

Proper language our frenemy

by Mark Pavilons

Our language is our main tool for communication and for many of us, it's our bread and butter.

In our home and native land, our language and our unique colloquialisms make us friends and bring all Canadians together.

When we're travelling, we're speaking the world's most popular language, we're welcomed.

Like our species, our language is constantly maturing.

According to Merriam Webster, the language doesn't take a vacation, and neither does the dictionary.

The words we use are constantly changing in big ways and small, and we're here to record those changes. Each word has taken its own path in its own time to become part of our language. To be used frequently enough by some in order to be placed in a reference for all. If you're likely to encounter a word in the wild, whether in the news, a restaurant menu, a tech update, or a Twitter meme, that word belongs in the dictionary.

A big batch of new words and new definitions for existing words has just been added to the dictionary at Merriam-Webster.com: 850 terms that come from a cross-section of our linguistic culture.

As a parent, I'm all too familiar with the term "hangry," which combines hungry and angry. If you have children, you know these ankle biters will literally eat anything and everything when it's past their meal time. I'm sure it has something to do with a chemical imbalance or hormones. I've witnessed the wrath and at times, it's like I'm tossing raw steak to the lions at the zoo.

I fully understand the need to recognize words that arise out of technology, terms unique to certain elements of tech.

"Instagramming" as a verb is suspect. If you post something to Instagram, isn't that sufficient? Oh, look at me, I'm "finger-text-agramming!"

One of my new favourites is "time suck," a term that means wasting your free time with something unproductive or meaningless. We're all guilty of this and have been doing so since the dawn of time.

But this term is more relevant today, especially with our smart gadgets sucking so much of our time, often with useless endeavours.

I am still amazed, and somewhat disappointed, when I see young people - children and teens - milling about, with heads down, buried in their cell phones. If you've ever seen a gaggle of gadget-gawkers, you know what I mean.

I've also seen couples, young men and women, in cars together, both on their phones!

Also, you might think that it's "adorbs" that some "rando" likes "zuke" along with "avo" in his "guac." Years ago, a sentence like that would get you a stint in the stockade!

I think abbreviations and portmanteaus (two words smashed together to make a new one) are abominations. What do you think about "bromance, chillax, frenemy, mansplaining"? They're all shart!

Our amazing English language is actually a West German language, influenced by Norse, Latin and French.

The earliest forms of English were spoken more than 1,400 years ago, in Great Britain in the 5th century. Middle English became vogue in the 11th century and early modern English took shape in the 15th century.

It's the third-most spoken lingo in the world.

While early published reports indicated women talk three times more than men, there were no concrete studies. One done in 2014 indicates women speak 16,215 words per day, and men belt out 15,669 words per day.

If you consider all the common conjunctions, pronouns, prepositions, we likely only utter maybe 500 unique words per day, or words that articulate meaning.

The Second Edition of the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary contains entries for 171,476 words in current use, and 47,156 obsolete words. There are also around 10,000 "derivative words."

The average adult has a vocabulary of upwards of 35,000 words and it's estimated that anyone can get by with an arsenal of only 3,000 words.

Try to explain the word "the" to someone learning English. It's the most frequent word we use and abuse.

Words are my life. In my line of work, they are my friends and as with most relationships, we have our ups and downs. They can be elusive, mean and ornery.

They can be smooth, silky and oh, so descriptive. I may be a veteran newsman, but I still make use of thesaurus.com!

It's estimated we learn a couple of new words per day and I think that's marvellous. Maybe I've introduced my readers to one or two over the years.

I'll never forget a mistake I made while reading out loud in my Grade 10 English class. The first time I came across the word "epitome" I read it "epa-tome." My teacher corrected me of course, in front of everyone, and that one faux pas is burned into my

brain to this very day.

While our language is a beautiful thing, it presents many challenges, for foreigners and English-speakers alike. Just try to define a word without using the word!

Technology has also changed our use and knowledge of the language. I came from the "pen and paper" generation, and I still take notes daily. Some journalists today record interviews electronically, but I always found that very time-consuming when writing an article. I rely on my notes and my memory and I have a pretty good track record.

But I know many who take "notes" on their phone and view their schedules on their tablets. They dictate their musings to a device, which auto-writes and auto-corrects, often with hilarious results.

We are born story-tellers and let's keep telling them. Don't be lazy with our precious vocabulary and give in to the vernacular.