

DAVID CRYSTAL

# WORDS

IN TIME AND PLACE



EXPLORE LANGUAGE THROUGH THE HISTORICAL  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGLISH AND OTHER

---

# WORDS

IN TIME AND PLACE





---

**OXFORD**

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of  
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© David Crystal 2014

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

First Edition published in 2014

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in  
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the  
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted  
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics  
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the  
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the  
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014932092

ISBN 978-0-19-968047-4

Printed in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

---

# Contents

Symbols and abbreviations	vi
General introduction	vii
1 <b>From <i>swelt</i> to <i>zonk</i>:</b> words for dying	1
2 <b>From <i>neb</i> to <i>hooter</i>:</b> words for nose	21
3 <b>From <i>cup-shot</i> to <i>rat-arsed</i>:</b> words for being drunk	29
4 <b>From <i>meatship</i> to <i>trough</i>, and <i>nuncheon</i> to <i>short-eat</i>:</b> words for a (light) meal	57
5 <b>From <i>gong</i> to <i>shitter</i>, and <i>closet</i> to <i>the House of Lords</i>:</b> words for a privy	71
6 <b>From <i>dizzy</i> to <i>numpty</i>:</b> words for a fool	85
7 <b>From <i>darling</i> to <i>lamb-chop</i>:</b> terms of endearment	103
8 <b>From <i>lo</i> to <i>knickers</i>, and <i>aplight</i> to <i>sapristi</i>:</b> oaths and exclamations	117
9 <b>From <i>guest house</i> to <i>B &amp; B</i>, and <i>hotel</i> to <i>floatel</i>:</b> words for inns and hotels	137
10 <b>From <i>meretrix</i> to <i>parlor girl</i>:</b> words for a prostitute	149
11 <b>From <i>mint</i> to <i>dosh</i>:</b> words for money	169
12 <b>From <i>smolt</i> to <i>untempestuous</i>, and <i>reigh</i> to <i>ugly</i>:</b> words for calm and stormy weather	187
13 <b>From <i>ealda</i> to <i>geriatric</i>, <i>bevar</i> to <i>poppa stoppa</i>, and <i>trot</i> to <i>old boot</i>:</b> words for old person, old man, old woman	197
14 <b>From <i>skiffle</i> to <i>grime</i>:</b> words for types of pop music	213
15 <b>From <i>astronaut</i> to <i>Skylab</i>:</b> words for spacecraft	237
Glossary	249
Further reading and sources	251
Chronological indexes	252
Chronological index of words	253
Chronological index of people	279
Chronological index of general topics	284

---

# Symbols and abbreviations

†	The dagger is used to identify words no longer used in English. It is not used for words and senses whose first recorded usage is in the twentieth century.
>	develops into
c.	<i>circa</i> – used to identify an approximate date
	shows a line break between lines of poetry
ch.	chapter
eOE	early Old English
<i>HTOED</i>	<i>The Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary</i>
IOE	late Old English
OE	Old English (see Glossary)
<i>OED</i>	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i>
Plays	A single numeral refers to an Act; a sequence of two numerals to Act-Scene; a sequence of three numerals to Act-Scene-Line. (Shakespeare line references and play chronology follow David and Ben Crystal, <i>Shakespeare's Words</i> (Penguin, 2002), also online at <a href="http://www.shakespeareswords.com">www.shakespeareswords.com</a> .)
vs	versus

---

# General introduction

Welcome to the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (*HTOED*) – or, rather, a tiny part of it. This huge two-volume work was published in 2009, with an online version viewable on the main *OED* website (<http://www.oed.com>). It was nothing short of a breakthrough in the historical study of English. I had been waiting for such a work for almost the whole of my linguistic life. I was in the audience at the Philological Society in 1965 when its originator, Michael Samuels, made public his proposal. His ambitious plan – to chart the semantic development of the entire language over a thousand years – was received with a mixture of incredulity and anticipation. Not only would it be the first historical thesaurus for any language, it would be dealing with a language whose vocabulary was known to be especially large. Expectation grew as articles and books began to be published on aspects of its content, and when it appeared, over 40 years later, it was widely acclaimed by readers for its breadth and depth of coverage. Since then, historians, linguists, philologists, and language enthusiasts in general have been working out the best ways of exploring and exploiting this unique resource. *Words in Time and Place* is an introduction to its treasures. My aim is to illustrate the way the *HTOED* is organized, to show the synergy between the thesaurus and its lexicographical parent, and to explore some of the linguistic and social insights that emerge from this interaction.

## Thesaurus vs dictionary

The title *HTOED* contains two terms, *thesaurus* and *dictionary*, that are not usually seen in such a close relationship, as they deal with the study of vocabulary from opposite points of view. We use a dictionary when we encounter a word and want to find out its meaning (or some other aspect of its use). We use a thesaurus when we encounter a meaning and want to find out the words that best express it. Bringing the two approaches together always presents a challenge.

