

## **Raymond Williams's Keywords: investigating meanings 'offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed'**

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When the second edition of Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society was published in 1983, Raymond Williams added notes on a further twenty one words (including 'ecology', 'ethnic', 'liberation', 'regional', 'sex' and 'western') to the original 110 entries of the 1976 first edition. Some of those words, Williams says in his brief 'Preface to the Second Edition', had been re-introduced from the original list he had worked on during the 1950s as a supplement to Culture and Society (1780-1950). Others, he adds, had 'become important in the period between that original list and the present time'<sup>1</sup>. The 1983 edition of Keywords sadly turned out to be the last. With Williams's death in January 1988, the process of revising existing words - and adding extra words, if needed - came to an end. The question therefore remains open whether, more than two decades later, a tranche of extra words would now be needed to reflect the work's original ambitions. Or would the consolidated group of 131 words, having been central (as Williams saw it) to successive formations of cultural thinking over at least the century-and-a-half which forms the time-span of Culture and Society, still be broadly the keywords now, snowballing and redefining senses but not yielding up their work of cultural definition to other terms?

This question would be a practical matter for an editor contemplating a third, updated edition of Keywords. At the same time, it raises once more the theoretical issues - about meaning change and about the relation between vocabulary and conceptualisation - that were Williams's own starting points in collecting notes in folders on his shelf half a century earlier.

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<sup>1</sup> Keywords, p.27. Culture and Society 1780-1950 was published by Chatto and Windus in 1958, nearly twenty years before the first edition of Keywords. All references to Keywords below are to the 2<sup>nd</sup> (1983) edition. In order not to clutter the text, where I quote from a clearly identified entry no page reference is given. Page references are provided, however, for all quotations from the 'Introduction' or other general material in Keywords.

The publication in 2005 of Tony Bennett et al's New Keywords<sup>2</sup> offered one possible answer to both the practical and theoretical questions. The editors of that collection list 142 words, forty one coinciding with Williams's selection but with 101 new entries, including 'alternative', 'celebrity', 'desire', 'queer', and many others that scarcely feature in Williams's writing, extensive though that is. The resulting book is a wide-ranging glossary of contemporary cultural studies. But the overlap with Williams is far from complete. Differences exist not only in the wordlist but also in overall approach, despite the editors' suggestion that 'other modifications we have made to the Keywords model are minor compared with the shift to a collective and more international mode of production'<sup>3</sup>. Downplaying any apparent shift between 'new' and original in their tribute to Williams in their own 'Introduction', Bennett, Grossberg and Morris quietly (and I believe misleadingly) claim the mantle of Williams's original undertaking.<sup>4</sup>

Prompted by likely influence of the Blackwell volume on readers unfamiliar with Williams's work, as well as by unresolved issues in Williams's 'keywords' research itself, I propose in what follows to outline what I take to be distinctive in Williams's publication of dictionary-like entries for culturally central but difficult 'key' words. By way of conclusion, I outline the continuing challenge of investigating 'keywords' in the 21st century.

## What is a 'keyword'?

If you google<sup>5</sup> 'keyword' and look through your first twenty results, the chances are you will find only references to using target words in searchable databases or for finding relevant web pages. In the fragments of text on your screen, the word

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (eds), New Keywords: a revised vocabulary of culture and society (Blackwell, Oxford, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Bennett et al, New Keywords, xxi.

<sup>4</sup> This is not the place for a review of New Keywords. Among many examples of difference in overall approach, perhaps the most startling is that, on the website for the book ([www.blackwellpublishing.com/newkeywords](http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/newkeywords)), under the banner 'What would *your* key words be?', the editors invite readers to suggest their own words to be included in a future contents list, with entries by a certain date to be entered into a prize draw.

<sup>5</sup> 'Google' is the trademarked name of the Google search engine. Increasingly, however, as occasionally happens with successful branded products, the name is adopted in (unprotected) generic use, often visible as derived forms (e.g. 'to google', 'googling', 'etc.'). Such 'genericisation' typically involves an intermediate stage during which generic use is contested by the trademark proprietor.

‘keyword’ will collocate, or be found next to, words such as ‘smart’ and ‘good’, as well as sometimes combining to form the compound ‘meta-keyword’ (or way of targeting clusters of keywords rather than individual words). Similar emphasis is to be found in online dictionaries specialising in computer and internet technology definitions. In Webopedia, for example, we are given the following senses:

(1) In text editing and database management systems, a *keyword* is an index entry that identifies a specific record or document.

(2) In programming, a keyword is a word that is reserved by a program because the word has a special meaning. Keywords can be commands or parameters. Every programming language has a set of keywords that cannot be used as variable names. Keywords are sometimes called *reserved names*.<sup>6</sup>

You might say that if you search online in this way, then finding a preponderance of ‘search’ and ‘programming’ meanings for ‘keyword’ should not come as too much of a surprise. But there is a deeper point here. The meaning of the term ‘keywords’ itself changes. Current prevalence of a ‘search’ sense for ‘keyword’ challenges any obviousness we might presume in the ‘Williams sense’ among readers coming to Keywords for the first time, and pushes discussion back a step, into a need to clarify what a ‘keyword’ is as a starting point in understanding what is distinctive in Williams’s study .

Following Williams’s own practice of developing his accounts of words as reflective essays based on the OED<sup>7</sup>, we might take the OED as a point of departure. ‘Key-word’, and ‘keyword’ as a combination, both appear under the entry for the headword ‘key’ (sense ‘key’ n1, 18 comb.). There we find the following:

(a) a word serving as a key to a cipher or the like (‘The key-word of these inscriptions’); and (b) a word or thing that is of great importance or

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<sup>6</sup> For Webopedia, visit [www.webopedia.com](http://www.webopedia.com)

<sup>7</sup> The OED is the Oxford English Dictionary ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)), first published, in parts, as A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, eds, J.A.H.Murray, H.Bradley, W.A.Craigie & C.T.Onions (OUP, Oxford, 1884-1928); re-issued (1933); 2<sup>nd</sup> edition eds, John Simpson and Edmund Weiner (1989); 3<sup>rd</sup> edition in preparation. Histories of the dictionary include the memoir by K.M.Elizabeth Murray, Caught in the Web of Words: James A.H.Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1977) and, more recently, Simon Winchester, The Meaning of Everything: the story of the Oxford English Dictionary (OUP, Oxford, 2003). For a highly detailed account of what each OED entry contains and how to read them, see Donna Lee Berg, A Guide to the Oxford English Dictionary (OUP, Oxford, 1993).

significance; *spec.* in information-retrieval systems, any informative word in the title or text of a document, etc., chosen as indicating the main content of the document.

