascribed to our words over time. There between the lines of its entries, we can read the fascinating story of our own changing cultures and values.

And that is exactly what was required by my project that began to emerge as *One Word* – an attempt to examine, deconstruct, and reinvent the received language of business and marketing, one word at a time.

The vernacular of business is a largely unquestioned inheritance. It is presented to its initiates as a vocabulary necessary for mitigating the inherent risks of commerce. The question, though, was why?

The *OED*'s entries, *Historical Thesaurus* and word use frequency proved invaluable in formulating the beginnings of a theory. In compiling and researching a 100-word sample from the most-used and enduring words of business and marketing, I found I could trace many of them to the beginnings of modern Western commerce. It began to appear that much of our business jargon stemmed from three distinct and corresponding categories: military, industrial, or religious.

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The language of business and marketing often feels dated, musty, and out-of-touch because it evolved during an era that looked very different from the one we are navigating today. It is marketing language rooted in assimilation that ring hollow in an era that, for many, seeks to center community, collaboration, and inclusion.

Let's take the word *leverage* by way of example. Marketing imperatives to 'leverage one's audience' or "fan base" just don't quite sit right. One can already hear the echoes of *exploit* in it, and the word's journey from the vocabulary of financial speculation closely parallels that of *exploit*.

Exploit enjoyed exclusive use as a positive term for 400 years, shifting to a negative term near the end of the Industrial Revolution – influenced by socialist sentiments in Europe and the anti-slavery movement in the US. The tide begins to turn around 1832, when we first see the noun *exploitation* form from the verb. In the U.S., it's a period that coincides with forced removal of indigenous nations, the beginning of debates over slavery, and The Panic of 1837 – economic collapse from speculative practices.

In the *OED*'s detailed outlines of the words *exploit* and *exploitation*, we effectively witness the mirroring of changing public awareness in the word's use. The meaning evolves alongside prevailing attitudes that humans should not be among the resources it is OK to 'use up.' And the way *exploit* was used before 1832? It's incredibly close to how we use the word *leverage* in business today.

As marketers and business owners, we are positioned with every word choice to either perpetuate a vernacular showing its philosophical age or to contribute to the work of re-purposing, re-creating, and expanding its use to an emerging era of social and linguistic responsibility.

This case study has been truncated but can be read in full at <https://tinyurl.com/language-business-marketing>



Frequency data

The *OED* provides both historical and modern frequency data for entries.

Historical frequency values are derived from Google Books Ngrams (version 2), a data set based on a corpus of several million books printed in English between 1500 and 2010. The Google Books Ngrams data has been cross-checked against frequency measures from other corpora and re-analysed in order to handle homographs and other ambiguities.

Modern frequency values are derived from a corpus of 20 billion words compiled by Oxford Languages. This corpus covers the period from 2017 to the present. It is mainly compiled from online news sources and covers all major varieties of World English.



Did you know that the OED is updated four times a year?

The latest update to the Oxford English Dictionary includes more than 500 new and revised words, phrases, and senses, including *nice-to-have*, *swear jar*, and *with a cherry on top*.

[View the update](#)

Neologisms and language monitoring

A neologism is defined in the *OED* as:

‘A word or phrase which is new to the language; one which is newly coined.’

Words come into the English language in all manner of ways. The *OED*'s mission is to record all of these word stories, capturing their development as they continue to unfold.

New entries are published online on a quarterly basis, and research into tracing a word's development utilizes a wide range of sources, for example:

- the *OED*'s reading programmes
- crowdsourcing appeals
- newspaper archives and magazines
- online forums and social media
- law tracts
- recipe books
- academic studies
- the *OED*'s network of researchers
- language corpora

***OED* editors are continually monitoring linguistic developments. Our databases and corpora have also enabled us to track and record words related to the coronavirus pandemic and climate change, and mean that we continue to monitor newly coined words and those used in new senses as they emerge and evolve.**



Case study: using *OED* definitions to interpret the Statute of the ICC

Stewart Manley is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Law, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Stewart's main areas of research are international criminal law and scholarly publishing ethics.

