

## Explaining the Meaning of the Words “Orient” and “Oriental”

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Words matter. Although it may seem an obvious aphorism, the words we use and the words we choose make a difference in how we as people and the institutions we work for are perceived.

But words are also mutable. The spelling and meaning of words can change over time. As their meaning alters, so does our reaction to those words. Since words can elicit different responses in people, it is sometimes difficult to judge how the words will be received.

Words and their meanings changed over time in antiquity, too. In ancient Egypt, for instance, different words were used to describe enslaved people. Initially, the words *hem* and *bak* meant “servant” but were also used to refer to an enslaved person. By the New Kingdom, the word *hem* was associated primarily with enslaved people and therefore took on a negative connotation in some contexts. Thus the meaning of the word *hem* changed, and people started using *bak* as the primary word for “servant” in the Third Intermediate Period. The word then changed again, this time to another word entirely: *khel*, meaning “child” in Demotic Egyptian. It seems that people’s discomfort regarding enslaved individuals led them to change the meaning of words, and even the words themselves, over time. This process took hundreds of years. In modern times, instantaneous communication lead to words changing their meanings quickly, or indeed to new words or phrases being invented, such as Oxford Dictionaries’ word of the year for 2022, *goblin mode*.

People who are not familiar with the Oriental Institute often conclude from its name that its work and collections focus on the cultures of East Asia, rather than on the ancient cultures of West Asia and North Africa. But why do they think that? And why was the name “Oriental

Institute” chosen by James Henry Breasted in 1919? A choice of word that today causes confusion for visitors as well as people who work and volunteer here. It comes down, once again, to how words change over time. The origins of the word *Oriental* go back to 314 CE, when the Romans reorganized the provinces of West Asia and North Africa as the Diocese of Oriens (Diocesis Orientis). The word *oriens* meant “East”—that is, “East of Rome.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is the present participle of the word *orīrī*, “to rise,” since the sun rises in the East. The area changed over time as certain parts, such as Egypt, were organized into their own dioceses by the fifth century CE. The word *orient* then appears in Old French and enters English via Anglo-Norman and Middle French, first appearing in English in the fourteenth century in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. The term *Oriental* first appears in the fifteenth century in John Lydgate’s *Troyes Book* and Guy de Chauliac’s *Grande Chirurgie*, both circa 1425. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Oriental studies and Oriental languages included Aramaic, Hebrew, Arabic, and even Armenian and Ethiopic, but not Chinese or Indian languages and cultures. It was not until the eighteenth century that the terms *Orient* and *Oriental* encompassed all of Asia, including countries such as India and China.

The words *Orient* and *Oriental* started to refer to East Asia and people of East Asian origin in the United States by the late nineteenth century. The term was used primarily to describe individuals of Chinese or Japanese descent and appeared frequently in the popular media of the time, especially newspapers and magazines that were under the control of media tycoons such as William Randolph Hearst. Because this usage and meaning were not universal, however, Breasted considered the term *Oriental* as appropriate for his institute. Yet, at the same time, it is clear that the word was often not being used in a positive way. For instance, in 1909, an author wrote in one of Hearst’s magazines, *Cosmopolitan* (now a women’s fashion

magazine), “It is a shock to the law-abiding people of this country to learn that in nearly all our great cities there are settlements of Orientals who are with us but not of us. . . . The Chinese are a great problem.” Other contemporary writings made similar claims. The *San Francisco Examiner* referred to the presence of Chinese in the United States as “Oriental contamination” (1909) and to Japan’s growing imperialist ambitions as “Orientalist Irritants” in an article of the same name (1919). Hearst made his prejudices clear in 1924 when he wrote, “I am strongly in favor of Japanese exclusion, to prevent these Orientals swarming into the country and absolutely overrunning it. . . . This is not race prejudice. It is race preservation” (all quotes from Denham 2022). It is clear that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the word “Oriental” increasingly became a term that was used to describe people of East Asian descent, namely Chinese and Japanese in a racist way.

