

## 21st CENTURY ENGLISH VOCABULARY

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English constantly renews itself by borrowing, coining, and combining words to fit new ideas and new developments, and that process has never been more apparent than in this, the last decade of the 20th century. Social and technological change, political and economic developments, new ways of working, leisure and sport, fashion and popular music, medicine, psychology, ecology, and even new types of crime all produce new words to express new ideas. In compiling the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, one of our tasks was to ensure the inclusion of such new, up to the minute words and uses of words. To do this, we monitor the ways in which the English language develops and behaves being illustrated in new ways, day by day.

### EXTENDING THE LANGUAGE

Paul Meara, in the last issue of this Review, pointed out how English readily forms new words by combining two. This linguistic phenomenon continues to take account of new developments in technology, as the following entries from the new edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* indicate:

**Internet** *n* **the Internet** a computer system that allows millions of computer users around the world to exchange information

**cyberspace** *n* [U] a word from SCIENCE FICTION, used to mean the place where electronic messages, information, pictures etc exist when they are sent from one computer to another: *We didn't meet in San Francisco we met in cyberspace.*

**Inter**, **net** (or network, of which this net is a short form), and **space** are all words in common usage. **Cyber** has leapt from obscurity; chiefly through the work of the author William Gibson. It was originally part of the technical term **cybernetics**, the study of automatic control systems, and was first adopted in science fiction with **cyborg**, a cybernetic organism, or high grade semi human robot. Gibson's fiction, in which the term cyberspace occurs, is also described as **cyberpunk**.

This example illustrates the wide ranging, no holds barred operation of English word formation, and might make the learner despair. But word combination can be a vivid, and easily understood, way of extending the language. Other combinations that describe new developments in communications technology are:

**multimedia** *adj* [only before noun] using a mixture of sound, pictures, film, and writing to give information, especially with computers:  
the latest multimedia encyclopedia  
**multimedia** *n* [U]

**edutainment** *n* [U] films, television programmed, or computer SOFTWARE that educate and entertain at the same time

Simpler forms of combination, some stark, like **downsize**, and some euphemistic, like **outplacement**, have evolved to describe new features of countries in economic recession:

**outplacement** *n* [C,U] the process of a company helping people to find new jobs after asking them to leave their employment

**downsize** *v* [I,T1] if a company or organization downsizes its operations, it reduces the number of people it employs in order to reduce costs -**downsizing** *n* [U]

Combinations of this kind are **underclass** that made its first appearance in the Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, and **ringfence**.

These combinations are part of the official vocabulary that might be found in formal announcements and official publications. Youth culture, on the other hand, produces less clearly structured words and meanings, which present a greater challenge to us as lexicographers.

**grunge** *n* [U] **1** *AmE informal* dirt; GRIME: What's all that grunge in the bathtub? **2** a style of fashion popular with young people in the early 1990s, in which they wear clothes that look dirty and untidy **3** a type of loud music played with electric GUITARS popular during this period

**mega** *adj slang* very big and impressive or enjoyable: a really mega party - **mega**

### READING AND MARKING

The earliest Longman computer held corpus was a file of new words. It predated the British National Corpus and the 30 million word Longman Lancaster Corpus. It was formed not by electronic scanning of large amounts of text, but by the traditional method of 'reading and marking', whereby lexicographers scanned through newspapers and magazines by hand, marking not only new words but new senses of existing words, and examples of the use of words in new constructions and new contexts. The results were then computerized. The existence of this database ensured that the compound **greenhouse effect** appeared in the *Longman Dictionary of the English Language's* 1984 edition and the verb **cherry-pick** appeared in that dictionary's 1991 edition.

### REPRESENTATIVE CORPORA OF WRITTEN AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE

The building of the 'reading and marking' file continues, although we now have the rich and varied corpus resources of the British National Corpus and the Longman Lancaster Corpus, amounting to over 150 million words of corpus technology. The BNC Spoken Corpus is particularly revealing, since it is classified by the age, gender, economic class and education of the speakers. The BNC allows us to confirm that the main form of 'mega' is as an adjective, although it is used by older people in its traditional affix form: "*This is only going to apply to mega projects*"; "*bolting together two super unions into one mega union*". There are uses of the straight adjective by younger people, with meanings ranging between 'big' and impressive:

**"a hundred people are gonna take fourteen days to erect this mega stage for Queen"**

**"everything is beautiful...and it's so still...that would be a mega painting, wouldn't it?"**

The adverb use is also represented, but less frequently:

"So I told the press next morning, who were mega grumpy."

