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INTRODUCTION TO VICTORIAN VOCABULARY

There are times in the history of the English language when we see enormous spurts in the growth of vocabulary. The period after the Norman Conquest was one, when thousands of French words came into English. The Renaissance was another, introducing a diverse range of borrowings from dozens of foreign languages, as English ships explored the world. But the nineteenth century exceeded both of those, with a veritable explosion in the lexicon of science and technology as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. From steam engines to motor cars, and textile mills to road building, the Victorian period might well be described as a brave new world of terminology.

Or a nightmare, according to some of the articles in *Punch* magazine. The concern is repeatedly addressed. How is it possible to avoid drowning in the flood of new jargon? Is it all necessary? And then, alongside the ever-increasing nomenclature of the sciences and factories, there was the even greater evolution of fashionable vocabulary and slang, the result of a class system whose divisions were becoming increasingly complex, as a new middle class elbowed its way in to sit, somewhat uncomfortably, between the traditional divide of upper and lower. A remarkable number of pieces in *Punch* during the Victorian era reflect the burgeoning and fast-moving slang of the elite, and how difficult it was for ordinary mortals to keep up with it. Not even personal names were exempt, as the cartoon opposite illustrates.

And then there was an additional complication: the new USA. When *Punch* began, in 1841, Anglo-American relations had improved dramatically since the Wars of Independence and of 1812, but ongoing disputes over trade, the boundary with Canada, and other issues provided a regular source of subject matter for articles and cartoons. And with America came Americanisms. Throughout the century, the distinctive vocabulary of the English emanating from the United States, and increasingly encountered in the British press, provoked continual irritation and mockery.

The article concludes:

From wheresoever the Slang plant draws its sap,—from the East or from the West, or from suckers indigenous to the British soil,—it is a rank weed, and the sooner it is rooted up the better.

In other places, Mr Punch answers his own question. The slang weed is so deeply rooted because it is assimilated at a very early age.



Master Tom (who has been rebuked for making use of school slang). 'But Grandma', Slogging is derived from the Greek word slogo (σλόγω), to slaughter, baste, or wollop; and by compounding, you see—'

Grandma' is quite overcome by Tom's learning

In 'A chapter on slang', many more examples are given a poetic treatment. Some words are still used, or their meaning is clear from the way they are used in the verses. This glossary may be needed for those that are less familiar today, or no longer used.

- baw*—posh pronunciation of *bore*
- beaver*—a hat of various shapes; in the seventeenth century a tall top hat made of silk (imitating beaver fur)
- bender*—colloquial for a sixpenny coin (probably because it bent easily)
- bob*—a shilling coin (12 old pence)
- bollinger*—a narrow-brimmed hemispherical hat, topped with a button
- brick*—see p. 18
- cheese/cheddar, the*—the fashion, the best
- cheese* (verb)—discontinue (as today, *cheese it!*)
- concern*—property, estate, business (as today, *a thriving concern*)
- crib*—thieves' slang for a dwelling house, shop or pub
- cut, go on the*—get tipsy (perhaps from a short cut taken to a tavern)
- cut, the*—superior fellow (compare today, *a cut above*)
- dem*—posh pronunciation of *damned*
- diggins*—colloquial pronunciation of *diggings* 'lodgings' (compare *digs*)
- fast*—see pp. 18–19
- fob*—a small pocket in a waistcoat or waistband
- gammon'd*—deceived, especially by plausible talk
- guv'nor*—colloquial spelling of *governor*, with overtones of its other senses of 'guardian', 'ruler' or just plain 'mister' (see also p. 19)
- mizzle*—vanish, disappear (perhaps from Shelta *mishli* 'go')
- rigging*—mocking, teasing (from *rig* 'trick, swindle')
- rum*—odd, strange (origin obscure, possibly from *Rom, romany* 'gipsy')
- stashed*—brought to an end (perhaps a blend of *stop* and *squash*)
- stick*—a dull or stubborn person (compare today, *old stick*)
- ticker*—any kind of watch
- tile*—a hat (from roof tile)
- tin*—money, especially silver coins (which, when worn smooth, resembled pieces of tin); Mr Punch has another view (see p. 18)
- tizzy*—a sixpenny coin (probably from *teston*, a sixteenth-century coin)
- tog*—see pp. 22–3
- turnip*—an old-fashioned watch with a heavy silver covering

reliable measurements...) made its use unexceptionable by the end of the century.

