

# Oxford English Dictionary News

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## Editorial

**Even now, over 200 years after his death, Samuel Johnson remains arguably the most famous lexicographer of all time; and of course the OED is indebted to his great *Dictionary* of 1755 in many ways, not least in the quotations he collected and used in his entries.**

However, the task of validating these quotations — in other words, of bringing them up to the bibliographical standards of the OED — is by no means a simple one. Even with the facility to search huge databases of English via the Web, there is still plenty of work for ‘harmless drudges’ to do in tracking down quotations, and Veronica Hurst pays tribute to the work of the volunteers who have helped us.

Another army of volunteers has focused its attention on a very different area of

enquiry: the vocabulary of science fiction. Individuals have always sent us the fruits of their investigations into the language, but here too the Web has opened up new ways of working, with impressive results, as Jesse Sheidlower explains in his article.

Finally, on a lighter note, I’m delighted to include Bernie Paton’s report ‘from the wordface’ on what I like to think of as the world’s first (and only woolly...) BASE jumper.

Peter Gilliver, Newsletter Editor and Associate Editor, OED

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## Pinning them down: the work of verifying quotations from Johnson's *Dictionary*

**When the editors of the First Edition of the OED needed to fill gaps in the quotation evidence they had acquired either by their own research or from readers' contributions, other dictionaries were an obvious source of material.**

Although earlier dictionaries had occasionally given named authorities for some definitions, Johnson’s great *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in two folio volumes on April 15, 1755, was arguably a pioneer in the use of illustrative quotations as we regard them today.

Johnson typically presented his evidence in this style, with his dictionary’s headword italicized where it appears in the quotation:

This *grant* destroy's all you have urg'd before.  
Dryden

Set it in rich mould, with *neats* dung and lime mingled.

*Mortimer's Art of Husbandry*

Over a hundred years later, the creators of the OED were more than happy to take advantage of Johnson’s labours: just over 2,000 quotations incorporated into the OED by James Murray and his colleagues were marked (J.), to signify that they had been adopted from Johnson’s *Dictionary*:

a1700 DRYDEN (J.), This grant destroys all you have urg'd before.



1707 MORTIMER *Husb.* (J.), Set it in rich mould, with neats dung and lime.

The first of these is fairly typical: the name of an author is the only reference attached to the quotation attributed to him by Johnson, so the nearest date *OED* can give is *ante* the author's death in 1700; the second offers a useful extra in the form of a title, cited here in *OED2* style.

The *OED* generally aims to provide full bibliographic details of works it cites as sources, giving publication date, author's name, a readily identifiable title for the work, with location details (volume, chapter, page number as appropriate), followed by an accurate illustrative quotation.

In contrast, most of Johnson's references tended to be brief — not to say terse; nevertheless many of his citations of writers simply in the titleless style 'Addison', 'Bacon', 'Swift', etc., were necessarily accepted at face value by Murray and his team. If any ungrateful doubts arose concerning the accuracy of Johnson's transcription, or perhaps of his memory, resolving all the adopted ones simply wasn't a practical proposition. (In fact many of the quotations drawn by *OED* editors from secondary sources such as Johnson were successfully tracked down in their original sources, but at the cost of considerable effort.)

A few years ago, however, tracing the remainder of these Johnson quotations to their source — and thence to the earliest findable edition in which they appear — became one of the intriguing sub-projects of the *OED* revision process. The task only became a realistic one with the advent of the Internet, and the introduction there of an invaluable resource in the form of searchable full-text literature databases. Here the subscriber can view the complete texts of major (predominantly literary) works which have been either keyed or scanned by optical character recognition techniques and mounted on a database. The texts may not be the first edition, but they constitute a fully searchable resource, and are ideal for locating such needles in the haystack as the Dryden quotation above. These databases were used to identify as much as possible of Johnson's illustrative literary material and, crucially, were buttressed by the assistance of several dedicated *OED* readers (in conjunction with Anne McDermott, Fred Nicholls, and colleagues of the Johnson Project at the University of Birmingham), who have between them trawled through Addison's *Works*, Atterbury's *Sermons*, Raleigh's *History of the World*, and other texts, as well as offering more serendipitous one-off discoveries from (for example) Bishop Wilkins's *Mathematicall Magick*.

