

Compacted Doctrines: William Empson and the Meanings of Words

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In this paper we describe the account of word meaning advanced by William Empson in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951). Exposition is supported by detailed historical analysis of the word *wit*, chosen to illustrate the possibilities, but also difficulties, of the framework Empson devised to investigate meaning 'equations' that his selected words are capable of entering into. Noting the apparent likeness between *Complex Words* and Raymond Williams's slightly later *Keywords* (1976/1983), including use by both authors of the term 'keyword', the chapter examines important differences of approach between the two authors (differences revealed especially in a review Empson published of Williams's *Keywords*, discussed in the chapter). In conclusion, it is suggested that despite differences between the two authors some similar implications regarding meaning follow from the work of both. These include the idea that, rather than merely describing distinct word meanings, or even meanings attributed to words by individual speakers, historical analyses of meaning should focus on social practices that accompany language use, including practices which find their existence and articulation in institutions. In this more social view of meaning, it is suggested, meaning and social identity are kinds of effect, or produced relation, rather than stable elements outside language with which to begin an analysis.

The primary aim is to clear up confusion, so the author describes not only the varieties of meaning in a word but the various controversies in which they get used. Also he recognises that these different meanings within one word are liable to interact, so that they form 'compacted doctrines', as when native was taken to imply 'all subjected peoples are biologically inferior'; and he decides that many of our common words regularly tempt us to accept wrong beliefs, usually political ones. ¹

Coming across this passage for the first time, a casual reader might assume that this is someone writing about William Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words*. But in fact it is Empson himself, reviewing Raymond Williams's *Keywords* for the *New York Review of Books* in October 1977.

That same casual reader might well have no difficulty in explaining his or her original assumption by pointing to numerous likenesses between *The Structure of Complex Words* and *Keywords*. Most obviously, there is use of the term 'keywords' itself, which Williams explains as follows:

They are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought.²

Empson also draws attention to the term, in his 'Comment for the Second Edition' of *Complex Words* in 1951,

Several reviewers suspected me of believing, in practice or even in theory, that every long poem has one 'key word' and can be explained by analysing the meaning of that. It seems a very absurd view.³

Besides the term 'keywords' itself, someone looking for likenesses between the two books might highlight the shared idea of analysable structures of lexical meaning (especially the sense of embedded or compacted social doctrines inherent in the histories of words). There is also a common interest in the strengths - but also the limitations - of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (often referred to by Empson under its name at the time of first publication, in instalments between 1884 and 1928: the *New English Dictionary* [N.E.D]). Williams approvingly cites Empson's assessment of the *Dictionary* as a 'majestic object'⁴; and for both writers, any work on the historical meanings of words is heavily dependent on it. More generally, too, the two writers share a concern with public susceptibility to political complexities and possible distortions of the meanings of words, and an insistence on the social importance of greater critical awareness about language and its operations.

What makes such questions of likeness and divergence between the two writers more than usually interesting, however, is the peculiar combination of the clear importance of the issues they investigate with the lack of systematic attention usually given to them. While a great deal of research has been done on how the mental lexicon is organised, on how lexical items are disambiguated in parsing, on processes of metaphorical usage, and on other sensitive areas in the workings of vocabulary⁵, little attention has been given even now - forty years after *The Structure of Complex Words*, and fifteen after *Keywords* - to connections between the complex ways in which subtly shaded senses of individual words are used in discourse and contribute to changing structures of perception and thought. Empson's and Williams's work - along with Leo Spitzer's *Essays in Historical Semantics* and John Danby's *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (both first published in 1949), and C.S. Lewis's *Studies in Words* (1960) - marked out an area of concern with what Empson, reflecting on Wordsworth's use of *sense*, described as a 'concentrated richness of single words'⁶. But this fresh area of concern has not been subsequently developed. Rather, it might be said that even now Empson's and Williams's work in this field is more admired than understood, which is why in this paper we confine ourselves to the primarily expository tasks of illustrating Empson's approach and comparing it with Williams's; only then do we begin to draw attention to unresolved issues which remain.

Unlocking Keywords

Despite the many areas in common concern between his own work and *Keywords*, Empson did not like Williams's 'vocabulary of culture and society'⁷. There seem to have been two main reasons why.

Firstly, Empson points out that influences from a word's past do not always survive into later

meanings. Citing as evidence the link between Jane Austen's predilection for puns and the fact that she never made a pun on the word, Empson challenges Williams's account of the word *interest*. Williams argues, in effect, that the word always carries a sub-stratum sense to do with money. But in his 1977 review of *Keywords*, Empson - who evidently felt his critique worth repeating in his 'Comment for the Third edition' of *The Structure of Complex Words*, published in the same year - argues, 'a pun of this sort can only impose a doctrine upon us if both meanings arise naturally in one context'⁸.

Empson's second criticism concerns what he sees as an undervaluing, in Williams, of possible resistance to biased use of words. According to Empson, Williams exaggerates the power of words to influence and direct thinking in ways that put language beyond self-critical thought. Williams's introduction, as Empson sees it, 'offers very little hope from the technique he provides'⁹. In his own writing, on the other hand, Empson prioritises a more direct idea of the enabling power of awareness of language, especially as regards resisting propaganda. As is well known, although Empson worked alongside Orwell in the Far Eastern section of the BBC Foreign Service, as Specialist Adviser to the Indian and Burmese Section during World War II, he drew very different conclusions regarding the propagandist power of words. Empson shared with Orwell the sense, exemplified most clearly in 1984, in which language can create new forms of truth which fundamentally contradict earlier truths, so brainwashing people with varieties of Newspeak. But pushed very far, such a view challenges Empson's deep commitment to human beings' rational capabilities, and the possibility for self-understanding inherent in powers of the human mind to distinguish and analyse meanings.

Summing up his arguments against *Keywords* - and in effect justifying the different terms of his own project in *Complex Words* - Empson concludes his review,

What he [Williams] needs to consider is the structure relating two meanings in any one of his chosen words, so that they imply or insinuate a sentence: 'A is B'. Under what conditions are they able to impose a belief that the speaker would otherwise resist? As he never considers that, he is free to choose any interpretation that suits his own line of propaganda.¹⁰

To decide how far this perhaps surprisingly forceful critique of Williams is justified - and to understand the relationship between Empson's views on words and more recent perceptions - we need to understand much of the detail of Empson's arguments. But we also need to understand how these arguments fit in with larger critical concerns and priorities. In this paper, therefore, we combine an outline of Empson's main arguments in *Complex Words* with an illustrative case study (of the word *wit*). In doing so, we compare Empson's account with other available studies (including C.S. Lewis's, and our own readings). Finally, on the basis of the two interconnected descriptions, we conclude with more general remarks about issues of compacted doctrines in the meanings of words.

