

POPULAR WORDS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present the most popular words and expressions of English identified by various linguistic companies in the past decades. The popularity of words changes with their use – new meanings and contexts are assigned to words; new words arrive to the word stock as a result of the need to express new phenomena. Linguistic societies trying to popularize their work annually create lists of the so-called words of the year for popular and academic discussion.

Key words: *lexicography, word, lexical item, linguistic society, dictionary, internet, word-formation process*

1. LEXICOGRAPHY AND DICTIONARY MAKING

Lexicography is an applied linguistic discipline, aim of which is to create dictionaries on the practical level; on the theoretical level its aim is to formulate principles regarding the dictionary compilation and to advise the lexicographers in overcoming the obstacles in the process. The primary study material of lexicographers is a lexical unit, a word.

Lexicography is closely related to lexicology, another linguistic discipline, since both of the disciplines deal with the words and lexical units in their own way. While lexicology is viewed as relatively objective, because it treats the words as parts of the word stock of a language belonging into one (or more) clearly defined categories; the lexicography deals with the word as with an independent linguistic problem, because the process of defining and classifying every single lexical unit is always unique process (Zhitnikova, 2004). The key role in the process plays the experience and knowledge of the lexicographer, the author of the dictionary. The subjectivity in the process of the word definition arises from the fact, that in English a word can belong to one or more grammatical categories. It can have more than one meaning, its pronunciation may vary across accents, it can be part of a multi-verb expression, and it can have specific grammatical use or can be used also in slang. All these aspects of the word are typically presented in the dictionary and the lexicographer has to rely on the experience when solving these matters.

The sources of the linguistic material were varied – the first “dictionaries” contained words which were used in the old documents, slowly adding the words useful for particular purposes (e. g. education, travelling etc.), to words used by literary authors, all of them indexed on the card with the so-called “citation” (Atkins & Rundell, p. 50) labourly organized alphabetically according to the key word. Finally, since the 1980's the primary sources of the linguistic analyses are the corpus linguistic “sample” materials consisting of authentic linguistic expressions, authentically produced without the primary purpose of the analyses. The analyses are performed thanks to introducing the reading programmes searching key concepts automatically in various types of texts. The lack of linguistic commentary on samples opens the space for their interpretation from several linguistic approaches, e. g. the changes in syntactical structure, the difference in the use of grammatical words, new collocations and word formation processes; for lexicography corpora serves as an unlimited source of new words, new meanings assigned to words and new grammatical features of words. This movement to authentic linguistic material analysis caused also the shift in approaching the dictionaries in the process of dictionary making and dictionary use – even if the dictionaries used to be viewed as the authoritative guides to word meaning and use (i. e. prescriptive in character), nowadays the dictionaries provide objective description of the use of a language by its native speakers.

The new words can be the products of unique expressive style of a literary author, they can naturally derive from technical and social development, or they can be generated naturally by the society as a reflection of the current situation. The new words can function systematically, i. e. in agreement to what could be expected from them according to the knowledge from grammar and lexicology – yet some of the words behave unexpectedly in larger construction, because the modern instant communication channels, namely social media, require brevity and complexity of the messages. As a result of this it can be observed that even the words with their traditional use in sentences can obtain new meanings, allowing them to break the structures in syntax and morphology.

The technological development brought also new methods into lexicographic research – the statistical analysis of word popularity on the Internet provides a helpful and instant tool and enables the lexicographers (and the whole linguistic community) to justify their claims on the word popularity. The popularity of words may be caused by various factors – because the word was used in an unusual context, because the word gives the name to new technical advancement, or because the word represents the current mood of the society – its interests, paradigmatic shifts or simply currently popular topics. The linguistic societies try to attract the attention of the general public by making lists of popular words according to several criteria to entertain the society, point at the crucial terms shaping it, or simply to present the data. The selected words are called “word(s) of the year” and they can be identified by several ways – by voting the society members, or by simply analysing the statistical data. The “candidate words”, i. e. the words taken into consideration when identifying them, are also usually presented to present the broader context.

The words presented in this contribution come from the lists of several respected linguistic associations, namely the American Dialect Society (ADS) that publishes not only the “winners”, but also “candidate words”; the Merriam-Webster (M-W) Word of the Year and the Oxford English Dictionaries (OED) that publish separate word lists for America and Britain, identifying the same words occasionally (e. g. in 2011, from 2013 to 2015).

