Language Grows and Transfigures

- KidsPost Reprint: “Planet Word, a new D.C. museum, explores the landscape of language”
- Student Activity: Visual Modifiers
- KidsPost Reprint: “Language evolves, and that’s okay (O.K.?)”
- Student Activity: How Do You Say …?
- Word Study: Sniglets, Neologisms and Other Additions to Language
- KidsPost Reprint: “How did Shakespeare shape the English language?”
Language Branches From Its Roots

Whether it was William Shakespeare, a comedian, a comic strip illustrator or linguistic arbiters, the creator of new words is part of the rich development of our language.

Some of the terms coined will remain in use through generations. Some words add to their definition or change in their meaning as culture changes. Others will drop out of use, only to be read in older works with footnotes to explain their meaning.

Science, technology, health and business arenas add many terms to vocabularies. The Romans named the five planets that they saw in the night sky after gods and goddesses. But Earth? It comes from Old English and Germanic words that mean “ground.” Penicillin was named by Alexander Fleming after his accidental discovery of a mold that killed bacteria. A new product needs a name — perhaps one that works well in advertising in any marketplace at home or around the globe.

Not all countries are receptive to an invasion of English words that would ruin the linguistic purity of their language. The French Culture Ministry’s General Commission on Terminology and Neology, for example, banned the use of “e-mail” in all government documents, publications and websites. It preferred “courier electronique” to be used.

America’s wealth of words reflects our heritage and history. More than 60 percent of English words have Greek or Latin roots — especially in science and technology. English vocabulary is rich with words from Africa, China, France, Germany, Spain, Japan, Norway as well as Native American terms. It transfigures to update and express new discoveries, developments and changes in perspective. As much as it grows, it has deep linguistic roots.
Planet Word, a new D.C. museum, explores the landscape of language

Exhibits include interactives to get kids thinking about how humans communicate

BY VICKY HALLET

• Originally Published October 21, 2020

“Freshen up.” “Powder one’s nose.” “Tinkle.” Washington, D.C.’s newest museum has these phrases painted on the restroom walls. It’s potty humor with a purpose: to remind you that there are a bazillion ways to express yourself.

Every room in Planet Word, which opens October 22, celebrates heeding that other urge — a desire to communicate that turns baby babbles into complex languages that let you deliver punchlines and powerful speeches. Expect it to be kind of noisy, promises founder Ann Friedman. “You can talk to exhibits,” she explains. “You have to use your voice and get involved.”

So you’ll find microphones in front of a 20-foot-tall wall covered in 1,000 words. Both are required for an interactive light show about the development of English, which asks questions and flashes responses based on whether people call out “clatter” or “spork.”

You can get pointers on pronunciation by chatting via iPad with videos of cheerful language ambassadors, who coach you through rolling your Rs in Spanish or making the three kinds of clicks in isiZulu, spoken in South Africa. There are more than two dozen lessons to choose from, including one on how deaf people communicate differently in every country. (That’s right, American Sign Language isn’t the same as British Sign Language.) Friedman thinks kids will particularly like talking to Noa, a 12-year-old girl from Israel, who explains the origins of the Hebrew word for “ice cream.”

Young people play an important role throughout Planet Word. The “Lend Me Your Ears” exhibit, which invites visitors to sit in front of a teleprompter and practice public speaking, features the Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech by Malala Yousafzai, who was just 17 at the time. The 2019 D.C. youth poet laureate, Gabriela Orozco, is the subject of one of the videos in “Words Matter,” an exhibit about how language can change your life and shape your identity. (Visitors can chime in by writing and recording their own messages.)

“Who experiments with words? It’s kids,” says Friedman, a former reading teacher, who appreciates that children and teens tend to create vocabulary.

Make-believe and magic swirl around the museum’s “Harry Potter”-ish library, where you can place any book on a special desk and an animated film about it appears. Speak to mirrors on the wall, and they reveal hidden dioramas based on “The Phantom Tollbooth” and other beloved novels. And look for the bookshelf that’s...
actually the door to a secret poetry nook.
There’s more wonder to behold in “Word Worlds,” where you can digitally “paint” over a panoramic image of a nature scene and cityscape. Instead of colors, you dip your brush into adjectives, or words used to describe things. So, “nocturnal” turns the sky dark and transforms a bird into an owl, while “hibernal” blankets everything in snow.