The traditional approach is that of the dictionary. Here the words are organized alphabetically, a principle first made explicit in the history of English by Robert Cawdrey in his *Table Alphabeticall* (1604), who finds it



necessary to tell his readers how to use his book (I have modernized his spelling):

If thou be desirous (gentle Reader) rightly and readily to understand, and to profit by this Table, and such like, then thou must learn the Alphabet, to wit, the order of the Letters as they stand, perfectly without book, and where every Letter standeth: as (b) near the beginning, (n) about the middest, and (t) toward the end. Now if the word, which thou art desirous to find, begin with (a) then look in the beginning of this Table, but if with (v) look towards the end. Again, if thy word begin with (ca) look in the beginning of the letter (c) but if with (cu) then look toward the end of that letter. And so of all the rest.

The alphabetical principle is an enormous convenience (once one has learned to spell), but it is a semantic irrelevance. Words which belong together are separated: *aunt* under A, *uncle* under U. We do not learn words in alphabetical order, either as children or adults. Rather, we learn them in a meaningful relation to each other as we develop our understanding of areas of experience. From the earliest years, vocabulary is presented to children thematically: they learn to distinguish *aunts* from *uncles*, *cats* from *dogs*, and *hot taps* from *cold taps*. In short, they learn the way the world is organized, lexically, into semantic fields.

The thesaurus – a genre that actually pre-dates alphabetical dictionaries – solved this problem. Roget's *Thesaurus* of 1852 is probably the best-known exemplar, and its full title summarizes its purpose: 'Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases Classified and Arranged so as to Facilitate the Expression of Ideas and Assist in Literary Composition'. There had been books of synonyms before Roget, organized alphabetically, like a dictionary. What Roget did was group these thematically, and organize his themes into a hierarchy that covered all areas of meaning. An index at the back of the book lists all the words in alphabetical order, so that a user can find the places in the thesaurus where they appear. But there are no definitions. A thesaurus assumes that you know what the words mean – or, if you do not, that you will look them up in a dictionary.

We might think that the ideal lexical product would be to combine the strengths of a dictionary with those of a thesaurus into a single book, but it takes only a moment's reflection to see how impossibly large and unwieldy such a conflation would be. *Words in Time and Place* illustrates the point on the smallest of scales. It contains only 1,240 entries representing just fifteen semantic fields, but even with minimal definition and illustration we are still dealing with over 90,000 words. Online solutions are more practicable, as we see with the *OED* website, where it is possible to display a semantic field from the thesaurus and link directly

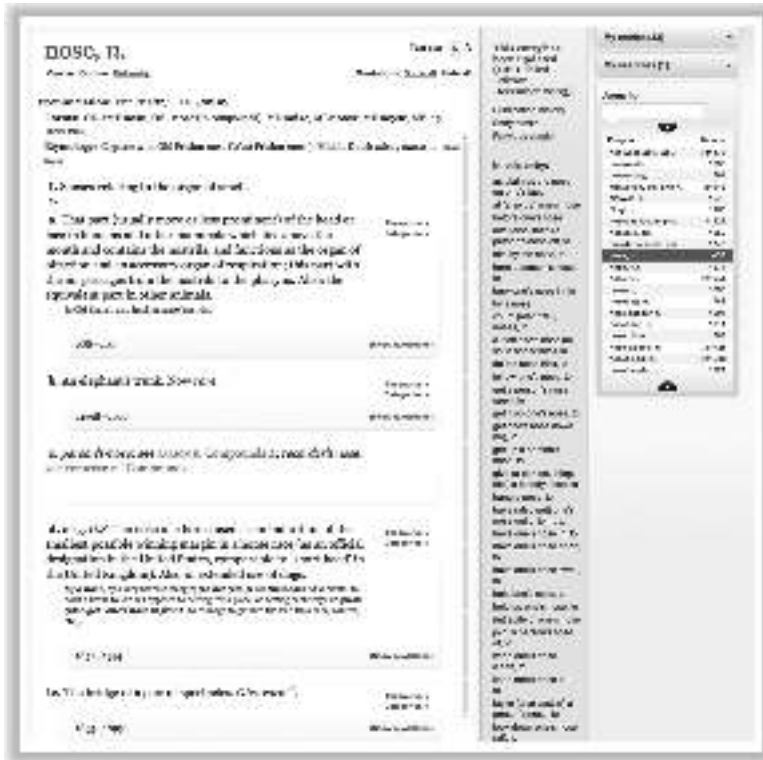
to the associated entries in the dictionary. It is this combinatorial approach which provides the most illuminating results, and which the present book illustrates.

### Why time *and* place?

A thesaurus brings together all the words and phrases that belong to a particular semantic field. But how do we choose which item to use? If the English language gives us over a hundred synonymous expressions in a particular field, as we see illustrated in several chapters of this book, how do we decide which one is appropriate for the meaning we have in mind? Or, if we are faced with someone else's use of vocabulary, how do we establish the factors which explain why that person chooses one word rather than another?

The *Historical* element in the *HTOED* provides one answer: we need first to establish *when* the item appears. Words and meanings change over time, so it is crucial to know what period we are dealing with before we are able to interpret someone's lexical use. This is the challenge facing all writers of historical fiction: they need to put words into their characters' mouths that suit the time in which they lived. It would be singularly inappropriate to have eighteenth-century characters using twentieth-century slang. And one of the commonest criticisms of historical films comes from the failure of the writers to carry out the required chronological checks. For example, in Episode 5 of the television series *Downton Abbey*, Thomas the footman says 'our lot always get shafted' (meaning 'treated unfairly') – a usage that is attested only from the 1950s, and certainly not contemporary to the time when the series was set, the 1910s. The *HTOED* helps prevent such lexical anachronisms.

