

Word nerds capture fleeting online English

As professionals struggle to keep up, a different kind of dictionary is recording a rich new vocabulary

JIM GILES

DO YOU know what a bullshit is, or an obesogen? You might be able to guess, but unless you're a word nut it would be hard to check, were it not for a new kind of online dictionary that puts the meaning and origin of bizarre and novel words like these just a click away.

Until recently, our main source of what words mean has been the tried and trusted paper dictionary. As reference works, these venerable tomes are still invaluable, but for tracking the dynamic changes that languages continually undergo, they can be too slow-footed. Their entry criteria are often extremely strict, and even dictionaries of slang sometimes require a word to be in use for a decade or so before it is included.

That gap is now being plugged in cyberspace. The availability of millions of online newspapers, blogs and digitised book

databases such as Google Book Search, combined with free search tools, is transforming the job of dictionary compilation. This in turn has led to a clutch of websites filled with new words and trends in language, run by amateur lexicographers. "There is an

explosion in this kind of work," says Grant Barrett, a freelance lexicographer based in New York who is also vice-president of the American Dialect Society.

The result is a new kind of dictionary that can be updated every day and has no size limits. These dictionary sites are even

making it easier for professional lexicographers to keep track of how language is changing, and so help keep these reference works up to date.

Barrett helps run Double-Tongued Dictionary, where bullshit and obesogen are among the many recent new words listed (they mean, respectively, an image from a computer game that has been enhanced to promote the game itself, and a chemical that causes weight gain). To populate the site, he searches newspapers, blogs and magazines for phrases like "known to fans as" or "coined the word" which are likely to precede newly minted words. Having found a new word, Barrett researches the term more thoroughly, usually looking for repeated uses before including it. The site moves fast enough to capture definitions of words that are out there now but may not hang around long enough to make it into a traditional dictionary.

Non-bugnuttery

noun Sanity. Cool, refreshing sanity

The web is also allowing word nuts to geek out in another way: hunting down when and where a term originated, an activity that used to require a painstaking trawl through the archives of newspapers and magazines. As digital versions of these collections are continually being posted online, these terms can now be dated much more quickly. The emergence of such databases has also spawned informal competitions in which amateurs vie to identify the earliest use of a particular term.

A number of these contests have been won by Barry Popik, a lawyer who in his spare time runs a blog about food-related words called The Big Apple.

Anti-Fonzie

noun Not cool, dude

Popik is a contributor and consultant to several dictionaries, often on his pet topic of food terms, and is an authority on the origin of "hot dog".

Last October, a search of the newly digitised archives of the *San Antonio Express News* in Texas allowed Popik to shed new light on how the word "nacho" originated. A 1950s recipe book recorded it as coming from the nickname of a chef in the Mexican frontier town of Piedras Negras – but was that just a folk tale? On the archive, Popik found several newspaper articles that gave the same account of the story, independently of the book.

Similarly, in 2002, Popik used the digital archives of the 19th-century *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* newspaper to locate one of the earliest mentions of "baseball", then written as two separate words, and what he says is the first ever mention of "chop suey".

Online dictionaries like these are also a great resource for professional lexicographers. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has used contributions from amateurs from around the time of its first publication in 1884. Volunteers continue to send in clippings from newspapers and magazines containing examples of new words, or different uses for old ones. Now the web has turbocharged that kind of work.

Take Urban Dictionary. Anyone can submit a word to this site, and as its editors do not verify new entries there's no way of knowing whether a term that appears in Urban Dictionary is used by anyone other than the person who sent it in. It does have

Henchgoon

noun An alternate term for "administrative assistant" or "minion of doom"

one overwhelming strength, though: the sheer volume of material it contains. Hundreds of words are entered every day, making it a useful first point of call for anyone wanting to check up on claims about a new word. "There is often bogus information there," says Ben Zimmer, a dictionaries editor at Oxford University Press in New York. "But if someone is using a word, the chances are very good that it will be put on Urban Dictionary."

