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‘The significance is in the selection’: identifying contemporary keywords

Immediately before the conventional acknowledgements which close Raymond Williams’s Preface to Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society (1976), the author comments that his ‘publishers have been good enough to include some blank pages, not only for the convenience of making notes, but as a sign that the inquiry remains open, and that the author will welcome all amendments, corrections and additions’.¹

More than thirty years on, those blank pages seem to have offered mostly only symbolic promise (even if, in repeating his invitation in the Preface to the 1983 second edition, Williams did feel prompted to thank nearly thirty correspondents for specific suggestions).² To the extent that Williams’s invitation was ever taken up, copies of Keywords in active use will be annotated with ‘amendments, corrections and additions’ of three main kinds: firstly, extra meanings and quotations for words already in the book (illustrating, antedating or functioning as counterexamples to meanings given in particular entries); secondly, notes on connections between the meanings given for closely related headwords (refining semantic networks that Williams considered particularly important, and which inspired his own investigation, in Culture and Society 1780 – 1950, of the verbal cluster ‘culture’, ‘art’, ‘class’, ‘industry’, and ‘democracy’);³ and thirdly - at least equally likely, I suspect - notes on different words altogether, words not included in Williams’s list but for which a case for inclusion might have been made.

The strong likelihood of notes of this third type would not have surprised the author of Keywords. In a passage earlier in the Preface, Williams records how he had initially selected 60 words from a much longer list, of around 200, and written short essays on each for inclusion as a notional appendix to Culture and Society. When the publishers rejected the idea of this appendix ‘vocabulary’, for reasons of space, Williams continued to collect examples, found new points of analysis, and added other words over a twenty-year period leading up to publication of the free-standing Keywords volume.

‘The significance’, Williams concludes, ‘is in the selection’. And he adds, ‘I realize how arbitrary some inclusions and exclusions may seem to others’.⁴

The issue of selection, inclusion and exclusion of candidate ‘keywords’ – both in more recent published volumes such as Tony Bennet et al’s New Keywords [2005]⁵ and as part of each of our intuitive mental lists - is as delicate, or awkward, now as it was then. In this article, accordingly, I consider what makes a word a candidate to be a keyword in Williams’s sense. As a way into exploring this issue, I report a discussion activity in which a group of ten scholars reflecting on Williams’s work, including myself, each nominated ten words in the published Keywords for removal from notional future editions (as no longer functioning as keywords of culture and society), then put forward for inclusion ten alternative words that now do. There will of course not be enough space to discuss the relative merits of each choice, or the significance of each person’s twenty choices viewed as a cluster; my discussion is limited to general issues. By way of conclusion, I draw together insights prompted by the exercise and consider whether criteria can be identified as regards what a ‘keyword’ is.

Vocabulary of culture and society

In an earlier article in this journal,⁶ I described how Williams’s ‘vocabulary of culture and society’ began as a set of files on individual words constantly updated on Williams’s bookshelf from the 1950s onwards. Those files were added to as Williams read and discussed works in teaching and for other purposes. Although his concern with keywords continued throughout his life (and is still reflected in late articles such as ‘Mining the Meaning: keywords in the miners’ strike’ (1988)),⁷ Williams also recognised that his work on ‘culture and society’ was in some sense a project of the 1950s and early 1960s. The relevant period began, he suggests, with his immediate post-war experience leading into the writing of Culture and Society 1780 – 1950 and reached a sense of completion of a ten-year body of work recorded at the end of the Introduction to The Long Revolution.⁸ Keywords itself gives entries for 110 key words, with a further 21 added for the second edition: a total of 131 headwords in all. Williams’s guide in selecting words appears to

have been that each keyword should be a complex, culturally defining word that serves both as a record of historical argument and as a resource through which we organise discussion and shape future action. Each word, Williams says, at some time virtually forced itself on him in the course of an argument it was being used to promote or rebut.

How exactly did Williams make choices about which words to include? Keywords, so the author tells us, is a ‘vocabulary’ not a dictionary. Principles governing selection of headwords, according to the Preface, are ‘more flexible’.⁹ By calling Keywords a vocabulary ‘of culture and society’, Williams also ensured that the book is suspended somewhere between a general vocabulary of words concerned with culture and society and a more specialised vocabulary of words which had shown themselves to be important in the tradition of writers discussed in Culture and Society. The relation between these two levels – lower-case semantic field and upper-case intellectual tradition – was crucial to Williams’s investigation of the cultural formation of the 1950s and 1960s. As subsequent social developments show, though -- especially developments in popular culture and in relation to the internet -- relations between largely literary traditions of thought and the forms taken by public communication (forms which are as a result essential to the ‘speech’ dimension of democratic politics) cannot be neatly projected from one period to another.¹⁰

Updating a word list

If links between discourse and social formation of even a general kind are not predictable, then where should we look now for words to include in a collection of ‘keywords’? When updating a dictionary (rather than a vocabulary or ‘record of an inquiry’ such as Keywords), an editor can draw on a number of tested strategies. He or she might aim for comprehensive coverage. There is no prospect of success if a lexicographer aspires to this, of course, as Samuel Johnson’s experience with his New Universal Dictionary of the English Language (1755) famously relates, and as modern dictionary-makers routinely acknowledge.¹¹ At least the principle of selection is clear, though, and doubts pass on to symptomatic omissions and peculiarities of definition. Alternatively, a modern editor can adopt a policy of selecting words and senses that meet

some standard of attested frequency as represented in a given corpus (as with Collins COBUILD and similar dictionary projects).¹² Or an editor might prepare entries for words judged to be especially useful to non-native speakers learning the language or children of a given age (as with pedagogic dictionaries).¹³ Or again, as many dictionary compilers have done throughout history, an editor might copy, then amend or supplement, a wordlist found in some other available dictionary.