But a historical perspective is not enough, for in any one period there are still choices to be made. We know from present-day experience that our ability to select an appropriate word depends on our awareness of such factors as *where* the word is used – by which sections of society, on which social occasions, in which part of the country or of the English-speaking world. In modern English, we know that some words have a regional dialect background (American, British, Australian, Scottish...), some are stylistically distinctive (technical, formal, colloquial, slang...), and some are simply idiosyncratic, being used by an individual speaker or writer for special effect (often, on just a single occasion). It was ever thus. It may be more difficult to establish what these nuances are in older vocabulary, but one thing we can be sure of: they will definitely have been there. The citations collected by the *OED* over the years provide the best means I know to establish the historical contexts of use that give us a sense of a word's place in the society of the time.



The opening of the online entry for *nose* (*n.*) in the *OED*, showing sense 1 and its subdivisions in outline mode. To see the lists of supporting quotations one clicks on *Quotations: Show all* at the top of the entry. The alphabetical character of the organization is evident in the listings on the right, showing related words in the *nose* entry and the location of *nose* in relation to the dictionary as a whole. To see the corresponding *HTOED* treatment, one clicks on the *Thesaurus* button to the right of the definition.

*Words in Time and Place* illustrates this double perspective for the set of semantic fields it contains. The coverage within a field is chronological, reflecting the way the items in the chosen field are organized in the thesaurus; but the treatment is lexicographic, reflecting the way these items are handled in the dictionary, and I rely on the unabridged *OED* for the definitions.



### Which semantic fields?

So, faced with the vast amount of data contained in both the *HTOED* and *OED*, how does one make a selection from the thousands of semantic fields to illustrate the explanatory power of a historical thesaurus? I used several criteria in choosing the fifteen fields presented in this book, bearing in mind that the primary aim is to convey the content of the *HTOED* in such a way that readers can see how it works and how best it can be used.

My first criterion was to ensure that the choice of fields would reflect the general balance of those found in the thesaurus. At the topmost level of the *HTOED* classification, we see the whole of experience divided into three categories: 'The External World', 'Mind' (in the print edition, 'The Mental World'), and 'Society' (in the print edition, 'The Social World'). In the print edition, 905 pages are devoted to the first of these (51%), 302 pages to the second (17%), and 560 pages to the third (32%). I have therefore reflected this ratio by choosing seven, three, and five fields respectively.

My second criterion was pragmatic. The English language is now a global phenomenon, and reflects a wide range of settings, each of which has vocabulary that expresses local identity. The distinctiveness is not so much regional (though this is one of the most rapidly growing areas of the lexicon) as technological and cultural. Fields such as fauna and flora, science, education, religion, and the arts are lexically prolific, and tend very quickly to break down into sub-fields that are specialized in character, with the words requiring a great deal of semantic explanation before it becomes possible to appreciate the way they relate to each other. Chemistry and Catholicism need a thesaural treatment just as much as any other subject, but their arcane terminology would present a barrier if used in an introduction for the general reader. For this book I have chosen themes which are part of everyday life, wherever one might live in the world: (in the order in which they appear) death, parts of the body, drink, food, hygiene, mental capacity, love, language, travel, morality, money, weather, age, pop music, and space exploration (both fictional and factual).

My third criterion was linguistic: to represent the types of word-class (part of speech) and word-formation found in English. The *HTOED* routinely distinguishes words that are nouns, verbs, adjectives, and so on, and as nouns always form the bulk of a semantic classification, that grammatical bias is reflected here, in eleven of my fifteen chapters. The remaining four show a verb (Chapter 1: Dying), two adjectives (Chapter 3: Drunk and Chapter 12: Calm and stormy weather), and an interjection

(Chapter 8: Oaths). In relation to word-formation, it seemed sensible to choose semantic fields that illustrate the range of possibilities in English. There are some semantic fields where little of lexical interest happens: under the heading of 'town', for example, there are long lists of nouns (*twin town, county town, port town, fishing town, mining town*, and so on) where all one can do is note the real-world diversity. By contrast, the fields I have chosen for the present book represent most of the ways in which words are created in English.

Fourth, I have selected fields which show how the *HTOED* taxonomy operates. Most of the chapters (1: Dying, 2: Nose, 3: Drunk, 6: Fool, 7: Endearment, 10: Prostitute, 11: Money) show single semantic categories of varying constituency (ranging from the 33 entries in Chapter 2 to the 151 entries in Chapter 3). Chapter 4: Meal and Chapter 5: Privy illustrate a field where there is a main category and one subcategory. Chapter 8: Oaths, Chapter 14: Pop Music, and Chapter 15: Spacecraft illustrate a category that has several subcategories. Chapter 9: Inns illustrates two vertically related categories; Chapter 12: Weather illustrates two horizontally related categories (opposites); and Chapter 13: Old Person a combination of vertical and horizontal categories.

