

# Neologisms in Online British-English versus American-English Dictionaries

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## Abstract

A common source of publicity for modern-day dictionary publishers is the regular (usually quarterly) release of lists of neologisms that have recently been added to their online dictionaries.<sup>1</sup> The publishing of updated versions of these sites every few months means it may no longer take years for new words to be included in a dictionary. However while different dictionaries may utilize neologisms in similar ways in order to improve brand awareness, the way in which these new words are presented and used in the dictionaries themselves can vary widely, including amongst those of differing varieties of English. This paper will describe differences in the approach and treatment of British-English neologisms in online editions of British-English dictionary *OED* (the *Oxford English Dictionary*) and American-English dictionary *Merriam-Webster*. In particular, the way in which each dictionary responds to potential new words will be discussed, as will the comprehensiveness of the resulting new entries and the differences found in the types of information each contains.

**Keywords:** neologism, lexicography, dictionaries, dictionary components, British-English, American-English, OED, Merriam-Webster

## 1 Introduction

Thousands of new words enter online dictionaries every year; according to their own publicity material, some 3,200 entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED, Third Edition*) during the year to January 2018,<sup>2</sup> while 1,100 entered *Merriam-Webster*<sup>3</sup> in the 12 months to March 2018.<sup>4</sup> Many of these novel words name or describe new items or concepts created through innovations in science and technology (Lehrer 2003: 371; Francl 2011: 417; Mitchell 2008: 33), and many others are coined by journalists or other professional writers, often in a bid to inject humor into a story, or simply as an expression of language play (Renouf 2007: 70). Neologisms can gain great popularity through repetitions of such use in the media, and indeed this is often where language users first come into contact with a new word.

As the disparity in the numbers of new words entering the two dictionaries above implies, there are significant differences in the approach to neologisms, leading to some dictionaries accepting more new words than others, and this is further reflected in the treatment of the new words which ultimately do appear. This paper discusses this issue in the context of the *OED* and *Merriam-Webster* online dictionaries, drawing upon the findings of a wider piece of research which investigated degrees of comprehensiveness between dictionary types and levels of responsiveness to new words (see Creese

1 See for example the September 2017 updates for the *OED* (<https://public.oed.com/the-oed-today/recent-updates-to-the-oed/september-2017-update/new-words-list-september-2017/>) and *Merriam Webster* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/new-words-in-the-dictionary-sep-2017>).

2 See <https://public.oed.com/the-oed-today/recent-updates-to-the-oed/>.

3 Formerly based on the *Collegiate® Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition and now based on an amalgam of the company's dictionary products (Merriam-Webster 2018a).

4 See for example <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/new-words-in-the-dictionary-march-2018>.

2017). Dictionary entries were analyzed based on the number and quality of industry-accepted “standardized” dictionary components they contained, plus a number of “non-standard” but increasingly common additional components, while responsiveness was assessed by how quickly new words (used in British-English national newspapers) appeared in dictionaries. However, the lack of accurate, or at times any, dating information made the latter extremely problematic for the *OED* and *Merriam-Webster*, particularly in the case of the latter, which has only recently begun adding “update” information, and still does not include any “inclusion date” details.

## 2 Materials and Methods

The wider study from which this paper is drawn involved examination, tracking and analysis of a sample of 34 neologisms, although only half of these featured in the *OED* and/or *Merriam-Webster*. As Table 1 demonstrates, 10 of these new words appeared in both dictionaries, with a further five appearing only in the *OED* and just two appearing only in *Merriam-Webster*.

Table 1: Neologisms appearing in *OED* and/or *Merriam-Webster* online dictionaries (source of definitions: *NeoCrawler* list, Ludwig-Maximilians Universität, n.d.).

Neologism	Part Of Speech	Meaning	<i>OED</i>	<i>Merriam-Webster</i>
acedia	noun	spiritual or mental sloth	Y	Y
bogof	noun	an advertising strategy that entices people to buy a product and get one for free	Y	
conurbation	noun	an extensive urban area resulting from the expansion of several cities or towns so that they coalesce but usually retain their separate identities	Y	Y
cyberbullying	noun	the use of internet and mobile phones to send embarrassing or hurting [sic] messages	Y	Y
cyberchondriac	noun	person who imagines they have a particular disease because their symptoms match those listed on an internet health site	Y	
earworm	noun	a piece of music that sticks in a person’s head		Y
e-tailer	noun	a company which uses the internet to sell its products	Y	Y
e-waste	noun	electronic products which have been discarded or have become useless		Y
frenemy	noun	a person you assume is a friend, although you don’t really like him/her	Y	Y
greenwashing	noun	the practice of making an unsubstantiated or misleading claim about the environmental benefits of a product, service, technology or company practice	Y	Y
hubristic	adjective	referring to someone or something behaving with hubris	Y	Y
promissory note	noun	a negotiable instrument, wherein one party (the maker or issuer) makes an unconditional promise in writing to pay a determinate sum of money to the other (the payee), either at a fixed or determinable future time or on demand of the payee, under spec	Y	Y
rewilding	noun	the process of returning species, habitats and landscapes to a natural state, as they would be without the intervention of humans	Y	
tenebrous	adjective	dark and gloomy	Y	Y

