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Tracking “the Enlightenment” Across the Nineteenth Century¹

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ABSTRACT/RESUMEN:

This paper has both substantive and methodological concerns:

Substantively, it is concerned with changes in the treatment of the concept "enlightenment" over the course of the nineteenth century. Its goal is to track the transmission, translation, and appropriation of German discussions on the nature, ends, and implications of *Aufklärung* into English. Its particular focus lies with the way in which a group of pejoratives associated with the concept in these German discussions (e.g., "falsche Aufklärung," "flache Aufklärung," "Aufklärerei") made their way into English and how, over the course of the nineteenth century, they were gradually abandoned. The result was the emergence, around 1910, of an understanding of "the Enlightenment" as a distinct historical period.

Methodologically, it is interested in exploring some of the ways in which recently developed text analysis and visualization programs (specifically, nGrams and Bookworm) can aid in tracking the movement of terms over time, across languages (German to English), and across disciplines.

It will argue that, in addition to their ability to survey a large corpus of texts far more readily than previously possible, such programs open up lines of inquiry that require historians of concepts to focus on the particular rhetorical force of certain modifiers (in this case, pejorative adjectives) that come to be associated with certain concepts but which, over time, can also become detached from them. The ability to track the movement of such terms prompts reflection on the advisability of attempting to enforce an overly rigorous demarcation between the "history of concepts" and the "history of words."

A presentation of some of the research on which this paper is based, along with a preliminary discussion of its implications is available on *Persistent Enlightenment*, the author's research blog: see the posts for March 17, 2013 and March 24, 2013.

¹ This paper draws on the my earlier discussion of problems with the (now revised) entry "Enlightenment" in the Oxford English Dictionary ("Inventing the Enlightenment: Anti-Jacobins, British Hegelians, and the Oxford English Dictionary," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64:3 (2003): 421–443) and material that previously appeared on my research blog *Persistent Enlightenment* (<http://persistentenlightenment.wordpress.com>).

TEXT/TEXT:

Oddly enough, the first English translations of the responses of Immanuel Kant and Moses Mendelssohn to the question “*Was ist Aufklärung*” did not translate the word *Aufklärung* as *enlightenment*. John Richardson’s 1798-1799 translation of Kant’s “essays and treatises” used “enlightening,” while the anonymous 1800 translation of Mendelssohn’s essay in the *German Museum* employed “enlightening the mind.” Something more is at stake here than the difficulty English translators faced in making sense of German philosophical works. These translations remind us how *Aufklärung* was used at the close of the eighteenth century: it designated a process in which individuals were engaged, rather than a philosophical movement or historical period to which individuals might belong. It was only in the wake of Hegel’s Berlin lectures on the philosophy of history and the history of philosophy that “*die Aufklärung*” came to designate a discrete historical period, rather than an open-ended process.

But the adoption of this convention in English (where, because of the emerging practices involving the capitalization of nouns and the use of definite articles, its appropriation can easily be traced) was surprisingly late: the phrase “the Enlightenment” does not appear with any regularity in the corpus of English texts scanned by Google until the final decade of the nineteenth century.



Figure 1

Of course, the absence of the phrase “the Enlightenment” does not necessarily mean that Anglophone writers lacked the concept these words designate. But it does raise questions about the relationship of words and concepts and about the implications of recent developments in the digital humanities for historians of concepts. This paper seeks to shed some light on the former by making use of some of the resources provided by the latter.

Words and Concepts

In the opening pages of *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1910)— the first book in English to employ the term “the Enlightenment” in its title — the Princeton philosopher John Grier Hibben surveyed the variety of words available to designate what would soon come to be known as “the Enlightenment.” Within the space of two

pages he referred to the object of his study as “the Enlightenment, or *Aufklärung*,” the “philosophical century,” “the age of illumination, or enlightenment,” and “the age of reason.”² Hibben may well have assumed that the menagerie of words that he assembled pointed to the same concept. But, as Quentin Skinner once argued:

The surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary has been developed, a vocabulary that can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept in question with consistency.³

Skinner’s claim suggests a corollary: the *lack* of such a vocabulary may be evidence that a group or society has not yet taken “self-conscious possession” of this new concept.

