

UNDERSTANDING THAROOROSAURUS AND DESIRIBILITY OF ITS USAGE (BY INDIAN SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH)

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Abstract

English is an evolving language as a result of which lots of words are added or removed in course of time. Of course, new, unprecedented, never-heard-before situations lead us to invent new words by various means and to repurpose, tweak, and redefine the existing words. Writers like Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Ben Jonson, Thomas More have contributed so many words in the past centuries (Dickson:2014) and in recent times, **Shashi Tharoor (with his use of exotic words) has taken the world by storm.** We discuss, in this paper, how words in general are invented, used and repurposed with special focus on Dr Shashi Tharoor's use of lexis. We also explore whether we can or should use such words in our everyday conversation.

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Introduction

According to Ethnologue (2021), 7139 languages are spoken in the world and still new languages are added or some die. As per a report in the Guardian (2016), not content with the million or so words the English speakers already have at their disposal, they are adding new ones at the rate of around 1,000 a year. With over 1350 million speakers (almost India's population), English is perhaps the largest spoken language in the world (of course the dictionaries contain about 1,70,000 words).

Since lots of new words are created every year, we should keep ourselves abreast of the process of lexical innovation in particular and language evolution in general so that we

can play around with words and use English with felicity. For the purpose of convenience, we have *italicized* the words. Before discussing how Tharoor invents and uses words, it is worthwhile to understand how words in general are created.

How Are Words Created?

Shakespeare is often considered a master neologist, because at least 500 words (including *critic*, *swagger*, *lonely*, and *hint*) first appear in his works. Similarly, Milton, who gave us 630 coinages, including *lovelorn*, *fragrance* and *pandemonium* is believed to be the most prolific minter of words. But many other writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer (*universe*, *approach*), Ben Jonson (*rant*, *petulant*), John Donne (*self-preservation*, *valediction*), Sir Thomas More (*atonement*, *anticipate*) are behind many of our lexical innovations. All words, however, are created by one of the many mechanisms (Bodley: 2016) discussed below:

Derivation: The commonest method of creating a new word is to add a prefix or suffix to an existing one as in *realisation*, *democratise*, *detonator*, *preteen*, *hyperlink*, *monogamish* etc.

Back formation: The creation of a new root word by the removal of a phantom affix, as in the noun *sleaze*, which was back-formed from “sleazy” and a similar process brought about *pea*, *liaise*, *enthuse*, *aggress*, *donate* etc.

Compounding: The juxtaposition of two existing words, mostly nouns, for example, *fiddlestick*, *claptrap*, *carbon dating*, *bail*

out etc. though other class words, e.g. *daydream*, *awe-inspiring*, *environmentally friendly* and so on.

Repurposing: Taking a word from one context and applying it to another is repurposing. Words such the computer *mouse* being named after the long-tailed animal or *crane*, after the long-necked bird are some examples.

Conversion: Taking a word from one word class and transplanting it to another as in the words *giant* (n) and *friend* which are now used as adjectives.

Eponyms are words named after a person or place, e.g. *Alzheimer's*, *atlas*, *diesel*, *sandwich*, *mentor*, *boycott*, *bigot*, *currant*, *hooligan*, *marmalade*, *silhouette*, *sideburns* etc.

Abbreviations and acronyms are the shorter forms of the existing words, as in case of the words *pram* (perambulator), *goodbye* (God be with you), *curio* (curiosity), *van* (caravan), *laser* (light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation), *NASA* (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) etc.

According to Behera (2013) loanwords or words borrowed from other languages as in *kismet, negro, brat, sputnik, bazaar, police, origami, bungalow, dachshund, ketchup, cruise, hammock, apartheid, zombie* etc.

Onomatopoeia refer to the words created by imitation of the sound they are supposed to make, e.g. *cuckoo, hiss, screech, wheeze* etc.

Reduplication or the repetition of a word or sound is a method that results in words like

flip-flop, goody-goody, helter-skelter, hurly-burly, hip hop etc.

Nonce words are words pulled out of thin air, bearing little relation to any existing form, e.g., *quark, bling, fleek* etc.