The linguistic societies take different approach in the selection of words of the year. The most productive is the ADS, that selects words and phrases popular in that particular year put into several subcategories (i. e. the most useful, creative, unnecessary, outrageous, euphemistic, the most/least likely to succeed) besides the Word of the Year itself. The words are selected by voting of the linguist members, who are present after discussing the merits of candidate words. The M-W selects the word of the year primarily on the basis of the statistical data. The words which were looked up the most in that particular year eventually become the winning words, reflecting the mood in the society. The OED combine two aforementioned approaches – the winning word is selected from the list of the most frequently looked up words after thorough discussion on the words and their significance in the year. What is similar in all the selection processes of all linguistic societies is that the selected word of the year does not have to be a newly created lexical unit. On the contrary, the existing words gain new meanings in the process of their use. The entire aforementioned selected processes do work with the statistics on the internet popularity of the words, therefore the words in the published lists and discussed later in this paper can be undoubtedly considered as “popular”. The words of the year can be ephemeral, being useful and popular only in the particular contexts and period; some words are permanently added to the dictionaries and are being used consistently, many of them being used and presented to students in textbooks and study materials.

The selection process of the Words of the Year is not exclusive to these linguistic societies – there are other lists available by other societies and individuals, or even newspapers, thinkers and essayists try to choose the word or expression which would represent the year in several letters. The words of the year serve not only as mementos for future generations, but serve also as a mirror reflecting the picture of the society on its members. The annual selection is performed since the 1990's with attempts to identify even the word of the decade, century or even the millennium.

The concept of the word of the year selection is not exclusive to English speaking countries; the concept is being embraced also in other countries, such as Germany or Russia.

2. POPULAR WORDS IN ENGLISH

The words that are presented can be analysed from several points of view, showing the multifaceted processes behind their origin followed by analysing and categorizing them by the lexicographers. As it has been already mentioned, the new ways of communication, primarily via the social media, require different approach to grammar, word formation and sentence structure.

2.1 Grammatical words

The presented words primarily affect the sentence and sentence structure, because the new ways of communicating typically limit the users in the number of characters they can use, forcing the users to omit the redundant words and concentrate primarily on the use of the semantically rich words. The first discussed word is **even**, an adverb typically expressing extreme surprise with the meaning “more than expected”, typically used and presented to the students in textbooks in the centre of the verbal phrase (e. g. *He never even opened the letter*, OALD 2000). In the spoken language, typical classroom English rules do not always apply; the word is used for “the general pattern of stylized verbal incoherence mirroring emotional incoherence” (McCulloch, 2014). Therefore it enables the speakers to express their utter shock and inability to continue in expressing the idea, while breaking the typical syntactical structures. Typical examples:

I can't even.

I cannot even.

I am unable to even.

Things I can't even. (McCulloch, 2014)

Because, a coordinating conjunction and a candidate word of ADS in 2014, is another example of a word used outside of their typical syntactical patterns. Typically, the word “because” semantically introduces consequences between two or more events realised within two independent clauses. Structurally, it stands in front of the subject and verb of a sentence. In the way the speakers use it these days, the word because is immediately followed by the object of the sentence, completely omitting the subject and verb of the structure.

Example: *Why did you do it? Because reasons.*

They is a pronoun referencing to the third person plural, referring to others, typically used in the sentence to the subject, neutral in gender. In speech it can also refer to gender neutral pronouns as someone, nobody, whoever etc., e. g. *If anyone comes, tell them I am in my office.*

In 2015, the ADS selected it for the Word of the Year, reflecting the cultural movement in the society accepting and embracing the gender ambiguous persons who did not clarify their gender status or preference.

2.2 Graphical symbols

The graphical (visual) symbols have relatively long history in the written communication, as they accelerate the message transfer and tend to be unambiguous. With the rise of the social media the need for instant and pointed messages has grown and the symbols tend to have not only semantic, but also functional meaning. In case of the **slash (/)**, the candidate word of ADS in 2013, its typical function (OALD, 2000, p. 1407) is either to provide alternatives (e. g. black and/or yellow), or to separate the items one from another (e. g. an orange/black dress). The modern communicating technologies benefit from the typical use of this symbol to the extent, that the symbol in its verbalized form started to penetrate also the spoken utterances, spelling the symbol as “slash”.

