

WILLIAMS

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### INTRODUCTION TO *KEYWORDS* (1976)

[...] I have emphasized this process of the development of *Keywords* because it seems to me to indicate its dimension and purpose. It is not a dictionary or glossary of a particular academic subject. It is not a series of footnotes to dictionary histories or definitions of a number of words. It is, rather, the record of an inquiry into a *vocabulary*: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group as *culture* and *society*. Every word which I have included has at some time, in the course of some argument, virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meanings seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss. I have often got up from writing a particular note and heard the same word again, with the same sense of significance and difficulty: often, of course, in discussions and arguments which were rushing by to some other destination. I began to see this experience as a problem of *vocabulary*, in two senses: the available and developing meanings of known words, which needed to be set down; and the explicit but as often implicit connections which people were making, in what seemed to me, again and again, particular formations of meaning – ways not only of discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences. What I had then to do was not only to collect examples, and look up or revise particular records of use, but to analyse, as far as I could, some of the issues and problems that were there inside the vocabulary, whether in single words or in habitual groupings. I called these words *Keywords* in two connected senses: they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought. Certain uses bound together certain ways of seeing culture and society, not least in these two most general words. Certain other uses seemed to me to open up issues and problems, in the same general area, of which we all needed to be very much more conscious. Notes on a list of words; analyses of certain formations: these were the elements of an active vocabulary – a way of recording, investigating and pre-

senting problems of meaning in the area in which the meanings of *culture* and *society* have formed.

Of course the issues could not all be understood simply by analysis of the words. On the contrary, most of the social and intellectual issues, including both gradual developments and the most explicit controversies and conflicts, persisted within and beyond the linguistic analysis. Yet many of these issues, I found, could not really be thought through, and some of them, I believe, cannot even be focused unless we are conscious of the words as elements of the problems. This point of view is now much more widely accepted. When I raised my first questions about the differing uses of *culture* I was given the impression, in kindly and not so kind ways, that these arose mainly from the fact of an incomplete education, and the fact that this was true (in real terms it is true of everyone) only clouded the real point at issue. The surpassing confidence of any particular use of a word, within a group or within a period, is very difficult to question. I recall an eighteenth-century letter:

What, in your opinion, is the meaning of the word *sentimental*, so much in vogue among the polite . . . ? Everything clever and agreeable is comprehended in that word . . . I am frequently astonished to hear such a one is a *sentimental* man; we were a *sentimental* party; I have been taking a *sentimental* walk.

Well, that vogue passed. The meaning of *sentimental* changed and deteriorated. Nobody now asking the meaning of the word would be met by that familiar, slightly frozen, polite stare. When a particular history is completed, we can all be clear and relaxed about it. But *literature*, *aesthetic*, *representative*, *empirical*, *unconscious*, *liberal*: these and many other words which seem to me to raise problems will, in the right circles, seem mere transparencies, their correct use a matter only of education. Or *class*, *democracy*, *equality*, *evolution*, *materialism*: these we know we must argue about, but we can assign particular uses to sects, and call all sects but our own *sectarian*. Language depends, it can be said, on this kind of confidence, but in any major language, and especially in periods of change, a necessary confidence and concern for clarity can quickly become brittle, if the questions involved are not faced.

The questions are not only about meaning; in most cases, inevitably, they are about meanings. Some people, when they see a word, think the first thing to do is to define it. Dictionaries are produced and, with a show of authority no less confident because it is usually so limited in place and time, what is called a proper meaning is attached. I once began collecting, from correspondence in newspapers, and from other public arguments, variations on the phrases 'I see from my Webster' and 'I find from my Oxford Dictionary'. Usually what was at issue was a difficult term in an argument. But the effective tone of these phrases, with their interesting overtone of possession ('my Webster'), was to appropriate a meaning which fitted the argument and to exclude those meanings which were inconvenient to it but which some benighted person had been so foolish as to use. Of course if we want to be clear about *hanxing* or *baobab* or *barilla*, or for that matter about *barbel* or *basilica* or *batik*, or, more obviously,

about *barber* or *barley* or *barn*, this kind of definition is effective. But for words of a different kind, and especially for those which involve ideas and values, it is not only an impossible but an irrelevant procedure. The dictionaries most of us use, the defining dictionaries, will in these cases, and in proportion to their merit as dictionaries, list a range of meanings, all of them current, and it will be the range that matters. Then when we go beyond these to the historical dictionaries, and to essays in historical and contemporary semantics, we are quite beyond the range of the 'proper meaning'. We find a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovation, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer; or changes which are masked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning. *Industry*, *family*, *nature* may jump at us from such sources; *class*, *rational*, *subjective* may after years of reading remain doubtful. It is in all these cases, in a given area of interest which began in the way I have described, that the problems of meaning have preoccupied me and have led to the sharpest realization of the difficulties of any kind of definition.

