The Power of Words

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The Power of Words

Essays in Lexicography, Lexicology and Semantics

In Honour of Christian J. Kay

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Introduction

This volume is in honour of Christian Kay, Professor of English Language at the University of Glasgow since 1996.

Christian’s career at the university goes back to 1969, when she was appointed a part-time research assistant on the Historical Thesaurus of English (HTE), an ambitious project initiated by Professor Michael Samuels. From 1969 Christian worked also as a part-time editor working on the Collins dictionaries, and the two posts started her on a research career in lexicography and lexicology.

Christian’s love of collating and categorising things goes back to her Edinburgh childhood, when she was never happier than when putting buttons or sweets into piles according to colour, shape or size. Her schooling took place at the Mary Erskine School, made famous by Muriel Spark, though there is nothing of Miss Jean Brodie about Christian. Christian thrived there and went on to Edinburgh University, where she graduated M.A. in English Language and Literature in 1962. Like many Scots, she decided to see the world: first she travelled to the States, where she completed a postgraduate M.A. in English at Mount Holyoke College, writing a thesis on “Synonym Clusters in Beowulf”. After that she spent three years teaching English at the Folk University of Sweden in Stockholm, where, inter alia, she learned to speak Swedish. On her return to Scotland she took the diploma in General Linguistics at Edinburgh in 1968-69. Luckily for us she forsook Edinburgh, coming to Glasgow in 1969 to work on the Thesaurus as well as for Collins dictionaries, and in 1979 she was appointed to a full-time lectureship in Glasgow’s English Language Department. She has now worked here for thirty-six years and with effect from September 2005 she will be an Honorary Professorial Research Fellow in the Department.

Christian has worked tirelessly and with great enthusiasm on the HTE and she has, since Michael Samuels’s retirement in 1989, been the project’s Director. The HTE, a monumental work, which promises to be such a great benefit to scholars in so many different disciplines, will be completed in the next few years. Already a large number of scholars have benefited greatly from using this project’s archives, as many of the articles in this collection witness. Many more visitors, too numerous to mention, have made pilgrimages to Glasgow to consult
the research materials assembled here. The largest work that has so far come out of the HTE project is *A Thesaurus of Old English* (1995, 2000), which is now about to be published again, this time in electronic form.

Christian has written a large number of articles on the HTE, semantics and lexicography. She has edited six volumes of essays, which include collections of conference papers on historical linguistics. At the turn of the century she embarked with Jim McGonigal and other colleagues at Glasgow University on the ambitious LILT project (Language into Languages Teaching) which was commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department. After its completion Christian toured Scotland introducing the software to teachers who have found it a major benefit in language teaching. Christian has always been at the forefront of computer assisted learning, producing programs such as *English Grammar: an Introduction, The Basics of English Metre* and *ARIES: Assisted Revision in English Style*. She has been Director of STELLA (Software for the Teaching of English and Scottish Language and Literature and its Assessment), a project in the Computers in Teaching Initiative, for many years and along with Jean Anderson has helped the University of Glasgow remain at the forefront of CALL. She is also a prime mover in the highly successful project, the Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech.

Her administrative abilities, including fund-raising, are legendary. When I succeeded Michael Samuels to the English Language Chair in 1990 Christian graciously guided me in the mysteries of Higher Education in the UK and in even more complex topics such as the administrative workings of the University of Glasgow. She made a superb Head of Department in the periods 1989-92 and 1996-99, demonstrating her flair for financial management and her admirable common sense and no-nonsense approach to some of the illogical or irrational dictates of central university or government. She also has wide experience of examining at all levels in the university system and is much in demand at international conferences.

Christian’s teaching has covered a wide range of topics in English language, from her own subjects of semantics and literary and linguistic computing to general linguistics, the history of English, pragmatics and spoken discourse. She is an extremely caring teacher and many scholars today have her to thank for the encouragement and
assistance she gave them. Many of the contributors to this volume acknowledge this help.

I think that this quotation from Matthew Arnold which, although intended for classical translators, fits Christian admirably: she is “eminently plain and direct both in the evolution of [her] thought and in the expression of it, that is both in [her] syntax and [her] words; [she] is eminently plain and direct in the substance of [her] thought, that is in [her] matter and [her] ideas; and finally that [she] is eminently noble.”

It is not all work and no play with Christian. She is a keen and knowledgeable supporter of opera and classical music, especially Scottish Opera.

It is therefore a great honour and pleasure to prepare this volume of essays on her research areas of lexicography, lexicology and semantics.

