

And the word of the year is... Well, there's not one

For many of us, there's not one word that can sum up the events of 2020. Oxford Languages thinks there are too many and have rather launched the publication of a language report: *Words of an Unprecedented Year 2020*.



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Just like our daily lives, the English language has undergone enormous change over the past year, adapting rapidly and repeatedly to world events. Words that a year ago we couldn't have imagined ourselves using are now part of everyday lexicon.

The Words of an Unprecedented Year report allows the team at Oxford Languages to share the evidence-based data they have at their fingertips to track and analyse the unfolding story. While we all hope for more stability in 2021, recording and analysing new words and their uses offers unique insight into understanding the current situation and navigating these 'unprecedented times.'

Previously, the Oxford Word of the Year has been selected as a word or expression shown through usage evidence to reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of the past twelve months, and to have potential as a term of lasting cultural significance. Using this as a starting point for considering the themes that have dominated 2020, there's perhaps only one place to begin...

Dating back to the 1960s, **coronavirus** was previously mainly used by scientific and medical specialists but, by April 2020, it had become one of the most frequently used nouns in the English language, exceeding even the usage of the word time. By May, it had been surpassed by **Covid-19**.

The arrival of the **pandemic** (a word which has seen usage increase by over 57,000% this year) has undoubtedly brought with it a language of its own, revitalising existing words and introducing us to new ones.

Depending on where you are in the world, you may have experienced a **circuit breaker**, **lockdown**, or have been asked to **shelter-in-place**, all words that saw huge increases in usage from March. Many of us formed support **bubbles** or **pods**, started to wear **face masks** or **face coverings**, and became familiar with calling medics, delivery drivers, and supermarket staff **key workers**, **frontliners**, or **essential workers**.

Technology and remote working

The pandemic has also sparked a revolution in our working habits. Two words that have seen more than a 300% usage growth since March are **remote** and **remotely**. **Got a meeting? Best ensure you are not on mute (along with unmute, this has seen a significant rise in usage this year). Need a change of scene? Take a workation (a holiday in which one also works) or book a staycation, holidaying at home or in your home country. Both words have seen increase in usage, almost 500% and 380% respectively.**

Social movements, social media and politics

Despite our inability to gather in large numbers in 2020, the year saw a surge in demonstrations and activism that is reflected in our language. In June, **Black Lives Matter**, and the abbreviated **BLM**, surged in usage and have remained high since.

Use of conspiracy theory has almost doubled between October 2019 and October 2020 and use of the term **QAnon** has increased by a massive 960% over the same period. Which brings us to the language of politics.

While the early months of the year saw large peaks in the usage of impeachment and acquittal, the latter has been dominated by words such as **mail-in** (which has seen an increase of 3,000% compared to 2019). And what goes up must come down... **Brexit** saw an 80% reduction in usage this year.

The environment

The pandemic has meant that climate change has not received nearly the amount of media coverage it has in previous years. However, precisely because of Covid-19, we have seen the introduction of a new word - **anthropause**, referring to the global slowdown of travel and other human activity and the subsequent welcome consequences, such as a decrease in light and noise pollution.

Casper Grathwohl, president of Oxford Dictionaries, says, "I've never witnessed a year in language like the one we've just had. The Oxford team was identifying hundreds of significant new words and usages as the year unfolded, dozens of which would have been a slam dunk for Word of the Year at any other time. It's both unprecedented and a little ironic— in a year that left us speechless, 2020 has been filled with new words unlike any other."

Download the Oxford Languages Words of an Unprecedented Year report at <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2020/>

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