# Episode #587
# The Curious Tradition of Words of the Year
# 2nd Jan, 2026

# <u>Transcript</u>

[00:00:00] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today it's the start of a new year, and also the start of a new three-part mini-series, all on the theme of "words and language".

[00:00:33] In part one, today's episode, we are going to talk about "Words Of The Year" - the words chosen each year by dictionaries for their particular cultural importance that year.

[00:00:45] In part two, we are going to talk about the **concept**[1] of **euphemisms**[2] in English - when you describe something unpleasant or uncomfortable in a more friendly way.

[00:00:57] And in part three, we are going to talk about the word "enshittification". It was **coined**[3] in 2022, but we'll look at what it means, how it has evolved since then, and what it tells us about the world we live in.

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[1] an idea or thought

[2] polite or softer words used to talk about something unpleasant

[3] created (for a new word or phrase)

[00:01:13] Ok then, let's get right into it and talk about words of the year.

[00:01:20] One of the great, but also **frustrating**[4] things, about language is that it is constantly **evolving**[5].

[00:01:29] Words change their meaning. Spellings change. Grammar changes. Words stop being used.

[00:01:36] And entirely new words are introduced.

[00:01:41] And the more people that speak a language, and the greater the variety of people who speak that language, the more this is the case.

[00:01:51] English, with its hundreds of millions of native speakers and billions more non-native speakers, **spread**[6] over practically every country in the world, is in a constant state of evolution.

[00:02:07] One of the ways in which **lexicographers**[7] try to document this evolution of language is by choosing a "word of the year", a word or expression in English that has been of particular cultural significance that year. It doesn't have to be a completely new

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[4] annoying because it is difficult

[5] changing slowly over time

[6] extended over a large or increasing area

[7] people who write or study dictionaries

word, although often it is, but it has to be a word or expression that entered the language in a way it never had before.

[00:02:36] Now, I should start by saying that defining a "Word of the Year" isn't actually an English-language invention; it was "inspired" by the German tradition of Wort des Jahres, "Word of the Year" in German, which started in 1971.

[00:02:56] It's now a tradition followed by most major English-language dictionaries, including the Cambridge and Oxford Dictionaries, Merriam-Webster, Dictionary.com, as well as the American Dialect Society and the Australian National Dictionary Centre, which reflect language used in American and Australian English, respectively.

[00:03:18] So, what we are going to do today is talk about this tradition.

[00:03:24] We'll start by talking about how it works and the process of how a word ends up being chosen as "Word of the Year". Then we'll talk about some of the particularly interesting ones from the past 20 years or so, and we'll end by talking about the words of the year for 2025.

[00:03:46] Let's start with the basics. How do dictionaries actually choose a word of the year?

[00:03:53] Well, it all depends slightly on who you ask. But **broadly**[8] speaking, it's a combination of data and editorial judgement.

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[8] in a general way; not too detailed

[00:04:05] Most major dictionaries now analyse enormous databases of written and spoken English.

[00:04:13] This used to be primarily from things like newspapers, books, the radio and TV, but it's expanded to include everywhere that language is recorded: social media, YouTube videos, podcasts, and so on.

[00:04:30] By analysing this data, **lexicographers** can identify which words are being used more than usual, which words have appeared out of nowhere, and which words have suddenly taken on new meanings.

[00:04:46] So that's the data side.

[00:04:49] But it's not just a question of numbers. It also involves people sitting down and thinking carefully about what a particular word tells us about that year. Not just how often it was used, but why. What does it reveal about how people were feeling, what they were talking about, and what **mattered**[9] most in that particular moment?

[00:05:16] That's the editorial side.

[00:05:18] And some dictionaries even add a third element. They release a **shortlist**[10], but put it to a public vote, letting members of the general population decide what the word of the year should be.

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[9] was important

[10] a small list of the final choices

[00:05:35] And while each dictionary might have its own criteria, there are usually a few common themes. Words that **reflect**[11] politics, culture, technology, social movements, and, more recently, the internet and how we talk online.