My colleagues and I recently used the *Oxford English Dictionary* to assist us in interpreting the Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), commonly called the Rome Statute. Our research entitled *The (Non-)Use of African Law by the International Criminal Court* has been published in the *European Journal of International Law*.

Interpreting ambiguous or vague language in an international treaty such as the Rome Statute requires the examination of, among other things, the 'ordinary meaning' of the treaty terms. **We chose the *OED* to understand ordinary meaning because our research showed that it has been a popular choice at the ICC.** An ICC judge, for instance, used the *OED* definition of *either* to address a legal issue related to the investigation of crimes committed in Afghanistan and another judge turned to the *OED* definition of *confirm* in a case from the Central African Republic. It made sense, therefore, to use the *OED* instead of a different general English dictionary.

The phrase we were trying to understand is in Article 21(1)(c) of the Rome Statute. We wanted to understand the requirement for the Court to examine and apply general principles of law derived from 'the national laws of States that would normally exercise jurisdiction over the crime'. Our hunch – and what we eventually concluded with help from the *OED* – was that the ICC must examine the general principles of law derived from 'the national laws of States that would normally exercise jurisdiction over the crime' but need not apply them if it decides that they are inappropriate.

This interpretation was important to us because we were researching how often the ICC uses African laws in its decisions and whether it should be using them more. The '*national laws of States that would normally exercise jurisdiction over*

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the crime' would almost always be African laws because, to date, all defendants before the ICC have been African and all of their alleged crimes have been committed at least partially on African soil. Additionally, the phrase had been interpreted in various ways by other scholars, leaving us without support for a clear meaning.

We used the *OED* to help interpret two words in the phrase: *including* and *appropriate*. **The *OED* definitions of these words and their impact on our interpretation will not surprise readers – after all, we were looking for ordinary meaning – but the use of the *OED* was a necessary and crucial step.** *OED* indicated, at least at this preliminary stage, that when applying general principles of law, the ICC is required in all instances to consider general principles derived from the laws of countries that would normally exercise jurisdiction over the crime.

Our research of Article 21's drafting history supported this interpretation. The phrase at issue was inserted as part of a compromise between two factions of countries, one that wanted no mention of particular national laws and the other that wanted particular national laws specifically enumerated. The eventual compromise language arguably provides some legal protection for defendants because a Kenyan defendant, for instance, presumably will be most familiar with Kenyan laws and thus will not be unfairly surprised if the ICC applies general principles of law derived from the national laws of Kenya as opposed to, for instance, US laws.

Laws and principles from countries like Uganda, Kenya and the Republic of the Congo have largely been excluded from conventionally accepted sources of international law – meaning the treaties, principles and customs from which international law emerges. This research, with the important assistance from the *OED*, argues that the ICC must consider these neglected laws more often, and thus takes a small step to shed light on and, hopefully, counter this inequity.



This case study has been truncated but can be read in full at <https://tinyurl.com/oed-and-icc>

“The OED helped us lay out the methodological bases for our research on linguistic change in a short period of time defined by the pandemic.”

