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How the New Dictionary Entries Reflect the Anxieties of Our Time

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Abstract: Language is a living organism in constant change. Each shift in language is a response to a change in collective priorities, fears and innovations, offering a unique lens through which to examine historical and contemporary transformations. Lexical changes shape whole communities and give them identity. The adoption of new dictionary entries reflects broader linguistic and cultural trends. Strating from this reality, the present work aims at highlighting the cultural relevance of new dictionary entries, as well as their psychological impact on the new generation.

Keywords: shift, lexical change, entry, cultural relevance, anxiety.

1. Introduction

Language is a mirror of cultural and social shifts. It is nothing new that language is a living organism in constant change. There are not only new words that enter the dictionary, but also new grammar rules that evolve rapidly and impose themselves among speakers. With language changing so quickly and comprehensively, one might ask why we should bother sticking to old words if their individual meanings have extended over their classical communicative or social role.

For example, a *wallet* has represented for a long time a leather or canvas case, in which people kept their money or essential documents. Now it is also a file on a smartphone in which one can keep electronic documents such as tickets and passes. Even the multiple versions of English (British, America, Indian, Australian etc.) may have contributing to enriching vocabulary and underlying the importance of mastering the subtleties of the language.

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However, there is a general tendency among English speakers to keep language as standard as possible while supporting the idea of the profound unalterability of language. "People wish standard English to survive because they consider it has authority and that it has authority because it is clear and unambiguous…those who choose not to do so may find themselves at a disadvantage." (Simon Heffer, 2024, p. XIV)

The evolution of words or new dictionary entries can be confusing through their misuse. For example, terms that mark the technological revolution such as *mainstream, platform, tweet* etc., can signal either the language evolution or a faulty use by not adapting to the right context. Regardless of this evolution, the new dictionary entries must be carefully selected and analysed to be as logical and intelligible as possible. The preservation or promotion of the language should not be treated frivolously, but as an act of cultural necessity.

2. The role of language in capturing societal shifts

Language is shaped by cultural transmission, as stated by Arbib M. A, 2005. Perceived as more than a tool for communication, language is a repository of human experiences, reflecting the complexities of societal change over time. Each shift in language is a response to a change in collective priorities, fears and innovations, offering a unique lens through which to examine historical and contemporary transformations.

From a historical perspective, languages have evolved continuously, each contributing more or less to shaping human civilizations. From interpreting language as a divine gift, to imitating natural sounds, using gestures to communicate or linking it to the evolution of the human brain, we have outlined a contemporary perspective rich in morphological, semantic or stylistic nuances to which are added technological progress, globalization and diversity as indispensable elements for the transformation of language.

There is always a dynamic change in society life. Changes shape whole communities and give them identity. Language development takes place within the community. It is deeply embedded in the interactions, values and practices of the community it serves. While individuals contribute to linguistic evolution, it is through collective usage, shared experiences and cultural exchange that languages truly grow and adapt.

Social interaction based on language enables collaboration and facilitates linguistic borrowing. Variations in dialects related to geographical position, generational influence shaped by unique experiences and innovations reflect deep connections and contribute to the diversity of language.

While language ensures the foundations of communication, enabling the expression of social norms, communities provide the context, dynamism and necessity for language to thrive. Language embodies the uniqueness of a community, reflecting its traditions, beliefs and way of life, whereas communities adapt language to meet their changing needs, creating new words, phrases and expressions. Language

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and community are mutually sustaining forces, each depending on the other for growth and survival.

3. Linguistic mechanisms driving the adoption of new entries

The adoption of new dictionary entries often reflects broader linguistic and cultural trends. We often ask ourselves what the role of a lexicographer is. A simple definition describes him as a specialist who writes and edits a dictionary. However, his mission is not only to define terms, but also to add new concepts that have acquired other meanings over time.

He must also add lexicographic content and update pronunciations or etymologies. Words are added to reflect the evolving nature of language and ensure the dictionary remains a relevant and accurate resource for communication. The main reason why new words are added is language evolution, which is mostly specific to humans as Hurford (2003:40) states "we are left with the material (anatomical, neural, biochemical) bases of language in humans…and the dynamics of populations and cultural transmission." According to Tellerman, M., 2014, "Languages evolved gradually having some continuity with other communication systems, rather than arising fully formed."

Cultures shape languages by providing the context and priorities that determine how people communicate. As Christiansen and Chater (2008) illustrate, language evolves and adapts to the selective pressures imposed by learners. In order to be successfully past to successive generations of speakers, languages must express their multiple meanings its users need to communicate.

Another reason why new terms are included in a dictionary is technological development. New inventions, cultural phenomena or global events, generally lead to the coinage of new words. For example, social media posts terms like *hashtag, metaverse, selfie, blockchain* etc. Based on their wide use, some loanwords are adopted from other languages and recognized in dictionaries. *Déjà vu* from French describes a situation or feeling experienced before and is widely used to refer to a psychological phenomenon: *She had a nagging sense of déjà vu.* (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/deja-vu)

The Danish concept *hygge* refers to comfort or coziness and has been popularized by lifestyle trends advocating mindfulness and well-being: *Even a picnic in the park can be very hygge, when done in the Danish way.* (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hygge)

The culinary contexts worldwide include terms like: *gnocchi* (Italian) – soft dumplings made from potato and flour, *sushi* (Japanese) – a dish of rice combined with seafood, *taco* (Spanish) – a Mexican dish consisting of rolled tortilla filled with various ingredients etc.