“Wouldn’t it be cool to go to school here?” Friedman asks. Planet Word’s red brick building — designed by famous architect Adolf Cluss — was originally a public school for boys and girls when it opened 151 years ago. Just a few years later, telephone inventor Alexander Graham Bell tested another idea from the roof: the photophone, which used light beams to send sound. What was his message? Words, of course.

IF YOU GO
What: Planet Word
Where: 925 13th Street in Northwest Washington (McPherson Square Metro)
When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday through Saturday.
How much: General admission is free, with a suggested donation of $15. Because of coronavirus, admission is limited to 25 visitors per hour. Advance passes are recommended, although a limited number will be available for walk-ups.

Safety guidelines: All visitors ages 2 and older must wear a face covering consistent with public health guidance. Children must stay with adults at all times. Groups should remain together and practice social distancing with other museum visitors. Free stylus pens are available to use with the interactive devices.

For more information: Call 202-931-3139 or visit planetwordmuseum.org.
Visual Modifiers

What happens when color is added to a black-and-white drawing? Does the piece become more vivid? Are the details lost in the vivacious display of tones? What impact is made by manipulating one color into different hues on the canvas? Or what emotional change happens by saturating the paper with intense primary colors from the palette?

Begin by drawing a sparse landscape in black and white. It could be your house, a place down the road, a city block, a barn or trees in a grove. Use the space below to draw several thumbnail sketches.
## Modify the Scene

You will be given or asked to select an adjective from a group of adjectives. Think about the emotions tied to that adjective. What will you do to your original sketch to express the denotation and connotation connected to this modifier? What colors will you add, if any? What items or details will you add or edit to convey the emotion?

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<thead>
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<th>Somber</th>
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<td>Stormy</td>
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<td>Summery</td>
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<td>Sunny</td>
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<td>Gloomy</td>
<td>Scented</td>
<td>Windblown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haunted</td>
<td>Shadowy</td>
<td>Worn</td>
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KIDSPOST

Language evolves, and that’s okay (O.K.?)

This odd word crept into the language less than 200 years ago.

BY ELLY VAN GELDEREN

• Originally Published September 30, 2019

Why do we say “OK”? Of all the words in the English language, “OK” is pretty new: It’s been used only for about 180 years.

Although it has become the most spoken word on the planet, it’s kind of a strange word. Sometimes it’s spelled out — “okay” — and sometimes just two letters are used: “OK.” Other times, periods are after each letter: “O.K.”

I’m a syntactician, which means I look at the structure of language. I also study words and how they change over time.

For example, the word “silly” used to mean “happy” and now means “foolish.” Sometimes new words develop, such as “stan,” which means a person who’s obsessed with a celebrity, and “exomoon,” a moon outside our solar system.

Linguists (people who study languages) don’t always know why these shifts happen. Usually they’re in response to social changes or scientific discoveries. But the largest dictionary of the English language, the Oxford English Dictionary, is always adding new words. In fact, it added 1,400 new words this June and will add more words two more times this year.

“OK,” whose earliest usage is 1839, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, generally means things are good or all right.

So why did people start to say “OK”? We aren’t entirely sure. But some linguists point to how, in the early 19th century, humorous abbreviations were popular. Young people would write things such as “KG,” which stood for “know go,” an intentional misspelling of “no go,” when they meant something was impossible. It was a way to play with language.

Likewise, experts think “OK” probably emerged as an abbreviation of “oll korrect” — which was a jokey way of saying “all correct.” Others say that it derives from “Old Kinderhook,” a nickname for 19th-century U.S. president Martin Van Buren, or that it comes from Choctaw, a Native American language.

The nice thing about “OK” is that it’s so versatile. It can be used as a noun, a verb, an adjective, a conjunction or an interjection. It has also competed, over time, with “alright” and “all right” — words and phrases that have identical meanings.

One last important fact: If you like to play Scrabble, it’s all right — and even OK — to use “OK” when playing. Just within the past year, it became an accepted word.

Elly van Gelderen is a professor at Arizona State University. This article was originally published at theconversation.com.
# How Do You Say … ?

