

Michelle's Workshop on Lexical Creativity & Word Formation in English Spring 2009

Introduction

Human beings are extremely creative with language. Language reflects how our ideas, ideals and ways of relating change through time, and it is one of our best tools to establish our identity and relate to each other. We use language to communicate and feel connected because beyond our emotional needs, we are always seeking ways to reflect our personal and social world better, and very importantly, to make people laugh. We constantly explore the expressive potential of language, which seems to be unlimited! We repeat lines from popular actors and actresses, politicians, from our favorite TV series, or commercials... because repeating that in different contexts is funny. On the spur of the moment, we make up words we need and can't find. We constantly create new expressions and sayings. We take words from other languages, and adapt them or not to our own, even getting to give them meanings they haven't got in the original language! We even imitate the word formation processes of foreign language with words we have made up, like when we created "sillonball" or "footing". For the sake of maximizing the expressivity of what we wish to mean, and/or for fun, we imitate the specific "languages" used by groups of people which are very different from us – their vocabulary, the ways of speaking of children, adults, teenagers, posh people, misfits, foreigners...

Languages are as alive as we are – they change at our own pace. Language makes us human, and the human creativity in using language is far from being matched by any other living species.

Defining what a word is can be really complicated because we create words with all kinds of items: we have words based on onomatopoeias (echoic words), like *oh, ah, ouch; bang, burp, blast, flutter, flash, sniff, pop, wow, burp, eek!, crash, bump, squeak or squash*. We make up words from particles, like "no *buts* here, please", or morphemes, like *e-[whatever]* (meaning electronic "whatever") or "the *isms*," after the impressive artistic movements of the beginning of the 20th century. We make up words from whole sentences, like *wachacallit* (What do you call it?) and we go even further – we even make up words that don't really *mean* anything (but again, what's "to mean"?), like the internationally famous nonsense word *supercalifragilisticexpiallidoious* or all those kinds of lines we use in songs, rhymes and poems, like *doodah*, or *smurf*, which can mean a lot of different things!

It's a fact: through analogy, induction or deduction, we people (who, according to Anni DiFranco are 90% metaphor) can decipher the meaning of newly heard words. Native speakers of any language have a strong intuitive knowledge of word formation. They can understand and create unexisting words.

[If you don't know what to uglify is, you ARE a simpleton, says the Gryphon to Alice in Lewis Carroll's "The Mock Turtle's Story", from Alice in Wonderland. It is impossible that an English-speaker who understands "ugly" or "beautify" is unable to understand "uglify" and its derivatives "uglification" and "unglifying". Analogy is at the core of human language.

We spent the afternoon talking away – "talking away"? Is this a phrasal? Well, a native speaker understands it perfectly well. Adding "away" means we were doing that happily, feeling carefree.

As an English lifelong learner, you can also develop this skill. It will help you "get the jokes", create your own, develop a sense of word formation in English, including the resourcefulness you need both to create and understand words. It will help you develop your intuitive knowledge of the morphology of the language and the uses of language items. So let us consider what goes on in a native speaker's mind... Enjoy the journey!

We will learn a bit about: **1. Affixation** (+ 2 Worksheets: Prefixes, Suffixes), **2. Conversion**, **3. Compounding**, **4. Other Word Formation Resources**.

Ways to create words in English

Traditionally, the major word formation processes have been **affixation** (attaching a prefix or a suffix), **compounding** (uniting /junáitin/ words) and **conversion** (nouns or adjectives becoming verbs, verbs and adjectives becoming nouns, even particles and suffixes turning into nouns...). But there are innumerable **other resources**, like neologisms or abbreviations. Let us start:

1. Affixation

Look at this! *Active, activate, activation, actively, activeness, activity, activism, activist, proactive, non-active...* We create all kinds of words by adding affixes to roots. Affixation was already popular in Old English.* One of the most productive prefixes in OE was **a-** (as in *alone, aloof, ablaze*). Today it is not very productive, in the sense that we don't create words with it, but we "add" it at times to words, temporarily, to make people laugh. Why does "a-changing" (said by Ross in episode 1 of Friends, season 1) make everybody laugh? Other typical OE prefixes were *be-* in *begin, beheaded*; *fore-* in *forehead, foreword, forethought*; *mis-* in *misunderstand, mislead, mistake*; and the negative and reversative *un-* in words like *undo, undecided*. Learn more about affixation by doing the Prefixes and Suffixes worksheets here: http://www.talkingpeople.net/tp/func_gram/index.htm

