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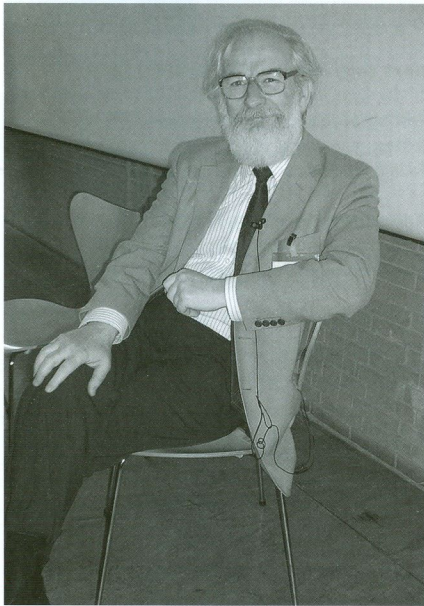
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In this issue: A New Year's guide to new vocabulary from **David Crystal**; what are those numbers really telling you? **Joe Laredo** does the calculation; a reminder of all the brilliant benefits of membership (and associateship) of the SfEP; how to get late payers to pay up, by **Natasha Reed**; plus news, reviews and much, much more.

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By Christina Thomas



David Crystal prepares to address the SfEP conference, September 2008.

New words for old

David Crystal

Every year the latest edition of a dictionary boasts about the new words it includes. I expect we'll see *subprime* in the lists for 2009, and *credit crunch* and *Second Life* and *Facebook* and *mouse potato* and ... It's not difficult to find new words to include, because there's plenty of choice: every day some three or four new words appear in English. Nowadays, to see if they've achieved a significant presence, all you have to do is search the internet. *Subprime* (with or without its hyphen) has around 20 million hits on Google. It'll be in.

What's much trickier is deciding whether a word should stay in the dictionary. Will the latest words achieve a permanent place in the language, or will they not be known in a few years' time? This is often the fate of slang expressions. Who says *daddy-o* now? Or *jeepers-creepers*? You can sense the way the language has moved on each time you read someone such as P G Wodehouse.

It isn't only slang. I once did a study of words that were being feted as 'new' in the 1960s, and included in the dictionaries of the time. Over half of them have gone out of everyday use now. Do you recall *Rachmanism*, *Powellism*, *peaceniks*, *dancercise*, *frugs* and *flower people*? All frequent in the 1960s. Historical memories today.

It's always been like this. In the 16th century, there was a period when people invented thousands of words with Latin and Greek origins – words such as *adnichilate* ('destitute'), *eximious* ('excellent') and *suppeditate* ('supply'). Critics called them 'ink-horn terms' because they were so lengthy you needed a lot of ink to write them down. There were even dictionaries of these 'hard words', to help people understand what on earth they meant. Only a small number achieved a permanent place in the language.

But dictionaries are notoriously reluctant to leave words out – for the obvious reason that it's very difficult to say when a word actually goes out of use. You can spot a new word easily; but how do you know that an old word has finally died? Did *grody* (slang 'nasty, dirty') die out in the 1970s, or is it still being used in the back streets of Boston? Indeed, you could argue that old words never die, if people keep hearing them. Last year, hundreds of people heard David Tennant (aka Hamlet) say 'Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely' in Stratford-upon-Avon several days each week. Are *rank* ('excessively luxuriant'), *gross* ('coarsely abundant') and *merely* ('totally') dead? Or just dormant?

On the whole, dictionaries keep words in, either until constraints of space force some pruning, or a new editorial broom looks at the word-list afresh and says 'Enough is enough'. That's presumably what happened in 2008, when the editors at Collins decided that some words are so rare these days that nobody would ever want to look them up. They blamed pressure on

