That Is so Fetch: A Look at the Fluidity of American English

James M. Yunik

Created in Esther Milu's
Fall 2018 ENC 4378 class

Abstract

This essay offers a look at the fluidity of the American English language in response to popular complaints about, or contempt for, new words and word uses in American English, as well as the common belief that American English is static rather than dynamic. Of particular focus in this essay are catalytic entities and forms of media which are herein referred to as actors and vectors, respectively. Specifically discussed are: corporate brands that have been co-opted to some extent in the public sphere; films that have directly or indirectly given rise to new words; hip-hop artists of considerable linguistic inventiveness and influence; social media and Internet forums in which new words or word uses sometimes spontaneously develop; and the Internet in general, which acts as a powerful catalyst for change. The essay concludes with a brief statement on the future of American English.

"That is *so… fetch.*"

"Gretchen, stop trying to make *fetch* happen. It's not going to happen."

This short excerpt is from *Mean Girls*, a movie produced in 2004 in which one supporting character, Gretchen, repeatedly uses the word *fetch* as an adjective. But what is the meaning of the adjectival form of fetch in American English? A search of any standard English dictionary will return only noun and verb forms of the word. The closest adjectival relationship you will find is the adjectival form of fetching, which means attractive. However, the right audience would clearly understand the adjectival form of fetch not just by its context but also by their memory of the word. Pressed for a definition, fans of *Mean Girls* would likely offer similar but disparate answers like cool, adorable, awesome, desirable, and so on. But while this form of fetch is widely known among certain audiences, it was never widespread enough to warrant official adoption into the American English lexicon. To put it another way, fetch never happened.

Of course, fetch was never offered with sincerity. Although the character, Gretchen, was sincere in pushing the word, *Mean Girls* was not. Fetch was a running joke and audiences knew it, so it is unlikely that anyone outside the movie ever said, "That is so fetch" for any reason other than the word's amusing pop cultural appeal. Perhaps this limited appeal is part of why fetch never attained widespread popularity.

Regardless, the story of fetch is indicative of the fluidity of language, and in this context, American English specifically. It is easy for the layperson to mistake a language for the sum of its officially designated vocabulary and rules of use. This definition is both sufficient and preferable for most people. After all, official languages are relatively long-lived and predictable. But "new nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs regularly enter the language as new technology and new ideas require them. They are sometimes abandoned, too" (Kolln & Gray, 2017). Indeed, American English is neither the first nor the last version of English. At present, it is merely one subdivision of a much broader English language (See Figure 1.0).

Within the context of this much grander field of sister languages, it is undeniable that American English is prone to change, and that change is happening right under our noses. Just as there is more to *fetch* than its official definitions, there is more to the American English language than its official codifications. Beyond the borders of "official" American English are multitudes of unofficial words that illustrate the language's perpetual malleability. These words are employed by innumerable communicators
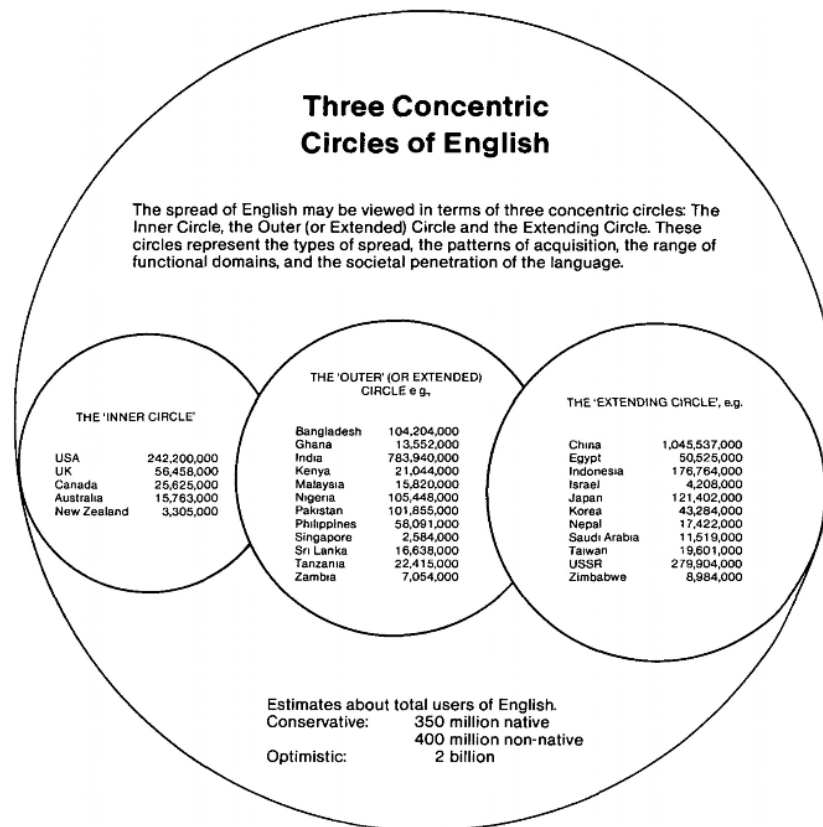
Three Concentric Circles of English

