

Terms of endearment in English

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Affection and tenderness in the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary Online*

Introduction

Terms of endearment enjoy great popularity in all languages to express feelings such as affection and tenderness. The present paper concentrates on the use of these types of words in English. The *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth the *HTOED*) serves as a valuable tool to identify the plethora of terms of endearment which became established in English over the centuries.

The present study is based on a lexicographical sample of 203 lexical items which are currently included in the *HTOED*. The *HTOED* project started as early as 1964 when the British historical linguist Michael Louis Samuels from Glasgow University suggested compiling a historical thesaurus based on the linguistic evidence of the *OED*, but arranging the data in a thematic network of semantically related words and phrases (Kay, Sylvester & Wotherspoon, 2001: 173). Led by a team of linguists, comprising Christian Kay, Jane Roberts and Iréné Wotherspoon, the *HTOED* had been compiled at Glasgow University for over 45 years, before it was published by Oxford University Press in 2009.

The *HTOED* arranges lexical items in the *OED* according to subject areas in chronological order. It consists of two volumes. The first volume constitutes the thesaurus, and the second volume consists of an index of most of the vocabulary items listed in the thesaurus. Its digital version can be searched via the *OED Online*. It is directly linked to the linguistic documentary evidence offered by the *OED* and makes it possible, for instance, to examine the entire sense extent of a particular word. Allan and Kay (2016: 222) draw attention to the fact that

The combination of *HTOED* with the more detailed information about individual words available in the *OED* makes a powerful tool for lexical analysis,

especially when reinforced by the increased availability of historical online corpora large enough to enable lexical research by allowing further scrutiny of contexts [. . .]

In the present study, the different terms of endearment were retrieved from the *HTOED* in the summer of 2020. Apart from the *HTOED*, the rich documentary evidence in the *OED Online* was consulted, in order to get a comprehensive overview of the etymology, meaning and usage of the various terms of endearment in English. This has so far been neglected in existing studies.

Terms of endearment in the *HTOED*

The thematic categorization of the terms of endearment has been established as follows in the *HTOED*: ‘the mind > emotion > love > terms of endearment.’ As is apparent, the mind constitutes the overriding domain, which includes lexical entries related to emotions. Emotions also encompass a variety of subcategories, including love terms. The field



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of love, on the other hand, comprises terms of endearment apart from additional lexical domains.

As mentioned before, the number of terms of endearment which can be found in the *HTOED* totals 203 lexical entries. The following list gives an overview of the numbers and proportions of the terms of endearment down the ages. Some illustrative examples of terms of endearment have been provided for each century (see [Figure 1](#)).

- (1) **Before 1000** (three lexical entries, i.e. 1.5%), e.g. *darling* (circa 888).
- (2) **1201–1300** (six lexical entries, i.e. 3.0%), e.g. *dear* (circa 1230); *sweetheart* (circa 1290).
- (3) **1301–1400** (four lexical entries, i.e. 2.0%), e.g. *sweet* (circa 1330); *honey* (circa 1375); *dove* (circa 1386).
- (4) **1401–1500** (eight lexical entries, i.e. 3.9%), e.g. *cinnamon* (circa 1405); *honeycomb* (circa 1405); *love* (circa 1405); *daisy* (circa 1485); *mate* (circa 1500).
- (5) **1501–1600** (53 lexical entries, i.e. 26.1%), e.g. *honeysop* (might have been first recorded in English in circa 1513); *mouse* (circa 1525); *butting* (about 1529); *beautiful* (1534); *lad* (1535); *soul* (circa 1538); *heartikin* (1540); *mully* (might have been first recorded in English in 1548); *lamb* (circa 1556); *ding-ding/ding-dong* (1564); *golpol* (1568); *mopsy* (1582); *ladybird* (1597); *duck* (1600); *sparrow* (circa 1600).
- (6) **1601–1700** (44 lexical entries, i.e. 21.7%), e.g. *honeysuckle* (1613); *pretty* (1616); *dear old thing* (about 1625); *frisco* (about 1652); *mon cher* (1673); *cherub* (1680); *deary* (1681); *lovey* (1684); *nug* (1699).
- (7) **1701–1800** (15 lexical entries, i.e. 7.4%), e.g. *dovie/dovey* (1769); *sweetie* (1778); *lovey-dovey* (1781); *lovely* (1791).
- (8) **1801–1900** (42 lexical entries, i.e. 20.7%), e.g. *ducky* (1819); *acushla* (1825); *chick-a-diddle* (1826); *honey child* (1832); *bubba* (1841); *honey-bunch* (1874); *bach* (1889); *diddums* (1893); *honey baby* (1895); *prawn* (1895); *hon* (1896); *so-and-so* (1897); *old crumpet* (1900); *pumpkin* (1900).
- (9) **1901–2000** (27 lexical entries, i.e. 13.3%), e.g. *honey-bun* (1902); *Schatz* (1907); *old bean* (1917); *treasure* (1920); *old (tin of) fruit* (1923); *sport* (1923); *sugar* (1930); *baby cake* (1949); *bubele* (1959); *lamb-chop* (1962); *yaar* (1963); *John* (1982).

