DAVID CRYSTAL

WORDS
IN TIME AND PLACE

EXPLORING LANGUAGE THROUGH THE HISTORICAL THESAURUS OF THE **OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY**

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Symbols and abbreviations

†	The dagger is used to identify words no longer used in English. It is not used for words and senses whose first recorded usage is in the twentieth century.
>	develops into
c.	*circa* – used to identify an approximate date
|	shows a line break between lines of poetry
ch.	chapter
eOE	early Old English
HTOED	*The Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary*
lOE	late Old English
OE	Old English (see Glossary)
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*
Plays	A single numeral refers to an Act; a sequence of two numerals to Act-Scene; a sequence of three numerals to Act-Scene-Line. (Shakespeare line references and play chronology follow David and Ben Crystal, *Shakespeare's Words* (Penguin, 2002), also online at www.shakespeareswords.com.)
vs	versus

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General introduction

Welcome to the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (*HTOED*) – or, rather, a tiny part of it. This huge two-volume work was published in 2009, with an online version viewable on the main *OED* website (http://www.oed.com). It was nothing short of a breakthrough in the historical study of English. I had been waiting for such a work for almost the whole of my linguistic life. I was in the audience at the Philological Society in 1965 when its originator, Michael Samuels, made public his proposal. His ambitious plan – to chart the semantic development of the entire language over a thousand years – was received with a mixture of incredulity and anticipation. Not only would it be the first historical thesaurus for any language, it would be dealing with a language whose vocabulary was known to be especially large. Expectation grew as articles and books began to be published on aspects of its content, and when it appeared, over 40 years later, it was widely acclaimed by readers for its breadth and depth of coverage. Since then, historians, linguists, philologists, and language enthusiasts in general have been working out the best ways of exploring and exploiting this unique resource. *Words in Time and Place* is an introduction to its treasures. My aim is to illustrate the way the *HTOED* is organized, to show the synergy between the thesaurus and its lexicographical parent, and to explore some of the linguistic and social insights that emerge from this interaction.

Thesaurus vs dictionary

The title *HTOED* contains two terms, *thesaurus* and *dictionary*, that are not usually seen in such a close relationship, as they deal with the study of vocabulary from opposite points of view. We use a dictionary when we encounter a word and want to find out its meaning (or some other aspect of its use). We use a thesaurus when we encounter a meaning and want to find out the words that best express it. Bringing the two approaches together always presents a challenge.

The traditional approach is that of the dictionary. Here the words are organized alphabetically, a principle first made explicit in the history of English by Robert Cawdrey in his *Table Alphabeticall* (1604), who finds it

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necessary to tell his readers how to use his book (I have modernized his spelling):

> If thou be desirous (gentle Reader) rightly and readily to understand, and to profit by this Table, and such like, then thou must learn the Alphabet, to wit, the order of the Letters as they stand, perfectly without book, and where every Letter standeth: as (b) near the beginning, (n) about the middest, and (t) toward the end. Now if the word, which thou art desirous to find, begin with (a) then look in the beginning of this Table, but if with (v) look towards the end. Again, if thy word begin with (ca) look in the beginning of the letter (c) but if with (cu) then look toward the end of that letter. And so of all the rest.

The alphabetical principle is an enormous convenience (once one has learned to spell), but it is a semantic irrelevance. Words which belong together are separated: *aunt* under A, *uncle* under U. We do not learn words in alphabetical order, either as children or adults. Rather, we learn them in a meaningful relation to each other as we develop our understanding of areas of experience. From the earliest years, vocabulary is presented to children thematically: they learn to distinguish *aunts* from *uncles*, *cats* from *dogs*, and *hot taps* from *cold taps*. In short, they learn the way the world is organized, lexically, into semantic fields.

The thesaurus – a genre that actually pre-dates alphabetical dictionaries – solved this problem. Roget's *Thesaurus* of 1852 is probably the best-known exemplar, and its full title summarizes its purpose: 'Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases Classified and Arranged so as to Facilitate the Expression of Ideas and Assist in Literary Composition'. There had been books of synonyms before Roget, organized alphabetically, like a dictionary. What Roget did was group these thematically, and organize his themes into a hierarchy that covered all areas of meaning. An index at the back of the book lists all the words in alphabetical order, so that a user can find the places in the thesaurus where they appear. But there are no definitions. A thesaurus assumes that you know what the words mean – or, if you do not, that you will look them up in a dictionary.

We might think that the ideal lexical product would be to combine the strengths of a dictionary with those of a thesaurus into a single book, but it takes only a moment's reflection to see how impossibly large and unwieldy such a conflation would be. *Words in Time and Place* illustrates the point on the smallest of scales. It contains only 1,240 entries representing just fifteen semantic fields, but even with minimal definition and illustration we are still dealing with over 90,000 words. Online solutions are more practicable, as we see with the *OED* website, where it is possible to display a semantic field from the thesaurus and link directly

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to the associated entries in the dictionary. It is this combinatorial approach which provides the most illuminating results, and which the present book illustrates.

Why time *and* place?

A thesaurus brings together all the words and phrases that belong to a particular semantic field. But how do we choose which item to use? If the English language gives us over a hundred synonymous expressions in a particular field, as we see illustrated in several chapters of this book, how do we decide which one is appropriate for the meaning we have in mind? Or, if we are faced with someone else's use of vocabulary, how do we establish the factors which explain why that person chooses one word rather than another?

The *Historical* element in the *HTOED* provides one answer: we need first to establish *when* the item appears. Words and meanings change over time, so it is crucial to know what period we are dealing with before we are able to interpret someone's lexical use. This is the challenge facing all writers of historical fiction: they need to put words into their characters' mouths that suit the time in which they lived. It would be singularly inappropriate to have eighteenth-century characters using twentieth-century slang. And one of the commonest criticisms of historical films comes from the failure of the writers to carry out the required chronological checks. For example, in Episode 5 of the television series *Downton Abbey*, Thomas the footman says 'our lot always get shafted' (meaning 'treated unfairly') – a usage that is attested only from the 1950s, and certainly not contemporary to the time when the series was set, the 1910s. The *HTOED* helps prevent such lexical anachronisms.

But a historical perspective is not enough, for in any one period there are still choices to be made. We know from present-day experience that our ability to select an appropriate word depends on our awareness of such factors as *where* the word is used – by which sections of society, on which social occasions, in which part of the country or of the English-speaking world. In modern English, we know that some words have a regional dialect background (American, British, Australian, Scottish…), some are stylistically distinctive (technical, formal, colloquial, slang…), and some are simply idiosyncratic, being used by an individual speaker or writer for special effect (often, on just a single occasion). It was ever thus. It may be more difficult to establish what these nuances are in older vocabulary, but one thing we can be sure of: they will definitely have been there. The citations collected by the *OED* over the years provide the best means I know to establish the historical contexts of use that give us a sense of a word's place in the society of the time.

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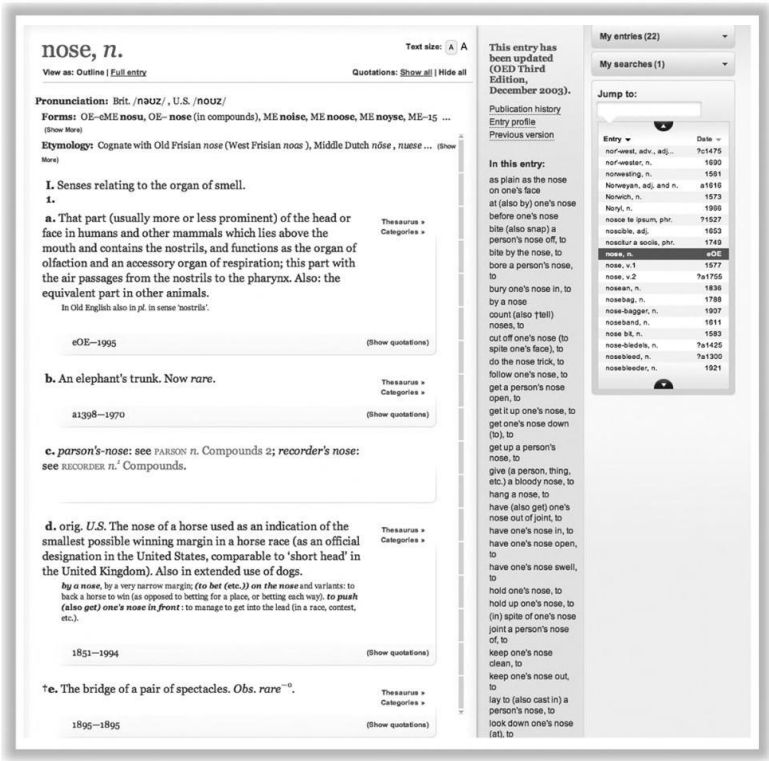

The opening of the online entry for *nose* (*n.*) in the *OED*, showing sense 1 and its subdivisions in outline mode. To see the lists of supporting quotations one clicks on *Quotations: Show all* at the top of the entry. The alphabetical character of the organization is evident in the listings on the right, showing related words in the *nose* entry and the location of *nose* in relation to the dictionary as a whole. To see the corresponding *HTOED* treatment, one clicks on the *Thesaurus* button to the right of the definition.

