

Phrase of the month Social distancing

Every year the big English dictionaries announce a “word of the year” – a word that has seen a major increase in its frequency of use, or which captures a dominant mood. A couple of years ago, most of them went for Brexit. Last year, Cambridge Dictionaries chose upcycling; Oxford chose a phrase – climate emergency. No prizes for guessing which words will be on the 2020 shortlists, but it will be difficult to choose a winner. Which would you vote for? Lockdown, virus, self-isolation ...? My money is on social distancing.

It’s not a new expression. The notion of a “social distance” was verbalised in the early 19th century – the *Oxford English Dictionary* has a first recorded use in 1830 – and it came to be a frequent term in the social sciences. It referred to the degree of closeness between people belonging to different social or ethnic groups. Who do I feel comfortable mixing with? Who belongs in my social world, and who doesn’t? It was all to do with such factors as race, class, money, fashion and behaviour.

We have to wait a century to see the present-day usage emerge. An edition of the *Times* in 1935 describes a lady watching “her husband’s embarrassed attempts to maintain a safe social distance between himself and his possessive admirer”. Now



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Social or physical?

we’re talking about physical distance. And it became one of the research goals in the science of human communication during the 1960s, under the heading of proxemics – the study of the way people use space to interact. How near may someone come before we start to feel uncomfortable – threatening our own personal space? Who is allowed to touch us, and how do we interpret the touching?

It turns out that people from different cultures have very different expectations and behaviours. Touching may be perceived as a friendly gesture in some countries; it can be hugely embarrassing in others, seen as a threat, or even a crime. British people begin to feel uncomfortable if someone in a conversation comes closer than about a metre.

I had a student from Brazil once who was used to a much closer norm. She would come to half that distance to tell me about her thesis. I would back away, to maintain my space. She would then come forward, to maintain hers. We made a circuit of my desk before I decided that enough was enough, and we had a chat about cultural social distances.

And so to our present-day dilemma. The current use of “social distance” has now been given a definite physical meaning – two metres. But the other meaning, of “social intimacy”, is still alive and well; so we have to be on our guard. Social distancing doesn’t mean “don’t be sociable”. On the contrary: to safeguard ourselves against the mental damage that can come from isolation, we need as much social interaction and solidarity as we can devise. It would have been far better if the powers that be had called it physical distancing instead.

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