

English Vocabulary

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A learner's nightmare

A COMPLICATED MIXTURE

Compared to many languages, English seems to have a rich and very large vocabulary. The reasons for this are well known. English vocabulary is a complicated mixture of Germanic words and Romance words. The Germanic words are words which English shares with languages like German, Danish, and Norwegian. The Romance words are words which English shares with languages like French, Spanish and Italian. These Romance words are further split up into two main groups. Some of these words became part of English at the time of the Norman Conquest, around 1100AD. The others were imported into English by scholars in the 18th Century, directly from Latin, or occasionally from Greek. The result of all this borrowing and adoption of words is that English vocabulary presents a lot of very awkward problems for foreign learners.

DIFFERENT FORMS

One problem is that English has lots of different words for the same basic idea. For example, in English we have the word HOUSE - a good, plain Germanic word - and a number of related forms are built on this basic word: HOUSING, HOUSEHOLD, HOUSEWIFE, HOUSE-BREAKING, HOUSEKEEPER, and so on. However, a large number of other words, whose meaning includes the idea of HOUSE or HOME are actually based on another root instead: words such as DOMESTIC, DOMICILE and DOMESTICITY, for example. These words are all based on the Latin word for a home: DOMUS. There is also another set of words based on the Latin word RESIDERE. These include RESIDE, RESIDENT, RESIDENCE and RESIDENTIAL. Similarly, we have in English, HORSE, with its associated words CAVALRY (from the Latin word for horse CABALLUS), CHIVALRY (from the French word for horse, CHEVAL) and EQUINE (from another Latin word for horse, EQUUS). It would be easy to give lots of examples of this sort, but the general point is that English will often use two or three different forms where many other languages will only use a single basic form. This obviously makes it difficult for learners of English to acquire a good grasp of English vocabulary. You may know the basic words, but not be familiar with the more unusual terms for the same thing. So, for instance, you might understand COW and BRAIN, but if you came across a reference to BOVINE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALITIS, you may not realise it had anything to do with cows or brains. In fact, it's a kind of illness that causes an inflammation in the brains of cows.

MIXED MESSAGES

A second problem for learners is that English Romance words and Germanic words tend to be used in different ways. On the whole, the words of Germanic origin tend to be more frequent than words of Romance origin, and they also tend to appear in less formal contexts than the Romance words do. So, for example, a DOOR is more ordinary than a PORTAL, a WOOD is more ordinary than an ARBORETUM, and a JOB is more informal than an OCCUPATION. English speakers are very sensitive to usages of this kind, and it is very easy to give the wrong impression by using a word in an inappropriate context. For example, I might write to someone, ASKING them to come and EAT at my HOUSE. But if instead I REQUESTED them to DINE at my RESIDENCE, this would imply an altogether grander affair, and a completely different set of social conventions. If you mix up the two sets of words, and REQUEST someone to come and EAT at your HOUSE, you end up with a complicated set of social messages, which is difficult for native speakers to disentangle: it isn't clear if this is a formal invitation or an informal one.

THE PROFESSIONAL PASSPORT

This distinction between words of Germanic origin and words of Romance origin seems to play an important social role in English. Corson (1985) has suggested that formal schooling in English is not just about building up a learner's vocabulary. Specifically, he argues that schooling teaches the learner a vocabulary that is largely based on Latin, and that people who do not have access to this vocabulary are effectively barred from certain types of profession, where complex vocabulary of this sort is taken for granted. It would be very difficult, for example, to become a lawyer if you did not have a good grasp of the Latin and Greek elements in the English language.

ITEMS AND SYSTEMS

Hakan Ringbom (1983) has suggested that learning vocabulary involves two very different types of learning. You have to learn the items that make up the vocabulary, but you also have to learn the systems that the language uses to exploit its vocabulary items. Some languages seem to have lots of items, and not much in the way of systems, while other languages have a small core vocabulary, and a lot of complicated systems that extend the way these core items are used. English appears, at first glance, to be one of the languages that has a lot of items, and not much system. If your native language is at the other end of the spectrum - that is, if you speak a language which has a small core vocabulary - then you will probably find it quite difficult to learn English vocabulary, simply because there are a lot of different words in the language. Words which are all part of the same word family for you will appear to belong to very different word families in English. An extreme example of this can be found in Arabic, where the words for BOOK, WRITE, SECRETARY, DESK, OFFICE, LIBRARY, READ, LECTURE are all variations on a single basic word form. In English, on the other hand, these words represent eight very different concepts, with no formal linguistic relationships between them, and native English speakers would normally see these items as eight completely different words.

THE RIGHT FIT

On the other hand, it would be wrong to give the impression that English has only a rudimentary lexical system. In fact, the English system is very complicated, partly because it uses different systems at the same time. There is one system for words of Germanic origin, and another system for words of Romance origin, and you need to know which words fit which system. A couple of examples of this are shown below. Typically, if you want to turn an adjective into a verb, you use either an -EN ending, or an -IFY ending. Which one is correct depends on the origin of the adjective. The words of Germanic origin take the -EN ending, while the words of Romance origin take the -IFY ending:

quick quicken beauty beautify
 dark darken vile vilify
 light lighten glory glorify
 soft soften solid solidify
 hard harden (holy) sanctify

Similarly, names of professions usually end in -ER or -IST, and again the choice depends on the origin of the word. Germanic words tend to end in -ER, while Romance words tend to end in -IST

bake baker journal journalist
 teach teacher active activist
 drive driver cycle cyclist
 kill killer rape rapist
 walk walker somnambulist

CONSTRUCTING COMPOUNDS

Alongside derivatives of this sort, English also allows some of its words to form compounds. Again, this is usually, but not exclusively associated with words of Germanic origin, and so may be unfamiliar to speakers of other languages which do not use this sort of system. The two main types are compound nouns and compound verbs, which can be constructed out of almost any combination of word class. For example:

Noun + Noun joy rider parking lot moon orbit skinhead
 Verb + Noun cut-throat kill-joy spoil-sport play-house
 Noun + Verb sunshine nosebleed headache discdrive
 Prep + Noun afterburner overtime aftercare

Verb + Verb hang-glide

Adj + Verb double-book fine-tune free-wheel

Prep + Verb underachieve overrate overblow

BEATING THE SYSTEM

What all this points to is that English vocabulary is really a lot more complicated - and therefore a lot more difficult to learn - than the vocabularies of some other languages. English vocabulary is exceptionally large, and to be fluent in English, you need to have a command of many more words than is the case in some other languages. Furthermore, English is unusual in that it uses word formation systems that are a great deal more complex than those you find in many other languages. It has several different systems, each of which only applies to a limited portion of the total vocabulary. Finally, English exploits the richness of its vocabulary in ways that some other languages do not in order to signal complicated messages.

MORE THAN INTUITION

In practice, what this means is that even advanced learners of English are more likely to meet words they do not recognise than learners of many other languages with an equivalent amount of experience. It also means that each new word in English has significantly more to be learned about it than is often the case for words in other languages; learners simply cannot rely on their intuition about how a word is used in English; they need reliable information about how English words work in practice. Vocabulary learning is a life-long experience. For English, it may be that one life-time is not enough.

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