Words in Time and Place illustrates this double perspective for the set of semantic fields it contains. The coverage within a field is chronological, reflecting the way the items in the chosen field are organized in the thesaurus; but the treatment is lexicographic, reflecting the way these items are handled in the dictionary, and I rely on the unabridged *OED* for the definitions.

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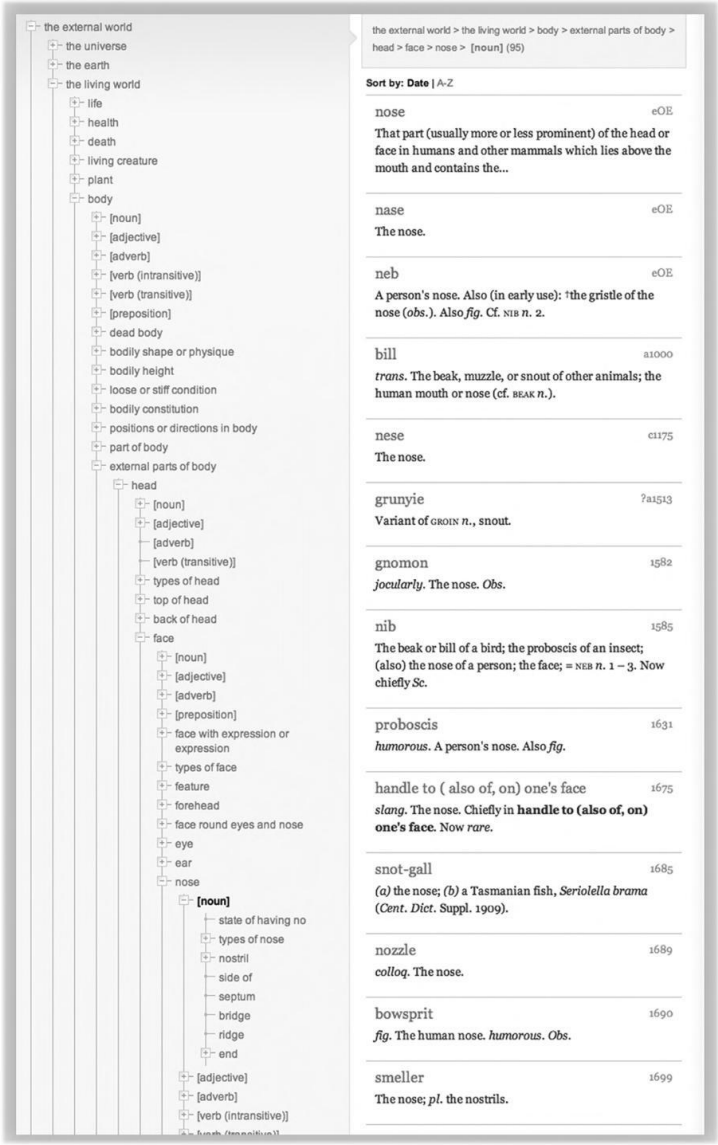

The opening of the entry for *nose* in the *HTOED* – the source of the timeline in Chapter 2 of this book. On the left one sees the path through the thesaurus taxonomy, summarized in Wordmap 2 (see Chapter 2): the initial heading (the external world) > the living world > body > external parts of body > head > face > nose > noun. Clicking on an item in red takes one immediately to the corresponding entry in the *OED*. The number of items in the category is shown at the top of the right-hand column (95). These totals will not always correspond exactly to the number of items in the corresponding chapter of this book, as I have conflated words with closely related forms, and sometimes added words from adjoining categories, as explained in the General Introduction and the Introductions to Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

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Which semantic fields?

So, faced with the vast amount of data contained in both the *HTOED* and *OED*, how does one make a selection from the thousands of semantic fields to illustrate the explanatory power of a historical thesaurus? I used several criteria in choosing the fifteen fields presented in this book, bearing in mind that the primary aim is to convey the content of the *HTOED* in such a way that readers can see how it works and how best it can be used.

My first criterion was to ensure that the choice of fields would reflect the general balance of those found in the thesaurus. At the topmost level of the *HTOED* classification, we see the whole of experience divided into three categories: 'The External World', 'Mind' (in the print edition, 'The Mental World'), and 'Society' (in the print edition, 'The Social World'). In the print edition, 905 pages are devoted to the first of these (51%), 302 pages to the second (17%), and 560 pages to the third (32%). I have therefore reflected this ratio by choosing seven, three, and five fields respectively.

My second criterion was pragmatic. The English language is now a global phenomenon, and reflects a wide range of settings, each of which has vocabulary that expresses local identity. The distinctiveness is not so much regional (though this is one of the most rapidly growing areas of the lexicon) as technological and cultural. Fields such as fauna and flora, science, education, religion, and the arts are lexically prolific, and tend very quickly to break down into sub-fields that are specialized in character, with the words requiring a great deal of semantic explanation before it becomes possible to appreciate the way they relate to each other. Chemistry and Catholicism need a thesaural treatment just as much as any other subject, but their arcane terminology would present a barrier if used in an introduction for the general reader. For this book I have chosen themes which are part of everyday life, wherever one might live in the world: (in the order in which they appear) death, parts of the body, drink, food, hygiene, mental capacity, love, language, travel, morality, money, weather, age, pop music, and space exploration (both fictional and factual).

My third criterion was linguistic: to represent the types of word-class (part of speech) and word-formation found in English. The *HTOED* routinely distinguishes words that are nouns, verbs, adjectives, and so on, and as nouns always form the bulk of a semantic classification, that grammatical bias is reflected here, in eleven of my fifteen chapters. The remaining four show a verb (Chapter 1: Dying), two adjectives (Chapter 3: Drunk and Chapter 12: Calm and stormy weather), and an interjection

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(Chapter 8: Oaths). In relation to word-formation, it seemed sensible to choose semantic fields that illustrate the range of possibilities in English. There are some semantic fields where little of lexical interest happens: under the heading of 'town', for example, there are long lists of nouns (*twin town*, *county town*, *port town*, *fishing town*, *mining town*, and so on) where all one can do is note the real-world diversity. By contrast, the fields I have chosen for the present book represent most of the ways in which words are created in English.

Fourth, I have selected fields which show how the *HTOED* taxonomy operates. Most of the chapters (1: Dying, 2: Nose, 3: Drunk, 6: Fool, 7: Endearment, 10: Prostitute, 11: Money) show single semantic categories of varying constituency (ranging from the 33 entries in Chapter 2 to the 151 entries in Chapter 3). Chapter 4: Meal and Chapter 5: Privy illustrate a field where there is a main category and one subcategory. Chapter 8: Oaths, Chapter 14: Pop Music, and Chapter 15: Spacecraft illustrate a category that has several subcategories. Chapter 9: Inns illustrates two vertically related categories; Chapter 12: Weather illustrates two horizontally related categories (opposites); and Chapter 13: Old Person a combination of vertical and horizontal categories.

At the end of each chapter I have devised a Wordmap showing how the chosen category or categories relate to other categories in the online thesaurus taxonomy. Categories comprising the focus of the chapter are shown in boldface. Above this focal item is shown the path that relates it, through various superordinate categories, to one of the three major divisions of the *HTOED*. Below it are shown any subcategories. To its sides are shown the categories operating at the same level of classification. Users of the print edition should note that there are some minor differences in headings between online and print versions of the taxonomy. My Wordmaps do not display the numerical codes used for navigation in the print edition.

It is very important to appreciate that the range of items included in an *HTOED* category – and thus, the ones dealt with in my chapters – is totally dependent on the application of the taxonomy. In this respect, we need to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a universal taxonomy. Taxonomies always reflect the mindset of their devisers, as the comparison of any two quickly illustrates. The taxonomy found in the Dewey decimal classification system, for example, widely used in libraries, differs in many ways from that used in the *HTOED*. Dewey's 'top ten' categories (general works, philosophy, religion, social sciences, language, pure science, technology, the arts, literature, history) very much reflect the interests of its author. And as one looks at lower-level categories, differences multiply. To take just one example: in Dewey, Central America is

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listed as part of North America; in *HTOED* it is grouped along with South America.