The translation of texts from one language into another reveals much about the difficulties that plague the passage of concepts from one intellectual tradition to another. For much of the nineteenth century, English translators appear to have had reservations about the German word that we now routinely translate as “enlightenment.” For example, in her 1841 collection of German texts, Sarah Austin translated the title of Kant’s essay as “What is Enlightenment?” but immediately added a footnote informing the reader that it was “impossible, without greater deviation from the original than I feel justified in making” to avoid the use of “this very awkward word, which is the exact translation of *Aufklärung*.” She went on to suggest that a “more significant title” for the essay would be “A plea for the liberty of philosophizing.”⁴ At the close of the century, J. Frederick Smith opted to translate the occurrence of *Aufklärung* in the opening sentence of Kant’s essay as “Free Thought” explaining,

Any translation of this *terminus technicus* may mislead. From Kant’s authoritative definition of the thing, it appears that our English “Free-thinking” substantially represents.⁵

Others, including the English Hegelian James Hutchison Stirling, simply left *Aufklärung* untranslated.

Stirling defended this practice on the ground that, in contrast to the English tendency to praise or damn isolated aspects of eighteenth-century philosophy,

The Germans ... have coolly turned upon it, lifted it, looked at it, and examined it piecemeal, till now, having at length fairly filled and satisfied themselves with what of instruction, negative or positive, they could extract from it, they have long since packed it up, and laid it on the shelf, labeled *Aufklärung*.⁶

² John Grier Hibben, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (New York: C. Scribner’s sons, 1910) 3-4.

³ Quentin Skinner, “The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon,” in *Regarding Method* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 160.

⁴ Sarah Austin, trans., *Fragments from German Prose Writers* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1841) 228.

⁵ Otto Pfleiderer, *The Development of Theology in Germany Since Kant*, trans. by J. Frederick Smith (London: MacMillan & Co. 1890) 3.

⁶ Stirling, “Lord Macaulay,” in *Stirling, Jerrold, Tennyson, and Macaulay with Other Critical Essays* (Edinburg: Edmonston and Douglas, 1868) 120-121.

For all their differences, Stirling's understanding of the relationship between words and concepts is not so distant from Skinner's. Stirling would seem to be suggesting that, unlike the English, the Germans possess a vocabulary that allows them to "pick out and discuss" (or, as he would have it, "pack up" and "shelve") the overarching concept that defined eighteenth-century thought. Lacking such a vocabulary, Anglophone writers would, he implies, be advised to take up the vocabulary that the Germans have provided.

Before "the Enlightenment": Aufklärung, and Illumination, Eclaircissement

Perhaps the most striking instance of a nineteenth-century translator's difficulties with *Aufklärung* involves a text that unambiguously employs the term to refer to the period that we know as "the Enlightenment." In his 1861 translation of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, John Sibree justified his peculiar choice of the French *éclaircissement* as a translation for *Aufklärung* this way:

There is no current term in English denoting that great intellectual movement which dates from the first quarter of the eighteenth century, and which, if not the chief cause, was certainly the guiding genius of the French Revolution. The word "Illuminati" (signifying the members of an imaginary confederacy for propagating the open secret of the day), might suggest "Illumination," as an equivalent for the German "*Aufklärung*"; but the French "*Éclaircissement*" conveys a more specific idea.⁷

"Illumination" had, in fact, enjoyed a modest popularity during the first half of the nineteenth century as a translation for *Aufklärung*. It was routinely used, along with "mental illumination," in *German Museum* (1801-1802) — a short-lived journal that specialized in translating eighteenth-century German texts into English. This convention was later taken up in translations of German histories of philosophy and in discussions of German philosophical works.

But, as Sibree noted, "Illumination" carried political connotations that he wished to avoid: during the 1790s, it had figured prominently in Anti-Jacobin polemics. Where Stirling sought to promote the use of *Aufklärung* as a way of facilitating a more philosophical account of the period, Sibree opted for a French loan-word as a way of avoiding the political tendencies associated with it. A comparison of Sibree's alternatives, along with instances of *Aufklärung* in English texts, suggests that *éclaircissement* (which had some currency in early nineteenth-century literary works) was not entirely unfamiliar to nineteenth-century readers:

