

# How new words come to be



THEY TRAVEL FROM ABROAD, OR MIGRATE FROM THE LAB. SOMETIMES, OLD WORDS GET NEW MEANINGS; OTHER NEW WORDS ARE JUST MADE UP!

DOST thou understand the

English language? It has changed a lot over time, as new words come into use and old words disappear.

The Oxford English Dictionary Online contains more than half a million words and definitions and adds at least 1,000 more every three months. English is the second-most-used language in the world (Chinese is first), and new words and usages are developed everywhere it is spoken. Here are some ways a word can end up as part of our language.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JANET BASSEMIR

## Foreign words settle in to stay

Languages are always borrowing words from one another, even if they change the pronunciation and spelling a little. Many times the new word comes along with the new item, such as spaghetti (Italian), camel (Hebrew), and chocolate (Mexican-Indian by way of Spanish). Ketchup (sometimes spelled catsup) comes from the Chinese sauce pronounced "ke-tsiap." Since Chinese doesn't use an alphabet like English, English users adopted different spellings that are still used today. Here are some more words from other languages:

**German** - kindergarten, blitz, poodle

**French** - salad, restaurant, garage

**Spanish** - rodeo, tornado, potato

**Italian** - piano, carnival, studio

**Arabic** - algebra, safari, sugar

## Combine words to make new ones

Some words are formed from combining other words, such as go-cart, sailboat, and raincoat. Sometimes the original

words were in another language. "Tele" is Greek for "far," and "scope" is Greek for "seeing," so a telescope is a far-seeing device. Here are some other combinations:

### Astronaut:

**astron** (Greek for 'star')  
+ **nautes** (Greek for 'sailor')  
= **star sailor**

### Automobile:

**auto** (Greek for 'by oneself')  
+ **mobile** (Latin for 'movable')  
= **moves by itself**

### Cosmonaut:

**cosmos** (Greek for 'universe')  
+ **nautes** (Greek for 'sailor')  
= **sailor of the universe**

### Interactive:

**inter** (Latin for 'between')  
+ **active** (from Latin 'to act')  
= **acting between**

## Words that are noises

Some words imitate the sounds they make, such as boom, hum, tweet, pop, whizz, and whisper. This is called onomatopoeia (on-oh-MATH-oh-PEE-yuh). Can you think of some more? Crash! Bang! Slam!

## Strung-together names

An acronym (AK-roh-nim) is a word formed from the first letters of a string of words:

**Radar** - RAdio Detecting And Ranging.

**Laser** - Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation.

**Scuba** - Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus.

**Sonar** - SOUNd NAVigation and Ranging.

Some words aren't really acronyms, but are just shortened versions that are quicker and easier to say, such as "hi-tech" for high technology or "bye" for goodbye, which is itself an already shortened form of the phrase "God be with ye."

## Brand names become ordinary words

A consumer product can become so popular that its brand name is used for that object, no matter who manufactures it. Jell-O is only one type of gelatin, but this brand is so well-known that people often call any gelatin-like substance jello. The same is true for Kleenex (for any paper tissue) and Xerox (meaning "to photocopy"). Manufacturers go to great lengths to try to keep their brand names from becoming generic terms, but often the battle is lost. Styrofoam, linoleum, and Popsicle all began as brand names.

## Borrowing words from literature

Writers have the advantage in adding new words to the language. They can put a new word in a book and it will be printed and distributed for everyone to see and adopt if they choose. Czech writer Karel Capek wrote a play in 1920 about mechanical creatures who work for humans. He called them robots, from the Czech word "robota," which means forced labor. The play was translated into English in 1923 and "robot" entered our lan-

guage to stay.

And now anyone who has read a Harry Potter book knows all about Quidditch, even though there's really no such sport.

## New names for new discoveries

Sometimes scientists and inventors get to make up a name for their new discoveries, such as neutrino, quark, and quasar. Inventions sometimes carry the name of their inventor or the person who makes its use common. The sandwich is named after John Montague, fourth Earl of Sandwich, who lived in the 1700s and popularized the idea of eating cold meat between slices of bread. An annual horse race was founded in 1780 by the twelfth Earl of Derby, and now "derby" is attached to a number of races, including the Kentucky Derby and even the Soap-Box Derby.

