

Keywords revisited: *personality* and *personal* in the light of the third edition of the *OED*

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The documentation provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* gave the crucial starting point for the studies in lexical and cultural history in Raymond Williams's *Keywords*. I will argue that the *OED* and its historical and descriptive methodology provides the most secure basis for any study of key terms in culture and society today, even in the age of large electronic corpora and text collections. I will look in detail at the changing documentation provided for some of the words discussed by Williams in the new revised edition of the *OED* that is currently in progress. In so doing, I will consider how the changing tools, resources, and methodologies available to the lexicographer today can also be of use to anyone attempting a study on the lines of Williams's *Keywords*. I will also consider ways in which the aims and objectives of such a study may differ from those of historical lexicography, and I will attempt to make some suggestions of tools and approaches which might be best suited for the compilation of the lexical data to provide the basis for a new *Keywords*.

In the preface to *Keywords*,¹ Raymond Williams refers twice to the importance of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in the development of his study. Firstly, he gives a very engaging anecdotal account of when he first looked at the *OED* entry for the word *culture* as he was beginning to consider recent shifts in the meaning of that word:

One day in the basement of the Public Library at Seaford, where we had gone to live, I looked up *culture*, almost casually, in one of the thirteen volumes of what we now usually call the *OED*: the *Oxford New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. It was like a shock of recognition. The changes of sense I had been trying to understand had begun in English, it seemed, in the early

¹ R. Williams *Keywords* (revised ed.; London, Fontana: 1983). Henceforth: *Keywords*.

nineteenth century. The connections I had sensed with class and art, with industry and democracy, took on, in the language, not only an intellectual but an historical shape.²

Some important caveats follow, as they do also in the more detailed account of the role of the *OED* in the preparation specifically of *Keywords* which follows later in the preface. However, in these detailed comments Williams strikes precisely the notes which I would like to take up in a discussion of the relevance of the new edition of the *OED* to any new consideration of key words on Williams's model. Firstly, he comments that "few inquiries into particular words end with the great *Dictionary*'s account, but even fewer could start with any confidence if it were not there". He draws attention crucially and perceptively to the date of the dictionary entries which he is consulting:

I have been very aware of the period in which the *Dictionary* was made: in effect from the 1880s to the 1920s (the first example of the current series of Supplements shows addition rather than revision). This has two disadvantages: that in some important words the evidence for developed twentieth-century usage is not really available; and that in a number of cases, especially in certain sensitive social and political terms, the presuppositions of orthodox opinion in that period either show through or are not far below the surface.³

Two further points are worth quoting verbatim:

Secondly, for all its deep interest in meanings, the *Dictionary* is primarily philological and etymological; one of the effects of this is that it is much better on range and variation than on connection and interaction. ... Thirdly, in certain areas I have been reminded very sharply of the change of perspective which has recently occurred in studies of language: for obvious reasons (if only from the basic orthodox training in dead languages) the written language used to be taken as the real source of authority, with the spoken language as in effect derived from it; whereas now it is much more clearly realized that the real situation is usually the other way round. ... Checking the latest Supplement for the generalizing contemporary use of *communications*, I found an example and a date which happened to be from one of my own articles. Not only could written examples have been found from an earlier date, but I know

² *Keywords* p.13.

³ *Keywords* p.18.

that this sense was being used in conversation and discussion, and in American English, very much earlier.⁴

I have of course drawn these quotations selectively from a much fuller argument which the interested reader should read in full. However, I have chosen each of them as an invaluable springboard for some questions which I would like to explore a little further.

Firstly, and most straightforwardly, the *OED* is now being fully revised, and not simply supplemented. At time of writing, approximately one tenth of the full alphabetical range of the dictionary has been published in revised form online, beginning at the letter M and finishing at present in the middle of the letter P (at POMAK).⁵ This alphabetical range obviously embraces a number of the words included in Williams's *Keywords*. I will look in detail at some aspects of the revised treatments of two of them, *personality* and *personal*. I will examine how changed documentation in the new edition affects the historical account given by Williams. Just as importantly though, I will look at the implications that some aspects of the evolving policies, procedures, and methodologies of the dictionary could have for word studies in the tradition of *Keywords*, and also at how the resources available to the lexicographer, and perhaps also to the analyst of key words, have changed in recent decades.

The *OED3* entry for PERSONALITY *n.* provides an immediate and striking example of how lexicographical antedating of words and senses can have implications for the summary accounts of word histories given in *Keywords*. Williams comments:

There has been a specialized C20 development – significantly, as so often, in both politics and entertainment – of a new noun from the most limited sense. There are ‘leading personalities’ (**personages** or, in an early specialized use, **persons; Very Important Persons** as the phrase now goes) but there are also, emphatically, ‘Personalities’. These are perhaps now more often well-known than lively people, though the sense of liveliness is intended to be close. In this use, presumably, most people are not ‘personalities’.⁶

⁴ *Keywords* p.19.