The spread of English may be viewed in terms of three concentric circles: The Inner Circle, the Outer (or Extended) Circle and the Extending Circle. These circles represent the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition, the range of functional domains, and the societal penetration of the language.

THE 'OUTER' (OR EXTENDED) CIRCLE e.g.,

Bangladesh	104,204,000
Ghana	13,552,000
India	783,940,000
Kenya	21,044,000
Malaysia	15,820,000
Nigeria	105,448,000
Pakistan	101,855,000
Philippines	58,091,000
Singapore	2,584,000
Sri Lanka	16,638,000
Tanzania	22,415,000
Zambia	7,054,000

THE 'INNER CIRCLE'

USA	242,200,000
UK	56,458,000
Canada	25,625,000
Australia	15,763,000
New Zealand	3,305,000

THE 'EXTENDING CIRCLE', e.g.

China	1,045,537,000
Egypt	50,525,000
Indonesia	176,764,000
Israel	4,208,000
Japan	121,402,000
Korea	43,284,000
Nepal	17,422,000
Saudi Arabia	11,519,000
Taiwan	19,601,000
USSR	279,904,000
Zimbabwe	8,984,000

Estimates about total users of English.
Conservative: 350 million native
400 million non-native
Optimistic: 2 billion

Fig. 1.0, Mesthrie, R. (2008). English Circling the Globe. *English Today, 24*(01). doi:10.1017/s0266078408000072

I refer to as *actors* in a variety of mediums I refer to as *vectors*. Within this essay, I hope to address to some extent what general groups these actors belong to, including what vectors they use to communicate, how they are changing American English, and what this may mean for the future of the language.

Corporate Brands

Corporate brand names like Amazon, Coca-Cola, and Facebook have so thoroughly propagated in American life that they seem entirely unavoidable, and they are far from alone. The adoption of corporate brands into American English may seem obvious. How else would anyone find or purchase a corporate service or product if they didn't know its name? If a brand is to flourish in America, it must enter the American English lexicon. It is possible for a brand name to become so successful that it undergoes *generification*, wherein it gains widespread use in describing all similar products or services regardless of the providing corporation. It might surprise you to learn, for instance, that Q-tips, Bubble Wrap, and Velcro are trademarked brands rather than blanket terms used to describe *any* cotton swab, sealed-air packaging materials, or hook-and-loop fasteners. Other well-known examples include Kleenex, Band-Aid, and Xerox.

Generification of corporate brands is an interesting phenomenon in part because it may be detrimental to the brand. In 2012, New York businessman David Elliott "registered several hundred domain names containing the verb 'google'" (Wirtz Law APC, 2012), and was subsequently ordered to relinquish control of said domains to Google, Inc. (now known as Alphabet, Inc.). Mr. Elliott responded with a lawsuit seeking to cancel the "google" trademark on the grounds that it had become generic, and that "the word 'google' is now commonly used worldwide in most languages as a verb meaning 'to search for something on the Internet'" (Wirtz Law APC, 2012). Although the lawsuit failed, Google faced continued legal challenges as recently as 2017 (Wirtz Law APC, 2017), and despite Alphabet Inc.'s efforts, the name of their search engine is still often used to represent generic Internet searches, further evidencing the fluidity of American English.

Entertainment

In October of 2016, the International Trade Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce released an Industry & Analysis report stating that "the U.S. [Media and Entertainment] market represents a third of the global industry and will reach approximately $771 billion by 2019, up from $632 billion in 2015" 2015

(International Trade Commission, 2016). The entertainment industry is clearly a big part of American lives, and its global, technologically-amplified reach provides it with enormous influence which—among other things—affect change within the American English language.

