

CHAPTER 1

THE LURE OF WORDS

DAVID CRYSTAL

I have never met anyone who has not at some time been lured by words. The word is one of those concepts that seem to accompany us from the cradle to the grave. Parents are excited by (and never forget) the emergence of their child's 'first word'. At the opposite end of life, we pay special attention to 'last words'—and if their owners are famous, collect them into books. In between, we find 'words' entering idiomatically into virtually every kind of daily activity. We 'have words' when we argue. We 'give people our word' when we promise. We can eat words, bandy them, mark them, weigh them, hang upon them, and not mince them. People can take words out of one mouth, and put words into another.

Words operate within parameters of linguistic extremes. One such parameter is length. At one end, we see words as single strings of sounds separated by pauses, or of letters separated by spaces. They are the entities we identify when we do crosswords or play word games. At the other end, we make words equivalent to entire sentences or discourses. We talk about news travelling 'by word of mouth', and when we say 'a word in your ear', or we 'put in a good word' for someone, the utterances might be any length.

Another parameter is meaning. At one end we pay scrupulous attention to the meaning words convey, and many books have been written attempting to explicate what is involved when we say a word 'has meaning'. At the other end, there are contexts where the meaning is totally irrelevant. In a game such as Scrabble, the critical thing is to find a word that fits into the grid and is allowed by the official dictionary, rather than to know what it means. Most people have little clue about the meaning of some of the two-letter words they look up in the word lists, such as *en*, *qi*, and *ka*. The important thing is that they help the player to score well.

A third parameter is scope: 'words' can be equivalent to 'language', and then they evoke another contrast of responses, ranging from positive to negative. The proverbs of the world express both attitudes. On the one hand, we have the Arabic maxim 'Words draw the nails from the heart', the Bulgarian 'A gentle word opens an iron gate', and the Chinese 'A kind word warms for three winters'. On the other hand, we hear that 'Fair words butter no parsnips' (or 'cabbage', as it is in parts of south-east Europe), that 'Words don't season soup' in Brazil, and that in Germany 'Words are good, but hens lay eggs'.

The contrast here is variously expressed: between words and things, words and deeds, words and thoughts, words and ideas. Writers throughout history have pondered the relationship between these pairings. Two broad trends are apparent. One is to see words as inadequate representations of thoughts, poor replacements for actions, or a dangerous distraction from experiential realities. The other is to see them as indispensable for the expression of thoughts, a valuable alternative to actions, or a means of finding order in inchoate realities.

We see the first position at work when words are described as 'the small change of thought' (by French novelist Jules Renard in his *Journal*, 1988) or 'merely stepping stones for thought' (by Arthur Koestler in *The Act of Creation*, 1964) or 'the great foes of reality' (by Joseph Conrad in *Under Western Eyes*, 1911). Francis Bacon is in no doubt: 'Here therefore is the first distemper [abuse] of learning, when men study words and not matter' (1605, *The Advancement of Learning*).

On the other hand, for British poet and novelist Osbert Sitwell, 'A word is the carving and colouring of a thought, and gives it permanence' (*Laughter in the Next Room*, 1949); for American longshoreman philosopher Eric Hoffer, 'Action can give us the feeling of being useful, but only words can give us a sense of weight and purpose' (*The Passionate State of Mind*, 1954); and for science-fiction author Philip K. Dick, 'The basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words' (*I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon*, 1986). The writer of the Book of Proverbs is in no doubt: 'Deep waters, such are the words of man: a swelling torrent, a fountain of life' (18:4, *Jerusalem Bible* translation).

Several writers search for a middle way, stressing the interdependence of words and thoughts. This is German philologist Max Müller's view: 'Words without thought are dead sounds; thoughts without words are nothing. To think is to speak low; to speak is to think aloud. The word is the thought incarnate' (*Lectures on the Science of Language*, 1861). English poet Samuel Butler gives the relationship poetic form: 'Words are but pictures, true or false, design'd / To draw the lines and features of the mind' (*Satire upon the Imperfection and Abuse of Human Learning*, 1670s). And Bronislaw Malinowski provides an anthropological perspective, observing the way different languages express different visions of the world: 'The mastery over reality, both technical and social, grows side by side with the knowledge of how to use words' (*Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, 1935).

