Exercise 3: Investigating the history of a word using online dictionaries

Aim: to investigate the history of the word ‘girl’

STEP ONE – Looking up girl in the MED (Middle English Dictionary)

1. Access the MED at: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary

2. Search for the term girl

3. Note the definition of this word in Middle English:

   girl(e n.

   Entry Info
   Forms: girl(e n. Also gurl(e, gur(e, gar(e.

   Etymology: ?OE "gyrela, from earlier "gurw"; see K.Luick in Anglia B. 8.235-6. ?Akin to OE gierela (from "garw") a garment.

   Definitions (Senses and Subsenses)
   1. (a) A child of either sex; --often, a boy; knave ~, a boy; (b) a girl, young woman.

4. Click on show 15 quotations

5. Note the various uses of the word in Middle English
STEP TWO – Looking up girl in the OED (Oxford English Dictionary)

1. If you are using a computer connected to the University network, you can access this resource directly by going to: http://www.oed.com/

N.B. If you are trying to access the OED from a computer not connected to the Oxford network then you will need to log in to SOLO and sign on using your Oxford Single Sign-On username and Password – search of oxford English Dictionary on SOLO.

2. Once you are connected to the online OED, enter the search term girl in the Quick search box.

3. Look at the entry for sense 1, by clicking on the word or on view full entry

What has happened to the earliest meaning of this word?

4. Look at senses 2 (a), 2(b), 3.

What process of change are apparent in these entries?

5. Look at senses 5, 6, 7, 8.

What process of change are apparent here?

(Answers to these questions can be found at the end of this exercise sheet)

6. What factors may have prompted these changes?
1. Use in Middle English (refer back to the MED entry)

[Note how frequently the word is used in collocation with the adjective gay, perhaps reinforcing a feminine referent.

Also note the beginnings of the process of specialisation in the collocation knave gerlys.

Also note the potential ambiguity in usage, as in the example from the General Prologue.]

2. Relationship with other words in the same semantic space.

7. Scroll back up to Sense 1 and click on Thesaurus >>

I. Senses relating to a person.

   knave girl n. a boy.

8. Go to the Historical Thesaurus (by scrolling down to the bottom of the list); this brings up a list of synonyms for the sense ‘young person’ as recorded in OED.

Note the number of synonyms and the contemporaneous extension of youth to mean individual young person (1325), as well as the collective noun for ‘young people’ (as it does in OE). Click on the word young and notice that the use of this word to mean ‘young person’ died out at a similar time to girl (1430).
9. Return to the OED entry for girl and scroll down to sense 4.

Click on Thesaurus > Go to Historical Thesaurus to see a list of synonyms for this sense as found in OED.

Scroll down this list for an overview of terms used to refer to a female lover in the OED.

Using the hierarchical structure on the left of the screen, click on ‘specific male sweetheart’ to bring up a list of similar terms used for male lovers.

Similar comparisons could be made for a range of similar concepts, giving insights into differing attitudes to men and women.

10. Another way of accessing this information is to browse through the Thesaurus by moving down its hierarchy: try browsing through The external world > The living world > People > Person

Within the subcategory Person, select woman > noun. Scrolling down this list, notice how many of these terms are labelled ‘derogatory’, ‘contemptuous’, ‘reprobatory’, ‘disparaging’.

By contrast the words listed under person > man > noun tend to be much more positive.
11. Finally, as a useful way of contextualising our earlier discussion of girl, click on child > noun.

This list provides an interesting snapshot of the different kinds of words that have been used to refer to children.

Notice, for instance, the number of words that liken children to young animals, e.g. young birds (chick, chicken, doveling, nestler, poult), mammals (whelpling, piggy, kitling, lambkin, joey, kid), amphibians (toad, tad, tadpole), and fish (kipper, tiddler).

Answers to STEP TWO: searching the OED

Quick search results

1. girl, n. c1300

...Chiefly in pl. A child of either sex; a young person.

What has happened to the earliest meaning of this word?

[It is now obsolete apart from in dialect use]

Look at senses 2 (a), 2(b), 3.

What process of change are apparent in these entries?

[narrowing/specialisation: ‘child of either sex > ‘child of female sex’

widening/generalisation: female child > young female > female of any age]

Look at senses 5, 6, 7, 8

What process of change are apparent here?

[pejoration/deterioration/degeneration:

young woman > prostitute

young woman > servant, slave

amelioration/elevation

prostitute > sweetheart.]