

Working out the Interest: Williams, Empson and Jane Austen

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1. Williams and Empson

In the introduction to the section *Four Ways of Looking at a Keyword*, in *CQ* 49.1, Alan Durant and I alluded to coincidences and clashes between Raymond Williams's conception of a "keyword" and William Empson's of a "complex word".¹ In this paper I want to focus on a case-study in the language of Jane Austen that will, I hope, throw light on some of the issues at stake between them and on the implications for any proposed continuation of Williams's project.

My starting-point is Williams's 1976 entry on *interest*, which he introduces as a particularly "significant" example of a keyword that has developed general meanings out of originally "specialized legal and economic senses". The specialised senses he has in mind are firstly the medieval sense, "which ranged from compensation for loss to a transitive use for investment with a right or share", and secondly the "modern financial sense", which developed in the sixteenth century "when the laws affecting moneylending were revised, that is, when usury became institutionalised (one hesitates to say 'regulated') as one of the bastions of capitalism and *interest* gained the meaning "money paid for money lent".²

What, Williams asks, is the relationship between these senses and the historically later uses of *interest* to mean "curiosity or attention" and *interesting* to mean "having the power to attract curiosity or attention"? These subjective senses (and, in the case of *interesting*, the word-form itself) start to be attested in the eighteenth century and have become predominant in modern conversational usage; but the process of their development proves, Williams finds, "exceptionally difficult to trace". Nonetheless, he concludes,

[i]t remains significant that our most general word for attraction or involvement should have developed from a formal objective term in property and finance... More significant, perhaps, is the extension and projection of this power to concern or attract attention and

¹ *Critical Quarterly*, 49:1 (2007), 4.

² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), 143-4.

curiosity, when we say that people, things or events are **interesting**. The question is whether this sense of an object generating such **interest** is related to the active sense of **interest** - of money generating money... It seems probable that this now central word for attention, attraction and concern is saturated with the experience of a society based on money relationships.³

Here, in one of the more starkly Marxist analyses of the *Keywords* collection, Williams posits a base structure of economics underlying a superstructure of feelings, whose validity is relativized (or even more radically put in question) by tracing the language of their articulation back to its roots. It's an analysis that Empson, in his 1977 review of *Keywords*, vigorously contested.

Empson's challenge is both ideological and methodological. Ideologically, of course, Empson was opposed to *any* programmatic ideology; his objections to Williams's Marxist analysis of *interest* are prefigured by a strikingly similar attack, made over twenty years earlier, on Archbishop Trench's theologically-inspired analysis of *pain*. Trench, like Williams, suggests that the modern subjective word is saturated with its objective origins as legal term:

there is a deeper feeling in the heart of man, bearing witness to something very different from this shallow explanation of pain in the present economy of the world – namely, that it is the correlative of sin, that is *punishment*; and to this the word 'pain', which there can be no reasonable doubt is derived from 'poena', bears continual witness. Pain *is* punishment; so does the word itself, no less than the conscience of everyone that is suffering it, continually declare.⁴

Empson gives as short shrift to Trench as to Williams, characterising both as propagandist readings of the data. But he also rejects the etymological method which they share and which sanctions their readings of past meanings into present uses. In 1951, he rounds off his scarification of Trench with this reflection:

The machinery of change of meaning, an important and interesting subject, has I think rather little influence on the equations between the meanings once achieved.⁵

His 1977 response to Williams makes the same point more briskly and more categorically:

³ Williams, *Keywords*, 144.

⁴ Richard Chenevix Trench, *The Study of Words* (London: Parker & Son, 1851), 37. Quoted in William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), 81-2.

⁵ Empson, *Complex Words*, 82

We would often *like* an influence from past uses to survive in a word, when it plainly doesn't.⁶

The methodological similarity between Williams and Trench is not accidental and is rather less surprising than might at first appear from the ideological gulf that divides them. Trench, as Empson points out, was the “father of the great NED” [now OED]; Williams, as he himself points out, was deeply indebted to the OED for the empirical basis of *Keywords*; and the OED, as one of the great monuments to the historical turn in nineteenth-century linguistics, gave primacy to etymology in its explanation of meaning.

