

Logophilic Musings: Serendipitous Lexical Luminosities

Seán Moran

Abstract:

The English language contains, as we know, many rare, unusual and delightful words. For example, 'serendipity' means 'the phenomenon of finding interesting, agreeable or valuable things by chance'. To the verbivore, grazing in the fertile fields of nouns, verbs and adjectives, the occasional serendipitous find is always a possibility, if fortune smiles. One recent chance discovery of my own is, ironically, a word meaning 'the opposite of serendipity'. Today, I shall explore the origin, meaning and usefulness of a carefully-selected range of fine English words.

Abstrakt:

Jak víme, angličtina má mnoho výjimečných, neobvyklých a půvabných slov. Tak například „serendipity“ („vrozené štěstí“) znamená najít náhodou něco zajímavého, příjemného nebo cenného. Pro žrouta slov pasoucího se na žírných nivách substantiv a adjektiv je možnost příležitostného nálezu vždycky reálná, usměje-li se na něho štěstí. Nedávno jsem čirou náhodou učinil objev, jímž je ironií osudu slovo opačného významu než „vrozené štěstí“. Dnes se budu zabývat původem, významem a užitečností několika pečlivě vybraných parádních anglických slov.

Key words:

vocabulary, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, serendipity, synchronicity

Klíčová slova:

slovní zásoba, Sapir-Whorfova hypotéza, vrozené štěstí, synchronismus

Introduction

I should begin by explaining the title of my talk. A 'logophile' is someone who loves words (a category which I'm sure includes everyone here today) and 'lexical luminosities' are words from the English lexicon which are so wonderful that they simply glow. Today I offer a few words – some of which you may have heard before, and some of which you almost certainly have not – in the hope that you will share my delight and enthusiasm in knowing these luminous words. Once I have described my six glowing words, I shall consider what effects the acquisition of new words such as these might have on us and our learners.

Firstly though, perhaps you can help me to clear up a mystery surrounding an English word of Czech origin: the word 'ahoy!' This, of course, comes from the informal Czech greeting, *Ahoj!* Interestingly, the inventor of the telephone – the American Alexander Graham Bell – used this word to answer his own telephone, in the form "Ahoy, Ahoy!" His practice did not catch on however (in fact, I have never heard a native English speaker answer the phone in this way). Apart from the cartoon character Mr. Burns on *The Simpsons*, who says "Ahoy-hoy", the word "Hello" has become usual for answering the telephone in anglophone countries. "Ahoy" continues to be used in the English language, though associated not with telephones but with pirates. We expect English-speaking pirates to bel-low phrases such as "Ahoy there, me hearties!" And here is the mystery: 'Ahoy/Ahoj' is a Czech word; pirates' natural habitat is on the high seas; The Czech Republic seems to have something of a shortage of coastline.

Defenestration

And so, on to my first luminous word: the noun 'defenestration' and its associated verb 'to defenestrate'. How wonderful to have an English term which conveys the meaning 'to throw out of a window'. Better still, the origin of this word lies in this fine city of Prague and two historical incidents in which the protagonists left a building involuntarily, and in rather an unconventional way. The latter of these, the famous 'Defenestration of Prague' of May 21, 1618, involved two Catholic deputies to the Bohemian national assembly, together with a secretary, being ejected through a window of Hradčany castle by Protestant radicals. Although they had a soft – hence painless – landing in a dung-filled moat, their pride was hurt and

this incident precipitated the Thirty Years' War. Nowadays, the word has two main uses. The first is a response to the increasingly litigious nature of students and school pupils. We can no longer jokingly threaten to throw unco-operative learners out of the window; in fact one teacher in the UK was sacked last year for doing just that. We can however say, "If you continue to do that, you will be defenestrated", for they will not know what we mean, beyond a vague sense that defenestration might not be an entirely desirable thing to happen to one.

Perhaps it is unfair to use our superior knowledge against students in this way, though, so I turn now to a second, metaphorical meaning of 'defenestrate' – from the world of computers. Microsoft Windows® is the predominant operating system for both desktop and laptop computers at the moment. Those who oppose this domination, perhaps preferring Apple Mac® or Linux systems, have adopted the slogan 'Defenestrate'. Instead of disposing of opponents by throwing them out of the window, the new defenestrators want to rid the world of Windows® itself. Many of us, who sometimes become so frustrated with Windows® that we feel like throwing our laptop out of the window, can sympathise with the 'Defenestrate' campaign.

Heterography

We all have students whose spelling is, shall we say, eccentric. My next word allows us to draw attention to a spelling error without using the word 'mistake'. We can say instead that the offending word is "an interesting example of heterography". 'Hetero' is a Greek prefix meaning 'other' so 'heterography' means 'writing otherwise', a term sometimes applied to William Shakespeare's habit of spelling words (including his own name) in a variety of ways. If we are in a kindly mood, and not inclined towards defenestration of our students, we can gently correct their heterographic indiscretions by comparing them with Shakespeare.

