

## English: it's a neologism thang, innit

[Sarah Churchwell](#)

Yes, these new Scrabble terms are abominations – but without them the English language would wither

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You can feel the collective shudder among language purists: "[innit](#)", "[grrl](#)" and "[thang](#)" have been admitted into the Collins Scrabble Dictionary. Admission into any dictionary is the first step on the road to legitimation, thus raising the question of whether mispronunciation constitutes a genuine neologism. I hate to admit it, but historically speaking the answer to that question is yes.

The cynics amongst us might wonder whether the dictionary's editors made deliberately provocative choices to stir up publicity. The Americans amongst us might wonder why an American like me is using the archaic "amongst" instead of "among" like a normal person. [Language](#) usage matters, in other words, not merely because of our need to communicate denotatively, but because of the complex, subtle array of connotative meanings conveyed by specific usages. Usage creates groups; it includes and excludes, and it hierarchizes. To wit: my use of the "-ize" suffix in "hierarchize" will brand me as a philistine to certain readers – a point to which I'll return.

We all know that language is mutable, that it must either evolve or wither away: there's no language so pure as a dead one. Babylonian is untroubled by the intrusion of new slang, as it is untroubled by speakers. The word "slang" is itself illustrative: it was first recorded in 1756, I learn from the OED, which offers a wonderfully sniffy definition: "The special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character." Language thus signals not education, but character: not what you know, but who you are. And who you are, linguistically speaking, is all about class, innit.

It is no coincidence that the word "slang" entered the language immediately after Samuel Johnson codified it for the first time in his 1755 dictionary. Johnson took a surprisingly descriptive (rather than prescriptive) stance toward English, acknowledging that change wasn't just inevitable, but normal. He also thought that an F was the same as an S, so what did he know? (This is a joke. I may be American, but I am familiar with the orthographic peculiarity that was the "long S" in the 18th century.) Standardized spelling soon followed, and the British generally chose the Norman route.

It took an American to start purging the French out of English. After the revolution (not "war of independence", thank you) the fledgling US sought to establish its independence culturally as well as politically. Moreover, the Enlightenment project of America's founders meant emphasizing literacy education; and pronunciation had already altered over the previous two centuries. In 1828 [Noah Webster](#) produced the first American dictionary, seeking to establish America's cultural distinctiveness. The much-maligned (in Britain) suffix "-ize" is not a modern outrage derived from US business speak, but dates back to Webster, who returned it to words derived from Greek verbs ending in "-izein". He also took the French out of words ending in "-re", and the "u" out of the suffix "-our", another French spelling. In other words, when the British mock "American" spellings, they are usually defending the French. That's what you call historical irony.

I was recently upbraided by an English woman for using what she called an "American barbarism" – the form "gotten", as in "I'd gotten tired of being corrected by arrogant, misinformed persons". I explained that "gotten" is a Renaissance usage found throughout Shakespeare; he uses "ungotten" too.

The mongrel tongue of English has always been a gallimaufry, a point acknowledged in 1579 by [Edmund Spenser](#) in his [Shepherdes Calender](#): "So now they haue made our English tongue a gallimaufry, or hodgepodge of all other speches." Gallimaufry comes from the French; so, ironically,

does "hodgepodge", which the OED informs me is a variation of hotchpotch, from hotchpot, from hochepot – an Anglo-Norman word.

The standardization of language may be a comparatively recent phenomenon, but fears about its corruption by foreign or degenerate "speches" are as old as xenophobia. The argument is always framed as an effort to keep the original language from "degenerating", but language can't degenerate: it can only live or die. The idea that languages are threatened by the inclusion of new words is as foolishly nativist as the idea that exogamy threatens bloodlines. What may be threatened by admitting new words are class prerogatives based on exclusive access to standard forms – and from a democratic perspective, that's not a bad thing.

From an aesthetic standpoint, however, "innit" remains an abomination. That said, true language purists won't admit the authority of Scrabble's dictionary in the first place. But they should: the first recorded use of "scrabble" is from no less canonical a source than the King James Bible itself. But note to the Scrabble editors: they spelled it "scrable".

## Viewpoint: Why do tech neologisms make people angry?

2 April 2013 – Tom Chatfield

**The bewildering stream of new words to describe technology and its uses makes many people angry, but there's much to celebrate, writes Tom Chatfield.**

From agriculture to automobiles to autocorrect, new things have always required new words - and new words have always aroused strong feelings.

In the 16th Century, neologisms "smelling too much of the Latin" - as the poet Richard Willes put it - were frowned upon by many.

Willes's objects of contempt included portentous, antiques, despicable, obsequious, homicide, destructive and prodigious, all of which he labelled "ink-horn terms" - a word itself now vanished from common usage, meaning an inkwell made out of horn.

Come the 19th Century, the English poet William Barnes was still fighting the "ink-horn" battle against such foreign barbarities as **preface** and **photograph** which, he suggested should be rechristened "foreword" and "sun print" in order to achieve proper Englishness.