2. Dr Murray and Dr Johnson

When the most famous of the OED's editors, James Murray, looked back on “the evolution of English Lexicography” in the Romanes lecture of 1900, he used the occasion to celebrate “the scientific and historical spirit of the nineteenth century [which] has at once called for and rendered possible the Oxford English Dictionary”.⁷ He locates the turning-point specifically in 1857, when Dr Trench “read two papers before the Philological Society in London *On some Deficiencies in existing English Dictionaries*” and “pointed out that for the *history* of words and families of words, and for the changes of form and sense which words had historically passed through, they gave hardly any help whatever”. Trench's papers planted the seed of “the idea that the Dictionary should be a biography of every word” and Murray prided the OED (and himself) on having brought that seed to fruition:

[The OED] seeks not merely to record every word that has been used in the language for the last 800 years... but to furnish a biography of each word, giving as nearly as possible the date of its birth or first known appearance... and the successive changes of form and developments of sense which it has since undergone.

What the founding fathers of the OED share with other exponents of the historical turn in nineteenth-century linguistic thought is a fondness for biological metaphors (borrowed variously from organicist philosophy and Darwinian science). In the phrases already quoted from Murray, for

⁶ William Empson, 1977 review of *Keywords*, first published in *New York Review of Books*, 27 October 1977, reprinted in *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. John Haffenden (London: The Hogarth Press, 1988), 185.

⁷ James A.H. Murray, *The Evolution of English Lexicography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 51. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from pp. 45, 50, 47.

instance, we find that dictionaries have “evolutions” and words have “families” and individual “biographies” (including a birth date). One effect of this style of thinking is to foster a propensity to see a word as a single coherent unit, with its identity established at birth and its later developments as “growth” or “branching”. As a result, there is a common tendency among those practising the etymological method in semantics to use one or more of the following, either as explicit forms of argument or as the unscrutinised presuppositions of their arguments:

- 1) a preference for story-lines about single 'organic' lines of development;
- 2) an attachment to the “original” (i.e. the earliest attested) meaning as the most correct or basic;
- 3) an assumption that the earliest meanings will be concrete rather than abstract, objective rather than subjective.

At their most extreme, these tendencies coalesce into the full-blown etymological fallacy as practised by Trench (under the influence of the Romantic philology of Horne Tooke); but, in their more attenuated forms, they remain unacknowledged but potent influences on the semantic analyses of later scholars who inherit them along with the materials supplied by Trench's brain-child, the OED. Williams's analysis of *interest* shows their shaping influence, and it can be detected in more recent OED-based work conducted within apparently very different paradigms.⁸

There are, however, alternative ways of looking at semantic relatedness in the structure of polysemous words, exemplified most notably in the general-universal philosophy of language that preceded nineteenth-century historicism and in the structuralist paradigm that succeeded it. The concrete>abstract generalisation is, for instance, rejected as a manifestation of “an obsolete philosophy” in Benveniste's 1954 paper on “semantic problems in reconstruction”, which prefers an account in which an abstract general sense precedes and underpins its specific realisations in different local and concrete contexts.⁹ Benveniste's preference is echoed (or prefigured) in the semantic methods of Dr Johnson, who, like his contemporary James Harris, was the inheritor of the eighteenth-century version of universal rational grammar which nineteenth-century historicism displaced. The difference this makes in semantic description can be seen by setting Johnson's entry for *interest* alongside the etymological entry of Onions “the last of the editors of the original Oxford

⁸ See, for instance, the emphasis on “semantic persistence” and on “the tendency” of meanings to shift from “non-subjective to subjective” in Elizabeth C. Traugott and Richard B. Dasher, *Regularity in Semantic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 280-1.

⁹ First published in *Word*, 1954, Benveniste's paper, “Problèmes sémantiques de la reconstruction” is reprinted in *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale, 1* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 289-307. For his reference to “une philosophie désuète”, see p. 298.

English Dictionary and for many years the doyen unquestioned of English lexicography”¹⁰.

Johnson's entry for *interest* (1755):

Interest (interest, Latin; interet, French)

1. Concern; advantage; good
2. Influence over others
3. Share; part in anything; participation: as, this is a matter in which we have interest.
4. Regard to private profit.
5. Money paid for use; usury
6. Any surplus of advantage.

Onions's entry for *interest* (1966):

A.