⁵ For introductory material on *OED3* see www.oed.com. On the third edition generally see also John Simpson, Edmund Weiner, and Philip Durkin, ‘The *Oxford English Dictionary* Today’, *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 102 (2004), 335-81, and see also further references given in John Simpson ‘The *OED* and collaborative research into the history of English’, *Anglia* 122 (2004), 185-208.

⁶ *Keywords* pp.233-4.

This passage (as indeed the bulk of the entry “Personality”) remains unchanged in the second edition of *Keywords*, although in fact volume III of the *OED Supplement*, published in 1981, provides a definition for this sense, and a first quotation which is in fact from the late nineteenth century, and which appears to show the same sense:

OED2:

3b. A person who stands out from others either by virtue of strong or unusual character or because his position makes him a focus for some form of public interest.

1889 G. B. SHAW in *Church Reformer* Mar. 68/1 Individuality is concentrated, fixed, gripped in one exceptionally gifted man, who is consequently what we call a personality, a man pre-eminently himself, impossible to disguise. 1919 V. WOOLF *Night & Day* iv. 46 I've only seen her once or twice, but she seems to me to be what one calls a ‘personality’. 1933 *Radio Times* 14 Apr. 82/3, I apply what may seem a whimsical test to broadcasting personalities. I ask myself if I would care to meet and talk with them in the flesh.

I think that there are perhaps interesting questions here about the development of the focal sense. Williams’s “liveliness” seems to be at play in the quotation from Virginia Woolf, “well-known” in the *Radio Times* example; Shaw is perhaps rather more of an outlier, perhaps in this context appearing genuinely as a precursor. However, the *OED3* entry changes the picture again, with a new definition, and a new first quotation:

3b. *spec.* A person who is well known by virtue of having a strong or unusual character. Also: an important or famous person; a celebrity.

1848 T. DE QUINCEY *Poetry of Pope* in *Coll. Wks.* (1889-90) XI. 51 The withdrawal..from a dramatic poet..of any false lustre which he has owed to his momentary connexion with what we may call the personalities of a fleeting generation.

The De Quincey example seems much more securely to show the sense that Williams is referring to, and to push this back to the middle of the nineteenth century.

Interestingly, De Quincey appears to flag this as a new or novel use, but perhaps another antedating will one day force us to review that assumption. It is also interesting to note the vindication of (or at least concurrence with) Williams’s identification of the salient semantic feature “well-known” in the revised *OED*

definition. Again though, the De Quincey example suggests that perhaps this component of the sense was already alive and well in the mid nineteenth century.

I would like to introduce a further strand at this point, taking up I hope not too defensively Williams's reference to the etymological component of the *OED*. The new edition of the *OED* pays a good deal of attention to the foreign-language precursors and parallels of English words, and in particular looks closely at the senses of the donor word and their history when the lexicographical and other resources available for the language in question make this possible.⁷ Indeed, Williams himself noted the importance of this sort of approach:⁸

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.⁹

French is today particularly well blessed with lexicographical resources, and it is often possible to make outline comparisons of the senses of a word in French and in English. For *personality* the *OED3* entry does precisely this, among other points noting that the French word is recorded with the sense 'important or famous person' from 1867 – thus not quite so early as our De Quincey example, but adding a Continental dimension to our picture of currency of this sense in the mid to late nineteenth century, and again pointing to "well-known" as a key element of the word's meaning.

Another striking illustration is provided by the etymology, first definition, and earliest quotations for the word *personnel* in the first edition and in *OED3*:

OED1:

[mod.F., n. use of *personnel* adj., personal, as contrasted with *matériel* material, e.g. *le matériel et le personnel d'une armée*. In earlier use anglicized; see PERSONAL B. 4.]

⁷ For an overview of *OED3*'s etymological work see Philip Durkin, 'Root and Branch: Revising the Etymological Component of the OED', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 97 (1999), 1-50.

⁸ For further illustration of the same approach in *Keywords* see also Alan Durant, 'Raymond Williams's Keywords: investigating meanings "offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed"', *Critical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

⁹ *Keywords* p.20.

1. a. The body of persons engaged in any service or employment, esp. in a public institution, as an army, navy, hospital, etc.; the human as distinct from the matériel or material equipment (of an institution, undertaking, etc.).

In quot. 1834 used in the French sense of ‘the sum of qualities which make up the character’: but this can hardly be considered as more than an isolated use in Eng.

[1834 *Edin. Rev.* LIX. 329 In their hands..the personnel of the robbers [became] more truculent.]

1837 J. S. MILL in *Westm. Rev.* XXVIII. 25 In moments of general enthusiasm it is enough that a party carries the favourite banner; but in the intervals between those moments, its importance depends upon the confidence inspired by its personnel.

