

Words that go 'bump' in the night

Written by gallupsun

Tuesday, 31 October 2023 11:04

Ghost words are the invisible words lurking in the shadows of our dictionaries, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting writers and speakers. They are the words that we think are real but are actually just figments of our imagination.

Some ghost words are simply misprints or typos. Others are invented words that never caught on. But whatever their origin, ghost words can be a real pain in the neck. They can make us look foolish, and they can even make it difficult to communicate effectively.

Esquivalence is a ghost word invented in 2001 by Christine Lindberg, an editor at the New Oxford American Dictionary, as part of a copyright trap. She defined it as "the willful avoidance of one's official responsibilities."

Lindberg's plan was simple, but it backfired. Dictionary.com copied the word "esquivalence" (defined as "the willful avoidance of one's official responsibilities"), but the NOAD didn't sue. Embarrassed, the word nerds at Dictionary.com wiped esquivalence from their site.

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Even though esquivance is a ghost word, it's still a pretty clever one. It perfectly describes the behavior we all hate: people who shirk their responsibilities and leave others to pick up the pieces.

Let's explore some more ghost words.

Dord: A ghost word that once fooled the lexicographers of the world. It was accidentally included in the New International Dictionary, second edition, in 1934, as a synonym for "density" in physics and chemistry. However, it was discovered to be a fabrication in 1939 and removed from the dictionary in 1947. But dord's legacy lives on as a reminder of the importance of accuracy and fact-checking in the world of words.

Honorificabilitudinitatibus: The longest word in the English language, but you probably have yet to hear it used in a sentence. It's a combination of Latin words for "honor," "ability," and "worthiness." Shakespeare invented it for comedic effect, and it's still a fun word to say.

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Slurb: A misspelling of "slurred" often seen in online writing. It's a reminder of the importance of proofreading because even a tiny mistake can make you look foolish. A linguist might groan at this misspelling because it shows a lack of understanding of the English language.

So next time you find yourself reading your dictionary cover-to-cover, watch out for ghost words! With a bit of knowledge and a healthy dose of skepticism, you can avoid their pitfalls and keep your vocabulary safe from their ghostly grasp.

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