[00:05:53] So now that we've covered the basics of how the word of the year is chosen, let's take a look at some actual examples.

[00:06:03] We won't go through every year, but I want to share a few highlights from the past couple of decades. Some are funny, some are serious, some are quite surprising, and others you might already use in your everyday English.

[00:06:21] Let's start by going back to 2005.

[00:06:26] That year, the American Dialect Society chose the word "truthiness".

[00:06:33] Now, although you might look at that word or hear that word and think, "I haven't seen that before, but ok, it has 'truth' in it, and 'iness' probably means the quality of whatever the adjective or noun was, in this case 'truth'. So maybe 'truthiness' means something like 'the quality of being true'".

[00:07:00] That would be a perfectly good guess, perfectly reasonable, but it isn't right.

[00:07:07] "Truthiness" was a term popularised by the American comedian Stephen Colbert to mean something that feels like it should be true, even if it isn't.

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[11] show or represent

[00:07:21] It was a new word for an old idea: the idea that people often believe what they want to be true, not what is actually true.

[00:07:33] With Colbert, he used it to criticise politicians and media figures who weren't so interested in the facts, just in what sounded good and felt like it was true.

[00:07:47] In particular, it was aimed at President George W. Bush and his famously strong **convictions**[12], like the existence of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, even if there wasn't any evidence.

[00:08:00] A nice word, right?

[00:08:03] Jumping ahead to 2013, Oxford Dictionaries chose "selfie" as its word of the year.

[00:08:12] As you no doubt know, a "selfie" is the word for a photo you take of yourself, typically with your phone. And although it probably seems completely unbelievable to anyone under the age of 18, anyone who lived before the iPhone and Instagram will know that this wasn't something that people always did, so there wasn't really a need for a word to describe it.

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[12] strong beliefs or opinions

[00:08:39] It's interesting to mention this because the **inclusion**[13] of this word as "word of the year" clearly **pinpoints**[14] this cultural **shift**[15].

[00:08:48] And if a historian in 100 years needs to figure out the exact date when humans started taking pictures of themselves **en masse**[16], well, the choice of 'selfie' as Word Of The Year provides a pretty good clue.

[00:09:04] And we can go on.

[00:09:06] In 2016, 'post-truth' was the word of the year. This referred to a time when objective facts seemed to matter less than emotions or personal beliefs. It was the year of Brexit, the US presidential election, and intense political **polarisation**[17].

[00:09:27] It's a pretty depressing word, but one that definitely captured the feeling of the time.

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[13] the act of adding or including it

[14] shows the exact moment or thing

[15] change

[16] all together, in large numbers

[17] when people split into two very different sides

[00:09:34] In 2022, Oxford let the public vote on the word of the year, and the winner was "**goblin**[18] mode". A **goblin**, if you don't know this word, is a sort of imaginary, naughty, often ugly creature that plays tricks on humans.

[00:09:52] And "**goblin** mode" describes a kind of lazy, messy, and **unapologetically**[19] **unbothered**[20] attitude.

[00:10:03] Someone in **goblin** mode might be eating junk food in bed and ignoring all responsibilities, simply not caring about what anyone else thinks.

[00:10:14] It's not a polite word necessarily, but it clearly **resonated with**[21] a lot of people who were feeling **burnt out**[22] or just done with pretending to be productive all the time.

[00:10:26] And that brings us to the present.

[00:10:30] In a moment, we'll look at the words that were chosen in 2025, but before we do, I want to just have a quick pause to ask what all these words have in common.

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[18] a small, imaginary, naughty creature

[19] without saying sorry or feeling bad

[20] not worried or not caring

[21] felt right for; connected with their feelings

[22] very tired and unable to keep going

[00:10:43] They aren't just words really. They are signs. They reflect what people are thinking about, what people are worried about, what they're joking about, and how language adapts to express new ideas or feelings.

