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## SELFIE

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We Australians are pretty easy to recognise by our turn of phrase – especially the way that we shorten words and then shove a vowel or two on the end. Fire officer becomes “firie”, tradesperson becomes “tradie”, and a tin of beer gets called a “tinnie”. So lend me your “earies”, and I’ll tell you the story of how “self-portrait photograph” became “selfie”. Yep, we Australians brought this new word into the English language – and I had a small part in this process.

## Selfie = New Genre?

There are claims that with selfies, art has entered a brand new genre. Supposedly the instantaneous self-portrait, shared via social media to the “audience”, is inviting them to connect – and this is a “first” in human history.

Perhaps.

However, millennia ago the Ancient Greeks had the concept of “methexis” in their theatre – where the speaker on stage would turn and speak directly to the audience. In return, the audience would join in with the stage action.

## HISTORY OF THE SELFIE

Possibly the earliest selfie was painted by Parmigianino back in 1523 when he created *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

We think that the earliest photographic selfie was taken by Robert Cornelius in 1839, in Philadelphia. He was an amateur chemist and photographer. He put the film in the camera, removed the lens cap, sat back and remained perfectly still for one minute, and then reached forward and replaced the lens cap. He then had to process the film with chemicals and dry it before he could look at the first photographic selfie. (There was nothing instant about photography in those days.)

Since then, things have changed. We’ve even had selfies sent back to Earth from Mars by the two Mars Rovers still exploring there – our first robot selfies from outer space.

For a brief while, the most famous selfie was the one taken at the memorial service of Nelson Mandela, one of the truly inspirational figures of the 20th century. This group selfie had just three people in

it: Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt was in the centre taking the selfie, and was flanked by the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the President of the United States, Barack Obama.

But then Hollywood got involved. The selfie orchestrated by Ellen DeGeneres at the Oscars in February 2014 is now probably the best-known selfie. She started off with Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts – and was then joined by Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Jared Leto, Bradley Cooper, Kevin Spacey and more. You know that they must be movie stars, because otherwise they wouldn't be thin enough to all fit into the one picture.

## Mars Rover Selfie

Both of the currently operating Rovers on Mars (the solar-powered *Opportunity* and the nuclear-powered *Curiosity*) have sent back selfies. In each case, they used a camera mounted on the end of an arm, took multiple overlapping selfies, and then combined them into a single selfie – minus the arm.

*Opportunity* sent back a selfie on 15 April 2014, to celebrate its sixth Martian winter. It landed on Mars on 25 January 2004, with a three-month guarantee – over 10 Earth years ago. Thanks to recent winds, its solar cells are now the most dust-free they have ever been since its first Martian winter in 2005. On 28 July 2014, it gained the record for the longest distance driven “off-world” – 40 kilometres.

*Curiosity* sent back its selfie on 24 June 2014, to celebrate the Marsiversary of landing on Mars on 5 August 2012.

**Marsiversary? The year on Mars lasts 687 Earth days.**

**I wonder how long it'll be before "Marsiversary"  
enters the Oxford English Dictionary. Probably  
when we have humans living on Mars . . .**

## **ETYMOLOGY OF "SELFIE"**

In the study of language, called etymology, the origin of a new word is defined by when it first appeared in print. In the old days, that meant paper, but times have changed.

The word "selfie" was officially born back in 2002, with Nathan Hope, hereafter known as Hopey – so you know that he's Australian. He went out for a mate's 21st birthday and had a little mishap. On 13 September 2002 at 2.55 p.m., he went onto an online forum (as Hopey) to ask about the dissolvable stitches that were by then in his lower lip. They were dry and uncomfortable. After a bit of chat back and forth, the entity known as "My Evil Twin, Beryl" asked him how he came to get these stitches, and at 3.19 p.m., he typed in reply:

"Um, drunk at a mate's 21st, I tripped ofer [sic] and landed lip first (with front teeth coming a very close second) on a set of steps. I had a hole about 1 cm long right through my bottom lip."

He then posted a "self-photograph" showing the stitches in his lower lip.

He continued writing: "And sorry about the focus, it was a selfie."

That was the very first written use of the word "selfie", in any medium (paper or electronic).

That's how the word "selfie" got into the English language. Its use ramped up slowly and steadily for a while, but then took off massively in 2013. In November that year, it was declared that over the previous year, the usage of "selfie" had increased by an astonishing 17,000 per cent. Who said so? The *Oxford English Dictionary* – or OED

– which, by the way, is *the* definitive record of our rapidly evolving English language.

How did the OED measure this?

Well, they analysed the Oxford English New Monitor Corpus, which is an archive of electronically stored structured sets of texts – fancy talk for

“whatever we could grab off the web, and store, and file”. Each month some 150 million words are collected. This database is statistically analysed every day to track new and emerging words – and “selfie” began to stand out from the pack.

So, in November 2013, the OED declared that for 2013 the Word of the Year would be “selfie”.

And in what forum did Hopey post the first-known use of “selfie”? It was my very own “Dr Karl Self-Serve Science Forum” on the ABC! And yes, I did Tweet about that . . .

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was officially born  
back in 2002.

## Really Cool?

The word “selfie” was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in August 2013, in their quarterly update of new words.

But in the Land of Etymology, there is another specialised, elite dictionary, jam-packed full of ridiculous words.

On 5 August 2014, “selfie” jumped into *The Official Scrabble Players Dictionary*.



## Potential Words of the Year, 2013

There were several runners-up for the Word of the Year in 2013. They included “twerk” (to dance in a low squat in a sexually provocative manner, using thrusting hip movements), “binge-watch” (to watch many episodes of a TV show in one bout) and “showrooming” (to visit bricks-and-mortar stores to examine merchandise before buying it online).

