Jolly Wicked, Actually

The 100 Words That Make Us English

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Extract

Introduction

> Man is a creature who lives not upon bread alone, but primarily by catchwords.
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> Robert Louis Stevenson, *Virginibus Puerisque*, 1881

> What you say is what you are.
>
> Playground taunt, 20th century

Jolly Wicked, Actually consists of one hundred of 'our' keywords, each followed by a short essay that typically looks at where the word came from and how it may have changed and evolved; how it has been used, by whom and with what intention; and how it keys into shared ideas of Englishness. Where space permits, exemplifying quotes – 'citations' – are included. These are the hundred words out of the million or so in the available lexicon that I think sum up our understanding of ourselves. They have not been selected according to any 'scientific' criteria, or on the basis of a survey; the choice is based on intuition, on personal encounters with

language-users in all sorts of settings and on adventuring in archives and libraries. It's certain that no two people asked to make such a selection would choose the same words, and criticism of these choices is very warmly welcomed. Throughout the process of writing, a host of other candidates have thrust themselves forward. In the last couple of hours I've heard or read: 'kicking off', in the sense of losing one's temper and starting a fight; 'continental', in the phrase 'continental manners and mores'; the adjective 'Pooterish', borrowing the name of the hero of George and Weedon Grossmith's 1892 *Diary of a Nobody* to define someone as comically narrow-minded and fastidious; and 'Middle England' (first used by Lord Salisbury in 1882, but popularised as a political buzzword a hundred years later), a paradigm of what the academics call an 'imagined community'. A case for inclusion in the 'Top 100' could be made for any one of these. Each of them can usefully be unbundled to call into question sub-surface assumptions and implications. Why employ a footballing metaphor for a sudden eruption of ill temper and/or violence? What exactly are the attributes held in common by 'continentals' – and where in Europe do these infuriatingly rational, sybaritic aliens and their noisy extended families reside? What could a contemporary lifestyle have in common with a mundane Victorian existence? Where, apart from in our imagination, is Middle England located and what are its defining features? An oblique sort of answer to this last question has been provided by a Dutch visitor, teacher Pieter Boogaart, in his *A272: An Ode to a Road*. Of the highway that runs through Sussex into Hampshire he said, 'for some reason it always filled me with a sense of nostalgia when we came across it or when I saw it on a map. It's a bit like falling in love . . .' The road has since been nominated as number 545 of the 1,170 'icons of England' featured on the internet.

This is not a list of my favourite words – that would include such indulgences as 'hoity-toity', 'raffish', 'cringeworthy' (Cuthbert of that ilk being a sort of anti-Bash Street Kid) and, if I'm honest, 'arse'. I've tried not to be utterly predictable in the choice of terms to cover, while still taking account of clichés and stereotypes if they are genuinely central to our self-image. Thus, **understatement** is included, because a scan of spoken and written sources shows that we do say it and write it, but 'hypocrisy', though alluded to, does not get its own entry, since it features mainly in outsiders' descriptions of English behaviour (scanning international publications confirms that the global hypocrite label, inevitable for any quasi-imperialist claiming the moral high ground, is more often applied to the USA these days), with one notable exception: the cries of 'humbug' (from 1754, origin unknown) whenever Labour politicians send their children to selective schools. 'Stiff upper lip' crops up once or twice in the following pages, but didn't merit an entry to itself. Apart from being, to my mind, a dodgy (1950s, 'unreliable', from 1860s, 'illegal', 'stolen') metaphor, it's actually American in origin, first attested in 1815: as innumerable **bore**s, echoing actor Michael Caine, have observed, 'not many people know that'.