What this means is that users of a thesaurus must always be prepared to look upwards, downwards, and sideways when exploring a semantic field. There are several cases in this book where I noted the omission of an expected word only to find it in an associated category. I discuss problems of this kind in the introductions to Chapter 5: Privy and Chapter 6: Fool. In a few cases, it is helpful to 'borrow' a word from an adjacent field to act as a source for later coinages. For example, in Chapter 3: Drunk, we find *bene-bowsie* (1637) and *boozed* (1850), which are clearly part of a semantic thread that should lead us back to *bousie* (1529) – but this last item is found not in the category I am expounding ('Drunk'), but in a co-ordinate category ('Affected by drink'). The moral is plain: read (or at least, skim) through the whole of a semantic field before deciding to focus on a part of it.

Another point to note is that, in a thesaurus, words may appear in more than one semantic category – a point not immediately obvious in the present book, where I have chosen single categories for illustration. For example, *lunch* is listed in the 'Light meal' category in Chapter 4, but in *HTOED* it is also found in a category reflecting its modern usage, 'Midday meal/lunch'. In the printed book, the comprehensive index to the *HTOED* is the place to go to find out which categories include a particular item. Online, clicking on the Thesaurus button attached to a sense will take you directly to the related locations.

Coverage and treatment

Having chosen a semantic field, I expected that the question of coverage would be decided for me: I would simply include in this book every item in the relevant *HTOED* list. In practice, there is a difficulty due to the ongoing revision process of the *OED*. The point is often missed by the general reader, who tends to think of a dictionary as a fixed and unchanging resource. In fact, all dictionaries need to be kept up to date, as new words enter the language, old words die out, and new discoveries are made about existing words. Traditionally, this was never a great problem, as new editions of dictionaries would appear only at intervals. But with online lexicography, everything has changed. As research continues, the latest findings are uploaded to the online *OED* every three months (latest revision dates are now carefully recorded at the website). This means that there is inevitably an increasing gap between the presentation of the lexicon in the last paper printing and what will be seen online. The *HTOED* was published in book form in 2009, so its electronic incarnation now differs in many small ways from what can be read there. Those who wish to

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relate my listings to those found in the book will therefore note several differences, as I followed the online version whenever I encountered a discrepancy.

The same point applies to treatment. Because of the intimate relationship between the *HTOED* and the *OED*, I took pains to use the definitions of the latter and to relate usage to the citations listed there. All the dates in *Words in Time and Place* reflect what is known about a word, in our current state of knowledge. I frequently talk about 'a first *OED* citation' or 'a single *OED* citation', in my entries. Always, this means: as far as we now know (i.e. in 2014). One of the most exciting things about the Internet is that it is allowing lexicographers to search for words in texts that previously have never been explored from their point of view. The gaps left by the first *OED* editors, with their limited human resources, are slowly being filled. The present editorial team is steadily working through the whole dictionary, but of course it will be many years before that task is completed. As I write, roughly a third of the entire work has been fully revised – and even the revised entries are often updated as new material arrives. Any 'first recorded usage' is thus subject to change, and by the time *Words in Time and Place* appears it will inevitably be a little out of date in this respect. Similarly, a word considered obsolete (marked by †) might easily be reborn, if someone decides to use it and the usage catches on. None of this is a reason to withhold publication, of course, for there is never a terminus when it comes to dictionary revision. The notion that a dictionary will one day be fully revised is a chimera. But it is wise to remember these methodological caveats whenever we cite a 'fact' from a historical dictionary.

A noticeable example of the way different periods of *OED* history are conflated online is in the treatment of the earliest period of the language. The *OED* included only those words in Old English that continued to be used in the language after 1150. By contrast, the *HTOED* included the entire vocabulary of Old English as recorded in *A Thesaurus of Old English*. The date-display also varies: earlier editions of the *OED* gave year-dates for occurrence (insofar as these could be established, and often qualifying them by a *circa* ('around') convention); whereas the *HTOED* labels all items in Old English as 'OE', giving no year-dates at all. The latest edition of the *OED* is in transition between the two systems, now further distinguishing early ('eOE') and late ('lOE') stages. My listings reflect the current trend, with all Anglo-Saxon citations showing simply as 'OE'.

A timeline organizes the entries within each chapter; but chronological listing can obscure linguistic relationships. After its first recorded use, a word can reappear, with only a slight modification, decades or centuries later; or it can be the trigger for a set of closely related compounds. It

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makes sense, in these circumstances, to cluster the related words within a single entry. For example, in Chapter 7: Endearment, I have placed in the entry on *honey* (1375) all later *honey*-related words, whose dates of first recorded use range from 1405 to 1978. They do not, therefore, appear in the timeline in their chronological place; but they are all, of course, listed separately in the Word Index.

I have departed from *OED* practice in just one respect: in citations from old periods of the language, I often modernize the spelling and punctuation to make the text easy to assimilate for those who are unused to reading early orthographic conventions. I don't do this when the example needs the original form to make its point (such as when recording Scots dialect expressions), or where a respelling would detract from the expressive impact of the text. But in cases where little is lost (such as in quotations from Shakespeare), I have gone down the modern route. Readers who want to see a citation in its original orthography can of course easily find it in the relevant online *OED* entry.

Although my treatment of individual entries relies on the *OED*, it is not restricted to it. In particular, I frequently refer to regional usage as recorded in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* and to the fuller account of colloquial usage found in Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* – works listed in the 'Further reading and sources'. Whenever I have used an *OED* citation I have added some literary or cultural background so that the example can be fully understood – for example, saying who the speaker is in a quotation from a play. And in my introductions to individual chapters, I have summarized the salient features of the semantic field from both a linguistic and (where relevant) a sociolinguistic or cultural point of view. One of the main functions of the *HTOED* is to provide a window onto the social and cultural history of English-speaking peoples. *Words in Time and Place* also provides a window – into what the *HTOED* has to offer – as well as acting as a homage to one of the most significant lexicological projects ever.

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1

From *swelt* to *zonk*

WORDS FOR DYING

A remarkable creativity surrounds the vocabulary of death. The words and expressions range from the solemn and dignified to the jocular and mischievous. And there is no better example of the latter than the 'parrot' sketch in the BBC television series, *Monty Python*. A customer returns to a pet-shop where he had earlier bought a supposedly living parrot. The owner refuses to accept that the bird is dead, and the confrontation leads to a glorious outburst of deathy lexicon (quoted here without the accents of the characters shown in the spelling):

Customer: He's bleeding demised!
Owner: No no! He's pining!
Customer: He's not pining! He's passed on! This parrot is no more! He has ceased to be! He's expired and gone to meet his maker! He's a stiff! Bereft of life, he rests in peace! If you hadn't nailed him to the perch he'd be pushing up the daisies! His metabolic processes are now history! He's off the twig! He's kicked the bucket! He's shuffled off his mortal coil, run down the curtain, and joined the bleeding choir invisible! This is an ex-parrot!!

This profusion of defunctive synonymy is not solely a modern phenomenon. An Anglo-Saxon equivalent to the *Monty Python* scriptwriters would have had over 40 expressions in Old English to choose from. His customer could have described his parrot as gone (*gegan*), departed (*leoran*), fallen (*gefeallan*), died away (*acwelan*), parted from life (*linnan ealdre*), gone on a journey (*geferan*), totally died off (*becwelan*), with its spirit sent forth (*gast onsendan*), completely scattered (*tostencan*), or glided away (*glidan*). We can't be sure about the nuances of meaning differentiating all of

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the verbs, but it's plain that the Anglo-Saxons were as concerned about finding different ways to talk about death as we are today.

There's a world of difference, though, between the tone of those Anglo-Saxon expressions and those often encountered now, and this is reflected in the opening entries of the intransitive verbs for 'die'. The early verbs are rather mundane and literal notions of 'leaving', such as *wend*, *go out of this world*, *fare*, *leave*, and *part*. Only later do we get a sense of where one is going to, with an initial focus on ancestors evolving into the notion of a divine presence: *be gathered to one's fathers*, *go over to the majority*, *go home*, *pass to one's reward*, *launch into eternity*, *go to glory*, *meet one's Maker*, *get one's call*.

