On Word-Formation Processes In Present-Day English
by
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English is a dynamic language. One way of answering the question 'How large is the English lexicon?' would be to compare two of the largest dictionaries of the English language. David Crystal compared the unabridged *Websters Third New International* (1961), including over 450,000 entries, and the integrated second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), with over 600,000 entries. Crystal's ample comparison revealed a lack of identity between the headword lists. The two dictionaries had only 21 headwords in common out of a possible 57. The discrepancies observed may be accounted for by differences in editorial emphasis. For example, the *Oxford* has many more historical references and British dialect terms than *Websters*, which in turn has many more local American items. Moreover, neither work claims a comprehensive coverage of the 'New Englishes', used in India, West Africa, Singapore, where thousands of new lexemes are coming into the language. Finally, the tradition of lexicography, which gives preference to the written language as the test for inclusion, will exclude many words and expressions that have never been recorded even if they are common in current spoken use (Jackson and Ze Amvela 2000: 45).

Crystal argues that even if we restrict the issue to standard vocabulary, there are many items that could be included as part of the lexicon, but which are not usually found in a dictionary, and concluded his analysis by noting that it is difficult to see how even a conservative estimate of English vocabulary could go much below one million lexemes. All of scientific nomenclature might indeed easily double this figure (Crystal 1995: 119).

The contemporary age witnesses a significant number of words entering the lexicon. In his article *Vogue Words through Five Decades* (*English Today*, 25), John Algeo writes: 'Wars, political scandals, international relations, terrorism, Eurounification, economic shocks and revolutions, falling walls and rising curtains, technological developments, medicine, space exploration, scientific theory, the New Age, family structure, social stratification and integration, the woman's movement, an aging population, life styles, ethnic identity, pop culture, sports, drugs, sexual mores, merchandising, communications, transportation, entertainment, the green revolution, and ecology – these are some of the areas that have been lexically active during the past half-century. […] In such words as these we read the values, concerns, and preoccupations of our time'.

Thus, John Algeo may also be taken to suggest an answer to the question 'Why study word-formation processes at all?' By word-formation processes we mean the different devices which are used in English to build new words from existing ones. The processes were already well established in Old English. Each word-formation process will result in the production of a specific type of word. Consequently, an understanding of these processes is one way of studying the different types of word that exist in English. At the beginning of the 20th century, in his second edition of *The King's English* (1908), Roger Fowler noted that 'if no new words were to appear, it would be a sign that the language was moribund, but it is well that each new word that does appear should be severely scrutinized'. Fowler also remarked that it is the progress of arts and sciences, as well as the crystallization

of political tendencies or movements in ideas that give occasion for the large majority of new words (cf. *http://www.bartelby.com/116/103.html*).

Fowler is among the first linguists to distinguish between *nonce words* and *neologisms:*

> "Among other arts and sciences, that of lexicography happens to have found convenient a neologism that may here be used to help in the very slight classification required for the new words we are more concerned with – that is, those whose object is literary or general, and not scientific. A 'nonce-word' (and the use might be extended to 'nonce-phrase' and 'nonce-sense' – the latter not necessarily, though it may be sometimes, equivalent to nonsense) is one that is constructed to serve a need of the moment. The writer is not seriously putting forward his word as one that is for the future to have an independent existence; he merely has a fancy to it for this once. The motive may be laziness, avoidance of the obvious, love of precision, or desire for brevity or pregnancy that the language as at present constituted does not seem to him to admit of. The first two are bad motives, the third a good, and the last a mixed one. But in all cases it may be said that a writer should not indulge in these unless he is quite sure he is a good writer."(*ibidem*).

Analysing lexical creativity, Leon Levitchi too distinguishes between nonce-words and the larger class of neologisms:

> "A peculiar fate is reserved to the class of neologisms known as *nonce-words* (nonce, from the Middle English *for the nones* – 'for that time'), words or phrases used only once in a certain context and left outside the general vocabulary of a language. […] In a wider sense, nonce-words may include all the words and phrases which, on various occasions (not necessarily 'once only'), their inventors tried to foist into the language, with the result that they have remained in its archives. When obviously superfluous, nonce-words are very much like *barbarisms*" (Levitchi 1970: 114).