Technology can be of some help in analysing language in action. 'Corpus-based' or computational linguistics, with its techniques of text-scanning and concordancing (electronically mapping relationships between words), now enables us to establish how frequently a given word occurs in a body of writing or a set of recordings, and the entire works of a writer can be scanned and 'tagged' to discover which words and combinations of words she particularly favours. One problem is that nearly all corpora consist only of *written* language, collected from newspapers and books, and where

spoken language has been recorded it is nearly always 'standard' English rather than colloquial or quirky language which is fed into the databases, so that we can't count on electronic sources for a fully comprehensive sampling of varieties, styles and idiosyncrasies. In any case, in a book of this kind there is not space enough to examine regional dialects and localised usages, unless they impact (like cockney rhyming slang, or Afro-Caribbean 'patwa', or Asian-influenced 'Hinglish', for example) on the 'mainstream' tongue. Simply listening in on authentic speech allows us to identify the rituals of English conversation, such as **grumbl**ing ('I've been queuing since eight o'clock this morning: what with one thing and another I'm about done for. I'd like to take that Attlee and all the rest of them and put them on the top of a bonfire in Hyde Park and burn them'), saying **sorry**, excusing oneself and others, veiled criticisms, endless social categorising, along with nonstop banter consisting of teasing and facetiousness, and a pervasive, even corrosive, **irony**.

In tracking the cultural and linguistic transformations of the last two hundred years, what strikes us is that there is a watershed, a relatively recent tipping-point or step-change where we started to use jargon unknown to our grandparents. Social upheavals like the agricultural and industrial revolutions, the two world wars, the advent of the so-called affluent society and **permissive**ness have all resulted in feelings of disjuncture and disorientation, but for my purposes the great transition was from 'Old England' to 'New Britain', and I think it happened very quickly, at the end of the 1970s. There have been numerous Old Englands, as from Victorian Pre-Raphaelite times onwards people have conjured up a purer, cleaner, more honest **society**, bucolic and homogeneous. *My* Old England encompasses everything that

preceded the free-market post-industrial multi-culti environment of the twenty-first century: I'm using it as shorthand for a relatively complacent, monoglot, insular, fussy, fusty (fourteenth century, from Latin *fustis*, 'cudgel', which became 'fust', a mouldy-smelling wine cask), obtuse (sixteenth century, from Latin *obtusus*, 'dulled' or 'cudgelled into submission') community, fixated on certain rectitudes and responsibilities. New Britain labels the Americanised-to-some-extent (to use a word we have strenuously avoided, even in the depths of self-loathing), service-oriented, unabashed, glossy, confessional, competitive constituency we have become in the have-it-all noughties. The distinction is artificial, of course, because of the continuities: money-making has been what we are all about for centuries; an unspoken tolerance of inequality persists; if we are white we are likely still to be resolutely monolingual.

Punk was the last *cri de coeur* against the old regime, the Sloane Rangers were its last gasp: a three-hundred-year-old system of embedded hierarchical values and behaviours reduced to a few items of clothing and style accessories. In terms of pop conceptualisations, the vortex known by the shorthand 'Thatcher' may have hijacked the 1980s, but New Britain would have come about had she – it – they not existed. It would have been called into existence by the post-punk stylists on the one hand (the evidence is there, first in the French magazine *Actuel*, then in its English imitation *The Face*), and on the other by the liberated lower middle classes, the once-repressed 'aspirational' majority, now united in common purpose with the more glamorous yuppies and upwardly mobile Essex boys. DIY individualism and bricolage met hedonism and consumerism and begat the hypermarket of style, pick-and-mix value systems, an economics of contingency. If this sounds glib – well, it's