2. Conversion

We take a verb, or an adjective, or a noun, or even a preposition and turn it into another word class: *ifs, buts and maybes* (conjunctions and adverb into noun), *that movie is a must* (auxiliary verb into noun), *the pros and cons* (prefix into noun), *the living and the dead* (adjectives into nouns), *to clean/calm/faint* (adjective into verb), *to fax/phone/bottle* (nouns into verbs)... Conversion is a very productive resource in English word formation.

Types of conversion	Create your own words! Use them in context
Conversion to NOUN - From verbs: <i>desire, fall, attempt, hit, answer, cheat, cover, walk</i> (manner of walking) - From adjectives: <i>a bitter (beer), the final (race)</i> - From closed-class words: too many <i>ifs</i> and <i>buts</i>, the <i>whys</i> & <i>why nots</i> (<i>why-nots</i>) - From affixes: the <i>isms</i> in the 1890s - From phrases: he is a <i>has-been</i>	
Conversion to VERB - There is reason to believe many verbs are created from nouns (<i>trouble, doubt, bottle, coat, father, cash, mail, bicycle</i>). It is hard to know if the word comes from that, but one thing is certain: this process is extremely productive today: <i>to chair a meeting, to air our opinions, to e-mail the students, to text someone, to polish the car, to fish in troubled waters...</i> - Verbs can also be created from adjectives: <i>clear, smooth, calm, empty</i> - Or from other language items!: If you <i>huh-huh</i> / <i>tut-tut</i> me again, I'll leave. Promise.	

3. Compounding

A compound word is made up of two or more words that together express a single idea. Compounds can be traced back to the Old English period: in poetry, OE people used *kennings*. Kennings were metaphors that had become names for something. From *day's-eye* derived *daisy*, from *nose-hole* we got *nostril*, from *spear leek* we got *garlic*, and from *wind eye, loaf keeper* and *loaf-maker* we got *window, lord, and lady*. Some tips for compounding:

* The English language came into being in the 5th century and the first OE poem was *Beowulf* (epic, like Cid Campeador, but Beowulf was... nicer?).

Hyphenation. There are three types of compounds.

- An *open compound* consists of 2 or more words written separately, such as *salad dressing*, *newspaper clipping*.
- A *hyphenated compound* has words connected by a hyphen, such as *sugar-free*, *mother-in-law*, *printer-friendly*.
- A *solid compound* consists of two words that are written as one word, such as *keyboard* or *typewriter*. Many solid compounds begin as separate words, evolve into hyphenated compounds, and later become solid compounds. Many are still oscillating between solid and hyphenated: *note book*, *note-book*, *notebook*.

For more on hyphenation, see worksheet on Affixes

Syntactic compounds are formed by regular rules of grammar, like sentences, and they are not listed in the dictionary as individual entries: Eating nuts is fun > *Nut eating* is fun. **Plurals** are formed according to the type of words they consist of. When there is a count word which is head, that takes the plural: *mothers-in-law*, *letter-boxes*. **Pronunciation:** compounds often carry the main **stress** in the 1st element (single accented compounds: *dishwasher*, *make-up*, *flashback*, *pick-up*, *English teacher*, *history book*, *savings account*, *blackberry*, *washing machine*, *scrubbing brush*), and this is what differentiates them from modified nouns: e.g. compare 'blackboard and 'black 'board, 'greenhouse and 'green 'house.

