

Kathryn Allan (University College London): “An *academic* question? Exploring the meaning of a contemporary keyword through historical text resources”.

The adjective *academic* has both positive and negative senses in Present Day English: it can describe anything related to higher learning or ‘scholarly’, but it is also used to mean ‘unpractical’ or ‘trivial’. This seems to reflect popular opinion about higher education in modern society: there is a tension between, on the one hand, the perceived prestige and value associated with scholarly activity and higher learning and, on the other, a view of non-vocational learning as indulgent and lacking practical use, and of academic institutions as irrelevant ‘ivory towers’ cut off from real life. Since *academic* seems to be caught up with contemporary debates about the nature of academia, it could be considered a modern keyword in Raymond Williams’ sense: a word that has ‘virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meaning seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss’ (Williams 1976: 13).

The pejorated ‘unpractical’ sense of *academic* is first attested in *OED2* in 1886, although some preliminary research using the *Times Digital Archive* suggests that there are slightly earlier examples (and therefore that redating in *OED3* is likely). This paper considers whether large-scale historical text resources such as the *Times Digital Archive* and the *19th Century British Library Newspapers Database* can offer fresh insights into the emergence of new polysemous senses that appear to be clearly culturally motivated. It explores possible triggers for a pejorated sense of *academic*, and examines the process by which the emerging new sense becomes more frequent and less contextually restricted.