

## English marks a million

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### Or does it? John Grimond has some infrequently offered answers



James Sillavan

Some events in 2009 may be more momentous, but surely not many: on April 29th the number of words in the English language will pass 1m. This astonishing fact prompts a host of frequently asked questions or, as wordsmiths call them, FAQs.

First, who says—or, in tabloid (this meaning coined in 1902) journalese (1882), who sez? The answer is the Global Language Monitor, a company based in Austin, Texas. It keeps an eye on the use of language, especially English, and tracks changes.

And by what authority does the Global Language Monitor say a new coinage is a genuine new word? None. Some countries, such as France and Spain, have academies that claim the right to regulate their national languages, and to repel invasive terms, usually from English. Neither England nor the United States attempts such an exercise in futility. English is a mongrel language that keeps its vitality by absorbing new words, uses and expressions. It promiscuously plunders other languages and delights in neologisms. It is the language of free traders and inventive entrepreneurs such as the staff of the Global Language Monitor.

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## Stick to the FAQs

So is it really a fact that English will have 1m words on the predicted date in April? Of course not. For a start, the global monitors explain that the actual date could be five days either side of April 29th. Then they say that English already has well over 1m words, if you accept the statement in the introduction to the Merriam-Webster dictionary that the language contains “many times” the 450,000 words it lists. Yet the Oxford dictionary lists only half as many.

Who’s right? How many words are there? That depends on what counts as a word. Should “write”, “writes”, “wrote”, “written” count as four words or one? If one, what about “be”, “am”, “are”, “is”, “was”, “were”? What about the numberless words with different meanings? Should “set” and “stock”, for instance, each count as one, though their meanings are manifold? And what of winespeak, computer drivel and other jargon?

Och aye, and whit about Scots? Yes, English gathers variants as it travels and, my, how it has travelled. Is the Scots “thrapple” just the same as the English “thropple” (throat)? Is the Australian “donkasaurus” (car engine) English or Australian or Greek?

Come to that, what about all the words that English picks up abroad? “Hobson-Jobson”, written in 1886, lists over 2,000 Anglo-Indian expressions. “Shampoo” and “bungalow” have certainly earned their place in the English dictionary, but what of the Hindi “dam”, the Indian coin once used in English phrases like “I don’t give a dam” but now consigned to history or misspelt, and so misunderstood, as “damn”? Or what of “roué”, a “French” word common enough in English but now almost unknown in French? List them all, you may say, along with jihad, tsunami, schadenfreude and béarnaise sauce. But the line must be drawn somewhere, so where?

**English does indeed have lots of words, almost certainly more than any other tongue.**

The global monitors would have the world believe that their lines are drawn scientifically: take the bulk of the best-known dictionaries, chuck in all the words in Shakespeare, Chaucer and the Bible, and then apply their proprietary algorithm, which trawls through the press, the internet and every other medium for new words. After that, apparently, the words must meet criteria about frequency of use in print and speech and their ability to stand the test of time. Words drop out of use as well as into it—Oxford lists 47,156 it considers obsolete—and most neologisms die almost as soon as they leave the lips of the rapper, valley girl or blogobore who utters them.



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So, last question, is the 1m-word claim meaningless? Yes, largely. But English does indeed have lots of words, almost certainly more than any other tongue. That is the consequence of its evolution. Basically Germanic, it was expanded by the conquering Normans, who introduced French, and the medieval scholars and clergy, who used Latin. As the global language of the modern world, it now has lots of local variants—some recompense perhaps for the words it helps to obliterate as more and more languages become extinct.

**John Grimond:** writer at large, *The Economist*

Worksheet

## A] Comprehension

**1 Read the article quickly. Mark these statements as ✓ [true] or ✗ [false] according to the article.**

- a) The article was written by James Sullivan.
- b) James Sullivan only drew the cartoon.
- c) The article was published in November 2008.
- d) 'April 29<sup>th</sup>' referred to in the article refers to April 2009.
- e) It is predicted that on April 29<sup>th</sup> 2009 the vocabulary of the English Language will be more than one million words.
- f) FAQs refers to 'formally asked questions'.
- g) 'who sez' is the way in which 'who says' is often written in popular newspapers.
- h) The prediction comes from an American company, Global Language Monitor.
- i) This company monitors and notes changes in the use of English.