Types of compounds	
Compound Nouns	Create words...
very common & productive: countable (<i>address book</i>), uncountable (<i>central heating</i>), singular (<i>welfare state</i>), & plural (<i>yellow pages</i>). ▪ n + n: <i>mother tongue</i>, <i>mouse potato</i>, <i>notebook</i>, <i>rainbow</i> ▪ n + V or V + n: <i>nosebleed</i>, <i>pickpocket</i>, <i>baby-sit</i>, <i>know-nothing</i> ▪ n + -ing or -ing + n: <i>family planning</i> / <i>swimming pool</i> - <i>babysitting</i> ▪ adj + n: <i>high school</i>, <i>brown-nose</i>, <i>social services</i>, <i>human rights</i> ▪ adj + -ing: <i>central heating</i>	
Compound Adjectives (*as you can see what would become a "complemento del nombre" in Spanish is considered here an <i>adjective</i>)	
very common and productive, many patterns. Multi-worded compounds are written with hyphens when they are used in front of nouns and without hyphens when they are used as the complement of a link verb: <i>An out-of-date book</i> / <i>That book is out of date</i> . <i>A free-and-easy relationship</i> / <i>A relationship which is free and easy</i> . ▪ adj. + -ing: <i>good-looking</i>, <i>hard-working</i> ▪ adv. + -ing: <i>well-meaning</i> ▪ adj. + p. part.: <i>low-paid</i> ▪ adv. + p. part.: <i>out-spoken</i>, <i>well-meant</i> ▪ adj. + -ed n.: <i>red-haired</i> ▪ no. adj + -ed noun: <i>two-legged*</i>, <i>copywronged</i> ▪ no. adj. + n: <i>(a) five-page*</i> (<i>poem</i>) ▪ n + adj.: <i>cherry* red</i>, <i>sky blue</i>, <i>snow* white</i> ▪ n + p. part.: <i>wind-blown</i>	
Compound Verbs	
Rare, Formed by back-formation or conversion from compound nouns. We may not be able to guess their meaning and they are often hyphenated. They can be intransitive (<i>ice-skate</i>), transitive (<i>tape record</i>), or both (<i>bottle-feed</i> , <i>mass-produce</i>). ▪ n + V: <i>sky-dive</i>, <i>bungee-jump</i>, <i>breastfeed</i> ▪ adj. + V: <i>ill treat</i>, <i>dry clean</i> ▪ V + n: <i>pick-pocket</i> ▪ V + V: <i>freeze-dry</i>, <i>make-believe</i> ▪ particle + V: <i>overbook</i>	
Other Compounds...	
Bahuvrihi compounds: their head is not the <i>head</i> ! <i>blockhead</i> is not about <i>head</i> , it's about sb whose mind is not bright / open. <i>Laptop</i> is about a computer that looks like the top of sth (it opens) but so light that you can put it on your lap.	

4. Other Word Formation Resources

Today neologisms are widely used in science and technology, and there is a boom in clippings, blends and acronyms (including initialisms and abbreviations), as a result of developing a kind of shorthand for written communication in texting (sending sms's), emailing, chat rooms and forums. (Note some of the examples can be classified in various categories.)

- **Neologisms:** new words; neoclassical, from Latin and Greek (telecommuting, discoteque, microbiology, nuclear, hyperlink, geothermal), or modern. Examples: from Greek *cyber-* *cybernetics* was coined by a writer in 1948 and over 200 combinations have recently been

created in SF, computer magazines, books and newspapers, like *cybercafé*, *cyber-money*, *cyberfeminism*, *cyber-shopping*, or even *cybersick* or *cyberphobia*! *Phobia* is another Greek suffix which after being introduced in 1786 generated many compounds, being some of the most recent *Europhobia*, *arachnophobia*, *cyberphobia*, *technophobia*, *computerphobia*...