OED3:

[< French *personnel* (adjective) PERSONAL adj., in early use in English contrasted with MATÉRIEL n., which may have given rise to this use in English; the corresponding use as noun is not recorded in French until 1831 (and then app. with no association with *matériel*); corresponding use of German *Personal* is, however, found earlier (end of the 18th cent. as *Personale*), and this may have been the model for the use in both English and French. Cf. slightly earlier PERSONAL n. 6, perh. also after German; it is possible that the German use was first adapted in English as *personal*, and subsequently modified to the French form *personnel* by association with the French loanword MATÉRIEL n. In sense 2 prob. independently after French *personnel* the physical appearance of a person (1812).]

1. a. The body of people employed in an organization, or engaged in a service or undertaking, esp. of a military nature; staff, employees collectively. Now usu. with pl. concord.

In early use freq. contrasted with the matériel or material equipment used in an organization or an undertaking. Cf. MATÉRIEL n. 2.

1819 W. T. W. TONE *Ess. improving National Forces* App. I. 97 Every thing relative to the personnel and materiel of the artillery. 1837 J. S. MILL in *London & Westm. Rev.* 28 25 In moments of general enthusiasm it is enough that a party carries the favourite banner; but in the intervals between those

moments, its importance depends upon the confidence inspired by its personnel.

Here there is certainly more detail, but crucially there is also much more attention given to how the use of the word in English compares with the use in other languages. OED2 assumed antecedent noun use in French, and Williams very understandably followed this, referring to “**personnel**, which was used in French in distinction to *matériel*, often in descriptions of an army; it was adopted as a foreign word in English from eC19 and had lost its italics by lC19”¹⁰. We now have sufficiently good lexicographical resources for French that we can feel reasonably confident that the date of 1831 that they provide for the use corresponding to sense 1 is meaningful. Combined with our English antedating to 1819, this poses the very real possibility that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, the use in English does not in fact follow a direct French model at all. However, by casting our net a little wider again, a different model may just have been found in German. (Another intriguing question to pursue with regard to the word *personnel* would be what seems to be the very rapid replacement of the word by the expression *human resources* in the discourse of management and business, and particularly as the name of a department in an organization. Although outside the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to investigate any associated discussion in the technical literature of management, and to trace the renaming of departments in particular organizations.)

The importance of looking closely at synonyms or near synonyms within English is also clear from almost any entry in Williams’s *Keywords*. Returning to the nineteenth-century uses of *personality*, the picture may be rounded out a little further by looking at the contemporary evidence for one of the other terms that Williams mentions, *personage*. The *OED3* entry for this word gives as the first sense “A person of high rank, distinction, or importance; a person of note. Freq. with qualifying word, as *great, important*, etc.”, but it is interesting that the nineteenth-century quotations show examples of use without a qualifying word in precisely the same period in which we first find the distinctive use of *personality*, albeit with a difference of meaning, here clearly “important person” rather than “a person who is well known by virtue of having a strong or unusual character”:

¹⁰ *Keywords* p.233.

1845 B. DISRAELI *Sybil* vii, Sir John Warren bought another estate, and picked up another borough. He was fast becoming a personage. 1893 F. F. MOORE *I forbid Banns* (1899) 120 Lady Ashenthorpe was a Personage. That she had become a Personage, proved that she possessed a large amount of tact.

Our intuitions might lead us next to compare the modern weakened sense of *celebrity* and its history. However, the most important tool to facilitate this sort of investigation of near, full, or partial synonyms is tantalizingly close: when published, and particularly in its electronic form, the *Historical Thesaurus of English* will make it possible to investigate many more such connections easily, rapidly, and systematically.¹¹ It will be a vital tool in addressing Williams's concern that the *OED* "is much better on range and variation than on connection and interaction". Used, as it is intended to be, in conjunction with the dictionary, the *HTE* may indeed open up new avenues of investigation for a number of items in Williams's *Keywords* list.

It might be thought that electronic corpora would make it simple, if a little time-consuming, to generate one's own documentation on the history of a given word in much more detail than that provided by the *OED*. An electronic corpus can give ready access to large numbers of illustrations of a word, typically displayed in a KWIC ("KeyWord In Context") format to facilitate browsing of examples. If the word is relatively common, we may be swamped with results, and we may want to narrow our focus by looking at particular collocations, or we may want a piece of software to generate a list of the most frequent collocations for us, to provide a snapshot of the word's use.

For contemporary (or near-contemporary) usage, a carefully constructed corpus such as the one hundred million word *British National Corpus (BNC)* can provide a rich picture of a word's actual use, reflecting different genres and registers through its carefully selected range of texts, and even permitting some comparison of spoken and written use. However, for rarer words it may be found that even large corpora like the *BNC* do not provide enough examples to give the sort of detailed picture that we would like, and we may need to turn to the next generation of much larger corpora, as I will illustrate below.