Neologism	Part Of Speech	Meaning	OED	Merriam-Webster
upskill	verb	to give employees extra training in order to improve their performance	Y	
warrantless	adjective	without a warrant; especially referring to governments' surveillance practices after 9/11	Y	
waterboarding	noun	a torture method of putting a cloth over the face and pouring water over it to make them believe they are drowning	Y	Y

## 2.1 Selection of Neologisms

The neologisms selected for this study were among those believed likely to be of interest to researchers in the fields of lexicography and neology, as well as linguists in general, based on the words' characteristics such as their development and behavior over time, and differences in the numbers and types of components appearing in their initial and developing dictionary entries.

Rather than effectively reinventing the wheel by identifying a set of neologisms from which to make this selection, it was decided to use an existing list of new words which had already been the subject of extensive analysis. This had been produced by the *NeoCrawler* program, designed and created by the EnerG team at Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich.<sup>5</sup> The new words had been identified and tracked within the Google Blogs environment (Kerremans 2015: 80), and researching them in my own project, in the context of lexicography, would allow for an expansion of the body of knowledge available about them. A review of the literature at the time and currently reveals that very little work has been done on the relationship between neology and lexicography, making this study of particular interest. Whilst Moon (2008) explores lexical creativity and dictionaries, Fischer (1998), Kerremans (2015) and Renouf (2013) make only passing references to lexicography/dictionaries in their studies of new words. Weiner (2009) gives a brief overview of the history of neologism inclusion in the *OED*, from separate "Supplements" through the "NEWS" ("New English Words Series") to the "Additions" volumes incorporated into *OED2* (see 3.1) and the current system of quarterly updates (2009: 391, 401). Algeo, meanwhile, reports that more than half of the neologisms from a 30-year corpus had no dictionary presence just two decades later (1993: 281), raising questions about the long-term survival rates of new words.

The *NeoCrawler* database (the creation and use of which is explained in full in Kerremans 2015) contained many more neologisms than were necessary or practicable for use in this study. Thus it was necessary to select from the full list a manageable sample of new words (a maximum of 40). Prior to extracting a random sample from the list, it was necessary to exclude words such as:

- Trade names
- Words which were likely simple misspellings, but which had gained popularity (an example of what Neuman, Nave and Dolev define as "buzzwords", or "fashion words" that enter the language and rapidly acquire great popularity before fading into obscurity (2010: 58, 67).
- Non-British-English words. The purpose here was to see how British-English neologisms fared in both a domestic dictionary and an American-English one. Specifically, the objective was to see whether there was any delay in the acceptance of neologisms – or indeed any outright failure of take-up of these words – due to a lack of the frame of reference needed to understand them. Examples might include new cricketing terms, since cricket is not played in the US (Creese 2017: 68).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.neocrawler.anglistik.uni-muenchen.de/crawler/html/index.php?abfrage=about>.

Having removed these unsuitable terms, the remainder of the *NeoCrawler* list was checked against a number of UK national newspapers, in order to ascertain whether the words were in “real-world” usage. Words which had appeared in these newspapers were carried forward to the next stage of selection. Newspapers were chosen as an indicator of real-world usage because they are aimed at a broad-cross section of the population and are produced daily (giving large numbers of readers regular and frequent exposure to any neologisms used).

The remaining neologisms were then entered into an online “randomizing” program,<sup>6</sup> which was used to select the final list of words used in this study. It had been decided, in the interests of sample representativeness, that in terms of word class the make-up of this list of neologisms should reflect that of the original *NeoCrawler* list. As a result, a total of 34 neologisms were selected, 82% of which were nouns, with just four adjectives and two verbs. Of these 34, only 17 appeared in one or both of the dictionaries under discussion here, 76% of which were nouns, with three adjectives and a single verb (see Table 1 above).