At the end of each chapter I have devised a Wordmap showing how the chosen category or categories relate to other categories in the online thesaurus taxonomy. Categories comprising the focus of the chapter are shown in boldface. Above this focal item is shown the path that relates it, through various superordinate categories, to one of the three major divisions of the *HTOED*. Below it are shown any subcategories. To its sides are shown the categories operating at the same level of classification. Users of the print edition should note that there are some minor differences in headings between online and print versions of the taxonomy. My Wordmaps do not display the numerical codes used for navigation in the print edition.

It is very important to appreciate that the range of items included in an *HTOED* category – and thus, the ones dealt with in my chapters – is totally dependent on the application of the taxonomy. In this respect, we need to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a universal taxonomy. Taxonomies always reflect the mindset of their devisers, as the comparison of any two quickly illustrates. The taxonomy found in the Dewey decimal classification system, for example, widely used in libraries, differs in many ways from that used in the *HTOED*. Dewey's 'top ten' categories (general works, philosophy, religion, social sciences, language, pure science, technology, the arts, literature, history) very much reflect the interests of its author. And as one looks at lower-level categories, differences multiply. To take just one example: in Dewey, Central America is

listed as part of North America; in *HTOED* it is grouped along with South America.

What this means is that users of a thesaurus must always be prepared to look upwards, downwards, and sideways when exploring a semantic field. There are several cases in this book where I noted the omission of an expected word only to find it in an associated category. I discuss problems of this kind in the introductions to Chapter 5: Privy and Chapter 6: Fool. In a few cases, it is helpful to ‘borrow’ a word from an adjacent field to act as a source for later coinages. For example, in Chapter 3: Drunk, we find *bene-bowsie* (1637) and *boozed* (1850), which are clearly part of a semantic thread that should lead us back to *bousie* (1529) – but this last item is found not in the category I am expounding (‘Drunk’), but in a coordinate category (‘Affected by drink’). The moral is plain: read (or at least, skim) through the whole of a semantic field before deciding to focus on a part of it.

Another point to note is that, in a thesaurus, words may appear in more than one semantic category – a point not immediately obvious in the present book, where I have chosen single categories for illustration. For example, *lunch* is listed in the ‘Light meal’ category in Chapter 4, but in *HTOED* it is also found in a category reflecting its modern usage, ‘Midday meal/lunch’. In the printed book, the comprehensive index to the *HTOED* is the place to go to find out which categories include a particular item. Online, clicking on the Thesaurus button attached to a sense will take you directly to the related locations.

### Coverage and treatment

Having chosen a semantic field, I expected that the question of coverage would be decided for me: I would simply include in this book every item in the relevant *HTOED* list. In practice, there is a difficulty due to the ongoing revision process of the *OED*. The point is often missed by the general reader, who tends to think of a dictionary as a fixed and unchanging resource. In fact, all dictionaries need to be kept up to date, as new words enter the language, old words die out, and new discoveries are made about existing words. Traditionally, this was never a great problem, as new editions of dictionaries would appear only at intervals. But with online lexicography, everything has changed. As research continues, the latest findings are uploaded to the online *OED* every three months (latest revision dates are now carefully recorded at the website). This means that there is inevitably an increasing gap between the presentation of the lexicon in the last paper printing and what will be seen online. The *HTOED* was published in book form in 2009, so its electronic incarnation now differs in many small ways from what can be read there. Those who wish to

relate my listings to those found in the book will therefore note several differences, as I followed the online version whenever I encountered a discrepancy.

The same point applies to treatment. Because of the intimate relationship between the *HTOED* and the *OED*, I took pains to use the definitions of the latter and to relate usage to the citations listed there. All the dates in *Words in Time and Place* reflect what is known about a word, in our current state of knowledge. I frequently talk about ‘a first *OED* citation’ or ‘a single *OED* citation’, in my entries. Always, this means: as far as we now know (i.e. in 2014). One of the most exciting things about the Internet is that it is allowing lexicographers to search for words in texts that previously have never been explored from their point of view. The gaps left by the first *OED* editors, with their limited human resources, are slowly being filled. The present editorial team is steadily working through the whole dictionary, but of course it will be many years before that task is completed. As I write, roughly a third of the entire work has been fully revised – and even the revised entries are often updated as new material arrives. Any ‘first recorded usage’ is thus subject to change, and by the time *Words in Time and Place* appears it will inevitably be a little out of date in this respect. Similarly, a word considered obsolete (marked by †) might easily be reborn, if someone decides to use it and the usage catches on. None of this is a reason to withhold publication, of course, for there is never a terminus when it comes to dictionary revision. The notion that a dictionary will one day be fully revised is a chimera. But it is wise to remember these methodological caveats whenever we cite a ‘fact’ from a historical dictionary.