Dr Jorge Antonio Leoni de León

Director, Instituto de Investigaciones Lingüísticas,
Universidad de Costa Rica



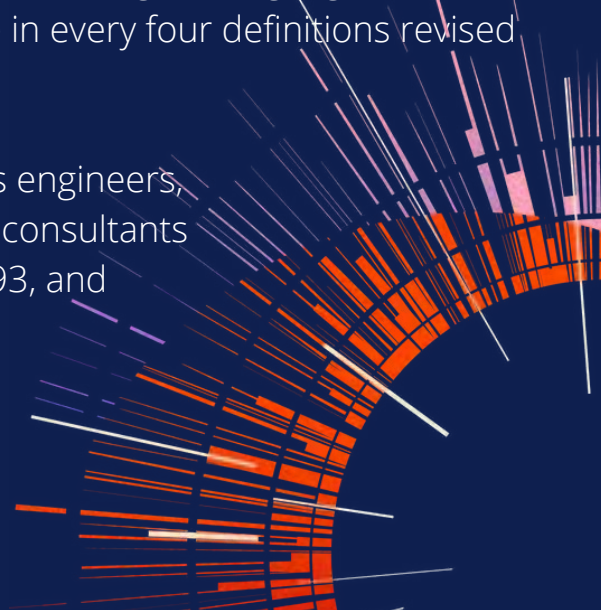
OED Revision Programme

As well as publishing new entries each quarter, entries are also updated as part of our revision programme. *OED* entries are constantly being reviewed to improve the accuracy of definitions, derivations, pronunciations, and the historical quotations.

The *OED* has been updated before, but has never received such a thorough overhaul as that currently in hand. In recent years, more and better resources have become available to language scholars. New historical dictionaries cover different varieties of English, specific periods of the language's development, and particular subject areas. A multitude of scholarly articles and books have been published that give a clearer understanding of the etymology of English, especially the history of words that have been borrowed from other languages. Countless other resources from both the distant and recent past are now helping scholars to refine and expand coverage of the formal, colloquial, slang, and dialect vocabulary of English since the twelfth century.

Through this productive but painstaking process today's editors are creating a document that gives a more accurate representation of each word's history and development, as well as a fuller chronological and geographical coverage of the English language. Work on the revision programme has already resulted in over one in every four definitions revised being augmented significantly with data on earlier usage.

Approximately 120 scholars, research assistants, systems engineers, and project managers, plus approximately 200 specialist consultants and readers, have been working on this project since 1993, and this revision of the *OED* marks a new chapter in our understanding of the history and development of the English language.



Case study: utilizing information from the *OED*'s revision programme

Lauren Simon holds an MSt in Linguistics, Philology, and Phonetics from University of Oxford. She continues to pursue linguistic research topics, primarily in semantics.

"Consider, for a moment, the word *bench*. *Bench* made its first appearance in the sense of 'A long seat, usually of wood or stone, with or without a back,' in early Old English; by the time the *OED1* entry for *bench* was published in the third fascicle in 1887, it had 9 senses and 11 subsenses. Today, after a 2017 revision, there are 11 senses of *bench* and 21 subsenses, the most recent dating to the 1940s. One may 'approach the bench' in a courtroom, 'ride the bench' in a football match, or 'bench press' heavy weights.

But how and why did *bench* develop new meanings? Questions like this are at the heart of historical semantics (the study of changes in meaning), yet they have historically been challenging to answer. New senses added to existing words can be hard to spot and even harder to study at scale, since they are identical in form to preexisting ones. How would one search for new senses of *bench* without having to comb through all the current ones? More importantly, as new senses emerge, how would one know to search for them?

This is where the *OED3* revision process comes in; as lexicographers identify and define new senses, they not only bring entries up to date but also produce a wealth of data on how meanings have changed—an invaluable resource for historical semantics researchers.

Patterns that emerge from this data can then answer questions which can then be considered in the context of cognitive linguistic theories about how the human brain may interact with language, both in any given moment and through time."

This case study has been truncated but can be read in full at <http://tiny.cc/OED-semantic-transfer>





Labels

Words in the *OED* are labelled appropriately—if labels were not included, a person reading an entry might understand that a word could be used by all English speakers in any context, but through labelling, it becomes clear that a particular term might be offensive or considered to be slang, or used only in a particular region or environment.

Case study: utilizing *OED* labelling and Advanced Search functionality

Roger J Kreuz is Associate Dean and Professor of Psychology at The University of Memphis, Tennessee

"Scholars in a variety of fields continue to grapple with the meaning of "ironic." Verbal irony is typically defined as language that "normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect," in the current *OED* definition. Irony's overlap with the concept of sarcasm continues to be a source of controversy among philosophers, rhetoricians, psychologists, and cognitive scientists who study the referents for these terms. The usage labels in the *OED* provide a unique lens for a close look at this slippery concept.