What might be called a ‘significance’ sense is given in (a) and (b) here alongside the specialised ‘search’ sense already referred to. The ‘search’ sense is seen in the following example among quotations later in the entry, ‘The system can process documents represented by a set of keywords.’ In this sense, exemplified from the 1960s, a keyword helps you locate something. The ‘significance’ sense is illustrated by, among other quotations, an observation by Edmund Blunden: ‘The key-word is the 116th of the Sonnets’. Understand the keyword, the sense here is, and you will understand something unspecified but more important. The two senses are not always easy to separate without further context (e.g. in the OED quotation ‘let us take the keyword “science”’). This is partly because you generally search for things that, at least while you are searching, seem things you will attach significance to if you find them. We can speculate, however, that the balance in relative prominence of the ‘search’ and ‘significance’ senses may have altered during the recent period of online information (something that may be suggested by but isn’t provable from the OED quotations, which range from 1859 through to 1971). There is also an important difference between the two senses, however, that concerns how you view what happens once you’ve found an instance of your keyword. In one case, your search is over. In the other, it is just beginning.

The fact that ‘keyword’ is a figurative expression, evoking privileged ways into something (a small door into a large room, lifting the lid off a casket), begins to explain why the term is used in the titles of reference works that list core technical vocabulary for specialized fields. There is a volume called Canadian Constitutional Keywords, for instance, as well as Keywords in Language and Literature, and many others. In such publications, the focus is on words (that are each made the headword for an entry) that may or may not be significant in their everyday sense, if they have one, but offer special leverage in understanding some technical field. Implicit in such collections is the idea that what you unlock with your keyword will be enriching or at least worth unlocking, despite being complex, tangled or otherwise blocked from easy access -- hence my room and casket imagery rather than keys to garden sheds or

parked bicycles. In this respect, we can contrast ‘keywords’ with what you might call ‘symptom-words’, or words that may still offer a key to understanding a cultural milieu but which in themselves appear trivial, as in John Morrish’s entertaining Frantic Semantics, which provides accounts of words such as ‘full-on’, ‘retro’, ‘benchmarking’, ‘anorak’, ‘issues’ and ‘totty’.<sup>8</sup>

Keywords in the ‘significance’ sense, then, are words freighted with importance for a particular domain. This is reflected in Williams’s focus on the specialised vocabulary of debates about ‘culture and society’. But Williams introduces a further crucial element: some words are not only significant and ‘complex’; they are also ‘controversial’. They are not (or not only) a matter of a distinct, technical sense (or senses) that may initially seem opaque but which can be understood if only you have a glossary. Rather, Williams’s keywords present a cluster of interlocking, contemporary senses whose interaction remains unresolved across a range of fields of thought and discussion. Interaction between the senses can lead to cross purposes and confusion in public debate.

To try to understand a ‘keyword’, in this more specific sense, you have to engage not only with what the word can mean on its own, but also with its complex relations with other, similarly complex words. Why go to all that trouble? Because such words are inescapable, in being the building blocks of cultural understanding. They provide both the material of thinking to be analysed – when used in earlier discourse -- and also the tools for further, new thinking: that is, they are material resources out of which concepts for cultural debate are formed. Confuse the words and you won’t grasp the historical development or current arguments. This in turn will restrict your ability to contribute effectively to discussion and planning for what might be called a better future. Williams’s notion of words as materials that both represent and mediate social relations is an essential context for his suggestive characterisation of language use as a process in which, ‘Meanings are offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John Morrish, Frantic Semantics: snapshots of our changing language (Pan Books, London, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Williams, Keywords, 12.

## Precedents and parallels

Williams's keywords research has I believe made a major contribution to understanding how complex words function in culture and society. But his interest in the topic is not unique. Nor was it unique, exactly, even in the period when Williams was working on his earliest notes. The term 'keyword' doesn't originate with Williams, either, being traceable back to late nineteenth-century semantics and the work of Michel Bréal, if not before.<sup>10</sup> More closely contemporaneous with Williams, there are also at least three important parallel investigations, each of which illuminates a different aspect of Williams's work: publications by C. S. Lewis, by I. A. Richards, and by William Empson. To understand the distinctiveness of Williams's contribution, therefore, it will be helpful briefly to recall these precedents and parallels before looking at how Keywords entries are structured. I refer to the three writers here not in historical sequence (from the 1920s through to 1960) but in terms of the type of relation to Keywords I believe they show.

### **C.S.Lewis**

Almost contemporaneous with Williams's early work towards Keywords, C. S. Lewis's Studies in Words (1960)<sup>11</sup> was based on lectures given at Cambridge in the late 1950s. For Lewis, the important questions about problematic words are ones of philological elucidation. 'Key' words including 'nature', 'sad', 'wit', 'free', 'sense', 'simple', 'life', and the phrasal formula 'I dare say' (now meaning roughly 'probably') have changed in meaning, Lewis argues, each radiating out (or

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Bréal, Semantics: studies in the science of meaning. [1900] Translated by Mrs Henry Cust (Dover, New York, 1964); for discussion of Bréal's classification of mechanisms in semantic change, see Elizabeth Closs Traugott and Richard B. Dasher, Regularity in Semantic Change (Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 52-60. More recently, emphasising connections between lexical semantics and social history, Georges Matoré develops the notion of 'mots-clés' for socially privileged key words in his La méthode en lexicologie: Domaine français (Didier, Paris, 1953); for discussion, see Stephen Ullmann, Semantics: an introduction to the science of meaning (Blackwell, Oxford, 1962), 252-3.

<sup>11</sup> C.S.Lewis, Studies in Words (CUP, Cambridge, 1960).

‘ramifying’) from a central meaning. For Lewis, the past is definitely a different country: they don't just do things differently there, they also talk differently; and the gap is something you cannot simply mind and step across if you are trying to read what Lewis disarmingly calls texts by ‘old’ authors.<sup>12</sup> Faced with such difficulty, what Lewis encourages is less to research word meanings (as some readers feel Williams does), than to read the historical source texts, on the basis that ‘one understands a word much better if one has met it alive, in its native habitat’<sup>13</sup>. There is a parallel here with Williams, in the emphasis Lewis places on avoiding the risk of missing in such words ‘dangerous senses’ that have the effect of ‘luring us into misreadings’<sup>14</sup>. Yet for all the apparent similarity, Lewis's choice of the adjective ‘dangerous’ is a reminder that for him the risk is only of being led off the safe path of correct interpretation into creative but frivolous, dehistoricised meanings of your own. This is unlike Williams, who doesn't entertain a notion of straightforward ‘correct’ interpretation, even if based on familiarity with the historical record.

## ***I.A.Richards***

By the time Williams was demobbed in 1945 and returned, alliteratively, from the Kiel Canal to a Cambridge college - only to be struck there (as he memorably recalls in the Keywords ‘Introduction’) by major shifts in the currency of English discussion - I.A.Richards had long gone. Between travels and mountains, Richards was teaching at Harvard, where his work on Basic English was already in decline and his relationship with C.K.Ogden increasingly strained<sup>15</sup>. Earlier in Cambridge, however, in Practical Criticism (1929) and before that in collaboration with Ogden in The Meaning of Meaning (1923), Richards had also been concerned with problematic keywords. For him, the issue is not only one of misreading local ‘dangerous’ senses but of the general, multi-layered nature of the interpretive process. Richards identifies for example a number of especially important words in criticism (‘meaning’, ‘belief’,

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis, Studies in Words, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, Studies in Words, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, Studies in Words, 13.