1. (legal) concern or right *in xv*;
2. advantageous or detrimental relation *xvi*;
3. matter in which persons are concerned *xvii*;
4. feeling of one concerned *xviii*

B.

injury, damages; money paid for use of money lent *xvi*¹¹

Onions's entry -- the etymological skeleton of the larger OED entry -- schematises the historical account given by Williams, in which a specific legal sense (A1) first generalises (A2) then personalises (A3) and finally subjectivises (A4) (though it's worth noting that, unlike Williams, Onions takes the modern monetary sense of sixteenth-century capitalism as a distinct re-formation (sense B), standing apart from this objective>subjective trajectory). Johnson's entry employs a quite different method, beginning with a general abstract sense (1), followed by specific applications/instantiations in contemporary synchronic usage. The difference in method correlates with a difference in scope, that is, in the set of senses they recognise. Onions does not include Johnson's senses 2 or 4 (both very common in the eighteenth century), perhaps because they don't fit very easily into the unified evolutionary narrative of A1-4. On the other hand, Johnson's map of the

¹⁰ C. T. Onions with G. W. S. Friedrichsen & R. W. Burchfield (eds) *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), v.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 480 (sense numberings have been added).

sense-field of *interest* contains nothing corresponding to Onions's A1 or A4. If the omission of A1 suggests that the original legal sense of *interest* had become obsolete by 1755 (or inert in the consciousness of an eighteenth-century speaker), the omission of A4 might imply that the subjective/affective sense had not yet emerged. For Johnson, at least, it would appear, interest is something that can be exerted or pursued, paid or received, but not something that can be felt.

Johnson does, on the other hand, supply clear evidence of the emergence of the affective adjective *interesting*. It is not to be found, however, under the headword *interest n.* Unlike Williams, he distinguishes *interest* as noun from *interest* as verb, and it is in the entry for the latter that we find both the affective sense and, in the authorial illustration, the adjective *interesting* itself:

To Interest/ Interest. (interesser, French) To concern; to affect; to give share in.

To Interest. To affect; to move; to touch with passion; to gain the affections: as, this is an interesting story

There are a number of differences here from Williams's account. Not only does Johnson derive *interesting* from the verb rather than the noun, but he derives noun and verb from different foreign originals, tracing the noun back to “interest Latin, interet French” and the verb to “interesser, French”. This allows us to envisage something different from Williams's organic growth model, which assumes a single line of descent incorporating both forms. We could, for instance, posit a history consisting of two distinct borrowings from French into English: the noun arriving as part of the Early Middle English acquisition of French legal terminology relating to feudal property-owning, the verb arriving as part of the large-scale post-Restoration importation of French vocabulary of sociability and sensibility. The affective sense might then reflect a particular moment in a quite separate evolution of the etymological “original” in another language and cultural context.¹²

The history of *interest* in French, let alone the story of the interaction between the two languages, is too large and complex a story to attempt here. But there is support for the specific French connection I'm hypothesising for *interesting* in an entry in Boyer's French-English dictionary of 1699. *The Royal Dictionary* was then the largest bilingual dictionary of the two languages and became the standard reference-work for most of the eighteenth century. Johnson could be expected to know it and there is evidence of that knowledge in the striking likeness

¹² Williams does note the importance and the problematics of the interaction between languages, though he is primarily concerned with the case of ideologically-loaded terms, such as *alienation*. See Williams, *Keywords*, 17-18.

between his entry for the verb *interest* and Boyer's entry for *interessier*:¹³

Boyer's *Dictionary* (1699)

interessier (*émouvoir, toucher de quelque passion*) to cause a concern, to move, to affect, to interest. (*Cette Tragedie interesse tous les spectateurs*, that Tragedy causes a concern in all the Audience, or affects the whole Audience)

Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755)

To Interest. To affect; to move; to touch with passion; to gain the affections: as, this is an *interesting* story

Not only does Johnson's entry echo “to affect” and directly translate “*émouvoir, toucher de quelque passion*”, but his illustrative example resembles Boyer's too. Both locate affective-interest in the context of the impact of a literary work on its audience (though Boyer, reflecting the literary priorities of the late-seventeenth century, assigns the affecting role to stage tragedy, while Johnson, responding to the mid-eighteenth-century rise of the novel, substitutes “story”).

