

## FEATURES

# Language is embiggened by words that don't exist

WHILE looking for the nine-letter word to solve *The Dominion Post's* Target puzzle, I came up with "goldthief". So, as anybody else would, I asked myself whether that was a word.

There are actually two questions here. The first is whether "goldthief" counts as one word or two; the second is whether it counts as a dictionary entry for English.

There are no rules in English for writing words solid, with hyphens or as two words.

In some instances, custom demands one spelling or another, but in many cases it is a matter of personal preference or house style (which publisher you happen to be



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### WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

dealing with). If I take three different dictionaries from my shelf, I find the spellings "seafront", "seafont" or "sea front", and "sea grass", "sea-grass" and "seagrass", respectively.

So if there are no rules, it seems reasonable that I should be able to choose to spell "goldthief" as a single word if it suits my purpose.

I should note, however, that there is a certain amount of fashion involved in these spellings.

The use of the hyphen in words like these seems to be rather old-fashioned these days, and other options are preferred in recent publications.

But if "goldthief" could be spelled as one word, that still does not answer the question of whether it is a word.

Its meaning is presumably clear, and there is a parallel in "horse-thief" (spelling as in *The Cham-*

*bers Dictionary*) or "car thief".

We need to be careful with a question like this, because it is not clear what the question means.

If it means, "Can I use this word in answer to a Target puzzle or to put on the board in Scrabble", then the rules for Target or for Scrabble define what counts as "being a word".

It has to be listed in the relevant dictionary (the Target puzzle specifies the *Chambers 21st-Century Dictionary*; in Scrabble you may use the official Scrabble dictionary, or agree with other players to use some other specific dictionary).

But there is clearly a sense in which a word can "exist" without

being in a particular dictionary.

If I look in the first edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, I will not find "user-friendly", for example, because that word did not come into use till some 40 years after the publication of the dictionary.

Since new words come into the language continually, there can always be a word which is in use but which is not listed in the particular dictionary consulted.

Technical words from specific areas can also fail to be noted in particular dictionaries: "morpho-syntactic", a technical term in linguistics, is not listed in *The Chambers Dictionary*, for instance,

though I use it in lectures to students in second year.

But the question is harder than that. One correspondent wrote to us about the word "embiggen", which he had heard and had done a Google search for, finding it in several documents.

Is that enough to make it a word, to say that it "exists"? And if it is not, what is the status of a word which some people (however ill-informed we may believe them to be) use freely, but which we cannot find in our reference books?

What we probably want to say in such cases is that there is such a word, but that it is not found in the kind of English that many of us

happen to speak or write, just as "morphosyntactic" is probably not in the kind of English most of the readers of this column will speak or write. At least we can find some traces of "embiggen".

Sometimes it is difficult to know whether a particular word has ever been used — perhaps "goldthief". Now that I've used it here, is there such a word?

And if you are worried about what the real nine-letter word was, the anagram of "goldthief", it was "eightfold".

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