In some cases, a word or phrase is used ironically far less often than its literal form, while in others, an ironic intention predominates. The *OED* editors have tried to capture this by including qualifiers in the usage labels. These are intended to give an idea of how often a sense is employed ironically. About a fifth of the irony labels in the *OED* contain a diachronic qualifier. Most of these are either "now ironic" or "in later use ironic" but never, for example, "previously ironic" or "once ironic", suggesting that new terms tend to be used literally at first and then evolve (or devolve) into figurative and nonliteral forms. Such shifts emerge when lexicographers compare citations over longer timescales, providing insights that cannot be obtained through experimental research."

In short, the usage labels from the *OED* can provide a useful test bed for evaluating ideas about language use. And when documenting usage over time, they can provide information that can be found nowhere else.

This case study has been truncated but can be read in full at <http://tiny.cc/irony-and-the-OED>



Sources and quotations

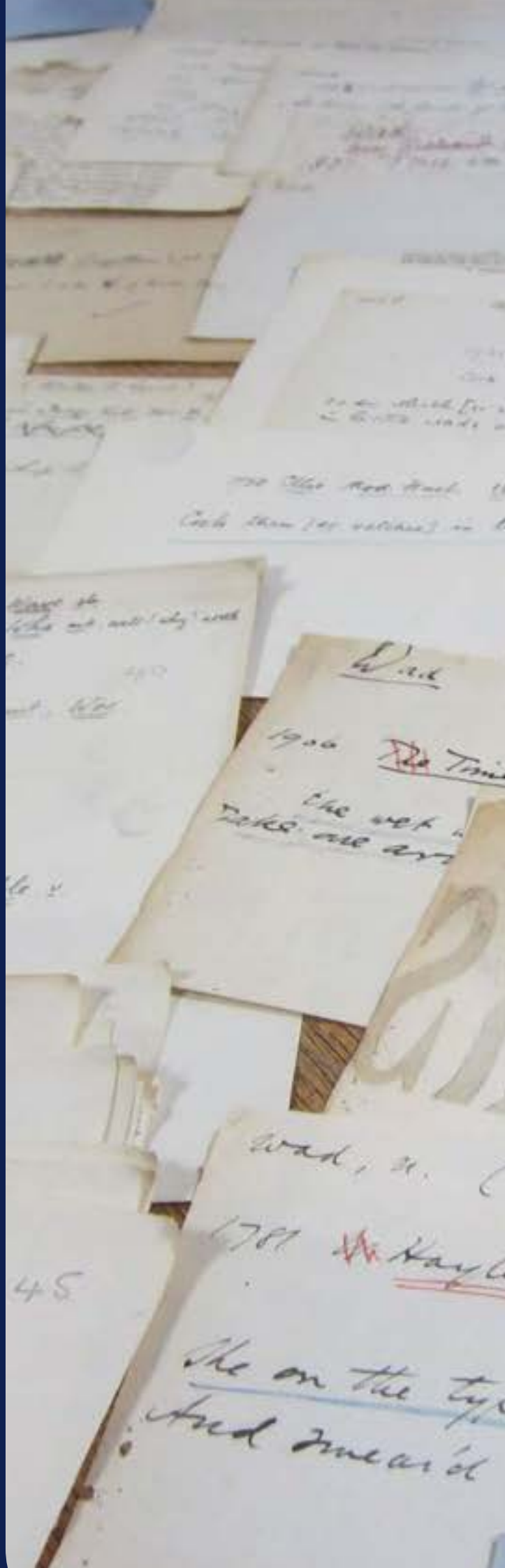
The *OED* is based on quotation evidence, and almost every sense and lemma of every entry includes a set of quotations from a wide range of sources, to illustrate the uses being defined, and to show when, where, and how a particular term was used. Each quotation is a real example of the word in use.