[00:11:00] So with that in mind, let's turn our attention to 2025.

[00:11:06] What were the words of the year this time? And what do they tell us about the moment we are living in?

[00:11:13] One of them is a bit surprising. It's not even a real word in the traditional sense. It's 6 7.

[00:11:22] Yes, the numbers six seven. That was chosen by Dictionary.com as its word of the year for 2025.

[00:11:32] If you've heard of this word before, it's probably because you have young kids, and if you haven't heard of it before and you're wondering what it means, the honest answer is… nobody really seems to know.

[00:11:46] I have a six-year-old son, and one of his friends came over to play the other day. I asked him–in Swedish, because we live in Sweden–how are you, and he responded "six seven", the English expression "six seven".

[00:12:03] His mum **shrugged**[23] and said she didn't really know why he said this, and it seems like there is no definite answer to what it means.

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[23] lifted her shoulders to show she did not know

[00:12:12] According to Dictionary.com, 6 7 became popular on TikTok and other social media platforms in 2024 and 2025. It started off as an **in-joke**[24], then a **trend**[25], then a **meme**[26], and somehow ended up becoming a phrase that means everything and nothing at the same time.

[00:12:36] Young people have used it in videos, comments, as a **gesture**[27], as a sort of **catch-all**[28] response to almost anything. If someone asks a question and you don't really want to answer, you can just say "six seven". If you're joking around with a friend and want to **tease**[29] them, just say "six seven". It means whatever you want it to mean, and that's kind of the point.

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[24] a joke only understood by a special group of people

[25] something popular for a short time

[26] a funny picture, video, or idea shared on the internet

[27] a movement of the hand or body that shows meaning

[28] something used for many different things

[29] playfully make fun of them

[00:13:00] The team at Dictionary.com described it as "a **playful**[30], Gen Alpha

expression of **absurdist**[31] internet humour". It's **chaotic**[32], slightly annoying, kind of

**meaningless**[33], and **oddly**[34] fascinating.

[00:13:14] And importantly, if you are old enough to vote, you're probably too old to use

it.

[00:13:20] So "6 7" was one of the words that was chosen. The Collins Dictionary,

interestingly enough, didn't even include it in its shortlist.

[00:13:30] There were 10 words shortlisted for its potential word of the year: 'aura

farming', 'biohacking', 'broligarchy', 'clanker', 'coolcation', 'glaze', 'HENRY',

'microretirement', 'taskmasking', and 'vibe coding'.

[00:13:46] We can actually go through them one by one, quickly.

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[30] fun and not serious

[31] very silly or strange on purpose

[32] out of control or disorganised

[33] having no clear meaning

[34] in a strange way

[00:13:50] Aura farming is when people post highly edited or **curated**[35] photos online to **boost**[36] their image.

[00:13:58] Biohacking is the idea of using science or self-experimentation to try to improve your body or mind.

[00:14:06] Broligarchy describes a group of powerful men who are all close friends, a kind of brotherly **oligarchy**[37].

[00:14:15] Clanker is a **derogatory**[38] term used for a computer.

[00:14:19] Coolcation is a holiday somewhere cool. Not cool as in fashionable, but cool in temperature, often taken to escape extreme heat.

[00:14:29] Glaze is to **excessively**[39] or **undeservedly**[40] praise someone.

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[35] carefully chosen and arranged

[36] make it stronger or better

[37] a small group of powerful people controlling something

[38] insulting or unkind

[39] to a greater degree than is necessary or normal

[40] in a way that is not right or that someone does not deserve

[00:14:34] HENRY, all in capital letters, stands for "high earner, not rich yet", which is used to describe someone who earns a lot of money but still feels financially **squeezed** [41].

[00:14:47] Microretirement means taking a break from work, not forever, but for a while, like a mini retirement earlier in life.

