



In the early 1970s, Maxwell Smart from the TV show "Get Smart" foreshadowed the future of mobile communication with a shoe phone. At the time, car phones were considered state-of-the-art.

Everything is smart

**More brash than astute,
more social than brainy,
more casual than intelligent:
“smart” is hard to nail
down as a term**

COPY — Peter Glaser

The word has completed a long journey full of twists and turns. Its voyage began in 2000 BC with Proto-Germanic, a language that emerged around the Baltic Sea and whose root word “smarta-” meant painful. In Old English, this evolved into “smear” – something that causes a sharp pain. By 1300, “smart” – its rough edges had since been ground away – metaphorically referred to “cutting” words and was associated with wit and vigor. By the 17th century, its meaning had branched out further; now, a smart person was considered intelligent, clever and knowledgeable. Fashion consciousness entered the picture shortly thereafter, as smart began to signify “trim in attire”. Finally, 150 years ago, “smart” re-entered the German language as a fashionable loan word.

The word began its inexorable march through popular culture in the 1950s. It was no longer enough to be cool; modern life demanded more. Being smart seemed to fit the bill. The early James Bond, played by Sean Connery, is as smart as it gets – faster than the others, effortlessly quick-witted and a rule-breaker in his own adroit, elegant way. He’s brash, provocative, almost amoral. In a word: smart. His female counterpart was Emma Peel. The secret agent portrayed by Dianna Rigg in “The Avengers”, a British TV series, is still viewed as a role model and fashion icon with inimitable poise and a penchant for leather catsuits and mini-skirts covered in bold op-art patterns.

The attractive new trait became so popular that it drew out the parodists. In the early 1960s, “Get Smart” began vigorously poking fun at “smartness”, along with secret agent tropes and the recent resurgence of technological optimism. The television series’ protagonist was Maxwell



Peter Glaser (60), by his own account, “was born as a pencil in Graz and now lives in Berlin as a word processor”.

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Smart, an operative equipped with devices boldly borrowed from an imagined future. There’s even an android named Hymie who works at headquarters but is comically slow-witted – a clever counterpoint to all the smartness. And Max’s shoe phone anticipates the key element of the communications age: the cell phone and its successor, the smartphone.

At first, only people were smart; now, they’ve been joined by things. At the end of the 20th century, technical objects began to act “as if they were guided by an intelligence”. Statistically, the frequency with which the word “smart” cropped up in millions of digitized books from the past century-and-a-half skyrocketed in the early 1990s and has continued to rise ever since.

“Smart” no longer refers exclusively to ultra-modern hardware or software. It’s also a special feature that describes products that are small, handy, ingenious and efficient. When things are smart (and have linked together to form an entire Internet of things (IoT)), they retrieve whatever they need from the Internet. “Today, smart isn’t only about technical sophistication,” said Andrea Licata, who established talentco, a smart green start-up in Berlin. “It also means sustainable, eco-friendly and low-impact.”

If you buy a telephone that’s rarely used to make phone calls but makes you feel like it could fly you to the moon if you ever read the user’s manual, you know one thing for sure: it’s a smartphone. These small devices epitomize everything that the word “smart” represents in the era of digital change. The smartphone has done more than completely transform our communications habits. In a world where there’s an app for every occasion, it has become the remote control of our entire life.

Today, few topics are more hotly discussed than artificial intelligence (AI). So why doesn’t anyone try to teach a computer how to be smart? Would people then have to fear a kind of super-smartness, akin to the hyperintelligent robots forecast by AI doomsayers, that one day would come to control humanity and evolution? In a way, smartness behaves much like humor. “You’ll know that AI has attained its ultimate goal,” says Professor Wolfgang Wahlster, CEO of the German Research Center for Artificial Intelligence, “when a computer can watch a silent Buster Keaton movie and laugh at all the right moments.” Nonetheless, being smart – and not just intelligent and unpredictable – will likely remain a far-off utopia for even the most powerful machine for a long time to come, if not forever. In the meantime, it can help us humans to cultivate this fascinating capability. “We’re going to merge with simulated neocortex in the cloud,” says Ray Kurzweil, Director of Engineering at Google. “So again we’ll be smarter.”

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