



Brave New Wor(l)d – How and Why the Lexicon is Changing

Change is happening at a phenomenal rate but the process by which words enter the language, and whether they survive, generally follows recognisable, time-old patterns. So argues writer, editor and lexicographer Kerry Maxwell.

When I was doing A Levels, tablets were little things prescribed by the doctor to make you better, wireless was the device my mum turned on to listen to the late Terry Wogan, and tweeting was an activity reserved for birds. So yes, I'm old, but I'm also lucky enough to have witnessed first-hand what's arguably been one of the most exciting periods in the history of language change.

As the examples above illustrate, language is a dynamic phenomenon – just like the grass in the park or your mobile handset, it's constantly changing – growing, shrinking, embracing the new and discarding the old. 'Twas ever thus, but in terms of the observation and spread of new words, the digital revolution was as much of a game-changer as the invention of the wheel. When the internet made the leap from exciting innovation to everyday tool, we were suddenly able to see, hear, discuss and share language with unprecedented ease and speed. And consequently today, it seems that new words have become a genuinely 'cool' thing – they're in the popular public eye, a trendy topic over dinner, social media, or on TV.

What's more is that it's we – that's you and I, and not an exclusive bunch of academics, publishers, or prescriptive linguists – who are the inventors of those new words. Any of us has, in theory, the opportunity to unleash our linguistic creativity on the lexicon, and as language users we're also the ones who ultimately provide the casting vote on what becomes a permanent fixture. And, as it turns out, the processes by which we invent are not entirely random. The majority of new words we encounter cleverly exploit the building blocks already present in English, using regular patterns of creativity that have been observable for decades.

Brand-spanking New?

The 21st century has given us 'bling', 'dench' and 'on fleek'. However such lexical curiosities are pretty rare in the community of new words, and, in reality, barely any additions to the lexicon are shiny, new letter combinations like these. It's unexciting, but true, that new words are far more about re-invention than original creation. A notable exception though is words based on proper nouns, one of the most famous historical examples of which is 'sandwich', a snack enjoyed by an eponymous 18th-century Earl whilst doing a spot of gambling. Fast-forward to the 21st century, and the verb 'google' as a generic reference to using a search engine is one of the few recent examples of a genuinely new word form that,

like sandwich, has very successfully embedded itself in the language with a meaning that we all now recognise.

Re-use, Recycle

The most straightforward way to create a new word is simply to grab one that already exists and use it in a completely different way. A 'troll' for example, is no longer just a pesky little bad guy in Scandinavian fairy tales, but a person who writes hostile comments on a website. As the younger senses of words like 'window', 'web', 'surf', 'browser' illustrate, this is a surprisingly effective way of adding to our vocabulary, providing a challenge for lexicographers who have to work out to what extent the new sense has eclipsed the older one when organising dictionary entries. Often the new sense is a different part of speech (remember 'wireless'? The noun sense of my younger years is practically obsolete and today of course we primarily use the word as an adjective). This process is technically known as conversion – the verb use of 'text' is an oft-cited example of this. More recent ones include 'friend' (= to add to your social media friends list) and 'medal' (= to win a medal), which have also made the leap from noun to verb, a process also known simply as verbing.

Two Are Better Than One

Most new words and expressions are based on at least one element of the English lexicon that we're already familiar with, helping us to understand, write, or pronounce them at once. Unsurprisingly then, a very common and particularly successful word formation process is compounding – sticking two or more existing words together to represent a concept for which there's a lexical gap. Recent examples include 'text neck' (= injury caused by bending over smartphones, etc.), 'hostile architecture' (= public buildings designed to prevent sitting, climbing on them etc.), and 'sharing economy' (= an economic system based around sharing resources). 'Closed' compounds (with no space or hyphen) are a bit less common but there are still a number of recent examples (e.g. 'photobombing', 'crowdfunding'). New combinations often take inspiration from existing ones – so, for example, from fast food comes 'slow food' (= carefully prepared food using local ingredients), and with a cunning transposition of consonants, jet-setting has given us 'set-jetting' (= visiting places featured in films or TV).

Mix and Match

Often, it's not whole words, but parts of words that are combined to create new expressions – think e.g. 'jeggings' (jeans + leggings), 'upcycle' (up + recycle), 'glamping' (glamorous + camping). These crowd-pleasing creations are technically known as blends or portmanteaus, and are magnets for media attention, the real celebrities of the neologism world. Their stardom is often short-lived though, and many disappear once all the fuss has died down. Occasionally, however, blends manage to earn their keep as useful additions to the lexicon, especially when they genuinely fill a lexical gap (e.g. 'podcast' = iPod + broadcast). They also prove more enduring when language users connect with them to such an extent that they effectively liberate a new affix (e.g. vacation – 'staycation' ... 'daycation', 'greycation'; bikini – 'tankini' ... 'mankini', 'monokini').

