



Damp Squid: The English Language Laid Bare

Jeremy Butterfield

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When James Murray compiled the OED in the 19th century, he used a small army of volunteers--and thousands upon thousands of paper slips--to track down the English language. Today, linguists use massive computer power--including the world's largest language databank, the Oxford Corpus, which contains more than two billion words--to determine for the first time definitively how the English language is used. From evidence contained in the gargantuan Oxford Corpus, Jeremy Butterfield here uncovers a wealth of fascinating facts about the English language. Where does our vocabulary come from? How do word meanings change? How is our language really being used? This entertaining book has the up-to-date and authoritative answers to all the key questions about our language. Butterfield takes a thorough look at the English language and exposes its peculiarities and penchants, its development and difficulties, revealing exactly how it operates. We learn, for instance, that we use language in chunks of words--as one linguist put it, "we know words by the company that they keep." For instance, the word quintessentially is joined half the time with a nationality--something is "quintessentially American" or "quintessentially British." Likewise, in comparing eccentric with quirky, the Corpus reveals that eccentric almost always appears in reference to people, as an "eccentric uncle," while quirky usually refers to the actions of people, as in "quirky behavior." Using such observations, Butterfield explains how dictionary makers decide which words to include, how they find definitions, and how the Corpus influences the process. Covering all areas of English, from spelling and idioms to the future of English, and with entertaining examples and useful charts throughout, this compelling and lively book will delight word lovers everywhere.

Damp Squid: The English Language Laid Bare Details

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Martine Peacock says

With a name like Damp Squid, I was expecting this book to be a lot more fun than it was. I only really scanned through it as I was intentionally looking for fun ideas to do with the English language. Undoubtedly an "interesting" book but not one you'd buy for someone who wasn't seriously into the construction and origins etc of English.

JulieK says

This was a gift from my brother. Some interesting parts, some parts that were a bit too esoteric for me. Recommended for serious word nerds only.

Ralph says

A damp squid? Some kind of wet cephalopod? If you are familiar with the phrase, you might be British, and if you are British, you might expect the book to be a disappointment, for such is the meaning of "damp squid." However, the book is anything but disappointing, and exposes many of the mechanisms by which words (or lemmas, as the author calls them) enter and leave the English language, and how they mutate over time. Getting back to the soggy squid for a moment, it was originally "damp squib," with a squib being fireworks...damp fireworks cannot explode, hence a term for a disappointment. But "squib" loses its meaning, claims the author, and people, in searching for a new word that makes sense, change "squib" to "squid." To tell the truth, I'd never heard the phrase before, but to me "squib" was a synonym for "blank," as in a cartridge with gunpowder but no bullet. So, the original term makes more sense to me than what the Brits have chosen to call it. And yet the lemma "squib" continues on with a new lease on life, now known to millions as the non-magical offspring of magical parents, in the Harry Potter books.

Anyone curious as to the mechanics of language and the problems facing lexicographers in this age of infernal digital machines will find this book fascinating, though English purists will be depressed to find out there is no way to prevent the formation of new words or to stop old words from gathering new (and annoying) meanings. From "what is a word" to "where does it come from" to "how is it spelled and used," the entire gamut of English is, as the subtitle promises, laid bare...not to be confused with naked.

Maurizio Codogno says

La linguistica è una materia che ha avuto un grande vantaggio dalla nascita degli elaboratori elettronici, tanto che negli anni 1960 nacque addirittura una nuova disciplina, la linguistica computazionale. Con il ventunesimo secolo la quantità di testo a disposizione di chi vuole fare delle analisi su come si evolve la lingua è incredibile: il corpus che ha dato l'idea per questo libro contiene la bellezza di due **miliardi** di parole (che poi sono qualche gigabyte... ma senza immagini e file audio-video vi garantisco che non sono pochi).

Nel libro si racconta di come si può vedere la lingua viva e all'opera, ad esempio accorgendosi di come le forme considerate errate dai grammatici prescrittivistici stiano o no prendendo piede nella lingua di tutti i giorni, o almeno in quella scritta ancorché rilassata come quella dei blog. Tra l'altro, il titolo stesso del libro è un errore grammaticale; l'espressione "damp squib" (letteralmente "petardo umido", che non scoppia e quindi è qualcosa di inutile) non era comprensibile a molta gente che l'ha così storpiato in "damp squid" (calamaro umido).

Per un curioso come me il libro si addentra troppo poco nei meandri della lingua inglese, sembrando a volte più che altro un'incensazione al Corpus; inoltre contiene troppe parole che mi sono del tutto ignote - il che non è così strano, se si pensa che c'è un capitolo che racconta di come lo stesso concetto si possa spesso esprimere con tre parole diverse: una anglosassone, una franco-normanna e una di origine latina o greca. Ma la lettura è stata comunque piacevole.