meant to: reference books have to be glib. But using that word makes me think of someone who hated it. My mother, who died two years ago, was young in the 1940s, flourished in the fifties, was bemused by the sixties and despaired more and more of the succeeding decades. She managed to be neither **common** nor **posh**, was soignée in a rather puritanical way, yet would never have used any of that string of defining adjectives herself. It was not done to objectify oneself, least of all by such overspecific terms. The suburban matron who dismissed her neighbours as 'vulgar and pushy', the ambassador's wife referring to a couple on the social circuit as 'not quite PLU' (for 'People Like Us') unwittingly categorised themselves, betrayed their own snobbishness. My mother had her favourite words, which she used to excess; **nice** exasperated me, 'kind' – an oddly old-fashioned word, little used these days – sticks in my mind: 'the English school, whose motto puts kindliness above flourishment or learning' (A. G. Macdonell, *England, Their England*, 1933). These anodyne (sixteenth century, from Greek *anodunos*, 'painless') words, evasive substitutes and clichés though they may have been, in a different way defined her and many others of her age. For my mother, as for her contemporaries, kindness, right and wrong, reasonableness and common sense were fundamental aspects of Englishness. These were both her personal touchstones and unquestioned, eternal values held in common. But we now realise that they are in fact, in the words of one linguist, 'unexamined cultural prejudices . . . masquerading as human nature', peculiar not even to all English speakers, but only to some of the inhabitants of Great Britain. Another central tenet of ours, **fair** play, is untranslatable and therefore has to be borrowed by other languages, and the concept of fairness itself (as in the child's protest, 'It's not fair!') is not innate or instinctive, but has

existed as a component of our language, and part of our mindset, only since the eighteenth century. In the same way, the English tendency towards endlessly hedging and qualifying – 'I think', 'I suppose', 'probably', 'presumably', 'possibly', 'allegedly', 'arguably', **actually** – is not shared by neighbouring cultures. It seems to have arrived with the Enlightenment and been consolidated by the idea of the unique, autonomous, responsible citizen having to negotiate and justify; in other words, the growing individualism accompanying industrialisation and commercialism. Feeding into the mix is the stuttering diffidence with which the English privileged have masked their unshakeable superiority.

Every language is different, every macro- or microculture is special in its way, but the idea that the English are unfathomable anomalies is an old one, and one that we tend, squirming with delighted false modesty, to endorse. Foreigners such as the Hungarian George Mikes have anatomised us and celebrated our peculiarities ('I expected the British nation to rise in wrath but all they said was: "quite amusing"'), while another Dutch visitor, the academic Dr G. J. Renier, entitled his 1931 treatment *The English: Are They Human?* By the English he meant middle-class or upper-middle-class English men, whom he gratifyingly allowed were human, as well as pragmatic and respectable, but hobbled by inarticulacy and emotional illiteracy. This caricature Englishman can still be found, still reluctant to commit, to enthuse or to offend, but his faint mumblings are drowned by a cacophony of other, harsher voices. The Old–New transition has been accompanied, in the UK more markedly perhaps than in any comparable society, by the rapid relaxation of all linguistic constraints and a retreat by the guardians of propriety (only Dr Johnson's 'harmless drudge', the lexicographer, I'm pleased to think,

can still pose as an authority on language, but with a strict remit to record, not to prescribe or proscribe). Fine distinctions have been done away with: 'shall' and 'should' have become 'will' and 'would'. Over the last few years, 'as if' has been ousted by 'like' in sentences such as 'She looked like she was experiencing difficulties' without attracting a single comment. Colloquialisms and slang, once forbidden, then permitted only within quotation marks or in imitation of 'racy' dialogue, are now allowed into the 'quality press' and pepper the conversation of respectable citizens. 'Bad language' in the sense of profanity, though still controversial, is everywhere. A tolerance for the non-standard has become a celebration of the outlandish, and older texts, even from popular publications, look strangely stilted or formal to our eyes.

Jolly Wicked, Actually looks back over the centuries, highlighting the twentieth century as a pivotal stage of development, but also reports from today's linguistic front line: what would John Betjeman have made of the idea of 'multi-ethnic youth vernacular' – the very latest thing in linguistic circles – the idea that a slangy teen code consisting of black and Asian patois delivered in a hip-hop intonation is set to oust standard English in a few years' time? How would those, my late mother among them, who once insisted on 'manners' react to the appointment just the other day of a national 'respect tsar' to enforce politeness, or the Channel 4 TV documentary entitled *The Seven Sins of England*, proving that rudeness, **slag**gishness, bigotry, **binge** drinking, hooliganism and violence have been bywords of Englishness for hundreds of years? How did we get from 'The English schoo . . . lay among its water-meads, and all around was the creator, the inheritor, the ancestor and the descendant of it all, the green and kindly land of England' (*England, Their*

England again) to 'The mass drunkenness every weekend which renders British town centres unendurable to even minimally civilised people goes hand-in-hand with the appallingly crude, violent and shallow relations between the sexes' (Theodore Dalrymple, *Our Culture, What's Left of It*, 2005). Rustic, dyspeptic Old England and urban, shouty New Britain actually coexist, quarrelsomely and querulously at times, each occupying its own psychic zone within the archipelago . . .