A noticeable example of the way different periods of *OED* history are conflated online is in the treatment of the earliest period of the language. The *OED* included only those words in Old English that continued to be used in the language after 1150. By contrast, the *HTOED* included the entire vocabulary of Old English as recorded in *A Thesaurus of Old English*. The date-display also varies: earlier editions of the *OED* gave year-dates for occurrence (insofar as these could be established, and often qualifying them by a *circa* (‘around’) convention); whereas the *HTOED* labels all items in Old English as ‘OE’, giving no year-dates at all. The latest edition of the *OED* is in transition between the two systems, now further distinguishing early (‘eOE’) and late (‘lOE’) stages. My listings reflect the current trend, with all Anglo-Saxon citations showing simply as ‘OE’.

A timeline organizes the entries within each chapter; but chronological listing can obscure linguistic relationships. After its first recorded use, a word can reappear, with only a slight modification, decades or centuries later; or it can be the trigger for a set of closely related compounds. It



makes sense, in these circumstances, to cluster the related words within a single entry. For example, in Chapter 7: Endearment, I have placed in the entry on *honey* (1375) all later *honey*-related words, whose dates of first recorded use range from 1405 to 1978. They do not, therefore, appear in the timeline in their chronological place; but they are all, of course, listed separately in the Word Index.

I have departed from *OED* practice in just one respect: in citations from old periods of the language, I often modernize the spelling and punctuation to make the text easy to assimilate for those who are unused to reading early orthographic conventions. I don't do this when the example needs the original form to make its point (such as when recording Scots dialect expressions), or where a respelling would detract from the expressive impact of the text. But in cases where little is lost (such as in quotations from Shakespeare), I have gone down the modern route. Readers who want to see a citation in its original orthography can of course easily find it in the relevant online *OED* entry.

Although my treatment of individual entries relies on the *OED*, it is not restricted to it. In particular, I frequently refer to regional usage as recorded in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* and to the fuller account of colloquial usage found in Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* – works listed in the 'Further reading and sources'. Whenever I have used an *OED* citation I have added some literary or cultural background so that the example can be fully understood – for example, saying who the speaker is in a quotation from a play. And in my introductions to individual chapters, I have summarized the salient features of the semantic field from both a linguistic and (where relevant) a sociolinguistic or cultural point of view. One of the main functions of the *HTOED* is to provide a window onto the social and cultural history of English-speaking peoples. *Words in Time and Place* also provides a window – into what the *HTOED* has to offer – as well as acting as a homage to one of the most significant lexicological projects ever.



1

## From *swelt* to *zonk*

### WORDS FOR DYING

A remarkable creativity surrounds the vocabulary of death. The words and expressions range from the solemn and dignified to the jocular and mischievous. And there is no better example of the latter than the ‘parrot’ sketch in the BBC television series, *Monty Python*. A customer returns to a pet-shop where he had earlier bought a supposedly living parrot. The owner refuses to accept that the bird is dead, and the confrontation leads to a glorious outburst of deathly lexicon (quoted here without the accents of the characters shown in the spelling):

*Customer:* He’s bleeding demised!

*Owner:* No no! He’s pining!

*Customer:* He’s not pining! He’s passed on! This parrot is no more! He has ceased to be! He’s expired and gone to meet his maker! He’s a stiff! Bereft of life, he rests in peace! If you hadn’t nailed him to the perch he’d be pushing up the daisies! His metabolic processes are now history! He’s off the twig! He’s kicked the bucket! He’s shuffled off his mortal coil, run down the curtain, and joined the bleeding choir invisible! This is an ex-parrot!!

This profusion of defunctive synonymy is not solely a modern phenomenon. An Anglo-Saxon equivalent to the *Monty Python* scriptwriters would have had over 40 expressions in Old English to choose from. His customer could have described his parrot as gone (*gegan*), departed (*leoran*), fallen (*gefeallan*), died away (*acwelan*), parted from life (*linnan ealdre*), gone on a journey (*geferan*), totally died off (*becwelan*), with its spirit sent forth (*gast onsendan*), completely scattered (*tostencan*), or glided away (*glidan*). We can’t be sure about the nuances of meaning differentiating all of

the verbs, but it's plain that the Anglo-Saxons were as concerned about finding different ways to talk about death as we are today.

There's a world of difference, though, between the tone of those Anglo-Saxon expressions and those often encountered now, and this is reflected in the opening entries of the intransitive verbs for 'die'. The early verbs are rather mundane and literal notions of 'leaving', such as *wend*, *go out of this world*, *fare*, *leave*, and *part*. Only later do we get a sense of where one is going to, with an initial focus on ancestors evolving into the notion of a divine presence: *be gathered to one's fathers*, *go over to the majority*, *go home*, *pass to one's reward*, *launch into eternity*, *go to glory*, *meet one's Maker*, *get one's call*.

The list displays a remarkable inventiveness, as people struggle to find fresh forms of expression. The language of death is inevitably euphemistic, but few of the verbs or idioms shown here are elaborate or opaque. In fact the history of verbs for dying displays a remarkable simplicity: 86 of the 121 entries (over 70%) consist of only one syllable, and monosyllables figure largely in the multi-word entries (such as *pay one's debt to nature*). Only sixteen verbs are disyllabic, and only three are trisyllabic (*determine*, *disperish*, *miscarry*), loanwords from French, and along with *expire*, *trespass*, and *decease* showing the arrival of a more scholarly vocabulary in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Even the euphemisms of later centuries have a markedly monosyllabic character (such as *slip one's cable*, *kick the bucket*, *meet one's Maker*).

