After old words finally die, they will live on in the virtual world

Lexicographers still have to decide which terms are obsolete and should be dropped, but the internet is changing all that, says David Crystal

Every year the latest edition of a dictionary boasts about the new words it includes. I expect we'll see sub-prime in the lists for 2009, 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. To see if they've achieved a significant presence, all you have to do is search the internet. Sub-prime has about 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 jeeps-jeepey? You can sense the way the language has moved on when you read someone like 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. More than half of them have gone out of use. (Dedicate, inflects (excellent) and suppediate (supply). Critics called them "inkhorn terms" because you needed a lot of ink to write them down. There were even dictionaries to help people to understand what on earth they meant. Only a small number have 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?

Do you recall peaceniks, dancercise, frugs and flower people?

Did grody (slang for nasty, dirty) die out in the 1970s or is it still being used in the backstreets of Boston? Indeed, you could argue that old words never die, if people keep hearing them. Hundreds hear David Tennant (aka Hamlet) say: "Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely.""
than half of them have gone out of everyday use now. Do you recall Rachmaninoff, Powellism, peaceniks, discount, frugal and flower power? All frequent then. 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 adnichitalize, rank and gross in nature possess it merely”, in Stratford-upon-Avon each week. Are rank (excessively luxurious, grossly coarse), abundantly and merely (in its sense of totally) dead? Or just dormant? On the whole, dictionaries keep words in either until constraints of space force some pruning or a new editorial board looks at the word list afresh. That’s presumably what the editors at Collins have decided that abstergent agnostic and the others are so rare these days that nobody would ever want to look them up.

Just because they’re left out of a dictionary of standard English doesn’t mean that they’ve disappeared from the language. Of course. Some of the words remain alive and well in regional dialects. The editors say they’re subject to the natural process of language change and nothing disappears. Because pages are time-stamped, the internet is already the largest corpus of attested historical data we have ever known. In that dictionary, words never die.

Even fatadic, attracting a pathetically 9,600 hits on Google today, will live on. If words could talk, they would say they had finally achieved what they always wanted: immortality.