
Urban dictionary: youth slanguage and the redefining of definition

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What's up with *meep* and other words in the Urban Dictionary

Introduction: the case of *meep*

In November 2009, Principal Thomas Murray banned the word *meep* from Danvers High School, located outside of Boston (Netter, 2009). Parents and students received automated e-mails and calls with a warning that saying or displaying the word *meep* would entail suspension. Students had ignored requests from teachers and administrators to stop, leading to the school-wide ban. This story contains entertaining elements: an overzealous principal who forwarded emails containing *meep* to the police; references to the meeping Muppet, Beaker; students sporting 'FREE MEEP' t-shirts; and Facebook-coordinated meepings. Referring to *meep*, Danvers High School student Mike Spiewak commented: 'I think it's unfair that they banned a word that's not even a real word' (Raz, 2009). According to Melanie Crane, another Danvers student, *meep* 'doesn't mean anything in particular' (Netter, 2009). As a result, its ambiguity allows for countless definitions. The authoritative source in defining the term throughout news coverage of the Danvers incident has been *Urbandictionary.com*, an online and open-source dictionary for slang and subculture terminology. For those of you who have never *meeped*, the primary Urban Dictionary (UD) entry deems it 'the most versatile word in the English language [which] can mean whatever you want it to mean.' UD lists 93 other definitions for the word, the most popular being:¹

1. A greeting!
Meep! How are you?

2. Filling in the blanks where other (curse) words would go.
Ahh.. Meeping Hell!
3. The only sound Beaker from the Muppets makes.
meep meep meep meep!
4. This is a word which is used when you are at lack of what to say.
...meep... ^ ^
5. An exclamation akin to 'ouch' or 'uh oh'; a noise someone makes when you poke/prod them.
I poked Tom in the stomach, and he meeped.
6. The human expression of confusion just as 'beep' is the computer expression of confusion.
Computer: CANNOT FIND SERVER (beep beep beep beep)
Human: ...Meep.



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7. Meep is a word used to describe someone who is looking adorably cute.
AWE! you are such a meep all huddled up that i just want to hug you!!

New linguistic derivations of *meep* proliferated in the face of the ban as *meepsters* called for a *mass-meeping* to cause some *meepalicious meep-ruption*. Students expressed their disapproval of the ban, coining phrases like ‘*may the meep inherit the earth,*’ ‘*meep against the machine!*’ ‘*Jesus mept*’ and the rousing ‘*WAKE UP MEEPLE!*’

Such original linguistic forms have circulated online, among the fifty Facebook groups celebrating *meep* and hundreds of cross-linked blogs and tweets. Googling the term brings up 826,000 results and searching for it on Bing yields 669,000 hits. But the story also moved beyond the online realm, meriting both national and international press coverage, the vast majority of which has turned to Urban Dictionary as *the* authority on youth language. And so while some dismissed *meep* as not a real word, it turned out to be a very real word with very real consequences for Principal Murray. For the students of Danvers High School, *meep* meant a defiance of authority; it conveyed the intention to follow rules only when students felt like doing so and it was this that in the end rendered a harmless Muppet sound just as threatening as a curse word.

The case of *meep* highlights the intersection of youth language and the internet with semantics, illustrating the evolving processes that lie behind verbal signification and its presupposed boundary between language and non-language, between ‘sense’ and ‘nonsense.’ How was this division historically created and how is it maintained? In recent years, the internet has provided users with a new domain in which to challenge such language hierarchies. How can we understand the internet as a social site for youth to question dominant language paradigms and ideologies? Exploring these questions through an analysis of Urban Dictionary reveals the hierarchical divisions between words and words that aren’t ‘real words,’ as Spiewak commented in the case of *meep*. Further, it demonstrates how young people are using the internet to seize the rights to lexicographic meaning-making and redefine the process of definition.

Lexifascists and prescriptibitches

Urban Dictionary defines these terms as follows.

Lexifascist: *An asshole who corrects others’ language. Rather than let slip a mispronounced*

or misused word, the lexifascist pounces with a correction. Usually this is done with an uppity attitude.