## Influences

Words for death in all the semantic and grammatical categories represented in *HTOED* are numerous (over 1100), as people search for ways of renewing their stock of apt metaphors, and they display a variety of sources. The Bible is one influence on the list below, as seen in Wycliffe's *disperish*, Tyndale's *depart*, Coverdale's *die the death*, and the King James Bible's *give up the ghost* and *the silver cord is loosed*. Classical texts are another: Greek mythology is the source of *take the ferry*; Latin, the source of *pay one's debt to nature* and *go over to the majority*. Shipping provides *slip one's cable*; the livestock industry, *kick the bucket*; pastimes, *peg out* and *cash in one's checks*; mining, *go up the flume*; finance, *hand in one's accounts*. Wartime produces a wide range of slang expressions (e.g. *pack up*, *cop it*, *conk*, *stop one*, *buy it*) as well as more solemn idioms (e.g. *shed one's blood*, *fall a victim*). Regional variation is very limited, but we do see some Australianisms in the list (*pass in*, *go bung*), and some words are clearly favoured in certain parts of the English-speaking world (e.g. *succumb* in India).

Another reason for the length of the list is that a large number of coinages are known from just a single citation. People seem to be quite discerning,

when it comes to judging the acceptable terminology of death, and several innovations simply never catch on. Some periods were clearly more inventive than others, reflecting times of major English lexical expansion, notably the end of the sixteenth century (e.g. *relent*, *unbreathe*, *transpass*, *lose one's breath*) and the euphemism-conscious nineteenth century, where a fifth of the items in the list appear for the first time (e.g. *stiffen*, *drop short*, *step out*, *walk*, *knock over*). A significant strand also originates in individual authors and texts, such as Gower (*shut*), Cursor Mundi (*flee*), Thomas More (*galp*), Shakespeare (*shuffle off*), and Pope (*vent*).

There is a great deal of stylistic variation. We see class division operating: at one extreme, upper-class slang (e.g. *walk* and *pip*); at the other, the language of the underworld (e.g. *croak*, *kiss off*, *perch*). There are signs of journalese (e.g. *succumb*), because finding an appropriate way to report a death is a perpetual challenge. Formality and solemnity contrast with colloquialism and slang: *yield the ghost*, *expire*, and *pass away* vs *go off the hooks*, *kick the bucket*, and *zonk*. Some constructions evidently have permanent appeal because of their succinct and enigmatic character, such as the popularity of ‘– it’ (whatever the ‘it’ is): *snuff it*, *peg it*, *buy it*, *cop it*, *off it*, *crease it*, *have had it*. It's possible to see changes in fashion, such as the vogue for colloquial usages in *off* in the middle of the eighteenth century (*move off*, *pop off*, *pack off*, *hop off*). And styles change: we no longer feel that *pass out* would be appropriate on a tombstone.

But some things don't change. *Pass away* has been with us since the fourteenth century. And, in a usage that dates back to the twelfth, we still do say that people, simply, *died*.

## Timeline

<b>swelt/ forswelt</b> † OE	King Alfred is the first recorded user of these two verbs meaning ‘die, perish’, with the prefix adding a nuance of ‘off’ or ‘away’; <i>forswelt</i> passed away in early Middle English, as did other prefixed forms, such as <i>aswelt</i> and <i>to-swelt</i> , but <i>swelt</i> survived; Joseph Wright's <i>English Dialect Dictionary</i> shows widespread use at the end of the nineteenth century from Scotland to Sussex; in standard English, still remembered in <i>sweltering</i> – said of weather that is so hot it could kill you.
<b>give up the ghost</b> OE	This is <i>ghost</i> in the sense of ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’; first used as <i>give the ghost</i> , later <i>give away the ghost</i> and <i>yield up the ghost</i> , with a pronoun often replacing <i>the</i> (as in <i>gave up his ghost</i> ); the <i>up</i> usage is first recorded in late Middle English, and became the norm after its repeated use in the King James Bible.