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space in the dictionary: with 2000 new words to include, the following old words would, regrettably, have to go:

abstergent cleansing or scouring
agrestic rural; rustic; unpolished; uncouth
apodeictic unquestionably true by virtue of demonstration
caducity perishableness; senility
caliginosity dimness; darkness
compossible possible in coexistence with something else
embrangle to confuse or entangle
exuviate to shed (a skin or similar outer covering)
fatidical prophetic
fubsy short and stout; squat
griseous streaked or mixed with grey; somewhat grey
malison a curse
mansuetude gentleness or mildness
muliebrity the condition of being a woman
niddering cowardly
nitid bright; glistening
olid foul-smelling
oppugnant combative, antagonistic or contrary
periapt a charm or amulet
recrement waste matter; refuse;
 dross
roborant tending to fortify or increase strength
skirr a whirring or grating sound, as of the wings of birds in flight
vaticinate to foretell; prophesy
vilipend to treat or regard with contempt

The *Times* was having none of this. In its issue of 22 September 2008 it launched a campaign: 'How you can help to save some cherished words from oblivion' (<http://snipurl.com/6vpgx>). People could vote to save the words they fancied. Collins, which is owned by News Corporation, parent company of *The Times*, agreed that words would be granted a reprieve if evidence of their popularity emerged before February 2009, when the word list would be finalized. So, we wait and see.

It was a curious headline, if you think about it, for if these words were being genuinely cherished, why should they be in this list at all? Nevertheless, there was quite a reaction. Andrew Motion went on record as supporting *skirr*. Stephen Fry was all for saving *fubsy*. Indeed, a 'save fubsy' online petition group was set up. They asked me to sign it, having been a commentator on the article in *The Times*, but it didn't seem right somehow. Linguists have a happy time trying to analyse and explain what is going on in language, but they try to keep their distance from where the real action is, so that they can talk about it objectively.

The list reminded me of those dictionaries of 'hard words', and of Dr Johnson, who included many learned words in his famous *Dictionary* of 1755. Some had negligible use even in his time, and are certainly long gone now. Nobody misses *infirmous* ('shapeless') or *pandiculation* ('feverish restlessness'), I suspect. But some of these 18th-century words retain a curious appeal:

bedswerver one that is false to the bed
curtain-lecture a reproof given by a wife to her husband in bed
figure-flinger a pretender to astrology and prediction
fopdoodle a fool; an insignificant wretch
nappiness the quality of having a nap
perpotation the act of drinking largely
smellfeast a parasite; one who haunts good tables
traveltainted harassed; fatigued with travel
vaticide a murderer of poets
worldling a mortal set upon profit

I included all of these in the Johnson Dictionary anthology I prepared for Penguin Classics in 2005. Reviewers repeatedly picked them out and revelled in them.

Just because words are left out of a dictionary of standard English doesn't mean that they have disappeared from the language, of course. Some of the words remain alive and

well in regional dialects. Looking at the Collins list, I know *niddering* and *skirr* are still used in parts of Scotland and the north of England, and *fubsy* (along with *fub*, 'stout') is mentioned in several dialect books. Maybe readers of this periodical will know some of the others.

It's a daring decision, to leave a word out, because you can never predict the future with language. A word or phrase can be obsolescent, then suddenly have its fortunes reversed by being used by some celebrity. Remember *on your bike* (meaning 'get up and do something useful', Norman Tebbit, 1967)? Or a newspaper headline pushes a spoken word into written prominence. Remember *Gotcha* (*The Sun*, during the Falklands War)? Attitudes change towards a word, so that one generation loves it and the next hates it and the next loves it again. That's what happens to many words that become 'politically incorrect', such as *black* and *queer*. Who knows? It is certainly possible that *The Times'* reporting of that set of words will attract fresh interest in some of them.

But whatever has happened to words in the past, the future is going to be very different. The internet is about to change everything in lexicography. In an electronic world, dictionaries can be of unlimited size, and nothing disappears. Because pages are time-stamped, the internet is already the largest corpus of attested historical language data we have ever known. In that dictionary, words never die. Even *fatidical*, attracting a pathetic 13,200 hits on Google today, will live on. If words could talk, they would say they had finally achieved what they always wanted: immortality.

About the author ...

David Crystal is the vice-president of the SfEP. He works as a writer, editor and consultant, and is a firm favourite with conference-goers. A prolific author, he is possibly best known for *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. See www.davidcrystal.com.