

Now you're talking

Author Susie Dent takes a selection of words from her new edition of The Language Report, now in its fifth year – each word is recorded in the Oxford Corpus, and each one is making its mark on the modern lexicon



The Language Report is written by Susie Dent, a leading lexicographer and language expert. She appears regularly on Channel 4's *Countdown*, as well as contributing to radio and television discussions on topical language issues. Previously she worked as Editorial Director for Reference Books at Oxford University Press.

Susie uses the Oxford Corpus – part of Oxford University Press's worldwide language research programme – to monitor the latest new words and to assess which ones will have a lasting impact on the English language. You may be amazed (or appalled) at the rise of the **chav**, or be dazzled by her findings on all things **bling**; you can check your green credentials, or watch out for the latest scam; and you can also find out what's new in **wordblending**.

Chav

For many observers of language, there is one word which, perhaps more than any other, has the unmistakable stamp of modern Britain, and which, however disagreeable its application, would be a leading candidate for the word of the century (see page 27).

In 2004, **chav** was propelled into the public arena, and it has stayed there ever since. Used to describe both an individual and an entire social class, the force with which it entered our daily vocabulary, and the intense debate surrounding it, provided a near-perfect example of modern linguistic success. Chav was elected the word of the year in the language report of 2004: its selection prompted headlines across broadsheets and tabloids announcing (and regretting) the arrival of a perceived underclass with no taste or social graces.

DID YOU KNOW?

The rise of the chav... Many people

think that chav is a brand new word. In fact, we think that 'chav' is over 150 years old and comes from the Romany word *chavi*, which was a term of insult. Its origins are in Chatham, Kent. The rise of the modern-day chav can be traced back to the website chavscum.co.uk, a site presenting itself as 'a humorous guide to Britain's burgeoning peasant underclass'.

Bling it on

Few other words can rival 'chav' in

the speed and force with which it came into popular usage.

However, as the century opened, another word suggested itself as the possible 'word of the noughties'...

Although much associated with the 21st century, **bling** was in fact first recorded in print in 1998, as a song title by US rapper B.G. ('Baby Gangsta'). Used to refer to ostentatiously expensive clothing or jewellery, or the style or attitudes associated with them, it was probably suggested by the idea of light reflecting off a diamond, or by the sound of jewellery clashing together.

Bling quickly and steadily moved out of the hip-hop world and into the mainstream in Britain as well as America, acquiring along the way a whole range of variants and uses. And it soon became journalists' favourite way of summing up our supposedly over-materialistic, celebrity-obsessed society.

Bling has today largely lost its popularity – in 2005 MTV showed a satirical cartoon which charted the demise of the word, from its hip beginnings to its use by those who were decidedly not streetwise. It ended with the caption 'RIP bling, 1997-2004'.

So, if its time is passing (post-bling





Susie Dent

is now in currency), and a new word will emerge to sum up the next big social trend, bling-bling will nonetheless live on as a term that instantly evokes the early 2000s.

Is green the new black?

'Had I been editing *Time* magazine I would not have opted for the "you" in YouTube as Person of the Year – although that was very clever. No, I'd have run an all-green *Time* cover under the headline, "Colour of the Year." Because I think that the most important thing to happen this past year was that living and now thinking "green" – that is, mobilising for the environmental/ energy challenge we now face – hit Main Street.'

Thomas Friedman in The New York Times, 22 December 2006

The 21st century has seen the prolific 'greening' of our language as well as our culture. Today, phrases such as 'reduce your footprint' require no glossing – the new imperative (one which for many scientists has been expressed far too late) is to minimise the impact on our planet. 'Footprints' come in many forms: they may be carbon, green, or ecological (eco), while we may use a footprint calculator to measure our impact on our natural resources. Ecological footprint analysis attempts to measure the human demand upon nature.

The frequency with which 'footprint' now evokes an environmental context can be measured by the Oxford Corpus. At the beginning of the 2000s, 'carbon' and 'ecological' scarcely featured on the linguistic map for 'footprint': today they are among its most frequent companions, along with the verb 'reduce'.

Technically speaking

'We're 14 hours into no BlackBerry, so you can imagine how things are. We've already started a 12-step group.'

White House spokesman Tony Fratto in April 2007, after the BlackBerry service went down across North America, causing national dismay.

'I had my own blog for a while, but I decided to go back to just pointless, incessant barking.'

A New Yorker cartoon by Gregory depicting two dogs in conversation, September 2005.