Example: “*Double duty actor slash director*” (<https://inalonelyplacefilm.com>).

Hashtag (#) is a compound term derived from the word for the “hash” symbol used in the programming and telecommunication devices, or in America as a symbol for pound. The word “tag” refers to the label given to the situation in which the symbol (word) is used. The symbol itself is typically used in social media in order to group the contributions (pictures, statements) into categories their author sees fit. By adding the “hashtag” the picture/statement either is easier to find in the group of all contributions, or can change the primary meaning of the message, or to gain social media traction. The hashtags can refer to the current mood or feeling of its author, or be used across various events as “signatures” (Saleem et al, 2014). One of the most popular hashtags, *#blacklivesmatter* referring to the situation of people of colour in the USA, was even identified by the American Dialect Society as the “Word of the Year 2014”. From the linguistic point of view, the hashtag typically contains more several words written together for the technical reasons. The individual words can be written with all low case letters or first letters capitalized. In the subsequent written text discussing the hashtag, its meaning and use, the hashtag can be written in italics.

Similarly as the word slash, the word hashtag can also be verbalized, causing the communication to be short, on point and clear in meaning.

Example:

Meant to write and email saying “Hey Jim, I’m afraid I can’t come,” but I hit send after writing “Hey Jim, I’m afraid.” *#EmailFail* (www.youtube.com)

Emoji (plural emojis) and their predecessors, the emoticons, are popular in the written instant communication, having the ability to significantly change the meaning of the conversation by conveying the additional emotional message. In their own way they substitute the body language, facial expressions and voice quality typical for spoken conversations. These qualities are absent from the written conversations and what is different in them from the previously analysed words (i. e. hashtag, slash), they are never verbalized in the speech. The difference between emoticons and emojis lies in their formation – while the former are created by conventional symbols of alphabet and punctuation in a specific arrangement, the latter are actual pictures. Generally speaking, the emojis and emoticons are easy to understand, even though some symbols need to be explained. This is the case of the Word of the Year 2015 selected by both branches of the OED, the selected the emoji is called “Face with Tears of Joy” without it actually being a word. The emoji depicts the face with both, smile and tears in both eyes, therefore possibly causing confusion in its interpretation. The dictionary explains the tears as the result of hearty and loud laughter. The emoji therefore carries positive message. The selection of emoji by a respectable linguistic society confirms their status in communication and the rise of social media and their importance in our lives.



Figure 1. "Face with Tears of Joy" Emoji

2.3 Popular proper names

The proper names entered the colloquial language primarily metonymically, referring for famous actions of the persons or inanimate objects.

Columbusing (a candidate word of ADS in 2014) is the act of discovering something that has always been there, the existence of which has been known to everyone but the discoverer. The verb appropriates the proper name of Christopher Columbus via metonymy, the stylistic and poetic means to express relations between events on the basis of the covert resemblance. In this case, the process of discovery of American continent, that had already been known and inhabited, with the discovery of the event or object. The word has syntactic function of a verb in sentences. The word was labelled as the most creative word the ADS in 2014.

To be **plutoed** (Word of the Year 2006 according to the ADS) refers to a situation when a person is relegated to a lower, less significant position, parallel to a situation of the former planet Pluto, which was decided by the astronomic committee in 2006 to be relegated from the status of a planet since its discovery in the 1930. The word behaves as a verb, typically used in passive syntactic constructions with the forms of the verb “to be”.

The surname of the American president **Obama** is without the doubt one of the most famous and most frequently used in English and texts of various types globally. In 2008 it was considered as the most useful word of the year 2008, reflecting the euphoria among the group of his voters in the election year. The name is for obvious reasons used independently, primary naming its actual holder without any attribute, or can create a part of compound words, such as *Obamacare*, i. e. the healthcare system improved and provided to American citizens designed by Obama's administration, or *ObamaMania*, the word referring to the symbol Obama represents for the America and the fascination with all things related to him.