Before 1201 there are hardly any terms of endearment in English. An exception is *darling*, which has been recorded in English since circa 888 (see

OED2). Their numbers increased slightly from the 13th century onwards and were at large over the course of the 16th century. In the 17th and 19th centuries, too, a comparatively large number of terms of endearment are documented in the *HTOED*. An exception is the 18th century, where the numbers fall sharply. This trend continues in the 20th century, where a decrease in terms of endearment is manifest. In the 21st century, no terms of endearment have been so far included in the *HTOED*.

The *HTOED* is a rich resource which encompasses a plethora of terms of endearment. It includes terms that lovers use for each other (e.g. *darling*, *sweetheart*, *treasure*), names for the female partner, among them several terms from the animal kingdom which are used in a figurative meaning, such as *dove*, *mouse*, *lamb* and *ladybird*. There are also a number of (chiefly colloquial) expressions employed by men, such as *lad* and *old bean*, and terms of endearment for children (e.g. *cherub*, *diddums*, *mopsy*, *chick-a-diddle*). In addition, the *HTOED* lists affectionate forms of address for elderly persons, comprising terms confined to informal usage, such as *dear old thing*.

Needless to say, most terms of endearment show highly positive connotations, such as *darling*, *honey*, *dear*, *love* and the diminutive affectionates *deary* and *lovey*. Yet we also find some words among the *HTOED* entries that may occasionally have slightly negative implications. This holds for the common term *sweetheart*, for instance, which is in some cases used ironically or disparagingly, as the following usage examples included in the *OED3* reveal:

- ‘1890 H. Caine *Bondman* iii. vi ‘Ot’s the name of your ‘ickle boy?’ ‘Ah, I’ve got none, sweetheart.’
- ‘1977 F. Parrish *Fire in Barley* viii. 82 Try harder, sweetheart, or I’ll plug you in the guts.’

Similarly, the use of the term *so-and-so* does not exclusively have positive implications. It is either documented as a euphemistic form of insult for an individual or occasionally an object or, in a milder use, as a tender form of address. This is corroborated by the following example retrieved from the *OED2*:

- ‘1977 B. PYM *Quartet in Autumn* i. 9 “Hoping to get off early, lazy little so-and-so,” said Norman.’ (*OED2*)

Obviously, metaphorical uses may reflect specific characteristics which can be seen. When a person is named as a variety of animal because of a particular property, for instance, it seems to have