Several of the selected neologisms were recognized as having actually been included in the *OED* for some time; long enough to not normally be considered “new”. These were “acedia”, “conurbation”, “hubristic”, “upskill” and “warrantless”. Three of them had also already appeared in *Merriam-Webster* (“acedia”, “conurbation”, “hubristic”), although as with all *Merriam-Webster* entries, there was no way to know *when* they had been accepted. All five, however had recently been accepted into other dictionaries covered by my wider research study, as well as obviously having been identified by the *NeoCrawler* system as “new” within the Google Blogs environment (Kerremans 2015). It seemed possible therefore that these terms might be experiencing some kind of revival following a period of possible dormancy, and it was decided to retain them as a kind of “neologic wildcard”, to see if anything could be learned from them. Although these “candidate neologisms” are really more “reincarnated” than they are “new”, for the purposes of this paper they are included in discussions of “neologisms”, unless stated otherwise.

## 2.2 Dictionary Inclusion Criteria

One of the key differences between the *OED* and *Merriam-Webster* is that the *OED* can be termed a “historical dictionary”, meaning that it aims “more than any other at comprehensiveness of inclusion rather than at a reportage of current use” (Algeo 1993: 283). Once a word enters the *OED*, it is never removed. It is “the most complete record of the English language ever assembled” (Oxford University Press 2015). *Merriam-Webster*, meanwhile, leans slightly more towards being a dictionary of current language use, although it rarely removes words, and when it does, it is only during major revisions conducted once every ten years (Mitchell 2008: 34).

Attestation, that is, proving that a word actually exists in the language, by showing it *in situ* (Atkins & Rundell 2008: 453 citing Simpson 2003: 268) is one of the “dictionary inclusion criteria” which are used to judge whether, for example, a new word or meaning is considered suitable for acceptance into that dictionary, either as a new entry, or as an additional sense for an existing word. While available space used to be another key factor in making these decisions in the days of the print dictionary, for today’s online dictionaries this is no longer the case. These days, the frequency and breadth of use of a term are key, as demonstrated by its citations (Atkins & Rundell 2008: 48). Both the *OED* and *Merriam-Webster* use citations as their main means of “attestation”, (although the *OED* is also now supported by corpus data, most notably the *Oxford English Corpus* (Oxford University Press 2018b) and the *Oxford New Words Corpus* (Oxford University Press 2018). (While *Merriam-Webster* calls its database of citations a corpus (Merriam-Webster 2018b), this, in my view, is a misnomer. A corpus is, according to Sinclair ‘a collection of pieces of language text in electronic form, selected according to external criteria to

<sup>6</sup> Research Randomizer: <https://www.randomizer.org/>.

represent, as far as possible, a language or language variety as a source of data for linguistic research' (2004: 22). *Merriam-Webster's* "corpus" does not in my view fit this definition, and is instead simply a database of digitized information.) Collecting these citations is carried out through the continued use of one of the earliest methods of dictionary compilation: extensive reading programs which show that the new words or meanings in question have been in use for long enough, and in a wide enough variety of publications and sources, to make them suitable candidates for inclusion in the dictionary (Atkins & Rundell 2008: 51; Merriam-Webster 2018b; Oxford University Press 2018a). Ten years ago, the key publication types for this process were printed ones, however today it is increasingly online information that is used to prove a new word's credentials (Mitchell 2008: 33). In addition, the length of time that a word must have been in circulation, in order to be considered a viable candidate for dictionary inclusion, has significantly reduced, in response to the much faster pace at which words can develop, and dictionaries can respond, as a result of electronic technologies. Even as recently as 2015, the *OED's* publicity FAQ pages stated that citations had to show a potential new addition "in actual use over a period of at least ten years" (Oxford University Press 2015). Today, new words are simply required to have been "widely used in print or online" (Oxford University Press 2018d). *Merriam-Webster* has always been less specific, even four years ago giving no indication of how many citations a word should have, only that there should be enough "to show that it is widely used" and that they should "come from a wide range of publications over a considerable period of time" (Merriam-Webster 2015).

### 2.3 Dictionary Components

The components used as vehicles for comparison between the *OED* and *Merriam-Webster* online dictionaries were in the main those recognized as industry-standards, as demonstrated in Atkins and Rundell's guide to the practicalities of planning and building a dictionary (2008: 200-246; 385-462). These components should enable information on words to be presented uniformly and recognizably across all entries. In addition, several non-standard components were also used, and these are increasingly being found in online dictionaries, which do not suffer from constraints of space or typesetting. These include elements such as inclusion dates and audio files (Creese 2017: 83). The industry-standard dictionary components are shown in Table 2, while Table 3 presents the non-standard components. There are significant differences, however, in which of these components each dictionary includes for the same neologism, as will be shown below.

