REVIEW

The hidden history of coined words. By Ralph Keyes. Oxford University Press 2021. Pp. xvi, 375.

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The hidden history of coined words by Ralph Keyes presents a thorough and compelling study of neologisms coined mainly from the late 19th century to the present day. More specifically, the author is interested in how successful new words were coined. Believing in Ben Zimmer's[1] (2009) claims that etymologists rarely know who should be credited for a given coinage, Keyes conducts his own investigation into secret backstories of a wide range of neologisms. The objectives of the analysis are (1) to discover the mechanisms and circumstances (including pure chance) responsible for successful, long-lasting coinages, (2) to trace various, sometimes unexpected, sources (such as children's books) and authors of neologisms as well as (3) to highlight complexities related to coinage formation (e.g., debates over the authorship claims of some booming coinages). These goals are articulated in the introduction entitled "A word with the Reader" (pp. xi–xvi). In it, Keyes also addresses the lack of a uniform research methodology across all the coinages. Regarding the structure of the monograph, the introduction is followed by three major parts, i.e., I. "How words are coined", II. "Sources of coined words" and III. "Coinage syndromes", all subdivided into a total of twenty chapters. The Bibliography (pp. 261–270) includes secondary sources the author consulted for general reference. Extensive Notes (pp. 271–348) provide an exhaustive list of primary sources of the discussed neologisms and verify the credibility of the research data. Acknowledgements extend on pages 349–350. Finally, the Index of 20 pages (pp. 355–375) guides the reader. Moreover, the analysis is enhanced with 39 illustrations (credited on pages 351–353), which provide the socio-cultural and historical context.

Part I of the monograph ("How words are coined") opens with Chapter 1 ("Zen and the art of word creation") and a story of Winston Churchill and his *Klop*. The anecdote serves to illustrate that although Churchill was Prime

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[1]   Chair of the American Dialect Society's (ADS) New Words Committee.

Minister of Great Britain twice and he was a prolific author of numerous neologisms, most of his purposely minted words became restricted to his close associates and the time he was in power. Churchill's long-lasting contribution to the English lexicon is the recoinage term *summit* "a meeting of global leaders". In the following sections, Keyes provides a brief overview of changing approaches to word-coiners. He specifically mentions Horace, who had to account for his neologisms, as well as Leon Mead's 1902 publication reporting hundreds of distinguished contemporaries to disclaim having coined any words. Next, Keyes notices that the 20th century became a golden age for new coinages and "[t]oday the creation of a neologism used by others is considered a feather in one's intellectual cap" (p. 9). Especially that "[c]oined words are like swarms of salmon eggs: few hatch, fewer mature, and only a handful make it upstream. Even those that do survive seldom endure. That's why trying to predict which new words will last is so challenging" (p. 10). Building on a few more stories, however, Keyes underscores that it is not the prominence of the coiner, especially the deliberate one, but the needs and tastes of the everyday users that are the decisive factor. Finally, the sources and stories behind different catchy neologisms can be so incalculable (e.g., *The wonderful wizard of Oz* owing his provenance name to one of the author's three cabinet drawers being labelled "O-Z") that word minting is perhaps better referred to as "Chaos Theory of Word Creation" (p. 15).

Chapter 2 ("Coined by chance") provides stories of various happenstances which gave rise to new words. Typos, misspellings and slips of the tongue (e.g., George W. Bush's *decider*) are noted as such incidents. Moreover, words being uttered spontaneously or humorously (like *Smurf*, originally *schtroumpf* to refer to *salt*, which word a cartoonist forgot) or simply misheard words, called *eggcorns*, (like Donald Trump's *big league* interpreted as *bigly*) are discussed. The aforementioned misspellings are illustrated with, e.g., *negawatt*, originally wrongly noted down *megawatt*. Keyes also sheds light on a few stories of words casually spoken in public (like James Murray's *nonce word*) being picked up and appreciated by the audience.

