The Historical Thesaurus Of The Oxford English Dictionary Took 230 People 44 Years To Complete

National Thesaurus Day, on January 18th, honors Peter Mark Roget, the author of Roget’s Thesaurus, who was born on this day in 1779.
In 1840, Roget retired from a successful career in medicine and spent the rest of his life working on “Roget’s Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases.” He published his first book of synonyms in 1852.

Roget was a physician with a real passion for list-compiling. He only started work on his Thesaurus after retirement in his 60s.

Before Roget, the word “thesaurus” simply meant a store or treasury.

The Oxford Dictionary gives “thesauri” as the plural of “thesaurus”. The Cambridge Dictionary prefers “thesauruses”, saying “thesauri” is “formal”.

Curiously, Roget omits the word “bear” in the list of animals in his Thesaurus, but he does include the phrase “had it been a bear it would have bitten you” under “Inattention”.

Roget’s thesaurus lists the word “thesaurus” under the concepts of “list”, “word” and “store”.

The Historical Thesaurus Of The Oxford English Dictionary was published in 2009. Volume Two, the index, is longer than Volume One.

At just under 4,000 pages, the HTOED (Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary) is the largest thesaurus in the world. It covers approximately 800,000-word meanings from Old English to the present day.

The HTOED provides a breadth of knowledge that is found in no other work and has more synonyms than any other thesaurus. The word immediately, for example, has 265 synonyms, ranging from ædre, which is only found in Old English, to yesterday, which is first recorded as being used in the sense of immediately in 1974.

The HTOED took 44 years to complete (started in 1965, published in 2009)

In total, 230 people have worked on the project.

It’s taken approximately 320,000 hours to complete the HTOED – that’s the equivalent of 176 years

The project has cost approximately $1.8 million – roughly $1.25 per meaning

With financial straits being an ever-present backdrop, one team-member, perhaps with excessive zeal, worked out how many pages of the OED could be recorded by a slip-maker within the lifetime of a single pencil (answer: 130)

A logophile is a lover of words

Philo of Byblos, a Greek historian, and grammarian, wrote On Synonyms, a dictionary of synonyms that scholars consider to be the first ancient thesaurus. Dating to the late 1st century or early 2nd century CE, the book lists Greek words that are similar in meaning to each other. Sadly, we don’t know much more about On Synonyms because copies of the work haven’t survived over the centuries.

The division between “words people” and “numbers people” is deep-seated. Many mathematicians may try to steer clear of thesauruses, and bibliophiles may avoid calculators, but the thesaurus is actually linked to a mathematical tool.

Around 1815, Roget invented the log-log slide rule, a ruler-like device that allows users to easily calculate the roots and exponents of numbers. So while the inventor of the thesaurus was compiling words for his tome, he was also hard at work on the log-log slide rule. A true jack-of-all-trades.

Urban Dictionary helps people decipher the latest slang terms, but where should you go when you need a thesaurus of slang? Urban Thesaurus, of course. The site, which is not affiliated with Urban Dictionary, indexes millions of slang terms culled from slang dictionaries, then calculates usage correlations between the terms. Typing in the word money, for example, gives you an eclectic list of synonyms including scrilla, cheddar, mulah, coin, and bling.

Sources:

National Day Calendar
Express

OUPblog

Mental Floss