Table 2: Standardized dictionary components used in neologism entries in *OED* and *Merriam-Webster* (Atkins & Rundell 2008: 200-246; 385-462).

Component	Description
Headword (lemma)	Indication of how a word should be written, shown at the beginning of the entry
Lexical unit	Subdivisions of headwords (also known as senses)
Definition	Explanation of the meaning of a headword
Pronunciation	Information on how a word should be pronounced
Etymology	Origins of a word. I include here word formations and earliest known use of the word
Spelling variant	Permitted differences in spelling of the headword / senses
Word class	Parts of speech
Grammar label	Grammatical information on correct use of the headword
Examples/quotations	Exemplars of how a word is used in real-life (including source information in the case of quotations)
Register/style/attitude label	Indicators of the tone of the headword
Region label	Indication of where the headword is generally used
Cross-reference	Marker showing that more information is available on the headword elsewhere
Run-on	Indicator that the word derives from another headword

Table 3: Non-standard dictionary components used in neologism entries appearing in *OED* and *Merriam-Webster* (Creese 2017: 83).

Component	Description
Inclusion/update date	Date indicating when the word first entered the dictionary
Audio file	Sound file aiding correct pronunciation of unfamiliar words (usually in both British- and American-English)
Derivative	Marker showing that the neologism in question has derivatives
Related term	Indicator that another word is linked to the headword, without actually being a run-on. This information can alternatively appear as a standardized Usage Note

### 3 Findings

While each is widely viewed as being a leading dictionary (see for example Sullivan 2017 and Hanks 2013), the findings of this study show the *OED* to be significantly more open to neologisms than *Merriam-Webster*. It accepts more neologisms, includes more information in the new-word entries it carries, and the quality of the information included is higher. Unfortunately, it is not clear why, given such similar inclusion criteria, this disparity exists. There is no way to know why a lexicographer chooses one component and not another. One can only speculate that perhaps *Merriam-Webster* employs additional criteria which it does not make public. Or perhaps the type and scope of materials read as part of its attestation process is more limited than that of the *OED*. Or it may simply be that for some reason words which do meet the criteria are somehow simply not collected. Former *OED* Editor at Large Jesse Sheidlower is cited as saying that the *OED* is “less conservative than *Merriam-Webster* in how quickly it accepts new words” and maybe this is the reason for the difference (Mitchell 2008: 33).

In addition, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to tell how long a particular neologism or dictionary component has been present in one of these dictionaries – and therefore how responsive the dictionary is to new words’ existence – due to inconsistent and often absent dating information.

#### 3.1 Dictionary Entry Dating and Responsiveness to New Words

One of the mechanisms used in the wider study from which this paper is drawn to assess the responsiveness of dictionaries to the presence of new words was the date that a new word entered a particular dictionary. The sooner a dictionary accepted a new word, the more responsive it could be considered (notwithstanding adherence to the dictionary’s inclusion criteria). However in the case of *Merriam-Webster* there was no date information provided. In the *OED*, full entries included various date details – sometimes a date of entry, sometimes a date of update or that the entry was awaiting update. However, “run-ons” did not have any date information outside of that provided for the main entry; there was no indication of when the “run-on” was added, whether at the same time as the main entry, or later on. What information there was, was also often unreliable. As well as the main date information (appearing in the top right hand corner of the entry), many entries also carried a link to a “Publication History” (now titled “Entry History”) box. However, while these used to give information such as when an entry had been updated, they did not say what had been done to it: for example whether a meaning had been added or changed, or whether a new dictionary component had been included. If there was more than one sense to the word, there was no indication which one had been altered. Even more problematic was the fact that quite often these “Publication Histories” were simply wrong. In June 2016 the *OED* “Publication History” for “greenwashing” suggested that the

term had been added to the online dictionary in March 2016, yet my own research had shown it to be present as early as August 2014. Today, “Entry History” boxes include even less information. The “greenwashing” box now makes no reference to when the word entered the online dictionary, but includes the stock phrase:

oed.com is a living text, updated every three months. Updates may include:

- further revisions to definitions, pronunciation, etymology, variant spellings, quotations, dating or styling of citations;
- new senses or phrases (Oxford University Press 2018c)

Entries which have been included in the previous edition of the *OED* (known as *OED2*) show a “Previous Version” link, taking the user to the entry which appeared in the 1989 version of the dictionary.<sup>7</sup> All of the “reincarnated terms” except “upskill” (which entered after the *OED2* was published) include this link. “Acedia” is marked as having been updated in 2011, while the entries for “conurbation”, “hubristic”, “upskill” and “warrantless” all show that they are each still awaiting updates. This suggests that these terms may indeed be still developing and experiencing some form of revival, as suggested in 2.1.

