








# **How to Catch a Unicorn:**

Defining meaning in monolingual dictionaries

*Hochschultag 2018*

Annina Seiler

# A typical dictionary entry

<b>unicorn</b> 	   	Headword
<b>NOUN</b>		Word class
1 A mythical animal typically represented as a horse with a single straight horn projecting from its forehead.		Definition
<b>– Example sentences</b> <i>‘The golden unicorn was on his feet, and his eyes suddenly had a spark lit up inside of recognition.’</i> <i>‘No one has ever set foot in the unicorns ’ meadow before,’ she said slowly.’</i>		Example sentences
[...]		
<b>Origin</b> Middle English: via Old French from Latin unicornis, from uni- ‘single’ + cornu ‘horn’, translating Greek monokerōs.		Etymology
<b>Pronunciation</b>  <b>unicorn</b> /'ju:ni:kɔ:n/ 		Pronunciation

# Describing meaning: The art of lexicography

“Like other linguistic statements, definitions in monolingual dictionaries consist of ‘**language turned back on itself**’, using the same language to describe as is being described.”(Jackson 2002: 93)

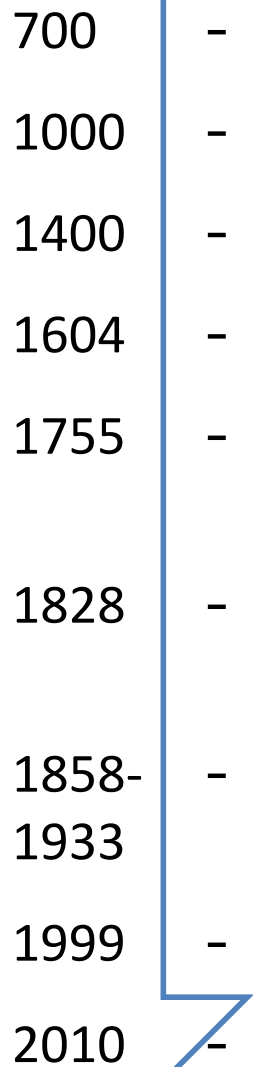
Two common forms of definition:

- **Synonym**, collection of synonyms, synonymous phrase
- **Analytical definition** (*genus proximum & differentiae specifica*)

*unicorn* (in stories) an animal like a white horse with a long straight horn on its forehead [OALD s.v.]

(Jackson 2002: 93-96; cf. Zgusta 1971: 252-63)

# A short history of the English dictionary

- 
- 700 - Epinal Glossary (Latin-English; ca. 4,000 entries)
  - 1000 - **Ælfric's Glossary** (Latin-English; topical; ca. 1,300 entries)
  - 1400 - *Promptorium parvulorum* (English-Latin; ca. 12,000 entries)
  - 1604 - Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall* (ca. 2,500 'hard' words)
  - 1755 - Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (ca. 40,000 entries)
  - 1828 - Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (ca. 70,000 entries)
  - 1858-1933 - **Oxford English Dictionary** (1<sup>st</sup> ed. ca. 250,000 entries; today 600,000 entries)
  - 1999 - **Urban Dictionary** (5,5 million entries in 2009)
  - 2010 - **Oxford Living Dictionaries: English**



# English definitions in Ælfric's Glossary

*Tintinnabulum* litel belle.

*Campana* micel belle.

*Belua* egelic nyten on sæ oððe on lande.

'**monster**: a terrible animal on sea or on land'

*Animal* ælc þing, ðe cucu byð.

'**creature**: every thing that is alive'

*Corpus* lic ægþer ge cuces mannes ge deades.

'**body**: the body either of living or of dead people'

(Edition: Zupitza & Gneuss 1966; my translation)

*Suburbanus* se ðe sit butan ðære byrig.

'**suburbanite**: someone who dwells outside town'

*Oppidanus* se ðe on fæstene sit.

'**town-dweller**: someone who dwells in a fortified place'

*Maritus* ceorl, ðe wif hæfð.

'**husband**: a man who has a woman'

*Uxor* wif, þe wer hæfð.

'**wife**: a woman who has a man'

*Prora* þar se ancerman sitt.

