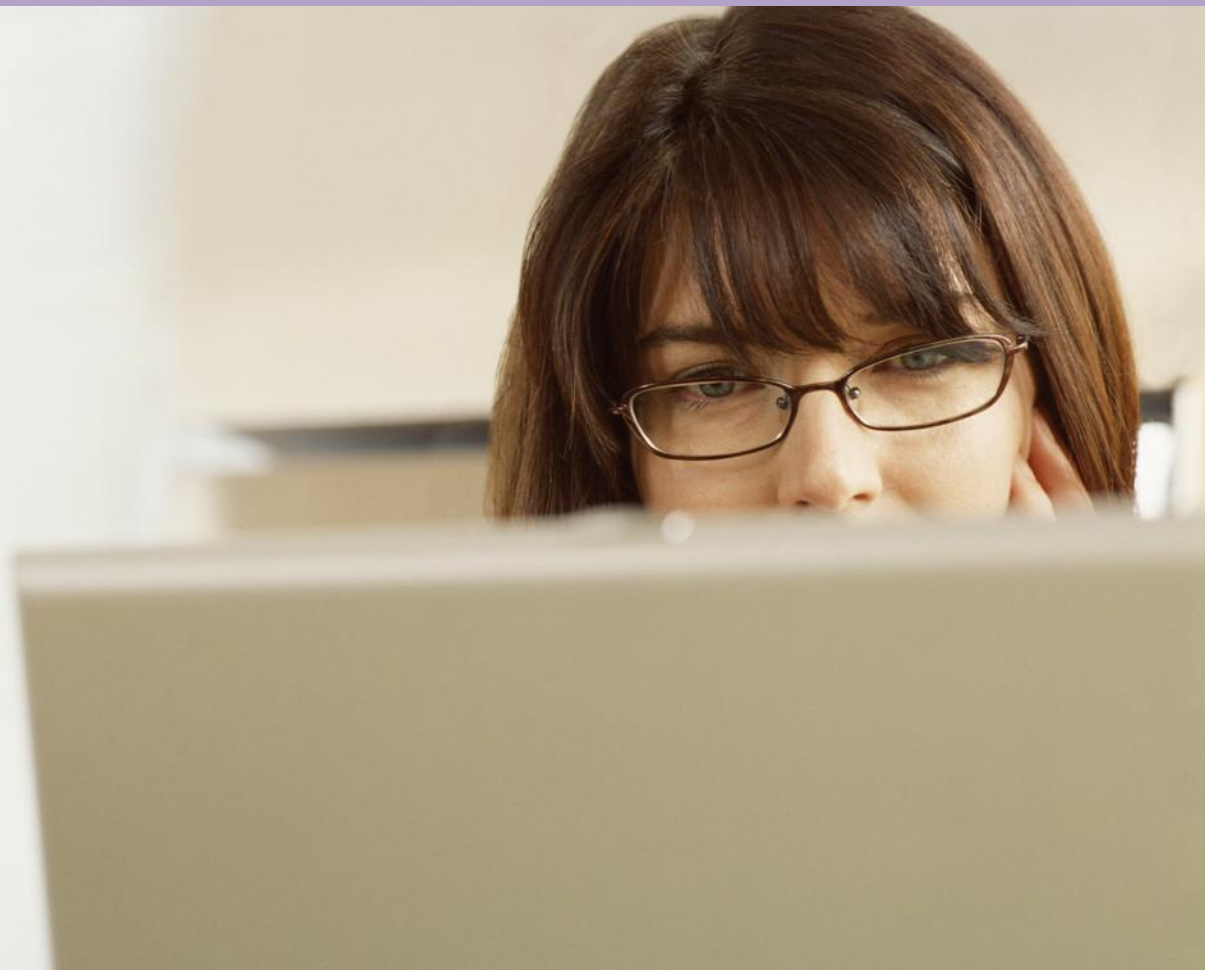# 'The Language and the Sentiments of their Times':
Teaching the Language of Historical Text

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Teaching the Language of Historical Text

Introduction

As students of history are exposed to a far greater range of primary source material – made readily available through online access via numerous portals and resources – the importance of engaging, and engaging meaningfully, with the texts presented to undergraduates has becoming an increasingly central aspect of the teaching of history. This has provided the history student with a fresh set of challenges when approaching study and research using primary sources. This project has sought to engage with some of the problems faced by history students in their understanding of historical language use, and issues surrounding language in contemporary context.

The ability to explain and show the importance of the linguistic past of English to history students has recently been made possible by the publication of the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (*HTOED*) in 2009. The *HTOED* categorises the recorded vocabulary of English alongside the dates of use of each word sense, allowing users to see for the first time how words and ideas were discussed throughout the history of the English-speaking peoples. It allows historians to see the word choices available to any given author, and to understand the precise nature and intent behind such a word choice in the period under study.

This project sought, therefore, to tie the study of historical documents by history students into the study of linguistic history. It aimed broadly across fields of research to cover as broad a curriculum range as possible and to showcase the breadth and depth of the material available in the *HTOED*.