Although *Merriam-Webster* carried no date information for any of its entries at the time of this study, it has now introduced some limited dating, although still not enough to be able to draw conclusions about its responsiveness to new words, since the most important date – when the word was first included – is still absent. However, some entries do now show when the entry was last updated, and some include a “first known use” component, giving an idea of the history of the word. It is not known when these new features were introduced, although the earliest “updated” date on any of these neologisms is November 2017. This was present on the entry for “acedia” in January 2018, however in March of the same year it had disappeared, as had its newly-added date of “first known use”. “Conurbation” has kept its new “first known use” and also gained an “updated” date (as have “promissory note” and “waterboarding”). “Hubristic” and “warrantless” have both remained dateless because they are “run-ons”, and “upskill” is not yet included in *Merriam-Webster*. Meanwhile “frenemy’s” new “update” information has been updated again, although it still has no other dates, and “earworm”, like “acedia” has lost its new-found “updated” information, although it has retained its new “first known use”. This latter date was 1802, yet there is no indication as to which of the two senses of “earworm” this applies to. It is only by referring to the dates of the attributed examples for the required sense, and comparing these with the dates of the attributed quotations in *OED*, that it becomes clear that this “first known use” applies to “corn earworm” (an agricultural pest) and not “a song or melody that keeps repeating in one’s mind”.<sup>8</sup>

It is not clear whether those *Merriam-Webster* entries which still do not have any dating features simply have not yet been updated, or whether they are missing in error. It would, however, seem from the many changes currently taking place on the website that the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary is perhaps undergoing another period of revision in March 2018. Perhaps when this is completed more entries will carry this important date information, and perhaps in time “inclusion dates” will also be added. Until that point, however, it is impossible to say with any accuracy which of these two dictionaries responds more quickly to new words.

### 3.2 Dictionary Components Findings

Of the 17 new words found to appear in one or both of the dictionaries under study here, the *OED* carried 15, while *Merriam-Webster* included only 12. Ten neologisms appeared in both dictionaries, although in all but two cases the *OED*’s entries were significantly more comprehensive, as Figure 1 shows.

<sup>7</sup> See for example <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/199107?redirectedFrom=tenebrous#eid>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/earworm>

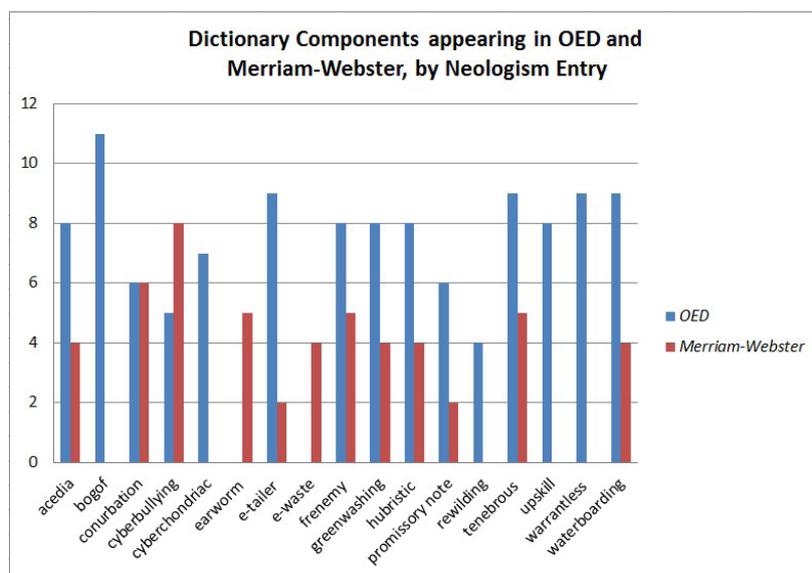


Figure 1: Dictionary components appearing in neologism entries in the *OED* and/or *Merriam-Webster*.

