An Introduction to Modern English Word-formation

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Acknowledgments

Foreword

English is the text-book example of a language that expands its vocabulary by unashamedly raiding other languages. For a thousand years new words have, like dockside imports, often borne an easily readable stamp of their country of origin: *outlaw* from medieval Scandinavia, *gentle* from medieval France, *madrigal* from Renaissance Italy, *chutney* from nineteenth-century India and *karate* from twentieth-century Japan, to name a few examples that indicate the chronological and geographical range. Such words clearly and interestingly reflect the contact that English-speaking peoples have had with other countries and other cultures, and so fascinated have scholars been for several generations by the patterns of word adoption that we have tended to regard this process as virtually the sole means by which changes in our vocabulary take place.

It is not, of course. We sometimes translate the foreign word we need, as Bernard Shaw did with Nietzsche's *Übermensch* to produce *superman*; or we achieve a new means of designation by using an existing word in a different sense, as with the homosexual meaning of *gay*. Or – to come to the concern of the present book – we can permute existing words and parts of words to make new combinations such as the nouns *boathouse, houseboat,* or the adjective *ungovernable*.

With all of these devices, we see vocabulary change triggered off by cultural change even where no transparently 'exotic' word appears as a result: the homely *corn* becomes the American word for the exotic maize when and because Americans start encountering maize in their daily life. But changes in vocabulary by the processes of word-formation have, in addition to their cultural and historical interest, a purely linguistic interest. That is to say, there are abstractly describable patterns which explain the regularities in the new words we coin and which explain also why certain formations would be unlikely or impossible (such as a negative adjective **ableungovern*). By contrast, there are few generalizations that one could

make in predicting the shape or internal structure of foreign words that we might adopt. Thus, although foreign words are normally given a 'domesticated' pronunciation, we cannot even say that an adopted word will be repronounced with only English sounds and sound sequences (*raison d'être*).

This is not to say that there are rules of word-formation as freely available to the native speaker as his rules of sentence-formation. Where almost every sentence we use is composed *ad hoc* to suit the occasion and is thus a 'new sentence', it is relatively rare for us to form a 'new word' and when we do our hearers or readers are more or less conscious both of its newness and of the rarity with which they encounter the phenomenon of newness. Even so, they would be generally able to distinguish a new word that seemed well-formed ('This wretched cupboard is *ungetinable*') from one that is not (**getunablein*). To this extent, word-formation is interestingly rule-bound and Valerie Adams gives careful consideration to the many complex kinds of regularity that are to be observed. She deserves especial praise, however, for resisting the temptation to sweep under an exquisitely patterned carpet the irregularities and striking idiosyncrasies which are – to say the least – no less characteristic of the creative side of lexical usage.

The volume makes a welcome contribution in a difficult and controversial field. As English has increasingly come into world-wide use, there has arisen an acute need for more information on the language and the ways in which it is used. The English Language Series seeks to meet this need and to play a part in further stimulating the study and teaching of English by providing up-to-date and scholarly treatments of topics most relevant to present-day English – including its history and traditions, its sound patterns, its grammar, its lexicology, its rich variety in speech and writing, and its standards in Britain, the USA and the other principal areas where the language is used.

University College London   RANDOLPH QUIRK
March 1973

Preface

The study of word-formation offers a great many puzzles to the present-day student of language; as Esko Pennanen (1972) observes in a discussion of some of the difficulties, not the least of these is its status as a branch of linguistic study. I have not tried in this book to grapple with major issues, such as the possibility of devising rules to account for just those compounds and affixed words which exist and are acceptable, and those which could exist and would be acceptable if they were to be formed; or the possibility of giving convincing reasons why some words are unacceptable while others of similar make-up are not. In the final pages I suggest – as others have recently suggested – that if we are to make much progress in understanding such matters, the topic of 'word-formation' as it is here defined may have to be recognized as after all rather superficially conceived: our real business should be with meanings and how they are expressed and combined. Questions like these, however, await a better understanding of many syntactic and semantic matters; they are for the future, and for works far more ambitious than this one.

The chapters which follow are chiefly concerned with data, and with classifications of data. As an introduction to the subject, they cannot claim to be complete, since a comprehensive treatment of the prefixes and suffixes is lacking. But I have tried to indicate to some extent, though in no very systematic way, how the various traditionally-recognized patterns of word-formation are interrelated; how, for instance, the make-up of noun compounds, verb compounds and compounds containing particles may be considered along with the patterns of zero derivation; how blends and compounds may be compared; how compound-elements and blend-elements may be more, or less, like prefixes and suffixes; and how certain concepts, such as 'instrumentality', 'location', 'resemblance', appear and re-appear in words of various types.

