

Dictionaries. Our linguistic bible. We pore over the pages, hoping it will prove the existence of a word so we can weaponize it in generational debates. We treat their definitions as a universal truth. Ironically, for the invisible lexicographers in charge, they are more dubious.

For us, our meaning of what makes a word “real” is usually a string of characters found in the dictionary. If this is the case, then it must also convey meaning, and be written in the alphabet relevant to that country. This therefore insinuates that a word is a string of characters that can be understood by the people who speak that language and conveys meaning. In fact, the Oxford dictionary defines a word as: a single unit of language that means something and can be spoken or written.

This definition may seem accurate written down, but it actually engenders a plethora of debates. What exactly constitutes a unit of language? Would an abbreviation count? Do dialectal contractions, such as I’mma or y’all, earn the title of a word, even if rarely transcribed? It could even be argued that words don’t convey meaning themselves, only in appropriate context and as part of sentences.

If we abide by the axiom that all entries in the dictionary are words, then it would appear that the string of characters has to be frequently and meaningfully used over a widespread area. This means technological jargon may appear sooner than other, regional-specific terms, as they occupy a central space in the lingua franca of the Internet. The term “byte”, an eight bit storage capacity, is transferrable across many languages, being used in a widespread geographical area and hence an example of a word with the potential to have made a rapid entry into the OED. Despite the longest word in English, pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis, being both frequently used and other a wide-spread area, some dictionaries choose not to include it in their publications due to the fact it is rarely used in relation to its meaning as a lung disease, and only in reference to its title as the longest word.

Controversy struck in 2015 when Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year was the “tears of joy” emoji, and in 2014 when the American Dialect Society named theirs as #blacklivesmatter. Emojis mimic another language we are perhaps more knowledgeable of than English; body language. As an emoji is the simplest element in transcribing this part of the dichotomy of language, a word is the parallel for the other side, being spoken communication. Hashtags are an intrinsic part of social media syntax, bolstering the political power of a term, like how an exclamation mark indicates strong feelings. Should this syntax be included as part of the headword (as the grammar used alters the denotation)? Both emojis and hashtags provide meaning in communication, leaving many to question why some lexicographers blatantly ignore them.

So, should dictionaries still be venerated as linguistic bibles, or subjective epitaphs to words whose meanings constantly evolve with each use?