In his *Essays on Terminology*, Alain Rey provides a theoretical description of the processes of lexical neology while laying the bases for systematic lexicological work in the domain. Exploring the needs for neologisms, Rey remarks that "a need for neologism may be *language-internal*, i.e. within one language area, or because of *external pressure*" (Rey 1995: 79-90) and gives as an example of the latter the diffusion of technical innovations, e.g. computer terminology from English to other languages. Following Rey's interpretation, neologisms become tokens of a creative process in the manner in which Rogers (1976, apud Helge Niska) describes it: "a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other" (cf. *http://www.lisa.tolk.su.se/kreeng2*).

Referring to lexical creativity, David Crystal uses the general term *coinage* for newly created lexemes, while making the same distinction in technical usage between nonce words and neologisms (Crystal 1995: 132). Crystal also notes the existence of *vogue words*, which are not the same as neologisms. Vogue words (see also J. Algeo's article quoted above) are lexemes used extensively by members of a particular group, consequently a neologism must acquire a certain popularity in order to be considered a vogue word. The word must be taken up and used frequently by large numbers of people, while being extended to contexts beyond the one which originally gave rise to it.

An example of a neologism that has evolved into a vogue word is *funk*, used mainly to refer to a music style, but which can also mean 'smelly', 'frightened' and 'panicky'. *Funk* is backformed from *funky*, which is polysemantic, dictionaries citing *funky* as one of the words

most difficult to define precisely: 1.a. Having a moldy or musty smell: *funky cheese; funky cellars*. B. Having a strong, offensive, unwashed odor. 2. *Slang.* a. Of or relating to music that has an earthy quality reminiscent of the blues: *funky jazz*. b. Earthy and uncomplicated; natural c. Characterized by self-expression, originality and modishness; unconventional: *funky clothes* d. Vulgar or eccentric in a humorous or tongue-in-cheek manner. *Funky*, which comes from the earlier noun *funk,* meaning 'a strong smell or stink', was probably derived from French dialectal *funquer*, 'to give off smoke', from Old French *fungier*, from Latin *fumus/fumigare* (cf. *The American Heritage Electronic Dictionary*).

Differences in meaning between British and American English should also be noted: in British English a *blue funk* is a state of panic or great fear, while in American English it refers mostly a state of dejection or depression. However, the modern meaning of a musical genre and the Black English term *funky* for 'something excellent' seem to derive from the American sense of *funk* for a bad smell. According to Michael Quinion, the meaning has evolved as follows:

> "The progression seems to have been that 'funky' was invented in the 1920s to refer to an obnoxious smell, especially in reference to a person who smelled bad, say of sweat. That was soon after transferred in Black English to somebody or something objectionable or worthless. By a process common in Black English, by the end of the 1930s 'funky' was being applied to things that were satisfying, impressive, or generally approved of (think of 'wicked' and 'bad', two other examples of this kind of deliberate inversion). The music sense – unpretentious, down to earth, rooted in the blues – turns up in the early 1950s as a further evolution of meaning' (cf. *http://www.worldwidewords.org, issue 256*).

Not only full forms but also affixes can become *vogue*: *-gate* (*Dianagate, Sexgate*), *Euro-* (*Eurochunnel* – a blend of *channel* and *tunnel, Eurozone, Eurocrat*), *-ist* (*ageist, racist, heightist*) (Crystal 1995: 179).

