

Twitter

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Social media would certainly be a less cheerful place without Twitter's chirpy logo: that powder-blue profile of a floating bird forever frozen in mid warble. But who first had the phonic imagination to fashion an onomatopoetic compromise between the language of feathers and the language of men? 'Twitter' (or 'twiterith' as it was initially crafted in the second half of the 14th century), first trilled from the quill of Geoffrey Chaucer in his translation of *Consolation of Philosophy* by the 6th Century philosopher Boethius. Predating both 'chirp' and 'warble' by a century, 'twitter' is one of over 2,200 words for which the Medieval poet is credited with having inked an inaugural usage. That it's the same author who wrote the poem *The Parlement of Foules* seems entirely appropriate.

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Serendipity

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Before 1754, if someone had wanted to express ‘the fortuitous discovery of something by chance’, he or she would have had to dip his or her nib **more than** a few times to eke out the full slog of such a cumbersome sentiment. Then presto, on **Tuesday 28 January**, the English writer Horace Walpole, while composing a letter, gifted to the world that rather peppy **prance** of syllables: ‘serendipity’. Walpole said he based his lyrical invention on a Persian fairy tale, **The Three Princes of Serendip**, whose protagonists, he insisted, “were always making discoveries, by accidents **and sagacity**”. That Walpole misremembered the actual gist of the tale (in fact the princes fail to find what they were looking for **despite** painstaking attempts) hardly matters; ‘serendipity’ is here to stay – a happy accident indeed. It’s not Walpole’s only quirky coinage. ‘Betweenity’, a word far more charming than its better-known synonym, ‘intermediateness’, deserves the same affection that its sibling ‘serendipity’ has enjoyed.

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Panorama

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Some words seem to vibrate with the very spirit of the meaning they denote. “Panorama” is one of these; its very rhythm seems in harmony with the wide, mountain-top vistas, boundless horizons, and unblinkered breadth of vision for which it stands. That the word (which literally means ‘all-seeing’) should have entered the world’s lexicon around 1789, a year synonymous with the collapse of that notorious cultural enclosure, Paris’s prison-fortress the Bastille, seems entirely appropriate to panorama’s emancipating vibe. How ironic, then, to discover that the word was initially attached to an entirely confined experience: a cylindrical painting that imprisons its audience – an indoor visual contraption devised by the Irish artist Robert Barker.

The hobo narrator of Harry McClintock's 1928 song Big Rock Candy Mountain dreams of reaching a carefree paradise where "they hung the jerk who invented work". While history may not remember the name of that particular "jerk", we do know who the identity of the French economist who invented a word for something almost

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