Albert-Reiner Glaap, Michael Heinze, Neil Johnstone
with the assistance of Malte Unterweg

Words as Windows
on English Life and Culture

Albert-Reiner Glaap, Michael Heinze, Neil Johnstone
with the assistance of Malte Unterweg

Words as Windows
on English Life and Culture

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Words as Windows on English Life and Culture /
Albert-Reiner Glaap, Michael Heinze, Neil Johnstone
with the assistance of Malte Unterweg. -
Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2012
ISBN 978-3-86821-355-3

Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

ISBN 978-3-86821-355-3

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
Tel. (0651) 41503, Fax 41504
Internet: http://www.wvttrier.de
E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

"In the beginning was the word," we read in the Gospel according to St. John.

*

"Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind," writes Rudyard Kipling.

*

"Words without thoughts, never to heaven go," Hamlet admonishes.

*

"We are walking lexicons. In a single sentence of idle chatter we preserve Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Norse; we carry a museum inside our heads, each day we commemorate peoples of whom we have never heard."

Penelope Lively. *Moon Tiger*

*

"I once heard an American student in Heidelberg say that he would rather decline two drinks than one German verb."

Mark Twain. *A Tramp Abroad*

*

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

Lewis Carroll. *Alice Through the Looking Glass*

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank, first and foremost, Malte Unterweg for his untiring work on the manuscript and the illustrations in this volume; Kai Lippert for providing the cover photograph; Dr. Erwin Otto and his team at WVT for their support throughout the project; and, last but not least, Brigitta Disseldorf for (once again) converting vague ideas into a perfect cover illustration.

Table of Contents

First Words

How this Book Works and What it Wants to Achieve

How this Book Works and What it Wants to Achieve

As Penelope Lively reminds us, English is the product of the amalgamation of the languages of the several peoples who have conquered and occupied England over the past 2000 years. Wales, Scotland and Ireland were only indirectly affected and hence preserved their Celtic cultures and languages.

The English language as we know it resembles nothing so much as an old English country house with a very long history, that has been built, partly demolished, rebuilt and extended with different materials over centuries.

A careful examination of the very first stages of construction in the cellars of the house reveals a few very early Celtic and Roman traces, just visible under the strong, but damaged, foundations laid in its earliest years by Anglo-Saxons from the 5th century onwards.

An attempted take-over by aggressive northern neighbours caused much destruction and finally resulted in the occupation of its north wing by the Danes in the 9th century. After many years of living in close proximity, a reconciliation between the former owners of the whole building, the Anglo-Saxons, and the inhabitants of the north wing, led, from the early 11th century onwards, to a joint construction of massive walls. This involved cooperation and compromises between the two groups in which many of their more complex original structures were lost. Most experts agree that this simplification represented a considerable improvement.

In fact, as we can see, these foundations proved strong enough to stand the test of time and to bear most of the weight of the great alterations that were to come from 1066 onwards. For it was in that year that the French branch of the family claimed, and then took over the house.

Its former owners were consigned to the cellars and the grounds where they were forced to act as servants for their new lords, who at first tried to ignore all the building work that had gone on before they arrived, preferring to use entirely imported materials. However, after a time they found that it was more and more convenient to use the existing foundations on which to erect their sophisticated French structure. Of course top and bottom did not fit exactly. Some alterations had to be made to the original foundations and more major ones to the French superstructure before they could fit together properly. Many of the more ornamental features had to be discarded – but after some 300 years the house started to take on the appearance so familiar to us today.

By the 15th century it was agreed that the result was a pretty fine building, perhaps more plain and not so very beautiful as some on the continent, but a solid, practical, comfortable and pleasant place to live and work in. Since then, although many additions have been made, and the house has massively increased in size, it has retained its original foundations, and its structure and overall appearance have remained largely unchanged. It is in fact this lack of an overall consistent design that makes the house

attractive to its many visitors from continental Europe. Nearly every one of them can find something of his own country in it, and some of the rooms, and sometimes whole wings, feel just like the ones at home.

Indeed, millions of students devote a great deal of time and energy to familiarising themselves with its design and the house has proved so popular that it has been successfully exported to many other countries around the world – to the U.S. and Canada in particular.

Nevertheless, despite its popularity, only a small proportion of those students and visitors have really looked into the history of the house and examined the building materials that went into making it over the centuries.

And that is the purpose of this little book: to show the reader when and how the house was built and to take a good look at the building blocks that were used. We invite the reader to use *Words as Windows* into the house and come with us on a tour around the building, not as a specialist in linguistics, but as someone generally interested in the essential features of the English language.