

BBC Learning English
6 Minute English
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Omnishambles



Callum: Hello, welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Callum and with me today is Neil. Hello Neil.

Neil: Hi there Callum.

Callum: In today's programme we're going to be talking about the word 'omnishambles'. Every year a committee at the Oxford English Dictionary comes up with a list of new words that have made a big impact on the English language.

Neil: Now they aren't necessarily words that will make their way into dictionaries any time soon but they are words that have been influenced by popular culture, sport, politics and other current affairs.

Callum: This year, at the top of their list, was the word omnishambles. Before we learn more about it, here's a question for you, Neil, about dictionaries.

From the following, who published the earliest English alphabetical dictionary?
Was it Robert Cawdrey, Samuel Johnson or Noah Webster?

Neil: Well I think this is a trick question. I think you want me to say Samuel Johnson. I don't think it's Webster because he was American. I'm going to go for Robert Cawdrey.

Callum: OK, we'll find out if you're right at the end of the programme.

Fiona McPherson is one of the judges who decides on the Word of the Year and she describes why new words make it on to the list. What are her main criteria?

Fiona McPherson

First and foremost it's about the evidence; so as long as people are using it and we can find independent examples. By independent I mean not just used by one person; you'll see it in various newspapers, perhaps novels, that kind of thing. But it's also the projected longevity, really. Some words are flash in the pan, but you can normally gauge by using your own judgement whether or not something is going to have a life.

Callum: Neil, what's most important?

Neil: She says that 'first and foremost' it's if the word is being used by more than one person; if it's being used in a variety of media.

Callum: Is that the only consideration?

Neil: No, she says it's also about the 'projected longevity' of the word, which is an estimation of how long the word will be used for. Some words, she says, are a 'flash in the pan' which means they are popular for a very short time but then disappear.

Callum: In an example of life imitating art, the word omnishambles first appeared in a BBC television political comedy in 2009. Can you tell us a bit about what it means?

Neil: Sure. The prefix 'omni', which means everywhere or everything, has been added to the noun 'shambles'. Shambles is a noun for something that is very poorly organised and planned. A complete mess! An omnishambles is this new word which emphasises just how really bad something has been messed up. Something that is an omnishambles is a complete and total disaster. It usually refers to a series of mistakes and blunders by politicians.

Callum: And it's a word that's become particularly popular for those who want to criticise the government. Let's listen to an example. This is Ed Milliband, an opponent of the British prime minister, speaking in parliament.

Ed Milliband (Leader of the Opposition)

Over the last month, we've seen the charity tax shambles, the churches tax shambles, the

caravan tax shambles and the pasty tax shambles. So, Mr Speaker, we're all keen to hear the prime minister's view as to why he thinks, four weeks on from the budget, even people within Downing Street are calling it an omnishambles budget.

Callum: Ed Milliband describing lots of different 'shambles', and then describing them all as omnishambles.

Neil: Yes, an omnishambles is a collection of shambles!

Callum: So why has the word caught on? Here's writer Tony Roche, who coined the expression in the political satire *The Thick of It*.

Tony Roche

It seems to have lent itself to being mutated. I think it might have been Vanity Fair used the word 'Romneyshambles' to describe various gaffes that Mitt Romney was making and it's been used in a few other contexts.

Callum: What reason does he give for the popularity of the word?

Neil: He says that it can easily be adapted and changed for different circumstances. He mentions the fact that the magazine *Vanity Fair* used a variation of it – Romneyshambles – to refer to US presidential candidate Mitt Romney making gaffes.

Callum: Gaffes?

Neil: Yes, gaffes, a word for embarrassing mistakes.

Callum: Let's listen to Tony Roche again.

Tony Roche

It seems to have lent itself to being mutated. I think it might have been Vanity Fair used the word 'Romneyshambles' to describe various gaffes that Mitt Romney was making and it's been used in a few other contexts.

Callum: Will this word have legs? Will it live longer than the current political period? Here's Fiona McPherson again; what does she think?

Fiona McPherson

What it has in its favour is it's already had some derivatives coming from it like Romneyshambles, we've heard when talking about Mitt Romney's gaffes about how he thought London wasn't ready to, to host a good Olympics. Things like that are good indicators that maybe this word will have staying power, but really time is the only thing that will, will tell.

Callum: What does she think Neil?

Neil: She makes a similar point to Tony Roche that the word already has derivatives, or different variations. She mentions the same example of Romneyshambles. It's this ability to adapt and evolve which she thinks might give it staying power – might give it the ability to become a more permanent feature in the English language. But ultimately, time will tell: we'll just have to wait and see.

Callum: That's the beauty of language, always evolving. Now before we run out of time and this programme becomes an omnishambles, let's get the answer to this week's question.

Who published the earliest English alphabetical dictionary. Neil, you said?

Neil: Robert Cawdrey.

Callum: And Robert Cawdrey was the correct answer and that was in 1604.

Well that's all from this edition of 6 Minute English. Until next time, thank you Neil and goodbye.

Neil: Goodbye!

Vocabulary and definitions

first and foremost	a formal expression meaning the most important thing to consider
the projected longevity	the estimate of how long something will live for
flash in the pan	short-lived, not long-lasting
a shambles	something which is very poorly organised, managed or performed
to coin (an expression)	to create or be the first to use a new word or phrase
a gaffe	an embarrassing mistake, usually made in public
derivatives	new words that have developed from another word
staying power	the ability to last a long time

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