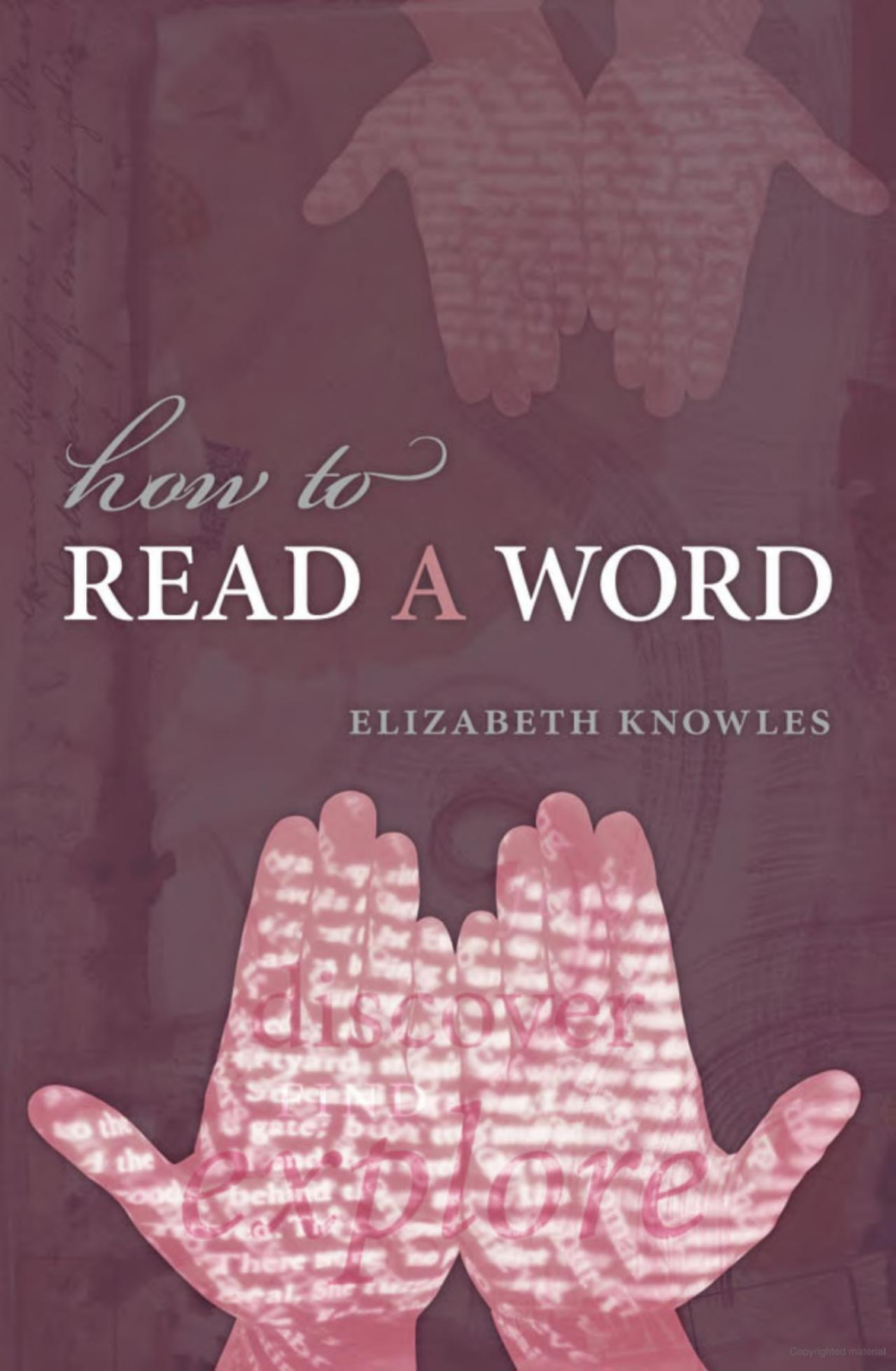

HOW TO READ A WORD

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Introduction

We encounter words constantly, through ordinary conversation, reading, overheard speech, broadcasting, the internet. In the same day, a person with an interest in language may hear the latest buzzword, or encounter a nineteenth-century usage through a dramatization or reworking of Jane Austen. Questions presenting themselves are not necessarily of literary origin: they may be triggered by consideration of the fruit section of a supermarket, reading a report in a newspaper, or by a report from another English-speaking country.