The fact that Johnson uses his own phraseology to illustrate *interesting* (rather than following his normal practice of supplying a quotation from one of the “best authors”) invites the further inference that the form/meaning of *interesting* had the status of colloquial rather than standard usage in 1755 (and indeed the earliest OED attestation for *interesting* in the sense of 'affecting' is 13 years later, with Sterne's 1768 use of the word in *A Sentimental Journey*, the work that did so much to institutionalise the cult of sensibility and another of its keywords, *sentimental*).

What have we learned from this excursion into comparative lexicography? One conclusion to be drawn – or hypothesis to be tested – is that, as regards both their etymology and their place in the consciousness of eighteenth-century English speakers, *interesting* as affective adjective and *interest* as economic noun may have distinct and distinctive “biographies”. More radically, their diachronic relation may be quite other than Williams supposes: the affective adjective may have preceded (and perhaps even sponsored) the emergence of an affective sense in the noun.¹⁴ The historical record is, at any rate, complex or cloudy enough to warrant Empson's claim that the onus is on Williams to demonstrate the affective/cash nexus that he has proposed, in particular to provide support for his conclusion that: “this now central word for attention, attraction and concern is

¹³ The similarities suggest that Johnson was familiar with the two-volume edition of 1699, since this entry was omitted from Boyer's abridged edition of 1700.

¹⁴ The OED offers the suggestion that the affective sense of the noun may be a “back-formation” from the past participle *interested*, but - exemplifying its preference for the “biographical” principle - it ignores the possibility of a secondary interference from French.

saturated with the experience of a society based on money relationships”.

3. Dr Johnson and Jane Austen

When Empson challenges Williams to demonstrate the interaction of economic and affective senses in *interest/interesting*, he gives an example of what he himself would regard as good evidence in such a case:

Jane Austen was relentless in making phrases for her ladies such as 'found herself obliged to be attached' (to a barely rich enough man); she would be bound to use the pun on interest if it had not felt too remote... A pun of this sort can only impose doctrine upon us if both meanings arise naturally in one context, with a standard interpretation, perhaps: 'Everyone knows, in such a case, that the more sordid procedure is the correct one.' The book needed to give an example of it...¹⁵

The example of Jane Austen's “punning” that Empson offers is germane to the question of an economic/affective interface and indeed is thoroughly Marxist in its implications. It comes from the first page of *Mansfield Park*, a book which implicitly exposes the economic foundation of late-eighteenth-century polite society (the security of Mansfield Park and its humane values depends, we learn, on the success of its owner's West Indian plantations) and explicitly raises the question of the economic foundation of eighteenth-century marriage customs. The novel begins with an extended account of the marriage fortunes (in both senses) of the three Misses Ward and there is no reason to doubt that Empson is correct in thinking that Austen here exposes the economic base (and the base economics) underlying and undercutting the language of feeling and sentiment. Miss Maria Ward marries a good income and is happy ever after; Miss Frances Ward marries a poor lieutenant and is miserable ever after. The third Miss Ward, unable to imitate the one and unwilling to imitate the other, is “obliged to be attached” to a country clergyman. Both participles in the phrase are double-valued and double-edged. In the vocabulary of social sentiment, Miss Ward is obliged = 'gratified' (as in the social formula “vastly obleegee”), just as, in a vocabulary of socio-economics, she is obliged = 'necessitated/compelled', to become “attached” to Mr Norris (which we may construe in affective terms as attached= 'enamoured', or in legal terms as attached = 'tied up, bound by contract'). The phrase as a whole offers its reader choices of interpretation about Miss Ward's motives for marrying Mr Norris – and everything we see of Mrs Norris in the subsequent course of

¹⁵ Empson, *Argufying*, 185.

the novel confirms Empson's hypothesis that, in this case at least, “the more sordid” interpretation is the correct one.

It's a fair challenge, then, for Empson to ask Williams to demonstrate the financial “saturation” of *interest/interesting* by a similar pun, but it's a challenge that in 1977 could only have been successfully answered by serendipitous reading and, in the event, Williams did not take it on. However, as we pointed out in *CQ49:1*, the development of electronically searchable corpora of English makes it possible for the modern investigator, as it was not for Williams or Empson (or Johnson or Murray), to chart the rise of a word-form in quantitative terms and also, with the help of a concordancing programme, to locate contexts where the interactions of its different senses can be seen in play (or at war).