In Chapter 3 ("Casual coinage") Keyes collects stories of inadvertently uttered words which, due to their semantic ambiguity, became interpreted and widely employed with a meaning unintended by their coiners. Nevertheless, the "wayward offspring" (p. 35) was still attributed to the astonished authors. One of the examples is *containment*, one of eight thousand words of the 1946 report of Moscow's U.S. ambassador George Kennan. The word was noticed and adopted as a term determining a long-term post-war policy of the USA towards Russia. Kennan's intension, however, was diplomatic and economic isolation, while *containment* soon developed primarily military association. Similar cases discussed by Keyes include *contraband*, *paradigm*, *paradigm shift* and *disrupt*.

Chapter 4 ("Just kidding") exemplifies cases in which neologisms were coined for fun. *Scientist* originated at an 1833 assembly of the newly established Association for the Advancement of Science, where it was jokingly suggested as a candidate word to refer to a scholar practicing one of the various branches of science. Cambridge University Professor William Whewell, a presumed coiner of the lexeme *scientist*, pointed to structurally similar nouns, such as *sciolist* "a person whose knowledge is only superficial; a pretender to learning" (OED) and *atheist*, to highlight the jocular tone of his neologism. Initially rejected, *scientist* was later gradually accepted as the most suitable word. Keyes also gathers the stories of a few more linguistic jokes which gave rise to, for example, *blog*, *zipless fuck*, *fashionista* and even *OK*. The latter can be traced back to an 1839 issue of the *Boston Morning Post* publishing a hoax note on grammar claiming that "o.k." stands for "all correct". The acronym was later employed, and thus reinforced, in the presidential election of President Martin Van Buren when *OK* stood for his nickname, i.e., Old Kinderhook. Keyes also quotes Metcalf (2012), who claims that the coinage owes its popularity to the fact that it "conveys an invaluable sense of ambiguity. *OK* indicates affirmation but not necessarily approval." (pp. 50–51).

In Chapter 5 ("Prankery") neologisms which have their genesis in prankery are discussed. Of these, *bigfoot*, *Moxie* and *gobbledygook* are assumed by Keyes to be the most successful. Interestingly, it is due to Washington Irving's prank connected with his publication of an intriguing book under the pseudonym Diedrich Knickerbocker, that the citizens of New York started to be called *Knickerbockers*. More recently, the coinage was employed by a basketball team, *New York Knicks*. Yet another Irving's prankery-related name for New Yorkers is *Gothamites*. Hence, New York became *Gotham*, starting to function as an equivalent of *Big Apple* and the *Empire City*. Of a few more stories brought forth by Keyes, that of *tank* is worth noticing. The word was created as a camouflage prank on enemies during World War I.

Chapter 6 ("Taunt terms: Euro") focuses on taunt terms coined in Europe. Here, the author brings to the light twisted stories behind *big bang*, *quakers*, *namby pamby*, *impressionists* and *impressionism* as well as *bureaucracy*, *à la silhouette*, *guillotine*, *ideology*, *suffragette*, *lumpectomy*, *meritocracy* and *the Iron Lady*. All these were initially uttered with the intention of mocking. Yet, the mockery was not detected by those who picked up those terms and employed them in a positive context. For instance, a French art critic Louis Leroy is quoted to have attended the 1874 exhibition of paintings by 55 artists discarded from the Paris Salon. In his review, Leroy stated that "unfinished wallpaper was more complete than the works on display. Far from being works of art, these paintings were merely *impressions*" (p. 69). The term took on, also among the artists themselves, and gave rise to *impressionists* and the school of *impressionism*.

Similarly to Chapter 6, Chapter 7 ("Taunt terms: U.S.") addresses the issue of taunt terminology, but in an American context. Keyes provides and extensive story of originally ridiculed *Bloomers*. Next, the author notices that mockery terms assuming a positive meaning participate in a semantic shift. He starts from such handbook examples as *nice* and *dude*. Next, Keyes cites *guy*, from *Guy Fawkes* trying to cause an explosion of the House of Lords. Initially, *guy* was an eponym for a villain, but later it was exported to American English as a compliment. Other examples include *Bible Belt*, *whistle stop* and *The Best and the Brightest*. The author concludes with *cartoon*, thus smoothly connecting to the next chapter.

