



Confusion in the Congregation

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In the LDS hymnal, certain word definitions that have morphed since the hymnal's original publication are now unclear to the modern congregation. Observing the context of words such as adorable, abroad, molest, and board reveals their specialization from broader usage in the 1800s to more limited usage in modern times. This article refers to the Oxford English Dictionary and the Time Magazine Corpus, and it suggests that understanding semantic change will help reluctant hymnal users to embrace even the most radical shifts in meaning.

It does not happen very often—after all, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) has been around for less than two hundred years—but every once in a while, as the congregation lifts its voice in song to fill the chapel, there will be a pause. An unspoken thought will echo in the brief hesitation before members plunge on through the lyrics, ignoring *that* word—a word that has obviously changed in meaning since the publication of the LDS hymnal. Because of the changes of language over time, few people can maintain reverence singing certain hymns in their confusion. In the passing of time, the meaning of one word becomes vulgar while another word’s definition will improve. Other times, definitions slip into the abyss of forgotten vocabulary. Semantic changes—changes of a word’s meaning over time—have caused confusion in many LDS hymns in recent times. Four hymns in particular stand out.

“Come Let Us Anew” is a hymn that causes confusion for LDS congregations. The lyrics for this song were written by Charles Wesley in the mid-1700s. The hymn is commonly sung as a cheerful anthem to welcome in the new year, but many church members are confused when they sing, “[Christ’s] adorable will let us gladly fulfill.” The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) reports the earliest definition of *adorable* as “worthy of or inspiring worship.” The OED reports the word used in accordance with this older definition as recently as 2005. However, using *adorable* as a sense of worship nowadays is unusual. In examining the Time Magazine Corpus built by Davies (2007), the word *adorable* has been used increasingly between 1923 and 2006, but this usage has implied a sense of silliness or childishness, or of being physically attractive. Using *adorable* with the meanings “charming” or “delightful” was reported in 1653 (only fifty years after the definition as “worship”); however, as it is used today, it is clear that the meaning of *adorable* continues to shift towards the latter definition rather than the former. When Wesley wrote the hymn, it is likely that the definition of *adorable* as “inspiring worship” was still prominent while the usage of the word with a more childish connotation was less used. The semantic changes

of this word shed light on the intended message of the song: “Let us do Christ’s will—which is a will worthy of worship.” The intended message is much deeper than the mistaken message of “let us do Christ’s cute and charming will.” This specific type of shift is called specialization. The definition of the word *adorable* has narrowed, or become more specialized, from a general feeling of inspiring worship to a type of admiration one directs towards children and stuffed animals.

Another hymn that holds linguistic confusion for LDS members is “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief.” The hymn describes the interactions between an ordinary man and a beggar. The man assists the beggar with many trials multiple times. Confusion comes for LDS congregations when the man hears the beggar’s voice “abroad and [flies] to bid him welcome.” The current meaning of *abroad* is “out of the country.” The text of this hymn was written by James Montgomery, who lived from 1771 to 1834. Telephones were not used during this time—the beggar could not have called the man for help over the phone—and it would be unlikely or impossible that the beggar’s shout in another country could have been heard by the man in his house. The OED reports that *abroad* originally meant “out of one’s house” or “outdoors; in the open.” That being said, it is likely that Montgomery intended to communicate that this beggar was close, just outside the man’s door, which explains the man’s haste to let the beggar in as practical. The word *abroad* has experienced a slight change of specialization over time. “Out of the country” is still “away from the house,” but nowadays the word *abroad* only refers to a specific type of absence from home.

Confusion about semantic changes is also found in the popular LDS hymn “Now Let Us Rejoice.” The hymn proclaims how wonderful life will be when Christ returns to reign over his people. Despite the joyous tone in the chorus, people inevitably cringe: “And none shall molest them [the Saints] from morn until ev’n.” When individuals hear the word *molest* today, they usually think of sexual harassment or sexual abuse. While those atrocities have been committed against LDS Church members,

especially in the persecutions experienced during the founding of the Church, it seems insensitive to include reference to those actions in a religious hymn. The OED reports that the use of *molest* to mean “to harass, attack, or abuse sexually” was first seen in 1889. “Now Let Us Rejoice” was included in the 1835 publication of the LDS hymnbook, over fifty years before *molest* was used with sexual connotation. Prior to 1889, the OED reports that *molest* simply meant “to interfere or meddle with . . . injuriously or with hostile intent.” The word has since then specialized to signify a specific type of harm, as well as experienced pejoration, meaning the word’s definition has become worse or more vulgar than its original definition. “Now Let Us Rejoice” is not crassly praising relief from sexual harassment, but is instead praising freedom from harm of all kinds including verbal attacks and physical strikes.

The LDS sacrament is a ceremony preformed every Sunday, and it is always preceded by singing a hymn from a specified selection of sacrament hymns. One of these hymns is “Again We Meet around the Board.” The word *board* stands out in this hymn as unusual: “Again we meet around the board / Of Jesus our redeeming Lord.” The image of meeting around a board causes some confusion. It would make more sense if it were meeting as a board, or in an assembly, but around an assembly does not seem logical, nor does the idea of meeting around a slab of wood. Looking into the definitions offered by Merriam-Webster Online, an archaic definition is a table, specifically one with a meal on it. As the sacrament is a ritual based on Christ’s sharing of bread and water with his disciples during the last Passover of his mortal life, the image of a table spread with a meal makes sense. The OED says that the use of the word *board* to mean “table” was common in the twelfth century. However, over time, the word lost the definition of “table” and, in a process known as generalization, retained only its more general meaning of a flat, wooden surface.

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not even two hundred years in establishment, semantics shift

frequently enough that some LDS hymns can confuse the singers. Understanding that a word has changed meaning can help people overcome the reluctance to sing a seemingly unimportant word and focus on what the writer of the hymn originally intended to convey.

References

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