Approach

The project sought to integrate into one readily and freely accessible resource a range of electronic resources in order to appeal to the broadest range of undergraduate history students on a number of courses/programmes.[1] As such, it aimed to provide – via links to external sources – discussion on a number of topics and periods from a range of electronic platforms. This breadth of approach was reflected in the number of topics covered across the project; this was done in order to demonstrate the technique central to our methodological approach and to show the ways in which this type of historical analysis can shed new, deeper, light onto the sources the students will have to consult throughout their degree programmes.

The website provides an introduction to this approach and explains both the methods of categorisation in the *HTOED* and the applicability of such information to the study of history. As has been noted elsewhere, it has emerged that 'a remarkably close relationship exists between social change and semantic change [and] it is not claiming too much to assert that no major social development has been lacking in semantic correlatives'.[2] As such, and with the increasing awareness of the importance attached to this type of linguistic change inherent in the study of the past, undergraduate history students are provided here with the tools to appreciate and investigate this phenomenon in topics close to their own areas of study.

Every case study begins with an extract from the *HTOED*, summarised by the authors to make explicit the shifting and varying concept of the topic under consideration. Key questions in the theme are provided in order to demonstrate to the students the shifts in conceptual understandings; these questions work also to show the ways in which assumptions they might have made about static and unchanging meanings have, in fact, altered over time. The units provide a short introduction to the ways in which the concept has altered or developed, with discussion of such shifts illustrated through quotations and other examples. Each of these units also contains a number of activities for the students to undertake; these activities involve making use of the *HTOED* and its classification structure to investigate primary sources. The *HTOED* categories are provided via links to the relevant *OED* section (and are also available through the University of Glasgow website); the primary sources are also provided via direct links, and also by publication details, where available or relevant.

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[1] The *HTOED* itself is available through the University of Glasgow's website or, for subscribers, in a modified form via *the Oxford English Dictionary* website. Certain of the resources linked are subscription-based but should be accessible for most HE institutions. A wide range of subscription resources have been utilised in order to minimise any impact, and where possible open-access resources have been used or suggested as alternatives.

[2] G. Hughes, *Words in Time: A Social History of the English Vocabulary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 224.

The case studies also provide other evidence and discussion on the development of the concept under study. This discussion involves showing the development of such categories and the word choices available at particular points in the past in order to emphasise again to students the importance of understanding contemporary language options when studying history. This approach to discussing the past has hitherto, before the publication of the *HTOED*, been exceptionally difficult and time consuming, but now represents an increasingly central element in various humanities fields.

Schedule and Issues

Due to some prolonged initial issues surrounding beginning the project, there has been a slight delay in the full completion of the website. This delayed the start of the project, and affected being able to secure the work of an experienced web editor in order to create the website. Similarly, staff changes – the loss of the Project Leader to an alternative post – have impacted on the original schedule and delayed publication. The editors have also taken the decision – after having received further JISC research grants to work on the *Parliamentary Discourse* project (incorporating the records of the Houses of Parliament via the *Hansard* records into this type of *HTOED*-related research) – to delay work on certain applicable units (notably on the concept of the state, the development of discussion of revolutions, and the shifts in description of uncivilised peoples) to incorporate this new and extensive open-access resource into the project website, in order to and update it with the most current research in the field.[3]

Although the website has been delayed, the editors have a commitment to the project and will continue to update and improve the website over the coming months uploading new/additional discussion and resources where relevant and appropriate. This will result in an output that details the most current research and the output of new efforts in the digital humanities which will be of significant benefit to history undergraduates. As of late June 2011, the web developer is near completion of a fully-functional website which will be able to be updated throughout the summer months in time for the new academic session 2011-12.

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[3] See, http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/digitisation/econtent11/discourse.aspx [accessed 20 June 2011].

Output and Engagement

In addition to the creation of the website, the project team intend to promote widely the resource amongst undergraduate history students (primarily, though not exclusively, in the United Kingdom). This will be done through a targeted electronic advertisement campaign (by contacting all the Departments/Schools of History across the UK) to promote the project website and raise awareness of the resources available. Further information will be made available upon publication of the website through a number of online resources – including, but not limited to, H-Net and the Intute: Arts and Humanities project – and an example of the resource's materials will be uploaded to the Humbox repository. Podcasts will be made available for download describing the units and explaining the methodological approaches taken. The website will therefore receive significant electronic promotion in order to attract as wide an audience as possible.

Concluding Thoughts

The project seeks:
1. to develop the understanding amongst undergraduate history students of the importance of meaningful engagement with primary sources
2. to demonstrate to students the wide range of electronic resources available to them through their institution's subscriptions
3. to enable students to gain guided experience of making use of the primary sources available through the e-resources, and to see some of the features available through these sites
4. to encourage students to consider the linguistic context of the writings they investigate throughout their study, and to engage with the scholarship on the importance of language and word choice to authors
5. to showcase the dexterity of the information available in, and through, the *HTOED* and provide historians with an appreciation for the central role it can – and should – play in our decoding of the past.

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