Forewords caught on, but sun prints didn't, instead joining the growing ranks of outmoded terms for innovations - a scrapheap that by the end of the century ranged from temporarily mainstream names like **velocipede** (meaning "swift foot" and used to describe early bicycles and tricycles) to near-unpronounceable curiosities like **phenakistoscope** (an early device for animation, meaning "to deceive vision").

I've spent much of the last year writing a book about technology and language and, today, the debate around what constitutes "proper" speech and writing is livelier than ever, courtesy of a transition every bit as significant (at least so far as language is concerned) as the Industrial Revolution.

From **text messages** and **email** to **chat rooms** and **video games**, technology has over the past few decades brought an extraordinary new arena of verbal exchange into being - and one whose controversies relate not so much to foreign infiltrations as to informality, abbreviation and self-indulgence. Hence the swelling legions of acronyms (**LOL!**), grunts of internet-inspired indifference (**meh**) and social-media-inspired techniques for dramatising the business of typing (**#knowwhatImean**).

In each case, the dividing line is largely generational - with a dash of snobbery and aesthetic appeal thrown in. Yet even the most seemingly obvious divisions between old and new can break down under closer examination.

When the Oxford English Dictionary took the leap and added some "notable initialisms" to its vocabulary in March 2011 - including "oh my God" (**OMG**), "laughs out loud" (**LOL**) and "for your information" (**FYI**) - it noted that **OMG** had first seen the light of day in a 1917 letter from a British admiral to none other than Winston Churchill.

Even that most iconic embodiment of online messaging, the **emoticon** - a happy or a sad face drawn in punctuation marks - was pre-empted by a satirical 19th Century magazine called Puck under the heading "typographical art".

Yet it would be perverse to pretend that there's nothing unusual about the age of the internet, not least in the move away from spoken words as the driving force behind linguistic change, and towards the act of typing on to a screen. We've already grown so used to saying phrases like **dotcom** out loud that we forget we are speaking punctuation marks.

With online offerings, success can girdle the world in a matter of months. When I first heard **tweet** as a term, I sneered. Now I accept it, just as the verb "to Google" has become a part of dozens of languages across the world. Where habit leads, language follows.

For the first time in human history, moreover, a majority of the world's adult population are playing an active role in the culture of reading as well as of writing. Social media networks are a particular engine of change, not least because what they offer is effectively an arena of typed conversation. Within them, written words spill out at the speed of speech, together with the peculiarly binary formulations that digital sociability involves:

- to **friend** and to **unfriend**
- to **follow** and to **unfollow**
- to **like** and to **unlike**.

While friend/unfriend and follow/unfollow may embody corporate coinages at their most reductive, there's a freewheeling creativity to word-building at the user end of social media.

If I meet my social media followers in real life, I'm indulging in a **tweetup** - that is, a meetup for **tweetps** (a contraction of "twitter peeps", itself a contraction of "Twitter people").

If I can't drag myself away from this particular social media service for even a moment, I may be a borderline **twitterholic** - although my fluency in speaking **twitterese** will be hard to dispute by anyone else in the **twittersphere**. I may even win the approval of the elite **twitterati**, so long as I don't embarrass myself by sending **dweeps** (drunken tweets).

And if you think all these words are unworthy of note, the Oxford English Dictionary disagrees with you.

It's far harder in some languages than others to import or invent vocabulary, of course. The Chinese character-based writing system entails constantly pressing old symbols into new service.

The word for a computer, for example, involves combining the characters for "electric" (dian) and "brain" (nao), while the character for "electric" itself originally denoted lightning.

If change must not be confused with progress, however, it's equally a category error to equate it with decay - not least because the changes currently taking place to language online are far too expansive either to summarise or condemn.

One of my own favourite neologisms is the **Cupertino effect** - which describes what happens when a computer automatically "corrects" your spelling into something wrong or incomprehensible.

The name originates from an early spellchecking program's habit of automatically "correcting" the word "cooperation" (when spelt without a hyphen) into "Cupertino", the name of the California city in which Apple has its headquarters.

One of my favourite Cupertinoos was my first computer's habit of changing the name "Freud" into "fraud" - or, more recently, of one phone's fondness for converting "soonish" into "Zionism".

As Cupertinoos suggest, onscreen language is both a collaboration and a kind of combat between user and medium. And if self-expression can sometimes be reduced to little more than clicking on "like", there's every bit as much pressure exerted in the opposite direction.

If you can do it, someone, somewhere has probably already coined you a term - from **approximeetings** with friends (arranging a rough time or place to meet, then sorting out details on the fly via mobile phone) to indulging in political **slacktivism** (ineffective activism carried out by clicking online petitions).

Only time will tell what endures. For digital natives and immigrants alike, though, there's much to celebrate in the constant flux of our tongue - not least in the reminders it offers of the human stories beneath even the most seamless of technology surfaces.

If the history of language teaches us anything, it's that logic and reason come after the event with words - and that we are always saying more than we intend.