2.4 Popular word-formation processes

The completely new words are relatively rare. The majority of the new popular words comes from the word-formation processes (Kvetko 1996, Carter & McCarthy 2006). The following section will provide the examples for the most productive ones.

Derivation is one of the most productive word-formation processes, producing a word consisting of an affix and a root. The aforementioned word **columbusing** is derived from the name Columbus and the suffix *-ing* typical for verbs. **Selfie** refers to the word consisting of the word “self” and the diminutive affix “-ie”. The origin of the word is probably in Australia, where many words contain the suffix “-ie” (e. g. *firie*, *barbie* etc; www.blog.oxforddictionaries.com). The word **baeless** is derived from the word “bae” and adding the suffix *-less* with the meaning “without”, combined together having the meaning “single”, without a romantic partner. This word was labelled as the least unnecessary by the ADS in 2014. The word **omnishambles** consists of the prefix “omni-“(everyone, everywhere) and “shambles” (confusion, mismanagement) describing the series of bad luck resulting in the general disorder.

Compounding, a word-formation process which combines at least two roots in order to describe one reality is also very productive, creating such words such as **manspreading**, a verb literally describing the typical sitting position of men with their knees wide apart, which is particularly inconsiderate when performed in the limited space of public transport. The verb **humblebrag** is used to describe the activities of people who compliment themselves on the social media. The compliment is typically disguised as a pretentious response to someone's compliment. The verb **binge-watch** describes the act of intensive watching several episodes of a TV show. The existence of this word is based on the new technical possibilities of recording the visual contents from TV, using the archives, purchasing or lending the visual contents from various providers, allowing the people with intensive lifestyle schedules to watch their favourite programme in convenience.

Shortening/clipping is probably the result of the limited number of characters the users have available on the social media. Their users look for the most appropriate ways of shortening the words, while keeping the words comprehensible. One of the most popular words among the young people is the word **bae**, shortened from the word “baby” (in the meaning of “romantic partner”), which is orthographically represented in the reduced pronunciation. The word **app** is the clipped form of the word “application” related to the software found in computers and smartphones that are designed to be customized for the convenience of their users. While in the past people had relatively small impact on what services the devices provided, these days most products are available to the users via applications. The clipped version of the application reflects the familiarity of the people with the technology. **Vape** is a verb which was clipped from the word “vapour” and now is used to describe the act of “smoking” an electronic cigarette, a “healthier” alternative to smoking tobacco. The status of the act of vaping is relatively unclear, as the vaping people are sometimes seen even on TV. Another word, the noun **blog**, was originally created as a compound of words “web” and “log” creating the word “weblog”, which was later clipped to its present form. The blogs have provided the platform for opinion of various people, revolutionizing the way people learned and shared the information and allowed their voices to be heard. The word was labelled as the word of the year 2004 by the Merriam-Webster Company.

Blending is word formation process based on combining two or more individual words together, typically based on the similarity of the vowel sounds, nowadays used mostly to blend two names of persons in romantic relationships, e. g. Ben + Jennifer = Bennifer, Brad + Angelina = Brangelina etc. From the legitimate Words of the Year of the candidate we select the **Googlegänger**, i. e. blend of words “Google” and “doppelgänger”. The word Googlegänger describes a random person with the same name that appears in the Google search while looking up someone else. **Podcast** is a word which can be both, a verb or a noun, consisting of the blended words “iPod” and “broadcast”, with the meaning of a sound file available to the listeners online for downloading. The podcast became so popular the learners of English can also find it in textbooks, e. g. in the Face2Face Upper-intermediate (2007, p. 58). The word **prehab** is a noun consisting of “premediate” and the clipped form of the word rehabilitation - “rehab”- referring to the act of being admitted to a facility dealing with addictions as an intervention before completely relapsing in the addiction. The word was labelled as the most creative word by the ADS in 2010. The verb **refudiate** consisting of the words “refute” and “repudiate” is the creation of Sarah Palin, an American politician, in 2010, who used it on record as the first person on social media. The word was labelled as the most unnecessary word by the ADS in 2010 and was not admitted into the dictionary. Finally, the word **phablet** is a noun consisting of the words “phone” and “tablet”, i. e. a device that was supposed to substitute both devices. The word was labelled as the word least likely to succeed by the ADS in 2012, because the popularity of the devices equally did not reach the expected levels.