This process of borrowings highlights the influence of globalization and the blending of cultural identities. Slang, jargon or informal words achieve significant usage even if they are more specific to niche communities. Sometimes, informal

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terms enter formal contexts and become part of mainstream communication. Such words capture cultural trends or movements describing the world as it evolves.

Entertaining habits like watching multiple episodes of a show or TV series are referred to as *binge-watch*. Collaborative work is rendered by the term *crowdsourcing*, a jargon from business and technology. *Ghosting* is a modern slang for cutting off communication abruptly and has entered the dictionary because it catches a specific social behaviour: *Ghosting is one break-up trend that I will never understand.* (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ghosting#google_vignette)

By including jargon, slang or informal terms, dictionaries remain relevant and practical tools for using language as it is spoken or written today. Moreover, such words become part of the standard lexicon, tracking their passage from ordinary use to formal recognition.

4. Lexical entries and their relevance to the new generation

Lexical entries, as fundamental components of a dictionary or lexicon, are structured records about words and expressions. They typically include information such as pronunciation, spelling, grammatical definitions, etymology and related forms. Their relevance to the new generation has increased due to shifts in language use, digital communication and technological advancements.

Lexical entries often adapt to represent diverse cultures, identities, and communities, essential for a generation that values inclusivity. They also help to bridge gaps between formal and informal language, making it easier for older generations and non-native speakers to understand new trends in communication.

Words are added to dictionaries through a careful and systematic process that reflects their widespread use and significance in real-world communication. Glossarists, the ones responsible for including new concepts do plenty of research to notice how terms are used.

Dictionaries include all kinds of standard words, slang, dialect or non-standard words, therefore their creators must wait until a word has gained some prevalence in the mainstream use. The main criteria underlying the selection and introduction of a new word into a lexicon include: widespread use, widely agreed-upon meaning, the word lifespan and its usefulness for the general audience. Words, much like living organisms, have a lifecycle. They are born, live and sometimes die due to the constantly evolving nature of language, shaped by cultural, technological and social factors.

Words are born through various mechanisms reflecting the need for new concepts, expressions or innovations. They include coinage (creation of new words – ex. *Google*), borrowing (taking words from other languages – *cliché* from French), derivation (*conception – misconception*), semantic shifts (the meaning of the word changes significantly over time – *undertaker* used to refer to someone undertaking various tasks or responsibilities - in the 15th century - whereas its current meaning refers to someone who manages burials), technological evolution (*emoji, streaming, deepfake, GIF* etc.).

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Words live by being included in daily communication, written texts or cultural idioms. When they lose relevance or fall out of use, words die. Some concepts disappear because they become obsolete or inappropriate. Lack of transmission to the new generation may also contribute to words death. Even the disappearance of certain activities or practices may cause the loss of practical relevance for some words.

Despite the multitude of newly entered terms, we will make a short analysis of certain dictionary entries which have marked the new generation, their relevance and longevity, to better observe the language dynamics in a highly digitalized world.

Podcast can be both a noun and a verb and refers to a digital audio or video file that can be downloaded from a website. The word was coined in 2004 by the British journalist Ben Hammersley in an article for *The Guardian.* Podcasts began as a way for individuals and organizations to distribute serialized audio content. They cover a wide range of topics like storytelling, education, health, comedy, news and gained popularity in 2010 with the rise of smartphones.

Podcasts have become a global phenomenon available on multiple platforms and their quality to adapt to technological advancements ensures their relevance and growth.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (dictionary.cambridge.com), *deepfake* defines "a video or sound recording that replaces someone's face or voice with that of someone else, in a way that appears real" – ex. *Nowadays anyone can download deepfake software in their spare time*. The term originated on Internet forums such as Reddit around 2017 to describe manipulated videos for malicious purposes. As regards its modern relevance, *deepfake* technology is both an innovation in media creation and a significant ethical challenge.

Selfie, the slang term for *self-portrait*, attested from 2002, had become popular due to the spread of digital cameras, social media platforms and because of people's fascination with their own image. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a photograph that one has taken of onesel, typically with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website." Due to its widespread use, *selfie* was chosen the word of the year in 2013, in the afore-mentioned dictionary.

Selfies were used in the photography industry long before the advent of social networks. Although there is no clear evidence who first used the selfie, the American photographer Robert Cornelius is said to have pioneered the concept. As a global cultural phenomenon, *selfie* has sparked controversy for reasons like ethics, moral questioning or mental health.

The constant need to capture and share images of oneself may reflect narcissism and self-obsession, prioritizing social validation. The selfie culture reinforces unrealistic beauty standards, may cause anxiety, fear of inadequacy or may turn into addiction. There are also ethical concerns related to taking selfies at places abounding in dramatism and vulnerability. Despite all the controversy, the *selfie* has become a universal language cutting across linguistic and cultural barriers.