The work which this book records has been done in an area where several disciplines converge but in general do not meet. It has been based on several areas of specialist knowledge but its purpose is to bring these, in the examples selected, into general availability. This needs no apology but it does need explanation of some of the complexities that are involved in any such attempt. These can be grouped under two broad headings: 'problems of information' and 'problems of theory'.

The problems of information are severe. Yet anyone working on the structures and developments of meaning in English words has the extraordinary advantage of the great *Oxford English Dictionary*. This is not only a monument to the scholarship of its editors, Murray, Bradley and their successors, but also the record of an extraordinary collaborative enterprise, from the original work of the Philological Society to the hundreds of later correspondents. Few inquiries into particular words end with the great dictionary's account, but even fewer could start with any confidence if it were not there. I feel with William Empson, who in *The Structure of Complex Words* found many faults in the dictionary, that 'such work on individual words as I have been able to do has been almost entirely dependent on using the majestic object as it stands'. But what I have found in my own work about the *OED*, when this necessary acknowledgment has been made, can be summed up in three ways. I have been very aware of the period in which the dictionary was made: in effect from the 1880s to the 1920s (the first example of the current series of Supplements shows addition rather than revision). This has two disadvantages: that in some important words the evidence for developed twentieth-century usage is not really available; and that in a number of cases, especially in certain sensitive social and political terms, the presuppositions of orthodox opinion in that period either show through or are not far below the surface. Anyone who reads Dr Johnson's great dictionary soon becomes aware of his active and partisan mind as well as his remarkable learning. I am aware in my own notes and essays that, though I

try to show the range, many of my own positions and preferences come through. I believe that this is inevitable, and all I am saying is that the air of massive impersonality which the *Oxford English Dictionary* communicates is not so impersonal, so purely scholarly, or so free of active social and political values as might be supposed from its occasional use. Indeed, to work closely in it is at times to get a fascinating insight into what can be called the ideology of its editors, and I think this has simply to be accepted and allowed for, without the kind of evasion which one popular notion of scholarship prepares the way for. Secondly, for all its deep interest in meanings, the *Dictionary* is primarily philological and etymological; one of the effects of this is that it is much better on range and variation than on connection and interaction. In many cases, working primarily on meanings and their contexts, I have found the historical evidence invaluable but have drawn different and at times even opposite conclusions from it. Thirdly, in certain areas I have been reminded very sharply of the change of perspective which has recently occurred in studies of language: for obvious reasons (if only from the basic orthodox training in dead languages) the written language used to be taken as the real source of authority, with the spoken language as in effect derived from it; whereas now it is much more clearly realized that the real situation is usually the other way round. The effects are complex. In a number of primarily intellectual terms the written language is much nearer the true source. If we want to trace *psychology* the written record is probably adequate, until the late nineteenth century. But if, on the other hand, we want to trace *job*, we have soon to recognize that the real developments of meaning, at each stage, must have occurred in everyday speech well before they entered the written record. This is a limitation which has to be recognized, not only in the dictionary, but in any historical account. A certain foreshortening or bias in some areas is, in effect, inevitable. Period indications for origin and change have always to be read with this qualification and reservation. I can give one example from personal experience. Checking the latest Supplement for the generalizing contemporary use of *communications*, I found an example and a date which happened to be from one of my own articles. Now not only could written examples have been found from an earlier date, but I know that this sense was being used in conversation and discussion, and in American English, very much earlier. I do not make the point to carp. On the contrary, this fact about the *OED* is a fact about any work of this kind, and needs especially to be remembered when reading my own accounts.