Films

Mean Girls may have failed to make fetch happen, but some other films have succeeded in generating new words and word usages or popularizing old words. Of course, some words are more useful than others, as evidenced by the soon-to-be-remade musical *Mary Poppins*. In the original 1964 film, Mary Poppins sings the word—take a deep breath and forgive me for not trying to tell you how to pronounce this—Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. Although it did exist prior to the movie (Merriam Webster, 2018), it is not surprising the tongue-twister did not truly become a part of American English until it was popularized by Mary Poppins. It may be used only rarely—if ever—as a pop culture reference, but supercalifragilisticexpialidocious is widely considered a real word and is even listed within the Oxford Dictionary as "Extraordinarily good; wonderful" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018).

Another word derived from film is *bogart* or *bogard*, which may be defined and explained thusly: "To aggressively take over or take charge of something. From film star Humphrey Bogart, who played strong-arm tough guys" (Smitherman, 64). As you can see in figure 1.1 from Google's Ngram Viewer, the term *bogarting* entered the public consciousness and has gained significant popularity in recent years.
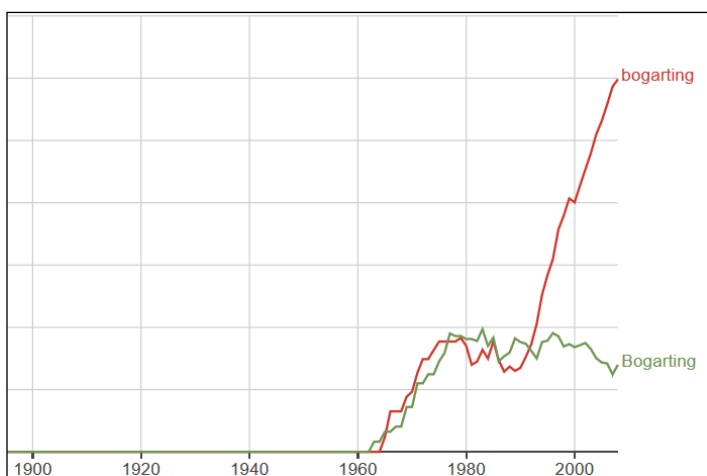

Figure 1.1, Google Ngram Viewer. (n.d.). Retrieved Nov. 19, 2018, from https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?con-tent=bogarting&case_insensitive=on&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=7&share=&direct_url=t4;,bogarting;,c0;,s0;;bogarting;,c0;;Bogarting;,c0

Interestingly, Humphrey Bogart and his acting reputation only *inspired* the creation of this word rather than creating the word directly, which goes to show the power of film in introducing ideas.

Another examples of this is the verb form of *gaslighting*, a psychological term which has regained some prominence as of late and is defined as "a manipulative maneuver used to deceive people into questioning their perception of reality. It is a form of psychological abuse" (Kivak, 2017). This word originated from a 1938 play and a 1944 film adaptation, both titled *Gaslight*. Within the film, "a devious husband…makes his devoted wife…think she is losing her mind through a variety of tactics. Most famously, [he] dims the flames on the gaslights in their home, then denies it happened when Paula says she saw them flickering" (Kivak, 2017).

Gaslighting is particularly striking as a neologism because it stands alone in American English. While one may communicate the concept of supercalifragilisticexpialidocious with words like *wonderful* or *spectacular*, or the concept of bogarting with synonyms like *hogging* or *monopolizing*, there are no synonyms for gaslighting in American English. Therefore, a word created for, and initially disseminated through, entertainment vectors has come to hold a singular position within the language. Now the word is commonly used in American English.

Hip-Hop

While other musical vectors do contain lyrical elements, lyrics are of primary importance in most hip-hop. Additionally, Hip-Hop has gained increasingly worldwide prominence in a variety of languages and cultures. According to Samy Alim, there is a "Global Hip Hop Nation, a multilingual, multiethnic 'nation' with an international reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical givens of the present" (Alim, 2007). In addition to global interactivity and lyrical focus, Hip-Hop typically encourages creativity. "Youth all around the world have engaged Hip-Hop and created their own Hip-Hop Nation Language Varieties and communicate with each other through the prism of style—a diversity of style as lingua franca, if you will—to form a global style community. Unity within the Global Hip-Hop Nation does more than merely tolerate diversity, it demands it" (Alim, 2009).