Prescriptibitch: *Someone who is militant about correcting grammar mistakes. Evil. Usually has no friends.*

To understand how Urban Dictionary subverts traditional lexicography, we will first explore the historical development of modern European rationalist language ideology. To do this, I want to quickly look at the social and linguistic processes in modernizing Europe that naturalized the relationship between ‘language,’ ‘semantics,’ and ‘sense.’ David Samuels traces this ideology to 16th- and 17th-century Europe and the rise of colonialism and modern nationalism. This ‘Age of Exploration’ was a time of increased contact with new languages and peoples. It yielded interpersonal and interlinguistic problems of communication and gave rise to Eurocentric perspectives on sense and nonsense, bringing them to the center of European thought about the world (Samuels, 2004: 316).

Against this backdrop of colonialism, nationalism emerged in attempts to create cultural unity out of diverse populations and practices. In promoting nationalism, the rationality of modernity strove to contain heterogeneity by seizing language, to stabilize and normativize semantic meaning, and to promote semantic meaning as the keystone of what language is for (Samuels, 2004: 303). At this time, language practices came under intense policy and policing, resulting in the creation of national standard languages. These standardizations excised heterogeneity and utterances that threatened the clarity or transparency of modern rational language (Samuels, 2004), including slang (Green, 1996). This pursuit for linguistic purity found fulfillment in early lexicography, which solidified meaning as strictly semantic meaning. This was cemented in references for, as Samuels comments, ‘If rationalists considered “language” to be some form of social-contractual arrangement between speakers, then dictionaries, grammars, and pronunciation guides put that contract in writing’ (Samuels, 2004: 302). Dictionaries enshrined standard language in texts, despite the number of mistakes or omissions, rather than in the linguistic and communicative competence of the speakers who use the language daily (Milroy & Milroy, 1991). And so, sense came to mean semantic sense, promoting a more rational and less sensual ideology that language is for clear and transparent communication only, an ideology that endures among prescriptibitches

today. And it's from such a paradigm that emerges the belief that if a word does not fall within the narrow confines of such a strict interpretation of meaning, it's 'not even a real word.'

The rivalry between prescriptivists and descriptivists continues to play out in contemporary lexicography as dictionaries struggle to draw the line between acceptable words and those 'that aren't even real words.' Prescriptivists decry the all-inclusiveness and democratic approach of descriptivists, which they interpret as a lack of responsibility; descriptivists see speakers themselves as linguistic authorities and look down on the narrow-mindedness and misinformed purism of prescriptivists (Crystal, 2006). According to one Urban Dictionary author, the role of a prescriptivist dictionary is 'to cramp the growth of a language and make it hard and inelastic.' Other definitions for the entry **Dictionary** include:

1. *A stepstool; a flyswatter; a paperweight; a doorstop; firewood*
2. *A thick book loaded with words an average individual will probably never use in her/his life and that thinks its always right*
3. *Apparently it was an archaic form of looking up words before spell check and Wikipedia.*
4. *A large book containing only 'real' words, their 'correct' spellings and their (far-less-entertaining-than-urban-dictionary) definitions.*

The Urban Dictionary stands as an alternative to this prescriptivist tradition as an online democratic dictionary shaped by the masses.

By publishing definitions written by the wider population, regardless of how rational or intelligible they may be, Urban Dictionary stands as what Samuels refers to as a 'practice of incomprehensibility.' These are practices that 'disrespect the master trope of modernity that language is a tool for clear and transparent communication.' Throughout the development of prescriptive language rules and standard varieties, marginalized social and linguistic groups have contested modern European rationalist language ideology through such practices. These practices, such as *vocables*, *skat*, and puns, perform the tension between meaning and nonsense that modernity sets up. It is practices like these that have been dismissed as 'novelties,' 'nonsense,' or 'jokes' because they subvert this naturalized relation between language and rationality. While some may see the counter-processes of Urban Dictionary as producing 'nonsense' or 'words that aren't real words,' it is this that renders it a contemporary practice of incomprehensibility. This discussion will now give a

quick analysis of Urban Dictionary to better understand how it stands as an alternative to the traditional lexicographic paradigm by pushing this boundary between sense and nonsense.

What is the Urban Dictionary?