<b>dead</b> † OE	<i>To dead</i> is totally ungrammatical today, but in its sense of ‘become dead’ it is in the Lindisfarne Gospels, and continued until at least the fifteenth century, sometimes with a prefix ( <i>adead</i> ). Chaucer talks about the body being <i>deaded</i> – a usage heard today only among young children struggling with irregular verbs.
<b>i-wite</b> † OE	<i>Witan</i> in Old English meant ‘see’. With the prefix <i>ge-</i> or <i>i-</i> it developed the sense of ‘look in a certain direction before taking that direction’ – so, to ‘set out’ or ‘depart’, and thus to ‘pass away’. The hermit Layamon used it in his chronicle of Britain (c.1200), and there are examples without the prefix until the sixteenth century.
<b>wend</b> OE	Now only used poetically, or in the expression <i>wend one’s way</i> , but in Middle English a very common verb, with a wide range of meanings to do with movement, including <i>wend from life</i> , <i>wend out of this world</i> , <i>wend into heaven</i> , and <i>wend to death</i> .
<b>forworth</b> † OE	Literally ‘become away’, used in Old English and until the fourteenth century in the sense of ‘perish’; <i>worth</i> also appears in <i>to-worth</i> , literally ‘come to nought’, used by Layamon in his thirteenth-century chronicle.
<b>go out of this world</b> OE	<i>World</i> has been used with a wide range of verbs (such as <i>depart</i> , <i>leave</i> , <i>wend</i> , <i>pass from</i> ) since Old English to describe the notion of going from one state of being to another. Probably often shortened to <i>go out</i> , though examples are only attested from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It remains a popular euphemism.
<b>quele</b> † OE	The French <i>qu</i> spelling replaced an earlier <i>cw</i> . In its sense of ‘die’, it is recorded from Old English until the end of the fourteenth century, often with a prefix, as in <i>becwelan</i> . Related meanings appear in <i>quail</i> and <i>quell</i> .
<b>starve</b> OE	Today, of course, it typically means ‘be very hungry’; but the notion of ‘starving to death’ captures the original use of <i>starve</i> , which meant simply ‘die’. Chaucer in <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> (c.1374) has Christ ‘first starf, and ros’ – he died and rose again. Regional usage (starving from the cold, as well as from hunger) has kept the sense going into modern times in several British and US dialects.
<b>die</b> c.1135	The default term for ‘cease to live’. Old English records several verbs for dying, but <i>die</i> is not one of them. It could have emerged out of a local English dialect, not recorded in writing, or perhaps it arrived as a borrowing from Old Norse.

<b>fare</b> † c.1175	The basic meaning of ‘journey, travel’ was common in Old English, and by the twelfth century had developed the sense of ‘journey from life’. The idea of ‘moving away’ could be emphasized by prefixes, as in <i>forthfare</i> and <i>forfere</i> . None of these usages outlived Middle English.
<b>end</b> † c.1200	‘Farewell, friends: thus Thisbe ends’, says Flute as Thisbe in the play performed at the end of Shakespeare’s <i>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i> (c.1595, 5.1.338). The usage is recorded until the late nineteenth century, when <i>end up</i> began to replace it, and later, <i>end up dead</i> . Don’t leave hospital against the doctor’s wishes, says an online health site, with the header: ‘Stay in that bed, or end up dead’.
<b>let</b> † c.1200	The original sense of <i>let</i> , meaning ‘leave’, naturally developed a meaning of ‘leave life behind’, in such phrases as <i>let one’s life</i> . The chronicler Holinshed (1587) talks of someone making his will and testament ‘not long before he let his life’. <i>Lose one’s life</i> , also recorded from around this time, became the standard expression.
<b>shed (one’s own) blood</b> c.1200	One of the earliest of the vivid substitutes for <i>die</i> , when someone has undergone a violent death for a cause. Christ is often described as ‘shedding his blood for mankind’. The expression becomes more elaborate over time, as when people say they are prepared to ‘shed the last drop of their blood’.
<b>yield (up) the ghost</b> c.1290	<i>Yield</i> developed a sense of ‘surrender, give up’ in the thirteenth century, and became a popular alternative to the earlier <i>give up</i> expression, coming to be used with other nouns, such as <i>soul</i> , <i>breath</i> , <i>life</i> , and <i>spirit</i> ; Jesus ‘yielded up his spirit’ in several present-day Bible translations.
<b>take the way of death</b> † 1297	The use of <i>way</i> to mean a specific direction of travel led to this expression; the Porter in Shakespeare’s <i>Macbeth</i> (1606, 2.3.18) produces a more flowery alternative, as he describes the professions ‘that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire’.
<b>die up</b> † c.1300	An early way of saying that a group of people or animals died, perhaps because of hunger or disease, <i>up</i> adding the sense of ‘entirely’, as in <i>eat up</i> . The husbandmen ‘died up with the famine and pestilence’, says a sixteenth-century source. <i>Die off</i> and <i>die out</i> were later replacements.
<b>fall</b> c.1300	A natural extension of the everyday meaning of this verb in the context of sudden death, where one ‘falls (down) dead’, especially as a result of violence. It is still used as a solemn way of referring to death in wartime: ‘those who have fallen in battle’.