But *reliable* continued to irritate him for over a decade. In a similarly named article, he takes another shot at it. Then, as is usually the case with neologisms that cause initial upset, familiarity breeds content. Other new words thought to be Americanisms take its place, and gradually the one that once caused such anxiety becomes unremarkable. Nobody today would think of *reliable* or *enjoyable* as American, and indeed it is unlikely that the USA had any role in the development of the sense from ‘capable of being enjoyed’ to ‘actually being enjoyed’, ‘affording pleasure’, for its first recorded use in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is by Alexander Pope in 1743:

The Evening of our days is generally the calmest, & the most enjoyable, of them.

Another citation is from one of Charles Dickens’s letters during the very decade when Mr Punch was complaining, in 1867:

This passage in winter cannot be said to be an enjoyable excursion.

The use in Britain of *Americanism* to condemn any new word is something that is still found today.

An interesting point is the comment that ‘the word is not in Johnson’. The reference is to Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*, first published in 1755. It was still considered the primary authority for the use of words over a century later, and would continue to be so until superseded by the project initiated by the Philological Society, *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, that began publication in 1884. This would later become the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Mr Punch’s deference to Johnson as an arbiter of lexical usage can be seen again on pp. 37, 41.

AN IMPROPER EXPRESSION

‘The most enjoyable number was the symphony,’ writes a musical critic in a notice of a Concert. This word ‘enjoyable’ is one of those novel expressions that have of late been intruded into the English of the Press and the Platform. Enjoyable, that which may be enjoyed; analogy defines it, for the word is not in Johnson. In the foregoing connection it means most productive of enjoyment. The symphony, described as having been enjoyable when it was played, would have been equally enjoyable if it had been murdered, or never been played at all. It would have been enjoyable—that is, capable of being enjoyed—whether it was actually enjoyed or not. To say that a composition, performed at a Concert, was enjoyable, is either to represent that it was capable of being enjoyed by a lover of music, or else to suggest that it might have been enjoyed if it had been properly performed, or could have been heard. A dinner is eatable, and likewise enjoyable, but in being eaten it, if enjoyed, is more than enjoyable. This word ‘enjoyable’ sounds like an importation from the United States. Though not so base a coin as ‘reliable,’ it is still not sterling, and has the ring of a dollar.

Vol. 64, 1873, p. 168

‘The Press and the Platform’ was a frequent expression of the age. Newspaper editor W.T. Stead, in an article headed ‘Government by journalism’ in *The Contemporary Review* (May 1886), sums it up:

the absolutism of the elected assembly is controlled and governed by the direct voice of the electors themselves. The Press and the Platform, of course, do not mean the printed words of a news-sheet or the wooden planks of a platform. They are merely expressions used to indicate the organs by which the people give utterance to their will, and the growth of their power is indicative of the extent to which the nation is taking into its own hands the direct management and control of its own affairs.

Just occasionally and rather reluctantly, Mr Punch seems to have something positive to say about a new usage—but only because it is not as bad as it might have been.

AMERICAN ENGLISH

The Yankees are said to have lately coined another new word to express the act, sometimes committed even in the United States, of a man who kills his wife. They call it 'uxoricide.' This is better than most of their additions to the Dictionary. They might have denominated wife-slaughter conjugicide; which would have been ambiguous. 'Uxoricide,' having been established as a current expression, must of course be well balanced with a name to signal the converse deed, which, by parity of nomenclature, will be termed mariticide.