This PHOTOCOPIABLE worksheet has been downloaded from [www.intelligent-business.org](http://www.intelligent-business.org)

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- j) The article questions the authority on which Global Language Monitor makes this prediction and concludes it has no authority.
- k) The article suggests that trying to control the influx of new or foreign words into a language is an impossible and worthless task.
- l) The author of the article is proud that English is a 'mongrel' language.
- m) The author thinks English is a weak and impure language because it is open to the influx of new and foreign words.
- n) The author then questions whether the prediction is true.
- o) The author thinks that English contains fewer than one million words.
- p) The author quotes the evidence of the Merriam Webster and Oxford English dictionaries.
- q) The author then discusses the definition of 'word'.
- r) The author thinks the definition is unclear.
- s) In the article, the author then begins to ask what we mean by 'English' and if this includes the language spoken in Scotland, Australia, India and elsewhere.
- t) The author asks if the many foreign words which are regularly used in English, should be counted as 'English words'.
- u) Global monitors of language claim that their systems are scientific.
- v) Their analysis is based on a study of other dictionaries, English literature, current newspapers, the internet and other media.
- w) After searching for all the different words they can find, the monitors then have to decide if each word is frequently used in modern English or if it an obsolete word.
- x) The author suggests that most new words survive for a long time before they become obsolete.
- y) In the final paragraph, the author summarises the origins of the English language.



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## B) Vocabulary

2 Choose the best definition for these words from the article.

	a)	b)	c)
1) momentous	important	quick	very small
2) astonishing	unbelievable	surprising	unhappy
3) a host	a large quantity	a large number	a difficult number
4) wordsmiths	frequent words	people who are good at spelling	people who are interested in words
5) tabloid	a popular small sized newspaper with many pictures	a newspaper about the meaning of words	a newspaper with many charts and tables
6) journalese	people who write newspapers	people who read newspapers	the style of language used in newspapers
7) keeps an eye on	controls	listens to	watches
8) a new coinage	a small metal piece of money	a new word	a new spelling
9) regulate	prevent	improve	control
10) futility	a useful action	an action which is sure to fail	an action which is sure to succeed
11) mongrel	a savage dog	a dog from different breeds	a working dog
12) invasive terms	obsolete words	new words	foreign words
13) plunders	visits	steals from	welcomes
14) neologisms	ancient words	frequent words	newly created words
15) numberless words	words which do not contain numbers	uncountable nouns	an extremely large number of words
16) drivel	meaningless language	complicated language	offensive language
17) chuck	throw	vomit	discard
18) their proprietary algorithm	an algorithm which they rent	an algorithm which they own	an algorithm they have created
19) the test of time	how quickly something becomes popular	how often something is used	how long something lasts
20) obliterate	develop	completely destroy	damage

## C] Style

**1 Read the article and think about the author's attitude to what he is reporting. Does the author really believe these statements?**

- |    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| a) | Passing the million mark will be a momentous event.                        | Y/N |
| b) | Global Language Monitor is based in Austin, Texas.                         | Y/N |
| c) | Some countries have academies which successfully defend their language.    | Y/N |
| d) | The mixed and complex origins of English are an advantage.                 | Y/N |
| e) | New words damage the purity and effectiveness of English.                  | Y/N |
| f) | Global monitors use scientific and accurate ways to track language change. | Y/N |
| g) | Most new words have very short lives.                                      | Y/N |
| h) | Many languages around the world are dying because few people use them.     | Y/N |

**2 Which of the following words best describes the writer's style?**

- a) didactic
- b) hypocritical
- c) ironic
- d) poetic
- e) satiric

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## Teacher's Notes

The main aim in studying this article is to introduce students to irony. Irony is frequently used in humorous writing in English. In irony, there is always a discrepancy between the surface meaning of what it said and the writer's actual communicative intention. If we say that an actor has 'an excellent face for radio', this is an ironic way to say he is not very good looking.

The author begins his article with this statement: *Some events in 2009 may be more momentous. but surely not many.* This ironic exaggeration is a frequent literary and rhetorical device used in English humorous writing. Amongst the masters of the style is P. G. Wodehouse. A few quotations will illustrate:

*He was a tubby little chap who looked as if he had been poured into his clothes and had forgotten to say "when!"*

*It was my Uncle George who discovered that alcohol was a food well in advance of modern medical thought.*

*There is only one cure for grey hair. It was invented by a Frenchman. It's called the guillotine.*

*The fascination of shooting as a sport depends almost wholly on whether you are at the right or wrong end of the gun.*

*Marriage isn't a process of prolonging the life of love, but of mummifying the corpse.*

*She gave me the sort of look she would have given a leper she wasn't fond of.*

The author Agatha Christie, who was married to the archaeologist Max Mallowen, advised her niece to marry an archaeologist, saying "*The older you become, the more they appreciate you.*"

Your friend arrives at your house for a party wearing scruffy jeans. Ironically, you say "*You didn't have to put on your best clothes!*"

## Answers

A) a\* b✓ c✓ d✓ e✓ f✓ g✓ h✓ i✓ j✓ k✓ l✓ m\* n✓ o\* p✓ q✓ r✓ s✓ t✓ u✓ v✓  
w✓ x\* y✓

B) 1a, 2b, 3b, 4c, 5a, 6c, 7c, 8b, 9c, 10b, 11b, 12c, 13b, 14c, 15c, 16a, 17a, 18b, 19c, 20b

C) 1 a) N, b) Y, c) N, d) Y, e) N, f) Y, g) Y, h) Y,

The writer's style is ironic.

