# A Level English Language

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# Bridging Course Week 2



# Week 2

This week in the bridging course we will look at how context affects language. We will look at language change in the news, and the roles of dictionaries and lexicographers and why this is often misunderstood by the mainstream press. We will also look at how historical events effect language – we will exemplify this by looking at very recent work on the impact of the Covid 19 Pandemic on how we use language, including some debates and controversies about this. At the end of this week you will be asked to write an essay. You should bring this into school in September and you teacher will give you feedback on it. You should try your best with this work, but again, don’t worry if you find it difficult. Some of the ideas here are challenging and your English Language teacher will be able to explain them when you return to school.

# A note on newspapers and news media

A lot of the work we are doing this week is based on news. It is important that you have an awareness of the biases and political standpoints of popular British, American and global news papers and news outlets. Research the following news outlets – where in the world do that come from? Are the tabloids or Broadsheets? Can you explain the difference between the two? Are they left wing or right wing, or neutral? Think about how you consume your news? Do you hear about the news directly, or through social media? Which of the following do you trust the most and the least?

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| The Times | The Guardian | The Independent | The BBC | The Daily Mail |
| The Daily Express | The Mirror | The Sun | The Telegraph | CNN |
| Fox News | The New York Times | Buzzfeed | Breitbart news | Al Jazeera |

Now try to fill in the table below for British newspapers only:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Broadsheet | Tabloid | |
| Red Tops | Middle Market Dailies |
| Left Wing |  |  |  |
| Right Wing |  |  |  |
| Neutral |  |  |  |

# Opinions in the Media

Below is an article from the linguist Lynne Murphy about how to read about Language in the news:

# How To Read the Language News – Sceptically

Professor Lynne Murphy offers six easy steps to help you distinguish between good journalism based on sound linguistic research and fake news when you read media stories about language.

When the editors of Collins Dictionary named fake news their 2017 Word of the Year, they probably weren’t thinking about the linguistic news – though they could have been. There’s plenty of bad journalism about language out there – and it’s been going on for years. My own speciality is looking at how American English is represented in the British press, a particularly fertile area for stereotyping, misunderstanding and misinformation. But it’s certainly not the only area.

Language is something the public want to know about. We all use language every day, and we tend to have ideas about English – what we like and don’t like about it. The media are very happy to give us stories about English that support or challenge our ideas about how English works. They know it’s great clickbait.

Too often, though, the news media present stories about English that misrepresent linguistic research, that interpret it in a way that suits certain prejudices, or that is not research-based at all. I have two bits of good news, though:

There is a lot of good language journalism out there too.

You have the power to cut through the hype and get a clearer idea of what’s going on in the English language today. In this article, I give a tool kit for evaluating language stories in the news, so that you can identify quality pieces, find the places to be suspicious, and do something about it when language articles are used to spread misinformation or prejudice.

**Step 1: Don’t Judge a Book by its Cover, or a Language Story by the Masthead**

Teachers like to tell us to ‘consider the source’ when evaluating information – and that is good advice. It’s probably better to trust a textbook about English written by a linguistics professor than to trust your great aunt (unless she is also a linguistics professor). But when looking at media stories, it’s easy to come to the conclusions ‘broadsheets good, tabloids bad’ and ‘conservative press is conservative, liberal press is liberal’. But very often linguistic ideas don’t go along with political ideas. I know very liberal people who are still linguistic snobs, for instance. And in my experience, there’s plenty of bad linguistic journalism in broadsheets and sometimes good analyses in tabloids.

Take this example: in 2011 the British Library publicised their research on changing pronunciations in the UK – for example which syllable is stressed in controversy (CONtroversy or conTROVersy) and whether garage is garRAZH or GARridge. They concluded that British pronunciation changes have little or nothing to do with American English influence. Americans don’t say the newer controversy pronunciation, for example. The Daily Mail’s headline for this story was:

*How is your English?*

*Research shows Americanisms AREN’T taking over the British language*

But broadsheet the Telegraph ran the story with this on top:

*The ‘conTROversy’ over changing pronunciations*

*To language purists they might grate, but new ways of pronouncing words are spreading in Britain thanks to the influence of US culture.*

It was an irresponsible way to present the story, and it was in the ‘quality’ newspaper.

**Step 2: Read Beyond the Headline**

Headlines are usually not written by the author of the article, but by the production editor who’s thinking ‘how can we get people to click on or share this article?’ Their advertising revenue depends on those *clicks* and shares. In cases like the Telegraph headline, it can look like the headline writer didn’t read the article. Headlines often exaggerate or use emotive language to garner interest. By the end of a bad headline, damage has already been done. The Telegraph article goes on to quote the researcher saying that the change in the pronunciation of controversy has nothing to do with Americans. But 38% of those who click on links don’t read the article. Of those who do read, only half will make it to the end of the article. Plenty of people will share the article on social media using only the headline to support a point they want to make. So, keep reading.

**Step 3: Look at the Language**

Take a minute and think about this BBC headline from 2017. What assumptions is it starting from? Is it trying to get a specific reaction from the reader?

*How Americanisms are Killing the English Language*

Look for presuppositions and metaphors. A presupposition is a claim that needs to be assumed to be true in order to interpret another claim. This headline expects you to accept two presuppositions: first, that the English language is being killed – they’re not asking whether they’re asking how. Another presupposition comes from the ‘the’ before ‘English language’: it presumes that there is one and only one thing called ‘English language’. Is that true? When they say ‘the English language’, what assumptions do they expect you to make about that English and who speaks it?

Metaphors are used to frame what’s happening in a particular way. But how does that metaphor work? Is the language alive? What would it mean for Americanisms to kill English? If Americanisms can kill, what are they? Disease? Poison? Weapons? Assassins? What other possible metaphors are there for words travelling around the world? British writers sometimes represent the English language as Britain’s ‘gift’ to the world (even though the dominance of English has contributed to the decline or death of many indigenous languages). Another possible metaphor might have Americanisms enriching or revitalising English, rather than killing it. Why was this metaphor chosen?

**Step 4: Evaluate the Research**

Many media pieces about language are mere opinion, based on a single person’s experience of English. The thing to remember about language opinions is that they’re generally based on very limited experience of English – from their own lifetime, social class, age group, educational background, etc. Everyone has a right to an opinion, but we (and they) shouldn’t mistake opinions for reality. Such articles often cherry-pick their evidence – that is, they use examples that support their point, but don’t acknowledge the many examples that don’t support it. Beyond the opinion pieces, much language news these days relates to linguistic research, in part because researchers feel pressure to show that their research is relevant by getting it into the news.

But research deserves critical caution as well. There’s stronger research and weaker research, and news organisations don’t always bother to differentiate between them. Consider this from another Telegraph article:

*The English language is evolving faster than ever – leaving older Brits literally lost for words, research has revealed. A detailed study has identified the social media language and mobile messaging terms that perplex millions of parents and which point to a future where emoticons may replace the written word. […] The study was led by the English language expert Professor John Sutherland [and] was commissioned to mark the launch of the Samsung Galaxy S6 phone. The results point to a seismic generational gap in how we use and understand modern informal text speak while also suggesting older style abbreviations and acronyms such as TXT are now so old they are considered antiquated by the younger generation.*

It raises a few alarm bells. How is this person an ‘English language expert’? In fact, the researcher is a professor of literature, not language or linguistics. The training in doing sociolinguistic research is quite different from that required for literary research. The research has been commissioned by a business that is promoting a new product. Such research does not have the quality-control requirements that go along with publication in an academic journal or research funded by an academic organisation. The company wanted something they could make a headline out of, so its press releases would be picked up as news items. That’s a lot cheaper and gets more ‘shares’ then an advertisement would get. There is no link to the original research report, so you can’t check the methodology, the actual findings, or the researcher’s interpretations of it.

