

Neologisms

Around 1900, in New Berlin, Ohio, a department-store worker named J. Murray Spangler invented a device that he called an *electric suction sweeper*. This device eventually became very popular and could have become known as a *spangler*. People could have been *spanglering* their floors or they might even have *spanglered* their rugs and curtains. The use could have extended to a type of person who droned on and on (and really sucked), described as *spanglerish*, or to a whole style of behavior called *spanglerism*. However, none of that happened. Instead, Mr. Spangler sold his new invention to a local businessman called William H. Hoover, whose Hoover Suction Sweeper Company produced the first machine called a “Hoover.” Not only did the word *hoover* (without a capital letter) become as familiar as *vacuum cleaner* all over the world, but in Britain, people still talk about *hoovering* (and not *spanglering*) their carpets.

The point of this small tale is that, although we had never heard of Mr. Spangler before, we really had no difficulty coping with the new words: *spangler*, *spanglerish*, *spanglerism*, *spanglering* or *spanglered*. That is, we can very quickly understand a new word, a **neologism**, and accept the use of different forms of that new word in the language. This ability must derive in part from the fact that there is a lot of regularity in the word-formation processes in a language. In this chapter, we will explore some of the basic processes by which new words are created.

Etymology

The study of the origin and history of a word is known as its **etymology**, a term which, like many of our technical words, comes to us through Latin, but has its origins in Greek (*étymon* “original form” + *logia* “study of”), and is not to be confused with *entomology*, also from Greek (*éntomon* “insect”). When we look closely at the etymologies of less technical words, we soon discover that there are many different ways in which new words can enter the language. We should keep in mind that these processes have been at work in the language for some time and a lot of words in daily use today were, at one time, considered barbaric misuses of the language. It is difficult now to understand the views expressed in the early nineteenth century over the “tasteless innovation” of a word like *handbook*, or the horror expressed by a London newspaper in 1909 over the use of the newly coined word *aviation*. Yet many new words can cause similar outcries as they come into use today. Rather than act as if the language is being debased, we might prefer to view the constant evolution of new words and new uses of old words as a reassuring sign of vitality and creativeness in the way a language is shaped by the needs of its users.

Borrowing

As Bill Bryson observed in the quotation presented earlier, one of the most common sources of new words in English is the process simply labeled **borrowing**, that is, the taking over of words from other languages. (Technically, it's more than just borrowing, because English doesn't give them back.) Throughout its history, the English language has adopted a vast number of words from other languages, including these examples:

<i>dope</i> (Dutch)	<i>piano</i> (Italian)	<i>tattoo</i> (Tahitian)
<i>jewel</i> (French)	<i>pretzel</i> (German)	<i>tycoon</i> (Japanese)
<i>glitzy</i> (Yiddish)	<i>ski</i> (Norwegian)	<i>yogurt</i> (Turkish)
<i>lilac</i> (Persian)	<i>sofa</i> (Arabic)	<i>zebra</i> (Bantu)

Other languages, of course, borrow terms from English, as in the Japanese use of *suupaa* or *suupaamaaketto* (“supermarket”) and *taipuraitaa* (“typewriter”). We can also hear of people in Finland using a *šekki* (“check”) to pay their bills, Hungarians talking about *sport*, *klub* and *futbal*, or the French discussing problems of *le stress*, over a glass of *le whisky*, during *le weekend*. In Brazilian Portuguese, the English words *up* and *nerd* have been borrowed and turned into verbs for the new activities *upar* (“to upload”) and *nerdear* (“to surf the internet”). In some cases, the borrowed words may be used with quite novel meanings, as in the contemporary German use of the English words *partner* and *look* in the phrase *im Partnerlook* to describe two people who are together and wearing similar clothing. There is no equivalent use of this expression in English (so far).

Loan-translation

A special type of borrowing is described as **loan-translation** or **calque** (/kælk/). In this process, there is a direct translation of the elements of a word into the borrowing language. Interesting examples are the French term *gratte-ciel*, which literally translates as “scrape-sky,” the Dutch *wolkenkrabber* (“cloud scratcher”) or the German *Wolkenkratzer* (“cloud scraper”), all of which were calques for the English *skyscraper*. The English word *superman* is thought to be a loan-translation of the German *Übermensch*, and the term *loanword* itself is believed to have come from the German *Lehnwort*. The English expression *moment of truth* is believed to be a calque from the Spanish phrase *el momento de la verdad*, though not restricted to the original use as the final thrust of the sword to end a bullfight. Nowadays, some Spanish speakers eat *perros calientes* (literally “dogs hot”) or *hot dogs*. The American concept of “boyfriend” was borrowed, with sound change, into Japanese as *boyifurendo*, but as a calque into Chinese as “male friend” or *nan pengyu*.