Graham D. Caie
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Old English colour lexemes used of textiles in Anglo-Saxon England

C. P. Biggam

Introduction

This paper is the first of at least two articles to investigate the Old English (OE) vocabulary of textile colours, in relation to both Anglo-Saxon manufactures, and imported materials.1 While the present paper concentrates on colour words, the next will be principally concerned with dyes and dye words.2 It is hoped that this semantic investigation will complement the valuable work taking place in the disciplines of

1 I would like to record here my gratitude to Prof. Kay for the years of interest and support she has generously given to my efforts in historical semantic research. Colour has long constituted one of our mutual interests. In all my work, including the present paper, her Thesaurus of Old English, produced with Jane Roberts and Lynne Grundy, has proved an invaluable research tool (Jane Roberts and Christian Kay with Lynne Grundy, A Thesaurus of Old English, King’s College London Medieval Studies XI, 2 vols., London: King’s College London Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1995).

2 The principal sources of Old English word definitions in this research are the Dictionary of Old English (DOE), and, for those words which have not yet appeared in the DOE (from the letter G onwards), the dictionaries by Clark Hall, and Toller (Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (eds.), Dictionary of Old English in Electronic Form A-F, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2003; J. R. Clark Hall, A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, with a supplement by Herbert D. Meritt, 4th edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960; T. Northcote Toller (ed.), An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth, Supplement by T. Northcote Toller with revised and enlarged addenda by Alistair Campbell, 2 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898-1972). In cases where I have published word-studies, I use my own definitions, and provide references. For Latin words, my principal authority is the dictionary by Latham and Howlett (DMLBS) and, for those words which have not yet appeared in the DMLBS, the Oxford Latin Dictionary (OLD), and the dictionary by Souter (R. E. Latham and D. R. Howlett, Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975- ; P. G. W. Glare (ed.), Oxford Latin Dictionary, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982; Alexander Souter, A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949). Definitions have been abbreviated where appropriate.
archaeobotany and the chemical investigation of dye traces on surviving textiles.

2. Scope of the Research

The results presented and discussed in both this and later papers are drawn from a review of all occurrences of hue words and dye words in the Old English corpus. All those references which could definitely or reasonably be related to a textile referent were retrieved, and then classified as belonging to one of four different contextual types relating to the geographical location of the textile: English, exotic, generalized and unknown. For these papers on the situation in Anglo-Saxon England, I have drawn on the English and the generalized contexts. The latter indicates contexts in which the author implies that a colour or dye usage is universally appropriate, and we must assume that an Anglo-Saxon audience or readership would have interpreted this as applicable to them.

The research does not include achromatic colours, namely, the range from black, through all the greys to white, since these colours (and also brown) were available without the use of dyes as, for example, in woollen textiles produced from sheep’s fleeces of these colours. Also excluded are words denoting colour features other than hue, such as DARK, PALE, BRIGHT and others, and textile colours which are not the result of dyeing, such as thread of gold.

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4 I have also decided to exclude OE *pell* and *pellen*, unless they are in association with a colour or dye word. Although the older dictionaries are agreed that this noun and adjective refer principally to a type of garment, they also tend to add senses which imply a specific colour, such as ‘purple garment, purple’ (Clark Hall, op. cit., s.v. *pell*). The Old English word derives from the Latin *pallium* which, in the context of early medieval ecclesiastical dress, was white in colour (Janet Mayo, *A History of Ecclesiastical Dress*, London: Batsford, 1984, pp. 23-24). Some examples of this garment were made of a costly material known as *purpura* in Latin, but it is clear that *purpura* was not always purple in colour, as Dodwell quotes examples of red, white, green, black and mixed-colour *purpura* (C. R. Dodwell, *Anglo-Saxon Art: a New Perspective*, Manchester Studies in the History of Art 3, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982, p. 146). It is clear, therefore, that the use of Modern English ‘purple’ in the definition of OE *pell/pellen* is unsafe, whether it is intended to refer to the colour of the pallium, or to the meaning of *purpura*. Dodwell defines *purpura* as a textile word, referring to shot-silk taffeta (colour not specific) (op. cit., pp. 147-50).
3. Textile Types

3.1 Silk

3.1.1 (seolc; geolu)
In the tenth-century medical work now known as Bald’s *Leechbook*, jaundice (*gealadl* or *geolwe adl*) is said to cause the body of the patient to ‘turn yellow like good yellow silk’ (*ageolwap swa god geolo seoluc*).\(^5\)

3.1.2 (godwebb; geolu)
See Section 5.1.1 under Garments (Unspecified).

3.2 Wool

3.2.1 (wull; hæwen)
See Section 4.2.3 under Straining-Cloths.

