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When I use a word . . . Lexicographical anniversaries

We commonly celebrate the anniversaries of events. We often celebrate personal events every year and more general events less often, typically in multiples of 10 or a hundred. However, we do not celebrate the anniversaries of the dates on which words entered our language. In many cases we know very precisely when a word entered the written language, or at least within a few years, and studying those birthdates can give insights into the ways in which a subject has developed over time. For example, of 792 medical words that entered the English language in the 1970s and 1980s, 32% were words relating to pharmacology, compared with 19% relating to biochemistry, 12% to microbiology, and only 6% to genetics. Although an analysis of this sort does not demonstrate the general importance of these activities, it does give insights into the extent and nature of the different types of activities that were taking place during that period.

Jeffrey K Aronson,

Anniversaries

We celebrate past events when the years turn round. That is what “anniversary” literally means. It comes from the Latin words *annus*, a year, and *vertere* to turn. We celebrate some events every year, typically our own births and marriages and the deaths of people we knew. We celebrate anniversaries yearly because of the rate at which the earth orbits the sun. We celebrate other events less often, typically in multiples of 10 or a hundred, because of the number of digits we have on our hands. General celebration of every event that happened on a particular date every year would lead to an impossible number of celebrations. For example, on 14 January every year we would find ourselves celebrating the death of the English astronomer Edmond Halley in 1742, the birth of the French painter Berthe Morisot in 1841, the death of the French painter Jean Ingres in 1867, the birth of the Alsatian physician and polymath Albert Schweitzer in 1875, the birth of the actor Faye Dunaway in 1941, and many others. It is wise to restrict the frequency of our celebrations. In my surveys of medical anniversaries, I have chosen to highlight only events that occurred 50 or 100 years ago.¹

Lexicographical anniversaries

We don't celebrate the anniversaries of words in the same way. But words have their birthdays too. In some cases we can pinpoint the exact year in which a word was invented. For example, in 1988 Peter Sterling, an epidemiologist, and Joseph Eyer, a neurobiologist, introduced a new term, *allostasis* (Greek *άλλος*, other, different), in order to explain data that linked patterns of physiological change with a variety of behavioural states.² They described what they called “a critical principle of physiology: to maintain stability an organism must vary all the parameters of its internal milieu and match them appropriately to environmental demands. We refer to this principle as *allostasis*, meaning ‘stability through change.’” They postulated that *allostasis* “involves the whole brain and body rather than simply local feedbacks [and is therefore] a far more complex form of regulation than *homeostasis*.” We

can also date the invention of “*hom[o]eostasis*” precisely; it was introduced by the Harvard physiologist Walter B Cannon in 1926 “to designate stability of the organism.”³

In other cases we have to rely on the earliest found published instance of the word. The anniversaries can be discovered in many cases by consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, which cites the earliest instances that the lexicographers have found of the words that they have included in the dictionary. For example, medical words that first appeared in the same year, 1988, as “*allostasis*” included the drug name *risperidone*⁴; *nef*, an auxiliary gene present in the human and simian immunodeficiency viruses⁵; *proteasome*, a complex of cellular proteinases⁶; and *biolistics*, a technique used in genetic engineering to introduce DNA into cells.⁷

In some cases, however, earlier instances of a word can be found. There are two ways in which this happens. Occasionally, the quotation given in the *OED* itself refers to an earlier instance. For example, the name of the drug *ondansetron* is given as dating from 1988, the date of publication of the British Pharmacopoeia Commission's volume of British Approved Names (BANs) that had been assigned in 1986, as indeed the *OED* states. In many more cases earlier examples than are listed in the dictionary can be found. For example, the word “*oversupination*” is listed in the *OED* as dating from 1989; however, when I searched for it I found an antedating from 118 years earlier,⁸ giving the word a birthdate of no later than 1871, and adding a slightly different meaning to that given in the dictionary: the dictionary defines the word as “*excessive supination of the feet, especially when running,*” whereas the 1871 use refers to excessive supination of the arm, when the radius catches on the ulna, which traps it.

The word “*chickenpox*” provides another interesting antedating. The earliest recorded instance given in the first and second editions of the *OED* was from the start of the 18th century, in *Chambers' Cyclopaedia* of 1727–38. However, in 2000, reading a Latin text from 1694, Richard Morton's *Puretologia or Exercitatio de Febribus Inflammatoriis*, I found an unusual earlier

instance: “... quod Variolae istae (quod primo monui) erant maximae Benignae eae scil. quae vulgo dicuntur Chicken-Pox.”⁹ Since then the *OED* has greatly extended the entry, and even earlier instances have been found; the term is now dated back to 1658, in *Mercurius Politicus*, a magazine that was published weekly from June 1650 until May 1660 and for the publication of which John Milton was responsible for some time up to January 1652.¹⁰

Antedatings of medical words are moderately common. When I searched for medical words that first appeared, according to the *OED*, in the 1970s and 1980s, I found 77 antedatings out of 668 new words in all (11.5%).

Analysing the printed birthdates of words can give insights into the extent and types of activities in different areas, although not necessarily their importance. In an analysis of 792 new medical words that have *OED* birth dates from 1970 to 2020, I found that words from pharmacology outnumbered words from all other disciplines:

Pharmacology 251 (32%)

Biochemistry 154 (19%)

Microbiology 92 (12%)

Genetics 51 (6%)

Others 244 (31%)

A more detailed analysis of the pharmacological words would throw light on the areas in which most advances have come.

We should pay more attention to lexicographical anniversaries.

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