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Amen to That

Five hundred years ago, in February 1526, some six thousand copies of William Tyndale's complete New Testament of the Bible were printed at a press in the Imperial city of Worms in Germany. Today, as we celebrate the quincentennial, there are only two copies known to have survived the banning and burning of his work in England. The British Library has one, which I actually held in my hands when I was making a recording of Tyndale's Matthew Gospel in original pronunciation for the library a few years ago. It's a beautiful piece of work, by any standards, and you can read it in a facsimile edition published by the library.

Why burn them? Because they were in English. Tyndale's was a daring initiative, partly based on the Greek sources and thus at odds with the Catholic establishment, where the sole acceptable version was the Latin Vulgate. Only a tiny proportion of the population could understand Latin, and Tyndale wanted the Bible to be understood by everyone in their own tongue, and moreover so clearly that it would be accessible even to, as he put it, 'the boy that driveth the plough'. The initiative was greatly influenced by Reformation Protestant thinking, and it was this, along with his ferociously anti-Catholic prose writing, that led to his execution for heresy in 1536.

His translation was a first, both in biblical history and in the history of the English language. There had been a few fragments translated into English before, going back to Anglo-Saxon times, and a group associated with John Wycliffe had produced a version of the whole Bible in the late 14th century, but that was in Middle English. Tyndale's text, in the contemporary vernacular of his time – known as Early Modern English – had a huge influence on the many translations that came to be permitted following Henry VIII's break with Rome. It's most evident in the King James Bible of 1611, the so-called 'Authorised Version' of the Church of England, where over 70 per cent of the New Testament text reflects Tyndalian expression.

It's this path of influence that has attracted the interest of those who study the development of the English language. While researching *William Tyndale and the English Language*, published by the Bodleian this month to celebrate the 500th anniversary, I carried out a fresh survey of his innovative vocabulary using the files of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I found a remarkable 822 instances of first-recorded uses – that is, cases in which Tyndale provides the first time we find these words written down in English. Here's a brief A to W (there are no examples X to Z) that illustrates their everyday range:

anointed, benefactor, chaos, dissent, effeminately, fainty, godless, high-climbing, idleness, to juggle, kindred, landlady, to muzzle, naughty, opening, pick-quarrel, riddance, slime, thanksgiving, unlock, violently, weak.

Not all have survived into modern Standard English and some have developed other meanings. 'Fainty' ('feeling faint'), for instance, is largely dialectal now, and 'naughty' meant 'evil, wicked' then, not its mischievous sense of today.

It's impossible to say whether these are personal inventions

or, more likely in most cases, Tyndale reflecting what was already being used in speech. But when we look at the many idioms seen in his Bible translation and

prose essays, we do often get a sense that personal creativity is at work. In the essays we first see such idioms as 'go to pot', in its figurative meaning of something being destroyed, or going to pieces, and 'half an eye', suggesting that an issue is so obvious it can be seen with the smallest power of vision. Then there's the punchy idiomatic structure seen today in such common expressions as 'no win, no fee', which is first found in his essays. Here's one he uses: 'no penny, no pardon' – that is, you get nothing for nothing. If you want something, you're going to have to pay for it. (The allusion is to clergy who demanded payment for their services.)

The colloquial tone of his discourse is evident in several idioms from the essays that retain their informal character today, such as 'make light of' ('treat as unimportant'), 'run wild' ('become disordered' or 'be out of control') and 'say the word' ('give an order or instruction'). But these are far outnumbered by those that appear in the Bible translation. Their punchy rhythm makes them easy to say and remember. Many have a nicely balanced two-part structure. A favourite pattern is noun + preposition + noun, especially using a linking 'of': 'a baptism of fire', 'a den of thieves', 'the signs of the times', 'the twinkling of an eye', 'the patience of Job', 'the salt of the earth', 'the apple of his eye'.

Some are linked by 'in', such as 'a thief in the night', 'treasure in heaven', 'no room in the inn', and some by 'and', such as 'flesh and blood', 'signs and wonders'. Another pattern is adjective + noun, as in 'a bottomless pit', 'wandering stars', 'a shining light' and 'a cheerful giver'. Then there are instances like 'the powers that be', which are more complex constructions, though still retaining a two-beat rhythm.

As idiom length increases, the rhythm increases to three main beats, which is still well within our ability to recall and repeat: 'suffer fools gladly', 'the blind leading the blind'. There may even be complete sentences with an idiomatic status: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' 'O ye of little faith!' 'Be of good cheer.' 'Go the extra mile.' 'Turn the other cheek.' 'Physician, heal thyself.'

And some show the 'rule of three', a widely recognised principle in rhetoric, where three items are brought together into a single rhythmical sequence, as in 'I came, I saw, I conquered' or 'Stop, look, listen.' Probably the best known from Tyndale is 'eat, drink, and be merry'. A few have come down to us in shortened form. We read in his Matthew Gospel, 'let not thy left hand know/what thy right hand doeth'. Today we're more likely to hear such succinct phrasing as 'left hand, right hand'.

It's not only the literal use of these expressions that shows Tyndale's legacy. It's also the way they are readily adapted in fresh contexts, echoing the original without using its exact phrasing. Take this line from his Matthew's Gospel: 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' This has generated a huge number of adaptations. My favourite, which I saw in an online forum, is: 'Sufficient unto the day are the emails thereof.' Tyndale lives!