Let's then investigate Austen's use of *interest/interesting*, both in the micro-context of specific instances in her novels and in the macro-context of contemporary usage as represented in ARCHER (A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers).¹⁶ The table below displays the comparative frequency with which the two items appear in ARCHER and in Austen (expressed in terms of instances per 1000 words of text).

corpus	no. of words in corpus	interest	interesting
ARCHER (1750-1800)	178,044	0.14	0.05
Austen	882,690	0.26	0.13
Letters	151,208	0.14	0.13
N.Abbey	78,518	0.28	0.11
Sense & S	121,294	0.35	0.12
Pride & P	123,971	0.20	0.11
Mansfield P	161,970	0.30	0.09
Emma	161,185	0.23	0.19
Persuasion	84,544	0.42	0.14

As reference corpus, I've selected the portion of ARCHER that represents the usage of Austen's older contemporaries, the language she would have grown up hearing (or at least reading). The first comparison in the table shows that, taking all her writings together, Austen uses *interest* roughly twice as often and *interesting* more than twice as often. Using only her letters as target corpus, we

¹⁶ For an introduction to ARCHER, see Douglas Biber et al, “The design and analysis of the ARCHER Corpus”, in *Corpora across the Centuries*, ed. M. Kyto, M. Rissanen and S. Wright (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

find that the frequency of *interest* is identical to that of the reference corpus (0.14 per 1000 words), while the frequency of *interesting* is still twice as high. Turning to the individual novels reveals that *Emma* stands out for its high usage of *interesting* while *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* lead the way in instances of *interest*. These numerical discrepancies point the way to a number of localised qualitative enquiries and I'll return later to the cases of *interesting* in *Emma* and *interest* in *Sense and Sensibility*. But I'll start by looking at *Northanger Abbey*.

Quantitatively, *Northanger Abbey* is not exceptional among the Austen corpus in its usage of either word, but it invites qualitative examination because it is a work in which Austen comments explicitly on the language and literature of sensibility. For example, she uses an exchange between her heroine, Catherine Morland, and Henry Tilney to comment on the rise of the intensifier *amazingly* and the semantic shift of *nice* from descriptive to affective adjective. The discussion of *nice* is particularly relevant here:

'But now, really, do you not think *Udolpho* the nicest book in the world?'

'The nicest; by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding.'

'Henry', said Miss Tilney, 'you are very impertinent. Miss Morland, he is treating you exactly as he does his sister. He is for ever finding fault with me for some incorrectness of language, and now he is taking the same liberty with you. The word "nicest" as you used it, did not suit him; and you had better change it as soon as you can, or we shall be overpowered with Johnson and Blair all the rest of the way.'¹⁷

And, sure enough, Henry offers a definition, evidently derived from Johnson's Dictionary, of the early-eighteenth-century descriptive meaning, before commenting on the later emergence of the subjective/affective meaning that has now become overwhelmingly its dominant sense:

Originally, perhaps, it was applied only to express neatness, propriety, delicacy, or refinement; people were nice in their dress, in their sentiments, or their choice. But now every commendation on every subject is comprised in that one word.

The context (and implied cause) of this shift is the language of women and the language of the literature of sensibility, sentiment and sensation: Catherine is the user of the new 'incorrect' sense and she is speaking of her response to that classic of Gothic fiction, the *Mysteries of Udolpho*,

¹⁷ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* (London: John Murray, 1818), 252-3. Subsequent quotations from this novel are from pp. 254, 93-4, 250-1, 254-5, 117, 182.

which has displaced Johnson and Blair in her reading curriculum.

The adjective *interesting* shares these contexts. It appears when Catherine again tries to commend *Udolpho* to a male reader (in this case John Thorpe, a character peculiarly immune to the claims of sensibility, whether in novels or in life)

'[Novels] are the stupidest things in creation.'

'I think you must like *Udolpho*, if you were to read it; it is so very **[[interesting]]**.'

It appears again when Henry Tilney stakes his claim to be a man of feeling by adopting (with ironical reservations) Catherine's literary tastes and her vocabulary:

The Mysteries of Udolpho, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again; I remember finishing it in two days, my hair standing on end the whole time... Here was I, in my eagerness to get on, refusing to wait only five minutes for my sister; breaking the promise I had made of reading it aloud, and keeping her in suspense at a most **[[interesting]]** part, by running away with the volume

And it is used by Eleanor Tilney, mediating between the enthusiasm of Catherine and the implied immunity of men (as represented by Henry) to excess of feeling and slipshod diction. (Note, however, how the distancing “that kind of reading” puts limits on the alliance of taste announced in the sisterly “we”.)