Vol. 66, 1874, p. 29

Whether it is American or not is actually debatable. The first recorded use of the word meaning 'act of wife murder' is in the very British *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, published in London. In an 1854 issue we read of an English clergyman who complains:

I cannot peruse an English newspaper for ever so short a period without witnessing such a detail of premeditated murders, suicides, infanticides, matricides, patricides, uxoricides, and fratricides, as never disgraced any other nation on the earth, however barbarous or uncivilized.

In the sense of 'wife-murderer', the first recorded use is indeed in an American source—the 1860 edition of Worcester's *Dictionary*—but London's *Fortnightly Review* seems to be using it routinely in 1887:

Adultery, incest, uxoricide, usually by poison, prostitution, are terribly frequent.

A more positive attitude towards Americanisms grew noticeably during the 1880s. It followed the marked improvement in diplomatic, military, and economic relations between Britain and the USA which led to what American historian Bradford Perkins refers to as the 'Great Rapprochement' between the two countries—the first signs of the 'special relationship' so often mentioned today—and dates it from 1895. American pronunciation and vocabulary became more favourably regarded, and indeed became quite fashionable—so much so that foreign visitors to Britain were sometimes left confused. *Punch*, as usual, was ahead of the game, with this 1888 cartoon.



A SOCIAL DIAGNOSIS

Fair Visitor. 'There's that lovely Woman again. I wonder who she is?'

M. le Baron (an experienced observer). 'Madam, I tink she must be an *English Duchess*, because she is ver pretty, she dress vell, she speak sroo her Nose, she say, "You bet," and she talk about *Dollars and Cars!*'

THE TECHNOLOGICAL INVASION

The consequence of the Industrial Revolution on English vocabulary was immense. Thousands of new technological terms coincided with a massive increase in scientific nomenclature. The result was a peak in the frequency graph of neologisms that had not been seen since the Renaissance, and that has not been equalled since. Over 150,000 words are in the *Oxford English Dictionary* timeline as having their first recorded usage in the period 1850–1900. This anonymous poet reflects gloomily on how things had gone. The allusion in stanza 5 is to Longfellow's poem 'The Building of the Ship' (1850).

THE NEW POETRY

Away with the older poetical 'plant'
That our ancestors hugged and cherished!
'Tis time that the bygone style of chant
With its perpetrators perished.

Away with the rhymes that represent
Loves, seasons, the Bard's internals
(This last to a much to free extent,
À la Lancet and such-like journals.)

For the times have changed and the Muse's tone,
Since the advent of RUDYARD KIPLING
The ancient restraints are overthrown
That the poet's wit were crippling.

He can now sing in technical terms of things
Like pistons and valves and boilers,
Not Spring, but of locomotive springs,
In the slang of the smoke-grimed toilers.

He can tune his lyre to the *Song o' the Ship*
(Not LONGFELLOW'S *Ship* but a *liner*),
In stokehold and gun-room depict a trip
With the air of a boat-designer.

No matter what handicraft or trade,
The constructor of odes will know it;
In electrical times not born but made
Is the new Polytechnic Poet!

Vol. 116, 1899, p. 185

Most of the new scientific terms had classical Latin or Greek origins. Mr Punch was especially concerned when he noticed their influence on his tailor. The example of the 'Palla Gallica advertisement' is a reference to the military tailors George Paul and Henry Fletcher of New Bond Street, who registered their design for what they called a 'Palla Gallica or long-sided coat' in 1847. The original *palla* was a type of short jacket; *Gallica* 'from Gaul'.

The gushing ad had been repeatedly printed in *The Law Times*, *The Economist* and the daily press.

Patronised by H.R.H. Prince Albert, Prince Calimachi, King Louis Philippe, the King of the Belgians, and the principal nobility of England and France. This is an original design or new configuration for a gentleman's overcoat. The peculiarity of its self-expanding skirts, whilst presenting an elegance to the figure altogether unapproachable by any other style, gives greater freedom in riding and walking. The pockets being invisible, are perfectly secure, and yet placed in the most comfortable position for the hands of the wearer. This coat may be worn with or without another, and is made for the present season of ventilating waterproof Saxon wool cloths, light, warm, and to accord with the times, the price is only Three Guineas. [*about £400 today*]