The evidence doesn’t merit the conclusions. They’ve shifted the discourse in two ways here: from evidence about one very specific kind of language [texting] to a claim about English in general from evidence from now to a historical claim. We can’t actually know whether English is changing ‘faster than ever’ from a study of two generations at one time, and there’s no reason to believe that the language of texting is the same as that of conversation or essay writing, for example. The shiftiness in the last point is something to stay very aware of. Articles about dialect-word research often shift into claims about accents. Evidence about spelling might morph into a claim about pronunciation or education. Consider whether there are other possible explanations for the phenomena discussed. For instance, where dialects are becoming less distinct, sometimes television is blamed. But are there other factors at work, such as more people travelling further for work, more people going to university, more people moving away from their place of birth in modern times? If children’s spelling is poor, it’s a big leap to decide that’s because of social media – you also need to check whether children’s spelling is always poor at that age (is it a developmental issue) or whether spelling education is done differently now than it used to be.

**Step 5: Check Their Facts; Do Your Own Research**

If the article links to the original research, have a look at that. It’s likely to have more careful conclusions and less misleading language than the media coverage. For instance, one study about changing accents in Britain (mostly due to the influence of major British cities) had one line about communication becoming more casual, possibly because of the influence of social media platforms from the US. A Guardian article on the study led with the claim that

*By 2066, dialect words and regional pronunciations will be no more – consumed by a tsunami of Americanisms.*

There was no way to get from the report to that conclusion – and in fact, the article was arguing that the report didn’t know what it was talking about. But to get to the point they wanted to make, the writer was gravely misrepresenting the research.

But sometimes it’s the researcher who gets it wrong – and the media reports it anyway. A 2017 news item claimed British words were losing ground to American words. But looking at the original research, I found that one of the ‘British’ words that British people aren’t saying nowadays was ‘capsicum’. It’s no wonder they didn’t find it in Britain, since it’s the Australian word for a sweet pepper.

You have the power to check claims made in the media about language, and all you need is access to the internet and a sense of which sources of information are reliable. Check a few dictionaries (just one and you haven’t really done your research since different dictionaries might offer different information). The Online Etymology Dictionary is free and has lots of good information about word histories.

**Step 6: Do Something About Fake Linguistic News**

Language changes; it’s inescapable. But a lot of media articles seem intent on creating villains in the story of language change. It’s the millennials! The immigrants! The Americans! The teachers! They’re who we can blame! These kinds of stories serve political purposes. They are propaganda. The aforementioned study about accents changing in Britain gave rise to a Sun headline

*The ‘th’ sound vanishing from the English language with Cockney and other dialects set to die out by 2066 due to immigration.*

That is a seriously problematic interpretation of the research, and it serves the Sun’s general antiimmigration stance. It was an unethical headline. And the newspaper deserved to be called out on it. In those kinds of situations, it’s not enough for us to know ourselves that it’s bad linguistic journalism. When the press demonises groups of people (or their languages) using bad thinking and poor research, we need to stand up. The good news is that in the era of social media, this is easier to do than ever. Contact the media source and point out the errors. Find better articles on the issues to share when you see people sharing the biased articles. Be a good citizen and start conversations about the problems and consequences of bad linguistic research.

**Lynne Murphy is a linguistics professor at Sussex University and author of The**

**Prodigal Tongue: The Love-Hate Relationship between British and American English (OneWorld, 2018).**

**Follow her on Twitter: @lynneguist**

# Questions

1. How do the news media often present stories about English?
2. What does Murphy feel is ironic about the coverage of the American pronunciation in the Daily Mail and The Telegraph?
3. Why does Murphy argue it is important to “read beyond the headline”?
4. Why is the metaphor “American is killing the English language” problematic to Murphy?
5. Why does Murphy argue that the Sun headline in Section 6 is unethical?

# Dictionaries and Lexicography

Every year, news stories appear in the media about new words being admitted into the dictionaries, or about Word the of the Year. In 2019, for example, the Word of the Year according to Oxford Dictionaries was **climate emergency**.

Look up the WOTY for the last 10 years. Different dictionaries sometimes come to different conclusions. See if you can complete the following table:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Oxford Dictionaries | Collins Dictionaries | Merraim Webster |
| 2019 |  |  |  |
| 2018 |  |  |  |
| 2017 |  |  |  |
| 2016 |  |  |  |
| 2015 |  |  |  |
| 2014 |  |  |  |
| 2013 |  |  |  |
| 2012 |  |  |  |
| 2011 |  |  |  |
| 2010 |  |  |  |

# Extended response:

Now that you have collected the data above, what do you think it reveals about the relationship between language and society?

# Dictionaries in the News

In 2015 dictionaries made the news again as a group of famous writers wrote in protest against the exclusion of so called “nature words” from the dictionary. Read about this in the Guardan article below:

Oxford Junior Dictionary’s replacement of ‘natural’ words with 21st-century terms sparks outcry

**Margaret Atwood and Andrew Motion among authors protesting at dropping definitions of words like ‘acorn’ and ‘buttercup’ in favour of ‘broadband’ and ‘cut and paste’**

[**Alison Flood**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/alisonflood)

“A” should be for acorn, “B” for buttercup and “C” for conker, not attachment, blog and chatroom, according to a group of authors including [Margaret Atwood](https://www.theguardian.com/books/margaretatwood) and Andrew Motion who are “profoundly alarmed” about the loss of a slew of words associated with the natural world from the Oxford Junior Dictionary, and their replacement with words “associated with the increasingly interior, solitary childhoods of today”.

The 28 authors, including Atwood, Motion, Michael Morpurgo and Robert Macfarlane, warn that the decision to cut around 50 words connected with nature and the countryside from the [10,000-entry children’s dictionary](http://fdslive.oup.com/www.oup.com/oxed/dictionaries/dictionary-selectors-2014/childrens.html), is “shocking and poorly considered” in the light of the decline in outdoor play for today’s children. They are calling on publisher Oxford University Press to reverse its decision and, if necessary, to bring forward publication of a new edition of the dictionary to do so.

The likes of almond, blackberry and crocus first made way for analogue, block graph and celebrity in the Oxford Junior Dictionary in 2007, with protests at the time around [the loss of a host of religious words](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/dec/10/oxford-junior-dictionary) such as bishop, saint and sin. The current 2012 edition maintained the changes, and instead of catkin, cauliflower, chestnut and clover, today’s edition of the dictionary, which is aimed at seven-year-olds starting Key Stage Two, features cut and paste, broadband and analogue.

“We recognise the need to introduce new words and to make room for them and do not intend to comment in detail on the choice of words added. However it is worrying that in contrast to those taken out, many are associated with the interior, solitary childhoods of today. In light of what is known about the benefits of natural play and connection to nature; and the dangers of their lack, we think the choice of words to be omitted shocking and poorly considered,” the authors have written to OUP.