'**prow**: where the anchor-man sits'

*Testudo* se þe hæfð hus.

'**tortoise**: he who has a house'

# Unicorn in Ælfric's Glossary

*Unicornis anhyrne deor. þæt deor hæfð ænne horn bufan ðam twam eagum; swa strangne and swa scearpne, þæt he fyht wið ðone mycclan ylp and hine oft gewundað on ðære wambe oð deað. he hatte eac rinoceron and monoceron.*

'**Unicorn:** a one-horned animal. This animal has one horn above the two eyes, which is so strong and so sharp that it [the unicorn] fights with the big elephant and often wounds it on the belly to death. It is also called rhinoceros and monoceros.'



London, British Library,  
Harley 3244, f. 38 (14<sup>th</sup> c.)

# *Unicorn* in the Oxford English Dictionary

- I. 1. a) **A fabulous and legendary animal** usually regarded as having the body of a horse with a single horn projecting from its forehead [...]
  - b) The reem of the bible (historical)
  - c) **In figurative use**
  - d) Horn of the unicorn (material)
2. A picture of the unicorn used in heraldry (heraldry)
3. The designation of a specific heraldic office (heraldry)
4. A Scottish gold coin (historical)
5. A constellation (astronomy)
6. a) **A carriage drawn by three horses**
  - b) adverb to 6a (*to drive unicorn*)
- II. 7. The one-horned rhinoceros (obsolete)
8. Name of a fish or shell (zoology)
9. A species having one horn (zoology)

# *Unicorn* in the Oxford English Dictionary



1a legendary animal



4 coin



6 carriage drawn by three horses



7 one-horned rhinoceros



5 constellation



2 heraldic animal



# A new meaning for *unicorn*

2 A start-up company valued at more than a billion dollars, typically in the software or technology sector.

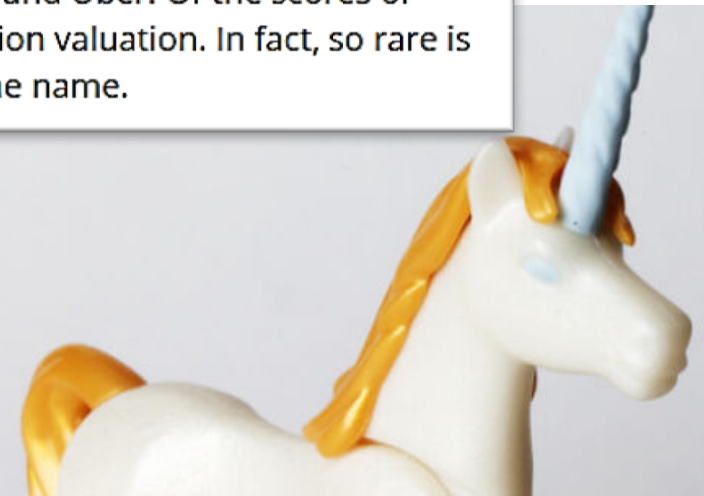
*'a currency-exchange unicorn'*

*[as modifier] 'many unicorn start-ups have little revenue to speak of'*

## What is a 21<sup>st</sup>-century unicorn?

In the world of big business, a *unicorn* is a start-up company valued at more than a billion dollars, and this new sense has now become so well established that it has just been added to [OxfordDictionaries.com](http://OxfordDictionaries.com). The new businesses earning the unicorn label are generally in the technology and software sectors, and include ventures such as Snapchat, Dropbox, and Uber. Of the scores of companies founded each year, only a tiny number ever achieve a \$1 billion valuation. In fact, so rare is this occurrence, that it is considered akin to finding a unicorn – hence the name.

Dictionary entry  
and blog article  
(19/09/2016)  
from the OLD



# Unicorn in the *Urban Dictionary*

27   

## Unicorn

A **person** you know that is your **perfect** match, and you could **always** picture yourself being with them...but you can't have them, or have never dated them, or they have kept you in the friend zone.