Error such as misspellings, mishearings, mispronunciations and mistranscriptions also produce new words, e.g. *scramble, shit, science* etc.

Portmanteau words are words composed of two or more words; formed by adding a part of one word with another part of one more words as in *affluenza, clicktionary, docufiction, fictomercial, humongous, Michiana, netizen, prosumer, spork, tributestimonial, zedonk* etc. (Behera: 2011)

Tharoor's Lexicon

The development of languages can lead to a change in meaning of words, referred to as semantic change. These changes occur with the passage of time and as we evolve, the language also changes. Of course, technology plays no mean a role in making a language flourish. Social media in general and Twitter in particular, for example, as a platform has created a language of its own and has even added to the lexicon of spoken language in several innovative ways. Since twitter and such other social media is generally used by educated, elite, English speaking people, it creates a huge influence among the followers. Let's take Shashi Tharoor, for instance, who as one of the most active influencer on twitter has created or repurposed a set of unique words- termed tharoorausus- which has taken the world by storm. Many of these words are so uncommon or exotic that we do not ordinarily use in our day-to-day communication- not even in academic discourse, not because they are scary or obsolete but because they are difficult to pronounce or understand. We examine below the words he uses, how and why he chooses them, and how it impacts the English language users. Some of these words also appeared in a news item in the Times of India (2020). To retain authenticity, we use the sentences Tharoor has given as illustrations (of usage in his book).

Agathokakological (adj) consisting of both good and evil [Usage: The Mahabharata is unusual among the great epics because its heroes are not perfect idealized figures, but *agathokakological* human beings with desires and ambition who are prone to lust, greed and anger and capable of deceit, jealousy and unfairness.]

Authorism (n) a word, phrase or name created by an author, which passes into common usage [Usage: The works of Shakespeare include hundreds of *authorisms*, including words now commonly used but unheard before his time, like 'bump', 'hurry' and 'critical'.]

Calumny (n) slander [Usage: We filed today in Delhi High Court; had enough of his campaign of *calumny*.]

Cromulent (adj) appearing legitimate but actually being spurious [Usage: The govt's statement to the court on the migrant workers' crisis made a *cromulent* case...]

Cwtch (n) a hug, but much more intimate than a hug [Usage: Once the election results are out, many a defeated candidate will be in need of a *cwtch*.]

Defenestrate (v) literally to throw out of the window [Usage: The opposition is united in its determination to *defenestrate* the Modi govt.]

Epicaricacy (n) deriving pleasure from the misfortunes of others [Usage: When the boastful braggart was defenestrated by his club, my *epicaricacy* knew no bounds.]

Epistemophilia (n) an excessive love of knowledge [Usage: He was constantly nose-deep in GK textbooks to a point where his *epistemophilia* was positively antisocial.]

Farrago (n) a confused mix [Usage: The channel's accusations against me were a *farrago* of lies...]

Floccinaucinihilipilification (n) the act of estimating something as worthless [Usage: My new book *The Paradoxical PM*, is more than just a 500-page exercise in *floccinaucinihilipilification*.]

Kakistocracy (n) a form of government in which the least qualified or most unprincipled individuals are in power [Usage: Sometimes, it has seemed that India has in many ways degenerated into a *kakistocracy*]

Kerfuffle (n) a disorderly outburst, tumult, row, ruckus or disturbance [Usage: In view of the *kerfuffle* around my tweet wrongly attributing to the US a picture of Nehruji in the USSR, I thought it best to tweet some pictures that really showed him in the U.S.]

Lethologica(n)the affliction of not remembering the right word for the thought you are trying to express [Usage: ...right in the middle of an interview, he suffered a crippling bout of *lethologica*.]

Luddite (n) one who strongly opposes the use of new technology [Usage: My aunt is a *luddite*; she still refuses to have a mobile...]

Muliebrity(n) femininity [Usage: His mother embodied all the qualities... associated with*muliebrity*.]

Opsimath (n) a person who begins or continues to learn late in life [Usage: When it came to reading, she was definitely an *opsimath*...]

Panglossian (adj) foolishly optimistic [Usage: 'Ayushman Bharat' is essentially a *panglossian* idea...]