- **Reduplicatives:** commonly used with children, informal speech. They relate to the idea of nonsense & the senses (sounds and movements mostly): *goody-goody*, *din-din* (dinner), *walkie-talkie*, *criss-cross*, *rat-a-tat*, *tick-tock*, *flip-flop*, *hocus pocus*, *wishy-washy*, *teeny-weeny* (tiny), *blah blah*, *boo hoo*, *beep beep*, *tee-hee* (way of laughing), *hotch potch*, *yum yum*, *yummy-yummy*, *drip drip*, *mumbo jumbo* (rubbish, nonsense), *bye bye*, *night night*, *zig zag*, *so so*, *tip top*, *chug chug*, *bow wow*, *pell-mell* (in disorder), *wee wee*...
- **Clippings:** shortening any part of a word: *quiz* (inquisitive), *phone*, *plane*, *flu*, *ad/advert*, *demo*, *exam*, *mike*, *prof* (professor), *peeps* (people). It can affect phrases: *mob* (mobile vulgus), *zoo* (zoological gardens), *dramadoc* (dramatised documentary), *SCI-FI*, *hi-fi*, *e-books*, *e-learner*, *bots* (robots), *prolly* (probably). Some shortenings are no longer recognized as such: *gin* (Genève), *whiskey* (water of life, in Irish and Scottish Gaelic).
- **Blends:*** combining two words to make one which usually combines the meanings and sounds of the two. Very productive. Examples: *brunch* (breakfast + lunch), *Japlish* (Japanese + English), *motel* (motor + hotel), *heliport* (helicopter + airport). Many technical and scientific terms are created by blending: *transistor* (transfer + resistor), *modem* (modulator demodulator), *smog* (smoke + fog), *urinalysis* (urine + analysis), *chloral* (chlorine + alcohol), *electrocute* (electro execute), *blog* (web log), *web cam* (web camera), *navbar* (navigation bar), *emoticon* (emotion icon), *mouselexia* (mouse dyslexia), *netiquette* (net etiquette), *netizen* (net citizen). Blends can give rise to new affixes: *info-*, for instance, which came from *information*. Many blends are created today to refer to new forms of exercise: *aquarobics*, *jazzercise*, *slimnastics*, *surfari*... The media, advertising and show business have created some: *infomercial*, *televangelist*, *rockumentary*, *automagically* (cars). Politics and economy too: *Reaganomics*. More: *blacksploitation*, *sexploitation*, *anticipointment*... Sometimes we lose track of the blend: *vaseline*, from German water+oil.
- **Acronyms, abbreviations and initialisms:** Today common in texting! If pronounced as a word, it is an acronym (*AIDS*). If letters pronounced separately, they're initialisms (*HIV*). Acronyms: ASCII (as-kee), NASA, LASER (light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation), NATO, ROM (Read-Only Memory), ASAP, SNAFU (Situation Normal –All Fucked Up), Yuppie (Young Upwardly-mobile Professional, 80s), OINK (One Income, No Kids), SITCOM (Single Income, Two Kids, Outrageous Mortgage). Environmental and social activists are very creative too: NIMBY (Not In My Backyard), BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anybody), NOPE (Not On Planet Earth). Initialisms: OK, TNT, TB, TV, DIY (do-it-yourself), CIA, PC, CD, DVD, AI (Artificial Intelligence, from robotics), RTFM (Read The Fucking Manual), GP (General Practitioner), jeep (General Purpose Vehicle), BBC, FBI, http, RL (real life), VL (virtual life)... Variable: UFO (u-f-o, ufo), URL, FAQ (US/UK). Abbreviations are not exactly acronyms but contractions or like symbols.
- **Eponyms:** using proper names to create nouns & adjectives. *Hooligan*, *guy*, *bloody mary*, *jacuzzi*, *boycott*, *nicotine*, *lynch*, *sandwich*... Based on geographical names: *bikini*, *china*, *hamburguer*, *jean* (Italy!), *cherry* (Spain)... Names from literature, mythology & folklore: *casanova*, *panic*, *cereal*, *european*... Brandnames: *band-aid*, *jello*, *zipper*, *tampax*, *Xerox*...
- **Borrowings:** loan words, and what we learn or imagine about them. From Spanish: *paella*, *fiesta*, *siesta*, *desperado*, *matador* (years ago, *torero* was the option), *macho man*, *bonita*...
- **Lexical phrases, idiomatic expressions, nonce words, wordplay (!):** fixed sets of words, slogans, popular lines or phrases... *In a nutshell*, *Give me a break*, *Have a nice day*... *Just do it!*, *I'm loving it*, *And they lived happily ever after* (story-telling), *May the Strength be with you* (Galaxy War), [Whatever] *rules* (graffiti), *to google* (to google your name), *to little r*, *to big r* (reply, reply to all), *netlag* (from jetlag: heavy traffic on the Web), *an e-collar worker who telecommutes*, *textual harrassment*...

* Creations by blending are also called *portmanteau words*, following Lewis Carroll, who actually used several in his Jumberwocky: *slithy* = *lithe* + *slimy*; *mimsy* = *flimsy* + *miserable*.