What to do, though, in updating a domain-specific vocabulary or glossary rather than a dictionary? In some areas the semantic field seems to dictate its own answer, by being relatively clearly defined and/or function-related (as arguably for specialised terms associated with aerodynamics, angling, antibiotics, or archery). Or it may be possible to select items from a corpus of discourse representing a specialised field (such as business English, reflected in corpora tagged for sub-genres such as negotiation, interviews, formal/informal meetings, telephone calls, etc, like BEC or CANBEC¹⁴); in such circumstances the editor draws on patterns within the corpus in deciding on the wordlist, perhaps again starting with frequency as the main criterion. In each case there will be practical complications, if consistency and usefulness are to be balanced against one another. But complications are likely to be outweighed by practical benefits. And again the editorial criteria will be clear.

Judged against such parallels, a vocabulary of ‘culture and society’ presents considerable difficulties. Firstly, the field is extremely broad. In many respects it is also indeterminate. There is no self-evident body of usage to invoke; there is no professionally accredited lexicon to gloss; and there is only a mixed and incomplete historical corpus to inspect (e.g. no spoken data directly recorded before a certain date; vast amounts of occasional written discourse lost or destroyed that might challenge our beliefs about recency, frequency or saliency). Even in narrow definitions, ‘culture’ includes an ensemble of beliefs, rituals, social relationships, traditions, myths and stories; and ‘society’ brings in further, if subtly overlapping and intersecting, relationships, themes and concerns.

Difficulties presented by this situation are offset to some extent by the qualification that Williams was not concerned with simply *any* words in the domain of ‘culture and society’ - that would take you back to the entire lexicon, and to the OED’s

dilemmas in endeavouring to gather evidence for ‘the meaning of everything’).¹⁵

Williams’s interest was in words used to talk *about* the field of culture and society, words which have the effect of giving shape to our understanding and defining future priorities. That is why Williams’s ‘keywords’ are typically found in both general and technical (typically political, philosophical, psychological or aesthetic) contexts of use; in those contexts, their different senses collide in struggles over what ‘culture’ is, what its value and consequences are, and how it is best understood. The practical question of *how* to select headwords for a ‘vocabulary of culture and society’ in such circumstances -- even before ushering them towards the second hurdle of whether they are sufficiently ‘key’ -- requires consideration that is not only linguistic but social.

Words and social change

Since William's death in 1988, a variety of factors have affected both the currency of Keywords as a volume and the influence of particular key words in that volume.

Those factors may be well known but are worth repeating here. Some are geopolitical, including increased economic liberalism and globalisation, widespread retreat from explicitly socialist political ambitions, 9/11 and its aftermath, the influence of China and demise of the Soviet Union, near completion of British decolonisation, the end of Apartheid in South Africa, and global warming and intensified fears for the environment, to name just some.

Alongside geopolitical changes on this scale, there have been other factors, still tied in complex ways to the large-scale political shifts, that extend or redirect trends Williams already observed in how political structures are experienced: shifts in notions of family, community and national identity; greater prominence given to political questions of gender and ethnicity; changing experiences of individualism and consumerism; and a heightened sense of personal autonomy and privacy.

Other shifts again - still closely connected to both the personal experience and the larger political conditions - involve the means and channels of communication themselves: diversification of systems of media ownership and control; extension of available communication technologies in terms of output, function and geographical

reach; rapid expansion and pervasive influence of the internet as a source of information and opinion; and continued spread of English as an international language, both in business and because of the scale of its use on the internet.¹⁶

Continuing shifts of cultural and political landscape of these kinds reinforce the significance of keywords research. Cultural changes are largely understood (and gradually ‘naturalised’) in dialogue between different views taken of them; and dialogue depends for whatever level of coherence and intelligibility it achieves on how topics are conceptualised, connected and contrasted with one another in rhetorical strategies calculated to build support for, acceptance of, or resistance to each successive change. Words -- especially particularly weighted or hard-working ‘key’ words -- are central to these processes of understanding and negotiation.

While social change in this way confirms the importance of continuing work on keywords, however, the sheer scale of social change since publication of Keywords also serves as a reminder that no particular list of words, then or now, should be considered fixed or final. Changes in the means of communication in particular significantly alter conditions of public interaction, including those Williams assumed in targeting his original list of headwords. Connection between academic work, public debate, media content, and day-to-day conversation may at any time appear a settled condition of civic life; but in selecting keywords we should be sensitive to historical change in those conditions as a further set of relations within the field of discourse and social practice that Keywords set out to analyse.