In other words, because of the lyrical nature of hip-hop and rappers' focus on diversity of style, the hip-hop genre is something of a petri dish for new vocabulary that encourages linguistic inventiveness and sometimes results in the formation of new words and word meanings as well as the rejuvenation of older words. Add to this the

prominent countercultural lean of many hip-hop artists as well as the fact that hip-hop audiences tend to be relatively young, and it is quite clear that hip-hop is a significant catalytic vector of change in American English.

Consider the following 1998 hip-hop track, *Ebonics*, in which the late Big L raps what is essentially a glossary of hip-hop vocabulary:

> Yo, pay attention | And listen real closely how I break this slang shit down | Check it, my weed smoke is my lye | A ki of coke is a pie | When I'm lifted, I'm high |
> With new clothes on, I'm fly | Cars is whips and sneakers is kicks | Money is chips, movies is flicks | Also, cribs is homes, jacks is pay phones | Cocaine is nose candy, cigarettes is bones | A radio is a box, a razor blade is a ox | Fat diamonds is rocks and jakes is cop | And if you got rubbed, you got stuck | You got shot, you got bucked | And if you got double-crossed, you got fucked | Your bankroll is your poke, a choke hold is a yoke | A kite is a note, a con is a okey doke | And if you got punched that mean you got snuffed | To clean is to buff, a bull scare is a strong bluff | I know you like the way I'm freakin' it | I talk with slang and I'ma never stop speakin' it (Coleman, 1998)

This excerpt may have presented some words with which you are unfamiliar as well as some with which you are not only familiar, but prone to use in casual conversation. Now, consider your likely familiarity with the following words and their unofficial definitions: *bling*, meaning expensive clothing and jewelry; *dope*, meaning very nice; *phat*, meaning excellent; *jiggy*, meaning uninhibited, particularly in a sexual manner; *twerk*, a specific dance move wherein one squats and repeatedly thrusts one's hips; *fo'shizzle*, meaning for sure; *grill*, a type of jewelry worn over the teeth; and *ghost*, to suddenly end all contact with a person. These are only a smattering of words that have been created or popularized by hip-hop artists, and while some of them may still be considered slang or unofficial, they are very much a part of the American English lexicon.

There should be no doubt of the transformative linguistic powers of rappers and hip-hop in general, and with its focus on unique lyrical expression and its youthful actors, the hip-hop genre remains in a perpetual state of flux.

> I think the problem with people, as they start to mature, they say 'Rap is a young man's game,' and they keep trying to make young songs. But you don't know the slang—it changes everyday. You can visit the topic, but these young kids live it

every day, and you're just visiting. (Rodriguez, 2010)

With this constant process of change in mind, it seems altogether likely, if not certain, that the effects of hip-hop will increase over time as the genre gains further prominence and legitimacy both domestically and worldwide.

The Internet

The Internet is a special case, the be-all and end-all of communication mediums, a super-vector by which all actors and other vectors may beget change on the world. However, the internet is much more than a channel of distribution; the degree to which communication is possible on the internet is without parallel in human history. With the internet, billions of human beings representing a dazzling number of disparate cultures and understandings can communicate instantaneously through social media platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit. These interactions foster changes in American English and other languages.

For instance, the term *on fleek*—meaning "smooth, nice, sweet" (Know Your Meme, 2018)—entered the American public consciousness in a video posted to the now-defunct Vine website in July of 2014 (See Figure 1.2).
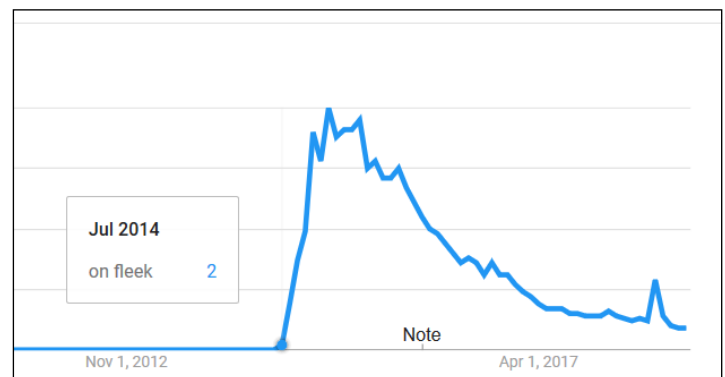

Fig. 1.2, On Fleek - Explore - Google Trends. (n.d.). Retrieved November 20, 2018, from https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=on fleek

Although the term is said to have already existed prior to 2014, it exploded in popularity after the video was posted, and it appears to still be in use even now. Although Vine no longer exists, the original video in which *on fleek* was first popularized can still be viewed on other sites such as [YouTube](#).