Tocsin

My preantepenultimate (fourth from last) word is 'tocsin'. This is spelled differently from the poison 'toxin', and signifies the ringing of a warning bell. As well as a literal alarm bell, it can also mean an

intuition that something is not right. We ought to trust our intuitive tocsins. As experienced teachers, we have developed an attunement towards our students which helps us to decide how to help them to learn and how to deal with them humanely in their various situations and moods. Sometimes yet another poor piece of heterography may irritate us: perhaps not to the point of defenestration, but possibly enough to prompt a sarcastic comment. At this point we should heed the faint tocsin we hear. Instead of a harsh word, let us smile at the students, show infinite patience, and help them with all the courtesy we can muster.

Shibboleth

A 'shibboleth' is a word which gives away important information about speakers – particularly clues about their ethnicity. The unfortunate fleeing Ephraimites of the Old Testament could not say 'shibboleth' (= 'floods') but pronounced it 'sibboleth' instead. As their defeated army attempted to return home to Ephraim by crossing the river Jordan through fords captured by the Gileadites, this hetero-pronunciation was their downfall. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed by the Gileadites after being required to say 'shibboleth' and failing the test. (Judges, 12:6).

In more recent times in Ireland, pronunciation is sometimes used to identify ethnicity. Northern Ireland Catholics and Protestants look just the same (although they each claim that the others' eyes are too close together), but they pronounce the word for the letter 'h' differently. Catholics say 'haitch' and Protestants say 'aitch', so it is possible to determine speakers' religion without asking them directly. Similarly, Catholics call the second-largest city in Northern Ireland 'Derry', whilst Protestants say 'Londonderry'. To avoid this shibboleth, so many people began calling the city 'Derry/Londonderry' (pronounced "Derry-stroke-Londonderry") that it has become humorously known as 'Stroke city'. Now that there is peace in Northern Ireland, and the ethnic composition is gradually changing, the need to know everyone's tribal loyalty is less important. The curiosity remains, however:

"Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?"

"I'm a Muslim."

"Yes, but are you a Catholic Muslim or a Protestant Muslim?"

I live in Tipperary in the Republic of Ireland (yes, it is a real place, not just a song) and you are very welcome to visit me there. It is a friendly county, but some of the people swear rather a lot. So, if you and your students want to blend in, you'll need to learn some local Anglo-Saxon obscenities.

Papyrocracy

There are many ways of ruling. Democracy is the rule of the people, plutocracy is the rule of the wealthy and 'papyrocracy' is to be ruled by paperwork. The UK education system is an example of papyrocracy, with the Irish system not far behind. I'm sure that Czech educators are far too sensible to allow themselves to be ruled by paper.

Zemblanity

Now for my last luminous word. I earlier defined 'serendipity' as 'the phenomenon of finding interesting, agreeable or valuable things by chance'. We encounter this phenomenon when we reach out in a library or a bookshop for a particular book and unexpectedly notice one on the shelf below which turns out to be marvellous. The internet version of this is to stumble across an amazing website whilst 'googling' for something completely different. 'Serendip' was the old Persian name for Sri Lanka, so 'serendipity' refers to the lucky explorer, sailing by sheer good fortune to its sandy shores and discovering a tropical paradise. What could be the opposite of such a Heaven on earth?

According to Simon Hertnon (2008, p. 210), the novelist William Boyd identified just such a geographical hell in the Russian archipelago of Nova Zembla 'a barren former nuclear testing ground in the middle of the icy Arctic ocean'. This led him to coin the word 'zemblanity', 'The opposite of serendipity, the faculty of making unhappy, unlucky and expected discoveries by design'. This is an extremely useful word for educators: in fact, Hertnon gives a highly-pertinent quotation from Steven Hayes (2007) as an example of this word in use: 'I hate mission statements. They are second only to educational outcomes for zemblanity.' So, when our tocsin warns us of a drift towards zemblanity in our teaching – perhaps led astray by the faulty maps of the papyrocracy – we must change course and let the winds of change take us where they will.

Language affects our *Weltanschauung*

Next, I want to explore the beneficial consequences of having a more extensive lexicon. As professional linguists and teachers, I'm sure that you see vocabulary-building as 'a good thing' both for its own sake and also for the improved communication which it allows. But there is yet another benefit. The acquisition of additional languages, and the construction of an enlarged vocabulary in those languages, leads to improvements in our students' ability to think conceptually. In the case of technical and specialist vocabulary – language for special purposes – this is a clear-cut intellectual gain, which other papers have addressed today.

I shall argue, however, that the ownership of other, more rarefied, lexical items – such as the ones we considered earlier – will also enhance thinking. Learning legal English puts us in a legalistic mindset, acquiring business English focuses our attention on the bottom line and mastering technical English encourages us to see the word mechanistically. Developing a more quirky and abstruse vocabulary however, allows us to think beyond these boxes defined by specialist terminology, in more powerful and nuanced ways.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

We can see language either as a 'cloak' which dresses up our thoughts or as a 'mould' which shapes the thoughts themselves. In common with most binary divisions such as this, there is the danger of a false dichotomy shaping our thoughts too simplistically, and the truth is probably somewhere in between. However, my preference today is for the 'mould' theory, in which the way we think is shaped by the language(s) we know. This is also no doubt an attractive theory for colleagues here in this room, for knowing a number of languages enables one's thoughts to be moulded in a rich variety of alternative ways. Alas, monoglots such as I are stuck within our conceptual prisons; enfeebled by our linguistic deficiencies.