“When, in 2007, the OJD made the changes, this connection was understood, but less well publicised than now. The research evidence showing the links between natural play and wellbeing; and between disconnection from nature and social ills, is mounting.”

The 28 signatories to the letter, who also include Sara Maitland, Helen Macdonald and Ruth Padel, say their concern is “not just a romantic desire to reflect the rosy memories of our own childhoods onto today’s youngsters”.

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“There is a shocking, proven connection between the decline in natural play and the decline in children’s wellbeing,” they write, pointing to research which found that [a generation ago, 40% of children regularly played in natural areas, compared to 10% today](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/mar/30/national-trust-children-playing-outdoors), with a further 40% never playing outdoors. “Obesity, anti-social behaviour, friendlessness and fear are the known consequences,” they say.

The campaign has been pulled together by Laurence Rose, who works for the RSPB and who provided a list of words taken out, including hamster, heron, herring, kingfisher, lark, leopard, lobster, magpie, minnow, mussel, newt, otter, ox, oyster and panther.

“Will the removal of these words from the OJD ruin lives? Probably not,” say the authors. “But as a symptom of a widely acknowledged problem that is ruining lives, this omission becomes a major issue. The Oxford Dictionaries have a rightful authority and a leading place in cultural life. We believe the OJD should address these issues and that it should seek to help shape children’s understanding of the world, not just to mirror its trends.”

They tell the publisher “that a deliberate and publicised decision to restore some of the most important nature words would be a tremendous cultural signal and message of support for natural childhood”, and ask it to “take that opportunity, and if necessary, bring forward the next edition of the OJD in order to do so”.

Macfarlane, whose forthcoming book Landmarks, which looks at the relationship between nature and language, was originally inspired by the OJD’s changes, pointed to [the response in 2008](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/3569045/Words-associated-with-Christianity-and-British-history-taken-out-of-childrens-dictionary.html) from the head of children’s dictionaries at OUP, who said the changes had been made because: “When you look back at older versions of dictionaries, there were lots of examples of flowers for instance. That was because many children lived in semi-rural environments and saw the seasons. Nowadays, the environment has changed.”

“There’s a realism to her response – but also an alarming acceptance of the ideas that children might no longer see the seasons, that all childhoods are urban, that all cities are denatured, and that what exists beyond the city fringe or the edge of the computer screen need not be named,” said Macfarlane. “We do not care for what we do not know, and on the whole we do not know what we cannot name. Do we want an alphabet for children that begins ‘A is for Acorn, B is for Buttercup, C is for Conker’; or one that begins ‘A is for Attachment, B is for Block-Graph, C is for Chatroom’?”

Motion, the former poet laureate, said that “by discarding so many country and landscape-words from their Junior Dictionary, OUP deny children a store of words that is marvellous for its own sake, but also a vital means of connection and understanding.

“Their defence – that lots of children have no experience of the countryside – is ridiculous. Dictionaries exist to extend our knowledge, as much (or more) as they do to confirm what we already know or half-know,” said Motion.

A spokesperson for Oxford University Press said: “All our dictionaries are designed to reflect language as it is used, rather than seeking to prescribe certain words or word usages. We employ extremely rigorous editorial guidelines in determining which words [can] be included in each dictionary, based on several criteria: acknowledging the current frequency of words in daily language of children of that age; corpus analysis; acknowledging commonly misspelled or misused words; and taking curriculum requirements into account.

“The Oxford Junior Dictionary is very much an introduction to language. It includes around 400 words related to nature including badger, bird, caterpillar, daffodil, feather, hedgehog, invertebrate, ladybird, ocean, python, sunflower, tadpole, vegetation, and zebra. Many words that do not appear in the Oxford Junior Dictionary are included in the Oxford Primary Dictionary; a more comprehensive dictionary designed to see students through to age 11. Words included in this title include mistletoe, gerbil, acorn, goldfish, guinea pig, dandelion, starling, fern, willow, conifer, heather, buttercup, sycamore, holly, ivy, and conker.

“We have no firm plans to publish a new edition of the Oxford Junior Dictionary at this stage. However, we welcome feedback on all our dictionaries and feed this into the editorial process.”

This article raises interesting questions about the role of dictionaries and whether they should be descriptive or descriptive. Do you think that the authors were correct to contest which words were included in the children’s dictionary? Fill in the table below with your ideas.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Yes, the authors were correct to protest about the exclusion of nature words from the children’s dictionary | No, the authors were not correct to protest about the exclusion of nature words from the children’s dictionary |
|  |  |

# Lexicography

Below are transcripts from TED talks by two American experts in lexicography, Erin McKean and Anne Curzan, when they talk about their work in producing dictionaries. I have included links to the TED Talks if you would prefer to listen rather than read. Once you have read or listened, answer the questions below.

# Anne Curzan – What makes a word real?

<https://www.ted.com/talks/anne_curzan_what_makes_a_word_real?language=en>

*I need to start by telling you a little bit about my social life, which I know may not seem relevant, but it is.*

*When people meet me at parties and they find out that I'm an English professor who specializes in language, they generally have one of two reactions. One set of people look frightened. (Laughter) They often say something like, "Oh, I'd better be careful what I say. I'm sure you'll hear every mistake I make." And then they stop talking. (Laughter) And they wait for me to go away and talk to someone else. The other set of people, their eyes light up, and they say, "You are just the person I want to talk to." And then they tell me about whatever it is they think is going wrong with the English language. (Laughter)*

*A couple of weeks ago, I was at a dinner party and the man to my right started telling me about all the ways that the Internet is degrading the English language. He brought up Facebook, and he said, "To defriend? I mean, is that even a real word?"*

*I want to pause on that question: What makes a word real? My dinner companion and I both know what the verb "defriend" means, so when does a new word like "defriend" become real? Who has the authority to make those kinds of official decisions about words, anyway? Those are the questions I want to talk about today.*

*I think most people, when they say a word isn't real, what they mean is, it doesn't appear in a standard dictionary. That, of course, raises a host of other questions, including, who writes dictionaries?*

*Before I go any further, let me clarify my role in all of this. I do not write dictionaries. I do, however, collect new words much the way dictionary editors do, and the great thing about being a historian of the English language is that I get to call this "research." When I teach the history of the English language, I require that students teach me two new slang words before I will begin class. Over the years, I have learned some great new slang this way, including "hangry," which -- (Applause) — which is when you are cranky or angry because you are hungry, and "adorkable," which is when you are adorable in kind of a dorky way, clearly, terrific words that fill important gaps in the English language. (Laughter) But how real are they if we use them primarily as slang and they don't yet appear in a dictionary?*

*With that, let's turn to dictionaries. I'm going to do this as a show of hands: How many of you still regularly refer to a dictionary, either print or online? Okay, so that looks like most of you. Now, a second question. Again, a show of hands: How many of you have ever looked to see who edited the dictionary you are using? Okay, many fewer. At some level, we know that there are human hands behind dictionaries, but we're really not sure who those hands belong to. I'm actually fascinated by this. Even the most critical people out there tend not to be very critical about dictionaries, not distinguishing among them and not asking a whole lot of questions about who edited them. Just think about the phrase "Look it up in the dictionary," which suggests that all dictionaries are exactly the same. Consider the library here on campus, where you go into the reading room, and there is a large, unabridged dictionary up on a pedestal in this place of honor and respect lying open so we can go stand before it to get answers.*