Come, Miss Morland, let us leave him to meditate over our faults in the utmost propriety of diction, while we praise *Udolpho* in whatever terms we like best. It is a most **[[interesting]]** work. You are fond of that kind of reading?

In all three of these examples, *interesting* advertises its membership of the lexicon of enthusiastic feeling by collocating with an intensifier – Catherine's naïve “so very interesting” being reflected and refracted in the Tilneys' cooler tribute “most interesting”.

Interesting appears later in the novel, this time as an index of Catherine's attempts to project the world of *Udolpho* on to the social actualities of Northanger Abbey. Here it marks her disappointment at finding that thrillingly mysterious documents are in fact mundane bills:

Shirts, stockings, cravats and waistcoats faced her in each. Two others, penned by the same hand, marked an expenditure scarcely more **[[interesting]]**, in letters, hair-powder...

In a later misadventure, it's the word Catherine herself resorts to (again with an intensifying *very*) to explain the feeling that has led her to intrude into the private rooms of the dead Mrs Tilney. Henry, startled to find her there, speculates on what “would prompt a visit like yours”:

'Eleanor, I suppose, has talked of her a great deal?' 'Yes, a great deal. That is---no, not much, but what she did say, was very **[[interesting]]**. Her dying so suddenly...

In this instance, the link between the interesting and the sensational is very close: what has made Eleanor's accounts of the late Mrs Tilney “very interesting” to Catherine is the conjecture that she might have been the victim of a Gothic-horror crime.

The contextual evidence from *Northanger Abbey*, then, supports the hypothesis that *interesting* is, for Jane Austen (as for Johnson), predominantly and saliently a subjective adjective, a member of the lexicon of affect, sensibility and enthusiasm. This hypothesis would explain the usage figures for *Emma*, given in the table above. Numerically, *Emma* is the outlier in the Austen canon: it has, to take the most obvious comparison, twice the number of instances of *interesting* found in *Mansfield Park*, the novel closest to it in date and length. It is also the Austen novel where the narrative is most consistently focalised in the consciousness of its heroine and where that heroine is explicitly described as an “imaginist”. Like *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma* is a novel about the dangers of subjective vision, but in this later, more sophisticated, variation on the theme, Austen's use of empathetic narrative allows the terminology of affect to pervade her own authorial diction.

What I haven't found – either in *Emma* or in *Northanger Abbey* – is a clear instance of the use of *interesting* with a financial sense or implication. Subject to correction from further research, the evidence from these two novels suggests that in Austen's idiolect, at least, the adjective is straightforwardly and monosemously part of the vocabulary of affect.

Interest as a noun has a different distribution from *interesting* in Austen's novels, a fact that perhaps in itself points to its having a different sense-range. Among the early novels, *Sense and Sensibility* is the one in which it is numerically most prominent (compare the figures for *Pride and Prejudice*, which is similar in length and similar in numbers for *interesting*). The title of the novel, too, might lead us to expect that any tug between economic and affective meanings in the word would register in the author's consciousness.

What we find, when we turn from the figures to the contexts, is that, unlike Johnson's dictionary, Austen's novel recognises and uses the affective sense. It is particularly associated, in terms of plot-contexts, with the Henry Dashwood family (Elinor, Marianne and their mother) and,

in terms of collocation sets, with the language of feeling. For example, it co-occurs with the word *feelings* itself in the account of Mrs Dashwood's initial response to the romantic figure of Willoughby:

Had he been even old, ugly, and vulgar, the gratitude and kindness of Mrs. Dashwood would have been secured by any act of attention to her child; but the influence of youth, beauty, and elegance, gave an **[[interest]]** to the action which came home to her feelings.¹⁸

Interest is similarly collocated with the vocabulary of feeling in the account of Elinor's (typically more temperate) response to the less romantic figure of Colonel Brandon:

She liked him... she beheld in him an object of **[[interest]]**

And it is this kind of interest that the repentant Willoughby desires to reactivate (using the collocation *feel an interest* that Johnson provided no entry for):

Domestic happiness is out of the question. If, however, I am allowed to think that you and yours feel an **[[interest]]** in my fate and actions... it will be something to live for.

