

Have You Been Bigging It Up?

Why is today's language so inflated? Why do we need to exaggerate words that stand up perfectly well on their own? This tendency to 'big up' what we say is one of the trends explored in Susie Dent's eagerly awaited annual round-up of the latest linguistic novelties and shifts in the English language: *fanboys and overdogs: the language report*.

Published on 6 October 2005 by Oxford University Press, it is compiled with the help of the language monitoring programme behind the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

According to Susie Dent, 'talking up' is nothing new, and yet it looks to be on the increase and to be becoming one of the most significant linguistic trends of the moment. Great acts today are performed not just by heroes, but by superheroes; nothing is ever simply 'good': it is **OVA-WICKED**, or **UBERBUFF**; government appointees are **TSARS**, and experts are **MEISTERS**. Such supersizing of language can be found in job titles too: receptionists carry the lofty title of **HEAD OF VERBAL COMMUNICATIONS**, while shelf-stackers are **STOCK REPLENISHMENT EXECUTIVES**. And watch out for the relentless positivism in business and political jargon, in which **FALLING FORWARD** is learning from your mistakes, public spending is cleverly couched as **PUBLIC INVESTMENT**, and situations are no longer complicated: they are **NUANCED**. In restaurants, our food is not just cooked: it is **CRISPED**, **SEARED**, **GLAZED**, **TRUFFLED**, and even **LACQUERED**.

Visibly different?

Appearance is, as ever, high on the list of things that generates new vocabulary. Today's fashion-conscious male may well be carrying a **MANBAG** (or **MURSE**); if on the other hand they are a **FANBOY**, they will be too taken up with their chosen passion for comic books or computer games even to consider their appearance at all. Cosmetics companies are also playing with language in an attempt to appeal to our vanity. Lipstick – or **LIP-GUNK** or **GOO** – is no longer 'dusky rose' or 'pillar box': the new colour choices range from **ASPHYXIA** to **STRAY DOG**. Face creams, meanwhile, promise – rather puzzlingly – to make us **FEEL VISIBLY DIFFERENT**.

Our puzzled nation

The leading candidate for **Word of the Year** – the one that has ignited the nation's interest and filled its newspapers – reveals a picture of

bowed heads, intense concentration, and quietly scratching pencils. It is of course **SUDOKU** (sometimes *sudoku* or *su-doku*), the logic puzzle with the Japanese name, which has knocked the crossword off its pedestal as Britain's favourite coffee-break activity.

Here are some more 2005 words and phrases in the news:

Political phrase of the year: DOG-WHISTLE POLITICS - a political strategy of using language intended to rouse a specific audience without disturbing the rest of the electorate, in the same way that a high-pitched dog whistle is only audible to some dogs.

Catchphrase of the year: THE ONLY GAY IN THE VILLAGE, from the British comedy series *Little Britain*, is now a formula: take out 'gay' and you can put in lesbian/bisexual/catholic/Tory/socialist/liberal or indeed any other group you can think of.

Musical word of the year: CRUNK (probably a blend of 'crazy' and 'drunk'), America's hottest urban style of Southern hip-hop, is the newest trend on the musical horizon. Look out for **CRUNK'N'B** and **CRUNK ROCK**.

Nastiest phrase of the year: HAPPY SLAPPING, the recording on a mobile phone camera of an attack on a stranger by a group of young people - one of 2005's most unwelcome additions to our vocabulary.

Then and Now: 1905 vs. 2005

fanboys and overdogs takes a look beyond highly topical words to consider those that represent the past hundred years. A comparison of the new words of 1905 and 2005 suggests in some cases giant leaps of imagination and, in others, a remarkable consistency. If at the beginning of the twentieth century suffragettes were in the news, the turn of the new century brought us **LADETTE** and **DUDETTE**. 1905 saw **TRUNK MURDERS** and **STAGGER JUICE**; today the talk is more of **HOOPTIES** and **CUDDLE PARTIES**. Such words give us a remarkable insight into the social preoccupations of their time. And yet some things don't change: were **HIGH FINANCE** and **BIG BUSINESS**, both coined a hundred years ago, simply early examples of **BIGGING UP**?

Read about these and hundreds of other new words and phrases, language trends, catchphrases, headlines, and slogans that have gripped our nation in 2005 in *fanboys and overdogs: the language report* by Susie Dent.

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Susie Dent, who has dedicated *fanboys and overdogs* to her friend the late Richard Whiteley, with whom she spent over ten years on *Countdown* testing the nation's love of words, is available for interview. For more information contact Sarah Kidd on 01865 353911 or email sarah.kidd@oup.com