According to Tom McArthur's *Oxford Companion to the English Language*, the term *neologism* was introduced into English in the 18th century from French *néologisme*, in turn derived from Greek *néos* 'new' and *lógos* 'word'. The dictionary also states that most neologisms in English belong to nine main categories:

1. Compounding: *couch potato*, someone constantly slumped on a couch watching television; *video-conferencing*, a number of people taking part in a conference or conferences by means of video equipment.
2. Derivation: *yuppie*, formed from *yup*, the initial letters of the phrase 'young urban professional' by adding the suffix *–ie*; *yuppiedom*, the condition of being a yuppie, formed from *yuppie* by adding the suffix *–dom.*
3. Shifting meaning: *spin,* a journalist's term for a special bias or slant given to a piece of writing.
4. Abbreviation: in Stock Exchange usage, *arb* from *arbitrager* or *arbitrageur*, one who sells securities or commodities simultaneously in different markets to benefit from unequal prices.
5. Back-formation: *peddle* formed from *peddler*; *televise* derived from *television.*
6. Blending: *motor + hotel → motel.*
7. Borrowing: loanwords such as *glasnost* from Russian; *nouvelle cuisine* from French, which is still the largest supplier of words to English.

8.   Very rarely, root creation, or coinage that has no relationship whatsoever with any previously existing word: *Kodak* and *googol*, the number 1 followed by 100 zeros (a word coined by a nine-year-old child around 1955).

The same dictionary lists the following representative lists of neologisms coined between 1940 and 1990:

1940s. *acronym, airlift, apartheid, atomic age, automation, baby-sit, bikini, blockbuster, call girl, circuitry, cold war, crash landing, debrief, declassify, doublethink, flying saucer, freeze-dry, genocide, gobbledygook, guided missile, hydrogen bomb, nerve gas, petro-chemical, quisling, radar, snorkel, spaceship, tape recorder, task force, vegan, VIP, xerography, zero in.*

1950s. *A-OK, beatnik, brainwashing, common market, countdown, desegregation, discotheque, do-it-yourself, egghead, hard sell, H-bomb, hotline, LSD, McCarthyism, moonlighting, Ms, name-dropping, nuke, overkill, panelist, paramedic, parenting, sci-fi, scuba, senior citizen, shopping mall, soft sell, sputnik.*

1960s. *affirmative action, biodegradable, bionics, brain drain, cable television, counter-productive, cryonics, disco, Eurocrat, fast-food, genetic engineering, jet lag, microelectronics, microwave oven, pop art, quasar, sitcom, space shuttle, underachiever, uptight, ZIP Code (AmE).*

1970s. *boat people, bottom line, downsize, ecocatastrophe, ecofreak, flextime, hit list, junk food, nouvelle cuisine, Watergate.*

1980s. *cash point, couch potato, golden handcuffs, golden handshake, gridlock, New Age, perestroika, personal organizer, silent majority, telemarketing, whoopee, yuppie* (cf. *http://w2.xrefer.com/entry/443073*).

As the *Oxford Companion to the English Language* indicates, the majority of neologisms in English are compounds, which recombine old words to form new ones with new meanings. English seems to have a propensity for compounding and throughout its history, thousands of common words have entered the language by this process, including *bigmouth, chickenhearted, do in, egghead, g-string, icecap, longshoreman, moreover, offshore, railroad, takeover* and *water cooler.* Compounds consisting of two roots, the simplest type of compound, also tend to be the most numerous in the language and there is almost no limit on the kinds of combinations that occur in English, for example Adj + Adj: *bittersweet;* Adj + Noun: *poorhouse;* Adj + Verb: *highborn;* Noun + Adj: *headstrong;* Noun + Noun: *rainbow;* Noun + Verb: *spoonfeed;* Verb + Adj: *carryall;* Verb + Noun: *pickpocket;* Verb + Verb: *sleepwalk.* It should also be noted that the relationship between the compound constituents is highly condensed and the meaning of a compound cannot always be predicted from that of its constituents, so a *jack-in-a-box* is a tropical tree, a *turncoat* is a traitor, and a *flatfoot* is a detective.

Meaning shifts too have been noted throughout the history of English, as proved by the current meaning of *silly*, for example, which in Old English used to mean 'happy. The overworked Modern English word *nice* meant 'ignorant' a thousand years ago and *fond* used to mean 'foolish'. When Shakespeare's Juliet tells Romeo, "I am too *fond*", she is not claiming she likes Romeo too much. She means "I am too *foolish*" (Fromkin and Rodman 1993: 337).

