

103 Humpty Dumpty was wrong ... and right

Still writing? Why? It's partly because I'm on a journey and am trying to find my way, but it's also partly that I'm desperately trying to work out **why** I'm so much happier now than I've ever been. Plus, it's hard-wired into my character, that I have to know **how** and **why** things work.

But I don't just want abstract knowledge; it's intensely practical. I'm an obsessive-compulsive problem-solver. I want to make things (life) work better. (That same characteristic has made me a world expert on macros, i.e. God can redeem people's failings, to help other people.)

Enough preamble. Let's hear from Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* (my bold):

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a 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.”

So the other aspect of my character is that I'm fascinated by words and their meaning, and especially how those words can be put together to effectively convey what ‘*I choose it to mean*’.

But that's also God's problem. How can God communicate with us – effectively?

Well, thank God, we've got the Bible. Phew! Yes, but the Bible is made up of words, and words are very slippery customers, and especially because their meaning can change with time – I mean **totally** change.

The word ‘nice’ is a compliment, right? Well, it used to mean ‘silly, foolish, simple’.

But then the word ‘silly’ went the other way; that used to be applied to things that were worthy or blessed; then it came to refer to the weak and vulnerable, and now it means foolish.

How is it ever possible for a word to completely change meaning? Humpty was right: ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’ The meanings of words change because of **the way people use them**.

It may be because people want to be deliberately counter-cultural, such as using ‘wicked’ to mean ‘awesome’ – or do I mean ‘aweful’ (another word whose meaning is changing/has changed!)?

But actually, Humpty was wrong – it's not so much about how **I** use them; it's about how **the majority** use them. Paul Beverley can't make people use words differently, but I can alert us to the danger.

Take ‘repent’ for example. Ask any educated person what it means, and they'll say something like, ‘feel sorry about something you've done wrong’. And OED agrees: ‘Feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin’.

Now, I'm no linguist or theologian, but isn't the origin of the word 'metanoia'? and doesn't that mean turning around, completely changing direction, i.e. turning your face towards God?

It's nobody's **fault** that we've lost so much of the positive value and meaning of the word 'repent', but when we're reading English translations of the Bible, we're the losers if we don't realise the positive sense that I think the writers of the New Testament intended.

But this comes back to Humpty's comment, 'which is to be master?' We must not allow the value and meaning of biblical words to be stolen from us.

One more secular example: What does it mean to say 'such and such has been sanctioned'? Ask the OED: Sanction: *Give official permission or approval for (an action)* **and** Sanction: *Impose a sanction or penalty on.* The two totally opposite meanings both apply *today*.

OK, I tricked you slightly by saying 'such and such', because if it's an *action* that has been sanctioned, then it's meaning 1, but if it's a *person or country* that has been sanctioned, it's 2.

My point? **Check the context**, and certainly don't quote things out of context!

[Hobbyhorse warning...] What do people today think of when they hear, 'the wages of sin is death'? For many, it'll be that God is going to smite you if you do things wrong. [24,52,72]

Why do people think that? It's not their fault; it's because **we** have (mis)quoted it out of context in order (for the best of motives) to get people to 'repent' ('feel remorse for their sins').

Can you see what I mean by saying that words are incredibly slippery customers?!

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