

**Interview with Professor Christian Kay on the Historical Thesaurus of English project,
by Dore van Haasterecht and Robert Lennon**

Robert: So what was it, what was it like to work on the Historical Thesaurus project, erm what was your experience on it?

Christian: Well I was working on it for a long time. I mean I came here nineteen sixty-nine as a research assistant. So then I was working on it full time as a sort of nine-to-five job. And then gradually I became a lecturer and had less time but more responsibility, till I ended up really running it for the last, what, twenty years maybe.

Christian: So it was a very long project. [laugh]

Robert: Yeah. So erm yeah there must have been a lot of changes along the way, like, we thought, erm we read that you erm changed the classification and the data collection maybe a couple of times.

Christian: Yes, I mean I don't think when it was started anybody realised how big it was going to be or how long it would take. I mean they said, the first calculation was fifteen years and it took forty-five so that was quite a difference.

Robert: Hm. Yeah.

Christian: Do you know Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases?

Robert: Yeah.

Christian: When we started that was what we used as a filing system. So you took the information out of the OED, wrote it on a slip of paper, and then you put a number in the corner which was something like 'three-six-five animals', which is the number in Roget's Thesaurus for animals and then it was filed. We used to have an archive where the speech studio is now. Erm, but we grew out of that. Roget's got one number for animals and in fact there are about sixteen thousand words in English, so it's not awfully helpful to put sixteen thousand words under one heading, so we gradually moved to something much more detailed. Erm, and that went on developing really over quite a long period of time, cause we had, you know, postgraduates doing theses and the first one was a guy from Canada who classified religion. So that was a bit done but that affected other bits, cause there were, there was too much for him to do so we ended up, he did 'the church' and then somebody else did deities and things like that, which was another complete section. And then we had a problem, well, where do you stop with deities? And we ended up putting in all sorts of supernatural creatures as well.

Robert: So it sounds like detail was your main, kind of, focus?

Christian: Yeah the structure of it emerged quite early, the big overall classes. That was in an exercise that Michael Samuels and I did. He was the founder of it. And we sort of set up twenty-six broad divisions and that survived, you know, right till the end, but the detail changed a lot.

Robert: Yeah.

Dore: How did you determine who was working on what? Cause I read you started with the letter L.

Christian: Yes, erm I don't know why they gave me the letter L. [laugh] Erm, well probably it was the next letter because at that point there were a lot of the teaching staff were doing a letter each. So the story is that Professor Samuels came into a departmental meeting and said, you know, "this is what we are going to do". The professors had that kind of power in those days. And so he did the letter A, or at least the volume cause it was OED volumes, and then the next person down did D to E, so by the time they got to me it was L.

Dore: And did you like working on the letter L?

Christian: No, er it's a very difficult letter. [laugh]

Dore: No? [laugh]

Christian: Cause it's got really nasty words like trying to sort out 'lay', the verb, and 'lie', the verb, over, you know, thirteen hundred years, that was very difficult. In fact I got C after that, somebody dropped out, and that's a much nicer letter, should you ever have to do anything like this. [laugh]

Dore: [laugh]

Robert: So should we avoid the word 'set', for example?

Christian: Yes definitely. [laugh] Yeah I mean S is the biggest letter in the alphabet.

Robert: [laugh] Yeah. Mm.

Christian: It has some horrible words in it. Those in some ways are the most difficult. I mean I did 'make'. I did L-M in fact and the rest of 'M' was quite nice but 'make', you know? [laugh]

Robert and Dore: [laugh]

Christian: You've got probably about a hundred different meanings in the OED. We tended to put them together, cause a hundred is really too many and in the OED quite a lot of it is based on grammar, you know, if you've got a different construction they'll separate it out, which is fine for their purposes but unnecessary for ours. Cause we had a rule, you can't have a word more than once in any semantic category. So if it's got nowhere to go you've got to start a new category, which may be a bit too detailed for what you want.

Robert: Yeah.

Dore: Yeah.

Robert: So, erm, in light of the scale of the project and how many words you were dealing with, was it made easier by advances in technology over the time?

Christian: Yeah ehm in some ways but by the time we really got into computers we'd done most of the basic data collection. We did experiment as to whether you could sit with a whole lot of slips on a screen and kind of sort them out, but that didn't work. Erm, I don't know anybody that's managed to do that. If you've got your sixteen thousand slips for animals, you need a table like this and you need to put them in piles and then you need to bring them back and do it again. So the basic thing was it made it more secure. Erm, it was, we stored it. It made it easier to cooperate with people outside Glasgow cause we could just send data quite easily. And it helped a lot at the end cause, you know, with something that takes that long, the bit you do at the beginning needs to be updated when you get near the end. So we were adding stuff right up to the last minute and it was much easier to do that on a computer.

Robert: Mm.

Christian: That's why dictionaries, if somebody starts a dictionary they usually start in the middle cause they know that everyone will look at the beginning and they want the beginning to be the best bit, not the the least bit. [laugh]

Robert: So would you have done much differently, looking back on... I know it's a big, big question, but. [laugh]

Christian: Erm. Yes it is. Well you sometimes think, you know, if I hadn't been lumbered with that, what would I have done? But I did find it intrinsically very interesting.

Robert: Mm.

Christian: Obviously if you were starting something like that now you would do it differently, but you couldn't start it now because nobody would give you money for something that you couldn't say "in two years we'll be able to put this on the internet".

Robert: Mm, mm.

Christian: You know, research is much more controlled.

Robert: Yeah.

Christian: And in the early days, you know, in theory, erm academics divide their time between teaching, research and administration, but the one that tends to get lost is the research.

Robert: Yeah.

Christian: You know, if you say “I’m spending one third of my week and I will not do anything else, I will do my research”, it’s quite difficult to maintain that.

Robert: Yeah.

Christian: So we did move much more to the work being done by people that were paid to do it rather than just academic time.

Robert: Mm.

Dore: How, how difficult was it to be working on a project where you couldn’t be sure if you could finish it because of the funding?

Christian: That was very demoralising at times, because we spent a lot of time sort of waiting for the next grant. Erm, I mean it was bad enough for me but it was even worse for the people that wouldn’t have a job, you know? By that time I had a job that would continue. But, you know, you might be in a position where three people would just have had to go if this grant hadn’t come through, so it’s difficult to sustain any kind of long-term role for research assistants particularly. What we found very helpful was postgraduates because they’re not looking at it as a career job. Erm, and there was often a very nice gap between somebody finishing their PhD and getting a job, and that was a very useful period for us cause they weren’t distracted by anything else.

Robert: Yeah.

Christian: So a lot of work was done that way, and the typing was all done either by people that were on job creation schemes - we did quite well out of that - or by students. Cause that was just straightforward data entry.

Robert: There was a government-funded project wasn’t there in the eighties?

Christian: Yeah. Em, it was quite big in the nineteen eighties, cause there was very high unemployment, among graduates as well as others, so we got involved with various programmes which were essentially work experience, so they would pay, well not really a salary but a living amount to people and we would get them, initially for a year, and we trained them and then the work they did was the return we got for the the training. And the same thing, at that point there were a lot of people who’d been secretaries doing typing in shorthand and word-processing was very much coming into offices, so we did the same kind of thing. We trained people in word-processing and in return they word-processed our data. So we had a lot of people at one time, we had twenty, thirty people, not all there at once but it was quite a big thing to organise.