M says

Quite a light hearted book, let down by (to me) impenetrable charts showing how word frequencies occurred. Also by at least one error, which I checked by consulting the OED Online. (Just so I could be sure I was correct in thinking he'd got it wrong). It is interesting to see how the use of words can be shown using the databases of quotations and this aspect was fairly fresh and original, otherwise I found 'Why is Q always followed by U' a better word book.

S.P. says

I chuckled, chortled and snorted my way through this entertainingly written book about the English language. I found the use of a large corpus to analyse how people actually use English as opposed to how (possibly other) people think English ought to be used to be interesting and enlightening.

I confess, if I knew enough about it, I would be a 'grammar Nazi' and would openly condemn anyone willfully abusing their epicentres and disinterested tautologies. Butterfield disagrees, and sees the language as an ever evolving body that inevitably changes over time (!). The criterion to which I would criticise this view would be the speed of the change in the modern language is much faster than which has previously occurred – with txt-spk being a prime example where language is changing faster than (perhaps) the grammarians would like.

In my view, the pure inventiveness of English is both its virtue and Achilles' heel. It could go either way – become even more a diverse construction of prose and ideas or degenerate into a kind of newspeak of abbreviated and limited form tht cn b txt'd btwn ppl of vy lmt'd ideas. Eod. (IMHO).

Rob Welch says

This was a delightful little book... it had just enough of some serious linguistics to give a taste of the inner workings of that science, but not enough to bore :) It was interesting to see how the "Corpus" is used to debunk many misconceptions about language in general and also about English... a fun read for anyone who enjoys language and linguistics...

Megan Anderson says

If you're a wordie like I am, then you'll absolutely love this.

This book focuses on the English language: where it came from, how it changes, how scholars keep track of it, and how dictionaries (more specifically, the Oxford English Dictionary) are created.

Sound dry? It's totally not. The tone of the book is very conversational and often quite humorous. The layout of the book is also appealing and keeps the information separated and easy on the eyes.

trisha says

entertaining...for a word geek. right up my alley

Alison says

I picked this one up because of a review I read in the Economist... maybe its a British thing, but I don't understand why so many people raved about this book. I found it boring and kept waiting for it to get better. Alas, no.

Ed Erwin says

I read lots of books on language, so I keep seeing the same tired old examples brought out to illustrate language change. This one, though, is written for a British audience, so while the ideas were not new to me, the examples often were. ("Damp Squi(b/d)" for example, must be a more common expression there than here!)

The main point of this book is to introduce to a wide audience the idea of using a digital corpus to examine how language is actually used in real life, rather than relying on examples found by experts.

A hard-core prescriptivist may not like the focus on "actual" rather than "correct" usage, but may still enjoy the introduction to using a corpus to explore usage changes.

The author talks a lot about how large the particular corpus he used was. Sure, it was big, but, they are growing all the time. Google's n-gram is the current size champ, and is available for anyone to explore. (I just used it now to see whether the spelling "alot" is on the rise or not. I like it better than the "correct" spelling. But n-gram shows that the use of that spelling is falling-off after a peak in the 1980s.)

Carl says

A book about the English language, focusing on the study of “text corpora”. A text corpus is a collection of different words from various sources: books, newspapers, blogs, emails, etc. There are several corpora, but the biggest is the Oxford Corpus, with two billion words.

Study of the Oxford Corpus shows that just ten words account for 25% of the occurrences. Examples of these most common words are “the, of, and, to, that, have”. This is not of earth-shattering importance, but I find it interesting. The top 100 words account for 50% of occurrences. The majority of these are Old English words – the bedrock of English.

The Oxford Corpus contains the contexts where the words occur: what other words are near, which tells us the connotations of words, going beyond their dictionary definitions. The Corpus also shows differences in regional use of words across the English-speaking world.

Computer analysis of the corpora is data mining applied to the English language, potentially a useful tool for linguists. It will be interesting to see corpora derived from spoken English, and to also see how the language changes. Perhaps there will be automatic syntactic analysis?

Danielle says

I also won a free copy of this book at the American Library Association conference. It's a look at the evolving nature of the English language. I found this book to be much more engaging than Alphabetter Juice because it had more of a narrative to it. It was actually rather interesting and a very quick read.

Rachel says

A fascinating study of words *as people actually use them.* Most books on language do not have the power of the Corpus behind them, which is what makes Damp Squid so special.

This book is written for a British English audience, which means that even hardcore linguaphiles like myself will be kept slightly off-balance the entire time. Even during the introductory, English-comes-from-German-and-1066-blah-blah-blah portions you won't find yourself bored (unless you've also studied British English, I guess).

The origin of the title, apparently a common phrase across the pond, isn't glossed until Chapter 6. Or an exercise in collocation--"What word most naturally comes at the end of this sentence?" isn't as dead simple for American English speakers as it would have been for Brits.

Have a very basic knowledge of Brit slang before going into this, or be willing to Google: if you don't know what a chav or a lorry is, you may be thrown a little too much off balance.

Definitely recommended for any word lovers.

Jennifer B. says

This was fun, entertaining, and educational. I've learned many new expressions to spice up my American English with.