He recently used the site to check out claims that the word "subprime" had a meaning other than the financial one that has become all too well known. According to some media reports last month, students were talking about having "subprimed" a test, but when Zimmer checked Urban

Dictionary, the new use was not there. It is far from a definitive test, but Zimmer says it was enough to make him sceptical about the media reports.

Another amateur site that the pros turn to is the Wordlustitude blog, written by Mark Peters (see "How Wordlustitude feeds my obsession"). He has tracked the use of infixes – words inserted into the middle of other words. Some of the best-known examples come from the TV cartoon series *The Simpsons*, where the eternally cheerful character Ned Flanders has coined phrases such as "in-diddly-different" and "wel-diddly-come". Peters's collection of "diddly" words caught the attention of Michael Adams, a linguist at Indiana University, Bloomington. According to Adams, infixes have

been used in poetry for centuries but spoken infixes have appeared only in the last few decades. Peters's collection provides further evidence that this is true.

Another aspect of the "diddly" collection has also been of particular interest to linguists. They had previously assumed that one-syllable words could not be infixated. But "diddly" shows that rule can be broken: "Shi-diddly-it", which has cropped up in blogs

unrelated to *The Simpsons*, is one example. Adams, who cites Peters's work in a book on slang due to be published this year, says this works in spoken English because the "y" at the end of "diddly" smoothes the transition into the end of the infixated word.

Writing on the Language Log blog, Zimmer credits Wordlustitude for the "wild discoveries" of words ending in "licious", such as kegelicious, tentaclicious and non-suckalicious. Zimmer says that Peters's "licious" observations show that the suffix is being used more than it was previously. "What once was an occasional delectation is now just a bit too overkillicious," he writes.

So as Urban Dictionary, Double-Tongued Dictionary and Wordlustitude provide up-to-the-minute updates on language, and detail words that traditional dictionaries may miss, do they call into question the future of traditional dictionaries? Barrett and other lexicographers reject any such suggestion, pointing out that the basics of language move slowly. New slang crops up daily, but most of it quickly disappears. By waiting years or even decades before deciding whether to include a new word, dictionary editors are able to make a better judgement on how language is really changing.

The value of amateur listings lies in the extra dimension they add to word hunting. "No savvy lexicographer ignores Urban Dictionary," Barrett wrote on his blog in 2006. "Its visitors might seem like a million chimps trying to hammer out Shakespeare, but among the useles words are gems that do indeed deserve to be on the record." ●

Celebutfreak

noun A freak with fame

Nanoblahblah

noun Nano-technobabble – or very, very tiny nonsense

HOW WORDLUSTITUDE FEEDS MY OBSESSION

I am obsessed with words that have failed. As an amateur lexicographer and rabid word nut, I want to preserve, enjoy and share ephemeral examples of our huge linguistic creativity, even though – and partly because – self-depantifiers, hamsterslaughter, zombiedar, henchgoon and messiahness-in-training will never make any dictionary, let alone a major one. Those colourful words (and thousands of others) are recorded on my blog Wordlustitude.

Lexicographers call these one-off terms, coined for a single occasion, "nonce words". Not all nonce words are as colourful as scapepoodle and juicyfruited, but my blog combines my

compulsion for collecting rare words with my not-so-mature sense of humour, so I select terms that are easy to joke about.

If it weren't for the web, I'd probably look for another hobby. Though I sometimes stumble across an appropriately inappropriate word in a book or magazine, almost all my findings come from the banquet of slangy, creative, Google-able language on blogs and message boards. The web is a feast for nonce-word collecting. It is enormous, dynamic, easily searched for linguistic goodies, and stuffed with colloquial copy written by millions.

As lexicographers make better dictionaries when they have more

information on actual language use, I also get some credit from the pros for data I have provided (see main story). My dictionary may be goofy, but the words are real.

I like to think the *Oxford English Dictionary* might one day welcome some of my words. It already contains a boatload of nonce terms, including ding-dong-doggedly, fleshhotpot, polydiabolical, loco-restive, trans-bedpost and thumperati, any of which would be quite at home on Wordlustitude. Even if they don't, at least nanoblahblah, whirly-twirly-leapy-fiippy and celebwhatever are being preserved somewhere. Mark Peters