

**Word Formation Processes:  
How new Words develop in the English Language**

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# **Word Formation Processes: How new Words develop in the English Language**

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# 1. Introduction: Why are new words needed?

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Because of new inventions and changes, every language is in need of new words – borrowed, derived or otherwise formed – simply because new things need new words. The human community is steadily growing and developing, just as the tool we use to communicate: Language. When new inventions and changes enter our lives, we are in the need of naming them and of course to communicate about them. Language is dynamic, it changes constantly. Inter alia because native speakers like to play with their language, or because there are no 'wrong' words. The key here is usage: If a new word, however silly it may be, is used by many speakers of a language, it will probably survive and it can happen that one day, it is an everyday word and entered our dictionaries. Especially in the last centuries, many word creations are spread amongst the language community. For example, if you take a look at the vast amount of new inventions made in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is obvious that the words we knew before were not enough to cover all these things. Exclusively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, abbreviations were and still are everywhere, thanks to the internet (chat rooms and e-mail) and the cell phone (text messaging with its limited number of characters). And of course there are language trends that come and go as time passes, for example youth language (college slang: *cool*, *chill*, *wasted* – Finegan 2007, 321) or the formerly mentioned abbreviations in the so-called txt spk (language abbreviated to fit into text messages: *cu*, *gr8*, *lol*, etc.). There are old words with new meanings, like *surf*, *bug* and *web*, whose meanings have broadened since the new technological inventions, but there are many other ways in which new words are created: If there is a new thing and the language community has no word for it, there are several options to create a new one. In the past and the present, people used – and still use - a variety of methods to create new words, such as compounding, derivation or coinage. In the following, some of these word formation processes are illustrated and examples for their use are given.

## 2. Word formation processes in the English language

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### 2.1 Derivation

Derivation, as "the most common word formation process" (Yule 2006, 57), builds new words by adding morphemes to stems. These morphemes are added to the target stem by affixation, through prefixes and suffixes. While prefixes like *un-* or *dis-* usually do not change the lexical category of a word, suffixes, such as *-ness* or *-ation*, usually do. If you take the examples *happy* → *unhappy* and *happy* → *happiness*, it is obvious that because of the suffix *-ness* the lexical category of *happy* has changed. The meaning is always slightly changed, but in a way that the final word is still closely related to the former word. In times of rapid changes in the world technology, new morphemes to describe new words rise, such as *cyber-* and *nano-* (Finegan 2007, 46).

There are of course more prefixes and suffixes, each indicating another aspect of change made to the meaning of the original word, e.g.:

Prefix	Meaning	Example
dis-, un-, anti-, (de-)	opposite, negative	<i>disrespect, unsteady, antibiotic, (desposal)</i>
ex-	out, upward, previous	<i>exclude, expand</i>
a-	without, not	<i>atheist</i>
re-	again, repeatedly (some exceptions)	<i>replay</i> <i>(remove, remote)</i>
non-	absence, negation	<i>non-smoker</i>

Suffix	Meaning	Example
-er, -or, -ar	creates an agent noun	<i>designer</i> (– one who designs; Finegan, 2007)
-ness, -ation, -ment	verb-to-noun derivation	<i>sadness, hesitation, treatment</i>
-less	lack of	<i>merciless</i>
-ize, -ate	creates verbs	<i>terrorize, hyphenate</i>
-al, -able, -ary, -ful	creates adjectives	<i>accidental, believable,</i> <i>imaginary, peaceful</i>

### 2.2 Compounding

Compounding is the process of putting words together to build a new one that "does not denote two things, but one" and that is "pronounced as one unit" (Wisniewski 2007).

There are four kinds of compound words:

- endocentric compounds: A (modifier) + B (head) = a special kind of B (*sea power*)

- exocentric compounds: A + B = compound with an unexpressed semantic head (*paleface*)  
- they mostly refer to deprecatative properties of people.
- copulative compounds: A + B = the 'sum' of what A and B denote (*bittersweet*)
- appositional compounds: A + B = different descriptions for a common referent (*singer-songwriter*)  
*(Compound (linguistics))*

The difficulty with compounds is to work out which words are more heavily pronounced in their first and which ones in their second part. Another problem, also for native speakers, may be to detect which compounds are written how, because some compounds are hyphenated, others are written separately and some are written as one word.

### 2.2.1 Reduplication / Echoism

We can count reduplication, also referred to as echoism, as a special kind of compounding, and this works through repeating a syllable or the word as whole (sometimes a vowel is changed) and then putting it together, as in *bye-bye* (exact reduplication), *super-duper* (rhyming reduplication), or *chit-chat* (ablaut reduplication). While exact reduplication creates a kind of baby-talk-like word, ablaut reduplication is more to denote a 'motion', e.g. from *ding* to *dong* (in *ding-dong*). "Almost all of these use the vowel 'i' in the first part of the reduplication and either 'a' or 'o' in the second part" (Martin 2006). Reduplication is used to denote plurality, intensification or a repeated action.

An interesting fraction of reduplication is the shm-reduplication, where shm- (or sometimes schm-), originating from the Yiddish, is added to the beginning of the target word, e.g. "Oedipus, Schmoedipus" (Peters 2010). Shm-reduplication is used to indicate mockery or irony and is also used as a diminisher.

