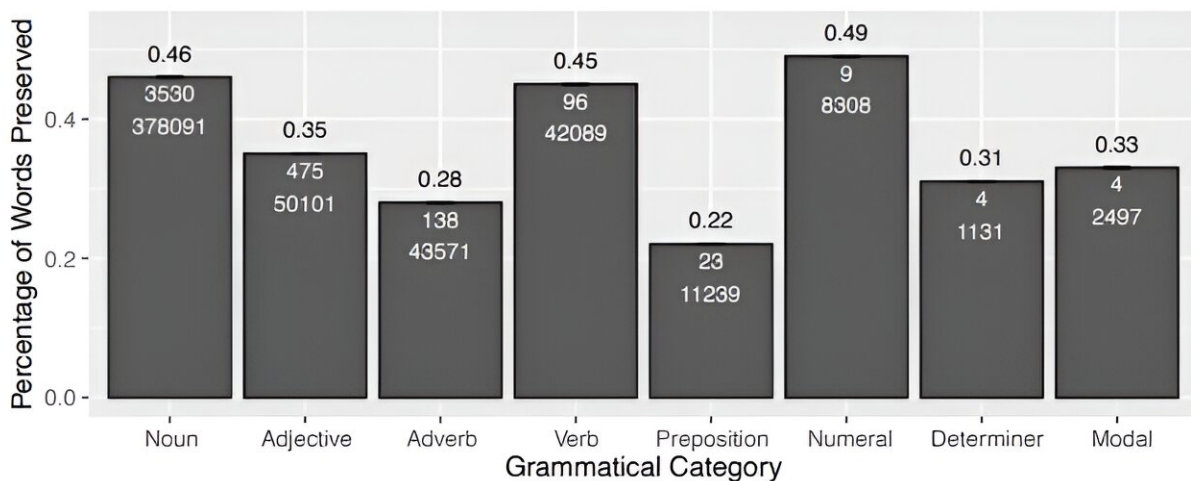


Survival of the fittest: Words like 'sex' and 'fight' are most likely to stand the test of time

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The percentage of words preserved in story retelling task by grammatical category. The text label from top to bottom respectively represents the percentages of word preservation, number of word types and number of word tokens in the corresponding grammatical categories. Credit: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2220898120

New research from the University of Warwick reveals that words like "sex" endure in our language in a "survival of the fittest" way, similar to natural selection.

While the recent announcement of Word of the Year explores new words, like "rizz" or "situationship," Professor Thomas Hills' research

delves into why some words survive in our modern linguistic landscape, while others don't.

The study concludes that words with the strongest lasting power are:

- Words acquired earlier in life
- Words associated with things people can see or imagine, termed "concrete" words. For example, "cat" is more concrete than "animal," which is more concrete than "organism"
- Words that are more arousing, including words like "sex" and "fight"

Academics suggest that these findings shed light on how the [human brain processes](#) and filters information—a process known as "cognitive selection." This becomes crucial in today's world, where various information forms continually compete for our attention.

Thomas Hills is professor of Psychology at the University of Warwick and an author of the study, "How cognitive selection affects [language change](#)," which is [published](#) in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*.

Hills said, "Information is a complex organism, constantly evolving as it undergoes cognitive selection within our minds. Languages change due to social, cultural, and cognitive influences. Information environments evolve due to war, disease, population changes, and technological innovations. However, the mind remains relatively stable, capable of exerting lasting impacts on language evolution. This cognitive selection influences what, in an information marketplace, will endure.

"Our study finds that properties like early acquisition, concreteness, and arousal give linguistic information a selective advantage."

The first study involved a story-retelling experiment where more than 12,000 people were asked to retell a collection of thousands of short stories, each on average 200 words long. For the second part of the study, psychologists analyzed millions of [words](#) of language from fiction and non-fiction books, newspapers, and magazines, over hundreds of years, from 1800 to 2000.

More information: Ying Li et al, How cognitive selection affects language change, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2220898120](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2220898120)

Provided by University of Warwick

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