The list displays a remarkable inventiveness, as people struggle to find fresh forms of expression. The language of death is inevitably euphemistic, but few of the verbs or idioms shown here are elaborate or opaque. In fact the history of verbs for dying displays a remarkable simplicity: 86 of the 121 entries (over 70%) consist of only one syllable, and monosyllables figure largely in the multi-word entries (such as *pay one's debt to nature*). Only sixteen verbs are disyllabic, and only three are trisyllabic (*determine*, *disperish*, *miscarry*), loanwords from French, and along with *expire*, *trespass*, and *decease* showing the arrival of a more scholarly vocabulary in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Even the euphemisms of later centuries have a markedly monosyllabic character (such as *slip one's cable*, *kick the bucket*, *meet one's Maker*).

Influences

Words for death in all the semantic and grammatical categories represented in *HTOED* are numerous (over 1100), as people search for ways of renewing their stock of apt metaphors, and they display a variety of sources. The Bible is one influence on the list below, as seen in Wycliffe's *disperish*, Tyndale's *depart*, Coverdale's *die the death*, and the King James Bible's *give up the ghost* and *the silver cord is loosed*. Classical texts are another: Greek mythology is the source of *take the ferry*; Latin, the source of *pay one's debt to nature* and *go over to the majority*. Shipping provides *slip one's cable*; the livestock industry, *kick the bucket*; pastimes, *peg out* and *cash in one's checks*; mining, *go up the flume*; finance, *hand in one's accounts*. Wartime produces a wide range of slang expressions (e.g. *pack up*, *cop it*, *conk*, *stop one*, *buy it*) as well as more solemn idioms (e.g. *shed one's blood*, *fall a victim*). Regional variation is very limited, but we do see some Australianisms in the list (*pass in*, *go bung*), and some words are clearly favoured in certain parts of the English-speaking world (e.g. *succumb* in India).

Another reason for the length of the list is that a large number of coinages are known from just a single citation. People seem to be quite discerning,

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when it comes to judging the acceptable terminology of death, and several innovations simply never catch on. Some periods were clearly more inventive than others, reflecting times of major English lexical expansion, notably the end of the sixteenth century (e.g. *relent*, *unbreathe*, *transpass*, *lose one's breath*) and the euphemism-conscious nineteenth century, where a fifth of the items in the list appear for the first time (e.g. *stiffen*, *drop short*, *step out*, *walk*, *knock over*). A significant strand also originates in individual authors and texts, such as Gower (*shut*), Cursor Mundi (*flee*), Thomas More (*galp*), Shakespeare (*shuffle off*), and Pope (*vent*).

There is a great deal of stylistic variation. We see class division operating: at one extreme, upper-class slang (e.g. *walk* and *pip*); at the other, the language of the underworld (e.g. *croak*, *kiss off*, *perch*). There are signs of journalese (e.g. *succumb*), because finding an appropriate way to report a death is a perpetual challenge. Formality and solemnity contrast with colloquialism and slang: *yield the ghost*, *expire*, and *pass away* vs *go off the hooks*, *kick the bucket*, and *zonk*. Some constructions evidently have permanent appeal because of their succinct and enigmatic character, such as the popularity of '– it' (whatever the 'it' is): *snuff it*, *peg it*, *buy it*, *cop it*, *off it*, *crease it*, *have had it*. It's possible to see changes in fashion, such as the vogue for colloquial usages in *off* in the middle of the eighteenth century (*move off*, *pop off*, *pack off*, *hop off*). And styles change: we no longer feel that *pass out* would be appropriate on a tombstone.

But some things don't change. *Pass away* has been with us since the fourteenth century. And, in a usage that dates back to the twelfth, we still do say that people, simply, *died*.

Timeline

swelt/ forswelt † OE	King Alfred is the first recorded user of these two verbs meaning 'die, perish', with the prefix adding a nuance of 'off' or 'away'; *forswelt* passed away in early Middle English, as did other prefixed forms, such as *aswelt* and *to-swelt*, but *swelt* survived; Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* shows widespread use at the end of the nineteenth century from Scotland to Sussex; in standard English, still remembered in *sweltering* – said of weather that is so hot it could kill you.
give up the ghost OE	This is *ghost* in the sense of 'soul' or 'spirit'; first used as *give the ghost*, later *give away the ghost* and *yield up the ghost*, with a pronoun often replacing *the* (as in *gave up his ghost*); the *up* usage is first recorded in late Middle English, and became the norm after its repeated use in the King James Bible.

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dead † OE	*To dead* is totally ungrammatical today, but in its sense of 'become dead' it is in the Lindisfarne Gospels, and continued until at least the fifteenth century, sometimes with a prefix (*adead*). Chaucer talks about the body being *deaded* – a usage heard today only among young children struggling with irregular verbs.
i-wite † OE	*Witan* in Old English meant 'see'. With the prefix *ge-* or *i-* it developed the sense of 'look in a certain direction before taking that direction' – so, to 'set out' or 'depart', and thus to 'pass away'. The hermit Layamon used it in his chronicle of Britain (*c.*1200), and there are examples without the prefix until the sixteenth century.
wend OE	Now only used poetically, or in the expression *wend one's way*, but in Middle English a very common verb, with a wide range of meanings to do with movement, including *wend from life*, *wend out of this world*, *wend into heaven*, and *wend to death*.
forworth † OE	Literally 'become away', used in Old English and until the fourteenth century in the sense of 'perish'; *worth* also appears in *to-worth*, literally 'come to nought', used by Layamon in his thirteenth-century chronicle.
go out of this world OE	*World* has been used with a wide range of verbs (such as *depart*, *leave*, *wend*, *pass from*) since Old English to describe the notion of going from one state of being to another. Probably often shortened to *go out*, though examples are only attested from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It remains a popular euphemism.
quele † OE	The French *qu* spelling replaced an earlier *cw*. In its sense of 'die', it is recorded from Old English until the end of the fourteenth century, often with a prefix, as in *becwelan*. Related meanings appear in *quail* and *quell*.
starve OE	Today, of course, it typically means 'be very hungry'; but the notion of 'starving to death' captures the original use of *starve*, which meant simply 'die'. Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* (*c.*1374) has Christ 'first starf, and ros' – he died and rose again. Regional usage (starving from the cold, as well as from hunger) has kept the sense going into modern times in several British and US dialects.
die *c.*1135	The default term for 'cease to live'. Old English records several verbs for dying, but *die* is not one of them. It could have emerged out of a local English dialect, not recorded in writing, or perhaps it arrived as a borrowing from Old Norse.

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fare † *c.*1175	The basic meaning of 'journey, travel' was common in Old English, and by the twelfth century had developed the sense of 'journey from life'. The idea of 'moving away' could be emphasized by prefixes, as in *forthfare* and *forfere*. None of these usages outlived Middle English.
end † *c.*1200	'Farewell, friends: thus Thisbe ends', says Flute as Thisbe in the play performed at the end of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*c.*1595, 5.1.338). The usage is recorded until the late nineteenth century, when *end up* began to replace it, and later, *end up dead*. Don't leave hospital against the doctor's wishes, says an online health site, with the header: 'Stay in that bed, or end up dead'.
let † *c.*1200	The original sense of *let*, meaning 'leave', naturally developed a meaning of 'leave life behind', in such phrases as *let one's life*. The chronicler Holinshed (1587) talks of someone making his will and testament 'not long before he let his life'. *Lose one's life*, also recorded from around this time, became the standard expression.
shed (one's own) blood *c.*1200	One of the earliest of the vivid substitutes for *die*, when someone has undergone a violent death for a cause. Christ is often described as 'shedding his blood for mankind'. The expression becomes more elaborate over time, as when people say they are prepared to 'shed the last drop of their blood'.
yield (up) the ghost *c.*1290	*Yield* developed a sense of 'surrender, give up' in the thirteenth century, and became a popular alternative to the earlier *give up* expression, coming to be used with other nouns, such as *soul*, *breath*, *life*, and *spirit*; Jesus 'yielded up his spirit' in several present-day Bible translations.
take the way of death † 1297	The use of *way* to mean a specific direction of travel led to this expression; the Porter in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606, 2.3.18) produces a more flowery alternative, as he describes the professions 'that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire'.
die up † *c.*1300	An early way of saying that a group of people or animals died, perhaps because of hunger or disease, *up* adding the sense of 'entirely', as in *eat up*. The husbandmen 'died up with the famine and pestilence', says a sixteenth-century source. *Die off* and *die out* were later replacements.
fall *c.*1300	A natural extension of the everyday meaning of this verb in the context of sudden death, where one 'falls (down) dead', especially as a result of violence. It is still used as a solemn way of referring to death in wartime: 'those who have fallen in battle'.