For certain words I have added a number of examples of my own, from both general and deliberate reading. But of course any account is bound to be incomplete, in a serious sense, just as it is bound to be selective. The problems of adequate information are severe and sometimes crippling, but it is not always possible to indicate them properly in the course of an analysis. They should, nevertheless, always be remembered. And of one particular limitation I have been very conscious. Many of the most important words that I have worked on either developed key meanings in languages other than English, or went through a complicated and interactive development in a number of major languages. Where I have been able in part to follow this, as in *alienation* or *culture*, its significance is so evident that we are bound to feel the lack of it when such tracing has not been possible. To do such comparative studies adequately would be

an extraordinary international collaborative enterprise, and the difficulties of that may seem sufficient excuse. An inquiry into the meanings of *democracy*, sponsored by UNESCO and intended to be universal and comparative, ran into every kind of difficulty, though even the more limited account that Naess and his colleagues had to fall back on is remarkably illuminating. I have had enough experience of trying to discuss two key English Marxist terms – *base* and *superstructure* – not only in relation to their German originals, but in discussions with French, Italian, Spanish, Russian and Swedish friends, in relation to their forms in these other languages, to know not only that the results are fascinating and difficult, but that such comparative analysis is crucially important, not just as philology, but as a central matter of intellectual clarity. It is greatly to be hoped that ways will be found of encouraging and supporting these comparative inquiries, but meanwhile it should be recorded that while some key developments, now of international importance, occurred first in English, many did not and in the end can only be understood when other languages are brought consistently into comparison. This limitation, in my notes and essays, has to be noted and remembered by readers. It is particularly marked in very early developments, in the classical languages and in medieval Latin, where I have almost invariably simply relied on existing authorities, though with many questions that I could not answer very active in my mind. Indeed, at the level of origins, of every kind, this is generally true and must be entered as an important reservation.

This raises one of the theoretical problems. It is common practice to speak of the 'proper' or 'strict' meaning of a word by reference to its origins. One of the effects of one kind of classical education, especially in conjunction with one version of the defining function of dictionaries, is to produce what can best be called a sacral attitude to words, and corresponding complaints of vulgar contemporary misunderstanding and misuse. The original meanings of words are always interesting. But what is often most interesting is the subsequent variation. The complaints that get into the newspapers, about vulgar misuse, are invariably about very recent developments. Almost any random selection of actual developments of meaning will show that what is now taken as 'correct' English, often including many of the words in which such complaints are made, is the product of just such kinds of change. The examples are too numerous to quote here but the reader is invited to consider only *interest* or *determine* or *improve*, though *organic*, *evolution* and *individual* are perhaps more spectacular examples. I have often found a clue to an analysis by discovery of an origin, but there can be no question, at the level either of practice or of theory, of accepting an original meaning as decisive (or where should we be with *aesthetic*?) or of accepting a common source as directive (or where should we be as between *peasant* and *pagan*, *idiot* and *idiom*, or *employ* and *imply*?). The vitality of a language includes every kind of extension, variation and transfer, and this is as true of change in our own time (however much we may regret some particular examples) as of changes in the past which can now be given a sacral veneer. (*Sacral* itself is an example; the extension from its physical sense of the fundament to its disrespectful implication of an attitude to the *sacred* is not my joke, but it is a meaningful joke and thence a meaningful use.)

The other theoretical problems are very much more difficult. There are quite

basic and very complex problems in any analysis of the processes of meaning. Some of these can be usefully isolated as general problems of signification: the difficult relations between words and concepts; or the general processes of sense and reference; and beyond these the more general rules, in social norms and in the system of language itself, which both enable sense and reference to be generated and in some large degree to control them. In linguistic philosophy and in theoretical linguistics these problems have been repeatedly and usefully explored, and there can be no doubt that as fundamental problems they bear with real weight on every particular analysis.

Yet just because 'meaning', in any active sense, is more than the general process of 'signification', and because 'norms' and 'rules' are more than the properties of any abstract process or system, other kinds of analysis remain necessary. The emphasis of my own analyses is deliberately social and historical. In the matters of reference and applicability, which analytically underlie any particular use, it is necessary to insist that the most active problems of meaning are always primarily embedded in actual relationships, and that both the meanings and the relationships are typically diverse and variable, within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change.

This does not mean that the language simply reflects the processes of society and history. On the contrary, it is a central aim of this book to show that some important social and historical processes occur *within* language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and of relationships really are. New kinds of relationship, but also new ways of seeing existing relationships, appear in language in a variety of ways: in the invention of new terms (*capitalism*); in the adaptation and alteration (indeed at times reversal) of older terms (*society* or *individual*); in extension (*interest*) or transfer (*exploitation*). But also, as these examples should remind us, such changes are not always either simple or final. Earlier and later senses coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested. It is certainly necessary to analyse these and other consequent problems as problems of general signification, but my emphasis here is on a vocabulary of meanings, in a deliberately selected area of argument and concern.