Throughout, I have included illustrative examples gathered from the

most recent sources, chiefly from newspapers and magazines. I believe that such transient coinages are valuable in helping us – and occasionally surprising us – when the dictionary lets us down. I have used them to show, for instance, how we are capable of making new compound verbs, such as *to chauffeur-drift*, or *to consumer-test;* and how patterns which we might have thought were played out are still alive. Thus we are able to form adjective compounds like *browfurrowed* and *yawning dull* on the patterns of the cliché-like *heart-broken* and *scalding hot;* and the little group of 'animal' verbs such as *to ape, to wolf,* gets a new member with the coining of *to squirrel.* Examples from these sources also provide interesting evidence of how word-elements of all kinds may be taken up and used in new formations. It was as natural for the Victorian journalist of the 1880s to coin the word *camelcade* for a procession or cavalcade of camels as it was for the reporter of the 1960s; and Sir Thomas More might have been surprised to learn that his invention, *utopia,* was to serve as a precedent for such twentieth-century creations as *pornotopia.*

I am very grateful to many friends and colleagues for their help and advice; in particular to Wolf-Dietrich Bald, Michael Black, Derek Davy, Geoffrey Leech and Eugene Winter for their valuable comments on portions of earlier drafts; and to John Wells for his help with the section on Esperanto. I am especially indebted to Ruth Kempson, who was a most helpful critic of most of the final draft. Lastly, I record my gratitude to Randolph Quirk for his encouragement throughout; for his patient and stimulating criticism of the whole book; and for his generously-given attention to every aspect of my work, from the most general issues down to the contribution of examples, and practical advice on the setting-out of the material. Having acknowledged such debts, I can only conclude by emphasizing that all the shortcomings which remain are mine alone.

University College London   V A
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Chapter 1

The word

1.1 Introductory

The ways in which new words are formed, and the factors which govern their acceptance into the language, are generally taken very much for granted by the average speaker. To understand a word, it is not necessary to be aware of how it is constructed, or of whether it is simple or complex, that is, whether or not it can be broken down into two or more constituents. We are able to use a word which is new to us when we find out what object or concept it denotes. Some words, of course, are more 'transparent' than others. We need only have met the separate elements of the adjectives *unfathomable*, *indescribable*, to be able to recognize the familiar pattern of negative prefix + transitive verb + adjective-forming suffix on which many words of similar form, like *uneatable*, are constructed. Knowing the pattern, we can guess their meanings: 'cannot be fathomed', 'cannot be described' – although we are not surprised to find other, similar-looking words, for example *unfashionable*, *unfavourable*, for which this analysis will not work. We recognize as 'transparent' the adjectives *unassuming*, *unheard-of*, while taking for granted the fact that we cannot use *assuming* or *heard-of*. We accept as quite natural the fact that although we can use the verbs *to drum*, *to pipe*, *to trumpet*, we cannot use the verbs *to piano*, *to violin*; and we cope effortlessly with the apparent paradox of *to dust*, meaning either 'to remove dust from something' or 'to apply a dust-like substance to something'.

But when we meet new coinages, like *tape-code*, *freak-out*, *shutup-ness*, *beautician*, *talkathon*, we may not readily be able to explain our reactions to them. We may find them acceptable and in accordance with our feelings about how words should be built up; or they may seem to us offensive, and in some way contrary to the rules. Innovations in vocabulary are capable of arousing quite strong feelings in people who may otherwise

not be in the habit of thinking very much about language. Quirk (1968) quotes some letters to the press of a familiar kind, written to protest about 'horrible jargon', such as *break-down* (of figures), 'vile' words like *transportation*, and the 'atrocity' *lay-by* (127–8). The apologist who wrote the following in *The Times* of 3 September 1943 showed an unusually liberal attitude:

> On August 27 this journal reported a speech in which Mr Herbert Morrison used the word 'triphibious'. ... On [August 31] a public school man, a master of English, fitted Mr Morrison's new adjective with its corresponding noun. ... A new word that catches on, or can be forced on, is no monster; it is a happy invention. 'Triphibian' therefore may now join 'happidrome', 'sportsdrome', and 'normalcy' ...

Perhaps the status of the master of English mentioned – Winston Churchill – had something to do with *triphibian*'s favourable reception. But to protest against lexical innovations is very often to appear ridiculous to later generations: who today would wince at *aviation* (now that we are thoroughly used to it), about which *The Daily Chronicle* commented in 1909: 'You could hardly think of a worse word.'