Chapter 8 begins Part II of the book entitled "Sources of coined words". The chapter ("Coins in bubbles") tackles countless neologisms being introduced or reinforced via such chiefly visual media as cartoons and comic strips. Along with graphics, captions and speech bubbles "were avidly consumed by young and old, the well-educated and self-educated, and white and blue collar readers alike. Like sports and the weather, they could be discussed by all" (p. 90). Moreover, numerous strips have been published for many years and have thus gained an established position among keen and engaged readership. Cartoons and comic strips also allowed elements of slang overheard by the authors to infiltrate into more common language. Of the neologism stories vividly described by Keyes, those of the *teddy bear* and *security blanket* appear among the most compelling ones. *Teddy bear* is owed to Theodore Roosevelt generously sparing a bear cub, which story was captured by *Washington Post* cartoonist Clifford Berryman. *Security blanket* originated in the comic strip *Peanuts*; first, used only literally but then the term acquired also a more metaphorical meaning.

In Chapter 9 ("Ink-stained word coiners") Keyes collects stories featuring columnists as authors of neologisms and slang-slingers. One of them was George Ade, who during his half-century journalist career in Indiana before World War II published estimated 1600 elements of slang including *excess baggage*, *chair-warmer* and *slow-poke*. Moreover, Ade contributed slang created by himself and helped popularise *OK*. Keyes discusses also the lexical input of columnists such as Damon Runyon (Ade's colleague publishing in New York), Walter Winchell (a 50-year-long New York journalist and the coiner of *blessed event*) and Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, who coined *beatnik* in 1958. Finally, Alsop brothers, Joseph and Stewart, both journalists, are being recognised as prolific coiners. Joseph Alsop is credited for *missile gap*, for instance, while Stewart's *hawks and doves* is considered as his most popular neologism.

Chapter 10 ("Kiddie Lit") provides the analysis of a range of coinages originating in children's literature. Among those are e.g., *nerd*, *grinch* and *Lorax* attributed to Theodor Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss). On the one hand, he meticulously created catchy words which would be remembered by children, but on the other

hand, Geisel felt no restrictions in his creativity because he wrote only for children. Yet another children's author, Lewis Carroll composing in the late 19th century, is described by Keyes as having "no idea what many of his coined words referred to. He just liked the way they sounded and was confident others would put them to good use" (p. 116). Moreover, the chapter includes a twisted story of *google* and that of *TASER* inspired by *Tom Swift*. By drawing attention to Tom's difficulty in naming his inventions, Keyes smoothly leads the reader into the next chapter.

Chapter 11, entitled "Naming the future", focuses on neologisms originating in futuristic writing. Words created to name imaginary phenomena were later adopted, when the modern world managed to make up and fiction came true. This was the case of e.g., *test tube baby*, *robot*, *robotics*, *satellite* and *cyberspace*, the stories of which Keyes compellingly presents.

Chapter 12 ("Literary lingo") discusses writers' contribution to neologisms. The novel authors or poets credited by Keyes include Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, John Milton, Charles Dickens, Washington Irving, Rudyard Kipling, William Sydney Porter (aka O. Henry) and James Joyce. Of those, John Milton, the 17th century poet, seems to be the most prolific, contributing more than 600 neologisms. Moreover, Keyes discusses such eponymous adjectives as e.g., quixotic, derived from the name of the protagonist of *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes, or *scroogish* motivated by Dickens' character of *A Christmas Carol*. Book titles are also recognised as a source of new coinages.