OXFORD ENGLISH CORPUS

The Oxford Corpus is the engine-room of the Oxford Dictionary programme, part of the largest language research project in the world. The Corpus is a huge collection of written and spoken language held electronically and used to track the very latest developments in today's language and provide evidence of how language is used in real situations. The Corpus contains text from all types of English, from novels to specialist journals, and newspapers to blogs. Since 1 January 2000 the researchers have fed over 2 billion words into the Corpus, giving Susie

Dent and other language-watchers the opportunity to track and document trends and patterns in the language. It also means that our lexicographers (dictionary makers) can create dictionaries which accurately reflect the richness of today's language. The development of the Oxford Corpus forms part of Oxford's ongoing commitment as your guide to the English language, and that's why we're highlighting the Corpus on the cover of every one of our English dictionaries.

■ For more information about the Corpus, visit www.askoxford.com/oec



The influence of the internet and its diverse communities on English has been dramatic, and the extent to which they have shaped our language incontrovertible. The language of the virtual world no longer appears in exclusively online locations. It has penetrated the real world in terms both of usage and of individual items of vocabulary.

The most influential words this century

■ **Blog:** surely one of the main new online words of the century, indicating just how many people want to write something which, for one reason or another, good and bad, would never get published in the 'old media'. Today, the growing number of linguistic spin-offs are ample demonstration that **blog** is a survivor.

From the original term have sprung **moblog** and **phlog** (sharing photos, often from mobile phones), **vlog** (video blogging), **splog** (a spam-like technique for exploiting inter-blog references), **pllog** (a political blog) and **flog** (which can be glossed in multiple ways, including a 'fake blog').

■ **mashup:** this is the read-write web's keyword, representing all the ways in which disparate online resources can be combined in unexpected ways.

■ **read-write web:** whether it's called the 'read-write web' or 'web-2.0', the (rediscovered) notion that everyone should be able to write to the web, as well as read it, will probably do more to upset old media than anything else the web has produced so far.

■ **wiki and Wikipedia:** possibly the most popular outcomes of the above.

■ **podcasting:** another neologism which established itself with amazing speed at the same time as inviting numerous spin-offs.

DID YOU KNOW?

Wordwatching

In the year 2000 the most likely word associated with **attachment** was emotional. In 2005 email was more common by a margin of about 20 per cent – it seems we are now writing and talking more about our email attachments than our emotional ones.

Bigger brother

Our language reflects the concerns facing us at the beginning of the 21st century. Two preoccupations

include information and security, and it is inevitable that each has an influence on the other: the Oxford Corpus shows us that we are concerned with information about our security, and the security of our information.

Information security is a frequent term these days that was hardly on the radar screen before the turn of the century. Another steady climber in US discourse today that was practically unknown only a few years ago is endpoint security: that is, security at the point of access to a database where it is vulnerable. This normally means at the point where ordinary people are able to access it.

The steady rise of the term **identify theft** is part and parcel of the same phenomenon.

DID YOU KNOW?

The huge growth in virtual dodgy dealing is evident in the Oxford Corpus...

The word **scam** has surged from 347 instances in 2000 to 10,409 in 2007. And scams are becoming more personal too. **Phishing, lottery, email, telephone, and dialler** all keep frequent company with the noun scam. And through the Oxford Corpus we've noted the increasing number of **cybercops** and **cybersleuths** patrolling the **cyberhighways**, who are protecting us from numerous **cybercrimes** such as **cybersquatting, cyberstalking** and even **cyberterrorism**.

But, also in **cyberspace**, you'll find a surprising number of **cyberpunks**, as well as a few **cybergoths**. We see **cybergeeks** hanging out in **cybercafés**, indulging in either a spot of **cyberbabble** or **cyber-romance**, or concentrating on the more serious subject of **cybernetics**. You certainly won't find them **cyberslacking**, that's for sure.

We're still not quite sure what a **cyberloo** is, but if this whole **cyberwhatnot** thing is developing a certain **cybertedium** in you, then you may be one of the many who are now suffering from **cyberphobia** or **cyberchondria**!

Blend it like Beckham

Wordplay has for centuries been at the heart of many coinages, and it is one of the primary processes in the

evolution of language which shows no sign of slowing down.

Among the many new 'blends' of the last five years have been **waparazzi**, those members of the public who imitate the **paparazzi** and take pictures of celebrities with their (WAP-enabled) mobile phones, **mandals** (sandals for men), plus **metrosexuals** (men who spend a lot of time on their appearance) and **machosexuals** or **retrosexuals** (men who do not).