It is clear that various factors are involved in our attitudes to words. *Lay-by* was objected to because it appears to be formed from the non-standard verb *to lay* (= 'to lie'), and *triphibian* is the result of the splitting up of an element *amphi-*, in *amphibian*, which anyone with a knowledge of Greek knows means 'both' and should not be split. Our knowledge of the classical languages causes us to object to 'hybrid' words, composed of a Latin and a Greek element, like *television*, or a classical and a native element, like *speedometer*. The objectionableness of *break-down* and *transportation* is not a matter of the breaking of rules, and is less easy to pinpoint. Unfamiliarity alone may be enough to cause prejudice against a word. *Patrial* (1629, = 'of or belonging to one's native country') was recently re-introduced for legal purposes connected with the Immigration Act of 1971. Although obviously useful and of wholly respectable Latin ancestry (from a presumed form *patrialis*, from *patria*, 'fatherland'), it was at once denounced (by a professor of law) as 'barbarous'. *Manual*, on the other hand, a word of similar make-up (from Latin *manualis*, 'pertaining to the hand'), causes no such reaction – indeed its secure establishment in the language was probably responsible for the prejudice against its synonym of Teutonic origin, *handbook*, which appeared in Old English, fell into disuse after the Middle Ages, and was denounced in 1838 as a

'tasteless innovation' (see Jespersen 1905, §47). Speakers of English appear to be conservative in matters of vocabulary, or at least to think that they are; but it may be that British speakers are more conservative than Americans: during the present century, attention-catching neologisms' like *aquacade, sexploitation, swelegant*, have appeared more frequently in American newspapers and magazines than in British ones.[1]

In the chapters that follow, I shall be concerned with some unconventional patterns of word-making, seen against a background of those established and productive patterns on which most generally-acceptable new words are formed. The reader will come across a number of ephemeral formations, illustrated to a large extent by quotations from newspapers. And in Chapter 13, we shall look at some developments that have been taking place over the last four hundred years or so, and it will be clear that it is not only modern word-coiners who break the 'rules' (*cf* the characteristic remark of a correspondent to the press quoted by Quirk (1968, 127): 'In these days of scientific as opposed to cultural education we need specially to be on our guard against debasement of language'). From an inspection of a range of established and transient coinages, we may gain some idea of the various forces at work in English word-formation and, incidentally, come to appreciate the irrelevance of Fowler's indignant protest: 'word-making, like other manufactures, should be done by those who know how to do it. Others should neither attempt it for themselves, nor assist the deplorable activities of amateurs by giving currency to fresh coinages before there has been time to test them' (1965, 253).[2]

1.2 Word-formation and linguistics

The subject of word-formation has not until recently received very much attention from descriptive grammarians of English, or from scholars working in the field of general linguistics. As a collection of different processes – compounding, affixation, 'conversion', 'backformation' and so on, about which, as a group, it is difficult to make general statements, word-formation usually makes a brief appearance in one or two chapters of a grammar. And the subject has not been attractive to linguists for two reasons – its connections with the non-linguistic world of things and ideas, for which words provide the names, and its equivocal position as between descriptive and historical studies. A few brief remarks, which necessarily present a much over-simplified picture, on the course which linguistics has taken in the last hundred years will make this clearer.

The nineteenth century, the period of great advances in historical and comparative language study, saw the first claims of linguistics to be a science, comparable in its methods with the natural sciences which were also enjoying a period of exciting discovery. These claims rested on the detailed study, by comparative linguists, of formal correspondences in the Indo-European languages, and their realization that such study depended on the assumption of certain natural 'laws' of sound change. As Robins observes in his discussion of the linguistics of the latter part of the nineteenth century:

> The history of a language is traced through recorded variations in the forms and meanings of its words, and languages are proved to be related by reason of their possession of words bearing formal and semantic correspondences to each other such as cannot be attributed to mere chance or to recent borrowing. If sound change were not regular, if word-forms were subject to random, inexplicable, and unmotivated variation in the course of time, such arguments would lose their validity and linguistic relations could only be established historically by extra-linguistic evidence such as is provided in the Romance field of languages descended from Latin. (1967, 183)

The rise and development in the twentieth century of synchronic descriptive linguistics meant a shift of emphasis from historical studies, but not from the idea of linguistics as a science based on detailed observation and the rigorous exclusion of all explanations dependent on extra-linguistic factors. As early as 1876, Henry Sweet had written:

> before history must come a knowledge of what exists. We must learn to observe things as they are, without regard to their origin, just as a zoologist must learn to describe accurately a horse or any other animal. Nor would the mere statement that the modern horse is a descendant of a three-toed marsh quadruped be accepted as an exhaustive description ... Such however is the course being pursued by most antiquarian philologists. (1875–6, 471)