By the time Breasted chose the term, *Oriental* was already going out of fashion at the University of Chicago, at least in certain departments, as a way to describe West Asia and North Africa. The term mainly seems to have taken on a narrower definition, meaning East Asia only, in the Department of Sociology, which had been founded in 1892 as the first sociology department in the United States. As early as 1908, William I. Thomas used the word *Orient* to describe China and Japan in his article “The Significance of the Orient for the Occident,” published in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Interestingly, this limited geographical scope was criticized in a response to the paper by Asakawa Kan’ichi, curator of the East Asian collection at Yale University, because it did not include India, and Asakawa thought it likely that Thomas “has not completely freed himself from the dogma that the Orient is a unit” because he made little distinction between China and Japan itself (something that Thomas denied in his response to Asakawa). In addition, in 1908–9, Ernest DeWitt Burton (1856–1925), University of

Chicago professor at the Divinity School and future University of Chicago president, led the “Oriental Educational Commission” to China. Funded by John D. Rockefeller Jr., the trip was meant to explore the possibility of establishing higher-educational institutions there.

Between 1924 and 1960, starting under University of Chicago sociologist Robert E. Park (1864–1944), a study was made of what was termed the “Oriental Problem.” Park, who taught at the University of Chicago between 1914 and 1933, was interested in the question why, in the view of sociologists, Americans of Chinese and Japanese descent were not assimilated into American society. Park was also the research director of the Survey of Race Relations on the Pacific Coast, a sociological study that examined the lives of individuals of Chinese and Japanese descent and how they related to Americans and Canadians. Starting in 1923, the study was commissioned by the Institute of Social and Religious Research, which was funded by John D. Rockefeller Jr., who also funded the Oriental Institute and the Oriental Educational Commission.

At the same time, the University of Chicago’s Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures covered the entirety of Asia and North Africa until 1966, when it split into three departments covering West Asia and North Africa, East Asia, and South Asia. Even though its professors were in the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures, which included East and South Asia, until then, the Oriental Institute ceased to have South and East Asian objects in its museum collection after it moved to its current location in 1931. The fact that the term *Oriental* meant so many different things during these years shows its lack of specificity at this time. It was clearly a word that meant vastly different things to different scholars, even on the University of Chicago campus, and whose meaning depended largely on context.

In 1908, Paul Reinsch of the University of Wisconsin could confidently declare, “Now we may consider ourselves tolerably free from race prejudice as against the oriental.” Other scholars, however, profoundly disagreed. One of the most famous was Edward Said, whose enormously influential book *Orientalism* (1978) has often been cited as the reason the term *Oriental* is now seen in a negative light. As has been observed above, however, the term was already used in a pejorative sense decades earlier, so while Said has contributed to the way we view the term, he is not the original source for the word being used negatively. As he explains it, orientalism describes how people from the West saw individuals living in West Asia and North Africa and “othered” them, comparing people from this region unfavorably to those living in Europe. The book has had a profound effect on how we describe the way in which individuals from Europe and North America have looked at these regions in scholarship, artistic expression, and indigenous responses, among many other long-lasting achievements it has achieved. Said’s book is one of the most important works of the twentieth century in terms of the effect it has had on scholarship.

To sum up, the way in which the terms *Orient* and *Oriental* are used has changed through time, and so has the connotation of the words in the United States. In 2016, the American government replaced derogatory ethnic terms for minorities such as *Oriental* with Asian American when congress passed unanimously, and President Obama signed HR 4328 which became Public Law 114-1574. The American experience of the word is different from that of people living outside the United States, and even within the United States some people find the word offensive while others do not. The way the term has been used, what it has meant, and the responses it has elicited in different people have varied, to the point where different people at the University of Chicago felt that the term meant different things. As we remove this word, it is

important to acknowledge and understand how and why we got to this point, why we decided it was important to move on, and why it is essential to explain it to current and future generations of students, scholars, and the public why we no longer use the term.

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Images:



Figure 1. Photograph taken in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China, April 12, 1909, in the *yámen* of the provincial treasurer during a visit by Ernest DeWitt Burton and Thomas C. Chamberlin, members of the University of Chicago's Oriental Educational Commission. University of Chicago Photographic Archive, apf1-02370, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.