In all these examples, the attribute of affective-interest moves beyond the domain it occupied in the simpler satire of *Northanger Abbey*. In *Sense and Sensibility*, it is associated with the morality of sympathy as well as the effusions of sensibility.

It is this that brings affective-interest into conflict with another, pre-existing sense of the word, Johnson's sense 4, which he defined as “regard to private profit”. Johnson's own illustrative examples suggest that he too regarded private-profit-interest as morally suspect: both quotations in the 1755 *Dictionary* entry personify it as a malevolent agent opposed to principle and honesty.

Wherever *interest* or power thinks fit to interfere, it little imports what principles the opposite parties think fit to charge upon each other *Swift*
'Tis *int'rest* calls off all her sneaking train. *Pope*

But there's a difference as well as a likeness between Austen and Johnson here. Within Johnson's sense-set, what makes private-profit-interest so bad is that it attacks or undermines the philanthropic

¹⁸ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: T. Egerton, 1811), 98. Subsequent quotations from this novel are from pp. 116, 184-5, 2, 30, 243-4, 235, 276, 290, 291-2.

connotations he attaches to sense 1, which his illustrative quotations collocate with “the common good”. Johnson's, that is, is a political morality, in which private-profit-interest is associated with the dangers of faction and corruption in public life. In Austen's lexicon, the entry of affective-interest into the sense-field creates a rather different opposition, located in the domain of private life and personal morality. Where affective-interest is the index of an ability to feel for others, private-profit-interest puts the head before the heart and the self before the other. It is therefore something that members of the Henry Dashwood family are explicitly dissociated from. In situations where their actions could be misinterpreted because, in practical terms, the outcome is potentially one of private profit, Austen explains their motives with particular care, as when the family moves in with their wealthy uncle:

[T]he old Gentleman's days were comfortably spent. His attachment to them all increased. The constant attention of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood to his wishes, which proceeded, not merely from **[[interest]]**, but from goodness of heart...

Or when a potential suitor for Elinor appears:

Some mothers might have encouraged the intimacy from motives of **[[interest]]**, for Edward Ferrars was the eldest son of a man who had died very rich... It was enough [for Mrs Dashwood] that he appeared to be amiable, that he loved her daughter, and that Elinor returned the partiality.

In the novel's plot design, the Henry Dashwoods are contrasted in this respect with Lucy Steele, who is systematically associated with the private-profit sense of *interest*. In the two examples below, the link is made in Elinor's represented thoughts about Lucy (in the first, *interest* collocates with the financial terminology of *manager*, *frugality*, *economical practices*, in the second, the selfishness of this kind of interest is flagged by its collocation with *vanity*):

She... saw in Lucy, the active, contriving manager, uniting at once a desire of smart appearance, with the utmost frugality, and ashamed to be suspected of half her economical practices; - pursuing her own **[[interest]]** in every thought, courting the favour of... every wealthy friend.

She wondered that Lucy's spirits could be so very much elevated by the civility of Mrs. Ferrars; --- that her **[[interest]]** and her vanity should so very much blind...

The same sense appears in Lucy's own represented thought about herself (this time collocated with *material*):

Such an opportunity of being with Edward and his family was, above all things, the most material to her **[[interest]]**

And in the authorial voice of the novel's conclusion, Lucy's final "prosperity" (itself a term compacting financial success and the "happy ever after" ending of fairytale) is announced as the (ironic) moral of the tale, as something to be

held forth as a most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to **self-interest**... will do in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and conscience.

Here, where Austen's allegiance to the claims of conscience requires her to be very clear about its opponents, she resorts to the explicit lexicalisation of the 'pursuing private profit' sense of interest as *self-interest*, which decisively disambiguates the self-orientated activity from the other-orientated feeling.

What does the evidence of *Sense and Sensibility* add up to? On the one hand, it might suggest that, for Jane Austen at least, interest as something to be pursued and interest as something to be felt are quite different entities. Although synchronically coexistent, these senses are semantically incompatible and occur in distinct collocational contexts. On the other hand, the very schematisation of their difference in this novel may point in the opposite direction, indicating an imminent danger of collision or ambiguity. Certainly Austen's choice of the disambiguating *self-interest* in a context where the simple *interest* would have made perfectly good sense to an eighteenth-century reader suggests a degree of worry about how far the affective and self-seeking senses are kept in separate compartments in her readers' minds.

