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OMG, tweetup is a candidate for the dictionary (LOL)

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The English language is expanding as never before, making it difficult to keep track. Jacqueline Maley reports.

John arranged a tweetup with Mary, a girl he had met at a minute mentoring event last week. He bought some new jeggings for the occasion, using up a whole day of his staycation to find just the right pair.

Just before the date, John switched on his PC and after navigating the paywalls on his favourite heritage media sites, he logged on to Facebook to post a quick update. That's when he saw it. What Mary had done. She had de-friended him.

If you got the gist of this tale of modern love and cruel rejection, you can count yourself a competent and up-to-date user of the English language.

This week an editor of the Oxford English Dictionary published a short-list of new words to be considered for inclusion in future editions, a list that included tweetup, the Twitter version of a meet-up; staycation, a holiday spent at home; and most notably de-friend, a term to describe the act of dropping someone from your list of Facebook acquaintances.

Every year The Macquarie Dictionary hosts a similar word of the year competition and this year's nominations are unsurprisingly heavy on financial terms - mortgage stress, rumourtrage, as well as the sinister-sounding "Zimbabwe option", which describes the doomed practice of printing more money to ease a financial crisis.

Some of the coinings are sly and self-deprecating - poverty porn refers to the exploitative depiction of poverty in films and books to entertain the wealthy, and geek chic describes a style of dress - think large-framed glasses and buttoned-up Polo shirts - that has become perversely trendy.

Some are just plain mean. A butterface is a woman with an attractive body, "but her face" is not so pretty. No doubt some journalists will object to the inclusion of heritage media, defined as "print newspapers, television, etc, which, although strong and influential in the past, are thought to be losing viability in the face of changing methods of communication".

But whether any of these words will still be around in a year or two is anyone's guess.

Linguists and lexicographers agree that technology, along with American English, is by far the biggest force for change in the English language today. It has revolutionised the way we communicate and the things we do, and as new things become possible, we have to find new ways to describe them.

But technology also moves incredibly swiftly, rendering new words obsolete faster than ever.

How can we determine which neologisms are passing fads and which should be included in dictionaries, our lexicological gift to the next generation? How to decide which words are worthy of being anointed official representatives of our language? Or is it our dictionaries that must change, moving from stolid documents of rusted-on record to more dynamic, changeable texts?

"You always get ephemera, things that have popped up in the media and won't stick around," says Susan Butler, the editor of The Macquarie Dictionary. "The main test is currency - have people actually offered this word to each other and been understood, and expected to be understood?"

David Astle, a crossword compiler for the Herald and author of its Saturday WordPlay column, believes

there are loose rules governing which words catch on. "Either there is a genuine gap the word fills, or there's a charm or a sexiness to the word that we want to retain," he says. Astle believes "de-friend" is here to stay. Although it describes a distinct act in cyberspace, it also has the capacity to be generalised into non-Facebook contexts.

"There's something mindful about it, and it underpins its opposite," he says. "Soon we may use it to describe what happens when the Christmas cards dry up or people stop returning calls."

Traditionalists may lament the passage of text-speak like LOL and OMG and verbs such as Google into the mainstream lexicon, but Butler says these people misunderstand the purpose of a dictionary. First, she says, it is a reference tool to help us spell and understand the meaning of words. Its other function is to be a true record of a language in the society as it is used.

"It needs to be comprehensive - words that people love and words they hate, formal and informal words. It should have all aspects of Australian life, culture, history and current activities in it."

It is anyone's guess whether the words we vote for this year will still be around next year, but perhaps it does not matter.

Geoffrey Nunberg, a linguist who teaches at the University of California at Berkeley, wrote in *The New Yorker* recently about words and the decade we already know as the Noughties.

Nunberg said that while many individual coinings already sounded dated, string these words together and they tell stories about what happened to us across those 10 years.

It is unlikely future generations will use Bennifer, the title of the now-defunct celebrity coupling of Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez, or spider hole, the name for a hastily-dug fox-hole like the one where US troops found a bearded Saddam Hussein hiding in 2003.

But Bennifer spawned a tradition of merging the names of couples, and the popular usage of many military terms paints an accurate picture of a battle-heavy decade.

"Some groups of words formed miniature narratives," Nunberg writes. "WMDs, cakewalk, shock and awe, mission accomplished, backdoor draft, hillbilly armour, stay the course, redeployment. That's basically the story, in 10 words or less."

American slang has taken off, driven by the popularity of US television shows and movies. Long-running programs such as *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld* broadened our language, and subcultures like skaters, gamers and music nerds all added their contributions - oily, pwn and emo, to name a few.

Then there are the endless streams of general slang, often derived from African-American culture: BFF, its derivative bestie, whatevs, bling, cougar, chillaxing, homies, hood, peeps, noob and biatch. All of which may be passe by the time this article is printed.

No one is suggesting these words gain entry to the dictionary, but to understand certain parts of the modern world, notably internet chatrooms or Twitter posts, you need to be ofay with them.

Slang, of course, is not new. Great authors have always peppered their fiction with it, because it is often the best way to capture character - through the realism of everyday speech.

Shakespeare loved slang, as did Chaucer, and Thomas Hardy's use of local idiom is essential to his exquisite characterisation. It makes some of his novels very dense to the modern reader, but they are still classics.

Those who object to the use of slang miss the point, Astle says.

"I'm all for mongrelising," he says. "That's why English is so beautiful, why it makes great poetry and crosswords. It's why the language is so flexible and enduring."

Butler agrees. Whereas Dr Samuel Johnson had to read "literature" to pick up words, now we have millions of sources of new language, and more people than ever can read or write.

"All I want to know is if a word is being used with total naturalness," she says.

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