Writing *Complex Words*

In his 'Comment for the Third Edition' of *The Structure of Complex Words*, Empson outlines his own sense of purpose in the book,

The basic idea is that, as the various meanings within one's word, and their interactions, are often tricky to analyse out, and yet the speakers often interpret a use of them with confidence and speed, there is likely to be an inner grammar of complex words like the overt grammar of sentences; and I tried to arrive at some of the rules.'¹¹

Empson believed that a key word - any recurrent but also peculiarly ambivalent or highly-charged word - not only functions, as he puts it while describing *all* in *Paradise Lost*, like 'a Wagnerian motif'¹², but also involves kinds of embedded 'semantic equations'. Words accumulate strata of senses and implications and assert propositions or arguments, even as they conceal such complexities by appealing to commonsense understanding. This is true not only of 'ordinary language', but also of poetry, which for Empson does not (as Richards and others had claimed) bi-pass questions of truthfulness with its own forms of 'pseudo-statement'. On the contrary, poetic language in Empson's view simply extends the resources of sense-making characteristic of language use more generally (though Empson works through his own complex qualifications to this position in relation to the meanings of the word *sense* in Wordsworth and *all* in Milton).

Working from these general premises, Empson seeks to analyse the 'logical structure' of words. At the simplest level, such analysis is desirable because, as Empson puts it in his account of C.S. Lewis,

Readers need to be warned that a writer often means by a word something other than what their own background leads them to expect; a working understanding of the historical process of change of meaning, by giving this awareness, may be enough.¹³

This is another way of putting the argument Lewis himself makes with his idea of a word's 'dangerous sense'. If a text

makes tolerable sense our tendency is to go merrily on. We are often deceived. In an old author the word may mean something different. I call such senses dangerous senses because they lure us into misreadings.¹⁴

Despite the great detail of Empson's arguments, however, and the wealth of illustrations he presents, *The Structure of Complex Words*, as its author rather dismally observes in the preface to the third edition, was to a certain extent a failure. Empson writes of his attempt to identify structures in the meanings of words,

The attempt, I thought, would probably come under severe attack from professional linguists, but I would probably learn things through trying to defend myself. Nothing of the kind occurred; on the literary side the book was well received, though with various disagreements, but on the linguistic side it fell like a stone.¹⁵

Empson seems to presume, in the passage which immediately follows the extract we have quoted here, that the book's failure was the result of his unwillingness to observe the academic proprieties, and publish in specialist magazines (a course of action partly explicable in terms of the fact that in such publications Empson would not have been able to be as rude as he wanted to be). It is certainly possible that the book's failure was partly due to this. But it has two other causes. One concerns the style of the book, which is idiosyncratic: Empson is

only writing to convince one person, himself; and his exposition and argument are tailored to that audience. The other cause is the state of linguistics at the time the book was published: many of the linguistic premises with which Empson chooses to argue (especially those in the work of Gustav Stern, or in I.A. Richards's psychological theories of meaning, which divided the word into a cognitive meaning and an emotional charge which was to be measured by some future psychology) were already considered slightly old-fashioned. In addition, the behaviourist attack on psychology led by the American linguist Leonard Bloomfield - about whom Empson writes critically at various points in *The Structure of Complex Words*, and challenges at length in Appendix III of the book - carried the day; and Empson's book was published in a decade (the fifties) in which few major linguists concerned themselves with semantics, and even fewer (if any) with historical semantics.

Departing dramatically from the behaviourist paradigm, Empson's investigations start from intuitions about meaning:

Till you have decided what a piece of language conveys, like any literary critic, you cannot look round to see what 'formal features' convey it; you will then find that some features are of great subtlety, and perhaps fail trace some at all.¹⁶

This emphasis on prior judgements of what a word or passage means leads Empson to a view of analysis which,

assumes an agreement, among those who seem most likely to know, as to what effect a given bit of writing produces, and goes on to argue that this can only have been produced by a curious but demonstrable process of interlocking and interacting structures of meaning.¹⁷

It is the interpretative competence from which such intuitions derive which makes possible analysis of what Empson, slightly depreciatively, often calls a word or text's 'tricks' and 'machinery'.

Beyond the local points of clarification that such historical analyses can offer, however, there is a more general thrust in Empson's analyses: that we can begin to understand the historical processes of creating meanings by bringing into the public domain, for investigation and discussion, the changing and complex senses of the words we use. Philological enquiry is in this respect connected with a larger ethical purpose, which Empson emphasises in his attention to the idea of public debate and in the confident view he takes of social understanding, by comparison with Orwell's apparent pessimism, or the analogous despondency as regards understanding and change Empson attributes to Williams. For Empson, many questions of political priority and direction spring from a need to think through, as clearly as possible, the way particular uses of language direct structures of thought:

Roughly, the moral is that a developing society decides practical questions more by the way it interprets words it thinks obvious and traditional than by its official statements of current dogma.¹⁸

Statements, feelings and moods

Because of Empson's concern to demonstrate that much more is carried in a word than its cognitive meaning, he begins *The Structure of Complex Words* with an analysis of feelings in words. In many respects, his account is dependent on Richards's study of emotions; it also takes up and argues with aspects of Gustav Stern's *Meaning and Change of Meaning*, and is generally shaped by a debate over emotions which held particular significance for thinkers of his generation. Commenting, in fact, on this importance of the analysis of emotions for Empson's generation, C.S. Lewis argues towards the end of *Studies in Words* that Empson's great achievement - on a scale comparable with the achievements of Richards - is to have demonstrated that 'the conception of emotional language can be very easily extended too far. It was time to call a halt'¹⁹. Since Empson's greatest originality lies in working on the logical structures of word meaning rather than on their emotional dimensions, it is appropriate, before reviewing his analysis of emotions, to introduce Empson's account of how words make statements, or how

a word can become a 'compacted doctrine', or even that all words are compacted doctrines inherently.²⁰

To describe how words create equations, Empson distinguishes five distinct ways in which a word can carry a doctrine, classifying them on the basis of 'both how the two meanings are imposed and which order they are given'.²¹

The first and simplest way Empson calls the Existence Assertion. This simply states that what a speaker is talking about is presumed to exist. To say things about astrology or God, in the absence of some obvious statement to the contrary, is to imply that you believe these things to exist.²²

But Empson moves on from this idea to more complex aspects of meaning, which he characterises in terms specifically of equations,

I think the same feeling of assertion is carried over to an entirely different case, which I shall call an 'equation' and propose to divide into four types. Two senses of the word are used at once, and also (which does not necessarily happen) there is an implied assertion that they naturally belong together, 'as the word itself proves'.²³

