

Language changes, so don't be afraid to embrace the new [*Times* editor's title]

Of course it pays to increase your word power. But how to do it?

Most of the time, it is done painlessly and unconsciously. We encounter *bling*, *chav*, *numpty*, or *blog*, and gradually build up a picture of what these words must mean. If we build up the wrong picture, sooner or later someone will correct us - an encounter of the second kind. Eventually, we will be able to check our understanding by looking them up in a dictionary - a close encounter of the third kind.

If the word has been around a while, it will be in the dictionary already. So the most obvious way to increase your word power is to have a dictionary readily available to check a meaning when you see or hear something unfamiliar. It has to be an up-to-date dictionary, of course - one published in the last five years or so. If you cannot remember where you last saw your dictionary, but you think you recall seeing the one Aunt Mavis left you in the shed last year, then something is not quite right.

But don't restrict your attention to the dictionaries. New words are coming into the language every day, filling gaps and meeting needs that weren't there before. Who invents these new words? You and me. In five main ways.

- We borrow words from foreign languages. This has always been a big feature of English, which has borrowed words from over 350 languages in its 1500-year history. Eighty per cent of English vocabulary is not Anglo-Saxon in origin. So, if sumo wrestling is your interest, acquire the terminology. You could become a linguistic yokozuna. Alternatively, just do another sudoku.
- We make new compounds: *googlewhack*, *pooper-scooper*, *snail mail*. And some of the patterns are quite productive, such as the way *-challenged* has come into the language as part of political correctness. We can now, it seems, be environmentally, visually, vertically, even linguistically challenged.
- We blend bits of words to make new ones - and thus we get *Chunnel*, *Oxbridge*, and *brunch*. New blends are turning up all the time. I believe there were some sexsational rockumentaries made about Glastonbury this year. Fantabulous.
- We convert words from one part-of-speech to another. It's a technique which goes right back to Middle English. 'Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle', says the Duke of York to Bolingbroke in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, effectively turning two nouns into verbs. And it's a major technique today. 'I wanna play with my scooter', says the child. 'I'll scooter you if you don't get off to bed right now', says the parent.

New conversions can upset some people: they object to usages like *to office at home* or *to firewall a computer*? But it doesn't take long before such conversions start to bed down, and people forget there was ever a fuss. Do you remember the rows over whether we should be allowed to say *to fax* and *to email*? I doubt it.

- We add affixes. We can hugely increase the number of words we have at our disposal by prefixing an *un-*: *uncool*, *unsorry*, *unyoung*. We can acquire still more by suffixing a *-y*: *arty-crafty*, *I'm feeling all Olympic-y*. And then we can do both at once: *untouristy*, *unChristmassy*, *ungimmicky*.

Do these coinages make you feel anxious? Be assured, they are all (except, so far, *Olympic-y*) in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. And if that doesn't calm you, remember *unshout*, *uncurse*, *unsex* and *vasty*, *plumpy*, *steepy*. As with so much linguistic invention, Shakespeare did it first.

PS BTW, don't forget new abbreviations.