Urban Dictionary: *A potentially useful website for defining words Webster denies the existence of [...]*

One means by which youth have historically contested their diminished communication capital (Thurlow, 2001 after Bourdieu, 1991) has been through nonstandard language practices such as slang. Conceiving UD as 'the anti-dictionary,' moderator Aaron Peckham created it to emphasize *slanguage* and regionalisms. UD defines *slanguage* in the following way:

Slanguage:

1. *Internet speak, usually very ugly in nature and makes every grammar nazi's eyes bleed*
2. *Word or phrase that is actually slang, but idiots confuse for real words; any word found in the dictionary that should not be there because it is improper English*

These definitions indicate the growing connection between slang and the internet as youth increasingly base their informal register on technological practices. Further, it displays the identification of slang as nonsense, as language that 'idiots confuse for real words.'

Since UD's inception in December 1999, more than 2.5 million authors have submitted over 5.5 million definitions (Peckham, 2009). Once these are published, visitors vote on whether the words are acceptable and have done so in the past decade 88 million times. Urban Dictionary has gained such popularity that Peckham has released two books based on the website in 2005 and 2007. And its momentum has hardly flagged. In the last year alone, 146 million people visited UrbanDictionary.com 260 million times. With young users visiting by the millions, it has taken its place among the internet greats such as Google, Wikipedia, Facebook, Myspace, and Youtube, that have defined this generation. Urban Dictionary promotes itself as a democratic, descriptive dictionary authored by the people for the people. The headline, splashed across the homepage, states, 'Urban Dictionary is the dictionary you wrote, *Define Your World*'. As a collaborative, web-based project, Urban Dictionary allows anyone with an internet connection to participate

in the authoring, compiling, editing, and publishing processes. Cotter and Damaso (2007) have pointed out two effects of this: Replacing the historically singular authoritative editor with non-specialist, large-scale group action has resulted in the publishing of ‘popular and divergent views, as opposed to authorized and uniform views of meaning.’ It also creates what they call the ‘user-author’, ‘a rare symbiosis between language user and lexicographer.’

In addition to process, UD challenges traditional dictionaries through its web technology, which allows for real-time publishing and encyclopedic entries. They do not provide information about parts of speech, pronunciation guides, etymologies, or standard punctuation and spelling which UD defines in the following way:

Spelling: 1) a lost art 2) something absent from the internet
It's 'you,' not 'u.' IT'S ONLY 2 MORE CHARACTERS.

UD is also teeming with made-up entries and redundancies, duplicates, and multiple identical definitions for the same headword. But it is also the entries that challenge traditional lexicography, as one blogger put it, written by the millions of people who obviously are ‘smart but do not apply themselves in class’ (Feather, 2007). These definitions fall into 4 categories:

Example 1: Standard words with standard definitions

Internet: *A world wide network of computers all linked together over the TCP/IP protocol.*
 I can look up stuff on the Internet using Google.

Example 2: Standard words with non-standard definitions

Internet: *A web of confusion, dismay, and pornography*
 I did a search for ‘World History’ on the internet and I received 500 results: all pornography.

Example 3: New words comprising completely new morphemes

Meh: *This is a universal, non-committal answer to every question ever posed.*
It's the answer that doesn't actually give any answer; the verbal equivalent of a shrug of the shoulders.
 I'm supposed to write an example here but . . . meh.

Another example of this third type of definition is *meeep*. The fourth category comprises portmanteaus:

Example 4: New words that combine old morphemes for new meanings

Sacrelicious: 1) *a description of a recipe that should not exist for religious reasons but tastes good anyway*

2) *any cooking done with communion wafers*

Try some Matzo crackers and bacon dip – it's sacrelicious.

This final type of definition is the most common found on Urban Dictionary as witty wordplay is so highly valued by users. Indeed, entries are often likely to be ad-hoc neologisms, invented just for an Urban Dictionary *neologasm*.

Neologasm: *the intensely pleasurable sensations generated by using, hearing or coining a new word or phrase (that doesn't suck). Frequent neologasms have been proven to reduce the biological age of both the speaker and the listener.*

Him: Volunteers submit over 1000 new definitions to Urban dictionary every day. It ain't fo the money; it's all about the neologasms.

Her: Oh baby!

And some entries seem to make little sense at all:

GABBLAAHHH

When you get exploded into millions of gibs and stuff but u have time to talk and what u say is GABBLAAHHH.

*LameKid: *gets puched in stomach**
LameKid: GABBLAAHHH!

MEEP

The most widely known word of the Meepers. They live among us, in us, and around us. They explode into your words at random times, not caring where you are or how random it will sound.

