The Evolving Definition of “Racism” and its Trail of Text-Artifacts

Ben Zimmer
Wall Street Journal

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WORD ON THE STREET

‘Bada-Bing’: Improvised Nonsense Turned Mobster Argot
The late James Caan slipped a few syllables of gibberish into ‘The Godfather.’ Now they have their own entry in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Ben Zimmer | July 15, 2022

WORD ON THE STREET

‘Curfew’: A Cap on Hearth Fires and Tennis Matches
A warning bell once told townspeople when to damp flames for the night. Now its name is invoked to clear the streets in times of crisis.

Ben Zimmer | July 7, 2022

WORD ON THE STREET

‘Cruise’: Once Just a Crossing, Now a Pleasure Ride
The term originally meant getting from here to there, before casinos and beach stopovers were added to the mix.

Ben Zimmer | July 1, 2022
zoom-. The videoconferencing service Zoom became omnipresent in 2020, as people’s work, school, and social activities went in the remote direction during the pandemic. The ADS recognized the efflorescence of Zoom-related terms with a special ad hoc category in the 2020 WOTY selection process, and Zoom- itself was nominated in the Most Creative Combining Form category. The monosyllable Zoom certainly lent itself to all manner of compounding, as in Zoombombing ‘disruptive intrusion on a Zoom session by online trolls’, Zoom fatigue, Zoom mom, Zoom party, and Zoom school. Overuse of Zoom left many people feeling Zoomed out (or oysegezoomt in Yiddish, as discussed above). An appropriate portmanteau word for that Zoomed-out feeling is Zoomie, blending with zombie (Thorne 2020). Some Zoom blends were more successful than others: while there were reports early in the pandemic of zooming ‘dumping a romantic interest over Zoom’, that term never really caught on in dating lingo (The Guardian 2020). Zoom also had the power to reshape previously introduced neologisms. As noted previously in ATNW (AS 96, no. 1 [Feb. 2021]), zoomer had been used for a member of Generation Z, on the model of (baby) boomer, but in pandemic times it was reinterpreted to refer to students’ reliance on remote learning, “an acknowledgment of the dramatic shift to remote communication that will shape the interactions of this generation” (Gerhardt 2020). [BZ]
**Zoom**— *combining form* Relating to the video teleconferencing software program Zoom

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**Zombie** *noun*  
[Zoom + zombie] One whose behavior has become zombie-like by spending too much screen time on Zoom

2020 Mar. 18, @Harley_Dalson, *Twitter*: I have become...a ZOOMbie #Zoom

2020 May 1, Anthony Silard, “Don’t become a ‘Zombie’ during quarantine,” *Orlando (Fla.) Sentinel*: Here are a few strategies you can try out to get the best from Zoom without becoming a fast-moving Zombie. Suggest a conference call rather than Zoom for smaller meetings. Your colleagues may be apprehensive about making this suggestion themselves. However, they will appreciate you being the first to share this idea and preventing them also from becoming Zombies.

2020 July 30, see quot. s.v. zoomed out

2020 Oct., Ricardo Levins Morales, “Zombie Apocalypse” (poster), *RLM Art Studio* (retail site) (see image)

2021 Feb. 2, Scott Toney, Jenn Light, and Andrew Urbaczewski, “Fight Zoom Fatigue: Keeping the Zombies at Bay,” *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* 48, article 10: 41: Although we smoothly transitioned the class to the online modality, we used video conferencing for the first time, so we always faced the Zoombies threat. It took planning and diligence to keep students’ eyes from glazing over and losing the class to Zoom fatigue.
Lies! Murder! Lexicography!

By Ben Zimmer
Dec. 2, 2012

HERE’S a tip: if you see the words “dictionary” and “scandal” in a sensational headline, prepare to be disappointed.

Last week, the British newspaper The Guardian broke a story from the dictionary world that seemed, at first blush, to be quite scandalous indeed. “An eminent former editor of the Oxford English Dictionary covertly deleted thousands of words because of their foreign origins and bizarrely blamed previous editors,” it began.

