Of Lookups, Trending Words, and Emoji: Meaning in the Internet Age

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The internet age has allowed us to listen in on speech communities that lexicographers have never historically had access to, supplying us with entirely new and diverse sources of research for our work. From online forums to social media, we now have the ability to analyze unedited, casual language from people of all ages and backgrounds. As new types of lexical items are being considered for entry into dictionaries, including emoji and memes, we must understand their significance and consider the most appropriate way to distill their meaning.

The internet changes the way we discover and define words. With over 70 million monthly users, Dictionary.com is positioned to gather insights from lookups to gauge both perennial and trending interests. In this talk I will discuss the ways in which Dictionary.com leverages this data. What do search patterns tell us about the cultural zeitgeist? Can search data point to gaps in our word coverage? And how can we anticipate user need based on individual lookup paths?

As a member of the Unicode Emoji Subcommittee, I will walk through the process of emoji proposal and creation. This process can be contrasted with the work of lexicography where we aim to describe already existing language—whereas with emoji, a small group of experts acts as gatekeepers. When emoji are released and their meanings become canonized in unexpected ways, this can be viewed as a valuable case study in paralinguistic innovation. At what point, if any, do emoji merit lexicographical treatment?