<sup>15</sup> See John Paul Russo, I.A.Richards: his life and work (Routledge, 1989).

‘sincerity’, ‘sentimentality’, ‘rhythm’, ‘understanding’, and others<sup>16</sup>) that act unhelpfully as ‘blunderbusses’: when they and similar words are used, ‘a cloud of heterogeneous missiles instead of a single meaning is discharged on each occasion’<sup>17</sup>. Failure to sift the spread-shot fired in such words is now often thought to have been for Richards a narrowly literary-critical matter; but Richards was as concerned, especially after the 1920s, to chart misreadings in political discourse, language learning, and in acquisition and use of Basic English. Much of Richards's career, in fact - in this respect anticipating Williams (though note also the reservations Williams expresses about Richards in Culture and Society<sup>18</sup>) - can be read as a series of efforts in different domains to investigate such communication problems and how reason and analysis can overcome them.

## **William Empson**

References to I. A. Richards in C.S.Lewis mainly express a debt Lewis felt towards the earlier scholar. But that debt is occasionally qualified by doubts in areas where he inclined more to the view of the author of the third important parallel with Keywords, William Empson. Among other works, Empson published The Structure of Complex Words in 1951, which lays out a framework of ‘semantic equations’ through which verbal senses can interact, in a given context, to produce statements reliant on implications, purposeful puns and double meanings. The parallels (and also contrasts) with Keywords are seen more clearly, however, in Empson’s review of the first edition of Keywords in New York Review of Books in 1977,<sup>19</sup> a review which is critical sometimes to the point of conveying exasperation.

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<sup>16</sup> I.A.Richards, Practical Criticism (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1929), 340.

<sup>17</sup> Richards, Practical Criticism, 300.

<sup>18</sup> Williams points to two difficulties he sees with Richards: an ‘element of passivity in his idea of the relationship between reader and work’ (Culture and Society, 244), and a concern with global communication that lacks any close-up social engagement. In making the second criticism, Williams claims that Richards’s relationship to the world is that of a ‘sole man to a total environment which is seen, again *out there*, as an object.’ (ibid., 245-6).

<sup>19</sup> William Empson, ‘Compacted Doctrines: Raymond Williams, Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society’, reprinted in John Haffenden (ed), Argufying: essays on literature and culture (Chatto and Windus, London, 1987), 184-9. Empson incorporates some sections of the review into his ‘Comment for third edition’ of The Structure of Complex Words [1951], 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Chatto and Windus, 1979).



What seems most to inspire Empson's exasperation is a vagueness he detects in Williams's account of 'interaction' between a word's multiple senses. For Empson, the idea -- which he develops in his own work and also attributes to Williams - that 'a word can become a compacted doctrine'<sup>20</sup> depends on different senses arising 'naturally in one context'<sup>21</sup>: sense A of a word must simultaneously represent sense B to a reader, in order to communicate the statement in question. Empson points critically in his review to Williams's account of **interest**, where Empson suggests this is unlikely to be the case. For Williams, by contrast, interaction between senses, as we will see, only sometimes occurs within a single use (for instance when a value judgement inherent in a word points in two directions simultaneously or where, as Empson approvingly notes, 'a controversial word contains both sides of the controversy in itself'<sup>22</sup>). In many other cases, interaction between senses appears to take place more at the level of the language community, over a period during which senses compete for saliency or have different social distributions, 'interacting' only in the abstract general sense of communication and miscommunication between social dialects.

The significance of this difference should not be underestimated. Through his lens, Empson sees 'compacted doctrines' in a word as something created by a writer or speaker's artifice, which can be grasped -- and accepted or rejected -- by a reader. For Williams, by contrast (at least in Empson's view) the effect of complex words is 'a dark picture as a whole' in which the words exert considerable power over the language user's ideas; but this is only, Empson insists, because of 'a theory which makes our minds feebler than they are'.<sup>23</sup> Diverging sharply from Williams at this point, Empson emphasises our rational ability to choose words rather than be affected by them, and suggests that the important research question about keywords that

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<sup>20</sup> As well as giving the title to the Williams review, 'compacted doctrines' is also an essential concept in *The Structure of Complex Words*. See for example the opening paragraph of Chapter 2, 'Statements in words', 39. For further comparative discussion of Empson and Williams, see Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe, 'Compacted doctrines: Empson and the meanings of words', in Christopher Norris and Nigel Mapp (eds), *William Empson: the critical achievement* (CUP, Cambridge, 1993), 170-95.

<sup>21</sup> Empson, 'Compacted Doctrines', 185.

<sup>22</sup> Empson, 'Compacted Doctrines', 187.

<sup>23</sup> Empson, 'Compacted Doctrines', 184.

Williams should address is ‘under what conditions are they able to impose a belief that the speaker would otherwise resist?’<sup>24</sup>

Exactly what Williams made of the criticism that Keywords encourages passivity in the face of verbal complexity -- a charge echoing his own criticism of Richards in Culture and Society<sup>25</sup> -- it is difficult to say. There is little or no evidence either of Empson's work in general or of the review of Keywords itself having any particular impact on Williams; and he didn't use the occasion of the 1983 second edition as an opportunity to reply.

## The Keywords ‘Introduction’

Each of the parallel studies outlined here offers a glimpse of a different dimension of Williams's work that I explore in more detail below. Williams outlines his own aims in Keywords in the first edition's justly celebrated ‘Introduction’. Keywords evolved, Williams says, from his exploration of the word ‘culture’ in his adult education classes. But neither the word itself nor the concept of culture, he found, could be understood without referring to a cluster of other words with which it interacts. Williams recalls that

the words I linked it with, because of the problems its uses raised in my mind, were *class* and *art*, and then *industry* and *democracy*. I could feel these five words as a kind of structure.<sup>26</sup>

At one level, then, Keywords is a ‘a record of an inquiry [sic] into a *vocabulary*: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group as *culture* and *society*’.<sup>27</sup> The narrative that begins with Williams's unsettling return to Cambridge leads on to a revelatory

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<sup>24</sup> Empson, ‘Compacted Doctrines’, 188.

<sup>25</sup> See n.18 above.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, Keywords, 13. See also the ‘Introduction’ to Culture and Society, 13-19.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, Keywords, 15.

moment in Seaford, in the basement of the public library, where Williams sees in the OED entry for **culture** a skeleton answer to questions he had been puzzling over. From there, the course of the inquiry moves to the cutting of the 'keywords' appendix from Culture and Society for reasons of length, and the ensuing collection of notes on the initial 60 words (and gradually others) for a further two decades. Throughout this long development, Williams reports how he was prompted, by questions immediately at hand, to consider meaning change as an interaction between what might now be understood as change in the language *system* and change in historically conditioned instances of language *use*: that is, as a process through which new ways of exploiting the meaning potential conventionally available in a word cumulatively alter the meaning of that word.