As regards diachronic work, Jonathon Green has provided a recent account of a future of digitized plenty in *Critical Quarterly*:

¹¹ For information on the *Historical Thesaurus of English*, a project based at the University of Glasgow, see <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/SESLI/EngLang/thesaur/homepage.htm>.

The reality for every lexicographer is that the field of play is constantly changing size and the goalposts continually move. The plenitude of sources increases almost daily; late last year Microsoft announced a partnership with the British Library to digitise vast chunks of its unique collection. Elsewhere in Europe national libraries have similar schemes in place. And the Google debate rumbles on.¹²

But, as Green notes, “that is still the future”.

The situation today is rather more constrained. Among the large corpora, *LOB* and *FLOB* for British English and *Brown* and *Frown* for U.S. English permit some diachronic comparison between language use in the years 1961 and 1991, but for a researcher of keywords this may provide simply two tantalizing moments in time. At 1 million words each, the corpora are also rather small for work on lexis. (A project which intends to provide similar slices from 1901 and 1931 is currently being led by Paul Rayson of Lancaster University: see <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/20thCenturyEnglish/>.)

When we turn to historical corpora in the strict sense – that is to say, carefully selected representative samples of language covering a range of years or periods – there is little currently available that can be of significant help to the researcher of individual word histories. The justly famous *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*, for instance, has revolutionized many aspects of linguistic research on Old English, Middle English, and early modern English, but at approximately 1.5 million words in total is too small to yield significant information on word histories, aside from the commonest function words and other grammatical items.

What if we look beyond corpora in the strict sense, to other large collections of electronic texts? Perhaps the ideal here is represented by *Eighteenth-century Collections Online*. The full text of 150,000 printed volumes is available for searching online, giving immediate access to a huge library of material, albeit with a search interface that can make checking through large numbers of matches rather time-consuming. But there is no comparable collection available at present for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To pick out some of the highlights: *Making of America* gives access to a large number of U.S. books and journals from the nineteenth century. *JSTOR* makes it possible to search the full run of some journals

¹² Jonathon Green “Slang By Dates” in *Critical Quarterly* vol. 48 no. 1 (Spring 2006) 99-104.

for a span of many decades (although not all institutions will have subscribed to its full range of journals). *The Times Digital Archive, 1785-1985* is a fairly self-explanatory resource, giving access to the full text of a hugely influential British newspaper over the whole of a two-hundred-year period. But even when all such sources are taken together, we are a very long way from having the materials for a fully representative picture of the use of English words in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

To deepen the gloom somewhat further, many of the words in the *Keywords* list are relatively common, and will yield many examples in any very large database. If our interest is in spotting shifting senses, and even in drilling down to a deeper level of semantic distinction than is shown by *OED*'s analysis of senses, then our task may well be very formidable, in just the area where *OED* relies the most on its own targeted reading programmes. Searching for use in the proximity of key terms may prove the only practical tool, but we must be very careful that prior selection of the key terms does not skew the results. We must decide whether the objective is a manageable "smash and grab", looking to pick out exciting examples which prompt further reflection and inform a discussion along the lines of one of Williams's *Keywords* entries, or whether instead the objective is to make an exhaustive survey of all examples, only to find this superseded when, inevitably, fuller and more balanced resources become available in due course. In particular, the resources currently available make any accurate statistically based assessment of the relative frequencies of particular senses of a word in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries almost impossible, quite apart from the problems of defining the boundaries between particular senses.

The *OED* can again prove a valuable tool in tracing significant patterns of collocations diachronically. Williams clearly realized this, and in a number of his *Keywords* entries he makes extensive use of the compounds shown by a word in different periods of its history as an index to its changing meanings. His article on *private* is a very good example of this. The compounds listed by the *OED* must be approached carefully; they have been included largely on the basis of complexity of meaning, provided that they exceed a given base level of frequency. However, the coverage is diachronic, and is on the firm basis of extensive reading programmes in addition to electronic databases. For instance, the compounds listed in *OED3* for

personality (both within the entry itself and at headword level) are an instructive group:

compound	date of first quotation	source of first quotation
personality type	1911	<i>Amer. Jrnl. Sociol.</i>
personality defect	1919	<i>Jrnl. Philos., Psychol. & Sci. Methods</i>
personality disorder	1919	<i>N.Y. Times</i>
personality problem	1920	<i>Amer. Jrnl. Insanity</i>
personality trait	1921	<i>Jrnl. Abnormal Psychol.</i>
personality profile	1922	H. L. Hollingworth <i>Judging Human Char.</i>
personality cult	1927	<i>Social Forces</i>
personality factor	1927	<i>Social Forces</i>
personality pattern	1927	<i>Social Forces</i>
personality test	1927	<i>Psychol. Bull.</i>
personality integration	1928	<i>Social Forces</i>
personality clash	1930	<i>Jrnl. Educ. Sociol.</i>
personality system	1930	<i>Jrnl. Abnormal & Social Psychol.</i>
personality inventory	1931	R. G. Bernreuter <i>The Personality Inventory</i>
personality structure	1932	<i>Amer. Jrnl. Sociol.</i>
personality variable	1933	<i>Jrnl Educ. Res.</i>
personality dynamics	1939	<i>Sociometry</i>
personality theory	1942	<i>Amer. Sociol. Rev.</i>
personality assessment	1944	<i>Psych. Abstr.</i>