The *OED* provides these new words with more detailed entries, with ten of its 15 neologisms featuring between eight and ten dictionary components, while nine of the US dictionary's 12 entries feature between just five and seven. In only one instance does *Merriam-Webster* include more information than the *OED*, that being “cyberbullying”, and the reason is that in the *OED* this appears only as a “run-on” of “cyber”, while *Merriam-Webster* includes a full entry. Interestingly, although it includes “cyberbullying” it does not include “cyberchondriac”, whereas *OED* also includes this, again as a “run-on” of “cyber” (although for reasons unknown, the former is hyphenated, and the latter is not).<sup>9</sup> “Run-ons” do not include definitions in *Merriam-Webster*, presumably because it is assumed that the user will understand their meaning based on the definition for the word from which they are derived.<sup>10</sup> The *OED*'s “run-ons” are more comprehensive because they *do* generally include definitions, as “cyberbullying” and “cyberchondriac” showed, but for some (unknown) reason “rewilding” (the process of returning land to a more natural state) is not defined (though its meaning is easily understood from the definition of the “headword”). In all cases however, “run-ons” lack “headwords”, since they are simply a subdivision of a larger entry.

In addition to its entries being less comprehensive in terms of numbers of dictionary components, definitions in *Merriam-Webster* have frequently been confusing. Prior to recent changes (see below) they regularly featured more than one definition for the same word (as distinct from multiple senses of the word), but with no indication as to why, or which definition should take precedence. In rare instances there would be a label marking one of the definitions as, for example, “business”, suggesting that it came from a business dictionary. However in most cases there were simply two definitions with the same meaning, the second of which would be labelled “Full Definition”. In some instances this was the more detailed of the two, and in others it was the simplest. For example, the entry for “promissory note” featured:

(1) initial definition: “business: a written promise to pay an amount of money before a particular date” followed by “Full Definition of PROMISSORY NOTE : a written promise to pay at a fixed or determinable future time a sum of money to a specified individual or bearer” (Merriam-Webster 2014).

The current entry is much clearer: the “Full Definition” is the main one and the other in fact comes from the LearnersDictionary.com,<sup>11</sup> with “business” as a “domain label” indicating the subject area

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/250879?rskey=xTMDWS&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>10</sup> See for example <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/e-tail>.

<sup>11</sup> [Http://www.learnersdictionary.com/](http://www.learnersdictionary.com/).

to which the entry belongs (Atkins & Rundell 2008: 227). These changes may well have occurred during the course of a major overhaul of the *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary which is believed to have taken place at the end of 2017, (and is believed to have been the point at which the site ceased to be based solely on the *Collegiate® Dictionary* and was instead widened to overtly incorporate input from a broad range of the publisher’s products<sup>12</sup> (Merriam-Webster 2018a)). This new site is somewhat clearer, inasmuch as all definitions are now properly labelled and users need only visit one page to find any number of definitions of the word from different subject areas and contexts. However, drawing on a broader range of the publisher’s products means that some entries are now extremely long, because the definitions from three, four or more dictionaries are included in one online entry. Different word classes are also all in that same single entry, instead of a menu system appearing in response to a search query, as is the case in the *OED*, allowing the user to select the version of the word they require. *Merriam-Webster*’s entry for “warrant”, for example carries a detailed entry, including definitions, multiple senses and examples, for both noun and verb in the generalized dictionary, as well as the “financial”, “learners”, “kids”, and “law” dictionaries. It also includes the “run-on” “warrantless”, the only extra word from this study to be added to *Merriam-Webster* in the past four years (and even this is actually a “reincarnated” term).<sup>13</sup> This welter of information, coupled with the inevitable advertisements found across the Web, makes for a very daunting and confusing entry. It is also in stark contrast to the earlier format, which was extremely sparse.

In monolingual dictionaries like these we would expect to always see a definition given for a full entry, yet in rare instances this is not the case. For example “acedia” in the *OED*, rather than having a definition, simply has a cross-reference to an even earlier entry, “accidie”, a term borrowed from French, meaning “physical or mental slothfulness”.<sup>14</sup> This kind of cross-referencing appears most often in the *OED*, with only one instance in *Merriam-Webster*, that of “conurbation”. Figure 2 demonstrates this disparity, along with the many components which are used only by the *OED*, and which therefore serve to make the British-English dictionary significantly more comprehensive than its American-English counterpart.