Cut and Paste

A more conventional alternative to the creative cannibalisation of words is the inventive use of a recognisable, 'off-the-shelf' affix, of which English has a reasonably extensive repertoire. Some more recent examples of this phenomenon include use of 're-' meaning 'again' (e.g. 'regift' = to give someone

a gift you received from someone else) and 'un-' meaning 'not' (e.g. 'unfriend', 'unfollow'), or affixes with more specific meanings such as 'hypo-' (e.g. 'hypnobirth', 'hypnosurgery') and 'bio-' (e.g. 'biomimicry' = modelling technical solutions on nature). It's also worth noting here that new coinages are often more successful if they can use these kind of processes of affixation/derivation to spread themselves further and make a bigger impact on the lexicon, e.g. 'google' – 'ungoogleable', 'set-jetting' – 'set-jetter'.

Keep it Brief

Often rooted in technology, abbreviations are a very popular way of inventing new terminology. They often become so familiar that language users don't always know, or need to know, their underlying expressions and happily interpret meaning from the abbreviated forms themselves. There are three main types. First, there are those simply formed from the initial letters of component words, e.g. HD (= high definition), SEO (= search engine optimisation), which are technically referred to as initialisms. Next, there are ones that appealingly roll off the tongue because the initial letter sounds combine to form a plausible word, e.g. 'BOGOF' (= buy one get one free), 'WAG' (= wife and girlfriend – think celebrity footballers' wives). These are, of course, technically known as acronyms. And finally, there are those which are not just initial letters but truncated versions of constituent words, e.g. 'WiFi' (= wireless fidelity), app (= application), 'blog' (= weblog), often described as clipped forms.

Something Borrowed ...

Of course, a very easy way to create new words is to snatch them from other languages, something that English has been doing very effectively for centuries. Recent acquisitions from other parts of the world include 'sudoku' and 'tsunami' from Japanese, 'Wiki' from Hawaiian and 'vuvuzela' (= the noisy and much maligned plastic horn blown at football matches), possibly from Zulu. Of course, it's not all one way traffic, and newcomers to the English lexicon are likewise appropriated into other languages, either as wholesale borrowings or with adapted spelling (e.g. 'blogosphere' is realised as 'blogosfeer' in Dutch, 'metrosexual' as 'metrosessuale' in Italian).

First World Problems

Though the patterns of word formation we've discussed so far have been recognisable in English for decades, even centuries, there's a growing influence on language change which is undoubtedly rooted in the 21st century. Since the turn of the millennium, we've witnessed a mounting wave of new words and expressions pushed into our vocabulary through technology in use. There are two driving forces here. One is what could be described as the 'operational' factors of using new media. For instance, character constraints in instant messaging, or simply finding ways to reduce the number of key presses, mean that it's sensible to economise, leading to now familiar abbreviations such as 'BTW', 'CU', 'GR8' etc., which have gradually been appropriated into everyday language both online and offline (whether language pedants like it or not). Another example is the verb 'swipe', which since the advent of touchscreen technology, is primarily the action of moving your fingers across the surface of a smartphone or tablet (and if you swipe left or right, you're doing something very specific in the world of online dating!). The second influence is the need to emulate the subtle meanings which would have been conveyed in face-to-face communication – physical gestures like arm movements or facial expressions – in a 'verbal' way on screen. This has given us the likes of 'LOL', 'OMG' and 'facepalm'. What's particularly fascinating here, is that though these words have evolved as a direct result of technology in use, we've connected with them to such an extent that we've allowed them into our spoken vocabulary, so that today we might

happily say 'LOL' instead of laughing, 'OMG' to express surprise, or even 'hashtag' as a light-hearted prefix to a short statement.

Can We Influence What Lasts?

So there it is, a brief look at the ways in which new words are currently being born – one influence a little newer, the other processes observable through history. Though patterns of word formation remain predictable, it's impossible reliably to foresee the long-term fate of a new expression, and though some have tried, equally impossible artificially to influence its use and acceptance. This all happens through the natural, and often entirely random, habits of language users as a whole. That said, there are certain factors which appear to increase chances of survival – ease of use (obvious pronunciation, interpretation and spelling), or the potential for extension and association (e.g. the word 'selfie' has cemented itself partly because of the deluge of creative variations in its wake – 'legsie', 'shelfie', 'dronie', 'stealthie'..., and the word 'blog' has asserted its presence by dipping into other word formation processes – 'audioblog', 'blogger', 'vlog'...). However the one overriding factor in any of this is usefulness; words only remain in a language if they stay relevant over time. Language change, what's allowed in and what's thrown out, is directly linked to the preoccupations of society in a given era, and though technology is a key player, it's not the only influence, as notably illustrated today by use of expressions like 'transgender', the new title 'Mx' (as an alternative to Mr/Ms, etc.) and the wider recognition of 'they' as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun.

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