The necessary context for such linguistic interest remained for Williams one of encountering difficult words in practical discussion.

Every word which I have included has at some time, in the course of some argument, virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meaning seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss. [...] I began to see this experience as a problem of *vocabulary*, in two senses: the available and developing meanings of known words, which needed to be set down; and the explicit but as often implicit connections which people were making, in what seemed to me, again and again, particular formations of meaning - ways not only of discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences.<sup>28</sup>

Williams goes on from this sense of practical urgency in trying to understand words to generalise about the particular words he is interested in, as a group:

We find a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovation, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer; or changes which are masked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically

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<sup>28</sup> Williams, Keywords, 15.

variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond the historical interest evident here (with its recognisable connections with Lewis), Williams forges links between the meaning and use of words and tensions in the social formations in which people live. Keywords don't only, in this view, give rise to 'dangerous' misunderstandings because words are difficult and have lots of senses; they are also connected with potentially quite a different order of danger, reflecting political interests and enacting real social conflicts. Williams was never interested *only* in words and their meanings, as arguably a lexicographer or philologist might be. Repeatedly he stresses interaction between verbal practices and other, social processes: his historical semantics forms part of a more general materialist history in which thought and language are integral elements of social reflection and action.

At the most general level, accordingly, the aim of Keywords is, 'to show that some important social and historical processes occur *within* language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and of relationships really are'.<sup>30</sup> A dialectical relationship is posited between meaning variation and change, on the one hand, and changing social formations on the other. To chart the dialectic is to map social conflict as much as the sorts of conventional linguistic processes of semantic change identified from Bréal onwards. Summing up these points in response to an interview question in Politics and Letters, Williams argues that, 'like any other social production' language 'is the arena of all sorts of shifts and interests and relations of dominance'. Verbal signs, accordingly,

take on the changeable and often reversed social relations of a given society, so that what enters into them is the contradictory and conflict-ridden social history of the people who speak the language, including all the variations between signs at any given time. [...] Certain shifts of meaning indicate very interesting periods of confusion and contradiction of outcome, latencies in decision, and other processes of a real social history, which can be located

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<sup>29</sup> Williams, Keywords, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, Keywords, 22.

rather precisely in this way, and put alongside more familiar kinds of evidence.<sup>31</sup>

## Structure of a Keywords entry

If Williams had written only the ‘Introduction’ to Keywords, not the entries themselves, his work should still stand as a valuable contribution to our understanding of word meaning. But Keywords overall is less a study in the theory of meaning than a collection of entries for individual words. How do those entries carry through what Williams proposes in the ‘Introduction’? In this section I describe what a typical Keywords entry consists of. In doing so, I focus not so much on editorial issues (such as how reference is made to a word’s ‘immediate forerunner’ or to the ‘ultimate traceable word, from which “root” meanings are derived’<sup>32</sup>) as on the argument about meaning being developed through each entry.

Keywords entries typically begin with a statement that the word in question is difficult, or that, even if it looks simple, it isn’t. So for instance, ‘**Nature** is perhaps the most complex word in the language’ and ‘**culture** is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’. Lower down the lexical top ten, but still giving cause for concern, we learn that ‘**Bourgeois** is a very difficult word to use in English...’; ‘**Humanity** belongs to a complex group of words’; ‘**Liberal** has, at first sight, so clear a political meaning that some of its further associations are puzzling...’; ‘**Utilitarian** has one complication...’; and ‘**Violence** is often now a difficult word, because its primary sense is of physical assault.... yet it is also used more widely in ways that are not easy to define’.

The source of difficulty in each case becomes clearer if we look further into a particular entry:

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<sup>31</sup> Williams, Politics & Letters, 176 – 7.

<sup>32</sup> See, ‘Abbreviations’, in Williams, Keywords, 29.

**Alienation** is now one of the most difficult words in the language. Quite apart from its common usage in general contexts, it carries specific but disputed meanings in a range of disciplines from social and economic theory to philosophy and psychology. [...] ... it is often confusing because of overlap and uncertainty in relation both to the various specific meanings and the older more general meanings.

Difficulties arise, in effect, because a range of senses that have followed different historical paths now coexist, sometimes with one or more parallel technical senses as well as a range of other, lay senses that cut across each other in unpredictable ways. Williams's presentation of such difficulty appears to support Empson's comment, in his review of Keywords, that 'the primary aim is to clear up confusion'.<sup>33</sup> But the confusions aren't all of the same kind, and we should distinguish at least two types.

The first kind of difficulty may be thought of as diachronic (or to do with historical change in meaning). The various meanings of a given word, in this perspective, are like historical strata or layers. Some of the word's meanings may persist into the present; but others will have become recessive and possibly disappeared altogether. In order to engage with discourse from earlier periods -- as is essential in cultural analysis, if we are to understand the beliefs and values of earlier members of what we take to be the same language community -- it is necessary to identify senses that the speaker or writer could have intended. With diachronic confusion, accordingly, the overlap between Williams and Lewis's 'dangerous senses' is at its strongest.

The other kind of difficulty is synchronic (to do with the language system as any user mentally models it at a given point in time). The difficult word is polysemous, having multiple, concurrent senses that are historically and semantically related. For example, **liberal** is used in a narrowly technical, party political sense, but also in a broader political sense that characterises a spectrum of positions, not all of which are 'liberal' in the first sense. The word is also widely used in other, non-political senses, for example meaning 'generous'; and each sense is amenable to a positive or negative spin depending on context and the assumed beliefs of the addressee. The significance

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<sup>33</sup> Empson, 'Compacted Doctrines', 184.

of such concurrent senses for Williams is not, as it typically is in Empson, how they can be overlaid to create multiple or ambiguous meanings in a single use,<sup>34</sup> but rather how, on the tongues of different interlocutors, they trip up discussion, obscuring and entangling socially important arguments that might be advanced by using them.

Synchronic and diachronic difficulties with word meaning are separated here for the purpose of exposition. But for Williams they are inextricably linked by the fact that we can only properly understand the present by reflecting on the symbolic resources in which we articulate our own circumstances (or, put in a different vocabulary, by seeing the symbolic other in the composition of the self). The challenge in analysing meaning is for Williams accordingly not the conventional ‘history of the language’ one of describing how the language system acquired by any language user comes to be as it is. Rather, the question is how any culturally-situated person can actively think, selecting among options for conceptualisation and expression that are shared with others in the language community but which have also been conditioned by the history of the language each speaker inherits, differently, and to different extents.