4. Textile Manufactures (Excluding Clothing)

4.1 Hangings and Coverings

4.1.1 (wagrift, stræl, hwitel, væstling; brun, brunbasu)
In his prose work *De virginitate*, the Anglo-Saxon scholar Aldhelm (died 709 or 710) stresses that purity is not sufficient, by itself, to achieve perfection, since it must be accompanied by other virtues. To illustrate his point he reminds the reader of hangings and coverings woven in diverse colours which please the eye much more than a monochrome product. Aldhelm, writing in Latin, uses the words *cortina* ‘curtain, wall-hanging’ and *stragula* (for *stragulum*) ‘bed- or couch-cover, rug, blanket’.\(^6\) In two manuscripts of this text, *cortina* is...

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glossed in Old English with *wagrift* ‘tapestry, veil, curtain’, and *stragula* is glossed with *stræl* ‘curtain, quilt, matting’, *hwitel* ‘blanket’, and *wæstling* ‘sheet, blanket’. 7

Certain of the threads in these products are said to be dyed *purpureus* in colour, that is ‘purple, crimson or sim[ilar] (the exact shade depending on the technique used)’, referring to the dye obtained from the *purpura* shellfish. *Purpureus* is here glossed *brun* in Old English. Both Napier and Goossens suggest that *brun* is an abbreviation for *brunbasu* (although Goossens adds a question mark to his comment), and the *DOE* agrees (s.v. *brun-basu*). While it is true that abbreviations are common in these glosses, the expansion to *brunbasu* in this context may be unwarranted. There is no doubt that the hangings and coverings evoked by Aldhelm are of the highest quality, since he describes the embroiderer’s skill in working pictures, and he continues with a second example comprising the Temple hangings in Jerusalem. This high-quality context may have persuaded earlier editors that *brun*, traditionally defined as ‘brown’ or ‘dark’, indicates too ordinary a colour, while *brunbasu* is more impressive, meaning ‘dark purple, purple; red-purple, scarlet’. 8 The *DOE*, however, while also defining *brun* as ‘of a brown hue, dark-coloured’, continues its definition to include this word’s extended range into ‘purple’ and ‘red’ (among other colours) when glossing Latin words with such meanings. Old English had no basic term for PURPLE and so conveyed this colour with various ‘reddish’ words, 9 and the use of

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8 I must express my doubts about this dictionary sense of ‘scarlet’ for *brunbasu*. Both elements of this compound term need more research, but it is clear that *basu* denotes warm (red-based) colours which are vivid, rich and eye-catching. I suspect that the addition of *brun-* creates a darkening effect to such colours, indicating, perhaps especially, violet, dark purple and crimson. This would parallel the effect of *blæ- in blæhæwen* which darkens *hæwen* ‘blue (grey)’. (C. P. Biggam, *Blue in Old English: an Interdisciplinary Semantic Study*, Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997, pp. 223-39.) Scarlet is not dark, and so appears to be in inappropriate company in the *DOE*’s definition of *brunbasu*.

9 Roberts, Kay with Grundy, op. cit., I, 146.
**Old English colour lexemes**

*brun* to fulfil this function in a translation context suggests it may have had a close relationship with the more impressive warm colours even where translation was not involved.\(^{10}\)

### 4.2 Straining-Cloths

#### 4.2.1 (*claþ; hæwen*)

A number of medical recipes in Old English call for a concoction to be strained or wrung through a blue cloth. In Bald’s *Leechbook*, treatment for ‘a broken head’ involves boiling some herbs in butter and straining them (*seohhian*) through a *hæwen* cloth (*claþ*).\(^{11}\) In Book 3 of the *Leechbook*, a treatment for palsy involves mixing coriander powder with a woman’s milk, and wringing it (*awringan*) through a *hæwen* cloth.\(^{12}\) Also in Book 3, the preparation of an ear-salve involves soaking several herbs in wine or vinegar, and then wringing (*wringan*) the resulting liquid through a *hæwen* cloth into the ear.\(^{13}\) The Old English colour word *hæwen* has been researched, and defined as ‘blue (grey)’ indicating that ‘grey’ is a less common sense than ‘blue’.\(^{14}\)

#### 4.2.2 (*claþ; linhæwen*)

Two further references of related interest to those in Section 4.2.1 occur in another medical text, the *Lacnunga*, at least part of which dates to the late tenth to mid eleventh century, but which contains much older elements. The first reference concerns a treatment for eyes that are ‘stopped up’, and which recommends taking specified herbs, and dripping (*drypan*) their juice into the eye through a cloth.\(^{15}\) The second reference is a treatment for ‘dimness of the eyes’ which involves soaking a part of wild teasel in honey, pounding it, and then

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\(^{10}\) This may explain the references where *brun* is used of flowers (*DOE*, s.v. *brun*, 1.b).