*Person: So as I was saying, **the** problem of global warm-MEEP.*

kldjvldlawkvdlkawvldkalks

kimchi loads dice javalin voice love addicted drugs lime aware waking korea vallium dancing long karate after we vikings lick kill dogs all life kinky survival.

Oh, did you hear? kldjvldlawkvdlkawvldkalks

As we can see, this is in contrast to most other dictionaries that strive for objectivity, for, as Peckham comments, ‘Urban Dictionary doesn't require definitions to be objective or factual. Lots of definitions are extremely subjective or provably wrong! But every definition is written by a normal person, and I think that's where Urban Dictionary's value comes from: the entries are funny, honest and

genuine' (Phillips, 2008). In subverting the process, form, and content of standard dictionaries, UD provides an alternative to prescriptivist norms and practices as well as the way in which an entire generation is thinking about language.

Conclusions

Conclusion: *The place where you got tired of thinking*

This discussion has tried to gain a deeper understanding of how the internet is redefining lexicography and challenging Bourdieu's notion of 'legitimate language' (Bourdieu, 1991). Urban Dictionary connects a global youth population that has repositioned itself as lexicographers able to make and review linguistic meanings. It provides them with an 'online, democratic scriptorium where neologisms and slang are explicated, tried out and rated' (*The Guardian*, 2008). And while most entries fade away, some reveal themselves as *mots justes*, moving from Urban Dictionary to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), as in the case of words like *bromance* and *chillax*, which were added to the OED this past year.

Though standard lexicography remains fundamentally based on prescriptive ideology, it is slowly changing. Many dictionaries now accept neologisms for Words of the Year. They base new entries on popular polls, internet searches for current usage, and email submissions by the general public. And as traditional dictionaries digitize, unlimited space and real-time updates expedite the process by which words go mainstream. This shift in paradigm for traditional lexicography thus indicates an increasing openness to new words, moving from a model historically based on rationality, analogy, logic, and etymology to one based more on usage. By slowly increasing entries to reflect popular and current usage, prescriptivist dictionaries have begun to acknowledge speakers, rather than solely texts, as sources of authority. And much of that authority is now coming from Urban Dictionary.

The 'practices of incomprehensibility' that pervade Urban Dictionary – its nonstandard orthography and punctuation, lack of standard grammar, multiple definitions, ad-hoc neologisms, and other nonstandard entries – are attacked by critics as sabotaging the validity and efficaciousness of Urban Dictionary. However, it is these practices that carry 'indexical criticism of mainstream coherence in its wake,' as Samuels states (Samuels, 2004: 316). It is through such practices of incomprehensibility that we come to realize that the

problem of European rationalist language ideology is that meaning wins out – over ambiguity, nonsense, and poetics – blinding us to significant linguistic and semiotic practices that pose ideological challenges to prescriptivist ideology (Samuels, 2004). *Meep* is significant not only because it defied Danvers school authorities, but because it also defies prescriptivist lexicography through being defined by the online masses. But most importantly, *meep* defies European rationalist language ideology through its myriad definitions, defying semantic meaning as the true purpose of language.

The true value of Urban Dictionary thus arises in the ways in which it has begun to free language from the all-too-binding prescriptivist language ideologies and lexicography that embrace some linguistic forms as meaningful while denouncing others as nonsense. It is not that we should do away with meaning, just that we must understand these language ideologies as historically situated and politically constructed. Urban Dictionary stands as just one resource that has called these ideologies into question, allowing users to expand their understanding of meaning in reevaluating how language is defined and bringing this perspective to the public realm. Though not suggesting that youth will overthrow the standard and replace the OED with Urban Dictionary, this research indicates an expansion of perspective in assessing the rights to words and meaning-making that has spread from youth outwards through Urban Dictionary.

Thus, in addition to challenging traditional lexicography and participating in a paradigm shift, Urban Dictionary stands as a reminder that we must only reassess our language valuations to broaden our perspective and include the previously ignored. Through tracing the historical development of modern rationalist language ideologies and observing the events and processes by which they have come to dominate contemporary lexicography, we may begin to recognize the ways in which they continue to restrain us today. ■

Note

1 Please note that all given definitions and examples are copied directly from UD, intentionally maintaining all grammar choices of the authors.

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