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Another modern word linked to online culture and social media is the idiomatic phrase *touch grass* which Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines as "to participate in normal activities in the real world, especially as opposed to online experiences and interactions." In a more symbolic way, *to touch grass* is the act of leaving the digital environment to reconnect with the real world (*I was told to touch grass after playing video games for hours on end* - https://knowyourphrase.com/touch-some-grass.

The phrase has gained popularity as a humorous slightly sarcastic response to people who are totally detached from reality. It is used to ridicule overzealous internet behaviour and to encourage someone to break away from the digital world.

The uncountable noun *smishing*, defined as "the criminal activity of sending someone a text message in order to trick them into giving personal information such as their back account number" (https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/smishing) is a combination of two words: *sms* (Short Message Service) and *phishing* (fraudulent action). The term has emerged in the early 2000s, with the proliferation of cyber attacks. In terms of cultural relevance, *smishing* reflects broader concerns about cybersecurity, privacy and the need for digital literacy in an increasingly connected world.

Slightly similar to the idiom *touch grass* is the phrase *awe-walk*, a combination of two ideas: *awe* (fear mixed with reverence, a feeling of amazement) and *walk* (to go on foot). The phrase is much related to mindfulness, mental health and gratitude emphasizing being present and appreciating the world. The term is highly used among psychologists who promote an intentional shift of attention outward instead of inward.

Dictionary.com registers the noun *information pollution* as "the introduction of falsehood, irrelevance, bias and sensationalism into a source of information, resulting in a dilution or outright suppression of essential facts." It has only negative connotations including misleading, irrelevant or low-quality information.

This widely spread phenomenon touches various social mechanisms and entities like mass media, politics, consumer culture, marketing, art etc. It is culturally relevant because it shapes how societies interact, trust and function in the digital era.

Brain rot (corp.oup.com) is a frequently used informal noun, declared the word of the year 2024 in the Oxford Dictionary. It designates low-quality online content, being described by the psychologist Andrew Przybylski as "a symptom of the time we are living in."

In a clearer way, *brain rot* refers to the deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, due to overconsumption of trivial material. Henry David Thoreau was the first to use the term in 1854 in his book *Walden*, in which he criticizes people's tendency to devalue complex ideas.

The term has gained cultural significance in recent years, especially within online communities, where it is used either humorously or critically to emphasize obsessive or overly indulgent behaviour towards certain social trends. Similar to its

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literal meaning of degradation, decay of organic matter, its metaphorical use is usually associated with excessive consumption of unchallenging content.

We may also add other terms and phrases to the list of negatively connotative entries: *crony capitalism* (an economic system in which family members and friends of government officials and business leaders are given unfair advantages in the form of jobs, loans etc. – dictionary.cambridge.org), *echo chamber* (a situation in which people only hear opinions of one type or opinions that are similar to their own), *biohacking* (scientific experiments done by people who are not official experts or scientists in order to commit crime). In addition to their negative significance, these terms often carry potent and vivid symbolic meanings because they represent societal fears, dysfunctions, or ethical dilemmas.

Most dictionary entries, specific to each generation reflect language constant evolution on the one hand, and society priorities, technological trends or cultural movements on the other. They also act as a lexical portrait of a particular time, providing a valuable resource for future generations to study linguistic and cultural shifts.

5. The psychological impact of lexical changes

Since language is deeply tied to identity, culture and cognition, the psychological impact of new lexical entries can be significant. Apart from reflecting a wide variety of semantic content, which contributes to broadening the cultural horizon, new dictionary entries also shape societal trends, cultural exchanges and the cognitive growth of individuals. At the same time, they can foster a sense of being modern, relevant or adaptable.

However, lexical changes can be perceived as something unstable, which may cause anxiety or threat to linguistic tradition or correctness. Some people only see the volatility of words which emerge rapidly and disappear from the collective vocabulary just as easily. Moreover, new dictionary entries may cause cognitive dissonance for users who struggle to reconcile these changes with their values. Keeping up with the information overload and the ever-changing linguistic landscape, can become a burden, giving rise to strong emotional reactions.

The semantic variety, the metaphorical nuances of idiomatic expressions or the low frequency of rather ephemeral terms can contribute to the non-confirming, contextualization of vaguely defined or extremely abstractly explained terms.

Providing clear definitions and cultural context for new lexical entries and highlighting the dynamic aspect of language can help users adapt and even embrace change.

6. Conclusions

Language as a living organism provides us with infinite possibilities of understanding its working mechanisms. Language is above all an effective tool for communication, whereas lexical updates ensure that people are able to describe contemporary realities

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and to reduce ambiguities in modern discourse. As technology evolves and global changes arise, we need new words to describe them.

Every word can be considered a suitcase in which specialists pack an idea and transmit it to a small community or a whole generation. Irrespective of the impact of the new lexical entries, users must realize that the essential role of language is meeting the needs of a changing world, fostering understanding, connection and inclusivity.

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