These questions are implicit in the opening statements of difficulty to be found in most Keywords entries. The main body of the entry is then largely descriptive. Beginning with an etymology often adapted from the OED, Williams works through a succession of meaning changes and simultaneous variants towards the current array of meanings. Supporting quotations are provided (also often drawn from the OED, but sometimes set in a fuller context than would be possible there). In some entries, reference is made to relevant developments in other languages, for instance in **alienation**, where Williams writes that ‘the argument is difficult and is made more difficult by the relations between the German and English key words’; or in

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<sup>34</sup> Empson's most vivid statement of how apparent ‘unity’ of meaning is achieved from a cluster of possible senses occurs in the final chapter of Seven Types of Ambiguity, and follows the common modernist trope of a chemical reaction: ‘It is these faint and separate judgments of probability which unite, as if with an explosion, to ‘make sense’ and accept the main meaning of a connection of phrases; and the reaction, though rapid, is not as immediate as one is liable to believe. Also, as in a chemical reaction, there will have been reverse or subsidiary reactions, or small damped explosions, or slow wide-spread reactions, not giving out much heat, going on concurrently, and the final result may be complicated by preliminary stages in the main process, or after-effects from the products of the reaction. As a rule, all that you recognise as in your mind is the one final association of meanings which seems sufficiently rewarding to be the answer – ‘now I have understood that’; it is only at intervals at the strangeness of the process can be observed.’, Seven Types of Ambiguity [1930] (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1961), 277.

**exploitation**, where we are referred to ‘the main French development...’ Williams shows frequent interest in such interaction between languages, acknowledging how

many of the most important words that I have worked on either developed key meanings in languages other than English, or went through a complicated and interactive development in a number of major languages. Where I have been able in part to follow this, as in *alienation* or *culture*, its significance has been so evident that we are bound to feel the lack of it when such tracing has not been possible.’<sup>35</sup>

What is notable, however, is that Williams is not particularly concerned with commenting on linguistic mechanisms of semantic change. There are throughout Keywords numerous, informal references to such mechanisms, for example to changes that occur ‘by analogy’, to occasions when a sense is ‘extended’, or when there is ‘a degree of habituation to the metaphor’. But there is little by way of reference to mechanisms identified in historical semantics, despite bibliographical references at the end of Keywords which range from Bréal, through Trier, Stern and Spitzer, to Ullmann.<sup>36</sup>

There is a reason for this. Williams is less concerned with general semantic mechanisms because he is more concerned with the pressures under which people have extended or transformed word meanings. He places special emphasis on adversarial uses, as in the repeated phrase, ‘there is then both controversy and complexity in the term’; and examples are especially prominent in which change is motivated by valorisation of a word away from any neutral descriptive sense, including commonly where the word begins to occur ‘with a derogatory implication’. In the case of **wealth**, for example, Williams points to development of ‘a strong subsidiary deprecatory sense’, and in **welfare** to ‘a subsidiary meaning, usually derogatory in the recorded instances’. He draws attention to ‘adversarial uses of **jargon**’, and to the fact that **liberal** ‘has been loaded with the aspersions of its enemies just as much as with the consequences of its own assumptions...’ With

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<sup>35</sup> Williams, Keywords, 20.

<sup>36</sup> See, ‘References and Select Bibliography’, in, Williams, Keywords, 339-41.



**liberal**, he goes on to point out how ‘the word has been under regular and heavy attack’, being frequently used ‘as a pejorative term’ to make up a ‘familiar complaint’, extending even to ‘being used as a loose swear word’. In Williams’s account, words are not only (as they are for Richards) blunderbusses that can be misfired; they are also artillery to be purposefully aimed.

In some entries, what is at issue is the complete reversal of a word’s semantic prosody, or emotive potential. This is the case with **modern**, where ‘the majority of pre-C19 uses were unfavourable, when the context was comparative [...] but through the C19 and very markedly in C20 there was a strong movement the other way, until **modern** became virtually equivalent to IMPROVED (q.v.) or satisfactory or efficient’. Sometimes it is primarily such evaluative use that causes confusion, by pointing in two different directions at the same time, as with **idealism**, where Williams suggests that ‘one of the crucial difficulties [...] is that, especially in some of its derived words, it is used, often loosely, for both praise and blame’, or with **commercial**, which ‘could be used either favourably or unfavourably’. In this respect **ordinary** is anything but ordinary, since the word ‘has a curious history and implication’ by means of which the same expression ‘ordinary people’ can be used ‘to express social attitude or prejudice in effectively opposite ways.’

Such acute attention to use of the same word in contexts shaped by very different speaker intentions, as well as different assumptions likely to be activated by the addressee, suggests that Williams would not have been uncomfortable with a recent shift of emphasis that has taken place in historical accounts of meaning: from semantics to pragmatics, and away from the idea of a series of distinct meanings in a word towards the view that speakers or writers stretch a word’s meaning in a particular context while retaining enough of its established sense to make the new use intelligible, with such pragmatic use then re-analysed as part of the word’s semantics, so bringing about the meaning change.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This is an inevitably simplified statement of Traugott and Dasher’s ‘invited inference theory of semantic change’ (IITSC), in which inferences regularly associated with linguistic material are gradually conventionalised as semantic meanings. See Traugott and Dasher, Regularity in Semantic Change.

Towards the end of each entry, Williams moves towards either of two typical codas. The first is a return to the pitfalls in contemporary use and how they afflict social practice. **Culture** is the prime case. Williams suggests that,

Within these complex arguments there are fundamentally opposed as well as effectively overlapping positions; there are also, understandably, many unresolved questions and confused answers. But these arguments and questions cannot be resolved by reducing the complexity of actual usage. [...] the complexity, that is to say, is not finally in the word but in the problems which its variations of use significantly indicate.

Such an ending may in reality only restate the word's problems. But in doing so such endings typically emphasise not only the challenge presented by the word to discourse comprehension but also why it needs to be addressed in specific areas of social practice.

The other kind of ending takes the form of reference to relations between the headword and other words in the same semantic field: how the cluster of words together creates distinctions, not necessarily in a neat or uniform way but with overlapping senses because of the complex social history. The shift towards more thesaurus-like presentation – which is something more significant than, as Empson describes it, the entries usually having ‘some derivatives and opposites thrown in’<sup>38</sup> – is perhaps the main significance of Keywords being a ‘vocabulary’ rather than a dictionary. In either format, the same overall task of form-function mapping is going on; but in the thesaurus approach, what is in question is not mapping from one form to multiple functions (a single word that has a number of polysemous senses), but rather mapping from one function to multiple forms (investigating how a network of words can lay claim to different aspects of an area of mental space)<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Empson, ‘Compacted Doctrines’, 184.

<sup>39</sup> This distinction is inevitably caught up in theoretical problems of word meaning, especially in the structuralist tradition descended from Saussure’s idea of a sign’s differential ‘value’ (but also to some extent in discussing a word’s meaning as its set of sense relations within a semantic field). For discussion of the thematic tradition in dictionaries, see Chapter 12 ‘Abandoning the alphabet’, in, Howard Jackson, Lexicography: an introduction (Routledge, London, 2002).