While the notion of Existence Assertion may seem uninteresting, Empson's first example of what he calls an equation is not. He takes for analysis the sentence of a Victorian matron, 'You can't take Amelia for long walks, Mr Jones; she's delicate'²⁴. The primary sense of *delicate* here is 'refined' or 'well brought up'; but the context demands a lesser but nevertheless independent sense: 'sickly'. The word poses an equation of the sort $A = B$, 'refined' = 'sickly'. As Empson puts it,

No doubt the trick of the thing is to pretend that the two ideas are identical, but they are also recognised as very distinct; in effect the matron packs in a syllogism; the relation imputed is "A entails B", with refined as "A" and sickly as "B".²⁵

Later, in examining the history of *delicate*²⁶, Empson indicates that such an equation is only

possible in the nineteenth century, not the eighteenth, because of the word's older meanings of 'fastidious' and 'luxurious or self indulgent'. Further, the equation only goes one way ('sickly' does not entail 'delicate', in the sense of 'refined'). Also, the equation can be shown to be articulated around a certain repression of the body (what Empson refers to as 'chastity and the consequences of tight stays',²⁷ - a fact which Swinburne was able to use to good advantage in the poems Empson analyses at the end of the chapter.

Empson's second type of equation²⁸ is not between two separate senses, but between a sense and its implication. Empson understands an implication as rather like a word's connotation: something that goes with the word in certain contexts but not in others. *Honest*, in older forms of English, will typically carry an implication of courage, when used of a man (it still carries that implication if used of a horse). In cases such as that of *honest*, the implication is equated with the sense; and Empson illustrates this with another example: *native*. *Native* starts off as simply a descriptive word, meaning 'indigenous inhabitant'; but through constant colonial use the term comes to carry the implication of 'inherently subjected' or 'racially inferior'.²⁹ Eventually, Empson argues, this implication was integrated into the sense of the word.

The third type of equation³⁰ - of which Empson suggests there may not be very many clear-cut cases (and the difficulties of his description do not make it easy to be sure of finding more) - is in some respects similar to the first, in that it involves a main meaning and a meaning demanded by the context. But the order of terms is reversed. The meaning demanded by the context, so Empson claims, is such that 'the word can only be applied to the referent in view by a kind of metaphor'.³¹ For this usage, Empson gives the example of Shakespeare's use of *fool*, in which, whatever other meaning it has, Empson argues that such other meanings are equated with 'clown'. Empson argues, in this case, that

the trick is that one part of the range of the word is treated as the 'key' or typical part of it, in terms of which the others are to be viewed. The rest of the meaning indeed seems to be remembered rather by treating it as a Connotation of the selected part, and to that extent Type III is analogous to Type II rather than Type I³².

For all its difficulties of definition, Type III is important: Empson suggests that 'in most controversies where both sides agree on using a key word, the word is given two rival equations of Type III³³; and he suggests that using words such as *worker* or *business man* inevitably involves drawing on potentially controversial prototypical concepts of the terms, or stereotypes, which are based on this type of equation.

In the fourth type³⁴, order does not matter; and Empson hazards a guess that examples of the type are to be found mostly in 'individual theorists and stylists'. What constitutes a Type IV equation is that two terms are brought together in either order, but as though united under some third term ('in a similar relation to a third meaning of the word'³⁵), rather than discursively stated. Empson's examples are *law* (encompassing both human and divine 'law') in Hooker, and *sense* (encompassing both 'sensation' and 'imagination') in Wordsworth. Problematic cases arise, for Empson, when there is doubt about whether the two terms create a superordinate third term, or not.

There is, of course, a possible fifth type of equation. But Empson rejects this, claiming to be

concerned only 'with the kind of suggestion in a word which seems to cling to it and can affect opinion, so that nonce-equations by jokers and poets are not what I am looking for'³⁶. He illustrates his rejection of a fifth type with an example from Book IV of Pope's *Dunciad*:

Where Bentley late tempestuous went to sport
In troubled waters, but now sleeps in Port.

(201-202)

What we have here is two words (*port* in both cases) rather than two senses; and Empson dismisses such cases as not forming equations partly on the basis that two words are involved, and partly because of the evident existence of an intention to hide a meaning, such that sudden discovery of the sense is part of the contrived effect.

Together, these brief descriptions illustrate the range of Empson's characterisation of the forms of statement carried in words, and give a sense of Empson's classificatory matrix for the detailed case studies which fill the following four hundred pages of *Complex Words*. In some passages, Empson presents his classification as being straightforward; in others, he recognises difficulties with the system, as, for example, when he acknowledges that there is

a certain amount of shuffling possible among the types according to the way the thing is received, and this seems rather untidy, but I should say that it only recognises the facts of the case.³⁷

To complete the general picture of Empson's account, we need now to return to Empson's analysis of Feelings. Firstly, there are implications carried by a word (as, for example with *honest*, above). Empson notates such feelings as A/I; thus, *honest* carries the implication 'brave'. But there are several other ways of controlling the sense of a word with feelings. One is to rule out certain meanings: when a history teacher says 'a bloody battle', the intensifier sense is ruled out in favour of the lexical adjective. Equally, the sense of a word can be altered by signalling approval or disapproval. This is achieved by what Empson calls Appreciative and Depreciative Pregnancies³⁸. Alongside more common currencies, the word *kitsch*, for example, can be used with an appreciative pregnancy, in which case it confers a positive evaluation on the object; the term *art*, with a depreciative pregnancy, confers negative evaluation.

Following on from these simple guides to what is included in a word's sense over and above its cognitive meaning, Empson moves to perhaps the single most valuable concept in *Complex Words*: that of a word's Mood³⁹. The term is taken from the grammar of sentences, where it indicates the speaker's relation to the sentence, and is carried over to individual words. Empson's sign for Mood is a hash: #. So for instance A # 1 gives the first mood of sense A, identifying the speaker's relation to someone else (Empson gives the example of a simple quotation "A" which can mean 'what they call so and so but I don't' or vice versa). More important than the #, however, is the question mark: ?. This sign indicates that the speaker is using the sense under cover of using it about someone else, or negatively: what might be described, following Empson's colloquial mode of presentation, as 'these people are not like me'. Finally, Empson adds the notation ê, for what is left over as emotion.

Summing everything up at the end of *The Structure of Complex Words*, Empson provides a

chart of the symbols he claims to need:

- A.B the Senses A and B used together
- A + B the Senses confused and regarded as one
- A.(B) the Sense B "at the back of the mind" when A is foremost
- A deliberate exclusion of Sense A from a use of the word
- A/I the first Implication (or connotation) of the Sense A
- A + an appreciative pregnant sense of A, making it warmer and fuller
- A - a depreciative pregnant sense
- A#I the first Mood of Sense A, a sentence giving the speaker's relation to someone else

among these
'A' "What I call A but they don't" or "What they do but I don't"
and
A? the Sense A used of oneself under cover of using it about
someone else, or as
- A? "I am not like him"

- A!I the first Emotion associated with Sense A
- A the Existence Assertion, "A is really there and worth naming"
- A=B the various Equations "A is B". Chart of the five types: viz.

