

# Coining it

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Each year, in the BBC Radio 4 series, *English Now*, I run several competitions on various topics to do with language. I try to think up an idea which will appeal to listeners, which they will be able to respond to intuitively and without technical training, and which won't take up too much time. You always know when you've found a good topic, by the size of the postbag. A poor topic generates only a few dozen entries. A good one will keep you reading for days.

This year, I found a winner. The first programme was about new words coming into English. The editor of the *Longman Register of New Words*, John Ayto, was the guest on the programme, and we spent some time talking about the remarkable number of words which enter the language each year, and where they come from. At the end, I somewhat tentatively suggested that listeners should send in their own candidates for new words in the language – words which didn't exist as yet, but which they felt ought to. I waited for the dribble of entries.

It turned out to be a flood. It was an extraordinary response, with over 1,000 entries submitted. Three months later, the programme was repeated. Another 1,000 entries. No fluke.

Several hundred entries were not recent coinages. A typical reply began: "We've used this word in our family for years . . ." A surprisingly large number of words came from young children, whose cute inventions or misapplications had caught on. Several were facetious. But a very large number were more serious in intent, with the coiner genuinely feeling that the language was missing out by not having a word for a particular area of meaning. What struck me, from this exercise, was how sharp people's sense is of the language's lexical gaps.

And how pervasive it is. The desire to create new words cuts across sex, age, class, job, region. I know, because people often say

something about themselves when they write to a radio programme. One entrant was over 90. Another was a third former at a secondary school. One was an emeritus professor of classics. Another was a mechanic who left school at 15. I could see no correlation between the excellence of a person's linguistic inventiveness and his or her social or regional background. The fascination with lexical creativity seems to be universal. Indeed, one of the entrants went so far as to label it: *leximania*, a compulsive desire to invent new words (F. Annand).

Acronyms proved to be particularly attractive.

**dommie** a downwardly mobile member of the middle classes (B. Spate).

**madsie** middle aged and downwardly sliding (A. Lanning).

**tinslie** two incomes no social life (applicable to those whose life circumstances have changed following the birth of a child) (J. Rath).

**frubo** furniture removed under bailiff's orders (applied to severely affected poll tax victims) (G. Short).

A selection of more "useful" items illustrates the wide range of word-formation techniques used – blends, analogies, puns, sound symbolism, neo-classical formations . . .

**fluddle** water extending part way across a path or, more usually, a road – bigger than a puddle but smaller than a flood (S. Morgan).

**nibling** a collective term to embrace nephews and nieces: children having an aunt or an uncle in common (R. Wollheim). This, he adds, would also allow investigation of currently obscure areas of human behaviour, such as *nibling rivalry*.

**incomputerate** characteristic of people who can't get to grips with computer culture (*incomputes*) (G. Abbott).

**litterate** said of people who care about litter (A. Ellam).

**illiterate** said of people who don't care about litter (A. Ellam).

**to be becatted** to be unable to do something because a cat is sitting in your lap (J. Syer).

**to be bushicated** to suffer the consequences of falling into, or being knocked into a thorny bush or shrub (J. Harrison).

**catfrontation** the cause of nightly noise when you live in a neighbourhood full of cats (M. Aldridge).

**steamulated** a stimulated steam railway locomotive enthusiast (R. Swaine).

**steamulant** a steam railway engine, from the viewpoint of such an enthusiast (R. Swaine).

**bureaucraphobia** a dislike or fear of those who work in local government, or as civil servants, or of officialdom in general (D. Rigley).

**publicophobia** a complementary dislike or fear, held by said officials (D. Crystal).

**polygrouch** someone who complains about everything (F.S. Flood).

**glaznosh** Western-style fast food recently introduced into Moscow (F.S. Flood).

**footbrawl** any physical violence associated with the game of soccer, its players, or supporters (J. Barker).

Some people seemed to have a real gift for coinage. Here are several from F.L. Smith:

**fagony** a smoker's cough

**remorsels** the after effects of eating snacks

**cornival** chiropodists' celebrations

**boomerique** an indigestible cake

**aginda** a pre-conference drink

Another was N. McNicholas, many of whose coinages focus on the mystical perversity which can be demonstrated by people, animals, and inanimate objects alike:

**bagonize** to anxiously wait for your suitcase to appear on the baggage claim carousel.

**darnicity** the mysterious force that changes a traffic signal to red just before you get to it.

**potspot** that part of the toilet seat which causes the phone to ring the moment you sit on it.

**kellogulation** what happens to your breakfast cereal when you are called away by a 15-minute phone call, just after you have poured milk on it.

**circumtreeviation** the tendency of a dog on a leash to want to walk past poles and trees on the opposite side to its owner.

**cartolitteritis** the pathological condition in those people who seem incapable of returning their shopping carts to the designated areas after use.

**blinksync** the guarantee that in any group photo, there will always be at least one person whose eyes are closed.

**illumination** the practice of switching on the bedside lamp to answer the phone in the mistaken belief that you'll be able to hear better.

**illuminoiance** switching on a light only to find that the bulb has burned out.

**hicgap** the time that elapses between when hiccups go away and when you suddenly realise it's happened.

Who says linguistic creativity is for poets alone? Some of these coinages are brilliant, but all illustrate an awareness of language structure and function that I believe is by no means exceptional. Indeed, on a few occasions, the same word was invented by two people – in one case, by three. And from time to time people proposed a word as new when in fact it already existed in the language, though not in common use for years. The *Longman Register of New Words* (1989) shows how this can happen. *Bimbo*, for example, became well publicised in 1988, and was widely thought to be a new word, when in fact it goes back decades (and is found, for example, in a vaudeville song of the 1920s). *Squaerial* is now used in Britain for the diamond-shaped aerial attached to a house for receiving satellite broadcasts. But several decades ago, an almost identical coinage was used for a type of motor bike.

The private filling of lexical gaps is a fascinating and largely neglected area of English usage. Most of the coinages will never become institutionalised (though who can say, after this article?) but they exist, probably in very large numbers, and remain unacknowledged. I decapitulate (take off my hat) to them. □