When planning for a trip to another country, you often read a travel guide. One useful section, common phrases and questions in the native language, is often memorized — or at least bookmarked. Also, if you have relatives in another country, your parents may have taught you a vocabulary and syntax to use when talking with them.

Let’s see if you know these phrases and how to ask these questions in France, Italy, Spain and a country of your own choice.  **NOTE: A few of the phrases/words are given to give you the idea of what to do.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Own Choice</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Spain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hello</td>
<td>Excuse me.</td>
<td>Hola</td>
<td>Hello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What’s your name?</td>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td>Mi scusi</td>
<td>Hola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You’re welcome</td>
<td>You’re welcome</td>
<td>Gracias</td>
<td>Hola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How’s it going?</td>
<td>C’est combien?</td>
<td>Mi scusi</td>
<td>Hola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m looking for a/the</td>
<td>C’est combien?</td>
<td>Ci mercato</td>
<td>El mercado</td>
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<td></td>
<td>market</td>
<td>museum</td>
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<td>hotel</td>
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<td>restaurant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who is your favorite singer?</td>
<td>Why?</td>
<td>Trae la facture/el cheque, por favor</td>
<td>Adiós, ¡Hasta mañana!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bring the bill/check, please.</td>
<td>Goodbye</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sniglets, Neologisms and Other Additions to Language

Have you ever heard of a doork, taken a flirr or been lerplexed? You are not likely to find any of these terms in a dictionary. They are sniglets, a word coined by American comedian Rich Hall. These items and actions exist, but as Hall said a sniglet was the word for them that “doesn’t appear in the dictionary but should.”

New words are added to English and other languages each year. For English, the Oxford English Dictionary is a main gatekeeper that decides acceptable entries for the OED. Careful attention is given to documenting the first uses, definition and etymology. In January 2020 the OED added “awesomesauce,” “onboarding,” “bokeh,” and “away message” among its quarterly new entries.

Languages are full of neologisms: new words, new meanings and usage. They often reflect cultural, scientific and technological changes. Psychiatry has also adopted “neologism” to explain a meaningless word created and used by a psychotic. English borrowed the word from French “néologisme” that comes from the Greek neos (meaning “new”) and logos (meaning “word”).

When we study etymology, we find that many words have Greek and Latin roots. We know this because of scholars (linguists) who recorded the use and entry of words into their language. Modern Italian is built on these roots: The Vocabolario (Dictionary) of the Accademia della crusca was printed in 1612 and reprinted and enlarged until 1923. Today’s new words are reviewed, then added; they may reflect recent additions to the Italian vocabulary, new meanings of existing words and the revival of older words.

The Académie Française, created in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu, published its first dictionary in 1694 with 18,000 terms. The organization continues to determine standards of acceptable grammar and vocabulary. The French have fought the addition of anglicisms to their language to keep it “pure, eloquent, and capable of dealing with art and science” so the Académie chooses or invents French equivalents. For example, French Culture Ministry’s General
Commission on Terminology and Neology fought the addition of “e-mail” and banned its use in government documents, publications and websites. They are to use “courrier electronique,” but many French people don’t like the long term so they use the English “e-mail” or the French Canadian “courriel.”

The 2020 edition of Larousse increased its 60,000 entries by 150 nouns, verbs and expressions. The criteria for inclusion: frequent use, absence of technical jargon and likely longevity. These new entries include:

- La charge mentale — the psychological effort and energy (primarily of women) required for domestic tasks, household management and the lives of one’s children. This term first appeared in a French comic strip by Emma. And was then translated into English as “mental load.”
- La bigorexie — the English word “big” and the French word “anorexie” combined to describe the condition of being addicted to the gym, physical fitness and sports.
- Ambassadrice — Already in the dictionary to mean the wife of an ambassador. It now means a female ambassador. In English, ambassador is gender neutral.
- La puberté — Between the ages of 18 and 30 approximately and still acting like an adolescent. In English, “kidult” conveys this idea, but very few use this word.
- La fachosphere — encompasses the entire online presence (blogs, social media, videos) of the “extreme right” in France. There is no English equivalent.

