

The Words of the Week - 5/1/20

Some of the words that defined the week ending May 1, 2020

Welcome to The Words of the Week, in which we look over some of the good, the bad, and the semantically imprecise words that tickled your curiosity this past week. Please note that [bad](#) is used here in a vague fashion; we do not really think of any words as bad (although sometimes they are a bit unruly).



'Sycophant'

[Sycophant](#) had another spike in lookups (it happens with this word once a year or so) when Jennifer Rubin, a columnist for *The Washington Post*, used the word in reference to the Vice-President.

Why would Pence act so recklessly, putting himself and caregivers in further danger? Well, Trump does not like the idea of wearing a mask so a sniveling sycophant probably wouldn't want to be seen in one, either.

— Jennifer Rubin, [The Washington Post](#), 29 Apr. 2020

We define *sycophant* as "a servile self-seeking flatterer." *Servile* means "meanly or [cravenly](#) submissive" or "of or [befitting](#) a slave or a [menial](#) position." The word has been in use since the early 16th century.

[craven](#): characterized by abject fear; cowardly.

[befitting](#): appropriate; suitable; proper.

[menial](#): of or relating to servants : lowly

Agaynst the byting of a sycophant or sclauderer there is no remedy.

— Philipp Melanchthon, *The confessyon of the fayth of the Germaynes*, 1536

Some of you may be curious about the other descriptor employed by Rubin, **sniveling**. Please note that the verb *snivel* (a word with a lovely range of disagreeable meanings, including "to snuff mucus up the nose audibly," "to cry or whine with snuffling," and "to speak or act in a whining, sniffing, tearful, or weakly emotional manner") may be conjugated with either a single or a double *L* (*sniveling* or *snivelling*; *sniveled* or *snivelled*).

sniveling: whining in a tearful manner

'Economic intercourse'

Joe Biden said something last week that made some people **furrow** their brows, and caused others to **snigger** and **guffaw**, when he made reference to *economic intercourse*.

furrow (n): a deep wrinkle. **furrow** (v): to make furrows, grooves, wrinkles, or lines in

snigger → **snicker**: to laugh in a covert or partly suppressed manner

guffaw: a loud or boisterous burst of laughter

One of the definitions we offer for the word *intercourse* is "connection or dealings between persons or groups." This is a noun, and Biden was modifying it with the adjective *economic*. It is not terribly uncommon, and not at all **risque**, to pair these two words together.

risque: verging on impropriety or indecency : off-color

The American Tradition Of Free Economic Intercourse

— (title) Clarence B. Carson, *The Freeman* (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY), 1 Nov. 1963

'UFO'

UFOs were on the minds of many people last week, following the release of what was said to be evidence of such objects.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) has released three videos that it says show evidence of "unidentified" flying objects. Yes, UFOs.

— [BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55111111) (bbc.com), 28 Apr. 2020

UFO is an abbreviation of *unidentified flying object*. Some people would insist that this word is an **initialism**, "an abbreviation formed from initial letters" (such as *CIA* or *FBI*). If you want to describe *UFO* as an **acronym** that's fine as well. *Acronym* may refer either to a word formed from the initial letter or letters of each of the successive parts or major parts of a compound term (such as *NATO*), and also is used synonymously with *initialism*.

initialism: an abbreviation formed from initial letters

'Famotidine'

[Famotidine](#) found itself in the news far more than it usually is, following reports that it was being considered as a possible treatment for COVID-19.

The fast-growing list of possible treatments for the novel coronavirus includes an unlikely candidate: famotidine, the active compound in the over-the-counter heartburn drug Pepcid. On 7 April, the first COVID-19 patients at Northwell Health in the New York City area began to receive famotidine intravenously, at nine times the heartburn dose.
— Brendan Borrell, [Science](#) (sciencemag.org), 26 Apr. 2020

Some words have definitions that raise brevity to an art form, such as [purdy](#) ("disagreeably self-important"), and then there are other words which require a little more verbiage. *Famotidine* is in the second category; we define it as "an H₂ antagonist C₈H₁₅N₇O₂S₃ used to inhibit gastric acid secretion especially in the short-term treatment of gastric and [duodenal](#) ulcers and [gastroesophageal](#) reflux disease and in the treatment of disorders (as Zollinger-Ellison syndrome) involving [gastric](#) acid hypersecretion."

[duodenum](#): the first part of the small intestine extending from the pylorus to the jejunum

[gastroesophageal](#): of, relating to, or involving the stomach and esophagus

[gastric](#): of or relating to the stomach

'Nobel Prize'

[Nobel Prize](#) spiked in lookups as well, after President Trump tweeted an as-yet unrecognized variant spelling.

Trump claims his tweets about 'Noble Prizes' were 'sarcasm' in day of erratic tweeting
— (headline) [The Week](#) (theweek.com), 27 Apr. 2020

The *Nobel Prize* (also referred to simply as *Nobel*) is "any of various annual prizes (as in peace, literature, medicine) established by the will of Alfred Nobel for the encouragement of persons who work for the interests of humanity." Alfred Bernhard Nobel (1833-1896) was a Swedish manufacturer, inventor, and philanthropist. The word [noble](#), which comes from the Latin *nobilis* ("well-known, noble"), has a range of meanings that include "possessing outstanding qualities," "of high birth or exalted rank," and "chemically [inert](#) or inactive especially toward oxygen."

[inert](#): lacking the power to move

Our Antedating of the Week: 'scuttlebutt'

For our antedating of the week we are looking anew at [scuttlebutt](#), a word which now means "rumor, gossip." This sense came about around the beginning of the 20th century; the original meaning of *scuttlebutt* was "a [cask](#) on shipboard to contain fresh water for a day's use" (the word is an alteration of *scuttled butt*, or a [butt](#) ("a large cask especially for wine, beer, or water") with a hole cut into it). Our

earliest known use of *scuttlebutt* had previously come from around 1805; recent findings show that the word was in use at least as far back as 1798.

cask: a barrel-shaped vessel of staves, headings, and hoops usually for liquids

Instead of an allowance therefore being served out daily, the scuttle butt should never be allowed to be empty; (unless for the purpose of cleaning it) and every man should be permitted to take as much water as he has occasion for, the officer on deck taking care, at the same time, that none be wantonly spilled or wasted.

— Alexander Stewart, *Medical Discipline*, 1798