Alternative strategies

Faced with editorial challenges presented by conditions of public discourse as well as by shifts in word meaning, we should consider three main updating strategies as alternative frameworks for defining what sorts of words we should look for, where, and why.

1. An editor might start (like the lexicographer who draws on an earlier dictionary) with Williams’s original list. His list of headwords was based, after all, on close

reading across an important 150 year period, from 1780 to 1950. Williams's words might therefore be thought to be embedded deeper into the language and culture than will have changed much in a generation. Williams also worked from a corpus, albeit not a carefully constructed, representative one: writings he was familiar with by canonical authors in a given English tradition (hence, partly, the description 'Left-Leavisite' sometimes applied to him).

Working from Williams's list would be likely to result in roughly the same headwords now as for 1976 or 1983: each word's meanings might have snowballed or need further elaboration; and there might be a sprinkling of new terms to add that Williams had overlooked or which have recently 'become more important in the period between that original list and the present time', as Williams put it in his Preface to the Second Edition of 1983.¹⁷ A number of other words may have become less consequential over the same period and no longer merit discussion. Updating in this way resembles what we must surmise Williams did in preparing his own second edition. Support for the core list is provided by the accounts of thinkers and writers presented in Culture and Society, reinforced by the more general argument (also presented there) that debate in successive social formations inflects a common stock of terms and concepts to meet new situations. Expectation of only marginal change in the wordlist in this way reflects an underlying belief: that, although interest in a historicised 'cultural' vocabulary may be triggered by a frisson of sudden change and surprise at people who 'just don't speak the same language',¹⁸ there is still continuity when you look closer, even as nuances of meaning for any given keyword alter.

2. A clear alternative to starting with Williams's list is to begin with the author's political commitments. By projecting these forward into present social circumstances, it might be possible to assess which words now present difficulties equivalent to those encountered by Williams in debates in which he participated. What makes a keyword 'key', an editor thinking along these lines might argue, is not so much its tendency to cause confusion as its concern with some fundamental issue of value, direction or social priority. New 'keyword' entries, of whatever

kind, need primarily to reflect an underlying political analysis or agenda and should extend or modernise (and so in that sense, 'update') political positions of the earlier analysis as much as its word histories.

An editorial strategy of this kind would have to start by engaging critically with Williams's 'situatedness'. His commitment to forms of common ownership - in the early 1960s, for instance, he went beyond usual proposals in suggesting this would be good even for cinemas - might then serve as an editorial litmus test, prompting discussion not only about what line to take on any particular issue but about conditions under which political positions in a keyword entry may shape, or - viewed from other perspectives - distort, the trajectory of semantic analysis.

Work building on Williams's achievements is importantly different from updating a glossary of angling or archery. It calls for a higher degree of critical engagement with the earlier author's thinking. Fresh analysis must construct, or will merely inherit or complacently presume, some position that an educated thinker - inevitably involved in a much changed set of actual relations between intellectual life, political involvement and cultural participation from Williams's - might out adopt in arguing through issues of culture and society. Achieving a credible editorial position calls for careful balance in how far the voice that comes through entries conveys the authority of a supposed objective dictionary editor; a particular authorial subjectivity; a systematic political position; and a more general ideology of the period.

3. The third strategy I believe is worth distinguishing starts not with the list or authorial viewpoint but with altered conditions of public debate. Change of discourse formation, an editor might suggest, queries the tradition-of-thinkers aspect of Williams's semantic work, which may now be flawed as a guide to editorial practice. The words that are problematic now may no longer be ones to be found in book culture and early television; contemporary keywords may need to be traced in the very different discourse environment of international and commercial multimedia. This third perspective calls for a whole new scan of cultural and political discourse, including more internationally (and across fields

such as human rights and environmental debates, popular science books, management consultancy, self-help and complaints websites and blogs, marketing and brand development materials, and daytime TV) if we are to discover where semantic bottlenecks and conflicts in cultural and political understanding in English now occur.

The value of a list of headwords constructed through a new political ‘scan’ of this kind would depend on how convincing the analysis of contemporary politics and letters turns out to be. In practice, it would be difficult to distinguish short-term buzzwords from deeper ‘key’ words, since the assumption would be as much of discontinuity within the historically influential vocabulary streams as of mainly the same words being re-used, albeit differently, from generation to generation. Potentially, a list of headwords produced from this starting point might contain a large number of new words in need of contextualisation in the long histories from which their current patterns of use are derived. Those histories might coincide at various points with Williams’s recognised authors, but it might be necessary to trace many new keywords in quite different traditions of expression from those appealed to in Culture and Society.

The ‘ten out, ten in’ exercise

A preliminary list of potential keywords could be constructed on the basis of any one of these three strategies (or some combination of them). Some words in the revised lists that would result -- or possibly most words, depending on which strategy is mainly followed -- will have appeared previously in Williams's Keywords; some other words will not. To evaluate proposed new choices, it is necessary to check how far each matches, on different dimensions, what has come to be understood theoretically as a ‘keyword’. Perhaps the best way of doing this is to toggle between particular cases and more abstract theoretical questions, rather than constantly circling general editorial dilemmas. Developing a framework for discussing difficult or marginal cases needs practice with a sample list. But where will a list of words for this purpose come from?

