

A Hey, Rita. Are you checking Facebook for the thousandth time today?

B No, actually I'm looking up a word. "Deontology." According to this online dictionary it means "The science of duty; that branch of knowledge which deals with moral obligations; ethics". It was used in an article I was reading where certain bankers were accused of "lacking deontology."

A Do you look words up on-line a lot?

B I do, actually. I can see what words large groups of people are looking at, and sometimes I can read amusing observations on public figures and their use of language.

A I imagine Trump gives you plenty of opportunities.

B When Trump referred on Twitter to some demonstrators as "professional anarchists", the online dictionary questioned that phrase; they said it fell into their new favourite category of "alternative facts." Later that day they shared a link to their definition of "oxymoron" which is... let me look it up... "a figure of speech by which a phrase produces a seemingly contradictory effect, as in 'cruel kindness' or 'professional anarchist.'"

A You know I'm not a tweeter, and most times I look up words in my big print dictionary that, yes, takes up space and weighs quite a lot. When I look up one word, I love discovering others on the page. And I like to know how professionals define words, not people using them in common speech with a maximum of one hundred and forty characters.

B The Tweet Generation is here, even heads of state tweet all the time.

A We used to have oratory, now we have tweets.

B And one of the things which these on-line dictionaries do is take the ambiguity that is often inherent in tweets and help clarify it. Which is probably one of the reasons why large numbers of people are now turning to dictionaries; they're looking for what's true.

A How do the dictionary companies do this?

B The editors study the way people use words, they evaluate that evidence, and they write definitions in a clear and unbiased manner. They want to provide the most accurate information about where a word comes from, how it's used grammatically, and what meaning it conveys.

A I imagine they use social media to gather evidence.

B Social media are used as a source and as an outlet. Some dictionary companies use Twitter and other networks for their word-of-the-day feature, words that are being searched by large numbers of people. The idea is to make lexicography more accessible and also, well, to increase advertising revenue through clicks.

A Lots of likes and thumbs-up for a good definition. I'm more interested in esoteric, little-used words than what's on everyone's mind and computer at this particular moment.

B But don't you think that juxtaposing current events with unusual words can help to show the relevance and usefulness of an expanded vocabulary? For example linking the word "oxymoron" to Trump's tweet on "professional anarchists"?

A That could be a good thing. Especially with people's diminishing vocabularies as they communicate in hash tags and tweets. They forget what a wealth of words is available that we can use to be more precise and creative in expressing ourselves.

B You'll be pleased to know that these on-line dictionaries have made more people interested in looking up words, and they've also increased sales of print versions of dictionaries.

A Public people especially should refer to dictionaries more often to avoid misusing words. One example is Hillary Clinton's phrase "basket of deplorables," when she was referring to Trump supporters. Not only was it demeaning to Trump supporters, but "deplorable" doesn't exist as a noun, only as an adjective.

B But isn't the English language sufficiently flexible to allow such liberty with words? Think of the humorous word for underwear — "unmentionables". As for deplorable, Merriam-Webster reported a surge in the number of people looking up the word.

A I'll definitely check out those dictionaries. But I'll still continue using my big print dictionary that gives me the true dictionary experience I love.

B Look at it this way: in our world today we're increasingly divided, and the dictionary helps people communicate with each other. In times of stress, people look for things that provide answers, like a dictionary. The advantage of on-line dictionaries is that they're available to everyone all the time.

Outline

The first speaker prefers looking up words in his big print dictionary as he likes to know how professionals define words and loves discovering other words on the same page. He is more interested in esoteric, little-used words than what is on everyone's mind and computer at any particular time. The second speaker looks words up online a lot to see what words large groups of people are looking at, and to read amusing observations on public figures and their use of language, like Trump on Twitter. Online dictionaries help clarify the ambiguity that is often inherent in tweets. We are increasingly divided in our world today, and the dictionary helps people communicate with each other; online dictionaries have the advantage of being available to everyone all the time.

Questions

1. How often do you consult a dictionary? What dictionaries do you use?
2. What methods do you use to expand your vocabulary?
3. Do you find the English language is more flexible than your mother tongue?
4. How do dictionaries help people communicate with each other?