

# Serendipity: Sustainable Cool

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*Language is always in transition, but can you remember a time when the word 'cool' wasn't cool?*

What's the difference between cool words and sustainable words? Cool words may come and go, but sustainable ones have the flexibility that gives them staying power. In current time, it's hard to determine which words will be sustained.



Karen Telleen-Lawton

My first memory of a newly cool word was turkey, circa 1970. My friend Julie's pipsqueak brother Paul called us turkeys with a disdain that left no doubt as to its intent. Paul went on to become a classics professor, but turkey did not become a classic.

One currently cool word is sweet. It boasts 51 definitions in the [Urban Dictionary](#), an online and now hardcover source made up of tens of thousands of slang words, many of which are co-topical with: "foreplay — misrepresenting yourself on a date in hopes of getting lucky." Sweet's myriad definitions range from: "An intensive, used to express satisfaction, acceptance, pleasure, excellence, exaltation, approval, awe or reverence" to "a connotation in minority and urban areas suggesting a man lacking in masculinity."

Cool itself may be the longest-lived cool word, which suggests its sustainable nature. I don't know a time when cool wasn't cool. I have friends in their 60s and 70s who swear cool was cool in the 1940s and 50s.

In fact, [Wikipedia](#) cites [Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Union Speech](#) in which he supposedly uttered: "In that supposed event (not abiding the presidential election), you say, you will destroy the Union; and then, you say, the great crime of having destroyed it will be upon us! That is cool. A highwayman holds a pistol to my ear, and mutters through his teeth, 'Stand and deliver, or I shall kill you, and then you will be a murderer!'" "



I'll leave it to bloggers to investigate whether this citation is accurate.

This usage seemed to have a sinister undercurrent not found today. The Wikipedia definition of cool is "an aesthetic of attitude, behavior, comportment, appearance style and Zeitgeist" with no single meaning but associations of composure and self-control "often used as an expression of admiration or approval."

Its variability may reveal cool to be still early in its evolution. Static or bureaucratically established words may be ones with a finite lifetime. France, Iceland and China have official government entities that invent word equivalences for new foreign words.

These official words may or may not be respected by their youth; travel and the Internet mulch languages more quickly than ever before. People meeting in cyberspace or the streets communicate in amalgamations such as Spanglish, Frinese and Arabrew.

Word weirdness is also unsustainable, such as when a word and its antonym have the same meaning. Flammable and inflammable, ravel and unravel, pressed and depressed, and shevled and dissheveled fall into this category. OK, so you've never heard of

shevled, but it makes sense. For example, I prefer to dress informally, but I always try to remain shevled, even after several appointments.

Language is always in transition. Turkey already has returned to the farm. Sweet will probably settle back to its earlier, benign self. But even if you're cool to the idea, "cool" will probably still be cool for your grandchildren.

*Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.canyonvoices.com](http://www.canyonvoices.com).*