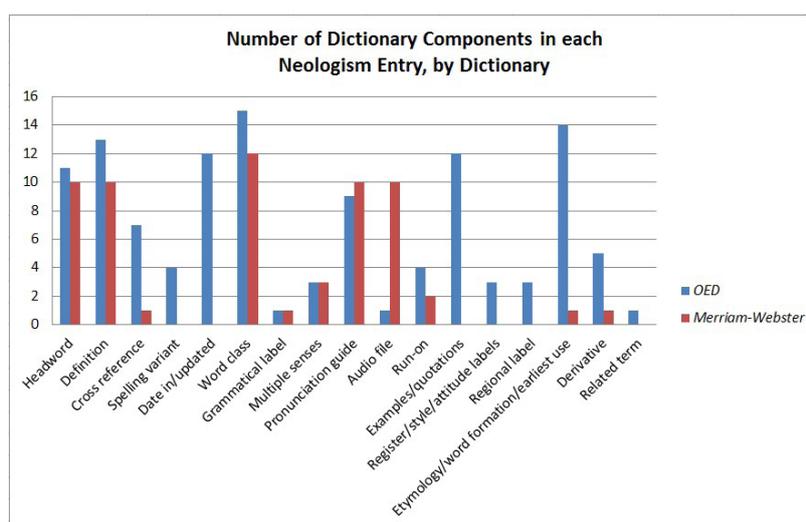


Figure 2: Total number of neologisms featuring each dictionary component, broken down by dictionary.

12 This means that the links from this paper to example entries are able to show only how the entry appears now, not the layout and degree of information that was present at the time of data collection. However in each case, the component or aspect being exemplified demonstrates the same characteristics, albeit in a different style, as it did previously.

13 See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/warrantless>.

14 See <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1068#eid39596420>.

The *Merriam-Webster* cross-reference from “conurbation” was to other dictionaries in the range, adding to the confusion surrounding this entry since one of those was the language learners’ dictionary, whose definition was already included without a label. As with all of the other neologism entries in the US dictionary, this has changed following the revisions to the site as a whole. In the *OED*, meanwhile, in most cases cross-references linked from an entry to the dictionary’s thesaurus function, as well as to alternate spellings, derivatives, related terms and grammatical information, thus making it easy to find a broad range of information, as Table 5 demonstrates.

Table 5: Cross-referencing in the *OED*.

Neologisms Containing Cross-Reference Links	Alternate Spelling	Thesaurus	Derivative	Related Word	Grammatical Information
acedia			Y		
bogof	Y				
hubristic		Y			
promissory note		Y			
tenebrous		Y			
upskill		Y		Y	Y
warrantless		Y	Y		Y

The *OED* has now also added frequency indicators to all of its neologism entries (except “run-ons”), to show how widely each word is used. This is another “non-standard” dictionary component, and one which *Merriam-Webster* does not use. Like the “audio file” change below, this is a dictionary-wide amendment, but it reinforces the pattern that the *OED* uses more non-standard components than *Merriam-Webster* does, and is further evidence of the *OED*’s more comprehensive approach to neologisms. Indeed, of the four non-standard components originally included in one or both of these dictionaries (“inclusion date”, “audio file”, and having “derivatives” or “related terms”), the *OED* used all except one (“audio files”) more than its American counterpart (see Figure 2). In the last few years the *OED* has added audio files to most of its neologism entries, while *Merriam-Webster* has made no change to its use of non-standard dictionary components, instead continuing to focus largely on the most basic of the standardized ones (see Figure 2).

One key addition it has made, however, is the introduction of examples, which it had previously not included in its neologism entries. These are now present for seven of its 12 entries: “conurbation”, “earworm”, “frenemy”, “greenwashing”, “promissory note”, “tenebrous” and “waterboarding”. The *OED*, meanwhile, carries “quotations” rather than “examples”. These quotations comprise attributed samples of the use of the word, and are generally drawn from Citation Banks made up of the kind of citations used in the attestation process described in section 2.2. They are also increasingly being complemented by examples from corpora (Atkins & Rundell 2008: 455). These quotations are present in all 15 of the *OED*’s neologism entries. *Merriam-Webster*’s new examples are generally, but not always, attributed, although in line with its position as a slightly more “current” dictionary it chooses to use the more common heading “examples”, and those included are usually quite recent and to be found on the internet.<sup>15</sup> However the presence of examples is still not consistent across *Merriam-Webster*, and this may be because their inclusion is so new. As mentioned above, it is believed that this change happened only very recently, and that prior to November 2017 these entries may have still been lacking examples of any kind. It may be that their addition is an ongoing process; certainly just two years ago none of the neologisms examined here were exemplified in *Merriam-Webster* online.

