

LOL

by Christopher Hughes

For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel, Which smoked with bloody execution, Like valor's minion carved out his passage.

How much of that did you understand? That passage was taken from Shakespeare's Macbeth, which tells of a King who fought against his enemies. Do you think Shakespeare, when he used the word “minion” was calling his hero a foolish unthinking person as we use the term today? Of course not. When Shakespeare wrote that passage the word “minion” meant “a favoured person.”

Language is constantly changing. When we understand where words come from and how they change, we can start thinking about the future of language. Understanding the past helps us shape the future.

Where do words come from? A language like English is made up of influences from any number of countries and cultures. English is about 60% comprised of words that come from Saxon, a type of Germanic language. Words like tongue, hair, and beard.

We borrow words all the time. Words such as ramen which has come from East Asia. Words like coffee come from trade influences. This one has come from Arabic.

Now we know where words come from. But did you know that words can also be invented?

Back to Shakespeare. He is said to have invented 1,600 words!

Words that we use all the time like elbow....obscene...and fashionable.

Historically, it was famous writers like Shakespeare who would make up words, but now-a-days it's people like you and me that control language development.

Have you ever seen or heard the word “LOL”? What does it mean? You and I know that it means “laughing out loud”. However, people such as my mother think it means “lots of love”.

People are constantly inventing new words that get used and then get added to the dictionary, which means they become part of the language. Here are just a few examples of recent developments in language that were made by people.

Now we know that words can be invented, but they can also change meaning overtime. Imagine 400 years ago, in London, St. Paul's Cathedral had just been completed. Imagine seeing it for the very first time. It would have been the highest

building in Europe and possibly the world. What do you think you would have said when you saw this majestic, amazing, outstanding building? Do you think that you would have said that it was...awful? Possibly not. But that is what King Charles the second is said to have said about this building. Do you think he really meant that? Do you think that he really meant that he was upset with this outstanding achievement? Like Shakespeare and his minion, of course not. At that time, 400 years ago, the world awful meant the same as...awesome. Over time, words can change meaning. We can see this with words such as “nice” which used to mean “stupid”. “Cute” which used to mean “smart” or “clever”. These are words that have changed over many hundreds of years, but now-a-days words are changing meaning at an astonishing rate. A few years ago we would have said, “do a Google search” if we wanted to know about something. We would have used “google” as a noun. However, now-a-days we’re far more likely to say “I’ll Google it”. We’d use it as a verb. A few years ago it was a noun, now it’s far more likely to be used as a verb.

Even very recent words, such as “LOL” which we talked about earlier...do you remember what “LOL” means? We said it means “laughing out loud”. Have a look at this exchange. Do you think this second person is really laughing out loud that she’s received an email? No. “LOL” has changed meaning. Now-a-days people use it as a sign of empathy or understanding.

Language is constantly changing When we understand where words have come from, how they’ve changed over time, we can start thinking about the future of language and who controls that. Historically, it was people like Shakespeare that invented new words. Historically, words changed over hundreds of years. However, now-a-days it’s people like you and me that change words and invent them at an amazing rate. What will be the next change in language? What will be the next words to be invented? That is entirely up to you and me.