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Word of the Year

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Webster's 2009 Word of the Year is:

Distracted driving

Distracted driving — what many are guilty of when they use digital devices on the go — is rapidly entering law books around the world and earns the 2009 Word of the Year choice at Webster's New World® College Dictionary. The competition had several worthy contenders, with *cloud computing* and *wallet biopsy* as runners-up. For other top candidates, visit the Word of the Year website at [NewWorldWord.com](#).

HOBOKEN, NJ, November 1, 2009 — Faster, lighter, more, NOW ... the new generation of tools and toys in the Digital Age is a global obsession. And today, it may also be a crime.

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A sign of the times surely, *distracted driving* is another reflection — and consequence — of our ongoing romance with all things digital and mobile and the enhanced capabilities they provide. While it now may be easier and quicker to feed our multitasking habits, it is not always safe, and many jurisdictions are formalizing that position by making it a crime to text or otherwise use a cellphone while driving. In other words, *CrackBerry* users beware, lest a charge of *DWD* (*driving while distracted*) or *DWT* (*driving while texting*) stain your record, not to mention endanger yourself and others. (*CrackBerry* — the mocking term for the BlackBerry™ and its "addicts" — was the 2006 Word of the Year. One wonders if *distracted piloting* will be on the list in 2010.)

The term *distracted driving* is also a linguistic catch, note Webster's New World® editors. As with *drunk driving*, it is not the driving that is drunk or distracted, but rather the driver. The target of the modifier distracted has been changed. Called *hypallage*, this twist is frequently seen in poetry, but as terms like *restless night*, *juvenile detention center*, and *careless remark* attest, such semantic inversion is not limited to the heights of language use.

Among the runners-up were

<i>cloud computing</i>	computer operations in which documents and data are created, edited, and stored remotely on servers and accessed by the user via an Internet connection (a beta definition, but this term is so well established that it will likely be added to the annual update of the College Dictionary in 2010)
<i>wallet biopsy</i>	examination, before medical service is provided, of a patient's ability to pay, enabling the health care provider to decide whether free or discounted medical care is appropriate; a term probably fueled in part by the debate on national health care

and a number of business and economy-related terms, such as *stimulus* and *Too Big To Fail*.

Choosing the Word of the Year is a pleasant exercise that the editors and language researchers (called citation readers) of Webster's New World® look forward to each year. "We survey the emerging English of the past year," says Editor in Chief Michael Agnes, "and choose one word (or phrase) that captures our imagination — whether with its intrinsic linguistic attributes or by the way it expresses how language reflects changing realities."

"In most cases," says Agnes, "the word chosen is a new one and thus hasn't yet found its way into the dictionary. As we do not try to predict the future of language change in English, the choice does not reflect an opinion that the term will eventually be found in the dictionary. In short, it's merely one that made us chuckle, think, reflect, or just shake our heads. In any case, it is a product of our language monitoring program, by which we collect examples of emerging new English — to the tune of nearly 3,000 new examples per month. Our citation files now hold approximately 2 million such examples."

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Selected by the *Associated Press*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and other leading newspapers as their official dictionary of choice, Webster's New World® College Dictionary represents the finest linguistic scholarship. For more information on the lexicographical process behind the dictionary, Editor in Chief Mike Agnes is available for interviews.

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