This work has enabled the two Johnson examples above to be presented in the revised *OED* as

1667 DRYDEN *Indian Emperour* II. ii. 19 This grant destroys all you have urg'd before.

1704 J. MORTIMER *Whole Art Husb.* II. 167 Set it in rich mould, with neats dung and lime.

Some 1,600 of the original 2,000 Johnson quotations have so far been tracked down; but we still need help with the remainder.

There are 45 unidentified quotations from Johnson's contemporary John Arbuthnot in the *OED* today, including the possibly theatrical

a1735 ARBUTHNOT (J.), He put off the representation of pantomimes till late hours, on market-days.

We also have a selection from Nehemiah Grew, such as this, apparently from his *Musæum Regalis Societatis*:

1681 GREW *Museum* (J.), Of the upper beak, an inch and a half consisteth of one concamerated bone.

And there remain sets of untitled quotations from the Earl of Clarendon (d. 1674), R. L'Estrange (d. 1704), and J. Woodward (d. 1728) which have so far defeated all comers.

The list of quotations adopted from Johnson's *Dictionary* can be found on the *OED Online* web site, at <http://www.oed.com/readers/johnson-alpha.html>. Those that have already been traced are given in pale grey type, with the finder's name in parentheses. If you have a little time to spare, or a favourite author that Johnson quoted, perhaps you too would like to take part in *OED*'s quest and join our list of successful detectives. Since Murray and his editors drew in the same way upon later lexicographers' illustrative material, we shall in due course be turning our attention to identifying and verifying text quoted in Richardson's *New Dictionary of the English Language* (he featured John Jortin, Bishops Hall and Taylor, Vicesimus Knox, and Edmund Burke among his sources); Latham's *Dictionary* (the Bishops again, Lamb's *Letters*, Macaulay) or Nares's *Glossary* (L. G. D. Acland, Thomas de Witt Talmage, and many contributors to New York periodicals such as the *Voice*, the *Globe*, and the *Homiletic Monthly*).

If you are working on one of these dictionaries, or an author quoted in them, we would be very pleased to hear from you.

Veronica Hurst, Principal Bibliographer, *OED*

## 'Where in the multiverse...?': researching the vocabulary of science fiction for the *OED*



The *Oxford English Dictionary* relies heavily on the work of volunteers to help with its research. We are grateful to the many people who have found important citations, answered questions, looked up hard-to-find references, and made suggestions.

But one problem of traditional approaches — either waiting for useful material to come in, or publicly seeking help with a small number of items (as with the Appeals List that appears in each issue of *OED News*) — is that they are too limited. Readers send in information that they have no way of knowing has already been superseded, and editors cannot effectively communicate research needs to a wide variety of volunteers.

Several years ago, the North American Editorial Unit began a test project that aimed to correct these problems by looking intensively at the vocabulary of a single subject: science fiction. Backed by a database that was constantly being updated, the project operated over the World Wide Web, delivering the latest status of our research to readers whenever they needed it. The result? Our coverage of science fiction vocabulary is vastly improved, with many terms traced back to extremely early print appearances, important entries brought to the attention of *OED* editors, and inaccurate definitions corrected. With little duplication of effort, the material we have received has been quickly and easily usable, thanks to the hard work of the project's key volunteers.

The idea was hatched when Sue Surova, a freelance researcher for the *OED* and a science fiction fan, was asked about the term *mutant*, referring to a human having a freakish appearance or unusual powers, as a result of a genetic mutation. The *OED*'s first citation was from 1954, but we expected that it had been in use earlier. When Surova sent a message to an online group, she got responses that enabled us to push the term back to 1938. The idea doing this on a wider scale arose rather quickly, and Surova enlisted the volunteer help of computer consultant Mike Christie.