The major sense of the word is the	Subject	Predicate
The sense demanded by the most immediate context is the...Subject	II	I
... Predicate	III	V
The order of the two senses is indifferent		IV

Wit

Wit is widely recognised as one of the most difficult words in the English language. To chart its usage from Shakespeare to Samuel Johnson is to follow the intellectual, literary, political and scientific conflicts of the time. How *wit* was used, and the discourse in which it was

formulated, determined both what a speaker thought of the word and of the self, as well as the relation between the two. Indeed, C.S. Lewis suggests that 'if a man had time to study the history of one word only, *wit* would perhaps be the best word he could choose'⁴⁰. In selecting the word for analysis, Empson himself comments,

We begin the examples with Pope's wit because, though fairly elaborate in detail, it keeps to the simplest Type I as regards equation order. If one wants to examine how a structure of meaning comes to be built up in a word, it seems natural to take the 'key word' of a long poem, in which the process might actually be seen at work; and here the key word names the theme of the poem.⁴¹

Empson's analysis, therefore, is a suitable place to test out the scope and procedures of the analytic framework he presents in *Complex Words*. Problems can be examined in Empson's own account, as well as in the parallel account offered by C.S. Lewis in *Studies in Words*; and we can go on to investigate difficulties left over from both.

The etymology of *wit* is simple. The word is derived from Anglo-Saxon *wit* or *gewit*, which means 'mind, reason, intelligence'. From this early sense follow a variety of complications. Roughly, it is possible to say that the word refers to the faculty of understanding. In the plural, however, it also refers to those who possess the faculty - though perhaps the only clear remnants of this sense in current English are formulaic phrases such as *at one's wit's end*.

Two associated senses then emerge. The first is associated with the kind of mediaeval psychology in which a person was understood as having five outward and five inward senses. The five inward senses were: memory, estimation, fancy, imagination and common wit, or common sense. What needs to be retained from this meaning, to follow the word's complex history, is that 'judgement' is a part of wit. The phrase 'I was frightened out of my wits' relates both to this meaning and to another meaning by which the mental faculty of 'wit' is understood to go implicitly with its proper or usual operation. There is a similar related sense with 'mind', which indicates the mental faculty and then, by an established implication, its normal or correct use; thus, 'out of my mind'.

The senses of *wit* referred to so far are (except for the specific phrases cited above) now obsolete. But while they were still in circulation, an upward valuation took place: *wit* comes to mean good or great mental capacity; and, in general, the word begins to indicate not the simple faculty but its quality (significantly, an analogous upward valuation took place in the word 'quality' itself). This use of *wit* becomes dominant in the Renaissance; and C.S. Lewis suggests that the development may well be linked to the fact that *wit* comes to be used as the standard translation for the Latin word *ingenium*. *Ingenium*, in Latin, starts off by meaning the nature or quality of something. But, applied to someone's intelligence, it comes to imply a favourable interpretation. But *ingenium* is also opposed in Latin to another mental quality, 'judgement'; and Lewis states that this is also true of the development of *wit* in English. The idea of 'ingenium' in Latin being close to insanity, for example (as in Seneca's maxim 'Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae', meaning 'No great ingenium, without a dash of insanity') is glossed by Dryden as 'Great wits are sure to madness near allied'.

But if Lewis is right to see an opposition between wit and judgement in Neo-classical criticism, this opposition had been worked for and to a large extent attained by way of

Locke's distinction between wit and judgement. If we go back earlier in the seventeenth century, it is doubtful whether this particular opposition can be found. Certainly Lewis is right to see some parallelling (a semantic calque) with *ingenium*. But if we look at Ben Jonson's remarks on the subject, entitled 'Ingeniorum discrimina' ('The Discrimination of Wit', part of *Timber*, published in 1640), we see that Jonson's use of the word is still labouring to make the distinction. He starts his passage,

In the difference of wits, I have observ'd; there are many notes; And it is a little Maistry to know them: to discern what every nature, every disposition will beare: For, before we sow our land, we should plough it. There are no fewer forms of minds, then of bodies amongst us. The variety is incredible; and therefore wee must search. Some are fit to make Divines, some Poets, some Lawyers, some Physicians; some to be sent to the plough, and trades.

There is no doctrine will doe good, where nature is wanting. Some wits are swelling, and high; others low and still; Some hot and fiery; others cold and dull; One must have a bridle, the other a spurre.⁴³

This passage is, in fact, almost a word-for-word translation from Quintilian, with *wit* taking the place of *ingenium*. But the content of the rest of the passage is a working-out of Jonson's theory of the correct way to study and write. In the course of his description, Jonson denigrates those who do not possess sound judgement and scholarship - those, above all, who think their native talent will get them by:

But the Wretcheder are the obstinate contemners of all helpes and Arts: such as presuming on their owne Naturals (which, perhaps are excellent) dare deride all diligence, and seem to mock at the termes, when they understand not the things; thinking that way to get off wittily, with their Ignorance.⁴³

The context of 'wittily' here, involving a sense above all of 'to mock', suggests that Jonson is using the word in roughly our modern sense. 'Wit' can be understood in context, as in OED Sense 7, as 'Quickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression, talent for saying brilliant or sparkling things, particularly in an amusing way' (the substantive has gone but the adjective *witty* remains). Jonson is using the sense of *wit* which involves passing from the faculty of understanding to the quality of that faculty (in both cases, also taking in holders of the faculty), then passing on to a particular expression of that quality.

There is also further sense of the word, which shows a similar development while resulting in a different content. The OED defines it (Sense 8) as follows:

The quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness (particular uses in 17th and 19th century criticism) later always with reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way.

