

WORDS POUR INTO ENGLISH - Part three

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In part three of a three-part article, Jean Aitchison continues her exploration of how words enter the English language. This month she looks at word formation process and 'layering'.

Word formation processes

New words are not totally new. The vast majority are made up out of existing components. The same word-formation processes recur around the globe, though each language has its own particular favourites.

New words are typically placed in inverted commas, when they are first introduced, as in 'The annual fee allows unlimited entry to district parks for your dog for a year and a case of 100 'pooper-scoopers"', a *pooper-scooper* being a tool for the removal of a dog's solid waste. As a word becomes accepted, these inverted commas are eventually dropped.

i) Compounds. In English, **compounding** has been the most prolific process throughout the 20th century. This consists simply of putting words together. Sometimes these remain as two words. Recent examples include **airport fiction** (books, especially ones that are not very serious, that people buy at airports to read while they are travelling on planes) and **hot desk** (a desk which is used by different workers on different days, instead of by the same worker every day).

At other times, the two parts are joined into a single new word, for example **jobseeker** (someone who is trying to find a job), and **webhead** (someone who uses the Internet a lot, especially in a skilful way). Sometimes the two parts are linked by a hyphen, as in **walk-in**, a recent adjective that describes a place to which you can go without an appointment, as in *walk-in clinic*.

ii) Affixes. **Affixation** is another common method of forming new words. An affix is an additional part of a word added at the beginning (**prefix**) or end of the word (**suffix**).

Adding an ending to an existing word continues to produce many new words in English. For example, *-iac* has been added to the word *brain* to create the recent new word **brainiac** (*informal humorous* someone who spends a lot of time studying and thinking about complicated ideas, but who is often unable to communicate with people in ordinary social situations: *Electrical engineering is the perfect career for a brainiac like him*). This word is also used as an adjective: *The company is trying to change its brainiac image*.

Many new words have also been created through the addition of the suffix *-ization*, as in **dollarization** (a situation in which countries outside the US want to use the dollar rather than

their own country's money) or **globalization** (the process by which countries all over the world become connected, especially because large companies are doing business in many different countries). This is, in fact, two suffixes combined, *-ize* as in **globalize**, then with an added **-ation**.

Another increasingly popular suffix is *-land*, as in **adland** (the activity or business of advertising, considered as a whole: *Anything that grabs your attention is good in adland*) and **cyberland** (activity that involves the Internet and the people who use it).

Prefixes have become more widespread recently. *Cyber-* is a good example of a prefix which has been used to create a range of new words (originally meaning 'computer', now often meaning 'to do with the Internet'). For example **cybercafé**, **cybercrime**, **cyberforensics**, **cyberfraud** (the illegal act of deceiving people on the Internet in order to gain money, power etc), **cyberland**, **cyberporn** (sexual images, films etc shown on the Internet).

And dozens of new words formed by prefixes relate to size, both large size and very small size, such as *micro-*, *super-*, and *multi-*, as in:

microbrewery a small company that makes only a small quantities of beer, and often has a restaurant where its beer is served

microengineering the activity of designing structures and machines that are extremely small

micromanage to organize and control all the details of other people's work in a way that they find annoying: *Professors warned that students will suffer if the state legislature tries to micromanage public education.*

supersize *AmE* a supersize drink or meal in a fast-food restaurant is the largest size that the restaurant serves

multi-tasking **1** a computer's ability to do more than one job at a time **2** the ability to do different types of work at the same time

These prefixes mostly have clear meanings. But suffixes too may have meanings: *-ism* is a suffix which has acquired a more specific meaning in recent years, alongside *-ist*. At one time, its meaning was fairly neutral, as in *pacifism* (the belief that all wars and all forms of violence are wrong). But gradually *-ism* has taken on a feeling of disapproval: *ageism* is 'unfair treatment of people because they are old', and someone who is prejudiced in this way is an *ageist*. Similarly, **lookist** (adj) is 'unfairly deciding to like or not like someone by considering only the way they look, their weight, their clothes etc'. The *-ism* is **lookism**, and the person who discriminates is a **lookist**.

iii) **Conversion (change of word class)**. A variety of other word formation processes exist, which sometimes suddenly erupt in dozens of new words and phrases. **Conversion**, the

change of a word from one word class (part of speech) to another is very common in today's English. It is easy for a language with few word endings to use this process, as with **to bookmark** (a verb formed from a noun) meaning 'to save the address of a page on the Internet, so that you can find it again easily'; **to ramp** or **to ramp something up** (a verb formed from a noun), meaning 'to try to persuade people that a company's shares are worth more than they really are'; and **to sample** (a verb formed from a noun) is 'to use a small part of a song from a CD or record in a new song'.

iv) Acronyms and abbreviations. **Acronyms**, initial letters of words, have been important for some time, and **abbreviations** such as *RIP* ('Rest in Peace', used on tombstones and in speech about someone who is dead) and *asap* ('as soon as possible') are widely known and used. Some of these acronyms become accepted as full words, such as *laser* ('light amplification by the stimulated emission of radiation', meaning a device that can emit an intense beam of light), which is pronounced as a word (leɪzə). Recently, acronyms and abbreviations have grown increasingly frequent, at least among teenagers and young adults, partly because of mobile phones, or cell phones, which can also send text messages, but which have very limited space on their screens. So brief message abbreviations are becoming common, such as **IMHO** ('in my humble opinion') and **CUL** ('see you later') - though caution is needed. Some abbreviations are ambiguous: **LOL** could mean either 'Lots of love' or 'Laughing out loud'!

v) Blends. Two words combined into one are known as **blends** (a term now more usual than the older one, **portmanteau words**, sometimes still used to describe this happening).

A few blends have become an accepted part of English, such as *brunch*, a mixture of *breakfast* and *lunch*, and some of them are intentionally humorous. For example:

netizen *slang* someone who uses the Internet, especially someone who uses it in a responsible way. This word comes from a combination of the words 'net', meaning 'the Internet', and 'citizen': *China and India will soon have far larger numbers of netizens than any Western nation.*

netiquette *informal* the commonly accepted rules for polite behaviour when communicating with other people on the Internet: *Netiquette says that you don't use all capital letters in an e-mail, because that shows you are angry.*

The word **imagineer**, from 'imagination' and 'engineer', means someone who has a lot of new ideas, and who is also able to use these ideas to do practical things.

Layering

Yet new words are not necessarily fresh ones. Existing words can split apart, in a process known as **layering**. New layers of meaning grow up alongside existing ones, such as **client** (a computer on a network that receives information from a server {=large powerful computer}), or

brother (a word meaning a black man, used especially by other black men). Similarly, **lurk** is now used not only of suspicious characters who may hide in the bushes, but also of someone who enters a **chat room** on the Internet, and reads what other people are writing to each other, but does not write any messages to them.

Another type of layering is when words appear to fade in meaning. In fact, this is not so much weakening, as an additional new meaning, as with the word *devastated*. 'The city was *devastated*', usually means that it was destroyed by an enemy or a major natural disaster, such as a volcano. But 'Peggy was *devastated* when her new hat got wet' is quite a trivial affair, and simply means 'Peggy was unhappy'.

Conclusion

Words, then, are continually coming into English. So is the language getting bigger and bigger? Yes, it is. But words do not necessarily stay for ever. They may fall out of use, and die away.

So how does one cope with all these hordes of words? The answer is: buy a recent dictionary. Hopefully, the current one will provide a useful stock of words for any student who wants to start the 21st century by updating their vocabulary.

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Words in the mind: An introduction to the mental lexicon, 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell 1994

Language Change: Progress or decay?, 3rd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001