

## Take Five: Words in the World

Teacher Margaret Coupe explores lexical and semantic change, focusing on the contexts which drive the creation of new words.

Whilst reading this, you may be wrapped in a slanket (a blend denoting a blanket with sleeves) or wearing Primarni (a blend of 'Primark' and 'Armani' which means cheap replicas of designer clothes) because you are short of money owing to the current economic state of stagflation (a blend which conflates 'stagnation' and 'inflation'). You may be slumped in front of the TV sofalising (a blend describing the action of socialising with friends/family from the comfort of a sofa via social networks - also implying someone who no longer goes out with real people). Through lack of exercise you may have developed a muffin top (a graphic metaphorical extension depicting the fat hanging over the top of jeans). You may be eating a pot noodle with a spork (a blend to describe an implement which is a serrated spoon). The adults in your life may be neglecting you because they are SKIS (an acronym meaning 'Spend the kids' inheritance') and are off bungee jumping. You may be so concerned about these adults' air miles that you have become a locavore (a clipping of 'local' with the combining word 'vore' from the Latin meaning 'devour').

Most of the words highlighted here were underlined in red on my screen. The computer's dictionary did not recognise them as they are fairly recent additions to the lexicon. All the words tell us something about life in the early part of the twenty-first century. They derive from the following domains: economics; fashion; health: increasing obesity in Britain and the US; changes in social behaviour and our view of ageing; technological advances affecting the way people relate to each other; awareness of the environment.

Five new words follow, which may give us an insight into the way we live now. Please note: lexical and semantic change occurs relatively quickly when compared to grammatical or phonological language change. I am well aware that by the time this article comes to press, these neologisms could be 'so last year'!

### Repatriation

War is a great generator of language. When human beings are at the sharp end of new experiences, the urge to create expressions to deal with them is heightened. Many 'war' words are euphemisms. In the Vietnam War, the lexical item, pacification, appeared which means 'bringing peace'. The American troops were spraying North Vietnamese fields and villages with Agent Orange, another euphemism - this time for flesh-burning napalm. Some war words contain black humour: in World War 2 snafu was an acronym used by the ordinary soldiers, an abbreviation of 'situation normal, all fucked up'.

Our television screens have made us all familiar with the sight of coffins, draped in Union Jack flags, carried through the main street in Wootton Bassett in a poignant 'welcome home' ceremony, where the

townspeople line the street to show respect for army personnel who have lost their lives in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. The noun to describe this, repatriation, is an interesting one. Its stem from Greek via Latin signifies 'home country' or 'fatherland', the source of the adjective 'patriotic'. Using a word from classical language sources creates an elevated register, which lends dignity to the proceedings. 'Re', as a prefix, can be attached to any verb or its derivative to suggest 'once more' or 'again'. Thus, the neologism is a euphemism masking the fact that these are people, often in the prime of life, who have been returned to their country, initially in body bags. To describe the transportation of corpses back home, the Americans use the more clinical, alliterative compound transfer tube which in a different way deflects from the stark reality of what is involved. Language in times of war often involves mystification.

## Unfriend

This lexical item is an example of affixation and grammatical conversion.

The prefix 'un' denotes a cancellation or reversal of an action or state. Here the noun 'friend' is used as a verb. The expression means to remove someone from your list of friends on a social networking site, usually Facebook. The word 'friend' has undergone a semantic broadening. Its more established meaning is a person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, exclusive of family or sexual relations. This definition would make it virtually impossible to have hundreds of 'friends'. In the twenty-first century the idea of friendship has changed from a qualitative to a quantitative one. A 'friend' on a social networking site could be someone who knows of your existence and to whom you present a persona in virtual space. (Linguists refer to the concept of the 'altered self'.) Unfriend as a word sounds quite cold and ruthless: could a real friend be dismissed at the click of a button? We see how technological advances and new ways of communicating alter the way we respond to each other as human beings (and are even, scientists posit, altering the way our brains work). Unfollow is where someone has stopped following your tweets: the equivalent, I'm told, of having a glass of wine thrown in your face!

## Hevage

Many of you will have seen the Dolce and Gabbana advertisement, where a man is shown looking seductive, wearing a white shirt unfastened to the waist and presenting a well-waxed chest to the world. This man is displaying his hevage (blend of 'he' and 'cleavage'). This neologism tells us quite a bit about markets and masculinity. Advertisers have traditionally made women insecure about their looks so that they purchase beauty products. Now men seem to be being targeted. There are several new words guaranteed to make men self-conscious about appearance, including moobs (a blend of 'man' and 'boob', slang for a woman's breast). Mirdles (a blend of 'male' and 'girdle') have been designed to create a ripped (a metaphorical extension to signify a well-toned body with good muscle definition) look. Changing relations between men and women in a post-feminist era have brought us the phrasal verb to man up which is also a grammatical conversion. This expression has entered the common register as it appeared in Coronation Street in February 2011. When shop-keeper Dev is sobbing because he has failed to insure the shop destroyed in the tram crash, his wife Sunita urges him to 'man up!'

## Kettling

As potential university students, many of you will have been avidly watching media coverage of the student protests (designated 'riots' in the red tops) about increased tuition fees and the policies of the Coalition Government concerning higher education. There have been many mentions of a new policing tactic known as kettling. This is where groups of protesters are contained for long periods of time before

being dispersed in a filtered way. As the students are without food, water and toilet facilities, and are herded together, this has led to more letting off steam, to carry on the 'kettle' metaphor, rather than a defusing of the situation. 'Kettling' is a verbal noun or gerund, and we again see grammatical conversion at work as in 'unfriend'.

## Legend

Terms of approbation change rapidly and are very much a feature of youth culture. Knowing the 'in' word for 'good' is a marker of in-group identity and a way of excluding others outside the network. In an introduction to a Year 9 lesson, I was trying to make an activity sound very exciting, so was somewhat offended when a boy stated that it was sick! I later discovered that he actually approved. He was using the word as a kind of subversion of its established meaning. Coded language like this as in the 80s' use of wicked and bad is a way of creating group cohesion. Legend has been re-cycled as a word with a whole new spin on it. The original meaning of 'legend' was a traditional story popularly regarded as historical but not authenticated. With the advent of cinema, the word broadened to mean a famous or notorious person as in 'legend of stage and screen'. The noun is now used in an almost hyperbolic way to denote anything approved of. In the Year 11 Year Book, there were results of polls where students voted on 'Most legend teacher-male' and 'Most legend teacher-female'. Here the word was used as part of a superlative adjective.

When Colin Firth attended the Oscar Ceremony, where he won the best actor award, he was accompanied by his wife who wore an upcycled dress. (This is where a designer dress is made out of second-hand clothing; she is said to be very green in her outlook.) Like her, language is economical: it recycles words already in use and creates new meanings to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world.

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