

## Language assembly

I start this assembly with something of a confession. For all that I am keen on reading, thoughtfulness and higher things, I do quite like some trashy TV. When *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here* is on, you will find me glued to it. At the moment, my trash TV fix is being supplied by *The Masked Singer*. The final was last Saturday, and as this was recorded last week I do not know who won it. The idea of the show is that a celebrity appears in an outlandish costume and sings. We all try to guess who they are from their disguised voice and the clues they offer. The three in the final were Badger, Robin and Sausage. I want Sausage to have won, but this assembly is inspired by Robin. I'll save the reason why til the end, but suffice it to say that the costume inspired thoughts about language – the words we use and how strange the English language is.

I am so glad that I am lucky enough to have English as a first language. I think it must be incredibly difficult to learn, as there can be few languages with so many traps and pitfalls to catch out the unwary.

Let me give you some examples. We are used to words that shift from a positive meaning to their opposite, with addition of a prefix. For example, something can be 'consistent', but shift to its opposite meaning when it is 'inconsistent'. Prefixes like 'in', 'dis' or 'un' are the usual signals of the shift in meaning. Or you could add the suffix, 'less' to make 'worth' into 'worthless' and 'value' into 'valueless'. But there is a trap. What about words that have a negative, but no positive? You can be 'disgruntled', but never 'gruntled'. Or you can 'disrupt, but you can never 'rupt'. An idiot can be 'gormless', but a bright person is never 'gorm'. 'Inept' and 'inert' are criticisms, but no one was ever praised for being 'ept' or 'ert'

Even more infuriating are words which, without changing, mean opposites – famously, 'inflammable' means both capable of catching fire, and incapable of catching fire. Bizarre, but not unusual. To 'sanction' something means to impose an official penalty on, but it also means to give official approval to something. The word 'left' means a person who remains – 'who was left at the end?' and to leave – 'who left before the end?' What about 'off'? It can mean when something is deactivated – 'the alarm was turned off' and the opposite - 'the alarm went off'. There are plenty more like that.

Words can be deceitful and confusing, but there are even worse examples of the problems that the English language can cause. One of my favourite oddities are fossil words – these are words that have become obsolete and would never normally be used by a modern English speaker. However, they can survive as fossils in phrases that we use without thinking. Take the phrase 'spick and span'. I bet that everyone watching knows what the phrase means. But look again at the words. Of the three, only one is in the language. No-one asks 'Have you spicked your room?' to hear the answer 'Yes, it is completely span.' 'Spick' and 'span' are fossil words from a previous era. Other phrases preserve fossils – 'kith and kin', where 'kith' is everyone you know that is not your family. 'Hither and thither' hides two more fossils, and

‘hither and yon’ adds one more. ‘to and fro’ has an antique shortened version of from. Most of us have forgotten that fortnight is also a shortened word – in this case of ‘fourteen nights’.

All the examples I have given are of unusual words, which can catch you out because they contain traps. But what about normal words? The English language can ambush you in other ways – by going for the simple rather than the complicated. Let me ask you this - which word has the longest definition in the latest edition of the Oxford English Dictionary? Any ideas? I’ll tell you. It is the word ‘set’. S-E-T. That simple word has 430 different senses or uses. In order to define a three letter word, the OED requires 60,000 words and 326,000 letters. That is the length of a novel. How can something so simple be simultaneously so complicated?

Let us finish with the Masked Singer again, and ask ourselves a final question. It is this: did the word ‘orange’ exist in the English language before the arrival of the fruit in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century? Let us remind ourselves what Robin from *The Masked Singer* looks like:



He clearly lives up to his nickname, robin redbreast. The robin famously has a red chest, which legend says he got from picking a thorn from Jesus’ crown of thorns, as Jesus made his way to be crucified at Calvary. The blood that issued from the wound fell on the bird and dyed his chest red.

The idea of a robin is completely wrapped up with its red breast. It is natural to us to think that Batman’s sidekick Robin wears a red vest. Here he is from the 60s TV show.



Even the authoritative Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, or RSPB, gets in on the action. Here is the illustration from their bird book for children.



The accompanying text is very clear. The robin is described as ‘The UK's favourite bird - with its bright red breast it is familiar throughout the year and especially at Christmas!’ But wait a minute. Does a robin actually have a red breast? Here is a picture of one.



Here is another.