Abbreviations of longer words or phrases may also become lexicalized: *nark* for 'narcotics agent', *tec* (or *dick*) for 'detective, *prof* for 'professor' and *gym* for 'gymnasium' are only a few examples of such short forms that are now used as whole words. This process

is sometimes called 'clipping'. An extreme kind of clipping is represented by initialisms, since only the initial letters of words, or sometimes initial syllables, are conjoined to be used as words. When initialisms are pronounced with the names of the letters of the alphabet, they may be called alphabetisms, but when they are pronounced like individual lexical items, they are acronyms, from Greek *akros*, 'tip' and *onyma*, 'name', by analogy with *homonym*. Examples of alphabetisms: *AI* – Amnesty International, Artificial Intelligence; *ATV* – all terrain vehicle (AmE), Associated Television (BrE); *BP* – beautiful people (AmE), British Petroleum, blood pressure (BrE). Examples of acronyms: *scuba* – self-contained underwater breathing apparatus; *AIDS* – acquired immune deficiency syndrome. The motivation for initialism is either brevity or catchiness, though sometimes euphemism may be involved (Jackson and Ze Amvela 2000: 88).

New words may be formed from existing words by 'subtracting' an affix thought to be part of the old word; that is, ignorance (wrong morphemic analysis) sometimes can be creative. Such words are called back-formations. The verbs *hawk, stoke, swindle* and *edit* all came into the language as back-formations – of *hawker, stoker, swindler* and *editor*.

Blends are also referred to as 'telescope' or 'portmanteau' words, being built from parts of two (or possibly more) words, the constituent parts of which are more or less easily identifiable. The resulting items are generally nouns: *breakfast + lunch →brunch; channel + tunnel → chunnel; dove + hawk → dawk; slang + language → slanguage,* while a few are adjectives, such as *glitter + ritzy → glitzy* and verbs, such as *gues(s)timate (guess + estimate).* Blends tend to be more frequent in informal style in the registers of journalism, advertising and technical fields and give rise either to new morphemes or to folk etymology. In most cases, blending results in the creation of new morphemes or in the addition of new meanings to old ones. For example, *automobile,* taken from French, was originally a combination of Greek *autos*, 'self' and Latin *mobilis*, 'movable'. The element *auto* became productive, as evidenced by the words *autobiography*, *autodidact* and *autocar,* while the second element also acquired a combining function, as in *bookmobile,* 'library on wheels' and *bloodmobile,* 'blood bank on wheels'. In the same manner, *hamburger* was blended so often with other words (e.g. *cheeseburger, steakburger, chickenburger, vegeburger)* that the form *burger* has acquired the status of an independent (Jackson and Ze Amvela 2000: 88).

Another important source of new words is borrowing from other languages, and some languages are heavy borrowers. English, for example, has borrowed extensively throughout its history and this seems to have had important consequences in the extensive character (larger than that of any other language) and at the same time the very cosmopolitan nature of present-day English vocabulary. For example, the simultaneous borrowing of French and Latin words has led to a highly distinctive feature of modern English vocabulary: sets of three items, all expressing the same fundamental notion, but differing slightly in meaning or style: *kingly, royal, regal; rise, mount, ascend; ask, question, interrogate; holy, sacred, consecrated.* The Old English word (the first in each triplet) is the most colloquial, the French (the second) is more literary, and the Latin word (the last) more learned (Jackson and Ze Amvela 2000: 35). Latin is not only the first major contributor of loanwords to English, but also one of the most important sources for the coinage of new English words.

English still borrows, and is likely to continue borrowing from other languages of the world. However, borrowing in recent times is characterized by two main factors: the frequency of borrowing is considerably reduced, and English seems to borrow from less and

less known languages. Consequently, English today is a prime example of a lexically mixed language, one in which the importance of the inherited Germanic stock in the central core of its vocabulary is nevertheless undeniable (Crystal 1995: 18). On the other hand, nowadays the borrowing movement has been reversed as more and more languages borrow from English, the current dominant lingua franca.