But the truth, it turns out, is more prosaic. The former editor, in compiling material for four supplements to the O.E.D., had not seen fit to include everything that was in a previous supplement to the dictionary’s first edition, published in 1933, including thousands of words borrowed from foreign languages.
Merriam-Webster Revises ‘Racism’ Entry After Missouri Woman Asks for Changes

Kennedy Mitchum, 22, said the dictionary definition needed to be expanded to include systemic racism. The dictionary’s editors agreed.

Kennedy Mitchum wrote to the editors of Merriam-Webster that racism was “prejudice combined with social and institutional power. It is a system of advantage based on skin color.” Christian Gooden/St. Louis Post-Dispatch, via Associated Press
A Missouri woman asked Merriam-Webster to update its definition of racism and now officials will make the change

By David Williams, CNN

Updated 1539 GMT (2339 HKT) June 12, 2020

Kennedy Mitchum, 22, works to get dictionary definition of racism changed 01:00
Will Merriam-Webster’s Coming Redefinition of “Racism” Revolutionize Discrimination Law?

BY ELIAS LEAKE QUINN
JULY 15, 2020 • 3:37 PM

Racism is getting a new dictionary definition. Justin Tallis/Getty Images
The Evolution of *Racism*

A look at how the word, a surprisingly recent addition to the English lexicon, made its way into the dictionary

By Ben Zimmer
1: a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race

2a: a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles

2b: a political or social system founded on racism

3: racial prejudice or discrimination
1: a belief that race is the fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race

2 a: a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles

   b: a political or social system founded on racism

3: racial prejudice or discrimination

Merriam-Webster’s 2020 *racism* revision
1 : a belief that race is the *fundamental* determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race

*also : behavior or attitudes that reflect and foster this belief : racial discrimination or prejudice*

2 a : a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles

b : a political or social system founded on racism
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also: behavior or attitudes that reflect and foster this belief: racial discrimination or prejudice

2a: the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another

specifically: WHITE SUPREMACY sense 2

// institutional racism

b: a political or social system founded on racism
Merriam-Webster’s 2020 *racism* revision

1. : a belief that race is the **fundamental** determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.
   
   *also*: behavior or attitudes that reflect and foster this belief: racial discrimination or prejudice.

2. a : the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another.
   
   *specifically*: WHITE SUPREMACY sense 2
   
   // institutional *racism*

b : a political or social system founded on racism and designed to execute its principles.
white supremacy  noun

Definition of white supremacy
1  : the belief that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races
   // The alt-right is a reactionary conservative movement ... . It is characterized by an embrace of fascism, white supremacy, and misogyny ...
   — Constance Grady

2  : the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable white people to maintain power over people of other races
   //  ... [William] Kelley turned his considerable intellect and imagination to the question of what it is like to be white in this country, and what it is like, for all Americans, to live under the conditions of white supremacy ...
   — Kathryn Schulz
The city of Chicago has had several suits on its hands as a result of that riot, many of which have been paid either to the victims or to their families. Several efforts were put in motion by our good white people to stem the tide of race hatred, and it was at this time that the Chicago Inter-Racial was born. A race commission was appointed by Governor Lowden, and they spent weeks taking testimony and published a large book on the subject. Many recommendations were made, but few, if any, have been carried out. Chicago has thus been left with a heritage of race prejudice which seems to increase rather than decrease.
racialism, n. Racial characteristics, tendences, prejudices, or the like; specif., race hatred.
racism

Mr. Takes. Yes?

So, let miss Eger know, please. 11/1/78

Has this term been entered in the addenda? I wanted to use it in a dr. and found that it is not in M.'34.

