Words, words, words

A

I use hundreds, maybe even thousands of different words every day.

Many of them have been part of my vocabulary since early childhood, but the words that fascinate me are the other ones, the ones that didn’t even exist a few years ago. As the world changes, the vocabulary that we use moves on, too. In fact, experts tell us that at least 4,000 new English words are coined every year. Have you ever stopped to wonder where they come from and why they have the meanings that they do?

B

It’s no surprise that some of the new words come from another language, but I was amazed to find out that Modern English, which has evolved from Old English, has taken about 80% of its vocabulary from other sources: mostly from French and Latin, but also from an incredible 350 other languages. Some of these loan words are used because there is no existing word in English to cover the meaning. In Britain, we now watch Japanese manga cartoons, eat the Greek dish kleftiko, and blow a South African vuvuzela to cheer on a football team.

(1) People think Italian coffee tastes better than the coffee traditionally drunk in Britain, so they often use the Italian word americano to order a black coffee in a café.
Whenever we switch on a computer or mobile, we do things that were unheard of a few decades ago. Sometimes, the new language that we need for technology evolves by giving new meanings to old words. Hack used to mean chop or kick and this usage carries on today. But as the internet developed, the word also started to be used with the metaphorical meaning ‘access someone else’s computer illegally’. (2) There are also new compounds of existing words, for example, cloud computing (computer resources delivered over the internet) and digital footprint (the record left on the internet of all your online activity). And then there are those useful things, prefixes. Instead of receiving an old-fashioned card bought in a shop and sent in the mail, I might now receive an e-card bought in an e-shop and sent by email. While e- is an abbreviation of ‘electronic’, cyber- means ‘to do with the internet’: we often hear about cybercrime and cyberbullies in cyberspace. There’s often a need to rename the old technology, too. When email became popular, the mail with envelopes and stamps seemed very slow, so it got a new name: snail mail.

Sometimes words are invented by comedians and scriptwriters for comic reasons. (3) Take the adjective big, add on the prefix en- or em- and the suffix -en, and you have the funny-sounding word embiggen. Just as ensure means ‘make sure’ and widen means ‘make wider’, embiggen means ‘make bigger’. There are now more than 300,000 mentions of the word on the internet, in contexts ranging from fan fiction to physics!
When my friends are worrying about their exams, I might tell them to **chillax** (chill out + relax). If my parents keep on complaining about the clothes on my bedroom floor, I can say that I’m using a new storage system: a **floondrobe** (floor + wardrobe). I might even slip on a **mankini** (man + bikini) next time I go to the beach, but don’t hold your breath! Blending two words together like this enables us to create lots of fun new words, particularly in informal English.

**Soz** is a word that’s short for ‘sorry’ and **yolo** stands for ‘you only live once’. I sometimes use it as an excuse for doing something a bit crazy, for example, ‘I’ve just bought some £400 trainers ... yolo!’

Do you know your nouns from your verbs? Don’t be too sure. Nouns can easily be converted into verbs because in English, unlike in many other languages, verbs don’t have to have a special verb ending. These days I **friend** (make friends with) people on Facebook and watch sportspeople **medalling** (winning a medal) in the Olympics. This can even work with brand names. If I need to look up some information, I’ll **google** it.

All these changes in English vocabulary are great fun to listen out for and you might even want to make up some new words yourself. Go on, give it a try – it’s **fantabulous**!