*Now, don't get me wrong, dictionaries are fantastic resources, but they are human and they are not timeless. I'm struck as a teacher that we tell students to critically question every text they read, every website they visit, except dictionaries, which we tend to treat as un-authored, as if they came from nowhere to give us answers about what words really mean. Here's the thing: If you ask dictionary editors, what they'll tell you is they're just trying to keep up with us as we change the language. They're watching what we say and what we write and trying to figure out what's going to stick and what's not going to stick. They have to gamble, because they want to appear cutting edge and catch the words that are going to make it, such as LOL, but they don't want to appear faddish and include the words that aren't going to make it, and I think a word that they're watching right now is YOLO, you only live once.*

*Now I get to hang out with dictionary editors, and you might be surprised by one of the places where we hang out. Every January, we go to the American Dialect Society annual meeting, where among other things, we vote on the word of the year. There are about 200 or 300 people who come, some of the best known linguists in the United States. To give you a sense of the flavor of the meeting, it occurs right before happy hour. Anyone who comes can vote. The most important rule is that you can vote with only one hand. In the past, some of the winners have been "tweet" in 2009 and "hashtag" in 2012. "Chad" was the word of the year in the year 2000, because who knew what a chad was before 2000, and "WMD" in 2002.*

*Now, we have other categories in which we vote too, and my favourite category is most creative word of the year. Past winners in this category have included "recombobulation area," which is at the Milwaukee Airport after security, where you can recombobulate. (Laughter) You can put your belt back on, put your computer back in your bag. And then my all-time favourite word at this vote, which is "multi-slacking." (Laughter) And multi-slacking is the act of having multiple windows up on your screen so it looks like you're working when you're actually goofing around on the web. (Laughter) (Applause)*

*Will all of these words stick? Absolutely not. And we have made some questionable choices, for example in 2006 when the word of the year was "Plutoed," to mean demoted. (Laughter) But some of the past winners now seem completely unremarkable, such as "app" and "e" as a prefix, and "google" as a verb.*

*Now, a few weeks before our vote, Lake Superior State University issues its list of banished words for the year. What is striking about this is that there's actually often quite a lot of overlap between their list and the list that we are considering for words of the year, and this is because we're noticing the same thing. We're noticing words that are coming into prominence. It's really a question of attitude. Are you bothered by language fads and language change, or do you find it fun, interesting, something worthy of study as part of a living language?*

*The list by Lake Superior State University continues a fairly long tradition in English of complaints about new words. So here is Dean Henry Alford in 1875, who was very concerned that "desirability" is really a terrible word. In 1760, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to David Hume giving up the word "colonize" as bad.*

*Over the years, we've also seen worries about new pronunciations. Here is Samuel Rogers in 1855 who is concerned about some fashionable pronunciations that he finds offensive, and he says "as if contemplate were not bad enough, balcony makes me sick." (Laughter) The word is borrowed in from Italian and it was pronounced bal-COE-nee.*

*These complaints now strike us as quaint, if not downright adorkable -- (Laughter) -- but here's the thing: we still get quite worked up about language change. I have an entire file in my office of newspaper articles which express concern about illegitimate words that should not have been included in the dictionary, including "LOL" when it got into the Oxford English Dictionary and "defriend" when it got into the Oxford American Dictionary. I also have articles expressing concern about "invite" as a noun, "impact" as a verb, because only teeth can be impacted, and "incentivize" is described as "boorish, bureaucratic misspeak."*

*Now, it's not that dictionary editors ignore these kinds of attitudes about language. They try to provide us some guidance about words that are considered slang or informal or offensive, often through usage labels, but they're in something of a bind, because they're trying to describe what we do, and they know that we often go to dictionaries to get information about how we should use a word well or appropriately. In response, the American Heritage Dictionaries include usage notes. Usage notes tend to occur with words that are troublesome in one way, and one of the ways that they can be troublesome is that they're changing meaning. Now usage notes involve very human decisions, and I think, as dictionary users, we're often not as aware of those human decisions as we should be. To show you what I mean, we'll look at an example, but before we do, I want to explain what the dictionary editors are trying to deal with in this usage note.*

*Think about the word "peruse" and how you use that word. I would guess many of you are thinking of skim, scan, reading quickly. Some of you may even have some walking involved, because you're perusing grocery store shelves, or something like that. You might be surprised to learn that if you look in most standard dictionaries, the first definition will be to read carefully, or pore over. American Heritage has that as the first definition. They then have, as the second definition, skim, and next to that, they say "usage problem." (Laughter) And then they include a usage note, which is worth looking at.*

*So here's the usage note: "Peruse has long meant 'to read thoroughly'... But the word is often used more loosely, to mean simply 'to read.'... Further extension of the word to mean 'to glance over, skim,' has traditionally been considered an error, but our ballot results suggest that it is becoming somewhat more acceptable. When asked about the sentence, 'I only had a moment to peruse the manual quickly,' 66 percent of the [Usage] Panel found it unacceptable in 1988, 58 percent in 1999, and 48 percent in 2011."*

*Ah, the Usage Panel, that trusted body of language authorities who is getting more lenient about this. Now, what I hope you're thinking right now is, "Wait, who's on the Usage Panel? And what should I do with their pronouncements?" If you look in the front matter of American Heritage Dictionaries, you can actually find the names of the people on the Usage Panel. But who looks at the front matter of dictionaries? There are about 200 people on the Usage Panel. They include academicians, journalists, creative writers. There's a Supreme Court justice on it and a few linguists. As of 2005, the list includes me. (Applause)*

*Here's what we can do for you. We can give you a sense of the range of opinions about contested usage. That is and should be the extent of our authority. We are not a language academy. About once a year, I get a ballot that asks me about whether new uses, new pronunciations, new meanings, are acceptable.*

*Now here's what I do to fill out the ballot. I listen to what other people are saying and writing. I do not listen to my own likes and dislikes about the English language. I will be honest with you: I do not like the word "impactful," but that is neither here nor there in terms of whether "impactful" is becoming common usage and becoming more acceptable in written prose. So to be responsible, what I do is go look at usage, which often involves going to look at online databases such as Google Books. Well, if you look for "impactful" in Google Books, here is what you find. Well, it sure looks like "impactful" is proving useful for a certain number of writers, and has become more and more useful over the last 20 years.*

*Now, there are going to be changes that all of us don't like in the language. There are going to be changes where you think, "Really? Does the language have to change that way?" What I'm saying is, we should be less quick to decide that that change is terrible, we should be less quick to impose our likes and dislikes about words on other people, and we should be entirely reluctant to think that the English language is in trouble. It's not. It is rich and vibrant and filled with the creativity of the speakers who speak it. In retrospect, we think it's fascinating that the word "nice" used to mean silly, and that the word "decimate" used to mean to kill one in every 10. (Laughter) We think that Ben Franklin was being silly to worry about "notice" as a verb. Well, you know what? We're going to look pretty silly in a hundred years for worrying about "impact" as a verb and "invite" as a noun. The language is not going to change so fast that we can't keep up. Language just doesn't work that way. I hope that what you can do is find language change not worrisome but fun and fascinating, just the way dictionary editors do. I hope you can enjoy being part of the creativity that is continually remaking our language and keeping it robust.*