But here we may begin to doubt the OED. We can agree on the passage from the faculty to the quality of that faculty, and then to the particular products or results of the faculty. But the way in which those products are then understood simply pushes the issue back to the faculty itself. The OED seems to have conflated different notions of product under the influence of

Neo-classical criticism. What the OED foregrounds is the efforts made by late seventeenth and early eighteenth century poets and critics to come to terms with difficulties around the notion of 'wit' inherited from the Metaphysical tradition. But there is a conflict between two senses of the products of 'wit', which the dictionary elides. For Shakespeare and Donne, *wit* involved verbal dexterity but also a more serious kind of association, the conceit, which found its justification in a particular way of understanding the world closely linked with the rediscovery of hermeticism during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Hermetic thought does not depend on a division between experience and language (in which one represents the other). In this sense, it differs fundamentally from the view which becomes a precondition of the scientific procedures developed by Bacon and the Royal Society. Rather, in hermeticism everything in the world, including language, is linked in a system of correspondences. *Wit* can then be understood as that product of the reasoning faculty which discovers unlooked-for analogies and similarities. These analogies are then understood as belonging to the realm of truth. Much writing and thinking during the seventeenth century - we might think particularly of Hobbes and the Royal Society - is concerned to deny any notion of truth which would grant such an effectivity, or capability for producing new kinds of truth, to language. Language cannot generate truth through the identifications created by metaphor and simile, but only in relation to its description of the world (for Locke) or its own strict definitions (Hobbes).

Only by bearing in mind epistemological debates of this kind as we contemplate changes in meaning - as well as the institutional sites on which such debates were fought out - can we understand changes in the word *wit*.

Effectively what took place was the narrowing of a wider meaning, which kept within its range verbal felicities ranging from what we still call 'wit' to those conceits which, in their play on words, were believed to reveal a truth about the reality with which they were connected. Examples of the kinds of consideration the dictionary tends to ignore can easily be found. One of the first examples of Sense 7 in OED, for instance, comes from Falstaff's speech at the beginning of *Henry IV Part 2*, Act I Scene 2, in which Falstaff bandies insults with the page Hal has sent to him before engaging in more serious insults with the Lord Chief Justice⁴⁴. Falstaff's claim is that 'I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men' (I,ii, 9-10). That the main sense here is close to our modern sense is made evident by Falstaff's preceding lines. The whole speech, before the use of the word *wit*, runs:

Men of all sorts take a pride to gird at me. The brain of this foolish compounded clay-man is not able to invent anything that intends to laughter more than I invent or is invented on me. I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men. (I, ii, 6-10)

If we simply take the meaning 'humorous' in this context, we miss the element of symbolic disorder Falstaff represents. Not only is Falstaff a constant threat to the political system; he also threatens the order of the play and the kingdom at a symbolic level - sexually in his polymorphously and bisexual body, and dramatically as the representative of an older stage tradition. The scene in which Falstaff proclaims himself 'witty' is only one example of the danger taken to be latent in his power over language; and this dimension of symbolic danger, rather than mere verbal frivolity, can only be appreciated if we bear in mind the contemporary linguistic theories of the day, and the way the word *wit* is articulated in them.

As regards the way *wit* develops in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, what is particularly significant is the emergence of theories regarding the relation between language and reality which underpin Bishop Thomas Sprat's famous pronouncements, in Section XX ('Their Manner of Discourse') of his *History of the Royal-Society* (1667). Sprat announces that all rhetorical figures, and in particular the arch-fiend metaphor, have been banished:

They have therefore been most rigorous in putting in execution, the only Remedy, that can be found for this extravagance: and that has been, a constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words. They have exacted from all their members, a close naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artisans, Countrymen and merchants, before that of Wits or Scholars.⁴⁵

Sprat's identification of 'Wits' as those who, along with scholars, use figurative language indicates that Sprat is condemning a whole system of rhetorical education and study which allows language powers of its own. The strictures of the Royal Society, and the dominant theories of language after the Restoration, necessitated the narrowing of the symbolic capabilities of 'wit', if both a kind of pleasure and joy in words and yet the dominant theories of the day were to be upheld. It is not surprising, therefore, that the new notion of a possessor of 'wit' emerges at this time. The relevant *OED* definition (Sense 10) runs

A person of lively fancy who has the faculty of saying smart or brilliant things, now always so as to amuse; a witty person.

The growth of this new meaning accompanies the emergence of our modern sense of *wit* as the major one; but it is only by holding in mind the quality, as well as the possessor of that quality, that we can understand this phase of the word's development.

The distinctions established during this phase in the development of *wit* are historically significant. If the notion of a truth inherent in language's own created connections is destroyed, the possibility of allowing 'wit' to be more than verbal play is excluded. Another word is needed, generally *sense*, to describe any judgement which is made of the quality of the mental faculty that is not dependent on its relation to language. What needs then to be noted is that adopting such a position denies virtually any effectivity to poetry in the realm of truth, and relegates it to the realm of delight: poetry becomes merely decoration. It is this problem that Neo-classical criticism, and poets like Dryden and Pope, wrestle with: they are confronted by a conflict between their desire to conform to the epistemology of the age, while at the same time claiming serious investigative and epistemological rights for poetry.

Such claims - in effect, claims for poetry's capability to explore and construct, rather than simply represent and reflect, truth - are made difficult to sustain by the developments in philosophical and scientific thought. But this does not mean it cannot be done. Poets such as Dryden and Pope went on using the word *wit* because they still wanted as far as possible to claim rights for poetry that had been denied by philosophy and politics: *wit* becomes a focus of contradictions in which poets can both accept and disavow the reign of Newton and Locke. While it may be impossible intellectually to reconcile the claims of poetry to be more than

ornament with the claims of the Royal Society to the royal share of truth in logic, this does not mean that attempts at such reconciliation are precluded from creative use of language. Indeed, one of the main achievements of Empson's subtle and delicate analysis of *wit* in Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is that Empson shows how the word is balanced between two fundamentally opposing conceptions. In one conception, *wit* is to be understood as 'conceptual force, range of imaginative power'; in the other, it is 'the power to make neat jokes or ornament an accepted structure.' Empson's analysis suggests that we should understand this hesitation between senses as one of the final attempts in English to articulate *wit* in both the old way and the new.

In order to understand precisely what Pope is doing with the word *wit*, we need to draw attention in Empson's analysis to the notion of the first two equations he sketches out and the notion of a mood. Roughly speaking, Empson understands the development of Sense 10 of *wit* as a mood attached to Sense 9. Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, in this view, becomes a prolonged definition of *wit*, together with a mood (or attitude towards the word and those who use it) which leaves the poet both defined and undefined. Pope's use of mood in the word parallels the whole strategy of the *Essay*: to distinguish rules poets must follow from rules they must not.

If we look at the poem's opening passage, we see three of the different senses of *wit* considered above; and we can also find a use of the head sense. While most of the equations which define *wit* or 'a wit' are equations of Type 1, there is one use which Empson describes as being of Type 2 (equations between a sense and its implication). While Empson himself does not consider this use to be fundamentally important, it is quite possible to argue that it serves as the focal point for the whole sequence of equations. The equation in question comes when Pope is inveighing against those who make one element in poetry predominate over the rest; Pope chooses 'wit' to start his condemnation off (the other elements he discusses are language and versification):

Some, to conceit alone their Taste confine
 And glitt'ring Thoughts struck out at ev'ry Line;
 Pleas'd with a Work where nothing's just or fit;
 One glaring Chaos and wild Heap of Wit.