[00:14:56] Taskmasking is pretending to **multitask**[42], when in reality you're just switching between tasks and not doing any of them well.

[00:15:06] And finally, vibe coding, which is using AI tools to build software, and it was this that was the winner.

[00:15:15] Vibe coding, if you haven't heard the expression, refers to the way that people are now using artificial intelligence to write computer code. Instead of sitting down and typing out hundreds of lines of code manually, people–like me–are now "**prompting**[43]" AI tools with natural language.

[00:15:38] Last year, I built a Chrome Extension that helps people learn new English vocabulary, as well as a tool that gives you feedback on your written English, and both of those were "vibe-coded". I have some knowledge of software development, but most

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[41] pressured or feeling short of money

[42] try to do many things at the same time

[43] giving instructions or requests to an AI tool

of the code was written by AI, with me checking it, rather than it being written **from**

**scratch**[44] by me.

[00:16:05] If you've done this yourself, you'll know it's pretty magical.

[00:16:08] It's a completely new way of building software, and it's changing who gets to call themselves a "coder". You no longer need to know every programming language. If you know how to ask the AI in the right way, in some cases that can be enough.

[00:16:25] So that's vibe coding. And like 6 7, it says something about the time we are living in. One word **reflects**[45] how fast the next generation is playing with language and identity online. The other reflects how fast our relationship with technology is changing, especially when it comes to work, creativity, and skills. But will people still talk about 'vibe coding' in 20 years?

[00:16:57] Well, most probably not. Software development might not exist in exactly the same way, and the probability of someone typing "create a signup form" into a text interface **seems…slim**[46].

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[44] starting from nothing

[45] shows or explains

[46] appears very unlikely

[00:17:11] And as for '6 7', well, like anything that starts as an 'in-joke', as soon as it enters the mainstream, it ceases to be funny, and stops being used, so the probability of anyone knowing what '6 7' means in even 10 years time seems equally **slim**[47].

[00:17:31] Some words of the year, however, do have **staying power**[48].

[00:17:37] In 2005, the New Oxford American Dictionary declared its word of the year to be a word meaning "a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio player", a word that **derived**[49] from a mixture of "broadcast" and "iPod".

[00:18:02] The word was, as you might have guessed, podcast.

[00:18:07] Back then, 20 years ago, it was not just a new word, but a new concept; the idea of downloading or streaming spoken content on demand was still relatively new.

[00:18:22] Today, of course, podcasts are everywhere, including what you are listening to right now.

[00:18:29] So, on one level, these "words of the year" lists are a bit of harmless fun. A way for a dictionary to guarantee it's going to make the news, and cultural

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[47] very small or thin; very unlikely

[48] the ability to last for a long time

[49] came from

commentators to have something to write about during a traditional slow period of the year, even if that word or expression is forgotten a **matter of**[50] 12 months later.

[00:18:50] But on another level, they're not just words. They are **snapshots**[51]. Tiny **time capsules**[52]. A reflection of what people were talking about. What people were paying attention to. What people were concerned about, confused by, or inventing.

[00:19:08] Some, of course, will **fade away**[53] into **obscurity**[54].

[00:19:13] Others might just shape the way we live and speak for many years to come.

[00:19:19] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on Words Of The Year.

[00:19:24] I hope it's been an interesting one and that you've learnt something new.

[00:19:27] As a reminder, this was part one of a three-part mini-series on the theme of words and language. Next up, we'll be talking about **euphemisms**, and we'll go through **a bunch of**[55] commonly used ones in English.

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[50] simply; only

[51] quick pictures or short examples of a moment

[52] things that keep memories from a certain time

[53] slowly disappear

[54] the state of being unknown or forgotten

[55] many; a group of

[00:19:41] And in part three, we'll talk about the fantastic linguistic and cultural concept of enshittification.

[00:19:50] You can find out more about that over at leonardoenglish.com.