Chapter 13 ("Ivy-covered words") focuses on neologisms introduced by scholars representing different branches of knowledge such as sociology, zoology, biology, neurology, medicine, anthropology, physics and psychology. Keyes notices that "[i]n today's academia it almost seems as though the less sense a coinage makes to outsiders, the more acclaim it's likely to win among peers. […] Peer pressure is alive and well there, even when it comes to monitoring the vocabulary faculty members use among themselves. Choosing the right word is an important way to signal that one belongs" (p. 149). The vividly described stories of more widely adopted academic neologisms include those of *broken windows* and *pecking order*, supported by rich imagery they evoke. Moreover, sociologist Robert Merton (the author of e.g., *role model*, *reference groups* and *Matthew effect*) and psychologist Abraham Maslow (*hierarchy of needs* and *self-actualisation*) are praised by Keyes for naming their ideas in a way that guaranteed a positive social reception. Further stories feature such scholarly terminology as *kinesics* (by anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell) and *proxemics* (by Birdwhistell's academic fellow Edward T. Hall) as well as 'erotogenic spots' (by gynaecologist Ernst Gräfenberg), being respectively interpreted and propagated by other scholars or writers as *body language*, *personal space* and *G-spot*.

Part III of the book, entitled "Coinage syndromes", opens with Chapter 14 ("Coined with intent"). Keyes initially puts in the highlight Sir Thomas Browne (1605–82), a medical doctor and philosopher, performing scientific experiments. The scholar is credited for some 784 neologisms, with *electricity* among others. Keyes posits that intentionally coined word "are typically created by combining existing words and clauses, adding prefixes and suffixes, and adapting roots borrowed from other languages. Greek and Latin figure prominently in such loans" (p. 164). The author also delves into the Victorian heritage of euphemisms referring to self-sex relationships. Then, Keyes introduces Margaret Sanger, an American feminist, who in her pamphlet described conception, boldly using words such as *climax*. In 1914 she coined *birth control* to replace *contraception*. Subsequently, Keyes addresses the notion of verbal gaps and states that "[s]uccessfully coined words catch on not because they are clever, or flatter the coiner, but because they meet a verbal need" (p. 168). Here he mentions, for instance, Greek-derived *cybernetics* as well as *feed-back*. The other tackled issues include "de novo words" (after Minkova & Stockwell 2001) such as, e.g., *Kodak* and *widget*, as well as words winning naming competitions, e.g., *nylon*.

Chapter 15 ("Nonstarters") takes up the issue of deliberately coined words with a short life span. As such are mentioned the results of word-coining competitions. As noticed by Keyes, "[w]inners of word-coining contests seldom outlive their fifteen minutes of fame. That's because these competitions favour wit over utility. They exist not so much to create a useful word as to see who can be most amusing" (p. 182). Words-of-the-year, usually context-restricted are recognised as deemed to a similar fate. The coiner's social prestige does not always guarantee their coinage's longevity, either. Keyes also provides stories behind and lists of the failure-bound ancestors of *TV viewer*, *zoo*, *phone* and *dymaxion*, to mention but a few.

In Chapter 16 ("Van Winkle words"), Keyes recognises words which are introduced, then disappear or stay obscure to reappear and flourish in favourable conditions. Such was the story of e.g., *serendipity* and *free-range*. The author also describes the so called "recency illusion", which refers to the impression that newly noted things are indeed new. He exemplifies this with *freak*, *vibe*, *good vibe* and *hobbit*, which existed a few decades earlier before they were noticed as attractive coinages. A similar situation applies to words and phrases used in book titles and titles of scholarly works. Even if accredited (more or less visibly) to the original coiner, they are associated with the bestselling author, as is the case of *Emotional intelligence* written by Daniel Goleman. Keyes ends the chapter with his investigation of the actual coiner of *Generation X*.

Chapter 17 ("Disputation") tackles the issue of debates over the authorship claims of successful coinages. As noted by Keyes, "[a] coinage that has never appeared in print, or can be found only in obscure publications, is susceptible to

being claimed by multiple self-proclaimed "coiners" or being attributed to them. That's why someone's claim to have invented a word is such an unreliable source of etymology" (p. 208). In the following sections, Keyes attempts to track down the actual authors of such neologisms as, e.g., *bad hair day*, *hot dog*, *affluenza*, *postmodern* and *establishment*. He also signals the problem of transatlantic claims to coinages like, for instance, *brunch* and *fashionista*.