Paracosm (n) a detailed imaginary world created inside one's mind [Usage: His little daughter spent hours in her own *paracosm* with people and pets only she could see.]

Paraprosdokian (n) a figure of speech in which the latter part of a sentence is surprising, in a way that prompts the reader to rethink the first part [Usage: My favourite*paraprosdokian* declares that 'the pun is the lowest form of humour-when you don't think of it first'.]

Rodomontade (n/verb/adj)boastful or inflated talk or behavior[Usage: The politician's *rodomontade* speeches sought to conceal his total lack of substance...]

Snollygoster (n)a shrewd, unprincipled politician[Usage: The term *snollygoster* can easily apply to many practitioners of Indian politics.]

Zugzwang (n)in chess etc., a 'compulsion to move' that places the mover at a disadvantage[Usage: The grandmaster, outwitted by his opponent, found himself in *zugzwang* and chose to resign.]

THAROOR'S TWEETS (CONTAINING EXOTIC WORDS)

Shashi Tharoor is a very active influencer on social media, especially twitter (@Shashi Tharoor). He takes to twitter to express his opinions and concerns almost on a daily basis. And incidentally, some of his tweets are incredibly popular because of the words he uses many of which were unheard of or were not in vogue or were difficult to pronounce and understand. Let's look at some of the tweets **wherein Tharoor uses long and less heard words in his interaction over the social media** to understand how his use of new

words makes people turn their heads. We have shown the words in discussion *initalics* with their meanings within brackets for the audience to understand the expression in context.

Tweet: Pleased to confirm this story. We filed today in Delhi High Court. Had enough of his campaign of *calumny*(slander)

Tweet: That must be the last word on this *fatuous* (pointless) controversy.

Tweet: To all the well-meaning folks who send me parodies of my supposed speaking/writing style: The purpose of speaking or writing is to communicate with precision. I choose my words because they are the best ones for the idea I want to convey, not the most obscure or *rodomontade* (boastful) ones!

Tweet: Their harassment was *puerile* (silly and immature).

Tweet: Exasperating *farrago*(a confused mixture) of distortions, misrepresentations&outright lies being broadcast by an unprincipled showman masquerading as a journalist.

Tweet: *Puritanical patriarchy* (displaying a very strict or censorious moral attitude) runs rampant...

Tweet: Felt a post-colonial *frisson* (a sudden feeling of excitement or fear) on hearing SaareJahanSeAchha played by bagpipers. Isn't it time our police bands included Indian instruments?

Tweet: Thanks! And comprehensibly too. I have NEVER used big words for their own sake, only when they're the most *apposite* (apt in the circumstances) ones for the idea I am trying to convey.

Tharoor's love Forun common words

From the discussion in the preceding paragraph, it is clear that the words Tharoor uses are not commonplace; in fact most of them go above the heads of the ordinary mortals. What is more: most of these words are not even found in a standard dictionary! It is, therefore, necessary for us to know how Tharoor knows or uses the words so that we can get some insight and upgrade our vocabulary. During an interaction with students at an event (in response to a student's query about his love for exotic words), Tharoor revealed how he developed his exotic vocabulary and surprised the audience by telling that he had "barely opened" dictionary in his life. How do we pick up new words? Let's see what Tharoor has to say: "I have read extensively...I had some advantages over all of you...I lived in India without television, without computers, without play station, without mobile phones... all I had were books."Incidentally, Shashi Tharoor, the wizard of words has authored a book titled *Tharoorosaurus* which contains these words. In an interview with DH (Sept 10, 2020), Tharoorreveals his secret of using the exotic words. Here are excerpts from the interview:

Q. Dr Tharoor, *Tharoorosaurus* is dedicated to your father Chandran Tharoor. How did he inculcate in you the love for writing, especially your interest in words?

A. My father was an immense influence on my life...He was a word-game addict...

Q. Could you tell us how you cherry picked the words and blended it with the contemporary world in this book of yours?

A. The contemporary world did play a large part in the selection I curated. Words like 'pandemic', 'impeachment', and 'quarantine' have lately been ubiquitous in the media that surrounds us. Some I'd recently used in tweets – 'farrago', 'snollygoster'... 'defenestrate', 'curfew'...