Encountering an unfamiliar word or phrase, or noticing for the first time some aspect of a known word, is a provocation to find out more. A single sentence can contain enough material to trigger a whole range of questions. For example, in October 2008, Paul McKeever, Chairman of the British Police Federation, was reported as saying:

> We are realists, we are pragmatists. We are not quixotic idealists who are looking for pyrrhic victories to prove a point.

The sentence generates a number of possible questions. *Realist* and *pragmatist* are used as virtual synonyms. What in fact are their precise shades of meaning, and when did the words enter the language? Or, the attention might be caught by *quixotic*, an adjective deriving from the name of a fictional character, Cervantes' Don Quixote. What other words go back to the name of a fictional character, or has Don Quixote any other influence on our language? (The expression *tilting at windmills* may come to mind.) Finally, there is the use of *pyrrhic victory*, an expression

coming from the classical world. (Investigation of current usage of the term might well turn up the spirited debate, conducted on www.sportsjournalist.com in January 2008, on how widely understood the phrase would be today.)

There is no limit to the questions we may ask about a word or phrase. (The furore surrounding the announcement, in June 2009, by the Global Language Monitor company that they would shortly identify the millionth word to enter the English language included not only heated debate as to the number of words currently estimated to be in the language already, but also, after the announcement of *Web 2.0* as the key item, considerable disagreement as to what can be held to constitute a word.)

Most simply, we might want to know what a word means, or where it comes from. We might wonder what other meanings it has had in the past, or whether it appears to be developing a further sense. How is it pronounced, and is there more than one way of saying it? Has it been used famously by a well-known person, or does it have particular social, cultural, or historical asssociations? Does it originate in a particular local dialect, or a form of World English?

Beyond this, we might consider whether the word belongs to a set which we choose to delineate. Is it, for example, one of a number of names for a particular type of thing? Does it belong with other words borrowed from a particular language? What other words were first recorded in the same century (or decade, or year) as the word in which we are interested? Each discrete piece of information can constitute a starting point. Are there more words like this? Perhaps with similar meanings, or origins, or dating from the same period? Did the word

exist in Shakespeare's day, or Jane Austen's, and if so, did it mean the same as it does now?

We may also be interested in associations which go beyond the strictly lexical. Does the word form a key part of a well-known speech or passage of literature, or is it associated in the public mind with a particular event, or period of time? Was it used particularly of or by a notable fictional character? Any aspect of a word may start us on a journey of exploration, and from multi-volume print dictionaries to the personally created websites of other language buffs, via such resources as the digitized texts searchable through Google Books, there have never been such rich resources to explore.

I have been professionally engaged with words, and dictionaries, since I first became a library researcher for the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, over thirty years ago. I have never forgotten the sense of excitement generated by a successful search for a word or phrase, and the fascination of the colourful stories that were revealed. It is the intention of this book to share some of that pleasure, by setting out in detail the ways in which we can all interrogate words. Using real-language examples, I have looked both at the questions we can ask, and at where and how we can look for the answers.

There has probably never been a time when someone who wishes to explore words has had richer resources to hand. I hope that *How to Read a Word* will offer its readers a chance to make full use of what is now available to us all.

Elizabeth Knowles

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Chapter 1
But is it in the Dictionary?

When we encounter an unfamiliar (not to say improbable) word we may well ask, 'Is it in the dictionary?'—a standard way of asking whether the item in question has an acknowledged existence. We think of a language as made up of recognized vocabulary (the 'lexicon').

At a press briefing on 29 September 2009, a reporter's question to the White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs was interrupted as her colleagues began to laugh. She had begun, 'From the standpoint of leverage or strategery, how do you—', and was cut off by the Press Secretary's comment that he loved the way 'a "Saturday Night Live" word' had 'entered into the lexicon'.