Compounding

In some of the examples we have just considered, there is a joining of two separate words to produce a single form. Thus, *Lehn* and *Wort* are combined to produce *Lehnwort* in German. This combining process, technically known as **compounding**, is very common in languages such as German and English, but much less common in languages such as French and Spanish. Common English compounds are *bookcase*, *doorknob*, *fingerprint*, *sunburn*, *textbook*, *wallpaper*, *wastebasket* and *waterbed*. All these examples are nouns, but we can also create compound adjectives (*good-looking*, *low-paid*) and compounds of adjective (*fast*) plus noun (*food*) as in *a fast-food restaurant* or *a full-time job*.

This very productive source of new terms has been well documented in English and German, but can also be found in totally unrelated languages, such as Hmong (spoken in South-East Asia), which combines *hwj* (“pot”) and *kais* (“spout”) to produce *hwjkais* (“kettle”). Recent creations are *paj* plus *kws* (“flower” + “corn”) for *pajkws* (“popcorn”) and *hnab* + *rau* + *ntawv* (“bag” + “put” + “paper”) for *hnabrauntawv* (“schoolbag”).

Blending

The combination of two separate forms to produce a single new term is also present in the process called **blending**. However, in blending, we typically take only the beginning of one word and join it to the end of the other word. To talk about the combined effects of *smoke* and *fog*, we can use the word *smog*. In places where they have a lot of this stuff, they can jokingly make a distinction between *smog*, *smaze* (smoke + haze) and *smurk* (smoke + murk). In Hawaii, near the active volcano, they have problems with *vog*. Some other commonly used examples of blending are *bit* (binary/digit), *brunch* (breakfast/lunch), *motel* (motor/hotel), *telecast* (television/broadcast) and the *Chunnel* (Channel/tunnel), connecting England and France.

The activity of fund-raising on television that feels like a marathon is typically called a *telethon*, while *infotainment* (information/entertainment) and *simulcast* (simultaneous/broadcast) are other new blends from life with television. To describe the mixing of languages, some people talk about *Franglais* (French/Anglais) and *Spanglish* (Spanish/English). In a few blends, we combine the beginnings of both words, as in terms from information technology, such as *telex* (teleprinter/exchange) or *modem* (modulator/demodulator). A blend from the beginnings of two French words *velours* *croché* (“hooked velvet”) is the source of the word *velcro*. There is also the word *fax*, but that is not a blend. It’s an example of our next category.

Clipping

The element of reduction that is noticeable in blending is even more apparent in the process described as **clipping**. This occurs when a word of more than one syllable (*facsimile*) is reduced to a shorter form (*fax*), usually beginning in casual speech. The term *gasoline* is still used, but most people talk about *gas*, using the clipped form. Other common examples are *ad* (advertisement), *bra* (brassiere), *cab* (cabriolet), *condo* (condominium), *fan* (fanatic), *flu* (influenza), *perm* (permanent wave), *phone*, *plane* and *pub* (public house). English speakers also like to clip each other's names, as in *Al*, *Ed*, *Liz*, *Mike*, *Ron*, *Sam*, *Sue* and *Tom*. There must be something about educational environments that encourages clipping because so many words get reduced, as in *chem*, *exam*, *gym*, *lab*, *math*, *phys-ed*, *poly-sci*, *prof* and *typo*.

Hypocorisms

A particular type of reduction, favored in Australian and British English, produces forms technically known as **hypocorisms**. In this process, a longer word is reduced to a single syllable, then *-y* or *-ie* is added to the end. This is the process that results in *movie* ("moving pictures") and *telly* ("television"). It has also produced *Aussie* ("Australian"), *barbie* ("barbecue"), *bickie* ("biscuit"), *bookie* ("bookmaker"), *brekky* ("breakfast"), *hankie* ("handkerchief") and *toastie* ("toasted sandwich"). You can probably guess what *Chrissy pressies* are. By now, you may be ready to *take a sickie* ("a day of sick leave from work, whether for real sickness or not").

Backformation

A very specialized type of reduction process is known as **backformation**. Typically, a word of one type (usually a noun) is reduced to form a word of another type (usually a verb). A good example of backformation is the process whereby the noun *television* first came into use and then the verb *televise* was created from it. Other examples of words created by this process are: *donate* (from "donation"), *emote* (from "emotion"), *enthuse* (from "enthusiasm"), *liaise* (from "liaison") and *babysit* (from "babysitter"). Indeed, when we use the verb *backform* (*Did you know that "opt" was backformed from "option"?*), we are using a backformation.

One very regular source of backformed verbs in English is based on the common pattern *worker* – *work*. The assumption seems to have been that if there is a noun ending in *-er* (or something close in sound), then we can create a verb for what that noun-*er* does. Hence, an *editor* will *edit*, a *sculptor* will *sculpt* and *burglars*, *peddlers* and *swindlers* will *burgle*, *peddle* and *swindle*.