The most influential scholar concerned with the new linguistics was Ferdinand de Saussure, who emphasized the distinction between external linguistics – the study of the effects on a language of the history and culture of its speakers, and internal linguistics – the study of its system and rules. Language, studied synchronically, as a system of elements definable in relation to one another, must be seen as a fixed state of affairs at a particular point in time. It was internal linguistics, stimulated by de Saussure's work

(1916), that was to be the main concern of twentieth-century scholars, and within it there could be no place for the study of the formation of words, with its close connections with the external world and its implications of constant change. Any discussion of new formations as such means the abandonment of the strict distinction between history and the present moment. As Harris expressed it in his influential *Structural Linguistics* (1951, 255): 'The methods of descriptive linguistics cannot treat of the productivity of elements since that is a measure of the difference between our corpus and some future corpus of the language.' Leonard Bloomfield, whose book, *Language* (1933), was the next work of major influence after that of de Saussure, re-emphasized the necessity of a scientific approach, and the consequent difficulties in the way of studying 'meaning', and until the middle of the nineteen-fifties, interest was centred on the isolating of minimal segments of speech, the description of their distribution relative to one another, and their organization into larger units. The fundamental unit of grammar was not the word but a smaller unit, the morpheme, about which Chapter 11 will have more to say.

The next major change of emphasis in linguistics was marked by the publication in 1957 of Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*. As Chomsky stated it, one of the aims of linguistics was now seen to be to make a grammar mirror 'the behavior of the speaker who, on the basis of a finite and accidental experience with language can produce and understand an indefinite number of new sentences' (15). The idea of productivity, or creativity, previously excluded from linguistics, or discussed in terms of probabilities in the effort to maintain the view of language as existing in a static state,[3] was seen to be of central importance. But still word-formation remained a topic neglected by linguists, and for several good reasons. Chomsky (1965, Chapter 1) made explicit the distinction, fundamental to linguistics today (and comparable to that made by de Saussure between *langue*, the system of a language, and *parole*, the set of utterances of the language), between linguistic competence, 'the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language' and performance, 'the actual use of language in concrete situations' (Chomsky 1965, 4). Linked with this distinction are the notions of 'grammaticalness' and 'acceptability'; in Chomsky's words, 'Acceptability is a concept that belongs to the study of performance, whereas grammaticalness belongs to the study of competence' (1965, 11). A 'grammatical' utterance is one which may be generated and interpreted by the rules of the grammar; an 'acceptable' utterance is one which is 'perfectly natural and immediately comprehen-

sible...and in no way bizarre or outlandish' (1965, 10). It is easy to show, as Chomsky does, that a grammatical sentence may not be acceptable. For instance, *this is the cheese the rat the cat caught stole* appears 'bizarre' and unacceptable because we have difficulty in work-ing it out, not because it breaks any grammatical rules. Generally, however, it is to be expected that grammaticalness and acceptability will go hand in hand where sentences are concerned.

The ability to make and understand new words is obviously as much a part of our linguistic competence as the ability to make and understand new sentences, and so, as Pennanen (1972, 293) points out, 'it is an obvious gap in transformational grammars not to have made provision for treating word-formation'. But, as we noticed in the first section of this chapter, we may readily think of words, like *to piano, to violin*, against which we can invoke no rule, but which are definitely 'unacceptable' for no obvious reason. The incongruence of grammaticality and acceptability, that is, is far greater where words are concerned than where sentences are con-cerned. It is so great, in fact, that the exercise of setting out the 'rules' for forming words has so far seemed to many linguists to be of questionable usefulness. The occasions on which we would have to describe the output of such rules as 'grammatical but non-occurring' (*cf* Zimmer 1964, 18) are just too numerous. And there are further difficulties in treating new words like new sentences. A novel word (like *handbook* or *patrial*) may attract unwelcome attention to itself and appear to be the result of the breaking of rules rather than of their application. And, as we saw with *aviation*, the more accustomed to a word we become, the more likely we are to find it acceptable, whether it is 'grammatical' or not – or perhaps we should say, whether or not it was 'grammatical' *at the time it was first formed*, since a new word once formed, often becomes merely a member of an inventory; its formation is a historical event, and the 'rule' behind it may then appear irrelevant.