These all seem to originate from two subject fields, psychology and sociology, and they thus seem to point up something of a gap in Williams's article, where use of the term in these fields is not mentioned. Additionally, all are first dated to within a span of only 33 years, from 1911 to 1944. Only one dates from before the end of the First World War, and none from after the end of the Second World War. We therefore have some very striking chronological boundaries for productive compounding of the word *personality*, revealing a short period in which 19 specialist terms were first used, and evidently reflecting a period in which the word was a key term in the field of psychology, giving rise to a small family of new terminology.

A search for the same compounds in the full text of six psychology journals on *JSTOR* (the runs of the earliest of which extend back to the late nineteenth century) gives interesting results. The earliest dates for these compounds in the psychology journals on *JSTOR* are: *personality type* 1923, *personality defect* 1934, *personality disorder* 1936, *personality problem* 1929, *personality trait* 1923, *personality profile* 1942, *personality cult* no matches, *personality factor* 1928, *personality pattern* 1929, *personality test* 1927, *personality integration* 1943, *personality clash* 1941 (only 3 matches in total), *personality system* 1938, *personality inventory* 1935, *personality structure* 1935, *personality variable* 1936, *personality dynamics* 1938, *personality theory* 1936, *personality assessment* 1949. The earliest dates of most the compounds in these journals are later than those in *OED3*, some of them by quite a wide margin. In one case, *personality theory*, there is an antedating of six years, from 1942 to 1936, and in another, *personality dynamics*, there is an antedating by one year from 1939 to 1938; this is unsurprising, in an environment where electronic databases are being enriched and enlarged all of the time, and where further antedatings, usually but not always small, can often be found even to revised *OED* entries. More interesting are the one case where no matches are found, *personality cult*, and also *personality clash*, which has only three matches, compared with over a hundred for most of these compounds. In both of these cases the *OED* first examples are from sociology rather than strictly speaking psychology sources, and likewise none of the subsequent *OED* quotations for either of these two compounds are from psychology sources.

The earliest dates for these compounds in 42 sociology journals on *JSTOR* (two of which are represented by runs dating back to the nineteenth century, and five more by runs dating back to before the end of the Second World War) are: *personality type* 1911, *personality defect* 1923, *personality disorder* 1925, *personality problem* 1925, *personality trait* 1923, *personality profile* 1928, *personality cult* 1958, *personality factor* 1915, *personality pattern* 1926, *personality test* 1923, *personality integration* 1928, *personality clash* 1929, *personality system* 1926, *personality inventory* 1933, *personality structure* 1932, *personality variable* 1937, *personality dynamics* 1939, *personality theory* 1942, *personality assessment* 1947. This time we have a full house: all of the *OED* compounds are represented. The majority, though not all, of the compounds have earlier first dates in these journals than in the psychology journals. (Very many of these first examples are in fact from *The American Journal of Sociology*, and a considerable number of them concern the analysis or evaluation of

military personnel.) There are four further antedatings to the *OED*: *personality factor* by twelve years, *personality pattern* by one year, *personality test* by four years, and *personality clash* (of which we had only three examples in the psychology journals) by one year. We also seem to have a further antedating to the *OED*, *personality system*, by four years, but closer inspection reveals this to be a rogue example, in which the two words are adjacent contextually but do not form an established compound: “Reduce, then, the personality system of seeing and recording to the position of one among many possible systems of seeing and recording”. (*The American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 32 (1926) No. 3 p.459.)

Arguably, much of this information is already found in the *OED* entry, but widening our sampling certainly helps to enrich the picture, and reinforce the initial findings. It also helps to sharpen our focus on the subject areas in which these compounds arise. We should be cautious here: *JSTOR* gave us 42 sociology journals compared to six for psychology, and perhaps some important early psychology journals could be missing from this list (I have not looked into this question further). However, the fact that two of the compounds gave either no matches at all or very few matches in any of the psychology journals is perhaps rather more telling. Importantly, both *OED* and *JSTOR* also testify to the continuing use of most of these compounds.