. . . But wait, was all talk of a classless society, of meritocracy, in vain? Have campaigns for 'equal opportunities' been a sham (thought to be a seventeenth-century northern dialect version of 'shame')? Is Old England staging a comeback? Private education, private health care, restrictions on immigration, the resurgence of outdated public-school slang, sneering at the lower orders (certainly during the noughties, it was fashionable to laugh at the feckless, bothersome 'chav', from a French dialect word for a young fox, first used as a term of endearment or address by Romanies) all are in the ascendant. The Mayor of London is a character from the pages of P. G. Wodehouse, and there are people on television called things like Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. Progressive, leftish north London is out of fashion (though the Wodehousian mayor secretly lives there); instead we have been introduced to the patrician glam-Tory 'Notting Hill Set', something like the Bloomsbury Group but without the painting, writing or thinking. Attempts to resurrect the Sloane Rangers or to rename them 'Hedgies' (after '**hedge**-fund managers') seem mercifully to have foundered, but where old money and new celebrity rub shoulders, the pampered 'yummy mummy' lives on. 'Nothing hardens my resolve to abstain from parenthood', snarled **bloke**ish hack Nirpal Dhaliwal, 'more than the herds of posturing yummy

mummies who congregate to slurp lattes and share the tedious details of their offspring's development'; although the mania for discovering new micro-categories to dissect and promote means that she too was reinvented not long ago in a spoof blog in the *Telegraph*, as affluent, brand-literate 'Dulwich Mum'. A reader from East Dulwich wrote, 'Whilst I have not met Dulwich Mum, I have encountered any number of her type; vacuous, self-centred with shrill voices, overdressed and under-talented children, no concept of real work and a husband who pays for everything . . . hardship is a closed shop or the cleaner turning up late.' Snippy, **chippy** class envy or a healthy contempt for pretentious twaddle (eighteenth century, from sixteenth-century 'twattle', an imitation of babbling or silly talk)? I think the latter, as she continues: 'Whilst there is a place for all voices in society this blog, like cable TV, demonstrates that unrestricted opportunity certainly does not improve quality.' The to-and-fro continues. The carnival moves on.

In *Jolly Wicked, Actually* I have tried to avoid 'lexicographese', the technical formatting, abbreviations and stylised defining language favoured by dictionaries. One convention, though, has been retained, in that some entries are followed by cross-references to similar or related terms listed elsewhere in the book. Additionally, each time one of the hundred keywords appears in a discussion of another term, or in the preceding introduction, it is highlighted in bold face.

In distilling millions of words into tens of thousands, I'm immensely grateful to Eve Marleau for help in foraging in the archives. I relied upon, among others, the British Library and its press archives; the libraries and archives of King's College London and the Borough of Richmond; and the British National Corpus. For language novelties, exoticisms

and slang I could rummage in my own Slang and New Language Archive at King's College London, which can be accessed at www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/humanities/depts/elc/resources/slangresearch.html. I consulted a very wide range of published sources and would advise anyone researching language and popular culture to do the same. The most authoritative titles differ considerably on questions of, for example, etymology, so beware of trusting in any single one, even one so eminent, comprehensive and useful as the *OED*. Beware, too, all information displayed on the internet: in every case it requires careful checking and corroboration.

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Modern authors, at least those who consider themselves techno-literate progressives, are expected to endorse 'connectivity' and 'visibility'. Postmodern texts are supposed to be 'open' and 'interactive', so if you would like to suggest your own keywords, or to question, comment on or criticise what appears in these pages, you can email me at tony.thorne@kcl.ac.uk.