

English Vocabulary. Why So Expansive?

Dean Culell

Abstract

This article was written in response to the numerous queries by my Japanese students over the years in regards to the sheer quantity of English vocabulary and the frustration in learning to understand the subtle nuances in meaning between them. It outlines and explores the various factors of how new words come into languages. The point is made that all languages are constantly in a state of flux and “evolving”. The focus is on the English language and covers such features as derivational morphemes, borrowing, compounding, blending, back formation, clipping, conversion, acronyms and words from names.

New words come into a language due to derivational morphemes, borrowing, compounding, blending, back-formation, clipping, conversion, acronyms and words from names.

The factors, which I am about to discuss, relate to the English language but do not necessarily exclude other languages. “Similar processes can and do occur in other languages” (Mangubhai, 2001, pg. 138).

Before I start in earnest, it is necessary to give a little introduction. Language, by its very nature, needs to be both creative and adaptive to allow humans to communicate fully in an ever-changing environment. In fact, “all natural languages would appear to contain rules for the construction of an infinite number of lexically composite phrasal expressions” (Lyons, 1995, pg.51) and “new words are continually being created” (Emmit & Pollock, 1991, pg.84).

In English, the parts of the lexicon to which we regularly add new words are the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. These are sometimes termed the content words or the open class of lexical items.

These are in contrast to the closed class of lexical items such as prepositions and conjunctions to which we don't normally add new lexical items (Fromkin, Rodman, Collins & Blair, 1996).

The first way in which we add new words to the lexicon is through derivational morphology. Fromkin et al, 1996, defines a morpheme as “the minimal linguistic sign, a grammatical unit in which there is an arbitrary union of a sound and a meaning and that cannot be further analysed” (pg.118).

Derivational morphemes are those that when conjoined with other morphemes form a new word. For example ‘-ion’ when conjoined with a verb creates a noun as in ‘prediction’ and ‘-ly’ when conjoined with an adjective creates an adverb as in ‘quietly’. These are in contrast to inflectional morphemes that never change the grammatical category but are needed to complete the word in some way. For example the third person present tense marker ‘-s’ as in ‘she plays’.

“The morphological rules of the grammar permit you to use and understand the morphemes and words in forming and understanding sentences, and in forming and understanding new words” (Fromkin et al, 1996, pg.136).

The second way in which new words come into a language is through borrowing. The English language has borrowed profusely over the centuries and like any language “is continually in a state of flux”. “Any significant event influences the introduction of new words, makes some words more prominent, and changes the meaning of some words” (Emmitt & Pollock, 1991, pg.87).

In the case of the English language, there have been three major periods in its history when intensive borrowing was undertaken. The first was the time of the Roman invasions during the first to seventh century. The second was the Norman conquest of the eleventh century. The third occurred during the Renaissance from the fourteenth to sixteenth century.

The Roman invasions served to basically wipe out the original Celtic language of Britain and to replace it with Old English. The Vikings then came along in the ninth century and added many of their words to this Old English.

Nouns such as ‘sister’, ‘dirt’, ‘skill’, ‘bag’, ‘cake’, ‘fog’, and ‘fellow’. Adjectives such as ‘wrong’, ‘low’, ‘loose’, ‘odd’, and ‘flat’. Verbs such as ‘give’, ‘call’, ‘want’, and ‘take’ and pronouns such as ‘they’ and ‘them’ originated from the Vikings (Emmitt & Pollock, 1991).

The Norman conquest of 1066 initiated a flood of French loan words. The loan words often reflect the fact that French was then the language of the ruling class. As a result there are many words that deal with government, law, religion, war, fashion and art. Some examples of these are; ‘judge’, ‘prince’, ‘people’, ‘saint’, ‘virgin’, ‘romance’, ‘prayer’ and ‘obedience’ to name but a few.

The Renaissance saw a considerable increase in borrowing. As Europe renewed itself in an

explosion of intellectual and cultural expression, words were subsequently borrowed to express these ideas. The majority stem from Latin but others came from classical Greek or Italian and Spanish.

Virtually all medical and anatomical terms have come from Latin and include 'electric', 'cylinder', 'stigma' and 'energy'. Some examples from Greek include 'pathos', 'phone' and 'rhapsody'. Italian has given us 'opera', 'bandit', 'contraband' and 'squadron' whereas Spanish has given us 'cash', 'guitar', 'sherry' and 'potato'.

Both widespread colonising by the British and the growth of world trade has brought English into contact with many new objects, experiences, cultures and languages. Subsequently, there have been many new words borrowed. The process continues today as can be seen in the conversational use of the Japanese word 'sushi' which is used as a replacement for the 'correct' English term 'raw fish'.

The third word building process is called compounding. This refers to the process of "stringing together other words to create compound words" (Fromkin et al, 1996, pg.52). There are three types of compound words; the closed form, the hyphenated form and the open form.

The closed form is when the two words are written as one. Some examples are 'notebook', 'keyboard', 'makeup' and 'childlike'. The hyphenated form, logically enough, is when the two words are joined by a hyphen such as 'six-pack', 'daughter-in-law' and 'left-handed'. The open form is when the two words are written separately as in 'post office', 'real estate' and 'middle class' (<http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/compounds.htm>).

Compounds can be made up of a variety of grammatical categories. Noun and noun combinations result in words such as 'football', 'blood pressure', and 'lieutenant colonel'. Noun and Verb combinations produce 'space-walk', 'frostbite', and 'spoon-fed'. Noun and Adjective types give us 'headstrong', 'watertight' and 'homesick'. The same can be done for both adjectives and verbs in all combinations (Fromkin et al, 1996).

