

Words about words

These points are likely to arise in discussions of the pairs and groupings of words in Paper 7.

1. Words change in their meanings and implications over time, and mean different things to different people.
2. Changes of language occur partly because the outer world changes; partly because our understanding of the world changes; and partly because various groups and communities ('speech communities') gain greater power and influence than hitherto and in consequence can make their voices and viewpoints better known.
3. So anxieties and uncertainties about linguistic change are often bound up with anxieties about changing relationships, and changing patterns of influence and power.
4. Concerns in the media about political correctness, for example, are connected with concerns about social change more widely, both nationally and globally, not just about language.
5. Different words are used in different contexts. With regard to discourse about 'race' in Britain, for example, there tend to be differences between:
 - legal, administrative and official usage
 - usage in most ordinary conversation amongst white people, reflected and reinforced by usage in the media
 - usage reflecting the self-understanding of individuals and communities from minority ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds
 - usage in academia.
6. It will be a long time before there is a shared vocabulary for talking and writing about race and ethnicity across all contexts even in the UK, let alone in the rest of the English-speaking world, or in international forums.
7. Only people with uncontested power can successfully stipulate how words should always be used.
8. The choice of a word frequently indicates the speech community to which a person belongs or with which they wish to identify. For example, Derry and Londonderry in Northern Ireland are the same place but the words are used in different communities. If you ask a stranger how to get there you indicate not only literally where you want to go but also, metaphorically, where you are coming from.
9. It is by and large not helpful to maintain that certain words are always 'correct' and certain others always 'wrong'.
10. It is, however, usually worth trying not to give avoidable offence. This is partly an ethical matter; partly a matter of simple courtesy; and partly a matter of prudence and self-interest.

11. It is important to develop shared usage and meanings within a group of colleagues.
 12. In relation to any one word, it is valuable to be aware of its pros and cons, and of the different contexts and speech communities in which it is current.
 13. People sometimes feel they dare not even open their mouth, in case they use the 'wrong' word. Such anxieties need to be acknowledged and talked about. They are not, however, an acceptable excuse for silence or inaction.
 14. 'The limits of my language are the limits of my world.' (Wittgenstein)
-