But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

How Are Words Added To The Dictionary?

May 21, 2021

Jane 00:21
This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. As you know, on this show you tell us what the episode should be about by sending the questions you're curious about. Then we run around to find helpful people who can offer answers. Melody and I have been making this show for more than five years now. So we've started to see patterns emerge about the types of questions young people like you are consistently interested in. And one of the topics we hear from you a lot about is words. So we've done episodes on who invented words, why people speak different languages from one another, why some words are considered bad. And we even did a whole live radio show early in the pandemic last year, where we just answered questions about words and language for a full hour. We have links to all of those episodes in our show notes, and in our newsletter, in case you're hungry for more word knowledge when you finish this episode, you can subscribe to our newsletter if you don't already at our website: ButWhyKids.org. When you're a kid, you learn new words practically every day. When you hear a word you don't recognize, or you come across an unfamiliar one in a book how do you find out what it means? You could ask someone or you could check a dictionary. A dictionary is a book or an online resource that tells you how to pronounce a word, how it might be used in speech or writing and what it means. In fact, let's look up the word dictionary in the dictionary. Okay, Merriam-Webster's online dictionary says: dictionary, noun; plural dictionaries. 1. a reference source in print or electronic form containing words, usually alphabetically arranged along with information about their forms, pronunciations, functions, etymologies, meanings, and syntactic and idiomatic uses. That's quite a definition. But who gets to decide when a word gets added to the dictionary and exactly how to say what it means?

Emma 02:37
My name is Emma, and I am eight years old, and I live in Mount Washington, Kentucky. And my question is, how do words get added to the dictionary?

Jane 02:46
Great question, Emma. We took your question directly to one of the people who actually gets to do the adding.

Emily 02:54
My name is Emily Brewster and I am a lexicographer, which means that I am someone who writes and edits dictionaries.

Jane 03:03
Lexicographer is a very big word. It's also a great word. Can you break it down? Where does that word come from?

Emily 03:09
Sure. The "lexico" part means word. It's also related to the word lexicon, which is a collection of words like a dictionary. And also like the words in a language those are both called lexicons. And the "grapher" part of lexicographer is the same "grapher" you hear in photographer and in videographer and in cartographer, that has to do with writing originally, but it is, you know, has to do with creating things making things.

Jane 03:40
Does that mean, you make new words?

Emily 03:42
I'm not actually allowed to create the words, but I get to define the new words, lexicographers never make words up.

Jane 03:52
Oh, so you help us understand exactly what a word means? And what other words we would use to describe that word?

Emily 04:04
Yes, a lexicographers job is kind of like a scientist's job, very much actually. We are scientists of the language. And we are always watching the words that people are using, and figuring out exactly what the words mean in all the different situations that people use them. And so we will write definitions for a new word, when we see that word being used by a lot of people in a lot of different situations with a meaning that is clearly used throughout all these different situations.

Jane 04:37
Emily is a senior editor at Merriam-Webster, that's an American company that's been publishing print dictionaries for over 150 years. You might have a Merriam-Webster dictionary at your home or school. Or maybe you have an Oxford English Dictionary, or a dictionary in another language that you speak at home. There are dictionaries for students and dictionaries for people learning English, technical dictionaries for specific types of science or medical terms. And then there's something called a thesaurus, which is a book you can use to find different words that mean similar things. That's a helpful reference when you're writing and you
don't want to use the same word over and over. The first widely accepted English dictionary that had words in alphabetical order was made more than 400 years ago, and it included 3,000 words. Some English dictionaries today have nearly 500,000 words in them. And just a few years ago, Merriam-Webster added 1,000 new words to its dictionary. In fact, in January of this year, it added more than 500 new ones.

**Julia** 05:43
My name is Julia, I'm seven years old, and I live in Denver, Colorado. My question is, how are words created?

**Emily** 05:52
Words are created in lots of different ways by lots of different kinds of people. A word gets to be a word just by communicating meaning it's a group of sounds that communicate some meaning. So you can create a word with your friend, and you and your friend, may be the only people who know what the word means, but it still counts as a word. It's not a word that's part of the English language until a lot of people use it and understand it, but it still counts as a word. So some words get created by people who are just playing with language and want to communicate something special. Some words get invented, because of a new development in science or technology. And some words get borrowed from other languages, and so they get a new version in their new language.

**Jane** 06:41
How many people need to be using that word before it becomes a word that is sort of accepted as a word?

**Emily** 06:51
A lot of people need to be using a word for a dictionary, like the dictionary that I write, which is published by Merriam-Webster, a lot of people need to be using the word before we determine that the word is really part of the English language.