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fine † *c.*1300	When the Old French word for 'to end, finish' (*finer*, modern *finir*) came into English, it was almost immediately applied to dying: 'Now that I've found what I had lost', says the author of the medieval poem, *Pearl* (*c.*1400, line 328) 'Schal I efte forgo hit er ever I fyne?' – 'Shall I lose it again before ever I die?'
leave † *c.*1300	'To leave one's life' was quite a common expression in Middle and early Modern English: 'Sexburga . . . left her life at the door of Milton church', says a sixteenth-century source.
spill † *c.*1300	*Spillan* meant 'to kill' in Old English (the modern sense of 'flowing over an edge' is much later, seventeenth century), and a weaker sense of 'perish' was often used in Middle English. In the fourteenth-century *Romance of William of Palerne* (line 1535), Melior begs the ill William to speak to her quickly 'or i spille sone' – 'or I shall die straightway'.
tine *c.*1300	An Old Norse word meaning 'lose', which later developed the sense of 'perish'; can still be heard in this sense in the Shetland Isles and parts of eastern Scotland. The idiom *tine the sweat* – 'lose life-blood' – is also recorded in the fourteenth century.
leese one's life-days † *c.*1325	*Leese* is an early form of *lose* (also related to *lease*, *less*, and *loose*), and *life-days* was a popular and succinct way of talking about 'all the days of one's life'. The combination of the two to mean 'die' was a natural outcome, though few instances have been recorded. *End one's days*, recorded first in 1533, proved to be the long-term usage.
part *c.*1330	In Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1599, 2.3.12), Mistress Quickly reports Falstaff's death: 'a parted e'en just between twelve and one'. The verb was often complemented by *from this life*, *hence*, *in peace*, or suchlike, and is still used in this way, especially in formal obituaries.
flit † *c.*1340	Today, *flit* has developed the sense of light and rapid movement, often secretive: butterflies flit, as do people who want to avoid paying for something. The medieval use was far more serious, emphasizing a change in state, including the change from life to death. 'When a man fra this world sal [shall] flitte', writes the fourteenth-century hermit Richard Rolle. Nobody would use it today in relation to dying.
trance † 1340	Today we know this word as a noun, associated with hypnotism; but it came originally from French *transir* 'pass away' – literally (from Latin) to 'go across'. Few examples have been recorded.

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pass 1340	An important verb of death, which gave rise to many later phrases. 'Vex not his ghost, O let him pass', says Kent of the dead king at the end of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (*c.*1608, 5.3.312). Today, the noun *passing* is globally used, but to say that someone has *passed* is common chiefly in North America. It has also become a favoured usage by spiritualists, along with *pass over* (first recorded use 1897), *pass to the other side*, and other such expressions.
determine † *c.*1374	The original meaning was 'come to an end' or 'cease to exist', so an extension to the end of life was very natural. Chaucer has Troilus telling Pandarus he would 'rather deye . . . and determyne . . . in prisoun' than lie to him – 'end his days in a prison' (*Troilus and Criseyde*, *c.*1374, 3.379).
disperish † *c.*1382	The word is known (also spelled *dispersh*) only in Wycliffe's early translation of the Bible, as in Judith (6: 3): 'All Israel with thee shall dispershen' – 'perish utterly'.
be gathered to one's fathers † 1382	One of the earliest idioms capturing the idea of being buried with one's ancestors, made popular by the use of *gather* in Bible translations, starting with Wycliffe. In later usage one could also be gathered *to one's people* or *to the saints*.
miscarry *c.*1387	If you miscarried, in earlier English, you came to some sort of harm, which at its worst could mean death. The fatal sense has carried over into modern English only in relation to babies within the womb.
go 1390	This unpretentious replacement for 'die' is one of the most common colloquial expressions used when observing a death ('she's gone'), and has achieved proverbial status ('Here today and gone tomorrow'). But it also introduces many other expressions, some religious in origin (e.g. *go the way of all flesh*, *go to glory*, *go to a better world*), some jocular (e.g. *go aloft*, *go west*).
shut † 1390	In *Confessio Amantis*, by poet John Gower, there is a single recorded instance of *shut* meaning 'close one's life': Pope Nicholas 'Hath schet as to the worldes ye' (2.2808) – 'shut to mortal eyes'.
expire *c.*1400	A French word (*expirer*) ultimately from Latin, meaning 'breathe out', and soon adapted to mean 'breathe one's last'. Printer William Caxton used it several times in his translations. A somewhat affected usage in modern times, the TV comedy series *Monty Python* gave it a new lease of life as one of the verbs describing a dead parrot: 'He's expired and gone to meet his maker!'

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flee † *c.*1400	A single recorded instance, in the religious poem *Cursor Mundi* (translation: 'How shall we live when you will flee?') illustrates the sense of 'depart this life'. It never became popular, probably because people shied away from the sense of haste involved in other uses of the word.
pass away *c.*1400	The most popular of all the euphemisms for 'die', beloved of undertakers. In its earliest use, people talked about the 'life' or the 'soul' passing away. Today it is the named person. Related phrases, such as *go away*, never caught on.
seek out of life † *c.*1400	A rare use of seek to mean 'go in a particular direction', used in the alliterative poem *The Destruction of Troy*, when King Remys kills one of the Greeks: 'that he seyt [sank] to the soil, & sought out of life'. It's an unusual construction, probably prompted by the need to find a word beginning with *s* to complete the alliterative pattern.
sye † *c.*1400	Old English *sigen*, meaning 'sink, fall', developed a general sense of 'go, proceed', and turns up briefly in Middle English in the expressions *sye of life* ('depart from life') and *sye hethen* ('go hence') – the latter in the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Gawain prays that his soul should be saved 'when he schuld [should] seye heþen' (line 1879).
trespass † *c.*1400	A strange, rare usage – a borrowing from French *trespasser* 'to pass beyond' (the origin of modern French *trépasser*, 'pass away'), occurring also in the form *trepass*. In a sixteenth-century translation of a French chronicle, people are said to have 'trepassed', or to have 'trepassed out of this uncertain world' and 'trepassed this life'.
decease 1439	In earlier centuries, such usages as *The king deceased at his palace*, *If she deceases of the plague*, and *He deceased this world* were commonplace, but today we rarely use the word as a verb. Rather, we encounter *deceased* as a noun (*the deceased*) or an adjective (*her deceased husband*, *he's deceased*), invariably in official and legal settings.
ungo † *c.*1450	This intriguingly simple construction has a single recorded instance, in a religious anthology: 'They schalle se heuyn ungo' – 'they shall see heaven not go', that is, 'pass away' or 'perish'. It deserved a longer life.
have the death † 1488	Today, people *meet* their death; in the fifteenth century they could *have* or *take the death*, or even *catch* it. This last is still heard in colloquial speech: 'If you go out without a coat you'll catch your death (of cold)!'

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vade † 1495	A variant form of *fade*, found until the end of the seventeenth century, when it went out of use. Many notions could *vade* – flowers, grass, beauty, health – and life itself.
depart 1501	William Tyndale's translation of the Bible in 1526 popularized the use of *depart* alone to mean 'die': 'Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace'. People soon expanded it, as in *depart to God*. The later development of the verb, especially followed by *from* (as in *The train will depart from platform 1*), led to the form which is the modern expression: *depart* (*from*) *this life*.
pay one's debt to nature *c.*1513	The notion of life as a loan from 'nature' which has to be repaid was known in the Middle Ages but came to its full flower of expression during the sixteenth-century classical revival in a variety of forms: *pay the debt of nature*, *pay nature's debt*. The source lies in classical Latin. An index in one of the works of the Roman biographer Cornelius Nepos (first century BC) contains *debitum naturae reddere*, glossed simply as *mori* ('die'). A century later, the idiom took a new direction: *pay nature her due*.
galp † 1529	There is just one recorded instance (by St Thomas More) of *galp up the ghost* – a word which seems to relate to *gape* and *gawp*. The notion of having your mouth open led to a sense of 'vomit forth', and thus this vivid (but rather surprising) figure of speech for having your spirit leave you.
go west *c.*1532	Today, when things have 'gone west' we usually mean they've come to grief in some way; but the idiom was widespread during the First World War in the sense of 'died'. Why 'west'? Probably because it was the place of the setting sun, and in Celtic tradition the abode of the dead. And the nineteenth-century US usage ('Go west, young man') may have contributed to its popularity, given the association with the pioneering unknown.
pick over the perch † 1532	The origin is obscure, but presumably has something to do with the sight of a pet bird dead on the floor of its cage, having fallen from its perch. *Pick* (meaning 'fall') is the earliest expression, but usage must have been uncertain, for we find it alternating with the phonetically similar *peck* and *peak*. Over the next 200 years, a range of other verbs came to be used: one could *hop*, *drop off*, *pitch over*, and *tip over the perch*, and at least one of these is still heard today. In the *Daily Mail* in 1995 we read 'So many of my old contemporaries have been dropping off the perch recently.'

