

How wonderful words can be utterly pointless

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Dictionary dazzlers: English is believed to have around 50,000 obsolete words.

Should we defend uselessness? Dictionary compilers have been collecting words that they think the world could do without — but which should be preserved for the sake of beauty.

Sharon groaned. She had felt real fleshment about organising her birthday party — but her hircine stepmother was limiting her to six guests.

That was just so novercal! Steph was the most bad-tempered and antithalian person she had ever met: everything she did was infelificic. Could anything be done to abirritate her? And was there a backspang that could be used to invite more friends?

The paragraph above contains seven words most people have never come across. “Fleshment” means the excitement that comes from a promising start. “Hircine” means “smelling like a goat”. “Novercal” means “to do with a stepmother”.

“Antithalian” means “opposed to parties”. “Infelificic” means “resulting in unhappiness”. “Abirritate” means “to make less irritable”. A “backspang” is a loophole.

All these words appear on the Merriam-Webster dictionary’s list of “Great Big List of Beautiful and Useless Words”. The dictionary is based on the work of the leading 19th Century American **lexicographer** Noah Webster.

“They’re wonderful,” it says of the words. “They’re obscure. They’re often quite pointless.”

There are many other **intriguing** words on the list. One is “ultracrepidarian”, defined as “giving opinions on matters outside your knowledge”.

Another is “pennyweighter”, meaning someone who steals a piece of jewellery by swapping it for a fake.

One of the most beautiful is “apricitie”, which was defined in 1623 as “the warmness of the Sun in winter”. One of the most satisfying to say is “sloomy”, meaning “sleepy or sluggish”.

But are these words pointless? A good many of them actually seem very useful, and should arguably be brought back.

Take “accismus”, which means “refusing something which you in fact want very badly”. It is surely useful to have one word you can use instead of nine.

Should we defend uselessness?

Absurd words?

Yes: A world which only included useful things would be very boring indeed. The things that make life worth living are often beautiful, funny or bizarre, without any practical application.

No: We live in an age where countless things are crying out for our attention. The only way to cope efficiently is to get rid of all those which do not immediately make it easier for us to function.

Or... It is risky to call anything useless. Things that you are tempted to throw away often turn out to be exactly what you need in an unexpected situation, so it is worth keeping them just in case.

Some people say

“I welcome new words, or old words used in new ways, provided the result is more precision, added colour or greater expressiveness.”

William Safire (1929 – 2009), American journalist

“The oldest, shortest words – ‘yes’ and ‘no’ – are those which require the most thought.”

Pythagoras (c570 BC – c495 BC), Greek philosopher

Empty heading

What do you think?

Six steps to discovery

1. Connect

How do you feel about this story? - Do you like strange words? Do you know someone who is sloomy?

2. Wonder

What questions do you have? - For example: Who decides which words should go in the dictionary? How many new ones are chosen each year?

3. Investigate

What are the facts? - Pick out one thing you know for certain from this story and one thing you cannot say for sure.

4. Construct

What is your point of view? - Something you are very fond of breaks and you are told to throw it away. Think about what you would say.

5. Express

What do others believe? - Which is the most beautiful word? Take it in turns to make suggestions.

6. Reflect

What might happen next? - Imagine you are asked to write for a dictionary blog. Write a story about accismus.

Glossary

Irritable - Easily annoyed.

Lexicographer - A person who makes dictionaries.

Intriguing - Very interesting. Something you want to know more about.