Part of the history of **welfare**, for example, is explained because ‘Most of the older words in this sense (see especially ‘charity’) had acquired unacceptable associations’. And with **idealism**, ‘The subsequent complexities of meaning can be indicated by pairing of opposites’, something which also happens with **radical**, whose 20th-century history is largely explained in a series of contrasts. Among the most interesting cases of how a word sits in its lexical field is **myth**, which we are told ‘alternated with *fable*, being distinguished from *legend* which, though perhaps unreliable, was related to history and from *allegory* which might be fabulous but which indicated some reality.’ In this web of sense relations (which go far beyond conventional classification into synonymy, hyponymy, meronymy, etc.) what is striking is Williams’s ease in switching between a so-called ‘semasiological’ approach (the ‘dictionary’ perspective, moving from word to meaning) and an ‘onomasiological’ approach (the thesaurus perspective, concerned with how conceptual areas are divided up between different words).<sup>40</sup> Where what are effectively thesaurus descriptions conclude dictionary entries, Williams signals an underlying theme of Keywords: how societies in different periods create differing configurations of senses for any given cultural domain. Those senses are the resources available - by habit, by ideology, or (in a more Sapir-Whorfian view) as the basic capability for thought that language allows - for political and cultural reflection, mutual understanding, and intercultural dialogue.<sup>41</sup>

Concern with how far cultural thought may be determined by a society's keywords - never precisely stated by Williams as a thesis - has been marginalised over the last twenty years by research suggesting the universality of cognition.<sup>42</sup> But the arguments

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<sup>40</sup> For discussion of how the contrast between these two approaches is reflected in different kinds of research question regarding meaning change, see Traugott and Dasher, Regularity in Semantic Change, 24-6.

<sup>41</sup> The view now widely known as ‘the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’ involves the claim that ‘two languages may “code” the same state of affairs utilizing semantic concepts or distinctions peculiar to each language; as a result the two linguistic descriptions reflect different construals of the same bit of reality. These semantic distinctions are held to reflect cultural distinctions and at the same time to influence cognitive categorizations.’ John Gumperz and Stephen Levinson, ‘Introduction: linguistic relativity re-examined’, in John Gumperz and Stephen Levinson (eds), Rethinking Linguistic Relativity (CUP, Cambridge, 1996), 7. The origins and subsequent history of the hypothesis are complicated, and involve not only all the celebrated words for snow, or Sapir and Whorf themselves (separately and together) but also antecedents including the 18<sup>th</sup> century linguist and philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt and the 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist Franz Boas.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, Basic Color Terms: their universality and evolution (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1969).

are not conclusive. As regards cultural keywords in particular, the case for language determining thought has recently been revived in publications by Anna Wierzbicka, for example in Understanding Cultures through their Key Words (1997)<sup>43</sup>. Working against dominant directions of cognitive semantics, which stresses how thought shapes language rather than the reverse<sup>44</sup>, Wierzbicka examines keywords as ‘focal points around which entire cultural domains are organized’<sup>45</sup>, and presents case studies including the English words ‘freedom’, ‘friendship’, and ‘homeland’ juxtaposed with their nearest equivalents in other languages. Wierzbicka’s studies differ significantly from Williams in important respects, nevertheless. By decomposing complex words into semantic primitives, for example (i.e. into their presumed, basic constitutive elements of meaning), and then formulating those primitives in what Wierzbicka calls ‘Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)’, Wierzbicka tries to establish a method for point-for-point comparison between complex words and concepts across languages and cultures.

## Reception and use

Having looked both at Williams's arguments about meaning in the ‘Introduction’ and at what Keywords offers in its roughly 300 pages, it is reasonable<sup>46</sup> now to ask what readers have made of those pages. Competition for the most owned but least read book is stiff, in historical semantics as elsewhere. As far as I can tell from informal reader feedback, the ‘Introduction’ is still read in literary, cultural and political academic circles; but less attention is typically given to individual entries. It is therefore worth asking -- leaving aside other interesting questions about the book’s reception -- in what circumstances a reader is likely to look up a word in Keywords rather than in other reference sources that may initially appear similar.

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<sup>43</sup> Anna Wierzbicka, Understanding Cultures through their Key Words (OUP, Oxford, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Eve Sweetser, From Etymology to Pragmatics: metaphorical and cultural aspects of semantic structure (CUP, Cambridge, 1990).

<sup>45</sup> Wierzbicka, Understanding Cultures through their Key Words, 16.

<sup>46</sup> In her most recent book, English: meaning and culture (OUP, Oxford 2006), Wierzbicka takes as one of her case studies the cultural loading implicit in unreflective use, as here, of the word ‘reasonable’. Her analysis combines a historical account of philosophical and legal use of the expression with contemporary corpus analysis, to map not just its range of senses but how such senses work together to create a distinctive field of cultural value. See Chapter 4, ‘Being Reasonable: a key Anglo value and its cultural roots’, 103-40.

Most commonly, readers report looking up a word while engaged in reading a particular text. They say they want to discover, when facing an immediate intellectual difficulty such as what **equality** meant for the Levellers or what **society** means in Hume, how the word in question has been used differently in different contexts. This use of Keywords combines the reference function of a general dictionary with the more specialised coverage of a topic-specific dictionary: Keywords is viewed as a dictionary of technical terms in ‘culture and society’ (i.e. as a historicised, technical glossary roughly equivalent to the Canadian constitutional keywords volume referred to above).

Other readers, especially students, report using Keywords as a sort of conceptual outline or crash course for a given area, especially at the beginning of an academic project or programme. The relevant Keywords entry provides historical context, for instance of **media** or **sociology** if you are studying one of those subjects, or of topics within a course of study, such as **reform** or **technology**. The purpose of this kind of reading is to move beyond simplistic or unnuanced use of complex and perhaps forbidding terms, building confidence as a preliminary to more detailed study. Such readings reflect a ‘history of ideas’ motivation, sketching how the same term can label changing concepts in different schools of thought, as well as in different periods.

Other readers again -- impressionistically, a minority -- report what I take to be a more far-reaching use of Keywords: engaging with an entry in order to clarify trajectories in continuing, as yet unresolved arguments (that is, as a tool for developing arguments still in progress rather than positions already taken up). Engaging with a word’s history and current polysemy in this way brings about a shift from consumer of to participant in current debate, and changes a reader’s relation to language. Such reading adds a further significance to the Williams quotation in my title, ‘Meanings offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed’. The processes of offering, feeling, testing, confirming, and so on are in this context not just an alternative terminology for describing semantic processes (more precisely, pragmatic processes) in the history of the language; they also characterize ways of thinking, or feeling our way into and testing out, new ideas and positions.