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die the death 1535	The apparently tautologous expression appears first in Coverdale's Bible, and is picked up by many writers, including Shakespeare: in the opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*c.*1595, 1.1.65), Hermia is told she must 'die the death' or enter a nunnery if she does not do her father's bidding. Dr Johnson concluded it was 'a solemn phrase for death inflicted by law'.
change one's life † 1546	The expression never caught on: only one *OED* citation has so far been recorded.
jet † 1546	Another rare usage: a single *OED* citation, from a husband and wife rhyming dialogue in a collection of proverbial expressions by John Heywood (Part 2, ch. 4). 'God forbid, wife, ye shall first jet'. 'I will not jet yet', she replies. The sense derives from *jet* meaning 'go, walk, stroll'.
play tapple up tail † 1573	*Play* or *turn topple-tail* is an early version of *turn topsy-turvy* or *turn a somersault* – an expression that seems to have been used colloquially to mean 'die'. We see a similar idea in *topple up one's heels* and later versions where the heels are *turned up*, *kicked up*, *laid up*, and *tipped up*. The nineteenth century adapted the notion: an 1860 source talks about people who 'turned their toes up'.
inlaik † 1575	*Laik* is a Scottish form of *lack*, and *inlaik* (also spelled *enlaik*) was used until the nineteenth century to mean 'be wanting' or 'failing' – and thus 'failing through death'. 'I sall [shall] enlaike of my present disease', writes the Scots historian David Calderwood in the 1650s.
finish † 1578	A rare sixteenth-century usage, which never caught on – though there is an instance in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (*c.*1611, 5.5.36). Cornelius reports the death of the Queen, and how there were wet cheeks among the observers 'when she finished'.
relent † 1587	A single *OED* citation shows how the notion of finally yielding to a request (the most common sense today) prompted the application of this verb to the giving up of life. The writer talks about his father who 'must by sickness last relent'.
unbreathe † 1589	The widespread sixteenth-century practice of coining new verbs with the *un-* prefix is found in this rather pedestrian innovation. It has only one recorded usage to date.
transpass † 1592	A similar derivation to earlier *trespass*, from French *transpasser* 'to pass over'. A single poetic citation by Samuel Daniel shows its use in English to mean 'pass away'.

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lose one's breath 1596	*Lose* has always been used with a range of anatomical or physiological objects: one can lose one's heart, head, mind, nerve, sleep, voice, senses, life . . . – and, in a single sixteenth-century *OED* citation, breath. Today, if we *lose our breath*, we are simply having difficulty breathing. But when Bartholomew Griffin writes, in his sixth sonnet to Fidessa, 'Oh better were I loose ten thousand breath | Then ever live . . .' he is thinking of something much more serious.
go off 1605	Some of our friends 'must go off', says Seyward after the battle in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606, 5.6.75). The usage continued into the nineteenth century, but other senses of the verb, such as 'lose quality' and 'explode' have come to dominate modern usage, making a sense of 'pass away' less attractive.
make a die (of it) 1611	A slang phrase, sporadically recorded, and still occasionally heard in regional dialect. 'Your time just hadn't come to make a die of it', says a character in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *The Yearling* (1938).
fail † 1613	'Had the king in his last sickness failed', says Buckingham's surveyor in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII* (1613, 1.2.184). This usage died out as other senses of *fail* came to the fore, but it was still being used in some regional dialects, such as Cumbria, at the end of the nineteenth century.
go home 1618	The operative word is *home*, meaning 'a place which welcomes you after death'. The verb varies: *go* is common, but one can also be *called* or *brought* home, or simply (in an *OED* citation from the 1990s) *get* home.
drop 1654	To *drop*, and a few decades later, *drop off* (1699), meaning 'suddenly die' or 'fall down dead', has always carried a certain colloquial appeal. The association with the word *dead* can be traced back to the fifteenth century, but it was only in 1930s America that this emerged in its strongest form, as a strong expression of dislike or scorn: *drop dead!*
knock off † *c.*1657	The sense of 'leaving one's work behind' seems to have prompted this slang usage, found mainly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In one of Thomas Brown's letters, we read of 'perverse people . . . that would not knock off in any reasonable time, on purpose to spite their relations'. The transitive use remains in use: people are *knocked off*, especially in crime novels.
ghost † 1666	This abbreviated version of *give up the ghost* is known only from the seventeenth century, with two citations in the *OED* from the physician Gideon Harvey.

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go over to the majority † 1687	To *go over* was usually a political expression (to change one's party) or a religious term (to convert to Roman Catholicism), but here it seems to have been influenced by a Latin phrase, *abire ad plures*. *The majority* became a popular euphemism for 'the dead' during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One could also *join* and *pass over*, or simply *go* to the majority.
march off † 1693	An isolated seventeenth-century *OED* citation illustrates the use of this expression to mean 'die'. The military associations of the verb, along with its suggestion of being in total control (walking 'with regular and measured tread', says the *OED*'s opening sense) and the accompanying connotations of pride and display, must have combined to make people feel this was not an appropriate way to describe the process of dying.
bite the ground †/ sand †/dust 1697	By contrast, people liked the dramatic metaphor of falling down in death during battle and thus 'biting' *the ground* (as used by Dryden), *the sand* (by Pope, 1716), or (by Smollett, 1749, and later by innumerable American writers) *the dust*. There have been many figurative applications of the latter: politicians bite the dust when they lose an election, as does anyone who suffers a serious defeat in a competition. Even inanimate entities can be so described: 'Anti-Independence Scare Stories Bite the Dust' read a news headline in 2013 about the campaign for political independence in Scotland.
die off 1697	Another attempt, after *die up*, to capture the notion of a group being 'carried off' by death. Today it's plants and animals that *die off*, following disease, cold, and suchlike; groups of people are usually said to *die out* (1865).
pike † 1697	This is an unusual application of the verb *to pike*, meaning 'hurry away' or 'make off with oneself' – itself an unusual extension of the meaning 'provide oneself with a pike or pilgrim's staff'. It also appears in the form *pike off*. In the north of England, until the nineteenth century, the staves used for carrying a bier at a funeral were called *pike-handles*.
pass to one's reward 1703	The implication is that the deceased has *gone* (*passed*, *been called*) to heaven, but people have never been slow to point to an alternative possibility. Mark Twain was one who used the expression ironically, in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883, ch. 51). Talking about an old friend, he comments: 'He went to his reward, whatever it was, two years ago.'

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sink † 1718	Like earlier *sye* and *fail*, this was a natural extension of the sense of *sink* meaning 'decline, fail in health'. 'The patient sunk under this last complaint', reports a doctor in 1804.
vent † 1718	Liquids and gases are the entities usually vented ('poured out, discharged'), and not life; but this did not stop Alexander Pope from writing, in his translation of the *Iliad* (Book 4), that Maris 'vents his Soul effus'd with gushing Gore'. It was a favourite word of Pope's: he uses it seventeen times in the work, in various senses.
demise 1727	The word is still used as a solemn noun, but is hardly ever heard as a verb (*When Shaw demised . . .*), apart from in some legal contexts.
slip one's cable 1751	An early nautical expression, meaning 'to leave an anchorage in haste'. Tobias Smollett, in *Peregrine Pickle* (1751, ch. 73) has the dying Commodore Trunnion consoling Peregrine with a storm of nautical metaphors and a caustic remark about his doctor: 'Swab the spray from your bowsprit, my good lad, and coil up your spirits. You must not let the toplifts of your heart give way, because you see me ready to go down at these years. . . . Those fellows come alongside of dying men, like the messengers of the Admiralty with sailing orders; but I told him as how I could slip my cable without his direction or assistance . . .'
turf † 1763	The use of *turf* as a verb, meaning 'to cover with turf', is known from Middle English, and was probably used regionally as slang for 'die' long before its first recorded use by poet William Cowper: 'That you may not think I have turfed it . . . I send you this letter'. He is aware that the usage is restricted, adding, after *turfed it*, 'to speak in the Newmarket phrase'.
move off † 1764	Occasional *OED* citations show that there was a vogue for colloquial usages in *off* in the middle of the eighteenth century: *move off* and *pop off* first recorded in 1764, *pack off* in 1766, *hop off* in 1797. *Hop* and *pop* were also used on their own, especially in the north of England. *Pop off* is still heard, usually in a comedy setting referring to a rich relative. Albert Chevalier's music-hall hit 'Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road' (1892) includes the lines 'Your rich Uncle Tom of Camberwell | Popped off recent, which it ain't a sell [i.e. mistake]', and this was reprised in the film *Ziegfeld Follies* (1945).

