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Release notes: the changes in empathy, employ, and empire

This release contains two quite large runs of entries starting with EMP- and ETH-. Although there are no very long entries here, there are a number of shorter or medium-sized entries that show interesting twists in their histories, especially in the connections they show with social, cultural, and political history. For instance, a close reading of *ethic*, *ethics*, and *ethical* reveals a great deal about approaches to the study of moral principles over the centuries – as well as bringing up recent innovations such as *ethical investment*, meaning investment that does not offend against the moral principles of the investor (recorded from 1915, earliest in the U.S.). *Ethnic* plays a central part in the difficult group of words used in distinguishing different groupings of people; many modern readers will be surprised to see that its earliest use in English was in the fifteenth century as a noun in the meaning "a person who is not Christian or Jewish; a heathen, a pagan"; sadly, few will be so surprised by the recent collocation *ethnic cleansing* (1991). *Empower* and *empowerment* both date back to the 1600s in more general uses, but their twentieth-century history is closely connected with that of various minority groups. I'd like to look a little more closely at the changes in meaning and use shown by three more sets of words: *empathy*, *employ*/employee/*employment*, and *empire/emperor*.

For the *OED Supplement* volumes of 1933 and 1972, which added the term and then expanded its coverage, *empathy* was a technical term of Aesthetics and Psychology, defined as "The power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation". From the mid twentieth century it has shifted decisively in meaning, to "The ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience, etc.", and it has also broken free from specialist use in Psychology to become a word in familiar, everyday use.

Modern uses of *employ*, *employee*, and *employment* reflect changes in the world of work. From its earliest occurrences in English in the 1400s, *employ* has had a variety of broader and more specialized meanings to do with using or applying things for a particular purpose. The specific meaning "To use the services of (a person) to undertake a task, carry out work, etc." is first recorded in English in 1523, although this (like most of the earliest uses of the word) reflects a meaning that is found already in Anglo-Norman and Middle French, from which English borrowed the word. Over time this meaning shows an increasingly marked narrowing to "to hire or retain (a person) to do something in return for wages or payment". Recently, it has become clear that the definition of *employ* and related words is being drawn more narrowly and precisely in the language of Human Resources and of employment law, and this has begun to have some impact on more general use as well: an *employed* person may be contrasted with an *unemployed* person, but also with a *self-employed* person.

The histories of some words are particularly closely bound up with events in cultural and political history. English has had the words *emperor* and *empire* since the Middle English period. *Emperor* was borrowed from Anglo-Norman and continental French in the thirteenth century, and *empire* (as well as *empery*) a little later, in the fourteenth century. Not so surprisingly, *emperor* was first used in English to refer to any of the sovereign rulers of the Roman Empire, but by the fourteenth century it was also being used with contemporary reference, to any of the sovereign rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. This became so usual that until the nineteenth century a reference to "the Emperor" without qualification or further context would normally be taken as referring to the Holy Roman Emperor. However, the word also began to be applied to rulers from further afield from an early date, to monarchs ruling over wide territories outside Europe, such as those of the Chinese, the Mongols, the Japanese, etc. The word *empire* shows a similar early history, "the Empire" by default long being the Holy Roman Empire. Use referring to Britain's overseas territories only becomes fully established in the 1700s; indeed, our earliest evidence for "the empire" in this use (minus the qualifying "British") is from 1769, with rather prescient reference to the impending losses in North America: "All parts of the empire have been alarmed with..apprehensions of danger to his Majesty's government in North America". An important further strand in the nineteenth century reflects political changes in France, with the proclamation of empires under Napoleon Bonaparte from 1804–15 and (the "Second Empire") under Napoleon III from 1852–70. It is the application to the glittering world of Bonaparte's French Empire that has had perhaps the most marked impact on the patterns of collocation of *empire* in English: the particularly opulent form of neoclassical furnishing and decoration known as the Empire style, or the empire dresses with waistline just below the bust and a long, loose, straight skirt (i.e., an *empire line*). Although named in honour of Britain's Napoleonic enemies, these terms did not come into

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common use in English until the mid nineteenth century, long after the Napoleonic Wars had ended. More straightforward British patriotism appears to have inspired the name of the *empire biscuit*: although the early details are unclear, it appears to have been a First World War replacement for earlier *German biscuit* as the name of a type of sandwich biscuit consisting of two round pieces of shortcake with a jam filling, topped with icing and a glacé cherry.

Philip Durkin
Deputy Chief Editor

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