### 2.3 Blending

A blending is a combination of two or more words to create a new one, usually by taking the beginning of the other word and the end of the other one. So new words like *spork* (**s**poon + **f**ork), *fanzine* (**f**an + **z**ine), *bromance* (**b**rother + **r**omance) or Spanglish (**S**panish + **E**nglish) are created. There are of course other ways to create a blending: for example, you can take both beginnings of a word (**c**ybernetic + **o**rganism → *cyborg*) or take a whole word and combine it with a part of another one (**g**uess + **e**stimate → *guesstimate*). (Yousefi 2009)

Another example of combining words, in this case names, is the blending of celebrity couple names, such as *Brangelina* (**B**rad + **A**ngelina) or *Bennifer* (**B**en + **J**ennifer).

Sometimes blendings are referred to as **portmanteau words**. The term *portmanteau* was coined by Lewis Carroll in 1882, when in his book *Through the Looking Glass* Humpty Dumpty describes a new word he uses as follows: "Well, 'slithy' means 'lithe and slimy'. [...] You see, it's like a portmanteau - there are two meanings packed into one word" (Carroll 1996, 102 - i.e. there are two different words with completely unequal meanings put together to form a new word with a new meaning).

### 2.4 Initialism & Acronymy

Initialisms and Acronyms are shortenings, build from the initial letters in a phrase or name. While

**acronyms** are pronounced as single words (*NASA, AIDS*), **initialisms** are pronounced "as a sequence of letters" (*DNA, USA*). (Finegan 2007, 48)

Some acronyms even become words of our everyday language, such as *laser* or *zip* code. But the most famous word based on a shortening is the initialism *OK*, whose origins are fairly argumentative.

Initialisms and acronyms can be sub-divided into a few groups:

- Acronyms containing non-initial letters (*Interpol - **I**nternational **C**riminal **P**olice **O**rganization, radar - **r**adio **d**etection **a**nd **r**anging)*
- Pronounced as a combination of initialism and acronym (*CD-ROM, JPEG*)
- Recursive initialisms, in which the abbreviation refers to itself (*PHP - PHP hypertext pre-processor*)
- Pseudo-initialisms, which consist of a sequence of characters that, when pronounced as intended, invoke other, longer words (*IOU – I owe you, CU – See you*). This kind of initialism is frequently seen on the internet.
- Initialisms whose last abbreviated word is often redundantly included anyway (*PIN number*)  
(*Acronym and Initialism*)

## 2.5 Borrowing & Calque

**Borrowing** is the process of actually borrowing words from foreign languages. The English language has been borrowing words from "nearly a hundred languages in the last hundred years" (Finegan 2007, 51), and today, French loan words are especially popular. The other way round, many countries also have taken many English words into their dictionaries, such as the well-known *OK* or *internet*. While most of the loan words are nouns, only some of them are verbs or adjectives. Mostly, the borrowed nouns are later changed or "made conform" (Finegan 2007, 52) to fit the verbal forms of the language, in speech and in writing. For example, *risk*, originating in Italia, was actually a noun when borrowed, but later, in need of a verb, it was converted: *to risk*.

**Calque**, another term for loan translation, describes the process of literally or word-for-word translations to create new words, e.g. *skyscraper* → *Wolkenkratzer*, *Lehnwort* → *loan word*. The stems are literally translated and then put back together, the meaning is the same as in the loan word.

## 2.6 Neologism/Coinage

As neologism or coinage we identify the word formation process of inventing entirely new words. This is a very rare and uncommon method to create new words, but in the media, people try to outdo each other with more and better words to name their products. Often these trademark names are adopted by the masses and they become "everyday words of language" (Yule 2006, 53). And in some cases, the meaning of these words is broadened and e.g. to 'google' means not always 'to use google to find something on the internet', but to 'search the internet'. Similarly, complicated chemical or technical terms (like *Aspirin*: acetylsalicylic acid) are adopted as the trademark term and often replace standard terms for e.g. in this example, painkillers. This also happened to words like *Xerox*, *Kleenex* or the German *Nutella*.

Some words are differentiated from 'standard' neologisms, namely **eponyms**. Eponyms are words that are "based on the name of a person or a place" (Yule 2006, 53). Common eponyms are

*sandwich* or *fahrenheit*. "They are very frequently used in science where units of measurement are named after people, like: *hertz*, *volt*, *celsius*" (Wisniewski 2007).

### 2.6.1 Onomatopoeia

This special type of word that depicts "the sound associated with what is named" (*Examples of Onomatopoeia*). For example, if you take a look at these words: *boo*, *chirp*, *click*, *meow*, *splash*, it is obvious what these words mean, namely the sound. In other words: they look like they sound when pronounced. Onomatopoeic words like *bang* or *boom* are often used in comic books to let the reader know what kind of sound is accompanied to the action.

## 3. Conclusion

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As we have seen before, there are many ways to create new words: Borrowing from other languages, blending together from several words or deriving from words we already have. Of course there are even more possibilities than mentioned before. There is the possibility to convert words from one grammatical category to another, for example from verb to noun (*to flow* → *the flow*) or from noun to verb (*the e-mail* → *to e-mail*). Other examples for other word formation processes include clippings, with which the word is shortened (e.g. *influenza* → *flu*; *advertising* → *ad*; *motorbike* → *bike*), or folk etymology, where words from other languages are taken and then, over time, people try to make sense of them. So gradually the word is changed to a more familiar form that usually keeps its original meaning, e.g. the Spanish word *cucaracha* was borrowed and then gradually transformed to *cockroach*. Even the creative respelling, where the spelling of words is changed for products (e.g. *Kleen*, *Krunch*), is considered to be one of these processes.

So finally, if we take a look around, we will see a mass of new words surrounding us, brought to us both consciously by language trends or advertising and unconsciously through language change over time. For example, if you read any of Shakespeare's work, it is obvious that language is dynamic, because both the grammar and the words are different to ours now. Language changes constantly. And who knows if the people will understand the language we are using now in a few decades?

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