\(^{11}\) Cockayne, op. cit., II, 24.


\(^{13}\) *Ibid.*, II, 344.

\(^{14}\) Biggam, op. cit., pp. 115-270.

wringing (*wringan*) the resulting substance through a cloth into the eye.\(^{16}\) In both these cases the cloth is described as *linhæwen*.

*Lin* can mean ‘flax’ or ‘linen’. It seems unlikely that a cloth would be described as ‘linen-blue’ (or ‘linen-grey’) since such a description would be redundant if the cloth were made of linen (‘linen-blue linen’) and confusing for other textiles (*e.g.* ‘linen-blue wool’). The flax-plant probably provides the answer, since the most common colour of its flowers is pale blue, so *linhæwen* is reasonably defined as ‘flax-flower blue’.\(^{17}\) (See also Section 4.2.3 below.)

### 4.2.3 (*claþ; hæwen*)

In Book 3 of the *Leechbook*, a treatment is recommended for ‘small eye’ (*æsmæl*), and all pains in the eye. ‘Small eye’ has been variously interpreted as shrinkage of the eye, or contraction of the eyeball or pupil.\(^{18}\) The problem is to be treated by chewing wild teasel and then wringing (*wringan*) the juice through a blue (*hæwen*) and woollen (*wyllen*) cloth onto the eyes of the patient.\(^{19}\)

Although several British plants can produce a blue dye, there is little evidence, either historical or archaeological, that anything other than woad (*Isatis tinctoria* L.) (OE *wad*) was exploited for this purpose in Anglo-Saxon England.\(^{20}\) The blue cloths used in medical treatments, therefore, were most likely to have been dyed with woad, and there may have been a very good reason for this. The woad plant has vulnerary and styptic properties, aiding the healing of wounds and the staunching of blood,\(^{21}\) and its appearance in certain Anglo-Saxon medical recipes suggests these properties were understood.\(^{22}\) It is clear, however, that wound-healing qualities are not especially helpful for some of the problems mentioned above, and it may be that certain

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\(^{16}\) Pettit, op. cit., I, 8.

\(^{17}\) Biggam, op. cit., pp. 209-10.

\(^{18}\) DOE, s.v. *æ-smæl*.

\(^{19}\) Cockayne, op. cit., II, 338.


\(^{22}\) For example, Cockayne, op. cit., II, 132 (a burn); II, 36 (an eye ulcer).
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4.3 Binding-Strips

4.3.1 (wraed; wraett; read, wraeteread)

In Book 3 of the Leechbook, a treatment for migraine (healf heafodece) is given which involves binding plantain roots around the head. The instruction reads bind þa moran ymb þ[æt] heafod mid wraete reade wraede. Cockayne interprets this as an instruction to bind [plantain] roots and wraett (a plant) around the head with a red band (... reade wraede), but others have taken wraete read to be a compound term meaning wraett-red. The latter interpretation would, of course, assume the binding-strips to have been dyed with wraett dye, and would exclude the presence of wraett plants. Since the term wraetbaso ‘wraett-red’ (or ‘-purple’, or ‘-crimson’) is extant, there can be no objection to the theoretical existence of wraetread.

Another cure for pain in the head (heafodece), however, lends support to Cockayne’s interpretation. In this instruction, the physician is told to take the lower part of wraett, put it on a red binding-strip, and bind it to the head (genim niopowerarde wraette do on readne wraed binde þ[æt] heafod mid). In this second cure, wraett is the only plant involved, and the binding-strip is an unspecified red. It would clearly be safer to interpret the first cure along similar lines, with the exception that two plants were involved in that case, plantain and wraett, perhaps because migraine is a stronger pain than general headache. Both cures would then involve the plants being tied to the head with red binding-strips, but not specifically wraett-red.

It is quite possible that the writer of these two cures was unconcerned about distinguishing between the wraett plant and wraett-dyed cloth, since it may have been simply the presence of wraett, in any form, which was important. Schlutter makes a good case for the wraett-plant being a source of red dye, by considering the evidence for the cognate word in Old High German, rezza or riza. This lexeme is

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23 Ibid., II, 307.
24 For example, O. B. Schlutter, “Anglo-Saxonica”, Anglia, 30 (N. F. 18) (1907), 239-60, 248; Toller, op. cit., see Supplement, s.v. wraet-read.
25 Cockayne, op. cit., II, 304.
26 Schlutter, op. cit., 249.