⁷ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (London: Bohn, 1861) 456

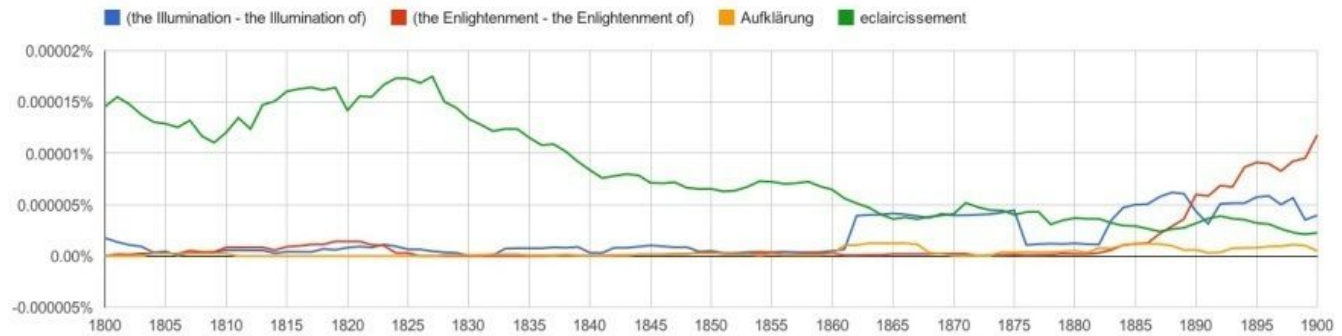


Figure 2⁸

Over the course of the nineteenth century it would appear that the concept of “Enlightenment” underwent two transformations. First, a term that, for most of the eighteenth century, had been used to designate a process, came to be used as a designation for a historical period. Figure 1 offers compelling evidence of the delay in the English acquisition of a crucial part of the vocabulary needed to consolidate that transformation. Figure 2 offers a hint of a second transformation that was intertwined with the first: a shift in the terms contested.

Contesting (the) Enlightenment

Among the misunderstandings that follow from juxtaposing “the Counter-Enlightenment” to “the Enlightenment” is a tendency to overlook the extent to which “enlightenment” remained, for longer than we sometimes realize, a contested concept. As Werner Schneider noted long ago, the thinkers most often recruited to fill the ranks of “the Counter-Enlightenment” saw themselves as defending a “true enlightenment” from a variety of impostors.⁹ Reflecting on the ambiguities inherent in invocations of the “counter-Enlightenment,” J. G. A. Pocock has pointed out that the term sometimes refers to “one brand of Enlightenment in opposition to another” and, at other times, to “a fixed antipathy to Enlightenment in some final sense of the term”¹⁰ The most important feature of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century arguments about enlightenment is that the contestants are far from possessing a “final sense” of what “enlightenment” involves.

Because these contests are marked by a flurry of contrasting adjectives (e.g., *wahre* and *falsche*) and peculiar neologisms (e.g., *Aufklärerei*), a crude (but, perhaps, not misleading) way of tracing their history would be to compare the persistence of

⁸ To avoid inflating occurrences of “the Illumination” with uses of the term in scientific or technical literature on urban or solar illumination, occurrences of “the Illumination of” are removed from the search. The same is true for “the Enlightenment of,” which screens out a few cases where the term was used to refer to the *process* of enlightenment (e.g., “the Enlightenment of the understanding”), rather than the period.

⁹ Werner Schneiders, *Die Wahre Aufklärung: Zum Selbstverständnis der Deutschen Aufklärung* (Freiburg: K. Alber, 1974)

¹⁰ J.G.A. Pocock, “Enlightenment and counter-enlightenment, revolution and counter-revolution; a eurosceptical enquiry,” *History of Political Thought* XX, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 132.

these pejoratives over time. As an example, consider the following survey of usages of *falsche Aufklärung*, *flache Aufklärung*, and *Aufklärerei*:

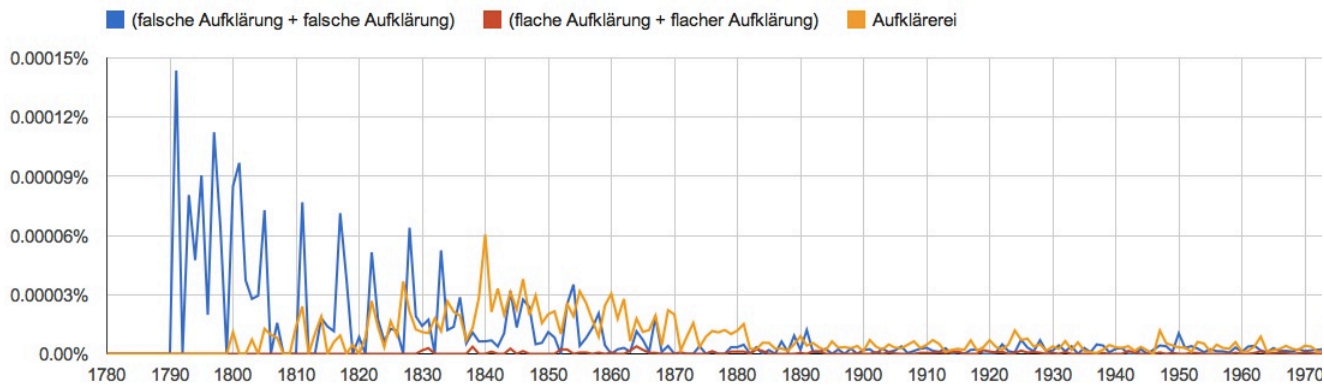


Figure 3

What is perhaps most immediately striking is the steady decline in usage of all three pejoratives between 1840 and 1880 (occurrences of these terms after 1880 are, more often than not, quotations from or republications of texts that date from the end of the eighteenth or the first half of the nineteenth centuries) and the more sudden fall in the usage of *falsche Aufklärung*.¹¹ One possible conjecture about the reason for this decline would be that, by 1880, something approximating a “final sense” of the general characteristics of the historical period known as *die Aufklärung* was secured. After that point, it was still possible to dispute the merits of the period, but attempts to vindicate the claims of the *true* conception of enlightenment as opposed to the false one ceased to be viable. The defenders of “true enlightenment” broke off their attempt to salvage an alternative conception of what enlightenment might involve. For better or worse, the “false enlightenment” was the only enlightenment: the particular conception of enlightenment that defined what now came to be seen as the most historically important tendencies in eighteenth-century thought had, as Stirling would have it, been deposited “on the shelf labeled *Aufklärung*.”

There is a striking example of this process at the start of Paul Leopold Haffner’s *Die deutsche Aufklärung*, a text dating from 1864. Haffner, a Catholic clergyman who would go on to become Archbishop of Mainz, began by feigning confusion as to what it meant to write a history of “enlightenment”:

Enlightenment is a sublime word, if one goes back to its meaning; it means illumination of the spirit through truth, liberation from the shadows of error, or uncertainty, of doubt. Enlightenment is, in its deepest meaning, the transfiguration [*Verklärung*] of reason.¹²

¹¹ What would appear to be an absence of uses of the term prior to 1790 is simply an artifact of Google’s scanning practices: very few eighteenth-century books reside on open shelves in libraries.

¹² P. L. Haffner, *Die deutsche Aufklärung. Eine historische Skizze* (Mainz: Franz Kirchheim, 1864) 1

But he quickly dropped this pretense and conceded that he was “too much a child of the nineteenth century” to pursue a history that diverged so violently from established convention of usage. So he resigned himself to speaking the degraded language of his day, “which exchanges the meaning of light and darkness,” which produces a literature that regards “the light of Christian centuries as dark gloom,” and which “greet[s] the shadows of doubt and the progress of religious barbarity as light.” It is obvious that Haffner rejected this enlightenment: it was grounded in a concept of reason that was “purely negative, destructive, empty; it has no positive content and no productive principle.” But it is equally obvious that he has abandoned any illusions that *Aufklärung* might mean anything better.