(289-292)

Pope is clearly alluding here to Metaphysical 'wit'. But rather than using an equation which brings the head sense in, in what Empson calls the predicate position (what the speaker is putting forward, rather than the already-established topic)⁴⁶, this use seems to place it in the subject position and equate it with its implication. The purpose of this appears to be that of bringing together the sense of 'power to make neat jokes or ornament an accepted structure' with the sense of 'conceptual force, range of imaginative power'. By equating the two senses, the equation belittles 'wit' but also preserves for it a certain dignity. As such, the equation accomplishes the logically impossible holding together of the power of wit and its belittlement. Interestingly, therefore, it is just after this crucial equation in the poem that Pope produces his most famous lines on wit, when he writes

True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest
 What oft was Thought but ne'er so well Exprest,

Something, whose Truth convinc'd at sight we find
That gives us back the image of our Mind
(297-300)

In these lines, there is a fresh attempt to integrate human beings, nature and language; and in his description, C.S. Lewis focuses on an unusualness, or strain, in Pope's usage: the way the modifier 'true' before 'wit' suggests that Pope is 'twisting the noun into a sense it never naturally bore', rather than repeating a current and dominant sense⁴⁷. But finally, there is no justification for wit except in 'expression', divorced from thought. Despite the memorability of the lines, their attempt to hold together Wit and Nature - and what Pope means by 'Nature' would need separate consideration - is finally doomed, in the sense that the very splitting-out of a Metaphysical sense of *wit* does not allow its re-integration into the predominant Restoration sense which is set up in opposition to it. This is very clear when Pope writes the *Essay on Man* some twenty years later, and concludes:

Shall then this verse to future age pretend
Thou wert my guide, philosopher and friend?
That urg'd by thee, I turn'd the tuneful art
From sounds to things, from fancy to the heart
For Wit's false mirror held up Nature's light
Shew'd erring Pride, WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT
(389-394)

Subsequently, although *wit* continues as a critical term, it has lost virtually all life in the old sense. This is what allows Samuel Johnson to come back and gloss the debate around *wit* with a metalanguage which makes it possible to distinguish between the word's various uses. In the *Life of Cowley*, Johnson writes:

If Wit be well described by Pope, as being 'that which has been often thought, but was never before so well expressed', they certainly never attained, nor ever sought it; for they endeavoured to be singular in their thoughts, and were careless of their diction. But Pope's account of wit is undoubtedly erroneous: he depresses it below its natural dignity, and reduces it from strength of thought to happiness of language.

If by a more noble and more adequate conception that be considered as Wit, which is at once natural and new, that which, though not obvious, is, upon its first production, acknowledged to be just; if it be that, which he that never found it, wonders how he missed; to wit of this kind the metaphysical poets have seldom risen. Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious, but neither are they just; and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found.

But Wit, abstracted from its effect upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.⁴⁸

The position of *wit* in Metaphysical thought is by Johnson's time well understood; and it is clearly recognised as being distinct from Neo-classical use of the term. But the loading of Metaphysical 'wit' has become for Johnson mere 'occult resemblances': *wit* has had its day.

Speakers and their words

It is worth noting at this point that C.S. Lewis gives a rather different history than the one we have presented here (which is based largely on Empson's). Lewis would have us believe that the progression within the word *wit* is primarily brought about by confusion. Because people who possessed the wit-quality would also be likely to make witty remarks, he suggests, the whole issue became confused during a period of transitional meanings for the word. Lewis surmises that a speaker

would slip in and out of the different meanings without noticing it. It is all ordinary and comfortable until one of the meanings happens to become strategically important in some controversy. A bad linguistic situation then results.⁴⁹

Some of the major discrepancies between Lewis's account and Empson's - which are discussed directly by both writers⁵⁰ - focus on whether the 'joke' sense of *wit* can be found throughout Pope's *Essay* or not. As Lewis puts it,

The question between Professor Empson and me is whether that slowly rising tide had yet reached all Pope's uses of the word. I believe it had not; the insulating power of the context still protected them.⁵¹

But what is more important than matters of detail such as this within the history of *wit* is a more important watershed between Lewis and Empson which emerges. For Lewis, illustrating his argument with discussion of *courtesy* and *curtsy*⁵², rigorous distinction is needed between a word's meaning and a speaker's meaning (Empson, by contrast, rejects the distinction in anything like a clear-cut form). For Lewis, whenever the distinction between speaker-meaning and word-meaning is thrown into doubt, language is somehow going wrong. In the case of *wit*, he recognises the movement of the word from the sense of *ingenium* to the sense associated with 'witty'. But he views this as just a sloppy use of language in which product comes to replace quality without anybody really noticing. At the same time, nevertheless, Lewis demonstrates that he is aware of both the critical and epistemological debates which precipitate the change, while somehow continuing to consider them separate from the word itself.

To understand the originality of Empson's work, what needs to be emphasised in Lewis's arguments regarding *wit* - which significantly uphold his more general belief that words have meanings and speakers simply use or adapt those meanings - is that they ignore the extent to which the selection of the modern meaning for *wit* is the product of the epistemological debates, and the specific theoretical and institutional struggles, of the seventeenth century. Yet as we have suggested above, it is only when we take such debates regarding the power of language seriously that we begin to see how speakers and writers of the period oppose, on the one hand, theories which allow language an effectivity and reality of its own (such that truth

is as likely to appear in words as in things), and, on the other hand, theories devoted to denying any such thing.⁵³

Empson's account incipiently recognises a dimension of word-meaning altogether absent in Lewis: an unacknowledged significance of the changes which take place in the word *wit* is that the epistemological debates which produce the narrowing in meaning had institutional sites which related the struggle over ideas to more obvious forms of political struggle. The successive definitions and re-definitions of *wit* are not, therefore, easily divisible into a word-meaning and speaker-meaning; and it is simplistic, as Lewis seeks to do, to identify a definite meaning and then say that someone was simply using that meaning for a specific purpose. What begins to be visible in Empson's writing is that *wit* provides a focal point at which meaning and identity collapse into the material of language, but in a way which nevertheless prevents them being produced, unproblematically, as mere effects. To use or define *wit* around the end of the seventeenth century is not just to choose a meaning; it is to attempt to establish a meaning and an identity.

This issue of the connection between the formation of a word's meanings and the formation of the speaker leads to a far more important divergence between Lewis's account and Empson's than the issue of the precise rate of change between senses of *wit* which they each acknowledge. While Lewis seems unable to bear the idea that questions of the speaker may be integrally involved in a word's meaning, Empson's whole project in *Complex Words* can be seen as an attempt to produce a theoretical account of exactly such relationships, showing how, in the case of *wit*, new definitions of truth and the relation between reality and language are to a large extent worked out, or fought over, through meanings for the word.

