

# Merriam-Webster names 'culture' word of the year

December 15 2014, by Leanne Italie

---



This Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2014 photo shows the word "culture" in the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, in New York. Merriam-Webster has named "culture" its 2014 word of the year. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

A nation, a workplace, an ethnicity, a passion, an outsized personality. The people who comprise these things, who fawn or rail against them, are behind Merriam-Webster's 2014 word of the year: culture.

The word joins Oxford Dictionaries' "vape," a darling of the e-cigarette movement, and "exposure," declared the year's winner at Dictionary.com

during a time of tragedy and fear due to Ebola.

Merriam-Webster based its pick and nine runners-up on significant increases in lookups this year over last on Merriam-Webster.com, along with notable, often culture-driven—if you will—spikes of concentrated interest.

In the No. 2 spot is "nostalgia," during a year of big 50th anniversaries pegged to 1964: the start of the free speech movement, the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the birth of the Ford Mustang and the British Invasion heralded by the landing of the Beatles on U.S. soil for the first time.

Nostalgia was followed by insidious, legacy, feminism and a rare multiword phrase that can be looked up in total, in a foreign language at that: the French "je ne sais quoi."

The Springfield, Massachusetts-based dictionary giant filters out perennial favorites when picking word of the year, but does that formula leave them chasing language fads?

"We're simply using the word culture more frequently," said Peter Sokolowski, editor at large for Merriam-Webster. "It may be a fad. It may not. It may simply be evolution."

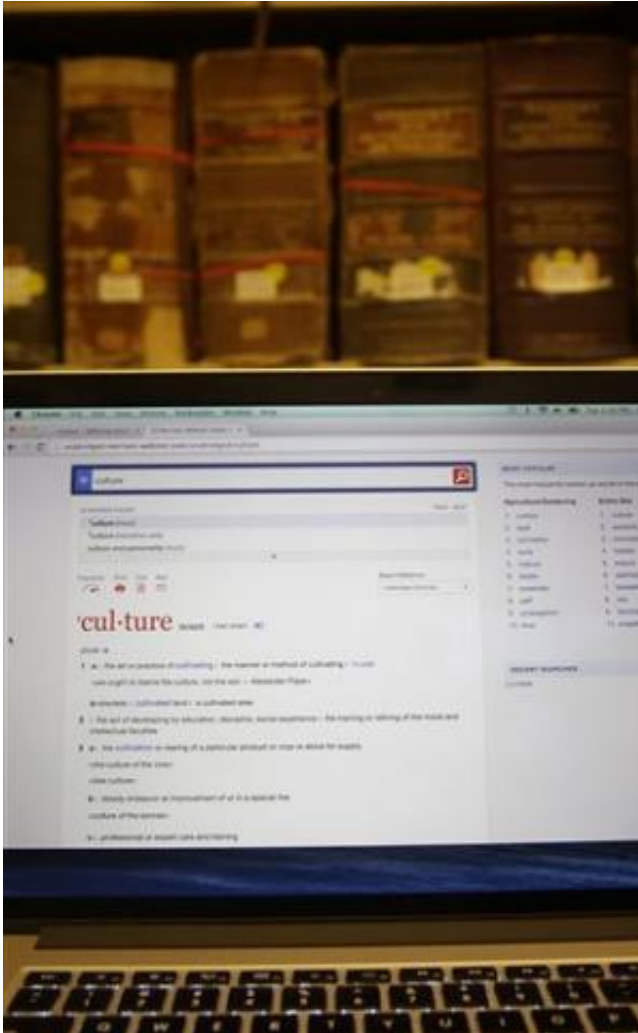
Sokolowski noted that the reasons words are looked up aren't just about not knowing what they mean. Sometimes, he said, we seek inspiration or a way to check in on ourselves. Of more than 100 million lookups on the website each month and a similar number on the company's app, culture enjoyed a 15 percent year-over-year increase.

Percentage-wise, it doesn't sound like much, but the raw number in that stratosphere is large, Sokolowski said. He wouldn't disclose actual

numbers, though, citing the proprietary nature of that data for a company still privately held.