The American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf are two famous names associated with linguistic mould theory, and their work is usually called 'The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis'. Sapir famously asserted that:

Human beings ... are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society ... The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Sapir 1958 [1929], p. 69)

Later, Whorf buttressed this view thus:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. (Whorf 1940, pp. 213–14)

As I hinted earlier, it is possible to take these views too far, and I suspect that many of us here would reject *strong* linguistic determinism, in which our thoughts are regarded as being *entirely* at the mercy of our language. I certainly hope so, speaking from my monolingual prison. Similarly, *strong* linguistic relativity, in which (say) Czech-speaking and English-speaking people are seen as inhabiting different universes because of their different languages, also seems a little implausible. The now-discredited myth that ‘the Eskimo have 100 words for snow’ began with a much less definite comment in Whorf’s (1940) paper ‘Science and Linguistics’ and, ahem, snowballed out of control over the ensuing years. If we can accept a moderate determinism, however, the desirability of an enhanced vocabulary is apparent.

Benefits of an enlarged lexicon

Many of the little, earthy ‘bread and butter’ words in the English lexicon are from the Anglo-Saxon. They have all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, but since they form the heart of the language we would not be without them. In fact the words ‘many’, ‘little’, ‘earthy’, ‘bread’, ‘butter’, ‘sledgehammer’ and ‘heart’ are all from the Anglo-Saxon (*manig*, *lyt*, *ieorðe*, *bread*, *butere*, *slecg*, and *heorte*, respectively). So are most of the English obscenities you may have heard. For blunt, direct communication of basic but important ideas, Anglo-Saxon derived words are unequalled. For

example, an assertive instruction for someone to go way and leave you alone can be highly effective when expressed in two words of Anglo-Saxon.

But if we wish our thinking to be a tad less basic, more nuanced and insightful, we need to enlarge our lexicons. If one has a hammer in one’s hand, everything looks like a nail, but with an enhanced linguistic toolkit, one is capable of much more conceptual work. Taking a new word into one’s ownership has two effects: linguistic and conceptual. Speaking personally, on the linguistic level, I have noticed that when I learn a new word, it seems to appear everywhere. This strange phenomenon is variously described as ‘priming’ or ‘synchronicity’. For example, I only recently discovered the word ‘tocsin’, which I shared with you earlier in this paper, and which Merriam-Webster defines as follows:

toc·sin [ˈtək-sən], *noun*, from Vulgar Latin *toccare* to touch + *senh* sign, bell
1: an alarm bell or the ringing of it
2: a warning signal

The very next day, the word appeared in a *Times* newspaper article, in the metaphorical sense of an uneasy feeling that something isn’t right; a twinge of conscience. The day after, I heard ‘tocsin’ once again on BBC Radio 3, and the following day I said it in a lecture. Now I’ve used it once again in Prague, so it belongs to me. If anyone in the audience here experiences this phenomenon of synchronicity with any of today’s new words, perhaps you would email to let me know?

On the conceptual level, we become sensitised to the *idea* that the new word represents. Once we possess the notion of a tocsin as a mental warning bell, we become more attuned to the possibility of intuitive *caveats* and are prepared to take them more seriously. When someone describes their misgivings about a particular course of action, we recognise this as a tocsin and give it a fair hearing. Our thinking has become more subtle and open-minded merely by the addition of a new word.

Conclusion

There are a few good reasons why the acquisition of specialist and technical vocabulary is advantageous to the learner. When we consider more recondite vocabulary – such as the rather obscure words we considered earlier – the benefits are not as clear-cut, but they are no less real. Our

language helps shape our world-view, so the more extensive our language, the more nuanced our *Weltanschauung*. Not only that, there is pleasure and delight in discovering a new English word or phrase – particularly when serendipity is involved. As I prepare to leave your wonderful university in the lovely city of Prague and fly back to Ireland, I will keep in mind some useful new vocabulary I very recently acquired. It came from an impressive group of European airline pilots whom I was teaching academic English near Dublin airport. They encouraged me not to use the term ‘plane crash’ but rather ‘uncontrolled flight into terrain’. Now I feel safe.

Literature

- Boyd, W.: *Armadillo*. London: Hamish Hamilton, Chapter 12, 1998
- Hertnon, S.: *From afterwit to zemblanity*. Auckland, NZ: New Holland, 2008
- Sapir, E. (1929): ‘The Status of Linguistics as a Science’. In E. Sapir (1958): *Culture, Language and Personality* (ed. D. G. Mandelbaum). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press
- Whorf, B. L. (1940): ‘Science and Linguistics’, *Technology Review* 42(6): 229-31, 247-8. Also in B. L. Whorf (1956): *Language, Thought and Reality* (ed. J. B. Carroll). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Online publications

Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary. Available on-line from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tocsin> (Accessed 9 February, 2010)

Contact:

Mgr. Seán Moran

Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland

e-mail: sean@seanmoran.com