*Remember my best **friend Jimmy** Jackson from **high school**? He is totally my unicorn.*

[#uneecorn](#) [#mr. right](#) [#horse](#) [#white](#) [#pretty](#)

by [alexa7590](#) October 03, 2008

 90  101 

Headword




Definition

Example sentences

Hashtags

Multiple entries

Rating

47   

## Unicorn

n. YOU-ni-corn

Word class

Pronunciation

# The meanings of *unicorn* in the UD

[0. magical creature]

1. a) A very attractive (and hence unattainable) person, mostly a woman; a dream partner  
b) A very rare event; something unattainable
2. A woman getting getting sexually involved with a couple

## **Singular meanings:**

- A start-up company
- A single cob of corn
- A transsexual woman
- Different kinds of sexual practices (esp. as a vb.; adj. 'horny')
- Different kinds of drugs (also as a vb.)

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## Unicorn

A mythical creature that no one has **seen** except in fairy tales **also known as a gay** black Republican.

*Child: **Mommy mommy** I just saw that there is a black man running for the Republican ticket and he's **gay**.*

*Parent: Dear, there's no such thing as a unicorn.*

#collaborator #traitor #uncle tom #sell out #disgrace

by **UltimateSin** October 01, 2015



↑ 1b A very rare event

↓ 2 A woman plus couple

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## Unicorn

A **bisexual** but **single female** in a swingers party.

*"**Hey look...** is that a **unicorn** over by **the bar**?"*

#swingers #sex #party #bisexual #mating

by **sueeey** June 17, 2013



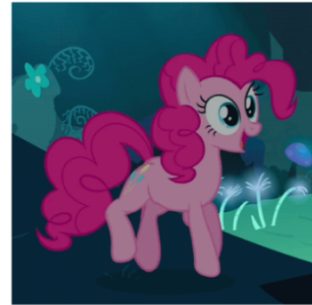
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## unicorn

A startup **worth** over one billion **dollars**. At risk of becoming complacent or **stagnant**

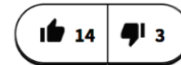
*Evernote is a unicorn; unfortunately its **value** has **dropped** because of stagnant **user** growth startup*



via giphy

#facebook #google #microsoft #apple #amazon

by **kashiv** March 14, 2016



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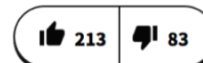


## Unicorn

**A single piece of corn.**

*I **ate** a **unicorn** yesterday!*

by **Asamusay** July 07, 2016








# The fuzziness of meaning

“Some modern lexical semantic theorists [...] would argue that this apparently simple aim [i.e. to attain precision and clarity in the definition of terms] is unachievable because it takes insufficient account of the **vague, fuzzy, and flexible nature of word meaning** in natural language, understates the **role of context**, and overlooks the prevalence of **metaphorical extension** of meaning.” (Hanks 2015: 94f.)

“An argument of the present chapter is that nonce words do not belong in dictionaries, even large dictionaries of record such as OED.” (Hanks 2015: 121)

# Nonce words in dictionaries: *covfeve*




TOP DEFINITION   

## covfeve

When you are too busy giving [Russia](#) classified information to correctly [spell words](#).

*"Despite the [constant negative press](#) covfeve"*

by [It is sad he is our president](#) May 30, 2017

 201  81 

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## covfeve

An [unpresidented typo](#)

*Despite the [constant negative press](#) covfeve*

by [John Wilkes Bluetooth](#) May 30, 2017

 916  460

## Covfefe: the creativity of typos

In the era of keyboards and touchscreens, typos are the scourge of our modern lives, causing embarrassment to presidents and paupers alike. But out of such errors, sometimes beautiful new words are born. Here we examine some cases where mistakes have led to the formation of new terms. Will *covfefe* join their ranks? We're still trying to work out a suitable definition...

### Adder

In Old English, the word *adder*, meaning a serpent or snake, was spelled *nædre*. In Middle English, the initial *n* was lost when people started saying 'an addre' instead of 'a naddre'. In fast speech, it is impossible to tell whether the sound /n/ belongs to the indefinite article or the following noun, which can lead to the 'n' migrating from one word to another. This process is known as [metanalysis](#), and has been responsible for changes in the spelling of several words, such as [apron](#), [auger](#), and [umpire](#).

Two entries from Urban Dictionary

Blog from Oxford Dictionaries (31/05/2017)

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