Each Language Report has included a collection of words which are being monitored by dictionary-makers – through the Oxford Corpus – for signs of staying power. Many may prove so ephemeral that they will be gone 12 months from now, while others already show signs of semi-permanence and enough persistence to warrant inclusion in the next Oxford dictionaries. Here are just some of the 'blended words of the moment' that are noted in the fifth edition of *The Language Report*:

■ **bipodding:** listening to an mp3 music player with someone else.

The term comes from the idea of two ('bi') people using an iPod.

■ **crowdsourcing:** a version of outsourcing in business, involving the use of large groups of amateurs outside an organisation to test a product or to perform other work, usually for a fraction of the usual cost.

■ **peerents:** parents who behave like their children's peers (or who treat their kids like their own peers) in a form of collaborative parenting. The term may well be one which was widely reported by newspapers but which, in effect, never took off.

■ **mojo:** an amateur journalist who uses their mobile phone to gather and disseminate news from within a community or from a live event.

■ **spanador:** a cross between a spaniel and a Labrador and the latest in a long line of dog name 'blends', including labradoodles, cockapoops, and schnoodles (poodles and schnauzers).

■ **urbeach:** an urban beach, and a trend which began with the Paris Plage, a section of land by the Seine which the authorities cover with sand and furnish with deckchairs every summer. New urbeaches are planned for Bristol and Birmingham (rumoured to be called Plage Brum), among other cities.

The word of the 21st century

Can any one word sum up the century so far? To celebrate the fifth edition of *The Language Report*, Oxford University Press is inviting the nation to select the word which represents the events or the moods of the 21st century. Vote for one of the words below at www.askoxford.com or submit your very own word of the century.

■ **Axis of evil** This term, first used by George W. Bush in his State of the Union address in January 2002, came to be shorthand in his administration's rhetoric about the threat of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction from an 'axis' or group of countries which included Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

■ **bling** Although coined in the late nineties by the US rapper B.G (Baby Gangsta), 'bling' is for many the word of the early noughties, denoting a celebrity-obsessed culture intent on being as flashy as those who were idolised.

■ **chav** The word 'chav' is a near-perfect example of the speed at which today's new words can spread. Very few of us will have heard of it until 2004/5 and it still remains at the forefront of an 'us and them' mentality which has characterised the opening decade of the century.

■ **bovvered** The word of the year in 2006, Catherine Tate's catchphrase of 'bovvered' has been repeated by the media as a neat shorthand for Britain's ASBO-deserving couldn't-care-less adolescents.

■ **9/11** 9/11 has become the immediate reference point for the terrorist attacks against America in 2001. Their repercussions have resonated throughout the years since, and many might consider them to be the catalyst for a chain of political and social events which have dominated the decade.

■ **Sars and bird flu** SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) gripped the public imagination in 2004 as the latest threat to public health. However, it is H5N1 or bird flu that is ringing alarm bells today.

■ **sex up** Meaning to make something more appetising, dramatic, or indeed sexy. This phrase came into greater currency thanks to a BBC report by the journalist Andrew Gilligan that British intelligence documents on Iraq had been 'sexed up' in order to justify war. The phrase 'sexing up' was soon applied to any number of contexts, from one's body and bedroom to further political documents where spin was suspected.

■ **footprint** The dramatic embrace of environmental endeavour has been accompanied by an array of new words and terms. The frequency with which 'footprint' now evokes an environmental context can



be measured by the Oxford English Corpus, with 'carbon', 'ecological' and 'reduce' among its most frequent companions.

■ **bowser** Few could have predicted the value of the bowser, supplying uncontaminated water to thousands of flood-affected Britons in the summer of 2007.

And a few more contenders...

- size zero
- podcasting
- surge
- truthiness
- Ground Zero

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE WORD OF THE 21ST CENTURY? VOTE NOW! www.askoxford.com

And the losers are...

Some of the new words that flew above the radar and then disappeared off the lexical screen:

■ **millennium bug** This term, due to hit at the beginning of the new millennium or Y2K, was one of the most frequently googled

items in the closing months of 1999, yet the threat of technological meltdown did not materialise.

■ **to dyson** This verb has been expected to enter the language as a rival for 'hoovering' for some years. As yet, however, it has failed to make any impact.

■ **freedom fries** A short-lived name used by some in the United States as a substitute for French fries. They were said to be served on the US Presidential flights during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and were the result of anti-French sentiment caused by a perceived lack of support for the war from the French government.

■ **slacktivism** The desire to do something good as long as it involves minimal effort. The term, a contraction of slack and activism, was one of many new recent 'blends'.

To buy a copy of Susie Dent's *The Language Report: English on the move 200-2007* (published by Oxford University Press) at the special price of £x.xx (normally £10.99), please call the order line 0000 00000 00000, quoting OUP/Bulletin.