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kick the bucket 1785	Joseph Wright lists several expressions for 'die' under *kick* in his *English Dialect Dictionary*, such as *kick one's clog*, *kick stiff*, and *kick up the heels*, but not *kick the bucket*, perhaps because by the end of the nineteenth century it had become so widely used in general colloquial English. *Bucket* here refers to the beam on which a slaughtered pig was suspended by its heels – a recorded usage in Norfolk, and probably known elsewhere.
pass on 1805	A genteel euphemism, based on the core sense of the verb, 'proceed from one existence or activity to another'. A poem in the *Ladies' Repository* of 1860 reflects on 'the dear ones who passed on before'.
exit 1806	The theatrical use of *exit*, 'leave the stage', made this verb an obvious candidate for 'die', and was an especially popular choice in newspapers reporting the death of an actor. It still is. When John Candy died in 1994, one headline ran: 'Exit Laughing'.
launch into eternity 1812	A favourite word of journalists when the event is sudden. One is not *born*, but *launched into the world*; and someone sentenced to death by hanging, as in an *Examiner* report of 1812, does not do anything as boring as *die*.
go to glory 1814	The most celebratory of all the religious expressions. Tom uses it on his deathbed in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852, ch. 41): 'I'm right in the door, going into glory!'
sough † 1816	A development, pronounced 'suff', of the Old English onomatopoeic verb, *swogan*, 'to make a rushing sound'. A widely used dialect word, it captured the notion of 'breathing one's last', especially popular in Scotland, in the form *sough away*.
hand in one's accounts † 1817	Not long after *account* came into English in the fourteenth century, it was used for the Day of Judgement: the *last* or *final account*. But it is not until the seventeenth century that we find such expressions as *go to one's account* and *make one's account*, and then in the USA, during the nineteenth century, the undeniably final *hand in one's accounts*.
croak 1819	One of the most widely known London slang words for 'die', which travelled the world, thanks (among others) to swindler James Hardy Vaux, transported to Australia for his crimes on no less than three separate occasions. He includes it in a vocabulary of 'flash language' at the end of his *Memoirs* (1819).

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slip one's breath † 1819	This is *slip* in the sense of 'lose hold of', also seen in the slightly later *slip one's wind*, another well-travelled cant expression. In Frederick Marryat's *Peter Simple* (1834, ch. 37) Captain Kearney defies his doctor by not dying, and remarks: 'he thinks I'm slipping my wind now'. In Australian writer Henry Lawson's short story 'The Bush Undertaker' (1896), a shepherd talks to a corpse he discovers in the bush: 'it must be three good months since yer slipped yer wind'.
stiffen † 1820	An unusual – but, given the profession of the speaker, understandable – clinical usage, illustrated by a single *OED* citation. 'I wish you'd stiffen', says Hatband the undertaker to King Tims, in John Hamilton Reynolds's *The Fancy*.
buy it 1825	Readers of Second World War novels will be very familiar with the report that an airman has 'bought it' – been shot down. In fact the expression was used not just of airmen but of any serviceman killed in battle, and the first recorded slang usage of *buy* meaning 'suffer a serious reverse' is in relation to a naval battle. It feels somewhat dated today.
drop short † 1826	A single *OED* citation from a sporting magazine shows a further slang development of *drop*: 'One of these days he must drop short.'
fall a sacrifice to 1839	A trend to increase the level of solemnity by moving away from the potential abruptness of short single words: 'Brave men have fallen a sacrifice to this kind of daring.' Alternatives to *sacrifice* were *victim* and *prey*.
go off the hooks 1840	Hooks keep things attached, so they are a prime candidate for a colloquial adaptation for death, attracting several verbs. After *go off* we find *be off* (1862), *slip off* (1886), *pop off* (1887), and *drop off* (1894) *the hooks*. The expressions all still have some life in them.
succumb 1849	This verb is usually accompanied by a stated cause – one succumbs to a disease or injuries. The usage today is often encountered in newspaper headlines: 'Five-month-old succumbs to swine flu' (*The Times of India*); 'Tiny Tim, Houston's fat cat, succumbs to cancer' (*Houston Chronicle*), both from March 2013.
step out † 1851	It is surprising to see this usage referring to death, given that the commonest sense of the phrasal verb in the nineteenth century was 'to leave a place usually for a short distance or short time'. The single *OED* citation, from 'The last bloody duel fought in Ohio' by the US short-story writer Thomas A. Burke, describes a man lying under a table as 'dead – stepped out'. However, as the speaker is drunk, it is perhaps no more than a piece of personal slang.

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walk (forth) † 1858	A piece of upper-class slang, with just a single *OED* citation. In Anthony Trollope's *Doctor Thorne* (ch. 4), the Honourable John suggests that if Frank Gresham's father were to die ('if the governor were to walk'), Frank would benefit greatly.
snuff out 1864	The notion of snuffing ('extinguishing') the flame on a candle proved an apt analogy for death, so we find both *snuff out* and *snuff* widely used in slang, as well as *snuff it*. The automatic nature of the everyday act promoted its use in casual contexts, where the speaker lacks any feeling of emotion or personal involvement.
go/be up the flume 1865	The earliest sense of *flume* ('stream, river') morphed in the USA into an industrial sense ('artificial water-carrying channel'), and ended up as mining slang. The flume was usually carried on tall trestles, hence the 'up'. One has to ignore the modern sense of an amusement park water-chute.
pass out *c.*1867	Yet another attempt to capitalize on the 'steady movement' connotations of *pass*, but overtaken by modern uses, such as 'complete a course of instruction' and 'lose consciousness'. Most people would find the first recorded use, a tombstone inscription, incongruous today ('Caroline wife of E J Langston born on 23 March 1833 Passed out 18 December 1867'), though the usage remains alive in some American dialects.
cash in one's checks 1869	One of the meanings of *check* was a counter representing a particular value, used in card games such as poker, and in the USA this proved an apt way of concluding the metaphor of life as a game. The most vivid of the expressions was *cash in one's checks*, later shortened to *cash in* or simply *cash*; but one could also *throw in*, *pass in*, *send in*, and *hand in* one's checks – or, later, *chips*. The usage transferred to Britain in the twentieth century, in the form of *to have had one's chips*.
peg out 1870	Two games compete for theories of origin: cribbage, where pegs are used to keep the score, and the winner is the first to finish the game, or *peg out*; or croquet, where hitting the peg is to finish a round and thus to *peg out*. Eric Partridge, in his *Dictionary of Slang*, felt that the former theory, 'from lower down the social scale', was the more likely source of the phrase when used in the context of death. Other twentieth-century slang uses include *peg*, without a particle, and *peg it*.
go bung 1882	*Bung* or *bong* is an Australian aboriginal word for 'dead'. In Australian and New Zealand English, *go bung* is 'to die', used both of humans and equipment. 'The telly's gone bung' is an example in the *New Zealand Oxford Dictionary*.

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get one's call 1884	*Call* has had the sense of 'summons' since the fifteenth century, but it was not until the nineteenth century that it came to be used, especially in regional dialect, for a 'divine summons' as death approaches. The first recorded usage (as *get the call*) is from Scotland.
perch † 1886	The many earlier phrases referring to a *perch* (such as *drop off the perch*) eventually simplified into the stand-alone verb. A single *OED* citation from *Sporting Times* illustrates a slang usage: 'S'pose I perched first?'
off it † 1890	A slang use of a particle as a verb, first recorded in the pages of *Punch* in a story about a young man who gave £1,000 to some sportsmen 'to see some stock which they said belonged to them – of course he found out after they'd off'd it that they didn't own a white mouse among 'em'.
knock over † 1892	A single *OED* citation from the *Illustrated London News* captures the notion of dying after an unexpected event: 'Captain Randall knocked over with some kind of a fit.' This is *knock over* in the sense of 'cause to fall down'.
pass in 1904	The abbreviated form of *pass in one's checks* or *chips*, or (in Australia and New Zealand) *pass in one's marble*. 'I want to breathe American air again before I pass in', from a New York paper, is the only citation in the *OED*. The expression may need its full idiomatic form in order to be clear.
the silver cord is loosed 1911	A biblical allusion: in the King James Bible translation, 'Or ever the silver cord be loosed' (Ecclesiastes 12: 6), referring to the dissolution of life at death. Given the widespread influence of the KJB on English idiom, it's surprising that there are no earlier examples.
pip (out) 1913	The two *OED* citations, both from this decade, indicate a youthful upper-class slang usage of the time. 'His mother's pipped', says a character in Arnold Lunn's *The Harrovians: A Tale of Public School Life*. And in *Potterism* (1920), Rose Macaulay describes a 17-year-old Jane as saying 'in her school-girl slang . . . "I think it's simply rotten pipping out"' (Part 3, ch. 4).
cop it 1915	From the seventeenth century on, *cop* developed a range of dialect and slang uses to do with taking and receiving. To *cop it* was to get into trouble. Army slang in the First World War is chiefly responsible for its application to sudden death. If you *copped a packet* you were wounded, probably severely; but if you *copped it* you were dead.