[00:19:54] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:19:59] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

# Key vocabulary

| Word | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Concept** | an idea or thought |
| **Euphemisms** | polite or softer words used to talk about something unpleasant |
| **Coined** | created (for a new word or phrase) |
| **Frustrating** | annoying because it is difficult |
| **Evolving** | changing slowly over time |
| **Spread** | extended over a large or increasing area |
| **Lexicographers** | people who write or study dictionaries |
| **Broadly** | in a general way; not too detailed |
| **Mattered** | was important |
| **Shortlist** | a small list of the final choices |
| **Reflect** | show or represent |
| **Convictions** | strong beliefs or opinions |
| **Inclusion** | the act of adding or including it |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Pinpoints** | shows the exact moment or thing |
| **Shift** | change |
| **En masse** | all together, in large numbers |
| **Polarisation** | when people split into two very different sides |
| **Goblin** | a small, imaginary, naughty creature |
| **Unapologetically** | without saying sorry or feeling bad |
| **Unbothered** | not worried or not caring |
| **Resonated with** | felt right for; connected with their feelings |
| **Burnt out** | very tired and unable to keep going |
| **Shrugged** | lifted her shoulders to show she did not know |
| **In-joke** | a joke only understood by a special group of people |
| **Trend** | something popular for a short time |
| **Meme** | a funny picture, video, or idea shared on the internet |
| **Gesture** | a movement of the hand or body that shows meaning |
| **Catch-all** | something used for many different things |

**Tease**                   playfully make fun of them

**Playful**                 fun and not serious

**Absurdist**               very silly or strange on purpose

**Chaotic**                 out of control or disorganised

**Meaningless**             having no clear meaning

**Oddly**                   in a strange way

**Curated**                 carefully chosen and arranged

**Boost**                   make it stronger or better

**Oligarchy**               a small group of powerful people controlling something

**Derogatory**              insulting or unkind

**Excessively**             to a greater degree than is necessary or normal

**Undeservedly**            in a way that is not right or that someone does not deserve

**Squeezed**                pressured or feeling short of money

**Multitask**               try to do many things at the same time

**Prompting**               giving instructions or requests to an AI tool

| | |
|---|---|
| **From scratch** | starting from nothing |
| **Reflects** | shows or explains |
| **Seems…slim** | appears very unlikely |
| **Slim** | very small or thin; very unlikely |
| **Staying power** | the ability to last for a long time |
| **Derived** | came from |
| **Matter of** | simply; only |
| **Snapshots** | quick pictures or short examples of a moment |
| **Time capsules** | things that keep memories from a certain time |
| **Fade away** | slowly disappear |
| **Obscurity** | the state of being unknown or forgotten |
| **A bunch of** | many; a group of |

# Language spotlight

## 1. A bit of harmless fun

- **Meaning:** something that is enjoyable and not meant to cause any trouble

- **Synonyms:** light entertainment, a joke, something playful

- **Antonyms:** something serious, harmful activity

- **Examples:**

    - The yearly word lists are **a bit of harmless fun**, even if people forget them quickly.

    - Don't worry about the game; it's just **a bit of harmless fun** to relax after class.

## 2. Fade away into obscurity

- **Meaning:** to slowly disappear and be forgotten

- **Synonyms:** vanish, disappear, die out

- **Antonyms:** stay popular, remain important

- **Examples:**

- Many internet trends **fade away into obscurity** after a few months.

- Some singers become famous quickly but then **fade away into obscurity**.

**3. Have staying power**

- **Meaning:** to last a long time; to remain important or useful

- **Synonyms:** endure, persist, remain

- **Antonyms:** fade quickly, disappear, be temporary

- **Examples:**

  - The word "podcast" clearly **has staying power**.

  - Only a few TV shows **have staying power** and stay popular for years.

**4. A reflection of**

- **Meaning:** something that shows or represents something else

- **Synonyms:** shows, represents, mirrors

- **Antonyms:** hides, covers, disguises

- **Examples:**

- These words are **a reflection of** the culture of that year.