*So how does a word get into a dictionary? It gets in because we use it and we keep using it, and dictionary editors are paying attention to us. If you're thinking, "But that lets all of us decide what words mean," I would say, "Yes it does, and it always has." Dictionaries are a wonderful guide and resource, but there is no objective dictionary authority out there that is the final arbiter about what words mean. If a community of speakers is using a word and knows what it means, it's real. That word might be slangy, that word might be informal, that word might be a word that you think is illogical or unnecessary, but that word that we're using, that word is real.*

*Thank you.*

# Erin McKean – The Joy of Lexicography

<https://www.ted.com/talks/erin_mckean_the_joy_of_lexicography?language=en>

*Now, have any of y'all ever looked up this word? You know, in a dictionary? (Laughter) Yeah, that's what I thought. How about this word? Here, I'll show it to you. Lexicography: the practice of compiling dictionaries. Notice -- we're very specific -- that word "compile." The dictionary is not carved out of a piece of granite, out of a lump of rock. It's made up of lots of little bits. It's little discrete -- that's spelled D-I-S-C-R-E-T-E -- bits. And those bits are words.*

*Now one of the perks of being a lexicographer -- besides getting to come to TED -- is that you get to say really fun words, like lexicographical. Lexicographical has this great pattern: it's called a double dactyl. And just by saying double dactyl, I've sent the geek needle all the way into the red. (Laughter) (Applause) But "lexicographical" is the same pattern as "higgledy-piggledy." Right? It's a fun word to say, and I get to say it a lot. Now, one of the non-perks of being a lexicographer is that people don't usually have a kind of warm, fuzzy, snuggly image of the dictionary. Right? Nobody hugs their dictionaries. But what people really often think about the dictionary is, they think more like this. Just to let you know, I do not have a lexicographical whistle. But people think that my job is to let the good words make that difficult left-hand turn into the dictionary, and keep the bad words out.*

*But the thing is, I don't want to be a traffic cop. For one thing, I just do not do uniforms. And for another, deciding what words are good and what words are bad is actually not very easy. And it's not very fun. And when parts of your job are not easy or fun, you kind of look for an excuse not to do them. So if I had to think of some kind of occupation as a metaphor for my work, I would much rather be a fisherman. I want to throw my big net into the deep, blue ocean of English and see what marvellous creatures I can drag up from the bottom. But why do people want me to direct traffic, when I would much rather go fishing? Well, I blame the Queen. Why do I blame the Queen? Well, first of all, I blame the Queen because it's funny. But secondly, I blame the Queen because dictionaries have really not changed.*

*Our idea of what a dictionary is has not changed since her reign. The only thing that Queen Victoria would not be amused by in modern dictionaries is our inclusion of the F-word, which has happened in American dictionaries since 1965. So, there's this guy, right? Victorian era. James Murray, first editor of the Oxford English Dictionary. I do not have that hat. I wish I had that hat. So he's really responsible for a lot of what we consider modern in dictionaries today. When a guy who looks like that, in that hat, is the face of modernity, you have a problem. And so, James Murray could get a job on any dictionary today. There'd be virtually no learning curve.*

*And of course, a few of us are saying: okay, computers! Computers! What about computers? The thing about computers is, I love computers. I mean, I'm a huge geek, I love computers. I would go on a hunger strike before I let them take away Google Book Search from me. But computers don't do much else other than speed up the process of compiling dictionaries. They don't change the end result. Because what a dictionary is, is it's Victorian design merged with a little bit of modern propulsion. It's steampunk. What we have is an electric velocipede. You know, we have Victorian design with an engine on it. That's all! The design has not changed.*

*And OK, what about online dictionaries, right? Online dictionaries must be different. This is the Oxford English Dictionary Online, one of the best online dictionaries. This is my favorite word, by the way. Erinaceous: pertaining to the hedgehog family; of the nature of a hedgehog. Very useful word. So, look at that. Online dictionaries right now are paper thrown up on a screen. This is flat. Look how many links there are in the actual entry: two! Right? Those little buttons, I had them all expanded except for the date chart. So there's not very much going on here. There's not a lot of clickiness. And in fact, online dictionaries replicate almost all the problems of print, except for searchability. And when you improve searchability, you actually take away the one advantage of print, which is serendipity. Serendipity is when you find things you weren't looking for, because finding what you are looking for is so damned difficult.*

*So -- (Laughter) (Applause) -- now, when you think about this, what we have here is a ham butt problem. Does everyone know the ham butt problem? Woman's making a ham for a big, family dinner. She goes to cut the butt off the ham and throw it away, and she looks at this piece of ham and she's like, "This is a perfectly good piece of ham. Why am I throwing this away?" She thought, "Well, my mom always did this." So she calls up mom, and she says, "Mom, why'd you cut the butt off the ham, when you're making a ham?" She says, "I don't know, my mom always did it!" So they call grandma, and grandma says, "My pan was too small!" (Laughter)*

*So, it's not that we have good words and bad words. We have a pan that's too small! You know, that ham butt is delicious! There's no reason to throw it away. The bad words -- see, when people think about a place and they don't find a place on the map, they think, "This map sucks!" When they find a nightspot or a bar, and it's not in the guidebook, they're like, "Ooh, this place must be cool! It's not in the guidebook." When they find a word that's not in the dictionary, they think, "This must be a bad word." Why? It's more likely to be a bad dictionary. Why are you blaming the ham for being too big for the pan? So, you can't get a smaller ham. The English language is as big as it is.*

*So, if you have a ham butt problem, and you're thinking about the ham butt problem, the conclusion that it leads you to is inexorable and counterintuitive: paper is the enemy of words. How can this be? I mean, I love books. I really love books. Some of my best friends are books. But the book is not the best shape for the dictionary. Now they're going to think "Oh, boy. People are going to take away my beautiful, paper dictionaries?" No. There will still be paper dictionaries. When we had cars -- when cars became the dominant mode of transportation, we didn't round up all the horses and shoot them. You know, there're still going to be paper dictionaries, but it's not going to be the dominant dictionary. The book-shaped dictionary is not going to be the only shape dictionaries come in. And it's not going to be the prototype for the shapes dictionaries come in.*

*So, think about it this way: if you've got an artificial constraint, artificial constraints lead to arbitrary distinctions and a skewed worldview. What if biologists could only study animals that made people go, "Aww." Right? What if we made aesthetic judgments about animals, and only the ones we thought were cute were the ones that we could study? We'd know a whole lot about charismatic megafauna, and not very much about much else. And I think this is a problem. I think we should study all the words, because when you think about words, you can make beautiful expressions from very humble parts. Lexicography is really more about material science. We are studying the tolerances of the materials that you use to build the structure of your expression: your speeches and your writing. And then, often people say to me, "Well, OK, how do I know that this word is real?" They think, "OK, if we think words are the tools that we use to build the expressions of our thoughts, how can you say that screwdrivers are better than hammers? How can you say that a sledgehammer is better than a ball-peen hammer?" They're just the right tools for the job.*

*And so people say to me, "How do I know if a word is real?" You know, anybody who's read a children's book knows that love makes things real. If you love a word, use it. That makes it real. Being in the dictionary is an artificial distinction. It doesn't make a word any more real than any other way. If you love a word, it becomes real. So if we're not worrying about directing traffic, if we've transcended paper, if we are worrying less about control and more about description, then we can think of the English language as being this beautiful mobile. And any time one of those little parts of the mobile changes, is touched, any time you touch a word, you use it in a new context, you give it a new connotation, you verb it, you make the mobile move. You didn't break it. It's just in a new position, and that new position can be just as beautiful.*