Strategery first caught the public attention in 2000, during the American presidential election between the then Vice-President, Al Gore, and his Republican opponent, George W. Bush. Bush's tendency to mangle words had already been noted by satirists, and in October provided the concluding moment (and punchline) of a supposed debate between Bush and Gore shown on a *Saturday Night Live* sketch. The debate moderator asked each of the candidates to 'sum up in a single word the best argument for his candidacy'. The comedian Will Ferrell, playing George W. Bush, responded with a satisfied nod, 'Strategery'.

Strategery was to embed itself successfully in the public mind as a characteristic 'Bushism'. In the following spring, a satirical sitcom, *That's My Bush*, was produced by Comedy Central (creators of *South Park*). The sitcom was staged in the White House of the new President and First Lady, and the American actor Timothy Bottoms was cast as George W. Bush. In March, the *New York Times* columnist John Leland published a column in the form of an interview with Timothy Bottoms. This included the following exchange:

> Q: What does the word strategery mean to you?
> A: I've never heard of that word. Is it in the dictionary?
> —in *New York Times* 25 March 2001

The question assumed that readers would connect Bush with *strategery*; the response used a familiar phrase, 'Is it in the dictionary?' to underline his supposed lack of grasp on language.

In the eight years between 2001 and 2009, *strategery* took on a certain life of its own. It was used jokingly in Bush's own White House. As the *Washington Post* of 17 October 2004 reported, his Chief of Staff Karl Rove's Office of Strategic Initiatives was informally 'known around the West Wing as "Strategery"'.

In August 2008, the *Jerusalem Post* published a review of *What Happened: Inside Bush's White House and Washington's Culture of Deception* by the former White House Press Secretary, Scott McClellan. Discussing McClellan's position, the columnist wrote:

> He was excluded from discussions at the National Security Council, the daily 'communications' conversations

> and the small, informal 'strategery' sessions where the real give-and-take occurred.
> —in *Jerusalem Post* 7 August 2008

By 2009, as we have seen, it was possible for *strategery* to appear in a question to the White House Press Secretary without any apparent intentional satire, although its reception indicated a general awareness of its history. However, it did demonstrate that to a certain degree it had 'joined the lexicon', even if it has not yet achieved full dictionary status.[1]

Over fifty years before, 'Is it in the dictionary?' had appeared in a column in the *Los Angeles Times* of 26 June 1948, Fred Colby's syndicated 'Take My Word for It'. In a previous column, Colby had introduced a paragraph on the word *khaki* with the words 'Overheard on a news commentation'. The 'Four Hour Speech Class' from the Central Junior High School of Kansas City, given the article to discuss, had written in to ask whether there were really such a word as 'commentation'. The nub of their question was, 'Did you make it up, or is it in the dictionary?'

Colby, assuring the class of the word's existence, went into some detail. *Commentation* was in *Webster's New International*, *Funk and Wagnall's New Standard*, and the *New Century Dictionary*, but not in a number of others, for example the *American College Dictionary* or *Funk and Wagnall's New College Standard*.[2] By giving these details, he was in fact giving some clues as to the word's lack of currency: *commentation* was to be found only in the older and larger American dictionaries. However, the Four Hour Speech Class were presumably satisfied: what they had wanted to know was whether a word they had never met had qualified for any level of recognition.

strategy

While enjoying the emergence of *strategery*, it is worth taking time to look up the background of the parent word, *strategy*. It came into English (via French) from Greek *stratēgos* 'army general', and turns out to be one of those words which have two existences. It is briefly recorded in the late seventeenth century (with reference to the Roman statesman and scholar Pliny the Elder), to mean a government or province ruled by a general. It was reintroduced in the early nineteenth century to denote the art of planning and directing overall military operations and movements in war: something that was seen as the special role of a commander-in-chief.