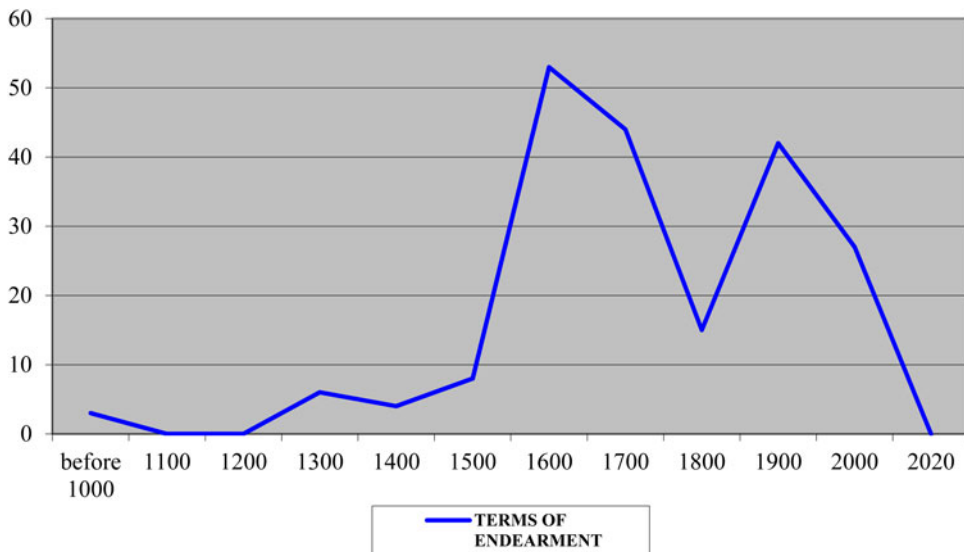


Figure 1. Graph showing lexical entries for terms of endearment by century in the *HTOED*

something to do with a common feature or quality that is thought to associate the person and the animal. The different *HTOED* items contain several animal terms of endearment, such as *dove*, *lamb*, *duck*, *sparrow*, *prawn* and *mouse* (now archaic). Among the animal names, there are also terms to which hypocoristic suffixes (e.g. *-y*, *-ie*) were attached to form affectionate diminutives: *dovie* with its spelling variant *dovey* (also as post-modifying noun in *lovey-dovey*) and *ducky*. The metaphorical use of animal names for individuals could perhaps be partly due to the influence of Shakespeare's plays, which may have contributed, to some extent at least, to the spread of these types of words in English. In his plays, Shakespeare included a plethora of animal names in direct speech and descriptions of peculiarities of his characters (see also Boehrer, 2016). In fact, several metaphorical terms of endearment from the animal kingdom are recorded in the relevant meanings in Shakespeare. An example is *dove*, which occurs in the corresponding sense in *Hamlet*:

- '1604 W. SHAKESPEARE *Hamlet* IV. v. 168 Fare you well my Doue.' (*OED2*)

Further examples are *lamb* and *ladybird*, which are also documented as affectionate forms of address for a female sweetheart in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

- '1597 W. SHAKESPEARE *Romeo & Juliet* I. iii. 3 What Lamb, what Ladie bird. . . Wher's this girle?' (*OED3*)

From the linguistic data in the *OED3* it becomes apparent that *ladybird* can also have negative implications. It may also be used as a depreciative term for 'a kept mistress; a lewd or wanton woman; a prostitute' (*OED3*). *OED3* examples are:

- '1699 B. E. *New Dict. Canting Crew Lady-birds*, Light or Lewd Women.'
- '1881 A. TRUMBLE *Slang Dict. N. Y., London & Paris* 20 Lady bird. A kept mistress.'

The *OED3* tells its users that these senses are rarely attested in present-day English.

A number of affectionate terms represent transferred uses of names for flora and fauna. For examples, *honeysuckle*, originally denoting a variety of plant producing sweet-smelling flowers, and *daisy*, the name of a flower used as a term expressing admiration. The latter has become disused in English (see *OED2*).

Some culinary terms are used in a transferred or figurative use, functioning as tender forms of address. Examples are the common term *pumpkin* and *lamb-chop*. Of these, *pumpkin* originated in American English as an affectionate form of address (see *OED3*). As to *lamb-chop*, the use of the word in its literal culinary meaning is prevalent in English. Examples of its metaphorical use with reference to an individual are scarce. The latest *OED2* quotation reflecting this sense dates from 1962:

- '1962 E. LUCIA *Klondike Kate* ii. 40 Mrs Bettis was persistent and her daughter was quite a lamb chop, so he finally agreed.'