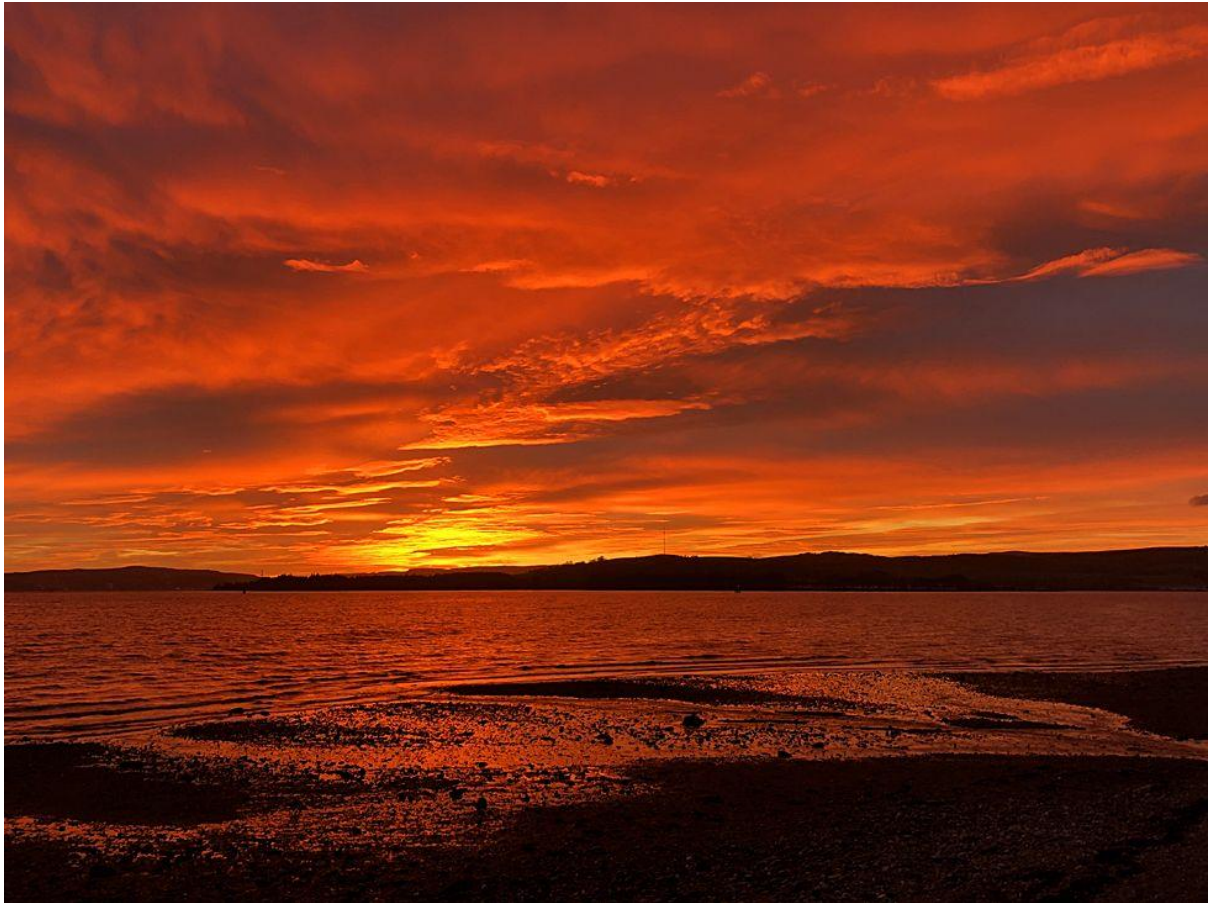


If that isn't orange, I don't know what is. It is all down to the power of language. Before the fruit arrived in this country, English did not distinguish between red and orange. Both were called 'red'. And because we already had the idea of robin redbreast, we ignored the facts our eyes gave us and continued to imagine – even actually see - a colour that just isn't there.

We do the same thing elsewhere, too. Have you heard the weather rhyme, 'Red sky at night, shepherd's delight'? A red sunset means good weather the next day. But are sunsets red? We all think so. Here is a sunset.



Here is another.



Isn't it incredible what words can do? They have the power to confuse, surprize and baffle. They can even make us deny the truth of things that are right in front of our noses.

The power of the English language should be a source of delight and wonder for us all. However, it is put into the shade by one associated extra-ordinary thing – the act of speaking at all.

In my next assembly I'll have few words to say about that.