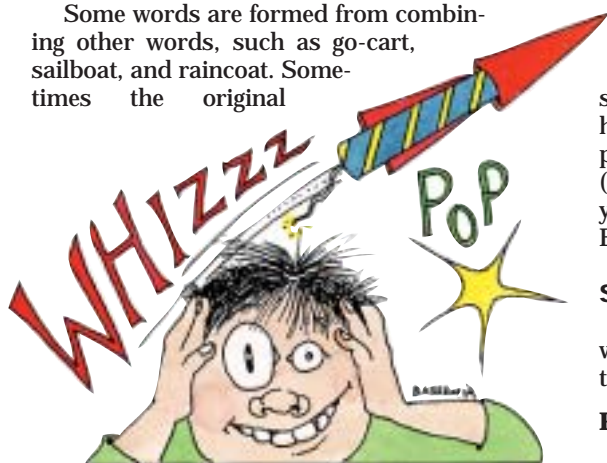
And look at the Internet! It has spawned such words as website, homepage, e-mail, and online.

## Old words put on new meanings

Sometimes an old word takes on a new meaning. When English-speaking people first began flying light wooden frames with cloth or paper stretched across them, they noticed that these objects flew in a way similar to a hawk-like bird called a kite. So they called the devices kites.

When computers were first being developed, some programmers found their computer was not working right. They finally traced the problem to a bug (a moth, actually) that had landed on the circuitry. Now "bug" has become a common term

Continued on next page



# The mystery of the famous word collector

ONE of the greatest contributors to the first Oxford English Dictionary was also one of its most unusual.

In 1879, Oxford University in England asked Prof. James Murray to serve as editor for what was to be the most ambitious dictionary in the history of the English language. It would include every English word possible and would give not only the definition but also the history of the word and quotations showing how it was used.

This was a huge task, so Dr. Murray recruited volunteers from Britain, the United States, and the British colonies to search every newspaper, magazine, and book ever written in English. Hundreds of volunteers responded, including William Chester Minor. Dr. Minor was an American surgeon who had served in the Civil War and was now living in England. He gave his address as "Broadmoor, Crowthorne, Berkshire," 50 miles from Oxford.

Minor joined the army of volunteers sending words and quotations to Murray. Over the next 17 years, he became one of the staff's most valued contributors.

But he was also a mystery. Despite many invitations, he would always decline to visit Oxford. So in 1897, Murray finally decided to travel to Crowthorne himself. When he arrived, he found Minor locked in a book-lined cell at the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane.

Murray and Minor became friends,

sharing their love of words. Minor continued contributing to the dictionary, sending in more than 10,000 submissions in 20 years. Murray continued to visit Minor regularly, sometimes taking walks with him around the asylum grounds.

In 1910, Minor left Broadmoor for an asylum in his native America. Murray was at the pier to wave goodbye to his remarkable friend.

Minor died in 1920, seven years before the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary was completed. The 12 volumes defined 414,825 words, and thousands of them were contributions from a very scholarly and dedicated asylum inmate.

S.J.H.

## WORD BOOKS FOR FURTHER STUDY

'The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology,' edited by Charles Onions (Oxford University Press, 1983) is a good reference source for the origin of words, but it's not exactly light reading. Older readers would enjoy it though.

For lighter fare, you might try these:

'Words Can Tell: A Book About Our Language,' by Christina Ashton (J. Messner, 1988).

'Where in the Word? Extraordinary Stories Behind 801 Ordinary Words,' by David Muschell (Prima Publishing, 1990).

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for a programming problem, even when they aren't talking about insects in the microchips.

## Jargon goes mainstream

Some words are specific to a job (countdown), sport (three-pointer), or a particular area of science or technology (reboot). People who aren't familiar with specialized terms may think others are speaking a foreign language. (For example; "This zip drive needs a 'scuzzy' [SCSI] port, but you can download to a CD instead.") But the terms may be adopted by the general public as well, with their original or a slightly changed meaning.