*Now, if you're no longer a traffic cop -- the problem with being a traffic cop is there can only be so many traffic cops in any one intersection, or the cars get confused. Right? But if your goal is no longer to direct the traffic, but maybe to count the cars that go by, then more eyeballs are better. You can ask for help! If you ask for help, you get more done. And we really need help. Library of Congress: 17 million books, of which half are in English. If only one out of every 10 of those books had a word that's not in the dictionary in it, that would be equivalent to more than two unabridged dictionaries.*

*And I find an un-dictionaried word -- a word like "un-dictionaried," for example -- in almost every book I read. What about newspapers? Newspaper archive goes back to 1759, 58.1 million newspaper pages. If only one in 100 of those pages had an un-dictionaried word on it, it would be an entire other OED. That's 500,000 more words. So that's a lot. And I'm not even talking about magazines. I'm not talking about blogs -- and I find more new words on BoingBoing in a given week than I do Newsweek or Time. There's a lot going on there.*

*And I'm not even talking about polysemy, which is the greedy habit some words have of taking more than one meaning for themselves. So if you think of the word "set," a set can be a badger's burrow, a set can be one of the pleats in an Elizabethan ruff, and there's one numbered definition in the OED. The OED has 33 different numbered definitions for set. Tiny, little word, 33 numbered definitions. One of them is just labelled "miscellaneous technical senses." Do you know what that says to me? That says to me, it was Friday afternoon and somebody wanted to go down the pub. (Laughter) That's a lexicographical cop out, to say, "miscellaneous technical senses."*

*So, we have all these words, and we really need help! And the thing is, we could ask for help -- asking for help's not that hard. I mean, lexicography is not rocket science. See, I just gave you a lot of words and a lot of numbers, and this is more of a visual explanation. If we think of the dictionary as being the map of the English language, these bright spots are what we know about, and the dark spots are where we are in the dark. If that was the map of all the words in American English, we don't know very much. And we don't even know the shape of the language. If this was the dictionary -- if this was the map of American English -- look, we have a kind of lumpy idea of Florida, but there's no California! We're missing California from American English. We just don't know enough, and we don't even know that we're missing California. We don't even see that there's a gap on the map.*

*So again, lexicography is not rocket science. But even if it were, rocket science is being done by dedicated amateurs these days. You know? It can't be that hard to find some words! So, enough scientists in other disciplines are really asking people to help, and they're doing a good job of it. For instance, there's eBird, where amateur birdwatchers can upload information about their bird sightings. And then, ornithologists can go and help track populations, migrations, etc.*

*And there's this guy, Mike Oates. Mike Oates lives in the U.K. He's a director of an electroplating company. He's found more than 140 comets. He's found so many comets, they named a comet after him. It's kind of out past Mars. It's a hike. I don't think he's getting his picture taken there anytime soon. But he found 140 comets without a telescope. He downloaded data from the NASA SOHO satellite, and that's how he found them. If we can find comets without a telescope, shouldn't we be able to find words?*

*Now, y'all know where I'm going with this. Because I'm going to the Internet, which is where everybody goes. And the Internet is great for collecting words, because the Internet's full of collectors. And this is a little-known technological fact about the Internet, but the Internet is actually made up of words and enthusiasm. And words and enthusiasm actually happen to be the recipe for lexicography. Isn't that great? So there are a lot of really good word-collecting sites out there right now, but the problem with some of them is that they're not scientific enough. They show the word, but they don't show any context. Where did it come from? Who said it? What newspaper was it in? What book?*

*Because a word is like an archaeological artifact. If you don't know the provenance or the source of the artifact, it's not science, it's a pretty thing to look at. So a word without its source is like a cut flower. You know, it's pretty to look at for a while, but then it dies. It dies too fast. So, this whole time I've been saying, "The dictionary, the dictionary, the dictionary, the dictionary." Not "a dictionary," or "dictionaries." And that's because, well, people use the dictionary to stand for the whole language. They use it synecdochically. And one of the problems of knowing a word like "synecdochically" is that you really want an excuse to say "synecdochically." This whole talk has just been an excuse to get me to the point where I could say "synecdochically" to all of you. So I'm really sorry. But when you use a part of something -- like the dictionary is a part of the language, or a flag stands for the United States, it's a symbol of the country -- then you're using it synecdochically. But the thing is, we could make the dictionary the whole language. If we get a bigger pan, then we can put all the words in. We can put in all the meanings. Doesn't everyone want more meaning in their lives? And we can make the dictionary not just be a symbol of the language -- we can make it be the whole language.*

*You see, what I'm really hoping for is that my son, who turns seven this month -- I want him to barely remember that this is the form factor that dictionaries used to come in. This is what dictionaries used to look like. I want him to think of this kind of dictionary as an eight-track tape. It's a format that died because it wasn't useful enough. It wasn't really what people needed. And the thing is, if we can put in all the words, no longer have that artificial distinction between good and bad, we can really describe the language like scientists. We can leave the aesthetic judgments to the writers and the speakers. If we can do that, then I can spend all my time fishing, and I don't have to be a traffic cop anymore. Thank you very much for your kind attention.*

# Questions

1. What does Curzan feel is unusual or problematic about how we as readers view dictionaries?
2. In Curzan’s opinion, what makes a word real?
3. McKean uses the metaphors of a traffic cop and a fisherman to describe her role – which metaphor does she prefer and why?
4. What does McKean mean by the ham butt problem?
5. In Mckean’s opinion, what makes a word real?

# Language in the news – the impact of Coronavirus in our language



Already, news articles have started to emerge about the impact of the pandemic on our language choices.

Below is a blog from the Oxford English Dictionaries website about the impact of Covid 19 on our language.

## Social change and linguistic change: the language of Covid-19

It is a rare experience for lexicographers to observe an exponential rise in usage of a single word in a very short period of time, and for that word to come overwhelmingly to dominate global discourse, even to the exclusion of most other topics. Covid-19, a shortening of coronavirus disease 2019, and its various manifestations has done just that. As the spread of the disease has altered the lives of billions of people, it has correspondingly ushered in a new vocabulary to the general populace encompassing specialist terms from the fields of epidemiology and medicine, new acronyms, and words to express the societal imperatives of imposed isolation and distancing. It is a consistent theme of lexicography that great social change brings great linguistic change, and that has never been truer than in this current global crisis.

The OED is updating its coverage to take account of these developments, and as something of a departure, this update comes outside of our usual quarterly publication cycle. But these are extraordinary times, and OED lexicographers, who like many others are all working from home (WFH, first attested as a noun in 1995 and as a verb in 2001), are tracking the development of the language of the pandemic and offering a linguistic and historical context to their usage.

Some of the terms with which we have become so familiar over the past few weeks through the news, social media, and government briefings and edicts have been around for years (many date from the nineteenth century), but they have achieved new and much wider usage to describe the situation in which we currently find ourselves. Self-isolation (recorded from 1834) and self-isolating (1841), now used to describe self-imposed isolation to prevent catching or transmitting an infectious disease, were in the 1800s more often applied to countries which chose to detach themselves politically and economically from the rest of the world.