At a recent seminar¹⁹ a number of scholars interested in different ways in Williams's work undertook a practical exercise of identifying possible keywords: what might be called a 'ten out, ten in' task. In format, the exercise was inevitably more like a parlour game than a scientific experiment, and in any case generated data only from a self-selecting rather than representative group ('representativeness' in such an exercise is a complex question). The form of the activity should nevertheless not distract from its interest in other respects. The exercise explored how much consensus exists among a group of people with a common professional interest in what a list of contemporary cultural keywords might look like. Beyond this, the activity also drew attention to possible arguments for and against words seriously proposed by someone which nevertheless failed to command widespread support. If Williams is right that, as he put it, 'the significance, it can be said, is in the selection', then an exercise focusing on the *process* of 'selection' as much as on its results may, for all its obvious limitations, offer a way into what the keywords of culture and society now are.

The activity generated two lists: an 'outgoing' and an 'incoming' list. The consolidated list of 'ten outgoing' words produced by this group of ten participants, on this occasion, consisted of a total of 45 words selected by different members of the group from Williams's overall list of 131 (i.e. roughly one third of the total number were listed at least once by somebody).²⁰ That figure invites reflection on whether the continuing 'keyword' priority ascribed to the roughly 80 other words which were not listed, by anyone, is more or less significant than the fact that approximately one-third of the total number of 1983 keywords were judged eligible by at least one person to be dropped as no longer essential. The bare numbers are equivocal. Perhaps of more interest is where the list shows words chosen by two or more people:

Alienation, Bourgeois, Career, Collective, Commercialism, Communism, Conventional, Dialectic, Doctrinaire, Dramatic, Existential, Hegemony, Improve, Isms, Masses, Medieval, Peasant, Realism, Socialist, Status, Utilitarianism.

Arguably the list becomes more revealing again where it highlights words chosen by three or more people:

Alienation, Collective, Commercialism, Communism, Conventional, Dialectic, Doctrinaire, Dramatic, Existential, Hegemony, Isms, Masses, Medieval, Peasant, Status.

And still more when it shows words chosen by four or more people:

Alienation (4), Collective (5), Communism (4), Dialectic (7), Doctrinaire (5), Hegemony (5), Isms (4), Peasant (7).

The corresponding list of proposed ‘ten incoming’ words consists of a greater number of different words, with fewer multiple-scored items (11 listed by two or more people in a set of 98). The larger number of different, proposed words is unsurprising, given that participants were no longer choosing from Williams's 131 keywords but from the entire, open set of English vocabulary. Again, it would be misguided to attribute much significance to bare numbers, not least because the activity was a discussion prompt whose rules were interpreted slightly differently by different participants.²¹ As a resource for discussion, nevertheless, here is the list in full:

A

Abstract
 Academic
 Agenda
 Antique (Ancient)
 Apologise
 Authentic

B

Black

C

Celebrity
 Censorship
 Civil (Society)
 Cognitive/Cognition (2)
 Complexity
 Consumer (Customer)
 Corporate

D

Debt
 Design
 Diversity

E

Education
 Emergent
 Emotion/Emotive
 Empathy
 Enterprise (Business) (3)
 Environment (2)
 Ethical (3)
 European
 Excellence

F

Faith
 Freedom
 Function

Fundamental (2)

G

Global (3)
 Good (2)

H

Home
 Humanity

I

Iconic
 Identity
 Imagination
 Instrumental
 Intervention
 Islam

J**K**

Knowledge (Information) (3)

L

Language
 Life (Living)

M

Marriage
 Meaning
 Measure
 Message

N

Network
 Neo-conservative

O

True/Truth

Opinion
Orientalism**U****P**

Urban

Partner
Perform
Pleasure (Happiness)
Post-
Property
Prophet**V**Value
Victim**W,X,Y,Z****Q**Qualified
Quality**R**Relativism
Real/Reality (2)
Religion/Religious
Responsibility
Rhetoric
Rights
Ritual**S**Secular
Space
Spirit/Spiritual/Spirituality
State (2)
Style
Sublime
Sustainable
System**T**Territory
Terror/Terrorism (3)
Text
Trauma

Words chosen by two or more people in this ‘incoming’ list were:

Cognitive/Cognition, Ethical, Enterprise (Business), Environment, Fundamental, Global, Good, Knowledge (Information), Real/Reality, State, Terror/Terrorism.

And words mentioned by three people (none received more than three mentions) were:

Ethical, Enterprise (Business), Global, Knowledge (Information),
Terror/Terrorism.