<b>fine</b> † c.1300	When the Old French word for ‘to end, finish’ ( <i>finer</i> , modern <i>finir</i> ) came into English, it was almost immediately applied to dying: ‘Now that I’ve found what I had lost’, says the author of the medieval poem, <i>Pearl</i> (c.1400, line 328) ‘Schal I efte forgo hit er ever I fyne?’ – ‘Shall I lose it again before ever I die?’
<b>leave</b> † c.1300	‘To leave one’s life’ was quite a common expression in Middle and early Modern English: ‘Sexburga . . . left her life at the door of Milton church’, says a sixteenth-century source.
<b>spill</b> † c.1300	<i>Spillan</i> meant ‘to kill’ in Old English (the modern sense of ‘flowing over an edge’ is much later, seventeenth century), and a weaker sense of ‘perish’ was often used in Middle English. In the fourteenth-century <i>Romance of William of Palerne</i> (line 1535), Melior begs the ill William to speak to her quickly ‘or i spille sone’ – ‘or I shall die straightway’.
<b>tine</b> c.1300	An Old Norse word meaning ‘lose’, which later developed the sense of ‘perish’; can still be heard in this sense in the Shetland Isles and parts of eastern Scotland. The idiom <i>tine the sweat</i> – ‘lose life-blood’ – is also recorded in the fourteenth century.
<b>leese one’s life-days</b> † c.1325	<i>Leese</i> is an early form of <i>lose</i> (also related to <i>lease</i> , <i>less</i> , and <i>loose</i> ), and <i>life-days</i> was a popular and succinct way of talking about ‘all the days of one’s life’. The combination of the two to mean ‘die’ was a natural outcome, though few instances have been recorded. <i>End one’s days</i> , recorded first in 1533, proved to be the long-term usage.
<b>part</b> c.1330	In Shakespeare’s <i>Henry V</i> (1599, 2.3.12), Mistress Quickly reports Falstaff’s death: ‘a parted e’en just between twelve and one’. The verb was often complemented by <i>from this life</i> , <i>hence</i> , <i>in peace</i> , or <i>suchlike</i> , and is still used in this way, especially in formal obituaries.
<b>flit</b> † c.1340	Today, <i>flit</i> has developed the sense of light and rapid movement, often secretive: butterflies flit, as do people who want to avoid paying for something. The medieval use was far more serious, emphasizing a change in state, including the change from life to death. ‘When a man fra this world sal [shall] flitte’, writes the fourteenth-century hermit Richard Rolle. Nobody would use it today in relation to dying.
<b>trance</b> † 1340	Today we know this word as a noun, associated with hypnotism; but it came originally from French <i>transir</i> ‘pass away’ – literally (from Latin) to ‘go across’. Few examples have been recorded.

<b>pass</b> 1340	An important verb of death, which gave rise to many later phrases. 'Vex not his ghost, O let him pass', says Kent of the dead king at the end of Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> (c.1608, 5.3.312). Today, the noun <i>passing</i> is globally used, but to say that someone has <i>passed</i> is common chiefly in North America. It has also become a favoured usage by spiritualists, along with <i>pass over</i> (first recorded use 1897), <i>pass to the other side</i> , and other such expressions.
<b>determine</b> † c.1374	The original meaning was 'come to an end' or 'cease to exist', so an extension to the end of life was very natural. Chaucer has Troilus telling Pandarus he would 'rather deye . . . and determyne . . . in prisoun' than lie to him – 'end his days in a prison' ( <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> , c.1374, 3.379).
<b>disperish</b> † c.1382	The word is known (also spelled <i>dispersh</i> ) only in Wycliffe's early translation of the Bible, as in Judith (6: 3): 'All Israel with thee shall dispershen' – 'perish utterly'.
<b>be gathered to one's fathers</b> † 1382	One of the earliest idioms capturing the idea of being buried with one's ancestors, made popular by the use of <i>gather</i> in Bible translations, starting with Wycliffe. In later usage one could also be gathered <i>to one's people</i> or <i>to the saints</i> .
<b>miscarry</b> c.1387	If you miscarried, in earlier English, you came to some sort of harm, which at its worst could mean death. The fatal sense has carried over into modern English only in relation to babies within the womb.
<b>go</b> 1390	This unpretentious replacement for 'die' is one of the most common colloquial expressions used when observing a death ('she's gone'), and has achieved proverbial status ('Here today and gone tomorrow'). But it also introduces many other expressions, some religious in origin (e.g. <i>go the way of all flesh</i> , <i>go to glory</i> , <i>go to a better world</i> ), some jocular (e.g. <i>go aloft</i> , <i>go west</i> ).
<b>shut</b> † 1390	In <i>Confessio Amantis</i> , by poet John Gower, there is a single recorded instance of <i>shut</i> meaning 'close one's life': Pope Nicholas 'Hath schet as to the worldes ye' (2.2808) – 'shut to mortal eyes'.
<b>expire</b> c.1400	A French word ( <i>expirer</i> ) ultimately from Latin, meaning 'breathe out', and soon adapted to mean 'breathe one's last'. Printer William Caxton used it several times in his translations. A somewhat affected usage in modern times, the TV comedy series <i>Monty Python</i> gave it a new lease of life as one of the verbs describing a dead parrot: 'He's expired and gone to meet his maker!'



---

sample content of Words in Time and Place: Exploring Language Through the Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary

- [read online Demons and the Devil in Ancient and Medieval Christianity \(Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae - Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language\) book](#)
- [read The Death of Comedy](#)
- [Plants on Islands: Diversity and Dynamics on a Continental Archipelago pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [read Before We Say Goodbye pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
  
- <http://weddingcellist.com/lib/Demons-and-the-Devil-in-Ancient-and-Medieval-Christianity--Supplements-to-Vigiliae-Christianae---Texts-and-Studies->
- <http://musor.ruspb.info/?library/Negotiations--1972-1990--European-Perspectives-.pdf>
- <http://fortune-touko.com/library/Plants-on-Islands--Diversity-and-Dynamics-on-a-Continental-Archipelago.pdf>
- <http://cambridgebrass.com/?freebooks/Before-We-Say-Goodbye.pdf>