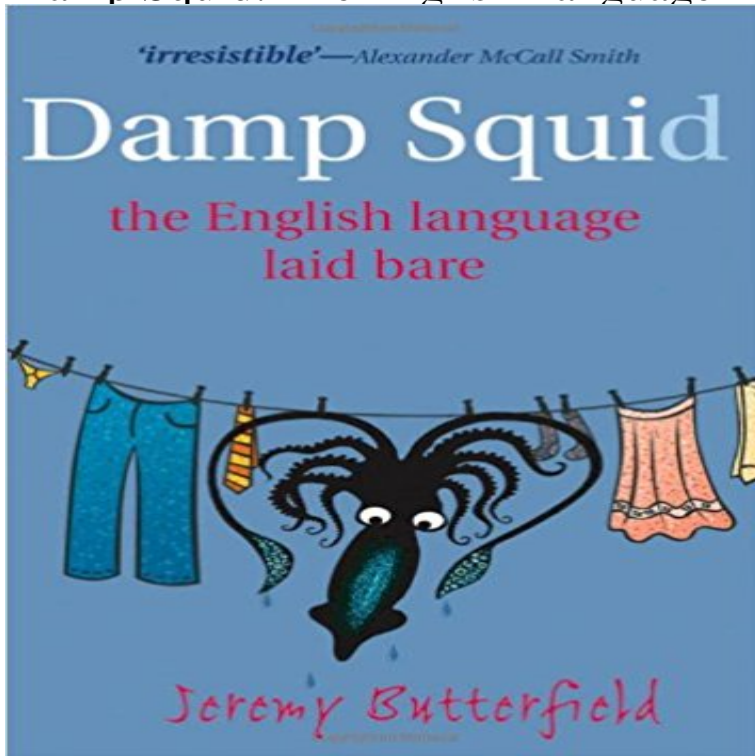


Damp Squid: The English Language Laid Bare



When James Murray compiled the OED in the 19th century, he used a small army of volunteers--and thousands upon thousands of paper slips--to track down the English language. Today, linguists use massive computer power--including the world's largest language databank, the Oxford Corpus, which contains more than two billion words--to determine for the first time definitively how the English language is used. From evidence contained in the gargantuan Oxford Corpus, Jeremy Butterfield here uncovers a wealth of fascinating facts about the English language. Where does our vocabulary come from? How do word meanings change? How is our language really being used? This entertaining book has the up-to-date and authoritative answers to all the key questions about our language. Butterfield takes a thorough look at the English language and exposes its peculiarities and penchants, its development and difficulties, revealing exactly how it operates. We learn, for instance, that we use language in chunks of words--as one linguist put it, we know words by the company that they keep. For instance, the word quintessentially is joined half the time with a nationality--something is quintessentially American or quintessentially British. Likewise, in comparing eccentric with quirky, the Corpus reveals that eccentric almost always appears in reference to people, as an eccentric uncle, while quirky usually refers to the actions of people, as in quirky behavior. Using such observations, Butterfield explains how dictionary makers decide which words to include, how they find definitions, and how the Corpus influences the process. Covering all areas of English, from spelling and idioms to the future of English, and with entertaining examples and useful charts throughout, this compelling and lively book will delight word lovers everywhere.

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