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Merriam-Webster's dictionary crew sums up 2016: surreal

By LEANNE ITALIE
ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Was 2016 a dream or a nightmare?

Try something in between: “surreal,” which is Merriam-Webster’s word of the year, unveiled Monday.

Meaning “marked by the intense irrational reality of a dream,” or “unbelievable, fantastic,” the word joins Oxford’s “post-truth” and Dictionary.com’s “xenophobia” as the year’s top choices.

“It just seems like one of those years,” said Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster’s editor at large.

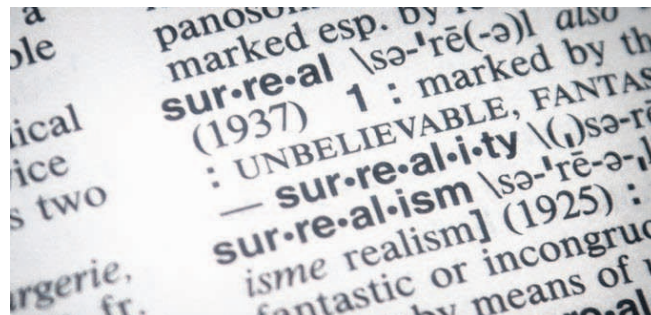
The company tracks year-over-year growth and spikes in lookups of words on its website to come up with the top choice. This time around, there were many periods of interest in “surreal” throughout the year, often in the aftermath of tragedy, Sokolowski said.

Major spikes came after the Brussels attack in March and again in July, after the Bastille Day massacre in Nice and the attempted coup in Turkey. All three received huge attention around the globe and had many in the media reaching for “surreal” to describe both the physical scenes and the “mental landscapes,” Sokolowski said.

The single biggest spike in lookups came in November, he said, specifically Nov. 9, the day Donald Trump went from candidate to president-elect.

There were also smaller spikes, including after the death of Prince in April at age 57 and after the June shootings at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida.

Irony mixed with the surreal for yet another bump after the March death of Garry Shandling. His first sitcom, “It’s Garry Shandling’s Show,” premiered on Showtime in 1986 and had him busting through the fourth wall, speaking directly to the audience and mimicking his



AP PHOTO/BEBETO MATTHEWS

“Surreal” is Merriam-Webster’s word of 2016 based on spikes in lookups.

real life as a standup comedian, but one who knew he was starring in a TV show.

“It was surreal and it’s connected to the actual original meaning of surreal, which is to say it comes from Surrealism, the artistic movement of the early 20th century,” Sokolowski said.

Which is to say that “surreal” didn’t exist as a word until around 1924, after a group of European poets, painters and filmmakers founded a movement they called Surrealism. They sought to access the truths of the unconscious mind by breaking down rational thought.

It wasn’t until 1937 that “surreal” began to exist on its own, said Sokolowski, who is a lexicographer.

Merriam-Webster first started tracking lookup trends in 1996, when the dictionary landed online. In 2001, after the 9/11 terror attacks, the Springfield, Massachusetts-based company noticed plenty of spikes in word lookups. The most enduring spike was for “surreal,” pointing to a broader meaning and greater usage, Sokolowski said.

“We noticed the same thing after the Newtown shootings, after the Boston Marathon bombings, after Robin Williams’ suicide,” he said. “Surreal has become this sort of word that people seek in moments of great shock and tragedy.”

Word folk like Sokolowski can’t pinpoint exactly why people look words up online,

but they know it’s not only to check spellings or definitions. Right after 9/11, words that included “rubble” and “triage” spiked, he said. A couple days after that, more political words took over in relation to the tragedy, including “jingoism” and “terrorism.”

“But then we finally hit ‘surreal,’ so we had a concrete response, a political response and finally a philosophical response,” Sokolowski said. “That’s what connects all these tragic events.”

Other words that made Merriam-Webster’s Top 10 for 2016 due to significant spikes in lookups:

BIGLY: Yes, it’s a word but a rare and sometimes archaic form of “big,” dating to around 1400, Sokolowski said. It made its way into the collective mind thanks to Trump, who was fond of using “big league” as an adverb but making it sound like bigly.

DEPLORABLE: Thank you, Hillary Clinton and your basket full of, though it’s not technically a noun.

IRREGARDLESS: It’s considered a “nonstandard” word for regardless. It’s best avoided, Sokolowski said. Irregardless was used during the calling of the last game of the World Series and its use was pilloried on social media, he said.

ICON: This spike came after Prince’s April 21 death, along with surreal. “It was just a moment of public mourning, the likes of which really happen very seldom,”

Sokolowski said.

ASSUMPSIT: At the Democratic National Convention, Elizabeth Warren was introduced by one her former law students at Harvard, Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy III of Massachusetts. He described how on his first day she asked him for the definition of assumpsit and he didn’t know.

“She said, ‘Mr. Kennedy do you own a dictionary?’ so everybody looked it up,” Sokolowski laughed.

For the record: It’s a legal term with Latin roots for a type of implied promise or contract. Kennedy didn’t define it when he told the story.

FAUTE DE MIEUX: Literally, this French phrase means “lack of something better or more desirable.”

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg used it in a brief concurring opinion in June to support a ruling that struck down a Texas law that would have closed all but nine abortion clinics in the state.

IN OMNIA PARATUS: A Latin phrase for “ready for all things.” Curiosity surfaced when Netflix revived “Gilmore Girls” recently, including reference to this famous chant during an episode in the original series where Rory is talked into leaping off a high platform as part of the initiation for a secret society at Yale. It became a rallying cry for fans of the show.

REVENANT: Leonardo DiCaprio played one in a movie of the same name, sending people scurrying to the dictionary. It describes “one that returns after death or a long absence.” It can be traced to the 1820s and while it sounds biblical, it is not, Sokolowski said.

FECKLESS: It’s how Vice President-elect Mike Pence described President Obama’s foreign policy when he debated Democrat Tim Kaine. It means weak or worthless.

Online: <http://bit.ly/2hMpVto>