Humblebrag is an interesting portmanteau apparently pioneered on Twitter in 2010 by the late Harris Wittels (Know Your Meme, 2018), who went on to publish [*Humblebrag: The Art of False Modesty*](#) two years later. The term has since attained widespread use, and even has a [subreddit](#) dedicated to it, with over 86,000 subscribers as

of this writing. Below, Figure 1.3 illustrates the word's popularity since 2010.

Many other new words are, unsurprisingly, used to describe aspects of life on the internet and with which you are likely as least passingly familiar: *tweet*, *post, webisode, friend/unfriend, viral, like, trolls, permaban,* and *paywalled*, are just a few. This is far from an exhaustive list of internet-centric words. The following terms were created and/or appropriated as popular internet vernacular:

> Taking the piss, on point, snatched, lit, chill, dude, bae, wicked, absolute unit, like, tl;dr, what's up/ wassup/sup/suh, awesome, I hear ya, ermahgerd, rage quit, props, creeping, buzzkill, cougar, flyover states, sheeple, owned/pwned, toxic masculinity, #fail, bomb, facepalm, throw shade, first-world problems, cray, hashtag, relationship goals, adulting, #Bible, plug, pop, keep it 100, GOAT, salty, I can't even, trash/trashy, low key/high key, bye, Felicia/Damn Gina, savage, sus, woke, fam, dad bod, Netflix and chill, sorry not sorry, the struggle is real, thirsty, basic, bounce, clap back, fire, hot mess, 'Merica, slay, YASS, shook, hangry, thicc, ghost, ratchet, bruh, roast, side-chick, feels, sipping tea/spilling tea.

Large as this list may seem, it is a mere drop in the bucket—perhaps *less* than a drop in the bucket—regarding the multitudes of words created and/or popularized within American English via the internet super-vector.

The Future

American English is fluid; the changes undergone in the last five years alone are irrefutable evidence of this fact, and the trend of its increasing linguistic change is likely to not only continue but accelerate due to the catalytic and empowering influence of the internet and globalization. It may be impossible to accurately extrapolate the current linguistic revolution into the future, but as further technological advancements engender greater global interconnectedness and cultural understanding, especially among the youth, one could not be blamed for predicting a markedly different American English a mere twenty years from now, if not sooner. Time will tell. After all, the only vector of change even greater—even more fetch— than the internet is time itself.
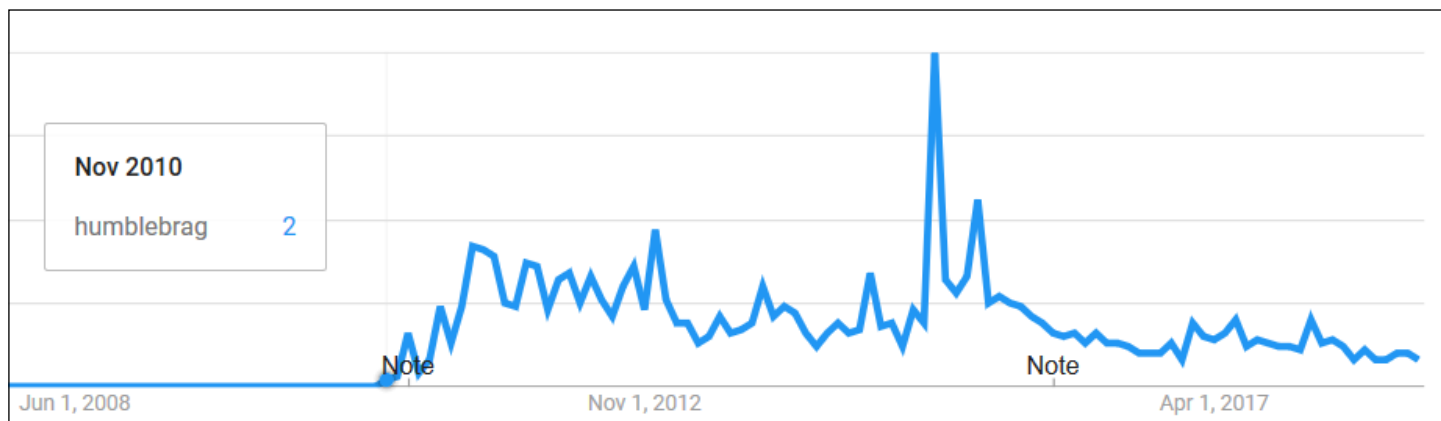