Used 1950 Addenda

P.S. C. 11/1/38

Used 1939 Addenda
The writing of the articles was done chiefly by Miss Rose F. Egan, Assistant Editor on the permanent editorial staff, who also prepared the essays that form the larger part of the introductory matter. To her clear analysis and understanding of the purposes of the book and to her skill in dealing with the difficult material of synonymy this work owes much of its quality.
citizen. 1  *Inhabitant, resident, denizen.  
Con. *Stranger, outsider. 
2 Citizen, subject, national are compared here only as denoting a person who is regarded as a member of a sovereign state, entitled to its protection, and subject to its laws. Citizen, which is far more common in the United States than in the British Commonwealth of Nations, North and South America. There is also a tendency to prefer national to subject or citizen in some countries where the sovereign power is not clearly vested in a monarch or ruler or in the people, or where theories of racism prevail. In some use, especially in international
Pope Attacks Racism and Nationalism

Hits Italian Mimicry of German Nazism

CASTEL GANDOLFO (UP) — Pope Pius XI attacked excessive nationalism and fascism for the third time in two weeks today and criticized Italy’s “unhappy imitation” of Germany’s racial theories.

There were reports the pope might issue an encyclical on the subject soon.

Addressing a group of young missionary students from the College of Propagation, the holy father said:

Unhappy

“We ask ourselves why Italy, with unhappy imitation, felt it necessary to copy Germany.”

He recalled that he was the son of a Milanese, who in 1848 drove the Germans from Milan and that therefore “someone could accuse me of being prejudiced, which is not so.”

“Catholicism means universality, not racism, not nationalism, not separatism,” he told the students. “Catholic action should be inspired by these principles. Catholic action is Catholic life.

One Method

“Catholic life means activity full of charity, full of virtue and of respect for the laws of God. There is no other method of thinking catholically, therefore one cannot think racialistically, nationally or separatistically.

“By racism and nationalism we mean those exaggerated forms, as they are commonly called, which are barriers raised between men and men, and people and people.”

The pope said that the only sane racism was the dignity of the human being and family “because men must be men, not beasts, and must gather in one sole big family.”

“This is the church’s answer to racism,” he said, “and this for the church is sane racism worthy of men.”

The pope told the students he had received an important communication today, but he declined to reveal its nature. Because of his outspoken attitude on racial nationalism, some observers suggested that the communication might have dealt with Italy’s new racial credo which gradually is being put into effect.
Writer Warns of ‘Racism’ As Foe To U. S. People

Sees Alliance of Reds, Nazis Against Religion

NEW YORK, Dec. 1 — Warning that the destructive forces of “racism” are increasing in the United States, the Rev. John LaFarge, Catholic writer, said that these elements would cause untold harm among the American people if immediate steps are not taken to combat them.

American racism, Father LaFarge said, is directed principally against Negroes, foreigners and Jews. He described it as the “pale but venomous elder cousin” of Nazi racism.

Impassable Barriers Seen

Like its Nazi counterpart, he added, American racism has erected impassable barriers between extensive regions and large groups of people. It has, in addition, formed its own myths and glories and romance and moulded its own social institutions. Above all, it has consistently come into conflict with Christian teachings, he declared.

Merriam-Webster editorial slip on racism, Nov. 1, 1938
racism vs. racialism

racialism in The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (1936)
Google Books Ngram Viewer

raceism vs. racialism

1930 - 1980

British English (2019)

Case-Insensitive

Smoothing

Google Books Ngram Viewer
Racism: esp., a doctrine, characteristic of totalitarian ideology, that national should be made up divisions should correspond to racial divisions and that the racial stock of the nation should be kept pure from admixture; esp. if (orig., a bolsicism), an assumption by the dominant race in a nation of racial superiority with attendant discrimination against minorities of other races.
racism ( ), n.
Assumption of inherent racial superiority or the purity and superiority of certain races, and consequent discrimination against other races; also, any specific (orig. a Gallicism) the Nazi assumption of Teutonic supremacy and attendant anti-Semitism.

This is the definition with which Miss Egan agrees.

Fate's issue. Fate does not misuse upon the accuracy of any part because of the death of cats.