Some brief comments on presentation are necessary:

1. In presenting new headwords (or ‘main entries’) in the ‘incoming’ list (as opposed to reporting Williams’s 1983 keywords in the ‘outgoing’ list), I have had to settle on a preferred citation form in cases where alternative forms, usually in different word classes, were proposed and discussed (e.g. ‘Cognitive / Cognition’) or where a derivative seems to signal an importantly different focus (‘Fundamental / Fundamentalism’; ‘Terror / Terrorism’). Such choices raise questions not only in the given case but about whether the root or base form for a keyword entry should follow an editorial convention based on its form, or (in contrast with dictionary practice) on current perception of what makes the word interesting, difficult or controversial.²²
2. In several cases I have added a formally unrelated word in brackets to a proposed headword (e.g. ‘Knowledge / Information’), where this other word was also discussed as a near-synonym or where interest in the wider concept or semantic cluster had not been precisely focused in a single word. The decision to present words in this way re-opens the wider issue of how far a keyword ‘vocabulary’ is concerned with concepts, or areas of conceptual space, as much as with specific words and their meanings (with the effect that a resulting ‘vocabulary of culture and society’, however presented, is both a thesaurus and dictionary project).

3. By presenting two overall, collated lists for the group as a whole I have (as noted above) inevitably obscured any particular coherence or significant clustering in each person's list, considered on its own. This inevitably also blurs the question raised earlier about what voice emerges from keyword entries, either individually or as a list: that of an authorial subjectivity, the claimed objectivity of a dictionary editor, a consistent political position, etc.

Even apparently minor editorial decisions raise questions about what precisely the conventions of a 'vocabulary of culture and society' are or should be. Such considerations could be overlooked; but it is better to highlight them as miniature test cases of 'keyword thinking' that can be used in establishing general principles. For readers less interested in the process of compiling a keywords list than in the outcome of that process, such decisions also record how much construction goes into (but is then hidden by) the standardised, authoritative appearance of any published dictionary or 'vocabulary'.

What makes a 'keyword'?

However informally gathered, lists such as the ones produced on this occasion point, if not towards interesting generalisations, then at least towards topics worth further investigation.

An obvious starting point in extrapolating from such lists is the semantic sub-fields of 'culture and society' suggested as being either only residually salient or which alternatively appear to have become more important. In the lists above, vocabulary associated with Marxist/socialist politics, now sometimes dismissed as an extreme of 'old-fashioned left/right politics', seems to have been mostly judged expendable. It is less easy to identify fields that have become increasingly important, though possibilities do begin to emerge where words were nominated by more than one person. Inconclusive evidence points nevertheless to a role for lists of this kind in questioning editorial attitudes and assumptions. If keywords are words which are active in a society's major

cultural debates, then you might expect intuitive importance of a topic area to be reflected in people's wordlist choices; and you might expect these, in turn, to be matched by evidence in patterns of use. Expecting precise correlations, even if you could decide on how to calculate them, would be unrealistic. But serious mismatches between sources of potential evidence for what a keyword is and does –used as a basis for what are inevitably to some extent subjective editorial judgements - call for comment if a perception is to be avoided that the headword list merely reflects an editor's preference in what is important or interesting.

Other questions - to simplify the dialectic that runs through keywords research - more directly concern features of the word histories rather than of social practices they in various ways 'represent'.²³ How many of the selected words in either list, for instance, are Latinate and how many Anglo-Saxon, reflecting longer processes of interaction between these two major sources of English vocabulary? Which words underwent their major semantic changes between Mediaeval and Early Modern forms of English rather than later? Which, if any, have significant histories, or higher frequency of use, in particular regional or national dialects of English, reflecting the changing geography of the language and contemporary political conditions of interaction between populations who use it? And which, as Williams himself felt to be especially important, have histories of significant development in languages other than English? Finally, do words in either list show kinds of register allegiance that may be symptomatic of an overall shift of discursive formation, as our changing class formations, multilingual population, and diversified media environment might predict? Investigating such questions is a matter for sustained research on proposed words, rather than a topic for the final pages of a short article. Going beyond impressionistic responses requires evidence gleaned from a combination of close reading, corpus linguistic techniques and contextual discussion.

A more immediately tractable question also arises, however: whether general criteria can be stated for what constitutes a likely keyword. Are there attributes, we can ask, that are regularly invoked in evaluating words for which a 'keyword' claim is made? In discussion during the 'ten out, ten in' exercise, the following five criteria were invoked at various points:

- **‘Currently used’**. Keywords are typically words with both a ‘popular’ and ‘technical’ distribution. They are commonly used to express and negotiate meanings in day-to-day discourse, while often also implying a claim to authority derived from one or more discipline-specific uses. Conversely, if a technical word is not commonly used outside a specialised literature, it is unlikely to have acquired the combination of technical and general senses that make it complex and potentially confusing. Some words may be far from obsolete in the general vocabulary but nevertheless obsolete as keywords because of narrowing in their distribution (as arguably with ‘existential’ or ‘anthropology’, which seem no longer much used in non-technical discourse). But caution must be exercised in applying this criterion. Any test adopted for ‘current’ use should not be reduced to a simple frequency count. ‘Current use’ for a keyword needs to be investigated taking into account some notion of prominence or salience in a given context, and across a corpus combining ‘opinion forming’ media (such as news and documentaries, feature articles, phone-ins, and blogs) with relevant academic or professional literatures (e.g. in fields such as psychology, business, science, or literary criticism).
- **‘Polysemous’**. Keywords seem typically to be words that are construed differently on different occasions of use. In clearest cases, such polysemy is a matter of relatively distinct senses, any one of which closes off other meanings that the word is capable of conveying in other circumstances. Under some conditions of use, however - perhaps especially where words are used in highly abstract contexts or by users who differ substantially in social or educational background or core beliefs - different aspects of overall meaning potential are activated simultaneously and lead to misunderstanding or confusion. The mechanisms involved in such misunderstanding vary, and combine the polysemy of individual words with pragmatic cues that prompt divergent lines of inference. What constitutes a keyword, accordingly, is in part how far the alternative meanings that create the sense of complexity or difficulty can be traced back to meaning problems in the word: questions of denotation and reference (especially

incompatible technical and general meanings); or complications of connotation and semantic prosody (the word's tendency to be read as implying statements of value, including sometimes simultaneously endorsing and pejorative senses); or different and incompatible mental schemas that are activated, for different groups within the language community, by figurative use of the word; etc.

- **‘Categorical.’** Keywords are typically words used to designate social or cultural concepts and practices. They are especially influential because they lexicalise, and so give recognised identity to, social practices, beliefs, value systems, and preferences. Typically, keywords are less likely, as a result, to be concrete terms (e.g. terms that denote particular types of meal, song form, sport, or style of clothing) than relatively abstract names for general practices, theories or standards of judgment. This is because keywords define and comment on culture and society rather than functioning as part of the fabric of day-to-day interaction and local transaction. This ‘categorical’ criterion begs an important question, nevertheless: whether there is a necessary level of generality for the cultural category (not narrow or field-specific, like 'tragedy', which Williams wrote about at length but never proposed as a keyword, but not broadly philosophical either, such as 'reason', which -- although the distinction is not clear-cut -- might be regarded as more a candidate for conceptual analysis than for specifically ‘keyword’ analysis).
- **‘Actively contested’.** Keywords are typically words that play a role in some kind of social debate or dispute. Such debates and disputes differ from controversies between schools of academic, technical or professional doctrine by involving more widespread, ‘popular’ viewpoints and argument (and so carry a presumption – crucial in Williams’s politics - both of community and of debate in an established public sphere). The test of whether a word is sufficiently contested is more than whether its alternative meanings have consequences (that would be true in most cases, and is undoubtedly true of controversies in academic fields, as for example with ‘structuralism’ historically in literary criticism); what is in question

is whether the disagreement also circulates in the public domain beyond any given professional field, for instance as part of what politicians like to call a ‘national debate’.

- **‘Part of a cluster’** of interrelated words which typically co-occur. As well as having multiple senses, keywords typically function either as part of a group of interrelated words which are together the terminology of debate for a particular topic, or as the principal word in a semantic field surrounded by cognates (a tendency partly obscured in Keywords by alphabetical presentation). With the criterion of ‘clustering’, the interest of a proposed word turns on its lexical semantic relations: how it relates to other words by which it can be substituted in a given context, or of which it is a hyponym or meronym; whether it conventionally serves as a euphemism or other kind of circumlocution for a given other word; or how it relates to other words in the same semantic field with which it contrasts, either as an opposite or as part of some scale of value or importance.

These five criteria, invoked under various names and in different permutations during discussion at the seminar referred to, may only amount to restatements of general themes in Williams’s Keywords Preface. In revised form, however, they lend themselves to evaluating proposed new words, which can be looked at under each criterion as well as considered for overall effect across all five. Appeal to such criteria, it must be emphasised, should not be reduced to some sort of mechanical application, as if ‘keyword’ is a class of word like noun or verb, or a technical concept with precisely defined properties. Criteria put forward here are not necessary and sufficient conditions for ‘keyword’ status, as if conceived in classical concept theory; rather, they are ways of focusing discussion, by characterising features of a ‘keyword’ prototype (for which Williams himself seems to have used exemplary words, especially ‘nature’ and ‘culture’). If used heuristically, such criteria may be helpful in allowing a case for or against including a word as a ‘keyword’ to be assessed in terms of goodness-of-exemplar (GOE) closeness to established keyword prototypical features.

Is there an optimum number of keywords?

Finally, it is worth asking whether there is an optimum number of keywords for the explanatory and critical purposes Williams and others have envisaged. Or is it better to extend the keyword list beyond the current 100-150 whenever an opportunity for investigation presents itself?²⁴