Corpora available today cannot give us a comparable picture of chronological development. What they can do, however, is give us a good picture of frequency within a particular period. For this particular period, we can also gain a crude check that nothing of importance has escaped *OED*'s net among collocations of very transparent meaning. If we look at a widely-used large corpus (one hundred million words of text) reflecting British English usage in a wide variety of registers from the early 1990s, namely the *BNC*, the following are the most frequently occurring compounds with *personality* as modifier of another noun (including plural forms as well as singulars in the totals).¹³ For comparison, I also give the total number of matches on Google (as of September 2006).

personality trait (BNC 65 matches) (Google 3,507,000 matches)

personality clash (BNC 38 matches) (Google 274,000 matches)

personality disorder (BNC 35 matches) (Google 7,390,000 matches)

¹³ For much more information on the *BNC* and its applications see <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>.

personality type (BNC 30 matches) (Google 3,110,000 matches)
personality cult (BNC 29 matches) (Google 310,000 matches)
personality change (BNC 24 matches) (Google 1,001,000 matches)
personality characteristic (BNC 26 matches) (Google 785,000 matches)
personality test (BNC 19 matches) (Google 7,580,000 matches)

Here the picture is quite a reassuring one: we see continuing vitality for items from the *OED* list, and we find no striking new movements into different semantic fields. However, we may also observe that the total numbers of matches in the *BNC* are small, and when the numbers are this small we may begin to wonder how representative a picture we are gaining. Google gives far more examples, but its coverage may well be skewed by over-representation of certain types of discourse, registers, text types, etc. Providing more detailed figures may be a task for the next generation of larger synchronic corpora, such as the *Oxford English Corpus*, consisting of approximately one billion words of tagged text drawn from web sources but with the intention of providing properly profiled representation of different varieties of English, different genres and text types, etc.¹⁴ We may also want to consider using different search software, which will look at the significance of certain collocations, sorting them according to their salience, rather than simply looking at the crude totals of matches.¹⁵ However, these are perhaps tasks for the future, albeit the near future.

The picture that is gained by the same method of simply arranging all of the *OED* compounds in chronological order for the word *personal* is more complex but no less instructive. The historical period is much broader, from the end of the fourteenth century through to the end of the twentieth, showing a reasonable crop of new compounds in all stages of the word's history in modern English, with, as one would normally expect, a greater frequency of items from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards:

¹⁴ On the *Oxford English Corpus* see <http://www.askoxford.com/oec>.

¹⁵ On one such software tool, the Sketch Engine, see <http://www.sketchengine.co.uk/>.

<i>compound</i>	<i>date of first quotation</i>	<i>source of first quotation</i>
personal noun	a1398	J. Trevisa tr. Bartholomaeus Anglicus <i>De Proprietatibus Rerum</i>
personal service	1582	R. Mulcaster <i>1st Pt. Elementarie</i>
personal appearance	1585	<i>Act 27 Eliz.</i>
personal oath	1587	R. Holinshed <i>Chron.</i>
personal name	a1631	J. Donne <i>Serm.</i>
personal injury	1655	W. Sales <i>Theophania</i>
personal liberty	1655	H. L'Estrange <i>Reign King Charles</i>
personal pronoun	1668	Bp. J. Wilkins <i>Ess. Real Char.</i>
personal bill	1683	<i>Colonial Rec. Pennsylvania</i>
personal identity	1694	J. Locke <i>Ess. Humane Understanding</i>
personal diligence	1700	in J. Stuart <i>Misc. Spalding Club</i> (1846)
personal execution	a1768	J. Erskine <i>Inst. Law Scotl.</i>
personal allowance	1796	W. Moss <i>Liverpool Guide</i>
personal representative	1796	A. Anstruther <i>Rep. Cases Court of Exchequer</i>
personal recognizance	1818	<i>Times</i>
personal god	1825	S. T. Coleridge <i>Aids to Reflection</i>
personal contract	1832	R. V. Barnewall & C. Cresswell <i>Rep. Cases King's Bench</i>
personal explanation	1844	T. E. May <i>Law of Parl.</i>
personal equation	1845	<i>Penny Cycl.</i>
personal call	1845	N. P. Willis <i>Dashes at Life with Free Pencil</i>
personal government	1849	<i>Examiner</i>
personal distance	1853	J. R. BEARD <i>Toussaint l'Ouverture</i>
personal loan	1853	J. C. Spencer <i>Argument Def. Rev. Eliphalet Nott</i>
personal column	1859	J. W. De Forest <i>Seacliff</i>
personal hygiene	1859	J. Bell <i>Rep. Importance Sanitary Meas. to Cities</i>
personal ledger	1864	R. Morris <i>Banks of N. Y.</i>
personal touch	1876	<i>Atlantic Monthly</i>
personal banker	1884	<i>Daily Gaz.</i>
personal idealism	1897	J. Royce et al. <i>Conception of God</i>
personal idealist	1902	H. Sturt <i>Personal Idealism</i>
personal foul	1910	<i>Indianapolis Star</i>
personal pension plan	1936	<i>Sheboygan (Wisconsin) Press</i>
personal space	1937	D. Katz <i>Animals & Men</i>
personal shopper	1941	<i>William & Mary Q.</i>

