

American Dialect Society picks “tweet,” “Google” as top words for 2009, decade

—by Dan Zak

“Anyone for ‘sexting?’” asks the 69-year-old man in the navy blazer and brown loafers. “Well if you give me your number,” comes a voice from the crowd which erupts in laughter.

Bunch of comedians, these linguists and lexicographers. They’ve crammed themselves in a dim, beige, boxy meeting room at the Baltimore (Md) Hilton to vote on a word of the year and a word of the decade—a solemn task that falls to just about everyone these days.

Other outlets have already named words of the year for 2009—*Merriam-Webster* picked “admonish” (huh?) and the *Oxford English Dictionary* went with “unfriend” (hrmph)—but the 121-year-old American Dialect Society thinks of itself as the granddaddy of them all, the first and last word in words of the year. Its hour-long quest must yield two words that are accurate, exciting, and durable.

Two words must satisfy both the crusty generation of veteran scholars and the giddy linguistic students whose jargon is a step ahead. It’s a tricky exercise, and the result always feels slightly off, given that words are evolving at a frenzied pace and everyone has become his own lexicographer with his own definitions.

There’s no smaller time capsule than a single word. In 2000, the American Dialect Society picked “web” to represent the 1990s, “jazz” for the 20th century, and “she” for the millennium. Ten letters can evoke an entire epoch.

This past year can be distilled into single words using the top look-ups on *Merriam-Webster’s* online dictionary which gets 1.3 billion page views a year. “Empathy” shot up during the Sonia Sotomayor hearings. “Philanderer” was a hit-magnet during the Mark Sanford confessions. Michael Jackson’s death sent the world scrambling for “emaciated.”

The top look-ups are the linguistic nerve endings of people’s curiosities at any given moment, says Peter Sokolowski, editor-at-large for *Merriam-Webster*. He regularly tweets the top look-ups to his 2,000 followers. Most recent blockbuster: “indigenous,” which has trended since the premiere of the movie “Avatar.”

Making these distinctions is “a way to have stillness in the midst of chaos,” says Paul J.J. Payack, president and chief word analyst for the *Global Language Monitor*, whose media analysis software made “Twitter” the word of 2009 and “global warming” the word of the decade. “People take a look at a group of words and say, ‘These defined what happened.’”

Merriam-Webster adds 100 words to its database each year. *Urban Dictionary* draws 2,000 reader submissions a day. *Global Language Monitor* calculates that a new English-language word is born every 98 minutes and that 1.58 billion people are re-sculpting English as they use it as a universal linguistic currency.

“We’re living in a time of wildfire word creation, with no gatekeeper for slang, and no way to settle on a term that will please everybody,” says Jack Lynch, author of *The Lexicographer’s Dilemma*. “Purists have always lamented the erosion of “proper” language, but it’s a lexicographer’s duty to describe the flux, not prescribe a paradigm. The English language has been doing fine for 1,500 years, and it’s going to outlive us all.”

Linguists’ meet-and-geek

In the behavioral spectrum of American conferencing, the linguists and lexicographers fall on the social end, confides a waiter at the hotel’s “tavern.” They gab and they linger. “They’re not like the scientists, who sit alone and order coffee without looking up,” the waiter says.

In meeting rooms at the hotel, they ramble about Vedic Sanskrit and Oregon English and chide one another for talking too fast. The lobby echoes with chatter about clitics and fricatives, and vowel fission. Conclusions are reached about the effect of first names on longevity (people whose names begin with “D” seem to die sooner than others), and talks are given on “The Effect on Dialect Features Under Intoxication” and how “Abbrevs Is Totes the Lang of the Fuche.”

The gimmicky sideshow of this syntactic circus is the word of the year/decade debate and vote. It’s the conference equivalent of an open bar: a free-for-all, slap-happy slug fest with words and phrases instead of drinks.

Thirty students and scholars showed up for this year’s nominating session. They jaw about the possible displacement of “search” by “Google,” how the flu-prevention term “Dracula sneeze” translates into American Sign Language. They argue the merits of “Salahi” as a verb and the pronunciation of H1N1 as “heinie.” Then comes the slightly more awesome task of nominating words of the decade. A blue PowerPoint slide pops onto a screen and asks a simple question.

“Who were we and what were we in the last decade?”

“Confused,” quips a man in a bow tie at the back of the room.

Celebration of words

The man in the bow tie is a 68-year-old dictionary editor from Poughkeepsie, N.Y., in town with fellow “word-men” to make the big word pronouncement. The average age at the table is about 60, and there’s a preponderance of tweed, cufflinks, and monogrammed dress shirts. Sipping wine, the men muse on the word of the year. “It’s a celebration of words,” says Bill Kretzschmar, an English

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professor at the University of Georgia. "It's exploration," says the editor from Poughkeepsie, Dave Barnhart.

"It's like all things in academia: the lower the stakes, the larger the passion," jokes Ron Butters, an emeritus professor of English at Duke. But it is important: "Language is an index of our social identity," says Richard Bailey, professor emeritus from the University of Michigan. "The point of the word of the year thing is that choosing words reflects reality," says Sheidlower. "If you choose wrong, you've failed in some important way."

At the opposite end of the hotel, in a noisy lounge, linguist students from William & Mary think a variation of "Kanye" should've been in the running and they are irritated that "unfriend" came up as a possible nominee. The *Oxford English Dictionary* already made that blunder. "I wonder how often 'Dracula sneeze' is used by younger people," says Elyssa Winzeler, editor of the *Linguist List* in Ann Arbor, Mich. "People who are 40 years older than us say they use 'search' more than 'Google,' but we don't," co-editor Erica Wicks adds.

And the winner is . . .

"I'd like to speak against all of these arguments for 'tweet' because they are all over 140 characters long," says someone back in that dim, beige, boxy room where all final arguments are made and raised hands are counted.

The jokes kept on coming, and there was a posse of rebel linguists who wouldn't let "sea kittens" and "Dracula sneeze" die. A gentleman in a gray suit argued against "H1N1" as word of the year because it would mean succumbing to the pork lobby. "I think my life has been more affected by 'Google' than H1N1," says a college student. "People are currently tweeting that 'tweet' is being nominated for word of the year," observes someone else. After much discussion, finally the final vote.

A year and a decade, both recently laid to rest, receive the briefest kind of epitaph. The two words meant to evoke the feeling of this moment years from now—"tweet" for 2009 and "Google" for the Aughts.