But what of the overall reception of Keywords? Even presuming that the different kinds of reading I have identified take place on quite a substantial scale, I suspect that Williams would have been disappointed by how little Keywords -- or the kind of attention to meaning it advocates -- now plays a part in political discussion. That disappointment could only be compounded by the fact that Williams hardly separated academic and political applications of his work. Rather, he urges an importance for Keywords as

an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical - subject to change as well as to continuity - if the millions of people in whom it is active are to see it as active: not a *tradition* to be learnt, nor a *consensus* to be accepted, nor a set of meanings which, because it is 'our language', has a natural authority; but as a shaping and reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view: a vocabulary to use, to find our ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history.<sup>47</sup>

Likely disappointment regarding the impact of Keywords a quarter of a century after its publication might nevertheless have been tempered for Williams by what, in one sense at least, could be called a kind of realism. As well as always taking a long view of historical struggle, Williams also expressed reservations about semantic and lexicographical work as a force for change, unless tied into other kinds of social practice. Having drafted Keywords entries initially during the 1950s, aware of the slightly earlier General Semantics movement<sup>48</sup>, he later notes in the 'Introduction' a crucial limit to the public value of work on meaning:

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<sup>47</sup> Williams, Keywords, 24 – 25.

<sup>48</sup> John Lyons describes the General Semantics movement (a name for work by writers in the 1930s and 1940s including Korzybski, Chase and Hayakawa) as involving a concern 'to make people aware of the alleged dangers of treating words as something more than conventional and rather inadequate symbols for things'; he suggests the movement might be more appropriately known as 'therapeutic semantics'. See, John Lyons, Semantics, 2 volumes (CUP, Cambridge 1977), 98. For further discussion, see Geoffrey Leech, Semantics: the study of meaning, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974),

I do not share the optimism, or the theories which underlie it, of that popular kind of inter-war and surviving semantics which supposed that clarification of difficult words would help in the resolution of disputes conducted in their terms and often evidently confused by them. I believe that to understand the complexities of the meanings of *class* contributes very little to the resolution of actual class disputes and class struggles.<sup>49</sup>

## Beyond 2000?

In his final years, Williams wrote explicitly of resources of hope, rhetorically directed towards the millennium year 2000. Beyond 2000 now, his approach to analysing cultural issues is less practised and less valued. Sometimes Williams's work is pigeonholed in its entirety as 'Marxist', in an apparently self-evident deprecatory sense. Whatever view you take of such criticism, there is an urgency that comes from continuing language use in looking again at how Williams's Keywords research, which invites scrutiny against historical evidence, relates to our ways of talking to one another about serious topics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century .

Changes of political climate – as well as changes, too, in meteorological climate - no doubt have implications as regards the appropriate editorial agenda for any revised edition of Keywords, actual or imagined. Greater emphasis would arguably now need to be placed on semantic fields including globalisation and the market, religion, rights and responsibilities, respect and inclusion, gender and ethnic politics, and others. Correspondingly, some of the attention Williams gives to terminology associated with Marxism could be reduced (e.g. **hegemony** or **socialist**), as political debates he was monitoring and contributing to have shifted. Much of this need for and process of

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Chapter 4 ('Semantics and society'), 40-58. Interestingly, many of the examples Leech links to different types of meaning here are also in the Keywords list of headwords. Cautioning against Hayakawa's arguments in Language in Thought and Action (1949), Leech is also close to Williams on the risk of cultivating 'an over-optimistic faith in the curative power of semantics', Semantics, 57).

<sup>49</sup> Williams, Keywords, 24. For Empson, it is especially this passage that makes Keywords seem a book full of 'gloom'; see Empson, 'Compacted Doctrines', 184.

revising – however you view the outcomes– is addressed in the ‘Preface’ to the Blackwell New Keywords.

While Keywords is a political book, however, it is not a book about politics. Current headwords are to be found less in large-scale political changes – the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of economic liberalism in China, 9/11, two wars in Iraq, etc -- than in cultural arguments that such events both reflect and inspire. There is no easily mapped route from political upheavals, no matter how seismic, into what a culture’s keywords are; those words have to be found in public discussion and cannot be read off from the news or the paradigm of any given academic discipline. Part of the reason words become keywords, in fact (and a reason for not being too hasty in making wholesale changes to Williams’s list) is because of an appearance particular words create of continuity, while disguising changes of meaning and perception they are used to express as well as very different facts and circumstances they are used to refer to.

Beyond the wordlist, however, there is a need to address other aspects of Keywords, which may also be seen most easily in a new light by considering what it would mean to update the volume.

Deciding what the keywords are is one thing, researching them is another. Williams, as we have seen, had his own method for doing this, reading around and expanding OED entries, linking shades of meaning to difficulties he could see in contemporary social discussion. There is no straightforward way of updating that method, for example by projecting from Williams’s engagement with the linguistics or lexicography of his period. Williams’s approach to meaning was a sort of verbal problem-solving, anchored (so he suggests in Culture and Society) in ‘not a series of abstracted problems, but a series of statements by individuals’.<sup>50</sup> Indeed he seems not to have engaged much with the semantic scholarship of the 1960s, 70s or early 80s (as is reflected in the way that the references in the bibliography, even in 1983, still end with Ullmann, still misspelt as ‘Ullman’).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Williams, Culture and Society, 18.

<sup>51</sup> Given the trajectory of Williams’s work, it is not surprising that he showed little interest in 1960s theories of lexical decomposition (such as Katz and Fodor). But it is surprising he didn’t engage with



There is an instructive parallel with William Empson here, which becomes more noticeable with time and distance. Williams's intricate work on the complexity of verbal meaning, like Empson's, has received little attention from linguists.<sup>52</sup> To understand why, and what implications may follow as regards studying keywords in future, we need to consider possible reasons for such apparent neglect.

For lexicographers, Keywords can appear a series of impressive mini-essays based on lexicographical work mostly already available in the OED. From the perspective of synchronic semantics and pragmatics, Williams appears interested in social rather than cognitive processes of meaning making, and so inevitably seems peripheral to the main research goals of the field. Even for historical semantics, the lexical items Williams investigates are idiosyncratic and relatively infrequently used, with (as Williams himself shows, though he would have rejected the distinction) social rather than linguistic causes motivating the shifts in meaning. In historical semantics, by contrast, the main focus is on regularity of semantic change, and so on those meaning changes which are most likely to explain aspects of the language system.<sup>53</sup> Apparent neglect of Keywords in linguistics may accordingly be as much to do with narrow disciplinary goals as with scepticism or indifference. But whatever the reasons, the result is the same: Keywords is now taken most seriously in cultural studies, with the consequence that subsequent work written by a generation of cultural studies scholars influenced by Williams is more concerned with history of *ideas* rather than with analysing the *vocabulary* of culture and society.

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(for instance) notions of meaning as use in Wittgenstein, or the idea of performative utterances in Austin, or the approach to implied meaning developed by Grice. And as regards lexicography, it may be unsurprising that Williams didn't engage with theoretical arguments, from the early 1970s onwards, to do with how much work is done by inference in calibrating a word's meaning in a given context. But given Williams's admiration for the OED, it does seem puzzling that he never addresses the issue of how sense boundaries are established. (For a recent, thought-provoking discussion of sense boundaries, see William Croft and D. Alan Cruse, Cognitive Linguistics (CUP, Cambridge, 2004), Chapter 5, 'The construal of sense boundaries', 109-40.