Sokolowski is a lexicographer, not a mind reader, so his observations about why any single word takes off in terms of lookups is well-informed but theoretical.

"The word culture's got a cultural story. We have noticed for years that culture has a cyclical spike every year at around Labor Day. That is to say back to school time during the month of September, so we've been watching this word spike at that time for years," he said by telephone from Springfield. "In recent years we've seen similar spikes at the end of semesters during finals."



This Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2014 photo shows Merriam-Webster's 2014 word of the year, "culture," on the Merriam-Webster website in front of old volumes of the dictionary at the dictionary publisher's offices in Springfield, Mass. Merriam-Webster based its pick and nine runners-up on significant increases in lookups this year over last at its homepage, Merriam-Webster.com. (AP Photo/Stephan Savoia)

But traffic throughout the year indicates that culture is a "chameleon," Sokolowski said. "When you put it next to another word it means something very different. For example, 'consumer culture' or 'rape culture,' which we've been reading about lately."

There's the "culture of transparency" in government and business, and "celebrity culture," and the "culture of winning" in sports, he noted. "It's a word that can be very specific, like 'test prep culture,' or it can be very, very broad, like 'coffee culture.'"

One standout reference that caught Sokolowski's eye in The New Yorker's December issue is from a new book, "How Google Works," which includes a description of a software fix by a few engineers that made ads more relevant on the search engine:

"It wasn't Google's culture that turned those five engineers into problem-solving ninjas who changed the course of the company over the weekend," wrote the authors, former Google CEO Eric Schmidt and former head of product development Jonathan Rosenberg.

"Rather it was the culture that attracted the ninjas to the company in the first place."

Before the word culture exploded, Sokolowski said, "we used to talk about 'society' a lot. Certain groups are taking 'society' out of their names now. It seems to be receding. Part of that seems to be because it's elitist. We're using the word culture more frequently in that place."

Not all lookup spikes are quite that complex. The reason "je ne sais quoi" landed at No. 6, for instance, is "dead simple," he said.

The fast-food drive-in chain Sonic, known for TV spots featuring two goofy dudes eating in a car, had them munching on boneless chicken wings in September.

"I've finally found myself a wingman," goofy guy No. 1 says of the wings he hopes will make him a chick magnet.



This Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2014 photo shows Merriam-Webster's 2014 word of the year, "culture," on the Merriam-Webster smartphone app and the dictionary's culture page at the dictionary publisher's offices in Springfield, Mass. Merriam-Webster based its pick and nine runners-up on significant increases in lookups this year over last at its homepage, Merriam-Webster.com. (AP Photo/Stephan Savoia)

"Oh right," sneers goofy guy No. 2, "gonna give you that certain je ne sais quoi."

Responds No. 1: "Jenna said what?"

They mine the word play a couple more times, but you get the picture.

"Since September when this ad came out this word has been close to the Top 10 or in the Top 10 of our lookups almost every single day,"

Sokolowski said.

Fast-food aside, he called this year's list a relatively sober one.



In this Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2014 photo, a Merriam-Webster dictionary sits atop their citation files for the 2014 word of the year, "culture," at the dictionary publisher's offices in Springfield, Mass. Citation files are notations of a word used in context over time. Merriam-Webster based its pick and nine runners-up on significant increases in lookups this year over last at its homepage, Merriam-Webster.com. (AP Photo/Stephan Savoia)

Insidious, for example, received a bump early in the year when a new trailer was released for "Insidious: Chapter 3," a prequel in the horror film franchise "Insidious," out in June. The word surfaced in a big way again, on Oct. 8, when a Texas hospital released a statement on the death of Thomas Eric Duncan, the first confirmed Ebola patient in the United

States.

The statement spoke of his courageous battle and the hospital's profound sadness when he "succumbed to an insidious disease, Ebola."

Rounding out the Top 10 are innovation, surreptitious, autonomy and morbidity.

"This is a fairly sober list. It was a fairly sober year," he concluded.

© 2014 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Merriam-Webster names 'culture' word of the year (2014, December 15) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-12-dictionary-culture-word-year.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.