The coronavirus pandemic created its own glossary of terminology in many countries. Would there be a quarantine, partial shutdown or a lockdown, for example. Would the English words (used by the CDC, WHO or the Johns Hopkins website) or terms in their own language be used to communicate these ideas? An example of this took place on November 2, 2020, when the Institute of the Croatian Language and Linguistics recommended that “zatvaranje,” a Croatian word formed from ”lock” – zaključati – and “down” – dolje, be used in public and by the media to mean the “introduction of quarantine or restrictive measures to increase security.” “Zatvaranje” would take the place of “lockdown.”

So, what is a doork? Hall said it was someone who pushes on the door marked “pull.” Have you ever taken a photograph when — surprise! — there was your finger in it? You’ve taken a flirr. And have you tried, and tried, to find a word in the dictionary but had no success because you don’t know how to spell it? Hall said you are lerplexed. All are sniglets created by Rich Hall or collected in one of his sniglet collections in the 1980s.

This is quite a lot to take in. Yet somehow you do add to your vocabulary as you read, study and take new courses, expand your hobbies and interests and listen to those around you.
Your Turn

1. What influence do you think social networks and the connections they make have on your awareness of new terms? Have you added words and phrases to your personal lexicon because of their use in your social network? Give an example.

2. What words or phrases associated with the coronavirus, COVID-19 or a pandemic have entered your vocabulary? Are there concepts you would never have thought about six months or a year ago that you now think about and even have a name for them?

3. What terms related to an aspect of science and technology do you find interesting? Check out its etymology.
   a. What is the term?
   b. Give its etymology.
   c. What makes this word or concept interesting to you?

4. New entries in the French dictionary Larousse reflect combinations of French and English words, changes in society and culture, and current political, technological and health circumstances. Think of an English word and a word from another language that you know. Create a new term.
   a. What is the term?
   b. Give its etymology.
   c. Provide its definition.

5. People can be entries in the dictionary. What state, regional, national or international figure would you recommend for entry? What qualities or achievements make this person worthy of lasting recognition? Or what quirkiness of behavior make him or her a standout or worthy of a sniglet?
How did Shakespeare shape the English language?

In the story, see if you can count the ways.

by Marylou Tousignant

Originally Published April 17, 2016

This week marks the 452nd anniversary of the birth of William Shakespeare as well as the 400th anniversary of his death. Both of these monumental events occurred in the English village of Stratford-upon-Avon, where Shakespeare’s life came full circle before his death in 1616.

In his flaming youth, however, Shakespeare took off for London in excitement to pursue a life in the theater. The busy city was a brave new world for this country lad, but Shakespeare didn’t lie low. Besides becoming a well-known actor, he wrote dozens of magnificent plays and more than 150 poems and other works, leading countless bedazzled readers ever since to call him the world’s greatest playwright and poet, the be-all and end-all of great English literature!

Others are more critical, saying it’s almost laughable to think that someone with a grammar-school education could have written such majestic works. In their mind’s eye, to credit it all to one man is too much of a good thing, and they are deeply suspicious.

But disproving Shakespeare’s authorship has been a wild-goose chase so far. And without such proof, his supporters refuse to budge an inch in their belief that Shakespeare wrote each and every word credited to him. But the naked truth is,
nobody knows for sure. Like much of Shakespeare’s life, the answer seems to have melted into thin air.

Maybe the truth will out someday. If so, the discovery could occur at Washington’s Folger Shakespeare Library, where scholars from around the world come to study the Bard of Avon. “Bard” is another word for poet.

The first major collection of Shakespeare’s work was printed in 1623. As good luck would have it, the Folger library has 82 of the 233 copies known to exist.

Shakespeare added more than 1,700 new words and phrases to the English language — many still in use. Computer searches have found that he may not have invented all of them, but he certainly made them popular. Want to try a zany challenge? We’ve hidden 30 of his words and phrases in this article. How many can you find? This game is not for the gloomy or faint-hearted. You could wind up in such a pickle you’ll be puking! Here’s a hint to help you get started: Nine of those words and phrases are in this paragraph. So hurry, for goodness’ sake! Time’s a-wasting and the game’s afoot!

— Marylou Tousignant

NOTE: This KidsPost article was published on Shakespeare’s birthday — April 17 — in 2016. Which birthday of Shakespeare is celebrated this year? How many years since his death?