Computer programmer David Griffin volunteered a program that managed the data, based on the open-source database MySQL, and I myself converted a disused desktop computer into a server running FreeBSD, a free version of the Unix operating system; the final system is able to handle varying permissions for any number of users

covering any number of subjects. Many science fiction terms, for example, are also terms in science — and in some cases their use in SF predates their use in scientific publications! Two examples are *asteroid belt*, which our project has brought back to 1931 in the pulp magazine *Wonder Stories*, and *neutronium*, dated to 1967 in the Second Edition of the *OED*, but dated to 1935 in *OED3*, with a further antedating of 1931 in the editorial pipeline.

The biggest initial effort was getting the *OED*'s science fiction terms into this separate database; the process could not be automated because so many of the entries did not have 'science fiction' as a subject label. Surova and Christie performed much of this work, also dividing the terms into three main categories: words found in science fiction writing, words used in criticism of SF (often describing genres or styles), and words used among SF fans.

After some early testing, the project was announced in December 2001 in an online newsgroup devoted to science fiction, and word spread to other sites. Soon we were being deluged with dozens of e-mails a day, containing suggestions, citations, and questions about our work. Mail came from all over the world, and correspondents included several noted SF writers. It took months to fully catch up with the backlog (and the pace has reached more manageable levels). But the results have been spectacular. Some of the entries we have published from the project include *Martian*, *meteor storm*, *mind-meld* (from 'Star Trek'), *moon base*, and *multiverse*, and out-of-sequence entries *bot* (a robot), *filk* (a type of song performed by SF fans), and *Sturgeon's Law* ('90% of everything is crap', formulated by writer Theodore Sturgeon).

The SF project, now run by Mike Christie along with Malcolm Farmer and Jeff Prucher, continues to deliver. And what of other possibilities?

Science fiction has several advantages as a subject for this kind of investigation. The vocabulary is largely self-

Words and phrases covered in the March 2004 *OED Online* update could help you to...

...nuzzle a nutritious nugget of nutmeg... ...obstruct an obtuse ogre with an oblong obstacle...

...obliterate occurrences of obnoxious odes... ...obligingly obtain ointment for an octogenarian officer...

contained; SF terms tend to occur in SF and nowhere else, while, say, political language can be found anywhere and everywhere. The fans are particularly committed, often have linguistic interests, and are computer literate. They may also be more likely to be able to volunteer time than specialists in more academically oriented fields.

Still, there are other areas that could benefit from a similar approach. The hardest part is finding volunteers

to lead the effort, who would have to face the awesome task of analysing and responding to dozens or hundreds of e-mails, updating the database, seeking additional help when necessary, tracking down obscure sources, and informing *OED* editors of the most important discoveries. But seeing the wonderful entries that come out at the end can be the greatest reward of all.

**Jesse Sheidlower**, Principal Editor, *OED* (North American Editorial Unit)  
The home page of the *OED SF* project is at <http://www.jessesword.com/SF>

## Sheep might fly: parachutes in a new light

**It is quite widely known that the inventors of the hot-air balloon were two French brothers, Joseph-Michel and Jacques-Étienne Montgolfier. Their first balloon was launched in 1783, amid much acclaim and press coverage on both sides of the Channel.**



According to the definition of *balloon* in this sense in the First Edition of the *OED*, written over a century later, Montgolfier hot-air balloons were still being used in the late 19th century for 'observing atmospheric phenomena, [and] for military reconnoitring', although the editors added, somewhat plaintively, that while 'to large balloons a *car* strong enough to carry human beings can be attached', they had met with 'little success at present, as a means of

travelling through the air'. Be that as it may, the Montgolfiers' invention was undoubtedly a success, and a landmark in the history of aviation.