<sup>15</sup> See for example <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/frenemy>.

In terms of the quality of the components appearing in these two dictionaries, it is interesting to note that while most of the neologisms include pronunciation guidance, in the *OED* this takes the form of the widely-recognized IPA or International Phonetic Alphabet system, while *Merriam-Webster* appears to use its own bespoke guidance system. The symbols used are different both from IPA and from the usual alternative, SAMPA (Speech Assessment Methods Phonetic Alphabet). This makes the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary harder to use, since no key is given to the pronunciation symbols it uses. The *OED*, meanwhile provides links from the IPA guidance in each entry to a detailed IPA chart (although these are not hyperlinks (underlined and a different color), meaning it may be only by accident that users discover their presence). The *OED* is not without its problems with regard to pronunciation, however. Where a word can be pronounced in several different ways (sometimes giving multiple IPA versions in the two varieties of English), it occasionally gets them the wrong way around. For example, it is my view that the US- and the British-English IPA has been transposed in the entry for “frenemy”.

One of the dictionary components that we might expect to be of particular use in the current discussion would be that of regional labels. We might expect words which are considered especially “British” or “American” to carry the relevant geographical label. Indeed in the *OED*, both “warrantless” and “waterboarding” are labelled as being mainly used in the United States, yet *Merriam-Webster* does not carry similar labels, making its entries again slightly less comprehensive. Indeed none of its neologism entries uses regional labels. “Bogof” is labelled in the *OED* as being mainly used in Britain, and this term does not appear at all in *Merriam-Webster*. This lack of acceptance into the American-English dictionary may perhaps indicate that a different term is used in the US to promote “buy one get one free” deals in shops, or indeed that a whole raft of US-specific marketing and promotional vocabulary exists, making “bogof” irrelevant for a US audience. Perhaps similar reasons may explain why “rewilding” appears in the *OED* but not in *Merriam-Webster*. It may be that the idea of reclaiming land and returning it to its natural habitat has yet to gain currency in the US, or perhaps that a different term is used, one which has yet to enter British-English. Without further specific research on this topic it is impossible to know; however, if this is the case it offers some resistance to the widely-held belief that language flows from the United States to the United Kingdom, not least because of the prevalence of American television programming and music on British shores (see, for example, Anderson 2017). While these new words have not gained a place in this US dictionary, they have held their own and become sufficiently well established to gain acceptance into the *OED*.

While geographical information may not be as extensive as one would hope, *Merriam-Webster* has increased the amount of “etymological/word formation” information included in its neologism entries. New information has been added to eight neologisms which previously had none: “conurbation”, “earworm”, “frenemy”, “greenwashing”, “promissory note”, “tenebrous” and “waterboarding”. Finally, the *OED* has added several new words and senses to its webpages. A new sense for “earworm” has been included (a tune that you cannot get out of your head),<sup>16</sup> and entirely new entries have been added for “bankster” (a dishonest banker)<sup>17</sup> and “hyperlocal” (something extremely local).<sup>18</sup> These entered in March, December and June of 2015, respectively. Thus, while both dictionaries are clearly continuing to develop their neologism entries, it appears that *Merriam-Webster* is still (intentionally or simply due to a lack of data) limiting its new-word entries to only the more basic of components. The *OED*, meanwhile, is continuing to expand its “neologic” offering.

16 See <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/318883?rskey=sCYLzS&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

17 See <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/425803?rskey=SDWaju&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

18 See <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/34824186?redirectedFrom=hyperlocal#eid>.

## 4 Conclusion

As Former Chief Editor of *OED* John Simpson points out, “neologisms are a window both on language change and continuity” (2007: 147). From the discussion above it is clear that, despite the availability of “standardized” dictionary components which should enable information on new words to be presented uniformly and recognizably across all entries, there are significant differences in how the *OED* and *Merriam-Webster* dictionaries approach and treat new words. *Merriam-Webster* appears to take a very cautious approach to these terms, limiting its entries to basic components such as definitions, senses, word classes and pronunciation guidance. The *OED*, meanwhile, presents a broader and more comprehensive range of information in its entries, including geographical details, date information and quotations. Both dictionaries have experienced site-wide changes in the past few years, and for *Merriam-Webster* these mean that it is beginning to catch up with the *OED*, particularly in the areas of dating and examples. However it still has some way to go, and for the time being, it is the “historical” dictionary, and not the more “current” one which is leading the way with a more comprehensive approach and treatment of new words.

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