For example: Have you ever heard of a black hole? To scientists, it's the name of a cosmological phenomenon. To the rest of us, it's a place into which our homework or socks from the dryer disappear.

## How could you add a word?

Could you make up a word to put into the language yourself? You could try. If other people liked your word, they might use it and spread it around. But you can't count your word as official until it appears in a dictionary.

One of the most comprehensive English dictionaries in the world is the Oxford English Dictionary, published by the Oxford University Press in England. The complete 20-volume dictionary contains definitions of words, information on their origins, and quotations to illustrate their

proper usage and meanings.

The dictionary is also available online, which makes it easier to update on a regular basis.

The Oxford University Press maintains the Oxford Reading Programme, which has a staff of readers who provide editors with quotations showing how words are being used. Dictionary editors research how the word came about and where it is being used. Then they decide if a new word is familiar enough to be included in the dictionary.

If you'd like to learn more about how words are used, you can visit their website at [www.askOxford.com](http://www.askOxford.com). You'll find quotes, questions and answers, a "jargon buster," and a place to submit questions of your own about our ever-changing English language.

Sharon J. Huntington

TODAY'S ARTICLE ON CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

Bringing a spiritual perspective on daily life

## How do you get to be important?

IF WHAT MAKES PEOPLE important is the number of lives they touch, the people they influence and impact, and the overall effect of their lives on their situations, the community, and the world, then Patrick is an important person.

At my daughter's school there's a busy intersection just before the place where children are dropped off. Every single car and bus that drops off students has to pass that spot each morning, and that means they have to pass Patrick.

Patrick is the crossing guard who directs traffic, but he doesn't just wave cars through. He dances them through, he delights them through, he entertains them through, he high-fives them through, he loves them through. Rain or shine, heat or sleet, he's there in good spirits. You can't pass Patrick without feeling a sparkle of joy, humor, and uplift. Nobody, in my opinion, at that busy school touches more people's lives with a more positive influence every day than Patrick.

So how did Patrick get to be so "important"? Did he

scramble up a corporate ladder, making astute career moves as he went? Did he battle to get ahead in politics so he could make a name for himself? Did he publish a best-selling book or become a movie star? No. Patrick just loves. He loves God, his job, the day, the people he's helping, the weather, and the school as a whole. He's living proof that it's the love we express that makes us effective and important.

Christ Jesus, whom many think of as the most important man ever, lived this approach in his work, too. Others around him wanted to make him into a political or a military figure, but he humbly fulfilled his mission through love. He healed and helped people everywhere he went. He didn't try to promote himself, but rather the good news that the kingdom of God, God's allness and goodness, were ever-present and built into everyone as God's likeness.

When asked what the most important thing was for people to do, he said: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second

is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matt. 22:37-39). He counseled his followers repeatedly to love each other and said that love was the fulfillment of all that they were supposed to do.

I've come to understand this to mean that our very function or purpose is to love. Since God is Love and the source of our being, then we are created and expressed by Love. The expression of Love naturally loves, just as the sunlight naturally shines. What makes the sunlight important is the fulfilling of its very function or purpose to shine. What makes us important is the fulfilling of our purpose to love as the response to God.

You could be standing in line at the grocery store, riding on a commuter train, walking down the sidewalk, or planting crops in a Nebraska cornfield, and if you did that job with love, it would transcend the activity itself and

become a powerful blessing to yourself, your family, your community, and the world.

I'm learning from Patrick's example that we don't have to wait for something

important to do to be important; we just have to love. I'm learning from Jesus' example that loving is the thing we do naturally as the reflection of Love. Since it's natural to love, then it's natural for us all to be important, and we can start to prove this by loving where we are, what we are doing, and who we are with right now.

*It is Love which  
paints the petal with  
myriad hues, glances in  
the warm sunbeam,  
arches the cloud with  
the bow of beauty,  
blazons the night with  
starry gems, and  
covers earth with loveliness.*

Mary Baker Eddy  
(founder of the Monitor)

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