The first quotation in any block of illustrative quotations is always the earliest example that was available to editors when the entry was prepared. The last quotation dates from the modern period, or the period at which a word is seen to fall into disuse.

Quotations are selected to show typical usage of a word or sense over the period of time it is in use, or fell out of use, and might also demonstrate:

- the geographical spread of the term
- the types of sources (genre, etc.) in which it occurs
- typical registers of use

Sources are as diverse as language corpora and stained glass windows. With our **advanced search** feature, you can browse the most common authors and works to be cited in the dictionary's example sentences—for example, you could use this feature to search quotations from *The New York Times*, Shakespeare, Chaucer, or *New Scientist*.



Case study: utilizing the *OED*'s sources and etymological information

Alessandra Zinicola Lopez is a doctoral student within the University of Central Florida's Texts and Technology program, specializing in Technical Communication.

Alessandra's research is primarily conducted on written English language publications such as cookery books and ephemera. As the language of the texts studied has changed over the centuries, there are instances where it is unclear what a recipe is calling for, and she frequently uses the *OED*'s historical record of the evolution of a word's form and inflections to help decipher meaning within cookery texts.

The *OED*'s search function enables the researcher to track the evolving spelling and meanings of particular cookery terms through time. After gathering this information, she is able to increase her understanding of the recipe in question by comparing other uses of particular words in it, in all their spelling variations.

One example was the evolution of the use of the word *mangoe*, which the *OED* showed to have historically meant *a pickle resembling that made of green mangoes*. This was significant as it cited a documented technical publication of the word occurring within twenty years of its use in a publication containing the recipe being researched, showing that the *OED* definition was applicable to that specific recipe. Understanding if certain cookery-related words were used at different times in history is critical to understand what the word actually meant during that time.

Without the *OED*'s record of word forms, senses, and quotations exemplifying usage, it would be much harder to make the historical linguistic connections needed to understand the histories of domestic technical communication, women's household work, and other topics related to her specialization.

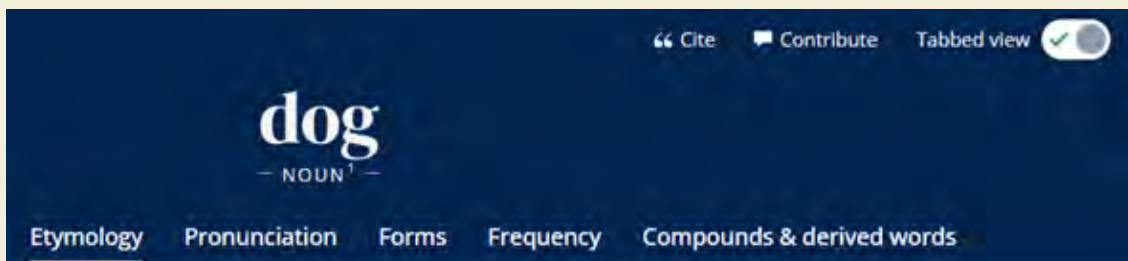
This case study has been truncated but can be read in full at <http://tiny.cc/historical-cookbooks>





Etymological information

Each *OED* entry offers etymological information to enable you to trace a word's origins, exploring both word forms and meanings. Click on the 'Etymology' tab (on a tabbed view) or on the link on the left-hand side navigation to view the etymological information about a word, and click any hyperlinked words to navigate to related entries.



A sense or lemma within the entry page may occasionally have its own etymology (shown in square brackets), if it has a history that is in part separate from that of the main entry.

Here's what makes the etymological information in the *OED* stand out:

- extensive coverage (more words, more etymologies, even of obsolete words, specialist terms, and regional varieties, and even more added every quarter)
- etymologies are very granular, giving the full life story of the word. No other English dictionary does this.
- *OED* etymologies are written by a team of specialists using the best resources and most up-to-date scholarly research
- built from scratch using data we have collected, then systematically and consistently structured and tagged
- accurate and up-to-date



“When I saw the OED’s new interface, I predicted that students would really like it. So far, that is true. I get comments like ‘The OED is more elegant in structure [than the American Heritage Dictionary].’ It is substantially more organized, and it is structured in a way that is easy for someone to study it. The structure and organization of the OED is just neater. I’m still getting good feedback from students.”