Later developments such as the compound *strategic thinking* testify to the positive light in which *strategy* is seen, and it is interesting to compare it with the linked word *stratagem*. Introduced in the late fifteenth century in the sense of 'a military ploy', it is most likely to be used today in the sense of a scheme to outwit an opponent or achieve an end, with an implication of deviousness or cunning. As Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), contemplating how her sister Lydia's marriage has been achieved, warns her aunt, 'If you do not tell me in an honourable manner, I shall certainly be reduced to tricks and stratagems to find it out.' And yet both *strategy* and *stratagem* come from the same root.

The ultimate authority?

'Is it in the dictionary?' is a formulation suggesting that there is a single lexical authority: '*The* Dictionary'. As the British academic Rosamund Moon has commented, 'The dictionary

most cited in such cases is the UAD: the Unidentified Authorizing Dictionary, usually referred to as "the dictionary", but very occasionally as "my dictionary".'[3] The American scholar John Algeo has coined the term *lexicographicolatry* for a reverence for dictionary authority amounting to idolatry. As he explained:

> English speakers have adopted two great icons of culture: the Bible and the dictionary. As the Bible is the sacred Book, so the dictionary has become the secular Book, the source of authority, the model of behavior, and the symbol of unity in language.
>
> —John Algeo 'Dictionaries as seen by the Educated Public in Great Britain and the USA' in F. J. Hausmann et al. (eds) *An International Encyclopedia of Lexicography* (1989) vol. 1, p. 29

While recognizing the respect for lexical authority illuminated by this passage, it is not difficult to find less unquestioning perspectives. The notion of any dictionary representing a type of scriptural authority runs counter, for instance, to the view of the 'Great Lexicographer' Samuel Johnson that:

> Dictionaries are like watches, the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true.
>
> —Samuel Johnson, letter to Francesco Sastres, 21 August 1784

A dictionary may also be highly derivative: twenty years before Johnson's letter, the French writer and critic Voltaire had warned cynically in his *Philosophical Dictionary* that 'All dictionaries are made from dictionaries.'[4] However, there is evidence that Johnson's contemporary Lord Chesterfield had

also embraced the concept of universal lexical authorization. He wrote to his son in 1754:

> Attend minutely to your style, whatever language you speak or write in; seek for the best words, and think of the best turns. Whenever you doubt of the propriety or elegancy of any word, search the dictionary, or some good author for it, or inquire of somebody, who is master of that language.
> —Lord Chesterfield, letter, 12 February 1754

Overall, it is reasonable to conclude that there is a natural tendency to regard the dictionary with which we are most familiar as having particular authority.

Which dictionary?

References to '*the* dictionary' assume not just that there is only one dictionary worth considering, but that (apart from quality) there will be no significant distinction between individual members of the class of dictionaries. Any dictionary will offer the same range of information. However, while it is true that any dictionary is likely to offer basic information as to pronunciation, part of speech, meaning, and probably origin, individual dictionaries differ widely in range and purpose.

When considering a dictionary of the English language, the first thing to establish is whether it is a historical dictionary, the primary purpose of which is to provide a record of the language across the centuries, or a dictionary of the current language, which will map the language as spoken today.[5]

budget /ˈbʌdʒɪt/ *noun & adjective*. See also **BOUGET**. **LME**.
[**ORIGIN** Old French *bougette* dim. of *bouge* leather bag from Latin *bulga*: see **BULGE**, **-ET**¹.]

▸ **A** *noun*. **1** A pouch or wallet. *obsolete* exc. *dial*. **LME**.
▸†**b** *spec*. A leather container, *esp*. a leather or skin bottle. **L16–M19**.
open one's budget speak one's mind.

2 The contents of a bag or wallet; a bundle, a collection, a stock. *arch*. **L16**. ▸**b** *spec*. A long letter full of news. **E19**.

SWIFT I read . . the whole budget of papers you sent. *fig.*: HAZLITT His budget of general knowledge. **b** DAY LEWIS I had a budget from her last week.

3 A periodic (esp. annual) estimate of the revenue and expenditure of a country or organization; an account or statement of this, *esp*. one made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the House of Commons; a similar estimate for a private individual or family. Also, the amount of money needed or available for spending. **M18**.

