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How many words are there in the English Language?

And, even more intriguing, how many do you know?

The first question is easy to answer: nobody knows. You might think all we have to do is count the words in the biggest dictionaries. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, has over 600,000 entries. But there are lots of words that this or any other dictionary wouldn't include.

Even if we restrict our count to words in Standard English, the biggest dictionaries could never keep up with the idiosyncratic usages that we see all around us. Compound words are especially difficult to handle. In a newspaper article on the health value of red wine, I find *best-scoring grape*, *a mould-prone climate*, *barrel-ageing* and *bottle-ageing*. The writer talks about *heart-friendly* wines, supporting the *red-wine-is-best* theory. These are all clearly intelligible words, and some are going to be encountered quite often. *Heart-friendly*, for example, had 270,000 hits on a Google search engine last time I looked. But they are not going to be included in a dictionary because their meaning is obvious from their constituent elements.

The vocabulary of science and technology presents another problem. There are, apparently, some million insects already identified, with several million more awaiting description. This means there must be at least a corresponding number of lexical designations enabling English-speaking entomologists to talk about their subject. And similarly, unknown numbers would be found whatever knowledge area we looked at, as academics are always innovating conceptually and devising new terms, or new senses of old terms, to express their fresh thinking.

Then there's slang. By its nature slang changes rapidly and is difficult to track. Few of the dozens of words for being drunk, for example, will appear in a dictionary – *lagered*, *boxed*, *treed*, *bladdered* ... – and of course nobody can be sure whether any of these items are still in use.

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Excerpt

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Above all there's the problem of capturing new words that arise as a result of English becoming a global language. Most of the adaptation that takes place when a 'new English' emerges is in vocabulary, as speakers adapt the language to meet their communicative needs. We need only think of a country's fauna and flora, food and drink, mythology and religion, oral and written literature, local laws and customs, leisure and the arts, social structure So, when a community adopts English, and starts to use it in relation to all areas of life, there's inevitably going to be a great deal of lexical creation. To take just one example, there are some 20,000 entries in the *Dictionary of Caribbean English* (1996).

What about the second question: how many words do educated native-speakers know – their *passive vocabulary*? How many do *you* know? A difficult question, but one that can be researched. All you have to do is go through a desk dictionary and tick the words you know! More realistically, take a sample of pages and make an estimate. I've done this many times with native-speakers, and the total is usually between forty and fifty thousand, and often twice this number. That may seem a lot, but remember it includes word families, such as *happy, happiness, happily, happy-go-lucky* The total builds up quite quickly. I've also done it with fluent second-language learners, and – surprise? – the figures also approach 40,000+, especially if the learner is an avid reader of English literature and is online a lot. We know more than we think we know.

Active vocabulary is much more difficult to count, as it varies so much from one time and situation to another. (Think of all the words we use at a festival, that are never used at other times of the year.) It includes the words we write as well as speak. Estimates suggest that our active vocabulary is about a third lower than our passive vocabulary. That's still more than most people think. Vocabulary sizes always tend to be underestimated.

Allsopp, R. (1996) *Dictionary of Caribbean English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.