Beth Rapp Young, Ph.D

Associate Professor; Department of English;
University of Central Florida



"Before this class, I was using dictionary.com or Merriam-Webster's. However, after this class, I am definitely leaning towards the OED. The interface is very useful and there is so much good information there, too! I truly think the interface is quite intuitive and any questions that may arise are already answered in the hyperlinks on their information page, which is always accessible."

Ariana Arzon

Student from the History of English class for B.A. in
English, University of Central Florida

Pronunciation and audio files

The *OED* gives pronunciations for English as spoken in Britain and the United States for non-obsolete headwords throughout the text. For words associated with other parts of the English-speaking world, we also give pronunciations in the relevant World English. Our transcriptions use the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (also known as IPA), and we also offer human-voice audio files.

James Murray, the *OED*'s first editor, viewed transcriptions and transcribed pronunciations as essential, as they sought to represent 'the actual living form or forms of a word, that is, the word itself, of which the current spelling is only a symbolization'.

In giving pronunciations, the *OED* reflects how language is first and foremost spoken (rather than only how it is spelled), and is representative of modern users of each word.

Some words are pronounced in more than one way—variants can be about a vowel sound, a consonant sound, placement of stress, and other possibilities. The *OED* reflects variation where more than one pronunciation is current or sufficiently widespread.

The *OED*'s ability to gather pronunciation evidence from spoken language has been transformed by the increasing online availability of video and audio from around the English-speaking world. Subtitles and captions make this material more searchable and therefore more useful.



Case study: using pronunciation information to facilitate language acquisition of Arabic-speakers

Mr Joy Arulappan is a lecturer at the English Language Center, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Al Musannah, Oman

It all commenced with the mid-semester exam results of my group of 27 students who were in the process of completing the Level-4 (CEFR – B2) general foundation English program. My own group's result was well below the average—the first time in my teaching career that I had such a result. It prompted me to look into the possible factors that might have contributed to the unusual result.

My students' issues were not only limited to the difficulty in identifying the graphemes and their corresponding phonemes of English language but also due to their L1 (Arabic). The Arabic language differs a great deal with English in phonology, lithography, morphology, and syntax. There is a considerable difference of about 16 sounds between the Arabic and English languages which cause obstacles to students. For example, phonemes like /p/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ʃ/, /ŋ/, and /v/ do not exist in the Arabic language, hence students read pat /pæt/ as bat /bæt/ resulting in more confusion which is often noticed in their writing, listening and speaking practices.

I began to focus on English graphemes and their representative sound combinations while teaching the target vocabulary with the aid of *OED's* pronunciation, which clearly divides the words in their morphemes and phonemes. Students tried to learn their spelling and pronunciation which included listening mostly to the British English sounds. This exercise enabled them to meaningfully decipher even abstract nouns.

The *OED* thus played a remarkable role in the active development of vocabulary and phonemes. The pass rate of my group in the end-of-semester exam went up from 22% to 52% and there was a 64% pass rate in the reading test, as compared to the 44.4% in the mid-semester exam.

Considering the short period of the remedial measures, the results were quite encouraging, and workshops were organized as part of the staff development program for the English Language Center (ELC) faculty to apply literacy strategies making use of the resources offered by *OED* and other platforms.

This case study has been truncated but can be read in full at <http://tinyurl.com/literacy-language-acquisition>





The *OED* World English Programme

World Englishes is a term referring to localized or indigenized varieties of English spoken throughout the world by people of diverse cultural backgrounds in a wide range of sociolinguistic contexts.

One of the main goals in the lead up to the centenary of *OED*'s first edition in 2028 is widening the geographical coverage of the dictionary.