I shall largely ignore these problems and issues, since I am concerned in this book mainly to describe and exemplify the results of some present-day processes of word-formation. I shall return briefly in Chapter 14 to the matter of word-formation and general rules; meanwhile it will be con-venient to employ two useful terms suggested by Jespersen, who was grappling with related topics in the nineteen-twenties. The following passage, taken out of context, appears to present a gross over-simplification, but it provides us with a useful rough distinction: 'While in handling formulas memory, or the repetition of what one has once learned, is everything, free expressions involve another kind of mental activity; they

have to be created in each case anew by the speaker, who inserts the words that fit the particular situation' (Jespersen 1924, 19). We may say, for the time being, that it is with formulas, or fixed expressions, that word-formation is mainly concerned, while syntax deals with the patterns on which free expressions are constructed, though we should remember that the distinction between free expressions and fixed ones is not by any means clear-cut. I shall be concerned in the rest of this chapter, and in Chapter 2, with the boundary which I shall set between 'word-formation' and 'syntax', and with the areas in which this boundary is blurred, before beginning to describe the main products of 'word-formation'. But in Chapter 14 I shall look again at the distinction between syntax and word-formation, and try to present the matter in a rather different light.

1.3 Defining the word

What exactly is a word? This is a term which is usually taken for granted, and never offers any difficulty until we try to state precisely what we mean by it. The failure of general linguists to provide a consistent definition of the word across languages has shown that it can only be defined with respect to a particular language; but it is also evident that a word-like unit is equally central and unmistakable for speakers of very diverse languages. Edward Sapir relates in support of the word's 'psychological validity' his experience in teaching two American Indians to write their own languages:

> Both had some difficulty in learning to break up a word into its constituent sounds, but none whatever in determining the words ... the words, whether abstract relational entities like English *that* or *but* or complex sentence-words ... are ... isolated precisely as I or any other student would have isolated them. (1921, 34 n.)

The word in English may be simple, composed of one constituent only, like *bat*, *hammer* or *sycamore*; or it may be complex, containing more than one constituent, such as *blackbird*, *fourth*. The elements of a complex word may be free forms: elements which in other contexts are independent, as those in *blackbird*, *devil-may-care*; or they may be bound forms: prefixes and suffixes, which never appear independently, like the first and last constituents of *uneatable* or the *-th* of *fourth*. Simple and complex words alike are distinguished from other constructions, it is generally agreed, by the fixed order of their constituents and by the impossibility of interrupting

them by a pause, or of inserting other elements. Exceptions to this rule look very odd indeed (and are effective because they are exceptions), *cf abso-bloominlutely* [Alan Jay Lerner, *My Fair Lady*, 1956, Penguin 1959, 23] and *fanfuckingtastick* [*sic*]: ' "Well, how are you? Have you had a good time?" "Fanfuckingtastick! Never stopped laughing, have we?" ' [John Osborne, *The Hotel in Amsterdam*, 1968, 130].[4] However, complex words composed entirely of free forms exhibit among their elements the same kinds of relationships that are found in sentences – for instance attributive adjective–noun, as in *blackbird*, verb–object, as in *forget-me-not* – and for this reason they are sometimes considered to be on the border-line between syntax and word-formation. As will appear later in this book, complex words of many different kinds contain relationships which are also found in free expressions. But there are structures, word-like in their semantic unity, whose elements are only partially fixed in their order, or which to a limited extent permit interruption, and it is these which can more properly be regarded as on the borderline. Some examples of such structures are given in the next section.

1.4 Words and phrases

Sometimes phrase-like characteristics of a sequence are betrayed by the way in which the plural is formed. This is not always so, and some complex nouns which form their plurals in an unorthodox manner must be seen simply as exceptions to the rule of the uninterruptibility of the word. Among such exceptions are certain compounds with *man-*, *woman-* as first element, which generally pluralize both elements, as in *men-servants*, *women-folk*. Other similar compounds, like *maid-servant*, *boy friend*, have normal plurals. Another exceptional group of compounds in which usage is divided over the placing of the plural marker is exemplified by *lord lieutenant*, *court martial*, which are made up of a head noun and a following modifying adjective on the Romance pattern. (The OED gives the plural of *court martial* as ' *courts martial*, sometimes incorr. *court martials*'.)

The interruptibility of words like *man-servant*, *court martial* is due to accidents of historical development, and does not indicate that the constituents of such words are less firmly attached to one another than those of compounds which form their plurals normally. Noun compounds with *-ful(l)* as second element are rather different. These vary as to the placing of the plural marker: for such words as *handful*, *bagful*, *sackful*, *spoonful*, Webster (1961) gives two plural forms, *handfuls*, *handsful*, and so on. Here, interruptibility by *s* shows doubtful word-status. There is a pro-gression from phrase to word (along with a semantic change from ' con-