What is striking is that, even if you keep to the five criteria listed above, very many words seem to meet them at a threshold level. The experience of presenting word lists I have outlined brought home - as Williams felt in relation to his own list - 'how arbitrary some inclusions and exclusions may seem to others'; and in practice, removing the limit of 'ten words out and ten words in' from the activity described would have allowed discussion to go on indefinitely. Additional words rush in (including from glosses for words already proposed), potentially widening discussion to a *de facto* position that very many or perhaps all defining, category words (perhaps all words) are keywords in some arguable sense. On the table in front of me now, for instance, lies the 1983 edition of Keywords, back cover facing up. The word 'transformation' stands out prominently in the publisher's blurb ('... a unique exploration of the actual language of cultural transformation'); the word looks slightly anomalous, prominent in the promotion but left out of the analysis and seeming to want to work its way inside. But if we give in to an inclination to call all polysemous or difficult words keywords, then 'key-ness' is extended until everything is foreground and there is no longer any background, no 'ordinary' day-to-day vocabulary against which keywords stand out as especially problematic. The verbal characteristic of polysemy implies a general condition of at least some degree of interpretive instability, certainly for any socially heterogeneous speech community communicating in varied social contexts of use and for a range of purposes. It may therefore be the perceived urgency of a given social agenda or debate, rather than the inherently polysemous character of particular words, that especially pressurises communication, transforms routine polysemy which in other circumstances is simply passed over into complexity, and confers key-ness. If that is so, then settling on a target number for a keyword list is a judgement made to address the interests, concerns or agenda of an anticipated readership, rather than on linguistic grounds.

What *effect*, it must be asked after so much careful dissection – beyond deciding whether to include a word in a specific or envisaged published volume - is created by conferring keyword status on a particular word? This question was posed at another recent seminar concerned with keywords in the form of whether - especially if keywords are selected by editorial committee - the resulting list confers unfair authority or canonical status on the words that have been selected.²⁵ If including a word in a published keyword list prompts further investigation of that word – a professional academic twist to people filling in the blank pages in Keywords that I referred to at the outset - then perhaps selection does begin to echo the process of literary canon formation on which the question was clearly modelled. In an important respect, however, the question is misconceived, in overstating academic influence by comparison with other forces active in meaning making and language change. The goal of keywords research is not particularly to set a philological agenda for cultural or literary studies. Such work is always an ‘appendix’ to discussion taking place somewhere else, for other reasons. There is no red carpet for words selected as keywords and no disrespect shown to words not awarded keyword status, no matter how important those words are in other ways (cf. debate over whether ‘genocide’ must be a keyword). Identifying and analysing keywords has value to the extent that it helps to disentangle dialogue between different social and professional groups, and between different styles of expression and intellectual frameworks, in a changing discursive formation. The impact of keywords *research*, accordingly -- including the significance that is in the selection – is in how far it encourages historicised understanding of contemporary struggles over the meanings of terms used in public discourse. Keywords are suitable subjects for academic study. But they are more importantly a live issue of literacy - of understanding and managing relations between language, discourse, and society - in a wider political culture.

¹ Raymond Williams, Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society (London: Fontana, 1976), 26

² Raymond Williams, Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society 2nd edition (London: Fontana, 1983), 26. All references to Keywords below are to the 2nd (1983) edition

³ See Williams's account of how he became interested in these five words in his 'Introduction' to Culture and Society 1780-1950 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), 13-19, as well as his restatement of that interest in his Preface to Keywords, 13

⁴ Williams, Keywords, 14

⁵ Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (eds), New Keywords: a revised vocabulary of culture and society (Blackwell, Oxford, 2005).

⁶ Alan Durant, 'Raymond Williams's Keywords: investigating meanings "offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed"', Critical Quarterly, volume 48 no 4 (2006), 1-26.

⁷ Raymond Williams, 'Mining the Meaning: key words in the miners' strike', Resources of Hope, edited by Robin Gable (London: Verso, 1989), 120-127. The four keywords Williams analyses as his way of defining the issues involved in this industrial dispute are 'management', 'economic', 'community' and 'law-and-order'.

⁸ Williams also includes his novel Border Country (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), which he says has 'an essential relevance to the two general books', as part of the same phase of work. Raymond Williams, 'Introduction' to The Long Revolution (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), 15.

⁹ Williams, Keywords, 26. That flexibility is exercised, for example, as regards which form of any given word (root or derivative) will be used as the headword for an entry (see discussion below, XX-XX), as well as in deciding how many words to include for each letter of the alphabet (in dictionaries, Edward Thorndyke's principles of selection and distribution of headword entries to balance out unequal numbers of words that exist for each letter in English are commonly employed). For discussion of how headwords in dictionaries relate to the number of words there are beginning with each letter, see Sidney Landau, Dictionaries: the art and craft of lexicography, 2nd edition (CUP, 2001), 241-3, or Howard Jackson, Lexicography: an introduction (London: Routledge, 2002), 163-5

¹⁰ Useful discussion of the historical development of communication as part of a recognised public sphere, with commentary on the influence of the early work of Habermas on this debate, can be found in Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, A Social History of the Media: from Gutenberg to the Internet 2nd edition (London: Polity, 2005), esp.61-87.