The metaphors increase and multiply, as writers struggle to find ways of expressing the relationship between words, on the one hand, and thoughts, deeds, and things, on the other. American historian Henry Adams: 'No one means all he says, and yet very few say all they mean, for words are slippery and thought is viscous' (*The Education of Henry Adams*, 1907). British novelist Aldous Huxley: 'Words form the thread on which we string our experiences' (*The Olive Tree*, 1937). An Indian proverb, much loved by Samuel Johnson: 'Words are the daughters of Earth, and things are the sons of Heaven.'

Some writers focus on what words actually do. Malinowski emphasizes their dynamic and pragmatic force: 'Words are part of action and they are equivalents to actions' (*ibid.*), and makes his point with some convincing examples: 'In all communities, certain words are accepted as potentially creative of acts. You utter a vow or you forge a signature and

you may find yourself bound for life to a monastery, a woman or a prison.' German novelist Thomas Mann adopts a social perspective, thinking of individuals: 'The word, even the most contradictory word, preserves contact—it is silence which isolates' (*The Magic Mountain*, 1924). British management educator Charles Handy also thinks socially, but on a grander scale: 'Words are the bugles of social change' (*The Age of Unreason*, 1991). Lord Byron gives words a mind-changing power: 'But words are things, and a small drop of ink, / Falling like dew upon a thought, produces / That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think' (*Don Juan*, 1819–24). American columnist Peggy Noonan captures their emotional force: 'words, like children, have the power to make dance the dullest beanbag of a heart' (*What I Saw at the Revolution*, 1990).

It is the tension between the two perspectives that some writers see as critical, for it generates a creative impulse. American novelist Julien Green puts it like this: 'Thought flies and words go on foot. Therein lies all the drama of a writer' (*Journal*, 1943). For Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a new word' (*Essays*, 1844). T. S. Eliot describes the tension as an 'intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings' ('East Coker', in *Four Quartets*, 1944). It's the challenge that provides the lure, evidently, especially for the poets. For Thomas Hood, 'A moment's thinking, is an hour in words' (*Hero and Leander*, 1827). For American poet laureate Richard Wilbur, writing is 'waiting for the word that may not be there until next Tuesday' (in *Los Angeles Times*, 1987). And Lord Tennyson expresses the quandary thus: 'I sometimes hold it half a sin / To put in words the grief I feel; / For words, like Nature, half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within' (*In Memoriam A.H.H.*, 1850).

The whole situation is made more fascinating by language variation and change. Words and their meanings do not stand still, and perpetually offer new possibilities to the creative user. 'For last year's words belong to last year's language / And next year's words await another voice' (T. S. Eliot, 1944, 'Little Gidding', in *Four Quartets*). 'A word is dead / When it is said, / Some say. / I say it just / Begins to live / That day' (Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, c.1862–86). And creativity extends to going beyond the existing wordstock. One of the most popular competitions I ever ran in my BBC radio series *English Now*, back in the 1980s, was the challenge to invent a word that the language needs. I received thousands of entries. The winner was the word we need when we are waiting by an airport carousel for our luggage, and everyone else's bags appear except yours. We are *bagonizing* (see Crystal 2006).

Word competitions are held every day, in some newspapers. How many words can you form from a string of letters? Which is the most beautiful word in the language? What is the longest word? What is the longest isogram (a word in which every letter appears the same number of times)? Can you make a humorous anagram out of the letters in the name of the prime minister? Can you write a poem in which every word contains the same vowel (a *univocalic*)? Can you write a text that doesn't make use of a particular letter of the alphabet (a *lipogram*)? Some people spend huge amounts of time on such tasks. Ernest Wright's novel *Gadsby* (1939), which uses no letter *e*, has 50 000 words. There seems to be a very fine dividing line between allurements and addiction (see Crystal 1998).

