

SATIPS

Support and training in Prep, Primary and Senior Schools

English

A Living Language

Back in September, both the Guardian and the Independent newspapers ran articles about the effect that leaving the EU could have on the evolution of our language:

‘Brexit could lead to the development of a new form of the English language, according to a new academic paper. Dr. Marko Modiano, of Gavle University in Sweden, said there were already signs that “Euro-English” was developing its own distinct way of speaking. And this could eventually be codified in a dictionary and taught in schools in much the same way that American or Australian English is today if English is retained as the lingua franca of the European Union after the UK leaves.’
www.independent.co.uk/news/science/brexit-latest-news-language-euro-english-uk-leave-eu-european-union-a7957001.html

Being rather curious, I wondered what effect this would have on the English which I teach and what effect it might already be having. Even now, EU documentation uses words in ways which a native speaker might find surprising: the verb ‘to precise’, for example, and ‘opportunity’ (used in the context of being opportune) or ‘planification’, therefore also assuming a verb, ‘to planify’, and these words have eased their way into usage. One can see how they might be formed, but they are also a forceful reminder that language is never static, and the opportunity such as that provided by the linguistic upheaval of leaving the EU (not to mention any other sort of upheaval) makes a great discussion prompt about our language.

I find the concept of the neologism provokes strong responses in pupils – they tend to view ‘language’ as denoting something taught in a lesson, but having little to do with the shifting landscape of words they themselves say and write. Many moons ago, ‘car bra’ and ‘twigloo’ were trending in the Oxford Dictionary of New Words (the next update to the dictionary is due in 2018) but technology has moved on and these words have passed into linguistic desuetude, but that’s how language maintains its momentum: constantly inventive, always looking ahead, but always checking back, too, acutely aware of its linguistic past. In a lesson, I might mix up old and new words (‘swoopstake’ and ‘geobragging’) and ask pupils to guess both their meaning and when they might have been used. We might try to invent our own words or reshape old

ones – in the classroom, we work on the rule that no word is ever moribund.

The poem ‘The Eve of Saint Agnes’ by John Keats is a thought-provoking way to bring to pupils’ attention the importance of old and new. The poem mimics a medieval setting and language but was written in the early 19th century, so Keats himself would have written and spoken a different English entirely from that of the poem. In it, pupils encounter the archaic chide, argent, faerily, timbrels, amort, perchance, but they are rendered ‘living’ in Keats’ hands. In class, we think about how those words might have come into being and the effects they create, with pupils drawing on all their knowledge, particularly of other languages, to make ‘good’ guesses at their meanings, strategies which are useful for all unfamiliar words which pupils will encounter.

Last year, I went back to asking my Year 8 pupils to keep a lexical notebook. It seemed absurd not to make use of the huge volume of complex and beautifully crafted language to which we expose them in our lessons, much of which is trimmed away from the lesson proper as we focus on some narrow area of grammar or poetry technique. I ask pupils to devise themes for their lexical notebook and to note down whole phrases or lines from texts, ones which they simply like or which challenge them, and to use the language in their own writing, changing and reinterpreting it for the task. In this way, their language undergoes a constant process of enrichment; gathered from many sources, it reflects not just the ‘now’ of language, but how history has shaped it and the context within which our language has evolved. William Shakespeare was excited by, and the master of, ‘that sort of thing’. What Shakespeare knew was that language survives by being a pliant beast; shaped by many hands, it keeps pace with change, alert as much to the future as to the past, and for this reason, signing the Oxford University Press’s petition to keep nature words in the Junior English dictionary would make sense to him; it makes sense to me too, if what we want to instill in our pupils is love of language.

www.change.org/p/oxford-university-press-nature-related-words-should-be-reinstated-in-the-junior-oxford-english-dictionary.

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