Fig. 1.3, Humblebrag - Explore - Google Trends. (n.d.). Retrieved April 22, 2019, from https:// trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=humblebrag

Works Cited

Alim, H. S., & Pennycook, A. (2007). Introduction to the Special Issue: Glocal Linguistic Flows: Hip-Hop Culture(s), Identities, and the Politics of Language Education. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, *6*(2), 89–100. doi-org.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/10.1080/15348450701341238

Alim, H. S. (2009). Translocal Style Communities: Hip Hop Youth as Cultural Theorists of Style, Language, and Globalization. *Pragmatics: Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association,* 103-127. doi:10.1075/ prag.19.1.06ali

Coleman, Lamon & Browz, Ron (1998). Ebonics. Los Angeles: Priority Records.

Eyebrows on Fleek. (2018, July 17). Retrieved from https:// knowyourmeme.com/memes/eyebrows-on-fleek

Google Ngram Viewer. (n.d.). Retrieved November 19, 2018, from https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph? content=bogarting&case_insensitive=on&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=7&share=&direct_url=t4;,bogarting;,c0;,s0;;bogarting;,c0;;Bogarting;,c0

Humblebrag. (2018, July 17). Retrieved November 20, 2018, from https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/humblebrag

International Trade Administration. "2016 Top Markets Report: Media and Entertainment." *Media_and_Entertainment_Top_Markets_Report.Pdf*, Department of Commerce, 2016, www.trade.gov/topmarkets/pdf/Media_and_Entertainment_Top_Markets_Report.pdf.

Kivak, R. (2017). Gaslighting. *Salem Press Encyclopedia.* Retrieved from https://login.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login?auth=shibb&url=https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=125600228&site=eds-live&scope=site

Kolln, M., & Gray, L. S. (2017). *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects.* Boston: Pearson Education.

Mesthrie, R. (2008). English Circling the Globe. *English Today, 24*(01). doi:10.1017/s0266078408000072

On Fleek - Explore - Google Trends. (n.d.). Retrieved November 20, 2018, from https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=on fleek

Rodriguez, J. (2010, June 10). Jay-Z Says He Plans to Age Gracefully In The Rap Game. Retrieved November 30, 2018, from http://www.mtv.com/news/1641254/jay-z-says-he-plans-to-age-gracefully-in-the-rap-game/

Smitherman, G. (1994). *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious | Definition of supercalifragilisticexpialidocious in English by Oxford Dictionaries. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

The Real Origin of Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. (n.d.). Retrieved November 20, 2018, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/origin-supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

Wirtz Law APC. (2012). Wirtz Law APC Files Federal Lawsuit against Google Inc. to Cancel "GOOGLE" Trademark. *Business Wire (English).* Retrieved from https://login.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login?auth=shibb&url=https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bwh&AN=bizwire.c41885470&site=eds-live&scope=site

Wirtz Law APC. (8AD, Spring 2017). GOOGLE Trademark Still at Risk: U.S. Supreme Court Review Sought by Wirtz Law APC in Case Seeking Cancellation Of GOOGLE Trademark. *Business Wire (English).* Retrieved from https://login.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login?auth=shibb&url=https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bwh&AN=bizwire.c80221364&cpidlogin.asp?custid=current&site=ehost-live&scope=site

James Yunik is a Sophomore undergraduate student majoring in Writing in Rhetoric with a minor in Technical Communication. He currently possesses an Associate of the Arts from Valencia College as well as an Associate of Science in Information Technology from Pittsburgh Technical College, and he is a self-published author. He looks forward to dual creative and technical writing careers.