Williams's own accounts are not confined to his discussion in Culture and Society, The Long Revolution and Keywords. Alongside numerous essays throughout his lifetime, sustained treatments of the issues can be found both in Communications (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962) and in Television: technology and cultural form (London: Schocken Books, 1975). The essay 'Advertising: the magic system', in Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso and NLB, 1980), 170-195, also discusses the impact of what is now usually called 'commercial speech' on democracy and the public sphere. Two useful perspectives on how communications are involved in restructuring of the public domain are John Thompson, The Media and Modernity: a social theory of the media (Cambridge: Polity, 1995) and Kevin Moloney, Rethinking Public Relations: PR, propaganda and democracy, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2006)

¹¹ For discussion of Johnson's Plan and then the Dictionary itself, see Landau, Dictionaries: the art and craft of lexicography, 48-51, Jackson, Lexicography, 42-6, or the account in Jonathon Green, Chasing the Sun: dictionary makers and the dictionaries they made (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996). For further discussion on approaches to compiling dictionaries now, see Jackson, Lexicography

¹² For detailed analysis of the COBUILD project, see J.M.Sinclair (ed), Looking Up: an account of the COBUILD project in lexical computing (London: Collins, 1987)

¹³ On the different purposes served by dictionaries, see Landau, Dictionaries: the art and craft of lexicography and Jackson, Lexicography

¹⁴ BEC is the Kielikanava (Turku Finland) Business English Corpus (one million words of spoken and written business English data). CANBEC is the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus (one million words of spoken data recorded in a variety of mostly British businesses (covering internal and external meetings, office talk, sales presentations, telephone conversations and general office banter).

¹⁵ For entertaining historical discussion of this issue, see Simon Winchester, The Meaning of Everything: the story of the Oxford English Dictionary (OUP, Oxford, 2003), especially the extract Winchester quotes from James Murray during his editorship on writing endless letters to find out precisely what is meant by 'obscure terms, sometimes obsolete, sometimes current, belonging to matter of history, customs, fashions, trade or manufactures', 145-6. For a view of Murray and the OED from within the Murray family, see 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).

¹⁶ See David Crystal, Language and the Internet, 2nd edition (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

¹⁷ Williams, Keywords, 27

¹⁸ Williams, Keywords, 11

¹⁹ The seminar was organised by Stephen Heath and held at Jesus College, Cambridge, July 2007. The ten participants were: Sylvia Adamson, Kathryn Allen, Jonathan Arac, Alan Durant, Philip Durkin, Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe, Arjuna Parakrama, Kellie Robertson and Katie Wales

²⁰ The full list of 45 runs: Alienation, Anarchism, Anthropology, Bourgeois, Career, City, Collective, Commercialism, Communism, Consensus, Conventional, Criticism, Determine, Development, Dialectic, Doctrinaire, Dramatic,

Empirical, Ethnic, Existential, Experience, Expert, Exploitation, Folk, Formalist, Generation, Genius, Hegemony, Improve, Isms, Jargon, Masses, Medieval, Ordinary, Peasant, Philosophy, Positivist, Realism, Sensibility, Socialist, Standards, Status, Structural, Underprivileged, Utilitarianism.

²¹ 100 words were expected, with any reduction from that number indicative of overlap. Only 98 word tokens were in fact listed (one participant didn't propose any 'incoming' words and several went beyond the prescribed ten); building on earlier discussion, one participant offered both a list of words coinciding with those selected by Bennett et al. in New Keywords (2005) and a further list of words not previously identified elsewhere; some lists underwent minor revision during the event, resulting in multiple versions

²² For discussion, see Landau, Dictionaries: the art and craft of lexicography, 76-81. For discussion of established OED practice up to 1990 on this and related issues, see Donna Lee Berg, A Guide to the Oxford English Dictionary (OUP, Oxford, 1993); for information on more recent practice, visit the Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com). In Keywords, Williams's practice is not consistent but seems to have been mostly to select what he saw as the difficult or controversial form as headword (e.g. 'humanity' rather than 'human'; 'nationalist' rather than 'nation', and 'structural' rather than 'structure'. The problems of working this way become quickly evident in Williams's choice, for example, of 'representative' as headword rather than 'represent', where the first half of the entry is then as much concerned with the problems of 'represent' as with the chosen headword 'representative'.

²³ For detailed discussion of issues raised by asking what is 'represented' in a representation, see the closing arguments of Stephen Heath, 'Representation', this issue, ??

²⁴ Tony Bennett et al's New Keywords provides a useful reference point here. Their collection discusses 141 words of which only 41 were in Williams's 1976/1983 list. Their 101 added words are drawn from a range of fields, and reflect both an effort to engage with the shifting, international ground of public debate - in being written by an international group of contributors - and a repositioning of the idea of 'public sphere' discussion by drawing freely on North American 'cultural studies' debates. Faced with the daunting task of giving coherence to the process of selecting headwords with a large number of international contributors working in somewhat different fields, the editors adopt a broad, inclusive approach. The result, as I argued in my article in CQ48:4, is an instructive reference volume which nevertheless leaves unresolved some fundamental issues about historical meaning that Williams was keen to address.

²⁵ The seminar was organised by Julie Sanders and Ron Carter and held at Nottingham University in October 2007, under the series title 'Transition' (interestingly part of a 'change' cluster along with 'transformation', as well as 'conversion' and 'revolution', and overlapping with a 'physical movement' cluster identified by Williams in his 'revolution' entry that also includes 'passage', 'motion' and 'action')