We can also see, *mega* can be used as an interjection, again especially by the under 25s:

"The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us hope. Mega."

And repeated for emphasis:

"It's only when you're really pissed off, I mean...mega, mega pissed off."

### NEW COMBINATIONS .

We can pick new words out of the corpus by requesting words which only appear after a certain date, such as these relatively new compounds:

**animal rights** *n* [U] the idea that people should treat animals well, and especially not use them in tests to develop medicines or other products: **animal rights protector/campaigner** (= someone who tries to stop cruelty to animals)

**estuary English** *n* [U] a way of speaking English that is common in the London area and is now starting to spread to other areas of England. In estuary English the letters 't', 'l', and 'h' are often not pronounced.

**ambient music** *n* [U] slow electronic music that you listen to when you want to relax.

We might assume that here we have three compounds used with about equal frequency. However, in the 90 million words of the BNC written corpus a broadly based corpus which is not dominated only by newspaper text, in contrast to some other corpora **estuary English**, so beloved of the media, does not appear, **ambient music** appears only four times, but **animal rights** appears 139 times, its most common collocations being **activists, campaigners, groups, and movement**.

## NEW MEANINGS

A great deal of language change, perhaps most, involves the development of completely new meanings of existing words, as here:

**leggings** *n* [plural] **1** women's tight trousers without a ZIP, which stretch to fit the shape of your body  
**2** trousers worn to protect your legs.

In the last edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, sense 2 of **leggings** was the only one represented

**horny** *adj* **1** made of a hard substance, such as horn **2** skin that is horny is hard and rough  
**3** *informal* sexually excited: feeling horny **4** *informal* sexually attractive: *I think he's horny.*

The third sense of **horny** entered British English from American English some time ago, the fourth is new, and used by young people.

**buddy** *n* [C] **1** *informal* a friend: *We're good buddies.* **2** *AmE spoken* used to speak to a man you do not know; *BUD: Hey buddy! This your car?* **3** someone who offers to look after and become a friend to a person who has AIDS.

The third meaning is very specific, and shows the process of new vocabulary being generated to describe a way of helping AIDS sufferers.

## COMINGS AND GOINGS

Borrowing has always been a rich source of new vocabulary in English. Recent straight borrowings from foreign languages by English have perhaps been most evident in the region of food, which has steadily become more varied and enjoyable since the 1950s, e.g. **tandoori**, **sushi**, and **burritos**. Fashion has adopted influences from other countries, and words for types of clothing have come and sometimes gone a **sarong** is no longer defined as "worn by Malay women and men", for instance. Types of music and dance **salsa**, **lambada** have been assimilated and so have types of sport and exercise **sumo**, **tai chi**. As a result of all this, an English word, **ethnic**, has acquired a new meaning roughly, *different and therefore interesting*.

Other intriguing shifts happen within British and American English, many of them not enduring

or important enough to be mentioned in a learners' dictionary. Politicians' words are taken up and used against them: "*but he didn't inhale*" (American politician distances himself from youthful indiscretion of smoking marijuana); "*he needs to spend more time with his family*" (British - politician may be dismissed or should resign).

Television programmes or films introduce new words that are taken up in conversation and sometimes words acquire a different connotation for no apparent reason. For example, the British **geezer** is now sometimes used by young people to mean, not just a man, but someone who is admired for breaking the rules or having his own unorthodox style of behaviour. A scandal or court case may lead to a new coinage by journalists, or introduce a word used by a small group to a wider audience, as in recent football corruption cases:

**bung** *n* [C] **1** a round piece of rubber, wood etc used to close the top of a container see picture at **laboratory 2** *BrE slang* money given to someone secretly, and usually illegally, to make them do something.

Borrowings by American English can be hard to keep track of. What was American English last year is often assimilated into British English the next year. This process has been going on for decades. The British would hardly bother to avoid using **blizzard** as an Americanism, but the word does come originally from American English. But with the arrival of the Spoken Corpus and the Longman Spoken American Corpus, Longman lexicographers now have access to a fascinating area of British and American English. Questions such as "Do British teenagers use the faintly American **Get off my case?**" can be answered on the basis of the latest corpus evidence with a resounding "Yes".

**get off my case** *spoken* used to tell someone to stop criticizing you or complaining about you: *OK, OK, just get off my case already!*

But all in all, lexicographers can't afford to take their eyes off the language for a moment!