Structures of meaning

We have discussed Empson's analysis of the word *wit* at some length because it illustrates possibilities, but also difficulties, in the analytic frameworks that Empson and others have devised to describe the complex histories of words. Above all, our account suggests that, rather than talking of words and the meanings given to them by individuals, we need to think of discourses and the practices that accompany them: practices which generally find their existence and articulation in institutions. It is this view of structures of meaning in words which begins to emerge in *Complex Words*, and which is arguably the most original aspect of Empson's analyses.

Some of the implications of such a view are worth comment. One is that meaning and identity become kinds of effect or produced relation, rather than elements from which to start. This does not mean that we should do away with words as units. We simply need to recognise that they are not themselves units of meaning, but material units whose articulation produces meaning. It is because the material units are not finally tied to any one meaning that they can function not only as central or 'key' words, but also as points of disruption, controversy and change in a discourse.

The notion that key words act as points of disruption and controversy, as well as of change, is indispensable if we are to understand how *Complex Words* fits in with Empson's work as a whole. It is also the main point at issue in Empson's reservations about Raymond Williams's

project in *Keywords*. So to compare the relative merits of Empson's and Williams's positions, as models for the further kinds of analysis that seem necessary in contemporary English studies, we need now to draw out our own cautions about Empson's theories and relate these to his criticisms of *Keywords*.

A first caution regarding Empson's analyses is that, although Empson claims it does not matter how many meanings for a word are conscious, he has a habit of writing as though the poet is consciously *choosing* all the meanings. The difficulty with this view is that it resurrects the notion of a subject unproblematically outside language at a further remove than Lewis's simple distinction between what a word means and what a speaker means by that word. Given the close connection Empson's case studies indicate between use of words and the formation of meanings and identities, this ambiguity is problematic. What seems needed, in order to connect the two conflicting senses of subjectivity, is an additional emphasis on the role of the social in meaning: an emphasis which can occasionally be found in asides Empson makes in the course of his exposition.

One such aside introduces the notion of the institutional site of a text. In explaining how a meaning can attach itself to a word, and how connotations (or Implications) can even overtake a word, Empson suggests that an Implication

will come from an habitual context of the word (not from its inherent meaning) and will vaguely remind you of that sort of context. The context is presumed to be usual among some group of people; a merely [private] fancy would be called an Association of the word.⁵⁴

A more general notion of the sociality of meaning also makes itself felt at the beginning of Empson's discussion of the concept of Moods. He writes that

the main argument in its favour is sufficiently obvious; language is essentially a social product and much concerned with social relations, but we tend to hide this in our forms of speech so as to appear to utter impersonal truths.⁵⁵

In stressing the social dimension of meaning in Empson's work, however, we run straight into a fundamental conceptual problem: how to reconcile notions of the historical formation of individuals and their autonomous existence. Crucial in thinking through this problem is the development of a concept of a social unconscious. Empson sets himself pointedly against any such notion, of course, insisting that the processes he describes are conscious and intentional:

I am trying to write linguistics and not psychology; something quite unconscious and unintentional, even if the hearer catches it like an infection, is not part of an act of communication.⁵⁶

The deep conflict in Empson's position is that it is difficult to believe he takes speakers and writers of English to be conscious of the syntax and lexis of English as they write - especially given his justification for the structure of *Complex Words* in the confidence and speed of routine human interpretation. On the other hand, given Empson's evident respect for literary artifice and argumentative control throughout his work, it is difficult not to believe he attributes a great deal of the subtle effects of words to deliberate choices consciously made by

the speaker or writer. If we are ever to resolve this conflict, we appear to need much more sophisticated notions of intention than Empson seems to be working with: notions which have to allow an existence to a social unconscious.

Something of what might be needed can be glimpsed by looking again at Empson's disagreement with Williams. Empson is enraged by Williams's claim that all uses of *interest* are saturated with money relations because many uses of the word *interesting* cannot be parsed in any way that brings out a reference to money at all. It is because of problems of this sort that Empson makes his celebrated claim that 'what Williams needs to consider is the structure relating two meanings in any one of his chosen words so that they imply or insinuate a sentence "A is B"'.⁵⁷

The important point, however, is not that a speaker is consciously saying "A is B". He or she may not want to say A is B. What matters is that use of the word inevitably leads the speaker to subscribe to the implication. In doing so, the speaker is defined as much as the word; and this accounts for the potential for embarrassment and anxiety when the implication is drawn out. In one sense, use of an equation is unconscious: Williams effectively conceives of a social unconscious working independently of the individual's consciousness. It is important, nevertheless, that the equation can be made conscious; and by focusing on the relationship between social dimensions of word-meaning and cognitive processes involved in interpretation, Empson - arguably more interestingly than Williams - points to the torque between individual and social.

As regards ethical and political consequences which follow from the two positions, the key question is exposed in C.S. Lewis's idea (quoted above) that, in uses of different meanings,

it is all ordinary and comfortable until one of the meanings happens to become strategically important in some controversy.⁵⁸

As is perhaps especially evident in Empson's essay 'Argufying in Poetry'⁵⁹, Empson consistently valued the capabilities of reason more than emotive but finally non-argumentative symbolic understandings of what is at stake in moments of controversy. As regards the processes of interpretation involved, he sought to displace what he dismisses as traditions of 'evasiveness and false suggestions' with 'another tradition, that of fair public debate'⁶⁰. Considering differences of perception and understanding in particular, Empson seems committed to an idea of shared human rationality which underpins even what may turn out to be conflicting interpretations. He constantly distances himself from the idea of distinct, socially-constructed regimes of meaning which are beyond the horizons of any individual speaker or writer's understanding or intervention.

Unlike Empson, Williams does not engage much with questions of cognition or the exact processes involved in individual interpretation. Rather, his memorable image at the beginning of the Introduction to *Keywords* is of people simply 'not speaking the same language' - a view which almost invites Empson to consider that Williams sees language-users as shaped by the words they use, thinking *in* more than *with* them, and being finally at the mercy of slogans and catchwords pressed on them by larger social forces. The conflict in Williams's position, in this sense, lies in the precise degree to which he takes it to be possible to learn and communicate across languages of different social formations, even with the 'extra edge of

consciousness' that can be gained from historical awareness.