Contemporary lexical creativity in English seems limitless. Lexical studies enthusiasts will find good starting points on the Internet. One Web reference engine, *xrefer*, is a unique source of information providing free access to the world's largest collection of encyclopedias and dictionaries. There are also quite a few websites dedicated to the recording and documentation of the latest evolving words and phrases in the English language. These websites include, for example, *http://World Wide Words, Wordspy, Logophilia, Turns of Phrase* etc. *Hy Tek Computer Forums,* for instance, features 'new words for 2005', such as *cube farm* – an office filled with cubicles; *assmosis* – the process by which some people absorb success advancement by kissing up to the boss rather than working hard; *404* – someone who's clueless (from the World Wide Web error message '404 Not Found', meaning that the requested document could not be located); *square-headed girlfriend* – another word for 'computer; *disorient express* – a state of confusion; *netizen* – a person who spends an excessive amount of time on the Internet.

Such examples illustrate varied types of word formation patterns as well as a wide range of semantic processes such as metaphor, metonymy and euphemism. Most sites set up by linguistic enthusiasts will testify to the creative aspect of word formation and use in present-day English, to the wide creative resources provided by this language, and last but not least, to the sense of humour of its speakers.

Furthermore, the actual existing words in the language constitute only a subset of the possible words. New words may enter the dictionary created by the application of morphological rules. It is often the case that when such a word as, for example, *commun + ist* enters the language, other possible complex forms will not, such as *commun + ite* (as in *Trotsky + ite*) or *commun + ian* (as in *grammar + ian*). There may however exist alternative forms: for example, *Chomskyan* and *Chomskyist* and perhaps even *Chomskyite* (all meaning 'follower of Chomsky's views of linguistics'). *Linguist* and *linguistician* are both used, but the possible word *linguite* is not (Fromkin and Rodman 1993: 43).

Possible but nonoccurring words such as *Bic*, before it was coined as a brand name, are accidental gaps in the vocabulary. An accidental gap is a form that obeys all the phonological rules of the language but has no meaning. These are also known as nonsense or possible words. Other lexical gaps are due to the fact that possible combinations of morphemes have not been made.

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* we find the following excerpt:

> *"I never heard of 'Uglification'"*, Alice ventured to say. *"What is it?"*
> *The Gryphon lifted up both its paws in surprise. "Never heard of uglifying!" it exclaimed.* *"You know what to beautify is, I suppose?"*
> *"Yes," said Alice doubtfully: "it means –to make-anything-prettier."*
> *"Well, then," the Gryphon went on, "if you don't know what to uglify is, you are a simpleton."*

Carroll's Mock Turtle added *–ify* to the adjective *ugly* and formed a verb. Many verbs in English have been formed in this way: *purify, amplify, simplify, glorify, personify.* The

Mock Turtle went on to add the suffix *–cation* to *uglify* and formed a noun, *uglification,* as in *glorification, simplification, falsification* and *purification.* Alice was very confused, since *uglification* was not a common word in English until Lewis Carroll used it.

As people evolve, their language will evolve too. They will find ways to describe new things and their changed perspective will give them new ways of talking about the old things. Tolerance for change represents not only the dynamism of the English speaking peoples since the Elizabethan Age, but their deeply ingrained ideas of freedom as well. This was the idea of the Danish scholar Otto Jespersen, one of the great authorities on English. Writing in 1905, Jespersen noted in his *Growth and Structure of the English Language*:

> The French language is like the stiff French garden of Louis XIV, while the English is like an English park, which is laid out seemingly without any definite plan, and in which you are allowed to walk everywhere according to your fancy without having to fear a stern keeper enforcing rigorous regulations. The English language would not have been what it is if the English had not been for centuries great respecters of the liberties of each individual and if everybody had not been free to strike out new paths for himself.

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