In Chapter 18 entitled "Word wars", a broader Anglo-American debate or even conflict over neologisms is addressed. Keyes starts from Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States claiming that the English colonists appeared in a new context which necessitates them to *neologize* and use old words with new meanings. Then, the whole range of different approaches to linguistic novelties on American soil is discussed more in detail. Those attitudes extend from calling Americanisms *barbarism* and assault on the King's English to seeing the neologisms as underlying the independence. Keyes also mentions the postulates of English purists frown upon Americanisms to form a language academy supervising the propriety of English. Moreover, various policies of dictionary compilers to the inclusion of new words are discussed.

Chapter 19 ("Coiner's remorse") exemplifies cases in which politicians, writers and even scholars regret having coined particular neologisms. This is mostly because "[l]ike unruly offspring, neologisms can go their own way, and in the process develop meanings their parents never intended." (p. 242) In the chapter, Keyes tells stories of, for instance, *nuclear option*, *global warming*, *truthful hyperbole*, *profit centers* and *The Selfish Gene*. The author also refers to some previously discussed coinages as being a source of dissatisfaction for their coiners. The examples include *containment* (see Chapter 3), *zipless fuck* (Chapter 4) and *G-spot* (Chapter 13).

Chapter 20 ("You too can coin a word"), the concluding chapter of the monograph, assumes the form of a recipe for a successful neologism. Therin, the author offers a summary of his major findings. Among the factors which facilitate the creation of a well-received coinage, Keyes lists a short form (monosyllabic words such as *blog* and *meme* are easier to memorise) as well as rich evocation, both visual (e.g., *broken windows*, *pecking order*) and emotional (e.g., *disrupt* and *contraband*) in order to employ more senses to build a connection with a new word. Letters empowering neologisms are pointed out as equally important. B symbolizes "speed and efficiency" (p. 248) and as "an assertive letter that bursts from one's pursed lips like a pellet shot from a BB gun" (p. 249) B is even argued to be partly responsible for Britons voting for *Brexit*. G adds spuzz (i.e., "mental energy, aggressive intellect") (p. 249) to coinages such as *geek*, *grinch*, *gobbledygook* and *google*. Moreover, G is so forceful that it can stand on its own as in *g-force* and *G-spot*. K, due to its conspicuous character, both in speech and in writing, is said to stay behind the success of *OK*. Ultimately, Keyes claims Z

to be attractive to coiners because of its vocal reference to the buzzing of the bees. Further, Keyes mentions a few authors who posit that naturalness aids the adoption of a given neologism, especially a blend (e.g., *brunch*). Versality of a word (e.g., *bug*) can also be helpful. Moreover, coinages making use of allusion need to appeal to terms which are familiar to a current generation. Thus, ancient mythology is not a topical source of reference while *helicopter parents*, additionally employing imagery, has been well-received. Certain neologisms are also lucky to be quickly adopted if they happen to be coined to cover a gap, as was the case with such terms relating to the Covid 19 pandemic as *herd immunity* or *social distancing*. Keyes notices that there is still an urgent need to create new coinages to refer to different social phenomena and to replace some already existing words with more user-friendly synonyms.

The hidden history of coined words by Ralph Keyes is a valuable contribution to scholarship. The volume presents a rich tapestry of neologisms with meticulously investigated origins. Also, the process of word coining is broken into constituent parts and thoroughly examined. Keyes offers a compelling perspective on etymology and successfully achieves his goals. Some words and phrases which recur throughout the book are actually examined from different angles, as they fall into multiple analysed categories. Keyes smoothly guides the reader from one chapter to another, and his inquiries are described with such vivid language that the reader, be it academic or non-academic, becomes completely absorbed. Due to the structure of the monograph, i.e., the division of the twenty chapters into sections devoted to the stories of particular words or phrases, the book can be read just as well as a collection of detective stories. Importantly for scholars, *The hidden history of coined words*, with its 80 pages of well-documented primary sources, inspires further research in new coinages. The volume under review will be highly appreciated by scholars interested in historical linguistics, especially etymology, historical word-formation, historical semantics and historical sociolinguistics, as well as in cultural studies.

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