Giving proportionate and balanced treatment to words from all over the English-speaking world is an enormous challenge, but it is one that the editors of the *OED* have the ability to take on, as we now have access to a wealth of information that was unavailable to editors of previous editions:

- The Internet enables us to instantly consult databases, newspapers, journals, and books from across the globe, as well as a number of dictionaries and grammars of specific varieties of English.
- Various forms of social media have also given us a view into current, informal, idiosyncratic uses of words from many different places, and even allow us to reach out to people who speak varieties of English to ask them about the words that characterize their local speech.
- We are also aided by contributions from members of the public, and specialist advice from an international network of consultants.



Case study: Making use of World English information in teaching International Relations

Prof Cristiana Pugliese is an associate professor of English at LUMSA University, Rome.

I use the *OED* in all my courses. The *OED* is of great help in tracing the etymology of words, and an indispensable tool to illustrate the different types of semantic change. I think that the historical dictionary and thesaurus make the *OED* a unique tool for teaching the history of English. **It is also the only dictionary that includes words from the anglophone world as a whole and not only from the British and North American varieties.**

My postgraduate course in World Englishes is part of a degree course in International Relations. This course looks at the general classifications of World Englishes and the main features of some varieties. Students are given samples of these varieties – for example songs, or articles from local newspapers – and are asked to examine their main features. We use the *OED* to look at individual words in selected varieties of English, their pronunciations, and meanings. We also use the available resources on the *OED* World Englishes Hub.

I'd like to add a general comment that goes beyond the *OED*'s practical uses in the classroom. Many people, whether native speakers of English or students of English, strongly believe in the existence of one 'correct' variety of English. In Italy, people in general and students in particular, show a reverence towards British English. They see it as the only and true English and a model to imitate.

During my classes I make an effort to fight their prejudices pointing out that there are many standard and regional varieties around the world. It is very important for me to have the 'support' of the *OED* on this matter. They may not trust me, but they certainly trust the *OED* when I show them that there are so many standard spellings and pronunciations in the dictionary and also many varieties of English included.



This case study has been truncated but can be read in full at <http://tinyurl.com/oed-modern-languages>

The Historical Thesaurus of the *OED* (*HTOED*)

The *HTOED* is a diachronic thesaurus, which provides not just synonyms of a particular word, but synonyms over time, arranged chronologically. It also provides taxonomic classifications, with words placed into categories, which are arranged in a structured hierarchy. The *HTOED* is much more than a synonym dictionary – rather, it's a semantic classification of the language and provides a semantic index to the contents of the *OED*.

It is a rich resource for looking at how people have spoken about things, places, people or concepts throughout the 1000+ years of language development charted by the *OED*.

There are four ways to browse the *HTOED*:

1. from the footer of the *OED* homepage, which will take you to the *HTOED* homepage, where you can see the structured categories
2. use the search box to look up words on the *HTOED*
3. access the *HTOED* from the list of results when you perform an *OED* search
4. access the *HTOED* directly from any *OED* entry which has a Thesaurus link

“Work involved literally chunking up the Oxford English Dictionary, sometimes ripping volumes into sections which could be distributed amongst staff and students. Initially, each person engaged on the Historical Thesaurus project was to work their way through pages of the dictionary, transferring word senses one-by-one onto individual index cards...”

Dr Fraser Dallachy

Lecturer, English Language & Linguistics, University of Glasgow, on the origins of the *HTOED*

Originally produced through extensive work at the University of Glasgow, today the *HTOED* is maintained through a close working relationship between the *OED* and the Glasgow teams.



The *OED* Researchers Advisory Group

The *OED Researchers Advisory Group* is a community of scholars providing feedback on new *OED* products, tools, and features.

Researchers involved with the group have the opportunity to share their research priorities directly with our development team, trial new *OED* functionalities and give constructive feedback on their use, and test newly developed tools for accessing *OED* data in their own research fields before they are made available to the wider research community.

Request to join the group for free at oed-group.oxfordlanguages.com/
(all requests are reviewed by the team)



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