Most of the culinary terms which can function as terms of endearment are associated with sweetness, such as *cinnamon*, *baby cake*, *sugar* and *honey*. The use of *honey* (also abbreviated as *hon* in colloquial English) as a pre-modifying constituent in noun phrases and compounds is comparatively productive, to coin terms reflecting tender affection, such as *honeycomb* and *honeysop*, both of which are now only rarely used as terms of endearment in current English, *honey-bunch*, *honey-bun*, *honey baby* and *honey child*. Of these, *honey baby* was originally confined to American usage, as in:

- ‘1895 *Trenton (New Jersey) Times* 8 July 6/1 Kissin it to make it well, are ye? God bless lilley honey baby.’ (*OED3*)

According to the etymological information given in the *OED3*, *honey child* has its origins in Irish English. It is now mainly documented as a term for ‘[a] sweetheart, a darling’ (*OED3*) in regional Southern and African American English, where it primarily occurs as a type of address (initially predominantly to a child). *OED3* examples are:

- ‘1976 *Ebony Jr.!* Dec. 42/1 “Let’s sit down, Honey Child,” his grandma said in a choked voice, as she looked at his frightened face.’ (*OED3*)
- ‘2006 *Guardian* (Nexis) 11 Dec. 20 Honey child, I always knew you’d come to me one day.’ (*OED3*)

Some terms of endearment are confined to regional Englishes, such as *acushla*, a designation of a sweetheart in Irish usage. According to the *OED3*, it reflects the Irish form *a chuisle*, which may itself be a shortening of *a chuisle mo chroí/a chuisle mo chroidhe* (now obsolete), which can be translated as ‘my heartbeat’, literally ‘pulse of my heart’. Additional examples of terms occurring in regional or national varieties of English are *John*, *bach*, *bubba*, *sport* and *yaar*. Of these, *John* is one of the very few examples of familiar forms of address which are derived from a proper noun. It serves as a general way of addressing any male individual in colloquial British English, e.g.:

- ‘1982 A. SAYLE (*title of song*) “Ullo John! Gotta new motor?”’ (*OED3*)

Bach, literally meaning ‘little’, has its origins in Welsh. The term constitutes a common address in Wales and its neighbouring regions, and it often placed after a proper noun. Examples from the *OED2* are:

- ‘1916 C. EVANS *CAPEL SJON* iii. 40 “A wanton bitch you are.” “Dennis bach, don’t say!”’
- ‘1961 E. WILLIAMS *George* vi. 75 Look in your book, Georgie bach.’

Bubba may constitute a hypocoristic variant of *brother*, and it occurs ‘as a nickname or familiar form of address for any boy or man, and as a title preceding a name’ (*OED3*) mostly in regional American English. In its usage as a friendly manner of addressing someone, typically among men who are not acquainted with each other, *sport* is mainly documented in New Zealand and Australian English. Examples from the *OED3* are:

- ‘1975 R. Beilby *Brown Land Crying* 80 “Come on, sport,” the doorman was saying patiently. “You can’t stop here. You’ve had a skinful.”’
- ‘2004 *Age (Melbourne)* (Nexis) 30 July 3 (*headline*) Us, like Yanks? Fair go, sport!’

Yaar is the only example among the *HTOED* entries that serves as a term of endearment in Indian English. The word is confined to colloquial usage, where it is used as a familiar form of addressing a friend or companion, e.g.:

- ‘1967 *Shankar’s Weekly (Delhi)* 12 Nov. 22/3 A fetching comedy that the teen agers will like in America and the class which looks up to them in India will applaud as “Wah, yaar!”’ (*OED3*)

Yaar reflects the synonymous Urdu *yār*, which is itself derived from Persian.

Among the lexical entries there are also some substantiated adjectives used as pet names: *beautiful*, *lovely*, *pretty* (typically in *my pretty/my pretties*), *sweet* and the corresponding affectionate diminutive *sweetie*. Obviously, these nominal uses reflect the positive characteristics and properties of the designated person which were originally described by the corresponding adjectival forms.