Consider, then, the following use of *interest* in a passage describing how Robert Ferrars visited Lucy Steele with the aim of rescuing his brother Edward from her clutches, only to fall into them himself:

Instead of talking of Edward, they came gradually to talk only of Robert,---a subject on which he had always more to say than on any other, and in which she soon betrayed an **[[interest]]** even equal to his own; and in short, it became speedily evident to both that he

had entirely supplanted his brother. He was proud of his conquest, proud of tricking Edward, and very proud of marrying privately without his mother's consent.

In this case it is not at all easy for the reader to decide which sense of *interest* is intended in the phrase “betrayed an interest”. And the 'feeling for others' v 'self-seeking' alternatives for the noun are matched by the double sense of the verb *betray*, which could mean 'to accidentally reveal' or (in a sense now obsolete but then active) 'to make a public demonstration of'. From Robert's perspective, his own superiority to Edward causes an affect too strong for Lucy to conceal; from Lucy's perspective her self-interest requires her to make a conquest of Robert, which is achieved by a demonstration of fascinated affection.

In other words, I'm proposing this as a case of an Empsonian pun, where separate senses are turned into compacted meanings under the pressure of a specific context. Robert Ferrars, securely endowed with his elder brother's portion of the family wealth, displaces Edward in Lucy's interest. The reader knows by this stage of the novel that Lucy's interest is purely economic; but her success with Robert depends entirely on his belief that it is a matter of feeling. The two perspectives-- incompatible yet complementary as they are--are blended here as expertly as in the complex use of “obliged to be attached” in the case of Mrs Norris.

4. Postscript: Austen and ARCHER

But would Empson have agreed that my last example answers his challenge to Williams? And, if so, would Williams have been content with this outcome?

One rejoinder Empson might make is that the private-profit sense involved in this case is only contingently financial. The more specifically capitalist sense which Williams would like to be active (“the question is whether this sense of an object generating such [affective] interest is related to the active sense of interest - of money generating money”) does occur in *Sense and Sensibility*, but it is comparatively inert. In Austen's novel, as in Johnson's dictionary, it appears in morally neutral contexts, as simply a practical fact of life. I have found no instance of its argumentative interaction with affective-interest, still less of a potential pun between the two that might hint at a compacted doctrine. Arguably, at the period when affectivity emerged as a possible sense for the word *interest*, the “money paid for money lent” sense occupied as separate a compartment in speakers' internal lexicon, as it does in Onions's dictionary entry. (This is not to say that the same is true for late-twentieth century speakers or writers; saliencies in a polysemy change over time, and a close inspection of contexts in a modern novel or journal might well yield the pun that indisputably supports Williams's case.)

But even granted the pun, Williams might not have valued his victory. The Empsonian pun is important to Empson because it supports his view that “cases of literary merit give us a special insight or window into how the mind operates when it uses language, because there the conditions for successful communication become especially definite.”¹⁹ But it's not clear that this is the kind of insight that Williams was after or, consequently, that Empson's methods and evidence are the most relevant to his needs or the most appropriate measures of his success. He said as much when, perhaps stung by Empson's review, he returned to the example of *interest* in *Politics and Letters*, replying to a question about the possibility of writing “a socially explanatory history” of keywords:

Once one has plotted the extraordinary transformations of a word like 'interest', for example, the next step would be to see in which areas of society specific usages of it started... In some cases a very close and differentiated account would be necessary, showing in which group a change of meaning started to occur, and then how and whether it was generalised...²⁰

Where Empson is concerned with meaning as an operation in and of the individual mind, Williams's primary concern is with the social group and its social agency. To fulfil the programme he outlines here, he would have to take some of the pathways I have not gone down in this paper, asking: did *interesting* and/or the affective sense of *interest* first arise among the polite literati? among religious enthusiasts? in women's language? in colloquial discourse and private registers? These are questions that align Williams firmly with modern historical socio-linguists and with the use of ARCHER (or other multi-author corpora) rather than a single author--here, Austen--as data-base. How and how far these corpora can support the kind of close-grained enquiry into sense development and differentiation that the Keywords project also requires... is another interesting story.

¹⁹ Empson, *Complex Words* (3rd edition, 1977), xxvii.

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: Verso Editions, 1981), 177-8.