Q. The word 'Satyagraha' makes quite an interesting and surprising entry into this book. Why did you choose it?

A. The book is aimed at an Indian audience... I had notoriously written in my *The Great Indian Novel* three decades ago that the British had taken the Hindi word "loot" into their dictionaries as well as their habits. The process continues, from "jungle" to "shampoo" to "cash" to "dungaree" and into the present!"Satyagraha" was coined in South Africa after a newspaper contest initiated by Mahatma Gandhi...

Q. Do you sometimes use these complicated words in casual conversations? How often are people taken aback by the usage of such words?

A. I am aware, I have a reputation of being some sort of walking-talking Thesaurus...I choose my words because they best express the idea I want to convey, not because they are the most obscure or rodomontade ones!

Can or Should We Use Such Words?

Yes, we can and should use exotic words but with a small caveat: as long as what we say makes sense. In other words, whatever we say or write must be clear to the audience; must convey the intended meaning in the speech environment. We can improve our vocabulary by following the tips suggested by Avery (British Council Foundation-Indonesia): One of the simple means is to read, read, and read for the more we read-be it novels, magazines, newspapers-the more words we will learn. Of course, the reader should identify new words and try to find out their meanings in context as s/he goes on reading. However, we could always look up a dictionary or thesaurus wherever in doubt which leads us to the second tip, that is to own a dictionary or thesaurus (it can be in any shape: print, or online or softcopy). And looking up a dictionary is not a herculean task anymore (contrast it with a situation when we had to carry a bulky dictionary) for we can do it wherever we are just at the click of a button-thanks to the mobile or any other device with the internet.

The habit of using a dictionary or thesaurus (online or offline) not only helps us understand the text properly but also adding to the repertoire of our vocabulary, e.g. synonyms, antonyms, usage etc. When we write down the new words we come across while reading, we will be familiar with the words and these words will be a part of our own dictionary. One more important point is that we should take one thing at a time or learn one

word a day which will build a list of new words. Playing some games, involving words, for example, crossword puzzles, anagrams, word jumble, Scrabble, Boggle etc. is a useful tip to expand the vocabulary. Also, we should engage in conversations because just talking to people can really help. To begin with, we can speak to friends, colleagues and peers in informal situations and gradually extend it to formal situations involving public. This will boost our confidence and make our language flow, as it were. When we use English in speech contexts over a considerable period of time we tend to achieve a fair amount of ease and fluency making the English sound native-like.

We should consciously use the words we come across or learn of course with restraint because sometimes certain words don't convey the intended meaning. We should always keep our eyes and ears open to the world of vocabularies so as to grab the word or words at the slightest opportunity, dive into its etymology, meaning, collocation, usage and other facets. The more interest we take in a particular word or words, the more fun we will derive and the better our communication will become. One day, we may possibly come close to being as erudite as Tharoor and our writings or speeches may even look or sound like tharoorosaurus. It is ambitious; it is aspiration but it is worth exploring.

Conclusion

Vocabulary is an interesting field for it opens up myriad possibilities for the user of English to express her/himself in an elite manner, especially in an academic engagement or intellectual environment. In addition, it can also add fun to the activities we indulge in where English is used. One can derive so much fun by learning a new word or using the word in a speech context or by sharing with others almost in an infectious manner so much so that people begin to turn their heads. And if the words are similar to what Tharoor uses, then it is sure to make people turn their heads in awe and admiration! So let's learn new words from whichever source they come and make the best use of the words to express with clarity and precision. It may not be possible for everybody or at least the laypersons to use Tharoorosaurus in everyday context but if pick up a word or two such words each day and start using it, even **difficult to pronounce and understand**, exotic, uncommon words will also become a part of our vocabulary; and what's more: it will embellish the English we write or speak. It is in no way to suggest that without using sophisticated words, we may fail to communicate or our English may sound ordinary. It is good to be aspirational and ambitious; let's try using words incrementally and bit by bit to our advantage!

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