As well as these nineteenth century terms put to modern use, more recent epidemics and especially the current crisis have seen the appearance of genuinely new words, phrases, combinations, and abbreviations which were not necessarily coined for the coronavirus epidemic, but have seen far wider usage since it began. Infodemic (a portmanteau word from information and epidemic) is the outpouring of often unsubstantiated media and online information relating to a crisis. The term was coined in 2003 for the SARS epidemic, but has also been used to describe the current proliferation of news around coronavirus. The phrase shelter-in-place, a protocol instructing people to find a place of safety in the location they are occupying until the all clear is sounded, was devised as an instruction for the public in 1976 in the event of a nuclear or terrorist attack, but has now been adapted as advice to people to stay indoors to protect themselves and others from coronavirus. Social distancing, first used in 1957, was originally an attitude rather than a physical term, referring to an aloofness or deliberate attempt to distance oneself from others socially—now we all understand it as keeping a physical distance between ourselves and others to avoid infection. And an elbow bump, along with a hand slap and high five, was in its earliest manifestation (1981) a way of conveying celebratory pleasure to a teammate, rather than a means of avoiding hand-touching when greeting a friend, colleague, or stranger.

New and previously unfamiliar abbreviations have also taken their place in our everyday vocabulary, and these too appear in the latest OED release. While WFH (working from home) dates from 1995 as mentioned previously, the abbreviation was known to very few before it became a way of life for so many of us. PPE is now almost universally recognized as personal protective (or protection) equipment—an abbreviation dating from 1977 but formerly probably restricted to healthcare and emergency professionals. The full phrase – personal protective equipment – dates from as far back as 1934.

As a historical dictionary, the OED is already full of words that show us how our forebears grappled linguistically with the epidemics they witnessed and experienced. The earliest of these appeared in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the great plague of 1347-50 and its follow-ups, which killed an estimated 40-60 per cent of the population of Europe, must surely have been an ever-present memory and fear. Pestilence, ‘a fatal epidemic or disease’, was borrowed from French and Latin, and first appears in Wycliffe’s bible of a1382, not long after this first great devastation. The related term pest (from French peste) appeared shortly afterwards. Our weakened uses of pest—an insect that infects crops, an annoying person—stem from this original plague usage. Pox (from the plural of pock, denoting a pustule or the mark it leaves) appeared in 1476 as a term applied to a number of virulently contagious diseases, most especially the dreaded smallpox (first recorded in the 1560s).

It was the great plagues of the seventeenth century, however, that opened the floodgates for the entry into English of words to describe the experience of epidemic disease. Epidemic and pandemic both appeared in the seventeenth century; the Black Plague (so called from the black pustules that appeared on the skin of the victims) was first used in the early 1600s (although its more familiar synonym Black Death, surprisingly, did not appear until 1755). It was the seventeenth-century plague that saw a whole village in Derbyshire choose to self-isolate or self-quarantine; the adjective self-quarantined was first applied, in a historical description from 1878, to the story of the heroic population of Eyam, which isolated itself in 1665-6 to avoid infecting the surrounding villages, and lost around a third of its population as a consequence.

As the world expanded, so too did the spread of diseases and their vocabulary. Yellow fever appeared in 1738, and the so-called Spanish influenza in 1890 (reduced to Spanish flu during the great epidemic of 1918). Poliomyelitis appeared in 1878 (shortened to polio in 1911), although the epidemic that attacked children especially and struck fear into the heart of parents was at its worst just after WWII. Recent decades have also seen their share of linguistic coinages for epidemics and pandemics. AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) appeared in 1982, and SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003. The coronaviruses themselves (so-called because they resemble the solar corona) were first described as long ago as 1968 in a paper in Nature, but before 2020 few people had heard of the term beyond the scientists studying them.

As we continue to monitor our in-house corpora and other language data to spot new words and senses associated with the pandemic and assess the frequency of their usage, the OED will keep updating its coverage to help tell the story of these times that will inevitably become embedded in our language.

The opinions and other information contained in the OED blog posts and comments do not necessarily reflect the opinions or positions of Oxford University Press.

# Essay Task:

How has the coronavirus crisis impacted upon your own language use. Collect as many examples as you can about how this pandemic has onfluenced your language? Have you acquired new words or do you use words in a different way. For example ,I sent a message to my family last Thursday which read “Zoom after Clap” – I do not think anyone would have known what I was talking about a few weeks ago! Once you have a detailed mind map, write up the account of how Covid 19 has changed the language of you and those around you.

# Extension

The current crisis has also triggered some debates about language use. For example, when Foreign Secretary Dominc Raab described Boris Johnson, who was suffering from the virus, as “a fighter”. This is covered in the BBC article below:

## Coronavirus: Why do we talk about 'fighting' illness?

By Justin Parkinson

Political reporter, BBC News

9 April 2020

Being tough - or a fighter - is often said to be an asset when someone has a serious illness, such as coronavirus, but is this sort of language helpful or misleading? "I'm confident he'll pull through," said Dominic Raab, as he addressed the nation following Boris Johnson being taken into intensive care, "because if there's one thing I know about this prime minister, he's a fighter".

The foreign secretary, Mr Johnson's de facto deputy as prime minister, has come in for criticism for his choice of language. It's not possible for a patient to "fight" a virus, as if it is a visible, human adversary, it's argued - that's the job of technology and medics. And, if someone succumbs to it it, does this mean they have lost their "battle"?

There was further reaction when Health Secretary Matt Hancock echoed Mr Raab's words. Angharad Rudkin, a clinical psychologist at the University of Southampton, feels Mr Raab's critics have a point. 'Battle terminology' is most helpful when people are fully in control of outcomes when in a challenging or adverse situation," she says. "For example, 'battling' through work or 'battling' your way through the traffic. It becomes less helpful when a person has little control over the outcome." With coronavirus, unlike military conflict, the enemy is invisible and inside people. Instead of taking up arms, the public is being asked to undergo the tedium and privations of self-isolation and social distancing to prevent its spread.In his address to the nation on 23 March, setting out further restrictions, Mr Johnson himself used distinctly military language, saying that "in this fight we can be in no doubt that each and every one of us is directly enlisted. Each and every one of us is now obliged to join together".

A few weeks earlier, he said: "Crucially, we must not forget what we can all do to fight this virus, which is to wash our hands with soap and hot water for the length of time it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice." But the PM was calling for a "fight" against coronavirus as a whole, not asking patients - rather than doctors or nurses - to "take it on" after being infected. "Not everyone is up for the fight," says Dr Rudkin. "Not everyone can fight. We need to be understanding of this and not judge others. Some may fight or battle bravely and still not 'win', but we need to see this as being more about the power of the attacker - the virus - than the fragility of the defender."

In 2016, the charity Breast Cancer Now raised concerns over the use of the expression "battling with cancer", questioning its accuracy as a description of what a patient goes through. Instead, it suggested cutting out "emotive language" and using "simple, factual" alternatives. These included "living with cancer", "recovering from cancer treatment" and "having treatment for cancer". Mr Raab's detractors might suggest he does the same when referring to Mr Johnson's coronavirus.

But language cannot be seen entirely outside its historical context, as politicians are well aware. Coronavirus is often referred to as the biggest crisis facing the UK since World War Two. Famously, following the evacuation of Dunkirk in June 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill delivered a House of Commons speech warning against complacency and of a long struggle ahead. In its best-known passage, he promised: "We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender."