**Jane** 07:06
That gets us back to Emma's question that we heard right at the beginning of the episode.

**Emma** 07:10
How do words get added to the dictionary?

**Emily** 07:12
Part of the lexicographers job is to read a lot and listen a lot and pay attention to the new words that people are using. And we collect these examples in a computer file. And then we can determine how many examples there are from what different kinds of sources. If all the
examples are only appearing on TickTok, then that tells us one thing about the word, but as soon as they're also appearing in, you know, a magazine that you would see at the dentist's office, then that tells us something else about the word's status. So we are always looking for information, for evidence, of how words are being used by the people who speak the English language. And when we have enough evidence that the word is really part of the language, that it's a word that most people already will recognize when they hear it, that's when we know that it's ready to be added to the dictionary.

Jane 08:06
Do you have an example of a word that's been added recently, that might help us understand what you're talking about?

Emily 08:11
Here's a word that everybody learned really, really recently. And that is the word COVID-19. That refers to this virus that we have all been very careful to try to avoid getting. And this word was created by the World Health Organization. And it was, it was, it got into our dictionary faster than any other word in the history of the dictionary has ever been added. Because what we knew immediately was that this word was not going away that everybody was talking about this word. This word was going to be used in books and newspapers and magazines for years. People were going to be talking about this word. So that's a word that got in very, very quickly. Another word that I like that got in, it's been a while now, but the word "chillax" was a word that a former student, the students of mine when I was a teacher, there were some students who had used this word chillax. And I didn't know if it was really going to stick around or not, and it did, and it eventually got into the dictionary. Chillax, of course, means relax. It's combining the word "chill" and the word "relax" and you get chillax. And that's another word. So you've got these, you know, words can be playful and fun, or they can be very serious.

Jane 09:30
Want to know some of the words that were just added to Merriam-Webster's dictionary in January of 2021. COVID-19 was already in there. But the definitions of "pod" and "bubble" were updated to include people you might have grouped up with when you weren't seeing other people because of the pandemic. Makerspace, where people get together in a common area and often share tools to make their own projects. BIPOC that's an abbreviation for Black, Indigenous and people of color. And second gentleman was also added. As you may know, Vice President Kamala Harris is married to a man named Doug Emhoff. He's the first man to serve as the spouse of a vice president. And he's known as the second gentleman. The partner of the President would be known as the First Gentleman or First Lady. Now, sometimes words have one definition that pretty much everyone understands. But some words are used differently by different people, or have different meanings depending on the context,
the situation you're using them in. Emily Brewster says, That's why dictionaries list different meanings for the same word.

Emily 10:41
There are lots of words that have many, many definitions to them, you can think about a word like "mouse," right, it means the little creature. And then it also means the thing that you use with your computer. And those words are there, they both mean the same word mouse in both cases, but they have lots of different meanings. And the same is true for words that are more closely related, but that have different shades of meaning.

Jane 11:04
And there are some words that especially young people take and change and maybe change the meaning so that they can use it in a different way than older people, than their parents. So they'll use the opposite of what the word actually means. Like, well, this probably isn't what you kids are saying now, but when I was a teenager, we would say that's sick. That was a sick move, you just did. Well, "sick" means you don't feel very good. But the way we were using it was to mean, awesome, rad, gnarly, super cool. But is sick gonna be in the dictionary in both ways.

Emily 11:40
Sick is in the dictionary in both ways, because the word is definitely established in that use. Yep. And kids do still say it some.

Jane 11:49
Good to know! Kids seem like maybe they're often involved in creating new words and bringing them to popularity. I mean, this is one area where young people really are changing things, right? I mean, old people kind of have an established way of using a language. And sometimes we all get new words like COVID-19. But it seems like young people really are responsible, a lot of times for changing the ways we use language and the words we use.

Emily 12:15
They definitely are, yes, and for a few different reasons. One is, I think that they are, they're, they're playful with language in a way that people who are not required to use language in a particular way can be so they have some more freedom with it. And they also recognize shifts in language. Or maybe they, they think that a word has a different kind of side meaning to it than it has in the past. And then they push it in that direction. And then it does have that other kind of side meaning what we would call a connotation to a word. But another reason is that kids like to use language in a way that the grown ups around them won't understand. And so that kind of use of language pushes, it pushes the whole language in a different direction. Sometimes they create these slang terms that only they understand, then they grow up and
they still use those terms. And then those terms get heard by their kids and those terms, just really they become part of the part of the fuller language.

Jane 13:20
Stay with us more about how words get into the dictionary coming right up. This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. Today, we're learning how new words get added to the dictionary with Emily Brewster, a lexicographer and senior editor at Merriam-Webster. So once we've established that a word is in use by a lot of people, how does it get into the book?

Emily 13:47
An editor like me will carefully read through evidence of the word in use, and formulate a really, spend a lot of time usually trying to put into very careful language, what the words meanings are. And then that is entered into a document and it is reviewed by other editors who then might change it or not. There's also different things that happen to the word, the word has to get a pronunciation. It has to have this kind of code that tells you how to say this word. And there is another editor who tells you how old the word is when the earliest evidence of the word in use is from. And then there's another editor who researches the history of the word. Where did the word come from? How did the word come to be? And then all of those, those stages are then reviewed by other editors. So their definition gets handled by lots of people before it's finally put into, you know, a special computer system that then makes it part of the website or part of a book.