Exploring the history of words provides a further dimension. ‘The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture’, says Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Essays*, 1844), concluding that ‘Language is fossil poetry’. The etymological lure is undoubtedly one of the strongest. I never cease to be amazed at the way word-books attract interest. Mark Forsyth’s *The Etymologicon* topped the best-seller Christmas list in 2011. I have had more online reaction to my own *The Story of English in 100 Words* than to any other of my books: making a personal selection of words seems to encourage others to talk about their own favourites. Any listing of obsolescent words generates a nostalgia which can turn into a call for resurrection. A word can be given a new lease of life through online social networking—or a good PR campaign.

When in 2008 Collins decided to prune a couple of dozen old words from its dictionary—such as *agrestic*, *apodeictic*, *compossible*, *embrangle*, *niddering*, *skirr*, and *fubsy*—a cleverly managed campaign generated huge publicity for the next edition. Collins agreed to monitor public reaction, and to retain words that obtained real support. *The Times* took up the campaign (Adams, 2008). Celebrities agreed to sponsor the words: British poet laureate Andrew Motion, for example, adopted *skirr* (the sound made by a bird’s wings in flight); British television personality Stephen Fry adopted *fubsy* (short and stout) and used it on his BBC panel/quiz show *QI* (i.e. Quite Interesting). A ‘savefubsy’ petition was launched online. An art exhibition featuring the words ran at the German Gallery in London. The result: both *fubsy* and *skirr* were reprieved, along with a few others, and all of the endangered words were retained in the online version of the dictionary.

Why do words get this kind of response? Henry Thoreau provides one answer (*Walden*, 1854):

A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips;—not to be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself. The symbol of an ancient man’s thought becomes a modern man’s speech.

Oscar Wilde provides another (*Intentions*, 1891):

Words have not merely music as sweet as that of viol and lute, colour as rich and vivid as any that makes lovely for us the canvas of the Venetian or the Spaniard, and plastic form no less sure and certain than that which reveals itself in marble or in bronze but thought and passion and spirituality are theirs also, are theirs indeed alone.

I take these responses from the literary canon, and that is how it should be, for, as Ezra Pound affirms, talking about the writing of *Ulysses*, ‘We are governed by words, the laws are graven in words, and literature is the sole means of keeping these words living and accurate’ (quoted by George Steiner in *Language and Silence*, 1967). But the lure of words extends well beyond literature in its canonical form.

Perhaps it is the sheer number of words that provides the attraction. The size of a language's vocabulary is such that there are always new lexical words to explore. When learning a language, the task of mastering the pronunciation, orthography, and grammar is a finite task. There are only so many sounds and symbols, and only so many ways of constructing a sentence. But there is no limit to the words. I have elsewhere called vocabulary 'the Everest of language learning', to capture the challenge learners face; but even that metaphor is misleading, for vocabulary has no summit or end-point. To count the words of a language is an impossible task, and estimates of the number of words in, say, English, are always wide of the mark. Great publicity surrounded the claim made by an American agency, Global Language Monitor, in 2009 that the millionth word had entered the English language (Payack 2008). All they had done, of course, was devise an algorithm which was able to count up to a million. The English language has long had more than a million words.

The reason that the task is impossible is partly empirical, partly methodological, and will be discussed in detail later in this book. It is empirical because the English language is now used worldwide, and thousands of fresh words—and fresh meanings of words—are being introduced by the 'new Englishes' that have evolved. Dictionaries and word lists of Jamaican, South African, Indian, Singaporean, and over fifty other global varieties of English show the extent to which the emerging identities of recently independent countries is reflected in lexical innovation (see Crystal 2003). There are 15 000 words listed in a dictionary of Jamaican English, for example—that is, words used in Jamaica that aren't known globally. Many of them are colloquial or slang expressions, unlikely to appear in print, but that does not rob them of their status as words. Many of these words come and go like the tides. It is impossible to keep track of all of them.

