

Words gotta work hard to get into dictionary

It takes more than popularity for a word to make it into a dictionary.



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Gathering sufficient evidence, such as independent examples of the use of a word from a variety of sources over a reasonable period, is among the key factors in the selection process.

Since 1978, the Oxford University Press dictionary project has been compiling a list of new words for inclusion in its English dictionary.

Some of the interesting words include izinyoka (Zulu name for electricity thieves and snakes), and gees ("spirit" in Afrikaans).

Dictionaries have evolved over the years, with lexicographers now using virtual databases to track the usage of words.

The manager for content development of Southern Africa's Oxford University Press, Phillip Louw, said the top 100 most frequently used words in the Oxford database accounted for more than half of the written English language.

"With the software we can determine how often a word is used in everyday writing," said Louw.

The software enables lexicographers to decide which words to put into different dictionaries.

Dictionary experts have found evidence of the use of words and phrases such as a "Marikana moment", which describes a "strong and angry public reaction" to a catastrophe.

But as new words make it into the dictionaries others have become endangered, such as "gallimaufry" and "aerodrome".

"A word that might surprise people with its longevity is imbongi (praise poet), the earliest English use of which was in 1836," Louw said.

Louw will be take part in a discussion at the SA Book Fair, at the Turbine Hall, Newtown, Johannesburg, this weekend.

Source: The Times

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