Boris Johnson is said to be responding to treatment. Could Mr Raab, a former boxer and a black belt in karate, be tapping into Churchillian rhetoric himself? The foreign secretary's comments, while arguably dubious in the strict medical sense, have the advantage of offering "plain English" that "people quickly understand" during a fast-moving crisis, says Pete Davies, managing director of Manchester-based Sugar PR, who advises corporate clients on crisis management and communications. "If public relations teams and political communicators took into account the views of the language police on Twitter, there'd be no time to get vital life-saving messages across," he adds. "The fact is, this is a fight that collectively we simply must win. Politicians shouldn't shy away from that term."

On an individual basis, the Centre for Perioperative Care has recommended people get as physically fit as possible to reduce the possibility of becoming seriously ill with coronavirus - the same advice it gives for pre-operation patients. This could be interpreted as "battle-hardening" oneself for the tribulations ahead, but that is not the same as "fighting" the disease once it is contracted. As for Mr Raab's words, says Dr Rudkin, while they are "flawed" in a strict medical sense, the use of combat imagery can "provide more comfort than anxiety" because it gives a sense of empowerment. The idea of the prime minister catching and getting over coronavirus could extend the feeling of a collective struggle. "The important thing is that we as a whole planet are in this together," Dr Rudkin says, "and there is a huge amount of strength that comes from knowing that."

Below is a related article about the “battle” metaphor when used in relation to cancer patients:

# Metaphors for Cancer, and Why They

# Matter

# Professor Elena Semino has been researching the metaphors people use to describe their own and others’ experience of cancer. Here she shares some of her findings.

*‘She lost her brave fight.’ If anyone mutters those words after my death, wherever I am, I will curse them.*

This is how Kate Granger, a doctor in her early 30s with advanced cancer, rejects the ‘fight’ metaphor that is often used for people who have died of cancer. Later in the same 2014 article for the Guardian newspaper, she adds:

*I do not want to feel a failure about something beyond my control. I refuse to believe my death will be because I didn’t battle hard enough. […] After all, cancer has arisen from within my own body, from my own cells. To fight it would be ‘waging a war’ on myself.*

At Lancaster University, we have studied the metaphors that cancer patients use to talk about their experiences, in interviews and contributions to online forums.

Why do Metaphors Matter?

Metaphor involves talking and, potentially, thinking about one thing in terms of another, on the basis of some perception of similarity. For example, being ill and fighting are different things, but we talk about the former in terms of the latter because both are difficult and potentially life-threatening. Metaphors matter because different metaphors ‘frame’ the topic in different ways, and these framings can affect our perception of ourselves and of our experiences. In the ‘fight’ metaphor, for example, the illness itself is usually cast as the enemy; getting better corresponds to winning; and not getting better corresponds to defeat. This framing can be quite negative for patients, as Kate Granger points out: it can be distressing for cancer sufferers to think that they have an ‘enemy’ inside them; even worse, if lack of recovery is seen as losing a battle, patients may feel guilty about something that is not their

fault. The shortcomings of a particular metaphor can be overcome by using a different metaphor. While suffering from breast cancer in 2005, journalist Melanie McFadyean suggested an alternative, in a piece for the Observer magazine:

*Why should people with cancer be expected to take up arms? It is better to see cancer as a journey. Everyone says that being positive helps you to come through, and being positive during a journey seems easier to me than being positive during a war in which the enemy is all around you.*

The ‘journey’ metaphor for cancer frames the whole experience very differently: it casts the illness as a road to travel on, or as a travelling companion, rather than an opponent; and it does not involve the idea that not getting better is a failure on the part of the patient. It is therefore not surprising that the 2007 NHS Cancer Reform Strategy includes many references to the patient’s cancer ‘journey’, but no instances of ‘battle’ or ‘war’. But do cancer patients actually use ‘fight’ and/or ‘journey’ metaphors, and, if so, how?

Cancer Patients’ Use of Metaphors

In our data, patients use both ‘fight’ and ‘journey’ metaphors fairly regularly: both types of metaphors occur, on average, between once and twice per 1,000 words. An example of each is given below:

*I have kind of prepared myself for a battle with cancer.*

*We are on the bowel cancer journey.*

In our study we have found plenty of evidence of the possible negative consequences of ‘fight’ metaphors. For example, a patient writes:

*I feel such a failure that I am not winning this battle.*

Here the metaphor clearly undermines the patient’s self esteem, at a time when she has many other negative emotions to deal with. Another war-related metaphor that can contribute to emotional distress is used by some patients who expect their cancer to return:

*I am a walking time bomb.*

This metaphor frames the possible future recurrence of the illness as totally unpredictable, irreversible and immediately devastating for the patient. On the other hand, for some patients at least, ‘fight’ metaphors seem to function as a source of pride, motivation and a positive sense of self:

*Cancer and the fighting of it is something to be very proud of.*

*My consultants recognised that I was a born fighter.*

*I don’t intend to give up; I don’t intend to give in. No I want to fight it. I don’t want it to beat me,*

*I want to beat it.*

When we considered ‘journey’ metaphors in our data, we found the same kind of variation. ‘Journey’ metaphors often express and reinforce feelings of purpose, control and companionship. Several patients use ‘journey’ metaphors to convey a sense of group solidarity with other cancer sufferers:

*The rocks in our paths are easier to handle when we’re all in it together.*

One patient uses a ‘journey’ metaphor to suggest that the experience of illness can have some positive aspects:

*My journey may not be smooth but it certainly makes me look up and take notice of the*

*scenery!*

On the other hand, some uses of ‘journey’ metaphors suggest lack of acceptance of the illness, or frustration at not being in control. One patient compares being ill with cancer to:

*trying to drive a coach and horses uphill with no back wheels on the coach.*

Another patient wonders:

*How the hell am I supposed to know how to navigate this road I do not even want to be on when I’ve never done it before?*

What Do Our Findings Mean?

Our findings support the avoidance of ‘fight’ metaphors in recent UK policy documents, and suggest that healthcare professionals should not introduce them first when speaking with patients. On the other hand, different metaphors seem to work differently for different people. ‘Fight’ metaphors can clearly be harmful for many patients, but they are also inspiring and motivating for some. ‘Journey’ metaphors are a better alternative for many patients, but they can also convey and reinforce negative feelings for some.

Ultimately, metaphors are resources for expressing ourselves and for making sense of our experiences. When we are ill, we should be encouraged and enabled to pick the ones that work best for us.

Beyond Fights and Journeys?

If metaphors are useful resources, we should have as many at our disposal as possible. We have collected many alternatives to ‘fight’ and ‘journey’ metaphors, from our data and other sources. For example, a cancer sufferer commenting on Kate Granger’s article uses a musical metaphor:

*To heal is to meet the rogue cells within and convince them to sing in tune with the rest of the body.*

In an article for BBC news, Andrew Graystone uses a household metaphor:

*For me, cancer arrived as an unwelcome lodger, parking itself in the back room and demanding attention. For three years I tried to be a courteous if unwilling host. Eventually the time came to invite my cancer to leave. She has left the place in a bit of a mess, and I’m conscious that she has kept the key. Still I’m hopeful that in due course all I will be left with is the rich memory of time spent with a stranger I never expected to meet.*

We are hoping to collect many more such examples that we can share with patients and doctors. If you come across any, or can contribute your own, we would love to hear from you.

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# Extension task

Write an opinion article for a newspaper in which you argue for or against the idea of using “battle” metaphors to describe those suffering from diseases.