J. K. GALBRAITH The balanced budget . . has been the *sine qua non* of sound and sensible management of the public purse. B. CASTLE The Chancellor must be free to have a later budget next year. P. DAVIES Most 'pure' scientists work in large laboratory teams . . and annual budgets run into hundreds of millions of dollars.

on a budget with a restricted amount of money.

– **COMB.**: **budget buster** (chiefly *US*) a person, policy, or measure proposing or effecting expenditure in excess of an agreed budget.

▸ **B** *attrib*. or as *adjective*. Designed or suitable for someone of limited means; cheap. **M20**.

Woman's Own Budget meals for the family.

budget account: see **ACCOUNT** *noun*.

■ **budgetary** *adjective* of or pertaining to a budget **L19**. **budge'teer** *noun* a person who makes up or supports a budget **M19**.

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary entry for *budget*, showing sense-ordering according to chronology.

The question we have in mind ('What did the word mean in Jane Austen's time?' 'What does it mean today?') will determine which is the best resource for our purposes.[6]

budget ▶ **noun 1** an estimate of income and expenditure for a set period of time: *keep within the household budget.*
■ (**Budget**) an annual or other regular estimate of national revenue and expenditure put forward by a finance minister. ■ the amount of money needed or available for a purpose: *they have a limited budget.*
2 archaic a quantity of written or printed material.
▶ **verb** (**budgets, budgeting, budgeted**) [no obj.] allow or provide for in a budget: *the university is* ***budgeting for*** *a deficit* | [as adj. **budgeted**] *a budgeted figure of £31,000.*
■ [with obj.] provide (a sum of money) for a particular purpose from a budget: *the council proposes to budget £100,000 to provide grants.*
▶ **adjective** [attrib.] inexpensive: *a budget guitar.*
– PHRASES **on a budget** with a restricted amount of money: *we're travelling on a budget.*
– DERIVATIVES **budgetary** adjective.
– ORIGIN late Middle English: from Old French *bougette*, diminutive of *bouge* 'leather bag', from Latin *bulga* 'leather bag, knapsack', of Gaulish origin. Compare with **BULGE**. The word originally meant a pouch or wallet, and later its contents. In the mid 18th cent., the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in presenting his annual statement, was said 'to open the budget'. In the late 19th cent. the use of the term was extended from governmental to other finances.

Oxford Dictionary of English entry for *budget*, showing sense-ordering according to contemporary currency.

Beyond this, we need to be aware of the degree to which considerations of space may have limited the degree of information to be given. We should also clarify how strictly the dictionary we are using holds to the principle that a dictionary exists to provide information about words and usage; does it perhaps offer wider coverage, and include encylopedic information?

dictionary

It is possible that *dictionary* will be one of the least-consulted entries in such a reference book, since if you are already using a dictionary, you may well not feel any need to explore its name. However, doing so does add interest and context to what has been a staple of our bookshelves for over five hundred years.

The first recorded use of the word in English comes from the first half of the sixteenth century, and its first appearance in a title is from a Latin-English dictionary of 1538, *The Dictionary of syr Thomas Eliot knyght*. In 1547, a Welsh-English dictionary advertised itself as 'moche necessary to all such Welshemen as will spedly lerne the Englyshe tongue'. By the early seventeenth century, a character in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* could respond to an unknown word, 'What's that? I need a dictionary to't.'

The term came into the language from medieval Latin, originally in the fuller form *dictionarium manuale* 'manual of words' or *dictionarium liber* 'book of words'. *Dictionarium* comes ultimately from Latin *dicere* 'to say', which is also the basis of our English word *diction*.

(For an overview of the history of dictionaries of the English language, see Appendix, p. 153.)

Through the ages

If we are investigating a word from the past, which might have had a different meaning in the nineteenth or twentieth century from the meaning it has today, a dictionary of the historical language is likely to be the most useful for us. In June 2009, coverage of the story of MPs' expenses featured the word *redact*, in