As might be expected, the discussion in English differs. While the French pejorative *philosophisme* was appropriated by English Anti-Jacobins, English critics of enlightenment never created a neologism that performed the same function as the German *Aufklärerei*. As a result, the work was done adjectives such as “false” and “shallow” (and, at a later point and to a much lesser extent, by “narrow”):

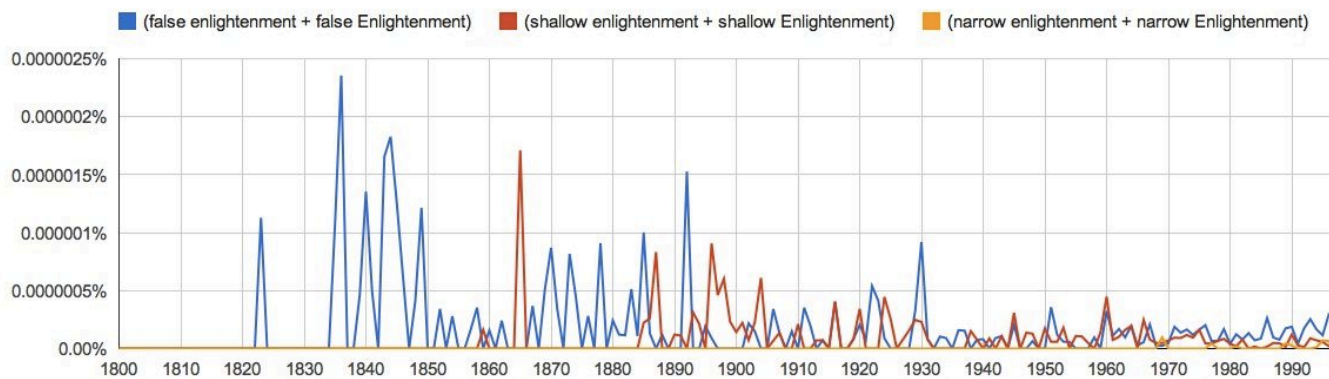


Figure 4¹³

A closer examination of the pattern of usage for “false enlightenment” and “false Enlightenment” clarifies that pejoratives were generally associated with *enlightenment*, rather than *Enlightenment*:

¹³ To simplify matters, this Ngram is not sensitive to capitalization.



Figure 5

There are few, if any, occurrences of “false Enlightenment” until the twentieth century. As had been the case in the German discussion, the adjectives “true” and “false” refer to a *process*, rather than a period: the arrival of a term designating the historical period in which a particular understanding of what the process known as “enlightenment” involved comes only after disputes about the truth or falsity of the this particular concept have ceased. This parallel to German discussions should not be entirely surprising. Indeed, the early appearances of “false enlightenment” are simply a continuation of the German discussion: the spike on the Ngram at 1835 is driven by editions of James Burton Robertson’s translation of Schlegel’s *Philosophy of History*.¹⁴

Some Implications

What implications — substantive and methodological — might be drawn from this somewhat hectic survey of the vicissitudes of the concept of enlightenment over the course of the nineteenth century?

First, it would appear that, as both Skinner and Stirling (that oddest of odd couples) suggest, words matter: *illumination*, *éclairecissement*, *enlightenment*, and *Aufklärung* do not designate the same concept. They carry different implications and these implications were clear to at least some of those who used them. Indeed, an enhanced sensitivity to the particular nuances of words may well be a defining feature of periods of conceptual contestation.

Second, capitalization — or, more precisely, the post-1800 conventions of capitalization in English — also matter. These conventions make the study of the emergence of the idea that there was such a thing as a discrete historical period called “the Enlightenment” easier to track in English than it is in German. Conversely, they make the job of English translators of German texts somewhat more difficult: there is no reason to assume that *die Aufklärung* should routinely be translated as “the Enlightenment.”

Finally, the resources available for tracking occurrences of words and phrases has significant implications for the work of historians of concepts. Though this attempt

¹⁴ Friedrich von Schlegel, *The Philosophy of History in a Course of Lectures, Delivered at Vienna*, trans. James Burton Robertson (London: Saunders and Otley, 1835).

at revisiting my earlier efforts at exploring the emergence in nineteenth-century English texts of the concept of “the Enlightenment” offers relatively few surprises, it fills in some blind spots (e.g., the rationale for Sibree’s choice of *éclaircissement*) and turned up a few texts (e.g., Sarah Austin’s Kant translation) that I previously overlooked. The Ngram Viewer may be a rather blunt instrument, but it will soon be supplanted by more elegant approaches. And, in some cases, a blunt instrument is enough to do the work that needs to be done.¹⁵

¹⁵ On the virtues of the Ngram Viewer for intellectual historians, see Benjamin M. Schmidt, “Words Alone: Dismantling Topic Models in the Humanities,” *Journal of the Digital Humanities* 2:1 (Winter 2012).