Conversion

A change in the function of a word, as for example when a noun comes to be used as a verb (without any reduction), is generally known as **conversion**. Other labels for this very common process are “category change” and “functional shift.” A number of nouns such as *bottle*, *butter*, *chair* and *vacation* have come to be used, through conversion, as verbs: *We bottled the home-brew last night*; *Have you buttered the toast?*; *Someone has to chair the meeting*; *They’re vacationing in Florida*. These forms are readily accepted, but some conversions, such as the noun *impact* used as a verb, seem to *impact* some people’s sensibilities rather negatively.

The conversion process is very productive in modern English, with new uses occurring frequently. The conversion can involve verbs becoming nouns, with *guess*, *must* and *spy* as the sources of *a guess*, *a must* and *a spy*. Phrasal verbs (*to print out*, *to take over*) also become nouns (*a printout*, *a takeover*). One complex verb combination (*want to be*) has become a new noun, as in *He isn’t in the group, he’s just a wannabe*. Some other examples of conversion are listed here.

Noun →	Verb	Verb →	Noun
<i>dust</i>	<i>Did you <u>dust</u> the living room?</i>	<i>to cheat</i>	<i>He’s a <u>cheat</u>.</i>
<i>glue</i>	<i>I’ll have to <u>glue</u> it together.</i>	<i>to doubt</i>	<i>They have some <u>doubts</u>.</i>
<i>referee</i>	<i>Who will <u>referee</u> the game?</i>	<i>to hand out</i>	<i>I didn’t get a <u>handout</u>.</i>
<i>water</i>	<i>Would you <u>water</u> my plants?</i>	<i>to hire</i>	<i>We have two new <u>hires</u>.</i>

Verbs (*see through*, *stand up*) can also become adjectives, as in *see-through material* or *a stand-up comedian*. A number of adjectives, as in *a dirty floor*, *an empty room*, *some crazy ideas* and *those nasty people*, have become the verbs *to dirty* and *to empty*, or the nouns *a crazy* and *the nasty*.

Some compound nouns have assumed other functions, exemplified by *the ball park* appearing in *a ball-park figure* (as an adjective) or asking someone *to ball-park an estimate of the cost* (as a verb). Other nouns of this type are *carpool*, *mastermind*, *microwave* and *quarterback*, which are also used as verbs now. Other forms, such as *up* and *down*, can also become verbs, as in *They’re going to up the price of oil* or *We downed a few beers at the Chimes*.

It is worth noting that some words can shift substantially in meaning when they go through conversion. The verb *to doctor* often has a negative sense, not normally associated with the source noun *a doctor*. A similar kind of reanalysis of meaning is taking place with the noun *total* and the verb *run around*, which do not have negative meanings. However, if you *total* (= verb) your car, and your insurance company gives you the *runaround* (= noun), you will have a double sense of the negative.

Coinage

The invention and general use of totally new terms, or **coinage**, is not very common in English. Typical sources are trade names for commercial products that become general terms (usually without capital letters) for any version of that product. Older examples are *aspirin*, *nylon*, *vaseline* and *zipper*; more recent examples are *granola*, *kleenex*, *teflon* and *xerox*. It may be that there is an obscure technical origin (e.g. te (tra)-fl(uor)-on) for some of these invented terms, but after their first coinage, they tend to become everyday words in the language. The most salient contemporary example of coinage is the word *google*. Originally a misspelling for the word *googol* (= the number 1 followed by 100 zeros), in the creation of the word *Googleplex*, which later became the name of a company (*Google*), the term *google* (without a capital letter) has become a widely used expression meaning “to use the internet to find information.”

New words based on the name of a person or a place are called **eponyms**. When we talked about a *hoover* (or even a *spangler*), we were using an eponym. We use the eponyms *teddy bear*, derived from US president Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt, and *jeans* (from the Italian city of Genoa where the type of cloth was first made). Another eponym dates from 1762 when John Montagu, the 4th Earl of Sandwich, insisted on having his salt beef between two slices of toasted bread while gambling. Apparently his friends started to ask “to have the same as Sandwich.”

Acronyms

Acronyms are new words formed from the initial letters of a set of other words. These can be forms such as *CD* (“compact disk”) or *SPCA* (“Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals”) where the pronunciation consists of saying each separate letter. More typically, acronyms are pronounced as new single words, as in *NATO*, *NASA* or *UNESCO*. These examples have kept their capital letters, but many acronyms simply become everyday terms such as *laser* (“light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation”), *radar* (“radio detecting and ranging”), *scuba* (“self-contained underwater breathing apparatus”) and *zip* (“zone improvement plan”) code. You might even hear talk of a *snafu*, which is reputed to have its origins in “situation normal, all fouled up,” though there is some dispute about the appropriate verb in there.