Conversion as the word-forming process changing the category of one word into another without affixation is also very popular process, primarily on the social media, but relatively rarely recognized by the linguistic societies. From the selected words the verb **trend** was converted from the noun “trend”, i. e. indication of the development and popularity of a particular situation. To **text** is a verb converted from the noun “text”, i. e. the words in the written form. The word text started to be used as an attributive word of a word “message”, referring to the SMS (short message service), recognized in 2004 by the Global Language Monitor.

2.5 Semantic changes and new contexts of words

The words and their use constantly undergo the processes of semantic changes (Kvetko 1996) – semantic narrowing and semantic widening. As in the previous word-formation processes, these changes reflect the current movements, moods and events in the society and reflect on them.

The Merriam-Webster Company specifically looks up the statistics on the search of the existing words that gained interest in the previous years, and identified the words “culture” (2014), “science” (2013), “pragmatic” (2011), “austerity” (2010), “admonish” (2009), “integrity” (2005), “democracy” (2003)

between the 2003 and 2015. The list of these words suggests that the society was dealing with paradigmatic changes in thinking and organization of countries and states that have influence to these days on the order and structure in society.

For instance, the word **culture** can be interpreted as the result of the strength of the stream of movements and ideologies floating in the society, causing confusion and misunderstanding between the members of different social and ethnical groups based on the lack of awareness of their respective values, beliefs and practices that are so complex, that they are labelled with the word “culture”. The members of the mainstream culture must read expressions of members of subcultures within its specific context.

Another word, the word **fail**, as a word describing a situation and used as a popular hashtag (e. g. epic fail, holiday fail etc.) on the social media.

Example:

Boss sent me text saying “check your email.” Email said “call me.” #*EmailFail* (www.youtube.com)

The word **salty** represents a flavour in cuisine, but in colloquial speech it refers to generally unpleasant aggressive situation. The word is parallel to words “sweet” (i. e. pleasant), “bitter” (i. e. unpleasant) or “juicy” (i. e. providing entertainment and numerous details) used to describe various situations or information. Similarly, the word **cloud** is based on a metonymy and the similar process as a word “star” referring to famous artists – in modern technology “cloud” refers to online storage service allowing the users to save and access their data virtually everywhere on the planet; the users have always the cloud with their data above their heads. Other word related to internet is the word **catfish**, originally naming a type of fish. The new meaning of the word is to pretend to be someone else on the social media, to create an alternate identity on social media to lure the users into interaction for various reasons. The word was labelled as the most creative word by the ADS in 2013.

There are also other productive word-formation processes creating the new words almost on the daily basis, popularity of which is constantly growing and it could be interesting to watch, which of them will be dominant in the years coming.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Lexical level of language is without the doubt the most dynamic and most productive of all levels. The need for systematic organization of the lexical units and their proper description lies in the hands of lexicographers who sort the linguistic material according to clearly formulated criteria. Their task is to regularly review and re-evaluate their work and bring the latest information to the users of dictionaries. The linguistic material coming from various sources, primarily the corpora, is regularly enriched with the newly created words related to the latest development of society, science and technology, or the existing lexical units are given new meanings in the context of the current social situation and trends (e. g. salty, cloud etc.). These newly created words and meanings are reviewed by linguistic societies that annually publish the lists of the so-called “Word(s) of the Year” in order to attract the attention of the general public. From the created lists and candidate words it can be observed, that majority of the words lie in the lexical fields of technology, social media or politics, occasionally appropriating the proper names of persons or objects with well-known story (e. g. Pluto, Columbus). The word formation processes dominant in modern words are mostly blending (e. g. phablet, prehab, podcast etc.), conversion (e. g. trend, text), derivation (e. g. baeless, omnishambles etc.) and compounding (e. g. humblebrag, manspreading etc.). The simple words that are typically used as function words in sentences are taken out of their typical position (e. g. because, they, even) and allow the speakers to form new yet eloquent syntactic and semantic units. The modern technologies (e. g. vape, binge-watch, selfie etc.), social media and instant messaging bring the pictures and punctuation symbols (e. g. hashtag, slash, emoji) into speech as well. Believing that the

development of language and vocabulary reflects the development of society, the new trends in language deserve the proper analysis.

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