Perhaps less well-known is the fact that Joseph-Michel Montgolfier was behind another 18th-century invention with far-reaching aeronautical consequences. The First Edition of the *OED* gave as its first example of the word *parachute* a quotation from 1785 from the *European Magazine*, in which it was stated that 'in Mr. Blanchard's late visit to this country [France], he brought his Parachute to England'. While revising the *OED* entries for a series of words beginning with *para*-recently, we came across a 1784 article from the *Gloucester Journal* which makes it clear that the elder

Montgolfier was responsible for the design behind this first parachute. (He is also, unsurprisingly, credited in the *Trésor de la Langue Française* as having first used the original French word *parachute*, in a letter written only a few months before the Gloucester article.) According to the report, 'after having thrown a sheep six times from the top of a tower..by the aid of a machine called a *parachute*, without the animal receiving any damage, he [sc. Montgolfier] prevailed upon a man..to try the experiment, which was performed with the utmost safety.'

While the requirement of a convenient tower made the parachute for many years impractical as a military tool, it continued to be experimented with, as shown in an account of 1837 which describes a parachute being launched from a balloon, and one of 1864 in which it was described how an unfortunate Mr Cocking (unlike Montgolfier's human parachutist) 'had cast himself into space in a parachute and..was smashed to death'. By the end of the First World War, and with the increasing use of aircraft in battle, the parachute had come into its own, and silk parachutes were regularly carried by aviators. By the '60s and '70s the parachute was being used for sport as well as in warfare, and even to return space capsules to earth.

Joseph-Michel Montgolfier's intrepid sheep, although apparently unharmed by its experience, probably died of fright shortly afterwards, but it had the honour of being the ancestor of today's parachutists, paragliders, parascenders, and earth-bound astronauts.

**Bernadette Paton**, Associate Editor, *OED*

## Appeals

Words or phrases which appear on the Appeals List are those currently being drafted or revised for the *OED* for which the documentary evidence is incomplete. Often these are slang or colloquial items which cannot be researched in specialist texts and are most likely to be found by a general reader in non-specialized or popular literature.

Usually the appeal is for an earlier example than our current earliest (e.g. 'antedate 1970' for a word for which our earliest example comes from 1970), but sometimes the appeal is for an interdating where there is a large gap in the *OED*'s quotation evidence (e.g. 'interdate 1589-1910'). Occasionally we ask for a postdating (e.g. 'postdate 1875'), if an editor feels that an item being revised is still current but has failed to find any recent examples through the usual avenues of research.

Please note: it is generally safe to assume that examples found by searching the Web, using search

engines such as Google, will have already been considered by *OED* editors.

**opsit** (v.: (S. Afr.) to court) postdate 1955

**opsitting** (n.: (S. Afr.) courting) postdate 1969

**to go down the pan** (v.: to go to waste, go disastrously wrong) antedate 1974

**Paul-Pry** (v.: to pry) postdate 1924

**pause** (v.: to suspend a device using the pause button, as in 'I paused the tape') antedate 1981

**Peakish** (a.: relating to the Peak District of England) interdate 1681-1991

**pick and mix** (also **pick 'n' mix**) (n.: varied range of sweets etc.) antedate 1961

**pick-and-mix** (also **pick-'n'-mix**) (a.: made up of diverse elements or items) antedate 1961

**to play away (from home)** (v.: to be unfaithful, commit adultery) antedate 1988

Please send submissions to [oed3@oup.com](mailto:oed3@oup.com)

## Interesting antedatings

Revision of the entries in the March 2004 *OED Online* update has revealed an earlier origin than previously known for many words, including:

**nudge** (noun; antedated to 1699 from 1836)

**nuke** (verb; 1962 from 1967)

**null** (adjective; 1450 from 1563)

**numbskull** (1697 from 1724)

**obfuscation** (a1425 from 1608)

**obliterate** (1548 from 1600)

**odd job** (1704 from c1770)

**ogreish** (1729 from 1852)

**oldie** (1799 from 1874)

## Quotable quotes

Thought-provoking snippets from the *OED* quotation files:

### hard cheese...

1872 *Galaxy*, Cadalous assaulted the city with his faithful Parmesans.

### ...sound advice...

1999 'Jay-Z' *Big Pimpin'* (song) in *Hip Hop & Rap* (2003), Go read a book, you illiterate son of a bitch And step up yo' vocab.

### ...and precision machismo...

1938 Z. Grey *Raiders of Spanish Peaks*, He threw Harriet in a parabolic curve far over his head.

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