BEYOND THE COINAGE DATE: LEXICOGRAPHIC RECOGNITION AND SEMANTIC RENEWAL IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper distinguishes the historical creation of a lexical form from the later public prominence, semantic recontextualisation and dictionary recognition of that form. A qualitative examination of English expressions documented by Oxford and Cambridge in 2024-2025 shows that established items such as brain rot and parasocial may be wrongly classified as recent coinages. A four-question annotation framework is proposed for future diachronic and corpus-informed neologism research. The paper does not report new corpus frequencies.

Keywords: lexical innovation; neologism; lexicographic recognition; semantics; English; conventionalization.

Introduction and research problem

The study of neologisms faces a recurring methodological confusion: public visibility, dictionary inclusion and historical coinage are sometimes treated as the same event. Digital expressions make the problem unusually clear because online circulation can cause an older expression to appear unprecedented. Oxford University Press selected brain rot as its Word of the Year for 2024 while acknowledging an attestation dating to 1854. Cambridge Dictionary made parasocial its Word of the Year for 2025, although the concept was already used in academic writing in the 1950s.

This conference paper argues that dictionary recognition should be treated as one observable stage in a wider pathway of lexical change. The aim is to develop a practical distinction between lexical creation, semantic recontextualisation, public diffusion and lexicographic institutionalisation. The topic is relevant to lexicographers, researchers of online discourse and scholars who construct contemporary English datasets. Without clear temporal definitions, a dataset of ‘recently introduced words’ risks mixing items that differ fundamentally in historical status.

Theoretical background

Plag distinguishes the availability of a word-formation pattern from the existence of a socially established lexical item [1; 38]. Hohenhaus (2005) further clarifies lexicalisation and institutionalization [2; 57], while Kerremans studies the conventionalisation of English neologisms through usage patterns over time [3; 105]. Taken together, these approaches indicate that a new form can remain marginal and an older form can acquire new public prominence. Lexicographic entries cannot, on their own, resolve the full chronology of the process.

A complementary consideration comes from digital discourse. Online vocabulary spreads through imitation, topical relevance, social identity and public discoverability. As Zappavigna demonstrates, searchable expressions can help users affiliate around shared attitudes even when they are not directly interacting [4; 174]. Such social mechanisms can support rapid visibility without proving that a word has gained enduring status across different communities.

Material and analytical framework

The analysis uses a small, non-random sample of expressions described in official Oxford and Cambridge releases in 2024–2025: brain rot, rage bait, parasocial, delulu, slop, skibidi and tradwife. Rather than collecting user posts, the study compares documented histories, published meanings and plausible pathways of uptake. Accordingly, it reports neither corpus-derived frequency counts nor claims about the demographic profile of users.

Four questions are applied to each expression. Is the linguistic form demonstrably recent? Is the culturally prominent sense recent relative to earlier uses? Does the evidence identify a move

between specialist and public registers? What type of editorial or lexicographic recognition is available? These questions distinguish three trajectories: new structural formation, semantic renewal and register expansion. They also make space for mixed cases. An item's presence in a dictionary is evidence of documentation, not a guarantee that a fixed meaning is shared by all speakers.

Rage bait illustrates formally transparent compounding accompanied by semantic specialisation. Oxford characterises it as content intentionally made to provoke outrage and attract engagement. Its interpretation therefore depends not simply on anger but on an inferred communicative strategy. Delulu highlights informal shortening and expressive stance: the colloquial form relates to delusional but may function as playful self-assessment or pointed criticism. Slop represents a previously existing negative label redirected towards low-quality internet output, especially AI-generated material.

Parasocial is a register-expansion case. Horton and Wohl's (1956) account of mediated intimacy predates contemporary influencer culture. Cambridge's 2025 attention reflects the prominence of the concept in a broader discussion of influencers and AI companions, not the coining of an entirely new term. Brain rot likewise shows recent thematic specialisation of an earlier expression. Skibidi makes a different point: its social meaning depends heavily on cultural references rather than transparent morphology.

Discussion and conclusion

The examples demonstrate why the term neologism should not be operationalised solely as 'a word noticed recently'. The more precise research object is an innovation event, which may involve form, sense, usage context or institutional status. A practical annotation table should therefore record the expression, historical evidence, current documented sense, formation mechanism, register, first available source in the dataset and unresolved etymological questions. This would prevent the artificial assignment of coinage dates based on dictionary publication.

Three implications follow. For corpus linguistics, dated tokens and transparent sampling are essential to any claim about diffusion. For lexicography, public editorial decisions must be distinguished from historical first attestations. For language teaching, the formal structure of a term should be explained together with its communicative stance and level of formality. Rage bait, for example, describes an alleged engagement strategy and may imply criticism; it should not be used as a neutral synonym for every upsetting post.

The present analysis is deliberately qualitative and limited to a small purposive sample of documented expressions. The findings are analytic distinctions rather than statistically generalisable results. Future research could compare time-stamped contexts before and after dictionary inclusion, estimate longitudinal collocational changes and examine whether meanings stabilise differently across platforms. Such a study would help explain not only which expressions become visible, but how their forms and senses remain recognisable beyond the communities where they initially gained attention.

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