The search for meaning in these compound words is problematic because "you cannot always tell by the words it contains what the compound means" and "that underlying the juxtaposition of words, different grammatical relations are expressed" (Fromkin et al, 1996, pg.53). This is how on one hand we get 'jumping bean' to refer to a bean that jumps but on the other 'laughing gas' that doesn't actually laugh.

At least with these two examples, the meaning of each separate compound can be seen to be in some way linked to the meaning of the whole. Unfortunately, for learners of English this is not always the case. A 'light year' for example isn't so light and 'a turncoat' is a traitor of all

things.

The next method is blending. This refers to the process of fusing together elements from two words to create a word which meaning shares or combines the meanings of the source words. The elements are usually taken from the beginning of one and the end of the other. An example is the word 'electrocute', which is a blend of electricity and execute.

The author Lewis Carroll used this technique extensively but named them 'portmanteau' words after a French carrying case that falls open into two halves. Blends are regarded as distinct from compounds in that the elements being put together in compounds are words in their own right such as 'townhouse' or freestanding words with prefixes or suffixes like 'megastore'. They are not a blend of two words as in 'motel', which is derived from 'motor hotel'.

An offshoot of this process is that occasionally new prefixes or suffixes arise which in turn affect the classification of later blends. An example in point is the word 'motorcade' (formed from 'motor' and 'cavalcade'). Other people using their knowledge of the grammar assumed that -cade was a suffix and so words like 'aerocade' were produced that are taken to be compounds.

Blends come from a wide range of fields. In language, blends are used to describe a language that has been heavily influenced by English such as 'Spanglish' (Spanish and English) or 'Franglais' (French and English). In sports there is 'Jazzercise' (jazz and exercise) and 'surfari' (surf and safari). In media and advertising there is 'infotainment' (information and entertainment) and 'camcorder' (camera and recorder). In science and technology we have 'transistor' (transfer and resistor) and 'nucleonics' (nucleon and electronics). (<http://www.quinion.com/words/articles/blend.htm>)

Back-formations are when new words are formed "from already existing words by subtracting an affix thought to be part of the old word" (Fromkin et al, 1996, pg.56). An affix is either a prefix or suffix. A prefix is attached to the beginning of a word whereas a suffix is attached to the back. The verbs 'hawk', 'stoke', 'swindle', 'peddle', and 'edit' all came into being from people mistakenly believing the -er ending in 'hawker' etc was a suffix (Fromkin et al, 1996).

In a similar vein, already existing nouns, which appear to be composed of more than one morpheme such as 'television' can also be back-formed to produce verbs such as 'televise' (Mangubhai, 2001).

Clipping "occurs when a word of more than one syllable is shortened and the shortened word becomes a lexicalised item" (Mungubhai, 2001, pg.139). This is also known commonly as

abbreviation but should not be confused with acronyms such as 'USA' in which the letters stand for a word.

Some examples are 'phone' (from telephone), 'exam' (from examination), 'maths' (from mathematics), 'vet' (from veterinary surgeon), 'photo' (from photograph), 'bike' (from bicycle) and 'ad' (from advertisement).

Acronyms "are formed from the initial letters of a set of words" (Mangubhai, 2001, pg.139). Some acronyms are read as individual letters. For example, 'PM' stands for prime minister and 'EU' for the European union. Still others are read as words. For example, 'AIDS' for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or 'OPEC' for the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (Redman, 1997).

Acronyms are first written with a dot separating each letter, but as time passes these dots are forgotten and it becomes an acceptable word. Other relevant examples are 'QANTAS' (Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Service) and 'scuba' (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus).

New words can also be introduced into the language by way of proper names of people and products. For example, the word 'sandwich' came into being after the fourth earl of Sandwich became accustomed to eating food between two pieces of bread in order to continue gambling.

Specific brand names have also come to be used to describe various types of the same product. For example the word 'biro' has come to represent all ballpoint pens. Similarly, the word 'Hoover' has come to signify all vacuum cleaners and is even used as a verb now.

The next technique in word building, conversion, is in fact linked to the example above of how 'Hoover' came to be used as a verb. When we refer to conversion we are saying that a "change in the function of the word occurs without any change in the word itself" (Mangubhai, 2001, pg.139). It is in fact very similar to back-formation but the difference is the word retains its original form. For example, the noun 'shovel' is now used as a verb in sentences such as "I have to shovel it up". Likewise, the noun 'book' is used as a verb in sentences such as "He booked me".

In conclusion, it can be seen that the grammar itself contains the morphological rules to create words and that this is possible through the use of derivational morphemes. In addition, the processes of compounding, blending, back-formation, borrowing, clipping, conversion, acronyms and words from names allow users of the language to be creative and adaptive.

References

- Emmit, M. & Pollock, J. 1991, *Language and Learning*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., Collins, P., & Blair, D. 1996, *An Introduction to Language*, Harcourt Brace & Company, Orlando.
- Guide to Grammar and Writing, Compound Words (Online). Available from URL: <http://webster.comnet.edu/grammars/compounds.htm>(Accessed 3rd of May 2001)
- Lyons, J. 1995, *Linguistic Semantics*, Cambridge University Press, London.
- Mangubhai, F. 2001, Study Book, *The Nature of Language*, Distance Education Centre, The University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba.
- Quinion, M. 1996, World Wide Words, *Through The Blender* (Online), Available from URL: <http://www.quinion.com/words/articles/blend.htm> (Accessed 3rd of May 2001).
- Redman, J. 1997, *English Vocabulary in Use*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.