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stop one 1916	Army slang from the First World War: 'to be hit by a bullet', which might be fatal. Only subsequent context would say whether a soldier was wounded or dead if he had *stopped one*.
conk (out) 1918	The etymology of *conk* in this sense is obscure, but probably an onomatopoeic word from the noise made by an engine when it breaks down. It is first listed in E. M. Roberts's Appendix to his war memoir, *A Flying Fighter*: 'A new word which is taken from the Russian language and which means stopped or killed.' The reference to Russian is inexplicable.
cross over 1920	A variant of *go over* and *pass over*, attested by only two *OED* citations from the 1930s, but probably still in use.
kick off 1921	US slang, first recorded in a John Dos Passos novel, *The Three Soldiers* (Part 2.1): the soldiers, worrying about the dangers of sickness, have heard about someone who has 'kicked off' with meningitis. In *The Drum* (1959), lexicographer Sidney Baker finds the same usage in Australia.
shuffle off 1922	Probably the most famous of all the literary alternatives to 'die' is Shakespeare's 'when we have shuffled off this mortal coil' (*Hamlet*, *c.*1600, 3.1.69), so it's not surprising to find writers tempted to use it. In 2011 it actually became the title of a novel: *Shuffled Off: A Ghost's Memoir*, by Robert McCarter. The verb actually means 'get rid of', which is included in a different category of *HTOED*.
pack up 1925	Various senses of the phrasal verb ('depart for good', 'cease to function', 'retire') combined to produce this (chiefly British) colloquial usage. The first recorded usage is in a dictionary of army and navy slang, compiled soon after the end of the First World War.
step off 1926	Just one *OED* citation illustrates this clearly self-conscious slang usage, in Edgar Wallace's *The Man from Morocco*: 'There will only be the bit of money I have when I – er – step off.' *Step out* (above) seems similarly idiosyncratic.
take the ferry 1928	A literary allusion to the boat which in Greek and Latin mythology takes the shades of the departed across the River Styx. John Galsworthy heads his chapter on the death of Soames Forsyte: 'Soames takes the ferry' (*Swan Song*, 1928, Part 3, ch. 15). The allusion remains available to writers.

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meet one's Maker 1933	*Maker*, referring to God as creator of all things, has been used since the fourteenth century, but the notion of *meeting one's Maker* is, surprisingly, not recorded until the twentieth century. It first turns up in one of Dorothy L. Sayers' novels, *Murder must Advertise* (ch. 15). Chief-Inspector Parker is annoyed that there are so few clues on the dead man's body: 'In fact, the wretched man had gone to meet his Maker in Farley's Footwear, thus upholding to the last the brave assertion that, however distinguished the occasion, Farley's Footwear will carry you through.'
kiss off 1945	A favourite slang expression with American crime writers. A typical example is John Evans, the pen-name of Howard Browne, who has his private eye say: 'I've got a customer who wants to know who kissed off Marlin . . . and why' (*Halo in Blood*, 1946, ch. 11).
have had it 1952	An idiom that causes maximum confusion to foreign learners, due to its meaning being apparently opposite to what it is saying. As a 1943 *OED* citation from *Time* succinctly put it: '"You've had it," in R.A.F. vernacular, means "You haven't got it and you won't get it."' The notion easily extended to loss of life, especially death through a sudden event. 'One slip and you've had it', says a writer about walking a tightrope.
crease it 1959	*Crease it* is the latest in a long line of *it* slang constructions for dying. The sense development is somewhat cryptic: 'cut a furrow in something' > 'stun an animal by a shot in the neck' > 'stun a person' > 'kill'. A character in John Braine's novel, *The Vodi* (1959), knows 'who's going to crease it before even the doctors do'.
zonk 1968	Originally an onomatopoeic word echoing the sound of a heavy blow, suggestive of finality. Two *OED* citations within a decade illustrate its slang use as a verb in the context of dying: 'If Johnny zonked, it would be bad'; 'she zonked and went rigid'. The phonetic appeal of the word has motivated a wide range of urban slang uses, mainly to do with being overcome by events, so *zonk* is unlikely to have much of a future in the context of mortality. If Johnny zonked these days, it's more likely to be the result of playing dice-games, drink, or drugs.

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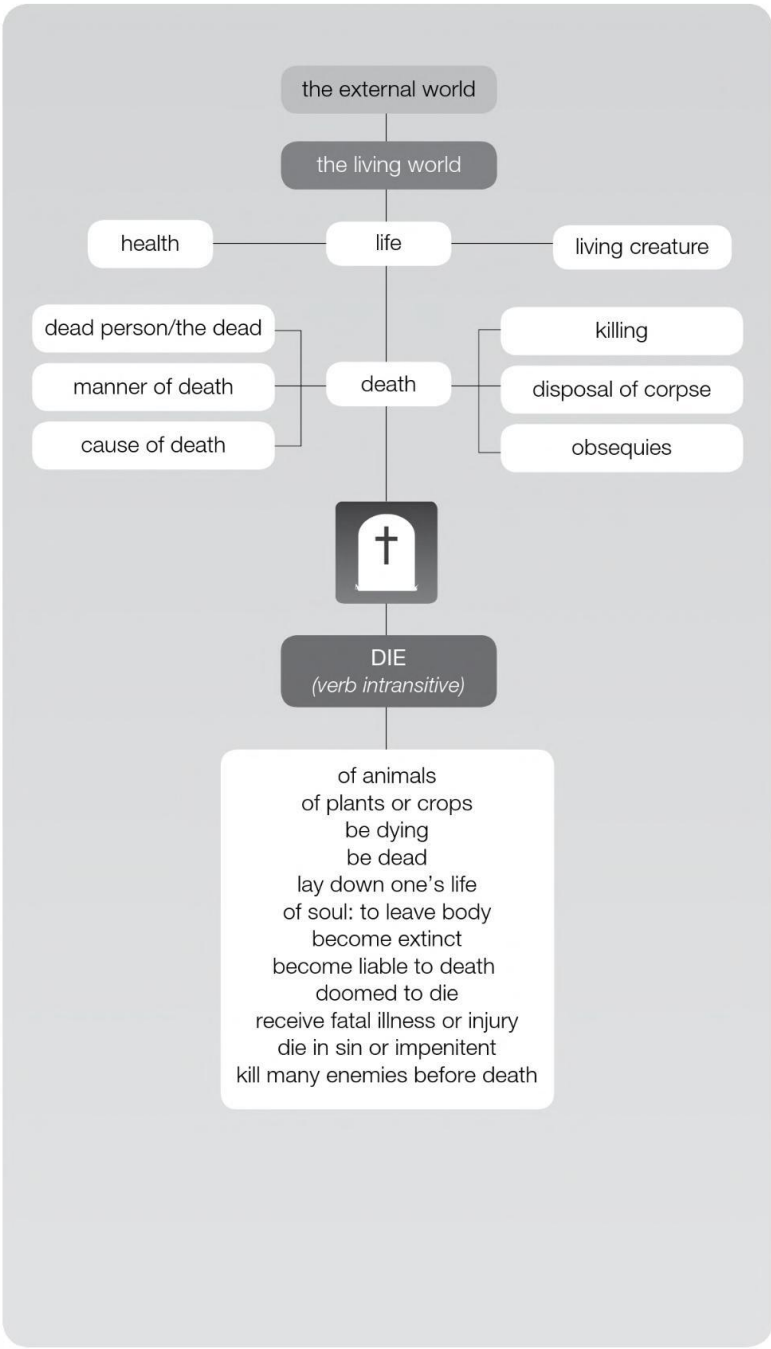

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