- Her behaviour is **a reflection of** her strong work ethic.

## 5. Done with

- **Meaning:** tired of something and not wanting to continue it

- **Synonyms:** fed up with, sick of, finished with

- **Antonyms:** interested in, keen on, enthusiastic about

- **Examples:**

  - Many people chose "goblin mode" because they were **done with** pretending to be perfect.

  - After working late every night, he was completely **done with** extra projects.

# Quiz

### Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. What point does the host make about "words of the year" at the end of the podcast?

a) They always become permanent parts of the language

b) They are meaningless and not worth discussing

c) They are fun, but also show what people cared about at that time

d) They are chosen only to promote dictionaries

2. Why do lexicographers analyse large collections of written and spoken English?

a) To learn new languages

b) To see which words sound the nicest

c) To identify how words are used and how language changes

d) To choose which books to publish

3. According to the episode, why do English words change so often?

a) English grammar rules change every year

b) Many people around the world use English in different ways

c) English has very few speakers

d) Dictionaries regularly delete old words

4. Why was "selfie" chosen as Word of the Year in 2013?

a) People had taken selfies for hundreds of years

b) It was a new fashion style that year

c) It was chosen randomly

d) It showed a cultural shift in how people used phones and social media

5. According to the podcast, who is probably "too old" to use the expression "6 7"?

a) Anyone old enough to vote

b) Anyone using TikTok

c) Anyone under 20

d) Anyone who likes memes

## True or False

6. The idea of choosing a "Word of the Year" started in the United Kingdom. (True/False)

7. Some dictionaries let the public vote for the Word of the Year. (True/False)

8. "Goblin mode" won Oxford's public vote in 2022. (True/False)

9. "6 7" has a clear, widely accepted meaning. (True/False)

10. Some Words of the Year become common and stay in use for decades. (True/False)

## Fill-in-the-Blank

11. If a historian in 100 years needs to figure out the exact date when humans started taking pictures of themselves __ masse, well, the choice of 'selfie' as Word Of The Year provides a pretty good clue.

12. It's not a polite word necessarily, but it clearly resonated _____ a lot of people who were feeling burnt out.

13. Young people have used it in videos, comments, as a gesture, as a sort of _____-all response to almost anything.

14. I have some knowledge of software development, but most of the code was written by AI, with me checking it, rather than it being written from_____ by me.

15. Software development might not exist in exactly the same way, and the probability

of someone typing "create a signup form" into a text interface seems…_____.



## Vocabulary Practice

16. What does "**evolving**" mean in the podcast?

a) Staying exactly the same

b) Changing over time

c) Becoming more difficult

d) Ending suddenly



17. What does "**inclusion**" mean in the context used?

a) The act of leaving something out

b) A type of scientific test

c) Adding or including something

d) A mistake in a dictionary

18. What does "**polarisation**" mean?

a) When everyone agrees

b) When people split into opposing sides

c) A way of taking photos

d) A type of political meeting

19. What does "**curated**" mean?

a) Chosen and arranged carefully

b) Randomly selected

c) Broken or damaged

d) Completely new

20. What does "**lexicographer**" mean?

a) A person who studies ancient scripts

b) A social media influencer

c) A specialist in computer programming

d) A person who writes or compiles dictionaries

# <u>Answers</u>

1.  c) They are fun, but also show what people cared about at that time

2.  c) To identify how words are used and how language changes

3.  b) Many people around the world use English in different ways

4.  d) It showed a cultural shift in how people used phones and social media

5.  a) Anyone old enough to vote

6.  False

7.  True

8.  True

9.  False

10. True

11. en

12. with

13. catch

14. scratch

15. slim

16. b) Changing over time

17. c) Adding or including something

18. b) When people split into opposing sides

19. a) Chosen and arranged carefully

20. d) A person who writes or compiles dictionaries