personal high	1946	<i>N.Y. Times</i>
personal best	1952	<i>Times</i>
personal construct	1952	S. M. Poch <i>Study of Changes in Personal Constructs</i>
personal alarm	1954	<i>Times</i>
personal organizer	1954	<i>N.Y. Times Mag.</i>
personal computer	1959	<i>Datamation</i>
personal caller	1966	<i>Listener</i>
personal computing	1966	<i>Math. of Computation</i>
personal day	1970	<i>Indiana (Pa.) Evening Gaz.</i>
personal flotation device	1972	<i>News (Frederick, Maryland)</i>
personal prelature	1981	<i>Times</i>
personal information manager	1985	<i>Business Week</i>
personal watercraft	1987	<i>Boating Industry</i>
personal digital assistant	1992	<i>PR Newswire</i>

Here some more caution is needed than with the compounds of *personality*. Some of the compounds, for instance *personal appearance*, are polysemous, and the first date given is only for the first-recorded of the two senses (in this case the sense “attendance in person” is recorded from 1585, but the sense “the visual aspect of a person” is recorded only from 1842). However, for the purposes of gaining a brief overview the list is useful. The earliest formation, *personal noun*, is a grammatical term, as is *personal pronoun* in the seventeenth century. The early formations contain a number of items concerned with law and with legal rights, such as *personal oath*, *personal injury*, *personal execution*. More recent formations show a marked movement away from individual rights and responsibilities, instead tending to denote things which are for the private benefit of an individual, such as *personal shopper*, *personal organizer*, *personal computer*, or which are individual achievements, as *personal high* or *personal best*. Increasing numbers of the formations denote things which may be possessed by an individual, but which crucially are not possessed by all individuals; it is also clear that the term has become attractive to advertisers, and to those promoting products or concepts more generally. In more traditional semantic terms, a process of amelioration is fairly evident, as a formerly fairly neutral term takes on increasingly positive connotations. We may see this amelioration also in such formations as *personal touch*, defined as “a personal element introduced into something otherwise institutional or impersonal”. From the point of view of cultural

history, we appear to have a term which can serve as a useful index to the growing importance of consumerism and individualism.

Here is the list of the most frequent compounds with *personal* modifying a noun from the *BNC*, with the total number of matches for the same search strings from Google for comparison:

personal computer (BNC 1124 matches) (Google 51,800,000 matches)

personal injury (BNC 435 matches) (Google 39,950,000 matches)

personal experience (BNC 306 matches) (Google 22,050,000 matches)

personal relationship (BNC 233 matches) (Google 9,430,000 matches)

personal life (BNC 210 matches) (Google 2,670,000 matches)

personal pension (BNC 184 matches) (Google 844,000 matches)

personal contact (BNC 165 matches) (Google 2,160,000 matches)

personal development (BNC 164 matches) (Google 5,360,000 matches)

personal service (BNC 159 matches) (Google 2,370,000 matches)

personal interest (BNC 153 matches) (Google 3,700,000 matches)

personal knowledge (BNC 145 matches) (Google 1,220,000 matches)

personal responsibility (BNC 131 matches) (Google 7,936,000 matches)

personal communication (BNC 130 matches) (Google 1,640,000)

personal quality (BNC 119 matches) (Google 1,390,000 matches)

personal assistant (BNC 114 matches) (Google 4,894,000 matches)

Again, we should be slightly wary of crude corpus data. To list just a few of the issues: Should we group together singular and plural forms in such cases as *personal injury* and *personal injuries*, or *personal experience* and *personal experiences*? The plural form *personal qualities* is much more common than the singular *personal quality*. How many of the matches for *personal information* in fact show this expression as the first element of longer compounds, such as OED's *personal information manager*? I have left out matches for the plural of *personal communication* since it is clear that the vast majority are the as the head of a longer noun phrase (such as *personal communications device*), but the uses of the singular form are also varied and need to be treated with caution.

However, the list does also highlight some transparent compounds which should perhaps be included in the *OED*, and which are certainly of interest for this sort of

survey, for instance *personal responsibility*. The term is an interesting one: there may be many contexts in which it is necessary to distinguish between a *personal responsibility* and for instance a *collective responsibility* or an *official responsibility*. However, the very high number of matches would be surprising if most uses of the expression were in contexts where such a distinction needed to be made, and inspection of individual cases makes it clear that a bleaching of semantic content has occurred here: to take *personal responsibility* for something is, in terms of literal meaning, exactly the same as taking *responsibility* for it *tout court*, the crucial difference being that *personal responsibility* brings with it positive connotations of *personal attention* and the generally positive connotations of the word *personal* in contemporary society.