The word-counting task is also complicated by methodological considerations. For what counts as a word? Are *cat* and *cats* one word or two? How many words are there in *flower pot* or *flower-pot* or *flowerpot*? Does an abbreviation count as a word? Do proper names count as words? Normally, we exclude names (such as *David* and *London*) from a word-count, assigning them to an encyclopedia rather than a dictionary; but we include them when they take on an extended meaning (as in 'The White House has spoken'), and there are many cases where we need to take a view ('That's a Renoir'). We need to be alert to these issues, to avoid making false claims. How many 'different words' does Shakespeare use? If we count *go*, *goes*, *going*, *goeth*, *gone*, etc. as separate words, the total is around 30 000 (it can never be a precise figure because of uncertainties over editions and what counts as part of the canon); if we count them as variants of a single 'word', *GO*, then the figure falls to less than 20 000. It is the need to clarify which motivated linguists to introduce a new term into the literature: *lexical item*, or *lexeme*. *Go*, *goes*, etc. are said to be variant forms of the lexeme *GO*.

The other counting task is more feasible: how many words do you, the reader of this book, know? If you have the time, all you have to do is go through a medium-sized dictionary and make a note of them. (Most people don't have the time, so they base their estimate on a sampling of a small percentage of the pages.) This would be only a first approximation, because not all the words you know will be in that dictionary—especially

if you are a scientist and have a large specialized vocabulary—but it will not be too far away from the truth. An English desk dictionary of 1500 pages is likely to contain around 75 000 boldface headwords. Most people find they have a passive vocabulary (i.e. the words they know) of around 50 000; their active vocabulary total (i.e. the words they use) is significantly less. Authors and word-buffs might have a vocabulary that is double this figure (Crystal 1987). One can nonetheless do a great deal with a relatively small active vocabulary, as the Shakespeare total illustrates—or the 8000 or so different words (excluding proper names) that are in the King James Bible.

Using this perspective, we now can quantify the lure of words. For if there are over a million English words waiting in the wings, and the best of us knows perhaps a tenth of these, there is an unimaginable lexical world waiting to be explored—unimaginable also because the vast majority of these words has more than one meaning. And they are all waiting in dictionaries to be used in new contexts. British novelist Anthony Burgess found a vehicular metaphor apposite: 'A word in a dictionary is very much like a car in a mammoth motorshow—full of potential but temporarily inactive' (*A Mouthful of Air*, 1992). American physician and essayist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr used a gustatory one: 'Every word fresh from the dictionary brings with it a certain succulence' (*The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, 1858).

Once again, looking to the poets helps us identify what it is that makes people talk about the 'magic' of words. Dylan Thomas, in his *Poetic Manifesto* (1961), picks up on the theme of quantity when he describes his first experience of reading:

I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on in the world between the covers of books, such sand-storms and ice-blasts of words, such slashing of humbug, and humbug too, and staggering peace, such enormous laughter, such and so many blinding bright lights breaking across the just-awaking wits and splashing all over the pages in a million bits and pieces all of which were words, words, words, and each of which was alive forever in its own delight and glory and oddity and light.

Sylvia Plath (in *Ariel*, 1965) describes the consequences of word choice. For her, words are 'Axes / After whose stroke the wood rings, / And the echoes! / Echoes travelling / Off from the centre like horses'.

So who should have the last word on *lurement* (first recorded usage, 1592, and marked 'rare' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*)? Or is it *luresomeness* (no attestation, yet, though there is a single record of *luresome* in 1889)? Perhaps we need a reality check from Samuel Johnson (in Boswell's *Life*, 1791): 'This is one of the disadvantages of wine, it makes a man mistake words for thoughts.' Or from Thomas Kyd (in *The Spanish Tragedy*, c.1589): 'Where words prevail not, violence prevails; / But gold doth more than either of them both.' Given the range of enthusiasms evident in the following pages, I opt for Evelyn Waugh, in a *New York Times* article in 1950: 'Words should be an intense pleasure, just as leather should be to a shoemaker.' Clearly, in this book, they are.