Lexiculture: Inquiries on Words

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The Lexiculture Papers comprise student scholarship in linguistics and anthropology, bearing on the relationship between words and the social milieus in which they are coined, used, and transformed. In choosing a neologism for this concept and for this project, I am consciously rejecting other terms, some of great antiquity (etymology, lexicography) and some of great recency (culturomics). Lexiculture aims to carve out a distinct interdisciplinary space, using concepts from sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, to study the ‘culture of words’ from a perspective accessible to lay readers and scholarly audiences alike.

This project had its inception in 2010. As a professor of linguistic anthropology at Wayne State University, I teach a course each year entitled Language and Culture, which is required for all our undergraduate anthropology majors. Many of these students come into the class with a vague interest in language, but also significant trepidation or even loathing at the sound of words like grammar and linguistics. Moreover, while some of my students have some knowledge of other languages, many of them do not, leaving English as the chief touchstone through which I can frame key concepts in the field. I developed a pilot project on the word chairperson (Chrisomalis 2010) followed by an experimental student project in my 2010 course, before putting it into full practice in the 2013 version of my course (Chrisomalis 2013).

The term lexiculture is not entirely of my own invention; after coining it, I discovered that Robert Galisson had originated it (in French) in 1988 and used it in several publications thereafter, in much the same sense that I am using it (Galisson 1988, 1999). The common point of interest in our approaches is that words are seen as discrete, analyzable aspects of cultural facts, and thus ways of understanding social change. However, to my knowledge, it has not percolated into the English-language scholarship to date.
Of course, neither Galisson nor I are the first to reflect on the importance of individual words and their meanings for understanding social life. Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* (1976) is perhaps best-known and widest-cited of these, seeking to demonstrate complex interrelations and semantic shifts in the basic vocabulary of the humanities and social sciences. Wierzbicka (1997) takes a cross-cultural, cognitive and linguistic approach to similar sorts of issues in her *Understanding cultures through their key words* and other publications. These have the advantage of a substantial scholarly apparatus, and enjoy their well-deserved reputations. But for the student just taking the first steps into research of any kind, what they lack is a means to the joy of discovery in the social sciences of language, of collecting data on new words, transformed words, and just plain weird words, and deriving a scholarly analysis.

My own (perceived) inability to convey to my students the joy of conducting their own linguistic research proved to be the major impetus for the Lexiculture project. In a field like archaeology, my departmental colleagues introduce students to research through work on large, collaborative field and laboratory projects in which they can develop their skills over time. In contrast, linguistic research is frequently seen as the purview of the ‘lone wolf’ and to require a steep learning curve, before which nothing serious can be accomplished. I became convinced that yet another class full of rote and rigor was hardly a blueprint for student success.

Given the wealth of tools available today, my entry into linguistic research for my students is through individual words, their histories, and their transformations. It is probably the case that I could not have done this project five or ten years ago because so many of the tools at our disposal online did not exist then. Linguistic corpora (such as COCA and COHA) and tools for massive textual analysis (most notably the Google Ngram Viewer) stand out among these, of course. But even having regular access to the online searchable Oxford English Dictionary makes a huge difference for students who may come into the class thinking of ‘the dictionary’ as an abstract tome containing ‘the language’. Using Elizabeth Knowles’ (2010) *How to Read a Word* as a core text, I aimed to get students first and foremost to think about words as aspects of social life, and only secondarily as subjects of quantitative research. Beyond specifically linguistic tools, I wanted to encourage students to look at how the words they were researching intersected with social and historical trends at particular times, and how they changed over time.

There are certainly parallels between lexiculture and the work done by proponents of *culturomics*, the quantitative analyses of texts, which is a sort of branch of corpus linguistics using data compiled by Google (Michel et al. 2011). *Culturomics*, and the Google Ngram viewer that is its primary public analytical tool, is important, and as you will see in the papers collected here, most of my students make use of Ngrams or other related tools of analysis. I share the conviction of the folks at the Culturomics project that “quantitative methods can be a great source of ideas that can then be explored further by studying primary texts.” (culturomics.org) But the question is, how ought one to do that? What works well and what doesn’t? Rather than get into the (by now rather extensive) scholarly
debate over whether these tools have any value (they clearly do), lexiculture seeks to actually use this approach in tandem with innovative theoretical and methodological approaches from the language and human sciences.

I developed the concept of lexiculture as a way of making the linguistic joys of lexicography and etymology intersect with the intellectual interests of my students in the social sciences. To be sure, an etymological puzzle can be amazingly fun, but antedating is not a substitute for analysis. Because I am a linguistic anthropologist (and not, principally, a dialectologist or a corpus linguist or a historical linguist, any of whose skills could be applied here), my particular focus is to get junior scholars (and, indeed, senior scholars!) thinking about the language-culture intersection in new and productive ways. I want to get them to think about new words not as individual inventions, but through their adoption into speech communities, through their transmission at particular historical moments, and through their transformations within social contexts.

The papers in this project constitute detailed individual student work conducted in the span of a one-semester intermediate-division undergraduate course of around 30 students. None of the students had extensive background in linguistics or linguistic anthropology prior to taking the course. Students chose words from a long (~100 items) list that I developed on the basis of their potential interest, or, if they wished, they could make a formal written proposal to analyze another word. The words on my list were single English words or two-word phrases that I felt might be of interest, and had their primary area of historical interest between roughly 1800 and the present. This time delimitation is necessary, in part, because the datasets that are freely available to students largely cover this period, and in part because of the more specialized knowledge that would be required to cover more distant periods (or, for that matter, non-English words). Of the 30 submitted projects, 12 were invited for submission to the project, of which the eight published here were submitted by the student authors.

It is my hope and expectation that, given the high quality of the submitted papers and the positive student response to the project, volume 2 of the Lexiculture Papers will be published here online in March 2015 or earlier based on next year’s class.

Sources

This is the list of sources given to Language and Culture students at the initiation of the project, and forms a wide potential range of materials useful for any particular lexicultural project. Some of these are accessible only through university library subscription, while others are more generally available. All of these links were active as of March 2014.

*Oxford English Dictionary
http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl
Comprehensive English dictionary with historical information
Online Etymology Dictionary
http://www.etymonline.com/
Comprehensive English dictionary of word origins and histories

Google Books
Books, any language, 1500 – present

Google NGram Viewer
http://books.google.com/ngrams
Word frequencies, English and other languages, reliable for 1800 - 2000

Google Scholar
http://scholar.google.com/advanced_scholar_search
Journal articles, any language, 1900 - present

Google News Archive
http://news.google.com/archivesearch
Newspaper articles, mostly American English, 1850 - present

Google Groups
http://groups.google.com/advanced_search
Usenet newsgroups, 1985 - present

Library of Congress – Chronicling America
http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov
American newspaper articles, 1836-1922

*Proquest Newspapers / Proquest Historical Newspapers
http://elibrary.wayne.edu/record=e1000733~S47
Newspaper articles and other sources, 1740 - present

*LexisNexis Academic
http://elibrary.wayne.edu/record=e1000033~S47
Articles, essays, newspapers, 1980 – present

COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English)
http://www.americancorpus.org/
400 million words in American English, various, 1990 – 2012

COHA (Corpus of Historical American English)
http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/
400 million words in American English, various, 1810 - 2009
References


Williams, Raymond. (1976). Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society. New York: Oxford University Press.