My starting point, as I have said, was what can be called a cluster, a particular set of what came to seem interrelated words and references, from which my wider selection then developed. It is thus an intrinsic aim of the book to emphasize interconnections, some of which seem to me in some new ways systematic, in spite of problems of presentation which I shall discuss. It can of course be argued that individual words should never be isolated, since they depend for their meanings on their actual contexts. At one level this can be readily conceded. Many of the variable senses that I have analysed are determined, in practice, by contexts. Indeed this is why I mainly illustrate the different senses by actual examples in recorded use.

Yet the problem of meaning can never be wholly dissolved into context. It is true that no word ever finally stands on its own, since it is always an element in the social process of language, and its uses depend on complex and (though variably) systematic properties of language itself. Yet it can still be useful to pick out certain words, of an especially problematical kind, and to consider, for the

moment, their own internal developments and structures. This is so even when the qualification, 'for the moment', is ignored by one kind of reader, who is content to reassert the facts of connection and interaction from which this whole inquiry began. For it is only in reductive kinds of analysis that the processes of connection and interaction can be studied as if they were relations between simple units. In practice many of these processes begin within the complex and variable sense of particular words, and the only way to show this, as examples of how networks of usage, reference and perspective are developed, is to concentrate, 'for the moment', on what can then properly be seen as internal structures. This is not to impede but to make possible the sense of an extended and intricate vocabulary, within which both the variable words and their varied and variable interrelations are in practice active.

To study both particular and relational meanings, then, in different actual speakers and writers, and in and through historical time, is a deliberate choice. The limitations are obvious and are admitted. The emphasis is equally obvious and is conscious. One kind of semantics is the study of meaning as such; another kind is the study of formal systems of signification. The kind of semantics to which these notes and essays belong is one of the tendencies within *historical semantics*: a tendency that can be more precisely defined when it is added that the emphasis is not only on historical origins and developments but also on the present – present meanings, implications and relationships – as history. This recognizes, as any study of language must, that there is indeed community between past and present, but also that *community* – that difficult word – is not the only possible description of these relations between past and present; that there are also radical change, discontinuity and conflict, and that all these are still at issue and are indeed still occurring. The vocabulary I have selected is that which seems to me to contain the key words in which both continuity and discontinuity, and also deep conflicts of value and belief, are in this area engaged. Such processes have of course also to be described in direct terms, in the analysis of different social values and conceptual systems. What these notes and essays are intended to contribute is an additional kind of approach, through the vocabulary itself.

For I believe that it is possible to contribute certain kinds of awareness and certain more limited kinds of clarification by taking certain words at the level at which they are generally used, and this, for reasons related to and probably clear from all my other work, has been my overriding purpose. I have more than enough material on certain words (for example *class* and *culture*) and on certain formations (for example *art*, *aesthetic*, *subjective*, *psychological*, *unconscious*) to write, as an alternative, extended specialist studies, some themselves of book length. I may eventually do this, but the choice of a more general form and a wider range was again deliberate. I do not share the optimism, or the theories which underlie it, of that popular kind of inter-war and surviving semantics which supposed that clarification of difficult words would help in the resolution of disputes conducted in their terms and often evidently confused by them. I believe that to understand the complexities of the meanings of *class* contributes very little to the resolution of actual class disputes and class struggles. It is not only that nobody can 'purify the dialect of the tribe', nor only that anyone who really knows himself to be a member of a society knows better than to want, in those terms, to



try. It is also that the variations and confusions of meaning are not just faults in a system, or errors of feedback, or deficiencies of education. They are in many cases, in my terms, historical and contemporary substance. Indeed they have often, as variations, to be insisted upon, just because they embody different experiences and readings of experience, and this will continue to be true, in active relationships and conflicts, over and above the clarifying experiences of scholars or committees. What can really be contributed is not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness. In a social history in which many crucial meanings have been shaped by a dominant class, and by particular professions operating to a large extent within its terms, the sense of edge is accurate. This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical – subject to change as well as to continuity – if the millions of people in whom it is active are to see it as active: not a *tradition* to be learned, nor a *consensus* to be accepted, nor a set of meanings which, because it is ‘our language’, has a natural authority; but as a shaping and reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view: a vocabulary to use, to find our own ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history. [ . . . ]