<sup>52</sup> Empson laments lack of acceptance of The Structure of Complex Words among linguists in 'Comment for the third edition' (1977), viii. He says the book was in this respect 'a failure' and 'fell like a stone'.

<sup>53</sup> 'The greatest degree of semantic regularity has so far been found in conceptual structures the lexemes of which are typically associated with grammaticalization, e.g. spatial deixis (*come, go*), temporal deixis (*now, then*), aspect (*have, finish*), modality (*want, will*), and case relations (*belly, head*). By contrast, little prospect of linguistic generalisation exists with changes occurring in relation to objects or concepts where the change is 'susceptible to extralinguistic factors such as change in the nature or the social construction of the referent'. (Traugott and Dasher, Regularity in Semantic Change, 3-4). Keywords entries are all of the second kind.

Such an academic split between different dimensions of the social production of meanings has if anything increased since Williams. This is regrettable, especially because the development of electronic search capabilities applied to large corpora of language use (techniques collectively known as corpus linguistics) encourages renewed attention to cultural keywords. Searching for uses of words on the scale such methods allow was simply not possible for Williams. He records how he read carefully and repeatedly through texts in order to find examples (how he searched for uses of **society** in Hume is a case in point). Now a search that might have taken several weeks can be done in a few minutes.

Corpora make possible many different kinds of result, not only bare lists of word tokens. For example, a search can present and compare relative frequencies (of the target word generally; of a specific sense of the target word; of the target word during a specified period of time; and so on); or it can analyse patterns of collocation (that is, different kinds of association between the target word and other words around it). For the kinds of question Williams explores in Keywords, the principal technique is likely to be basic concordancing: the display, as a list, of all instances of a word in a selected corpus (whether in a particular book, in works by a particular author, or in work in a particular genre or period). Each instance appears centred on the screen or page, preceded and followed by a selected number of words to provide enough context for analysis of how the target word in the concordance line is being used.<sup>54</sup>

It is a coincidence of the terminology that such a concordance line is usually now known as a ‘key-word-in-context’ (or KWIC). In corpus linguistics, the term ‘keyword’ here is usually meant in just its search sense. But ‘KWIC’ in a Keywords context reunites the two senses outlined above: the search sense of ‘keyword’ (the concordancer finds each instance of the word in the corpus) and the significance sense

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<sup>54</sup> For a general outline of corpus linguistics, with useful discussion of lexicography, see Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad and Randi Reppen, Corpus Linguistics: investigating language structure and use (CUP, Cambridge, 1998). For reading concordance lines in particular, see John Sinclair, Reading Concordances: an introduction (Pearson, London, 2003). An especially detailed account of corpus approaches to word meaning is, Michael Stubbs, Words and Phrases: corpus studies of lexical semantics (Blackwell, Oxford, 2002). On the basis that individual uses of words involve ‘a realization of widespread discourse patterns’, Chapter 7 ‘Words in Culture 1: Case studies of cultural keywords’ (145-169) investigates ‘constellations of repeated meanings’ in corpus data, linking Williams’s interest in cultural keywords to empirical corpus analysis (includes brief case studies of ‘ethnic’ and ‘racial’).

(Keywords keywords, if they can be called that, are worth displaying because of what Williams calls, in his ‘Introduction’ to Culture and Society, their ‘capital importance’<sup>55</sup>).

New electronic tools will not provide magic answers to the problems Williams was concerned with, however. This is partly because of the variable sense of the other major word in the expression ‘key-word-in-context’: ‘context’. For most linguistic purposes, context in a concordance line only needs to be a sequence of 5 -- 20 words on either side of the target word, enough to indicate immediate collocation. Evidence in the small ‘frame’ around the word can usually be found to show how the speaker or writer is treating the sense given to the word: as new, or as somehow in need of explanation, or as slightly old-fashioned or pejorative, etc.<sup>56</sup> For Williams, by contrast, relevant context meant a far larger body of material. His extensive reading may have been slow but it had compensating strengths: it allowed him, for instance, to read for minor shifts of sense for which evidence might only emerge in large-scale, higher-order thematic or discursive patterns. Publication of Keywords in a reference format tends to obscure this value in Williams’s scholarship, creating an illusion that keywords were even then something to be simply looked up. Choice of format may even contribute to the not uncommon opinion that Williams’s insights are better reflected in studies like The Country and the City (1973)<sup>57</sup> than in Keywords itself, where there is sometimes a tension between arguments encapsulated in reference form and discussion struggling for space.

What would continuing work on keywords achieve? In general terms, such work would test how far a variationist account of meaning change (i.e. one in which meanings coexist in shifting patterns across a population and produce overall semantic change only as a result of many small-scale shifts in use) can be tracked in complex keywords of the lexicon using current electronic search techniques. One research problem of special interest within this general field of enquiry would be Williams's interest in causation - arguably his own unfinished business: how any new

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<sup>55</sup> Williams, Culture and Society, 13.

<sup>56</sup> In this respect, reading a concordance line still draws on methods Murray outlines in his 1870 leaflet for OED volunteer readers on choosing illustrative quotations; see Winchester The Meaning of Everything, 109.

<sup>57</sup> Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (Chatto and Windus, 1973).

meaning diffuses or is propagated across the language community by different social groups. Williams freely acknowledged that the practical difficulties in this area are severe. But when pressed in a Politics and Letters interview on how far it would be possible to look ‘at the first usages of terms or pilot shifts in meaning, and then at the diffusion of those usages and shifts, tracing the forces which were the bearers of them - in other words, writing a socially explanatory history’,<sup>58</sup> Williams replied with a clear invitation to post-Keywords research:

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 which they were then reversed, and so on. [...] 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 - either diffused through the general educational system or in some other way, or remaining a term within a specific class. All these possibilities have to be explored.<sup>59</sup>

The possibilities all have to be explored. Electronic corpora are, at least for some relevant areas, available to make such analysis if not easy at least not entirely fanciful. There are challenging tasks of interpretation alongside the searching. Much of the pioneering work Williams started in Keywords and elsewhere, tracing meaning backwards and forwards between linguistic analysis and historical and political commentary, is there waiting to be continued.

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<sup>58</sup> Politics and Letters, 177. The question of the means of diffusion and propagation of meanings can be asked in different ways. As Stubbs notes in his discussion of keywords, there are affinities between how Williams outlines the issue and how Dan Sperber addresses the question of how representations (which may be much longer than individual words, and might for example include verbal images or whole stories) suddenly become contagious and spread across a society. As a model for analysis (with helpful contrast between how representations can establish a tradition or how alternatively they can spread like a rapid epidemic then just as quickly disappear), Sperber develops the idea of an ‘epidemiology of representations’. See especially, ‘Anthropology and Psychology: towards an epidemiology of representations’, in Dan Sperber, Explaining Culture: a naturalistic approach (Blackwell, Oxford, 1996), 56-76.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, Politics & Letters, 177 - 8