



## What's in a word?

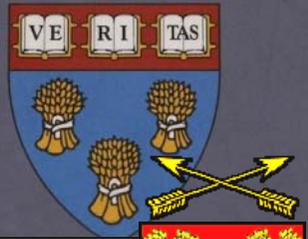
A news item caught my eye. Harvard University, one of the world's top universities, is no longer going to call people 'Master'. Is it because they no longer show great skill or proficiency in their studies? No, some people object because the word used also to be used in the context of slavery. Now I don't want to say that the slave trade was anything but reprehensible, but this is, to my mind, ridiculous sensitivity combined with ignorance. Some words just have more than one meaning, and which to apply is usually obvious from the context.

### *New words*

But sometimes we do need a new word: there are new situations or inventions which don't exactly match an existing word, so for clarity a new one has to be coined. The dictionary admits several of these each year—words like 'hashtag' or 'declutter' or 'e-cigarette'.

### *New meanings*

Some old words get used in new ways too, but I'm less comfortable with this. It can result in a



Harvard University crest (above) is also under threat—because of a perceived connection to slavery. Pupils at a local school might say the same?



loss of information or clarity—indeed, that is sometimes deliberate. So the recent redefinition of 'marriage' to include all gender pairings is incomprehensible to me given that the term 'civil partnership' was already coined, unless the only purpose was to attack the 'normality' of the status quo.

### **Some new words...**

*food swamp* - an area with an abundance of fast food retailers but a dearth of healthy, fresh food sellers

*farecasting* - predicting the optimum date to buy a plane ticket, especially on a website or using an app

*digital diet* - a deliberate reduction in the amount of time spent on the Internet

*grey gapper* - a person of retirement age who takes a year out of their normal life to go travelling

### *Words in context*

New meaning is often given when a word is used in a new context. An obvious example is swear words. Even the most coarse are most frequently used with a different meaning from their Anglo-Saxon original! And there would be a lot of shocked silences if God answered every time someone threw his name into their sentence. I'm reminded of what I was told as a child: "Think what you say before you say what you think".

Margaret Hobbs is from  
St Thomas's Church, Oakwood  
[www.st-toms.org.uk](http://www.st-toms.org.uk)