A useful further illustration of the development of *personal* is provided by the derivative *personalize*. This word was originally modelled on French *personnaliser*, and there is nothing in the history of the word in English before the twentieth century which cannot be explained as the result of fairly close adherence to the usage found in French; *OED*'s senses 1 and 2 below show no distinctive innovations in the word's history within English which occur independently of its French model. However, in the early twentieth century the picture changes significantly with the appearance of *OED*'s sense 3. This is an innovation within English (and is not reflected in French until decades later, in 1959). Significantly, it is an innovation that is found originally in U.S. English, and which first arose very specifically in the world of consumer goods.

OED3 PERSONALIZE v., etymology and senses section:

[< PERSONAL adj. + -IZE suffix, after French *personnaliser* to accord a personal character to (a thing or abstraction), to personify (1704), to make personal allusions or attacks (c1768), to make (something) identifiable as belonging to a particular individual (1959, after English). Cf. earlier PERSONALIZING n. Cf. PERSONATE v., PERSONIZE v., PERSONIFY v.]

1. *trans.* To represent in or as a person, or as having human attributes; to personify, embody.

1747 W. Warburton *Wks. Shakespeare* V. 354 (note) Danger is personalized as serving in the rebel army, and shaking the established government. 1754 A. Murphy *Gray's Inn Jnl.* No. 82, The Poets are fond of personalizing both physical and moral Qualities. 1855 G. W. Burnap *Pop. Objections to*

Unitarian Christianity 142 The proper, distinct, and real character of the [Holy] Spirit is that of a divine power..., and it is only personalized by idioms of speech. 1893 A. M. FAIRBAIRN *Place Christ in Mod. Theol.* I. ii. §1. 48
 What sort of religious ideal did He personalize? 1948 *Times* 24 Sept. 5/5 This vice of personalizing a nation or race and attributing to it as a person the characteristics, real or imaginary, of some of the individuals composing it.
 1991 G. RICHARDS *Philos. Gandhi* (BNC) 5 All the names and forms attributed to this indefinable power are, in Gandhi's view, symbols, and attempts to personalize God.

2. *trans.* To cause an issue, argument, etc., to become concerned with or emphasize individual persons or personal feelings, rather than general or abstract matters; to make personal.

1892 *Polit. Sci. Q.* 7 115 This abuse increased the importance of single leaders, personalized politics and made the state a battle-field of selfish interests. 1902 *Anaconda* (Montana) *Standard* 25 Jan. 8/3 Each soul must find its own belief or rest in dead tradition. To accept the thought of today is as futile as to accept the old creeds without rethinking, personalizing them anew. 1948 *Times* 10 Feb. 4/1 He..charged them with having vulgarly personalized issues of principle. 1991 *Sci. News* 26 Jan. 62 (advt.) By structuring the book as one child's 'diary' from six weeks to four years, Stern personalizes the rich theoretical information the book provides.

3. *trans. orig. U.S.* To make (a thing) identifiable as belonging to a particular individual, organization, etc., esp. by marking it with a name or set of initials. Also: to design or produce something to meet individual requirements; to customize.

1910 *Washington Post* 24 Sept. 3 (advt.) The Calvert label in a garment..identifies the best there is in Clothing Woolens; the highest grade of modeling and making. They've got the snap and the style that personalizes them; they've got the intrinsic worth that substantializes them. 1935 *Advt. for Mohawk Sheets* (Miller & Rhoads, Richmond, Va.), Now personalized with smart needlecrest initials. 1966 *Electronics* 31 Oct. 42/3 In the CP and EP, the memory is a plug-in unit that can be replaced in a few minutes, so that the design of either model can be quickly personalized for a special application.

1990 *New Jersey Goodlife* Jan.-Feb. 53/2 You can personalize a shower with body sprays, rainbars, jetstreams, and hand showers.

Conclusions

No audience well-disposed to Williams's *Keywords* is likely to be unaware of the merits and uses of the *OED*. However, the extent of *OED* revision currently in progress may not be so widely appreciated. I hope to have illustrated its implications for future work on the *Keywords* model, both in terms of the revised data available for words which have been published in the new edition, and, just as importantly, in terms of the potential of its developing methodology for other words which have not as yet been revisited by the dictionary editors.

As regards new electronic resources, it would be foolish to deny that they are transforming the practice of lexicography and are greatly enhancing the quality of its results. If used advisedly, they also have enormous potential to enhance any future work on the model of *Keywords* which takes information about word histories as its starting point. However, these new resources do not supersede the kind of diachronic data provided by a historical dictionary, and even when large diachronic corpora do become available, they will need to be used carefully in conjunction with more traditional resources if we are to gain a rich yet balanced and comprehensible picture of historical development in meaning.

Finally, as regards the words *personal* and *personality* themselves, I hope to have teased out a little more of a developing system of complex and interconnected meanings, which it would be hard to describe better than in Williams's own words:

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 variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Keywords* p.17.