In view of the scale of difficulty involved in thinking through questions of this kind, it can seem unduly dismissive of Empson to have objected so decisively when Williams writes,

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.⁶¹

Empson's critical reaction that this passage 'makes our minds feebler than they are' (and that it contributes to a 'gloom' he detects in *Keywords*⁶²) ignores the development of Williams's argument. The passage which immediately follows the quotation that so clearly antagonised Empson captures - possibly better than anything in Empson's own writings - a sense of connection between individual formation and social formation:

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 [...] What can really be contributed is not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness.⁶³

The final section of the same paragraph, too (which closes Williams's discussion of the aims of the book, as he turns to problems of layout and method) brings together what appear to be all the major concerns which unite Empson's and Williams's work. For all the divergence between the two writers, emphasised by Empson and by others since, a casual reader coming across the passage in question for the first time might take it as a statement of the main points of common cause, rather than the beginnings of unresolved disagreement, between the kinds of important critical work outlined in both *Complex Words* and *Keywords*:

This is not a neutral view 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 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.⁶⁴

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Notes

1. New York Review of Books, 27 October 1977. Reprinted in William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, edited by John Haffenden (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), pp.184-9. Quotation, p.184. [The Haffenden collection of work by Empson is referred to for convenience below simply as *Argufying*.]
2. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), revised edition 1983. [Hereafter referred to as *Keywords*] Quotation, p.15.
3. William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), reprinted 1979. [Hereafter referred to as *Complex Words*] Quotation, p.xi.
4. Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, p.39. What is now generally known as the *Oxford English Dictionary* was first published, in parts, as *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, edited by J.A.H. Murray, H. Bradley, W.A. Craigie & C.T. Onions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884-1928). It was later re-issued in a corrected form, with Introduction, Supplement and Bibliography, in 13 volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933); the dictionary continues to undergo revision. For a detailed account of the planning, initial production and difficulties of the OED, see, K.M. Elisabeth Murray, *Caught in the Web of Words: James A.H.Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977).
5. Detailed accounts of the main linguistic theories of word meaning can be found in John Lyons, *Semantics*, 2 volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). An analysis of word-meaning consistent with the larger claims of Relevance Theory is, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.90-3. Practical work on the semantics of words can be found in James Hurford and Brendan Heasley, *Semantics: a Coursebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Units 16-20, pp.177-231. A good introductory account of language processing and interpretation is Judith Greene, *Language Understanding: a Cognitive Approach* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), especially Parts 1 and 2.
6. *Complex Words*, p.289.
7. The sub-title to Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (see n.4 above).
8. *Argufying*, p.185.
9. *Argufying*, p.184.
10. *Argufying*, p.188.
11. William Empson, *Complex Words*, p.viii.
12. *Complex Words*, p.101.

13. William Empson, 'Professor Lewis on Linguistics', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 September 1960. Reprinted in *Argufying*, pp.142-6. Quotation, p.143.
14. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), reprinted 1990. [Hereafter referred to as *Studies in Words*]. Quotation, p.13.
15. *Complex Words*, p.viii.
16. *Complex Words*, p.437.
17. From a radio talk on the use of Basic English in teaching criticism (dated 1939, and, according to Haffenden, 'probably written as part of a series he [Empson] broadcast on Radio WRUL in Boston, when he needed money for the onward journey home from China'). Quoted in the introduction to *Argufying*, p.9.
18. Quoted in Stanley J. Kunitz (ed), *Twentieth-Century Authors: A Bibliographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*, first supplement (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1955), p.308. Discussed by Haffenden in the introduction to *Argufying*, p.7.
19. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, p.314.
20. *Complex Words*, p.39.
21. *Complex Words*, p.46.
22. Empson's Existence Assertion corresponds closely to what might now more commonly be thought of as existential presupposition, or the existential commitment presumed as a felicity condition on acts of assertion. For discussion, see, Stephen Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Chapter 4. See also, Gerald Gazdar, *Pragmatics: Implicature, Presupposition and Logical Form* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1979), pp.45-8. For an account of presupposition which relates presupposition to a body of socially-constructed, ideological assumptions ('interdiscourse'), see, Michel Pecheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology: Stating the Obvious*, translated by Harbans Nagpal (London: Macmillan, 1982).
23. *Complex Words*, p.40.
24. *Complex Words*, p.44 ff.
25. *Complex Words*, p.45.
26. *Complex Words*, pp.76-7.
27. *Complex Words*, p.77.
28. *Complex Words*, pp.48-50.
29. See also the entry in *Keywords*.

30. *Complex Words*, pp.50-1.
31. *Complex Words*, p.50.
32. *Complex Words*, p.51.
33. *Complex Words*, p.51.
34. *Complex Words*, pp.51-2.
35. *Complex Words*, p.52.
36. *Complex Words*, p.54.
37. *Complex Words*, p.64.
38. *Complex Words*, pp.16-7.
39. *Complex Words*, pp.17-20.
40. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, p.86.
41. *Complex Words*, p.84.
42. Ben Jonson, *Timber*, in, C.H. Herford Percy and Evelyn Simpson, *Collected Works of Ben Jonson*, volume VIII, 'The Poems; The Prose Works' (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), lines 669-680, p.584.
43. Ben Jonson, *Timber*, lines 745-50, p.586.
44. *Complex Words*, p.85; *Studies in Words*, p.98-9.
45. Thomas Sprat, quoted in Charles Barber, *Early Modern English* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976), pp.132-3.
46. For further discussion of subject position and predicate position, see Empson's explanation, *Complex Words*, pp.45-6.
47. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, p.107.
48. Samuel Johnson, 'Life of Cowley', in, *Lives of the Poets* (London, 1779-81).
49. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, p.103.
50. Empson in *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 September 1960, cited in *Argufying*, p.144. See also, C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, p.96.

51. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, p.96.

52. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, p.99.

53. If we want to relate the history of *wit* either to a history of reason or to a history of poetry, the particular positions and beliefs would need to be distinguished. Roughly these are, on one side, the hermetic theories of language of a Bruno or a Campanella, which understand language's relation to reality not as that of representation but of a kind of reproduction in which language literally figures reality; on the other side, those Augustinian theories of language which entail that in certain uses words can lose the conventional relation to reality and become 'the audible and visible sounds of a direct apprehension of invisible and inaudible truths'. Both kinds of theory - though differently - grant the poet some kind of access to truth. For descriptions of Renaissance theories of language, see, for example, R.H.Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics* (London: Longman, 1967), chapter 5, pp.94-132.

54. *Complex Words*, p.15.

55. *Complex Words*, p.18.

56. *Complex Words*, p.31.

57. *Argufying*, p.188.

58. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, p.103.

59. *Argufying*, pp.167-73.

60. *Argufying*, p.168.

61. *Keywords*, p.24.

62. *Argufying*, p.184.

63. *Keywords*, p.24.

64. *Keywords*, pp.24-5.