Jane 14:49
And do you do that process once a year or once every couple of years or every every time there's a new word that has hit that critical level?

Emily 14:58
We update our dictionary, right now, the Merriam-Webster.com, dictionary two or three times a year, and we will post when we, when we do an update, there will be hundreds of changes that have been made all at once. And we do that because often when you make a change to one definition, there, you'll need to also make a change to another definition. So we do a whole batch of words at one time, but we're constantly working on them. It's you know, when, when one batch is done, you're already starting to work on the next one.

Jane 15:27
Now, the dictionary is known for being a really big, huge, heavy book, because there are so many words in it. But I imagine it would just keep getting bigger and bigger and heavier and heavier. If you only added words and never took words out. So what's the process for taking a word out of the dictionary?
Emily 15:46
We really try not to take words out of the dictionary. But yes, to have the, we still publish print dictionaries. And we do have to take words out sometimes, we also take out other information to avoid taking out the words. So for example, dictionaries used to include lists of all the colleges and universities in the United States of America. Well, we decided you can find that information somewhere else, we’re gonna take that out so we can put more words in. But the kinds of words that we take out when we do need to take something out, those words are usually related to some kind of outdated technology that nobody uses anymore. So a long time ago, when I was a kid, there were no photo copiers, there were machines called mimeograph machines. And there was a something there’s that "graph" again, in lexicographer, mimeograph and there was the the the process was called "mimeography." So we wouldn't take out the word mimeograph or the word mimeography, but we would take out words that were related to that, because they're really not used anymore. And not all the words, I just mean, there's probably some word related to mimeography that nobody uses anymore because mimeograph machines are not used anymore. So we look for words that nobody is going to miss.

Jane 17:05
But you would keep something like the word mimeograph in, because I could imagine reading a novel from the 1980s, that would include the word "mimeograph," and I might not know what that means, and nobody I know is using it. But I'd still want to be able to look it up or, or even an older word from the 1600s. To so that I could better understand something from the past. Is that one of the reasons why you keep them in there?

Emily 17:28
Yes, definitely. And we actually include words that people are like, that people will find in literature that is still widely read. So any word that gets used by Shakespeare, for example, that stays in the dictionary, and really all of the you know, any, any widely read book of literature, we want to make sure that the vocabulary used in that book is still present in the dictionary because those words are still alive in the language. They might not be used in, in everyday conversations, but they're still used in the books that we read and talk about.

Jane 18:02
Before we let Emily go, I had to ask her if she had a favorite word to share with us. Maybe not surprisingly, she couldn't pick just one favorite. But she did tell us about one word she likes a lot.

Emily 18:14
I've always really liked the word "persnickety." I think it's fun to say. And I like that it starts with that p-e-r persnickety? I just think that's a fun one.

Jane 18:26
Can you define it for us?

Emily 18:28
Someone who is persnickety is picky and has very particular ideas about how things should be.

Jane 18:35
One of my favorite words that I learned when I was younger was defenestration.

Emily 18:40
That's a very good one. Yeah.

Jane 18:42
I like the sound of it. And then I really like the meaning to throw something out of a window. I liked that. And then learning about the different parts of the word and, and that "fenestra" it's, it doesn't sound like, what windo? Where's window in that, but fenestra comes from a different language and means window and so "de," you know, out so you learn how words come together. And then it's like, Oh, that makes sense. It's the act of throwing something out a window. If you learn the different parts of the word, you can see why it means what it does. And I loved that.

Emily 19:12
Yeah, that's very fun. Here's another one. I really like. The word, everybody knows, or a lot of people know the word "miniscule." It means very, very small. And it used to refer to lowercase letters. Well, there's another word "majuscule." That means capital letters, but it never got that other meaning to just mean something that's very big. And what I really, there's also a form of the word majuscule, that means that is "majuscular." And that just means having to do with capital letters or with big letters, any big letter that's an a big font. But I really, I would love to see people use the word majuscular to mean the opposite of miniscule. You could have like a, you know, a majuscular meal or something instead of a miniscule meal.

Jane 19:56
I can't wait to start hearing that all of the kids who are listening are going to know this word and the adults are going to be like, what? What are you even talking about? Okay, so that's your homework. Find a way to work majuscule or majuscular into conversation with your friends or teachers or family this week. Thanks to Emily Brewster for helping us peek inside the
dictionary today. She's a senior editor at Merriam-Webster. And if you want to hear more about words, you can check out Merriam-Webster's podcast Word Matters. Emily is one of the hosts. If you have a question, have an adult record you asking it. Then send the file to questions@ButWhyKids.org love hearing what's on your mind. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. Our show is distributed by PRX. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!