

Q. Every year the self-designated wordsmiths of Lake Superior State University prepare a list of English words to be banished from the American vocabulary because they are “tired, over-used, and generally useless.” Does their list of “banned” words help to get rid of them?

A. No. Only public usage decides which words to keep and which to discard, and the public ignores edicts. In the 2010 list, for example, only two words have not been seen since the group banned them: *bromance* and *chillaxin*. (But then I had never noticed those words before 2010, so I am not an authority on the subject.)

On the other hand, one word the wordsmiths banned was *Obama*, as in the compound, *Obamacare*. That compound is still in robust health and has spawned several additional prefixes since being “banned.”

The English language does change, however, to the annoyance of some of its speakers. Words are added; others disappear. Our vocabulary expands and contracts; words change in meaning. One example appears in the word *robust*, used in the paragraph above. Until recently, *robust* referred only to the well-being of animate beings (as in, “the robust athlete”). But *robust* has greatly expanded and is now a fad word, describing corporations, endeavors, and economies.

To be awarded the title *Lady*, a woman once had to be of noble birth. Then the meaning of *lady* expanded to include upper-class women. Now every woman is democratically entitled a *lady*, and to call a female adult a *woman* borders on insult. (Our local newspaper avoids that mistake: in reporting a physical altercation between two inmates, both were referred to as “ladies”).

While the meaning of some words expands, the meaning of others narrows. During the Middle English period (approximately 1066 to 1500), any young person was called a *girl*. Now it has narrowed so that it describes only a young female person. When a governor of California warned Republicans not to be “girlie-men,” a phrase he coined during a political campaign, Democrats were furious.

When a new meaning takes over, the original meaning of a word may vanish.

This has occurred with the word *nice*, which meant “ignorant” when English people borrowed it from France in 1290. Chaucer adopted it almost at once, but with new meanings: “lascivious or wanton.” Currently, *nice* has lost that pejorative sense and has expanded to mean “pleasant or agreeable in nature, attractive in appearance, of good character, subtle, executed with skill.” (For other favorable meanings, check any dictionary.)

Romantic poet John Keats described the biblical Ruth as “sick for home, she stood in tears amid the alien corn,” which gave most modern readers a mental image of Ruth, surrounded by tall cornstalks. But that image is false. During the early nineteenth century, when Keats wrote that poem, *corn* meant “grain,” and only since that time has its meaning narrowed to identify a specific kind of grain. The meaning of the word *deer* has also narrowed; it once meant “any wild creature.”

*Earmark* looks like a compound composed of *ear* and *mark*. But the first syllable actually has nothing to do with an *ear*, the organ of hearing. Instead it refers to a seed-bearing spike from which the word *ear* was derived, as in an “ear of corn.” That is the same *ear* as appears in *earmark*, which originally was a mark identifying ownership of a domestic animal.

Folk etymology also results in language change. The Dutch word *booze*, which referred to glass bottles shaped like log cabins, filled with liquor, and sold by E.C. Booz, a Philadelphia distiller. These were called “Booz bottles.” People quickly began to associate the name of the distiller with the name of the product; the word *booz* added an *e*, its spelling changed, and *booze* expanded to mean any alcoholic drink. As a result, the phrase “Booz bottle” has disappeared.

The word *hangnail*, originally a compound referring to the damage a painful house nail might inflict, is made up of *hang* (originally *ang*, meaning

“pain”), as in the first syllable of *anguish*, plus *nail*. As people associated the pain from damage to the cuticle of a person’s fingernail, the word *hangnail* took on its new name. We achieved the name *cockroach* from the Spanish term (“*cucaracha*”) because Americans associated it with the Spanish words *cock* (“rooster”) and *roach* (“fish”).

In Old English (before 1066) one word for *man* was *gome*. Although that word disappeared, it continued to be used in the compound *bridgome*, which then became our modern *bridegroom*, because the public associated the noun *gome* with the noun *groom* (“stable boy”) despite no link in the two meanings.

We gain vocabulary by adopting it from other languages. The word *caucus* was adopted from the Algonquin Indians, *sofa* from Arabia, and *potato* from Haiti. We gain vocabulary by adding new forms from our own stock: The noun phrase *a lot* (“a portion”) came into Middle English from the verb *to allot*. The verb *to beg* came from the noun *beggar*, and *to burgle* from *burglar*.

We add words as we need them and discard them when they are not needed. In the Old English epic “Beowulf,” there were 59 words for *hero*. On the way to modern English, 58 were lost. Icelandic has numerous words for *snow*. We need only one. And every speaker of English is aware of the burgeoning new vocabulary the Internet has produced.

Efforts to control English are not new. Eighteenth-century grammarians believed that the language they had inherited was “extremely imperfect.” Even the best writers committed “gross improprieties, which ... ought to be discarded,” wrote Robert Lowth, a grammarian, in 1762. It’s safe to say that our current crop of language reformers will have no more success than was achieved by Lowth and his earnest group. **TFL**

---

*Gertrude Block, lecturer emerita at the University of Florida College of Law, can be reached at [block@law.ufl.edu](mailto:block@law.ufl.edu) or by snail-mail: Gertrude Block, Lecturer Emerita, Emerson Hall, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.*