Names for organizations are often designed to have their acronym represent an appropriate term, as in “mothers against drunk driving” (*MADD*) and “women against rape” (*WAR*). Many speakers do not think of their component meanings. Innovations such as the *ATM* (“automatic teller machine”) and the required *PIN* (“personal identification number”) are regularly used with one of their elements repeated, as in *I sometimes forget my PIN number when I go to the ATM machine*.

Derivation

In our list so far, we have not dealt with what is by far the most common word-formation process to be found in the production of new English words. This process is called **derivation** and it is accomplished by means of a large number of small “bits” of the English language that are not usually given separate listings in dictionaries. These small “bits” are generally described as **affixes**. Some familiar examples are the elements *un-*, *mis-*, *pre-*, *-ful*, *-less*, *-ish*, *-ism* and *-ness* which appear in words like *unhappy*, *misrepresent*, *prejudice*, *joyful*, *careless*, *boyish*, *terrorism* and *sadness*.

Prefixes and suffixes

Looking more closely at the preceding group of words, we can see that some affixes are added to the beginning of the word (e.g. *un-*, *mis-*). These are called **prefixes**. Other affixes are added to the end of the word (e.g. *-less*, *-ish*) and are called **suffixes**. All English words formed by this derivational process have either prefixes or suffixes, or both. Thus, *mislead* has a prefix, *disrespectful* has both a prefix and a suffix, and *foolishness* has two suffixes.

Infixes

There is a third type of affix, not normally used in English, but found in some other languages. This is called an **infix** and, as the term suggests, it is an affix that is incorporated inside another word. It is possible to see the general principle at work in certain expressions, occasionally used in fortuitous or aggravating circumstances by emotionally aroused English speakers: *Hallebloodylujah!*, *Absogoddamlutely!* and *Unfuckinbelievable!*. We could view these “inserted” forms as a special version of infixing in English. However, a much better set of examples can be provided from Khmu (or Kamhmu), a language spoken in Laos, South-East Asia.

	Verb	Noun	
(“to drill”)	<i>see</i>	<i>srnee</i>	(“a drill”)
(“to chisel”)	<i>toh</i>	<i>trnoh</i>	(“a chisel”)
(“to eat with a spoon”)	<i>hiip</i>	<i>hrniip</i>	(“a spoon”)
(“to tie”)	<i>hoom</i>	<i>hrnoom</i>	(“a thing with which to tie”)

From these examples, we can see that there is a regular pattern whereby the infix *-rn-* is added to verbs to form nouns. If this is a general pattern in the language and we know that the form *smal* is the Khmu noun for “an ear ornament,” then we can work out the corresponding verb “to put an ornament in the ear.” According to Merrifield *et al.* (2003), the source of these examples, it is *sal*.

Multiple processes

Although we have concentrated on each of these word-formation processes in isolation, it is possible to trace the operation of more than one process at work in the creation of a particular word. For example, the term *deli* seems to have become a common American English expression via a process of first borrowing *delicatessen* (from German) and then clipping that borrowed form. If someone says that *problems with the project have snowballed*, the final word can be analyzed as an example of compounding in which *snow* and *ball* were combined to form the noun *snowball*, which was then turned into a verb through conversion. Forms that begin as acronyms can also go through other processes, as in the use of *lase* as a verb, the result of backformation from *laser*. In the expression *waspish attitudes*, the acronym WASP (“white Anglo-Saxon Protestant”) has lost its capital letters and gained a suffix (*-ish*) in the derivation process.

An acronym that never seems to have had capital letters comes from “young urban professional,” plus the *-ie* suffix, as in hypocorism, to produce the word *yuppie* (first recorded in 1984). The formation of this new word, however, was helped by a quite different process, known simply as **analogy**, whereby new words are formed to be similar in some way to existing words. *Yuppie* was made possible as a new word by analogy with the earlier word *hippie* and another short-lived analogy *yippie*. The word *yippie* also had an acronym basis (“youth international party”) and was used for some students in the USA who were protesting against the war in Vietnam. One joke has it that *yippies* just grew up to be *yuppies*. And the process continues. Another analogy, with the word *yap* (“to make shrill noises”), helped label some of the noisy young professionals as *yappies*.

Many of these new words can, of course, have a very brief life-span. Perhaps the generally accepted test of the “arrival” of recently formed words in a language is their published appearance in a dictionary. However, even this may not occur without protests from some conservative voices, as Noah Webster found when his first dictionary, published in 1806, was criticized for citing words like *advocate* and *test* as verbs, and for including such “vulgar” words as *advisory* and *presidential*. It would seem that Noah had a keener sense than his critics of which new word forms in the language were going to last.