In the collection of terms of endearment recorded in the *HTOED*, we can also find some words derived from foreign languages which can be categorized as direct loans, i.e. borrowings which show no or only slight assimilation (in pronunciation, spelling etc.) to the receiving language. Examples are *mon cher*, a borrowing from French which translates as ‘my dear’, and *Schatz*, a term of endearing address which goes back to German. A look at the linguistic documentary evidence included in the *OED2* suggests that *Schatz* is confined to German-speaking contexts in English, as in:

- ‘1907 E. von Arnim *Fräulein Schmidt* xlii. 174 The trumpeter and his *Schatz* sat quietly in the kitchen.’ (*OED2*)

Its German source *Schatz* shows a wider semantic scope than the borrowing in English: it translates as ‘treasure.’ As to the English word *treasure*, it has been used as a term of endearment since 1920, i.e. some years after the first recorded use of the corresponding German borrowing:

- ‘1920 K. Mansfield *Let.* 31 Oct. (1977) 194 But, my treasure, my life is ours. You know it.’ (*OED2*)

However, the *OED2* gives no indication as to whether the meaning of *treasure* could possibly have been influenced by the German. It thus may well be that the relevant change in meaning represents an independent semantic development within English. There is also *bubele*, a borrowing from Yiddish. It is restricted to Jewish usage, where it is used as an affectionate variety of address, typically with respect to ‘a child or elderly relative’ (*OED3*), e.g.:

- ‘1968 *Naugatuck (Connecticut) Daily News* 21 Nov. 3 If you think this is going to be a megilla from a yenta, listen, bubele.’ (*OED3*)

Its Yiddish source *bubele* is ultimately derived from *bobe* ‘grandmother’ (see *OED3*).

A number of terms of endearment have become rare or obsolete. Examples are *heartikin*, an affectionate diminutive which translates as ‘little heart’, *mulling* and its possible derivative *mully*, now rare terms for ‘a sweetheart’, as well as *golpol*, *butting*, *nug*, *frisco*, *ding-dong* and *ding-ding*, which are equally no longer or only rarely used as tender forms of address. The etymological origin of *mulling*, *golpol*, *butting*, *nug*, *frisco*, *ding-dong* and *ding-ding* is not clear according to the *OED*. *Mulling* might have been formed on the basis of the verb *to mull* ‘to fondle’ and the suffix *-ling* (see *OED3*). As to *golpol*, it might perhaps be related to the word *gold-poll* (see *OED2*), *butting* might have been coined on the basis of *butt*, a species of fish (see *OED3*), and *nug* may have been influenced by *pug* (now disused), a pet name for an individual or sometimes an animal. According to the *OED3*, *pug* was also used to specify a type of toy, such as a puppet. *Frisco* might be a pseudo-loan from Italian, literally meaning ‘frolic’ or ‘freak.’ The latest *OED2* example of its usage as a tender form of address dates from about 1652. As

to *ding-dong* and its spelling variant *ding-ding*, the *OED2* lacks any explanation for the usage of these forms as types of endearing addresses. The latest usage examples of these terms as pet names date from the 17th century, e.g.:

- ‘1602 W. CLERK *Withals’s Dict. Eng. & Lat.* 61 My ding-ding, my darling.’ (*OED2*)

Conclusion

From the present study it has turned out that the *HTOED* is a valuable source, including manifold terms of endearment, ranging from expressions that couples use to address each other and affectionate forms of address in particular for women, among them a considerable number of terms for animals used figuratively, to familiar forms of address used among men, affectionate forms of address for children and elderly individuals. In addition, the *HTOED* encompasses a variety of pet names which are confined to regional or national varieties of English, as well as borrowed lexical items which function as terms of endearment.

Most of the terms of endearment recorded in the *HTOED* seem to be in full use. The latest word in this sample of lexical items is the aforementioned *John*, which has been documented as a familiar form of address since 1982. No terms of endearment have been so far recorded since the 21st century. The decrease of these types of words in recent decades might point to the fact that nowadays, speakers of English might be less creative with respect to the coinage of terms of endearment than they used to be.

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