Merriam-Webster draft definitions for racism, Nov. 1938
Racism (rāsˈizm), n. Assumption of inherent racial superiority or the purity and superiority of certain races, and consequent discrimination against other races; also, any doctrine or program of racial domination and discrimination based on such an assumption. — racist, n.
prefabricate - fabrication of a house in standardized parts in a factory except for final assembly and prior delivery.

preview - advance showing or advertise.

purge* - elimination of the disloyal traitor.

racism - racial domination and discrimination.

refresher - renewing former training.

riboflavin - the growth-promoting factor of vitamin B complex, found in whey, eggs, and green leaves.

ripcord - cord pulled to open a parachute in descent.

rock' wool' - an insulating wool-like fiber.
Racism in Webster’s Second Addenda (1939)

rac’ism (rās’īz’m), n. Assumption of inherent racial superiority or the purity and superiority of certain races, and consequent discrimination against other races; also, any doctrine or program of racial domination and discrimination based on such an assumption. — rac’ist, n.
Racism in Webster's 3rd New International (1961)

**Racism** \(\text{'ra,sizəm}\ n -s [\text{prob. fr. F racisme, fr. race + -isme -ism}]\ 1:\text{the assumption that psychocultural traits and capacities are determined by biological race and that races differ decisively from one another which is usu. coupled with a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to domination over others 2a: a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles b: a political or social system founded on racism 3: Racialism}\)

**Racist** \(\text{\textbackslash 'rəsæst}\ n -s [\text{prob. fr. F raciste, fr. race + -iste -ist}]\ 1:\text{one who advocates or believes in racism 2: advocating or practicing racism (\text{"\textlangle~ ideas\text\rangle}) 3: \text{advocating or practicing racism (\text{\langle~ leader}})}

**Rack** \(\text{'ræk}\ n -s [\text{ME rac, rak; prob. of Scand origin akin to}}

**Racing Skate**
Racism in Webster's 7th Collegiate (1963)

**racialism** 
\[ \text{ˈrā-ʃəl-izm} \] 
*n* 1: racial prejudice or discrimination  
2: RACISM 1 — racialist 
\[ \text{ˈrā-ʃəl-ist} \] 
*n* — racialistic 
\[ \text{ˈrā-ʃəl-ist-ik} \] 
*adj*

**racially** 
\[ \text{ˈrā-ʃə-lē} \] 
*adv* : in a racy manner

**raciness** 
\[ \text{ˈrā-sē-nes} \] 
*n* : the quality or state of being racy

**racing** 
\[ \text{ˈrā-sing} \] 
*n* 1: the sport or profession of engaging in or holding races  
2: horse races that are a sport or business

**racing form** 
\[ \text{ˈrā-sing fərm} \] 
*n* : an information sheet giving pertinent data about horse races

**racism** 
\[ \text{ˈrā-ˌsiz-əm} \] 
*n* 1: a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race  
2: RACIALISM  
1 — racist 
\[ \text{ˈrā-sist} \] 
*n*
Full Definition of **RACISM**

1 : a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race

2 : racial prejudice or discrimination

—**racist** 
\-sist also -shist\ noun or adjective
Unabridged entry for racism, M-W online (2016-2020)

**racism** noun

Save Word

rac·ism | ˈrā-sə-zəm  also ˈri-shə-

**Definition of racism**

1 : a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race

2 a : a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles

   b : a political or social system founded on racism

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The History and Dictionary Meaning of Racism

Racism appears to be a word of recent origin, with no citations currently known that would suggest the word was in use prior to the early 20th century. But the fact that the word is fairly new does not prove that the concept of racism did not exist in the distant past. Things may have words to describe them before they exist (spaceship, for instance, has been in use since the 19th century, well before the rocket-fired vessels were invented), and things may exist for a considerable time before they are given names (t-shit does not appear in print until the 20th century, although the article of clothing existed prior to 1900).

Dictionaries are often treated as the final arbiter in arguments over a word’s meaning, but they are not always well suited for settling disputes. The lexicographer’s role is to explain how words are (or have been) actually used, not how some may feel that they should be used, and they say nothing about the intrinsic nature of the thing named by a word, much less the significance it may have for individuals. When discussing concepts like racism, therefore, it is prudent to recognize that quoting from a dictionary is unlikely to either mollify or persuade the person with whom one is arguing.
What is the role of lexicographers in public debates and discussions about contentious words and phrases?

Do we need more transparency in the processes lexicographers use in creating and editing dictionary content?

What can we learn from the trail of “text-artifacts” documenting lexicographical revisions?
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Thank you for listening!