

Processes of Word Formation

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F. Acronymy

Acronymy is the process whereby a word is formed from the initials or beginning segments of a succession of words. In some cases the initials are pronounced, as in MP (military police, or Member of Parliament). In others the initials and/or beginning segments are pronounced as the spelled word would be. For example, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) is pronounced as /neto/ and radar (radio detecting and ranging) as /redar/. In the last forty years there has been a great increase in the use of acronyms. They tend to abound in large organizations—for instance, in the army, in government, and in big business—where they offer neat ways of expressing long and cumbersome terms. The very names of some businesses have been acronymized, like Nabisco, Texaco, and Alcoa. Many acronyms are used and understood only by initiates in a given field, like the military CQ, TDY, and BOQ, whereas others gain general currency, like GI, CO, and PX. It is likely that you employ some campus acronyms that would not be understood elsewhere.

G. Blending

Blending is the fusion of two words into one, usually the first part of one word with the last part of another, as in gasohol, from gasoline and alcohol. The resultant blend partakes of both original meanings. Many blends are nonce words, here today and gone tomorrow, and relatively few become part of the standard lexicon. The two classes, blends and clipped words, are not sharply separated, and some words may be put into either class.

H. Back-formation

If someone should ask you, "What does a feeper do?" you would probably answer, "He feeps, of course." You would answer thus because there exist in your mind such word-pairs as tell-teller, reap-reaper, write-writer, singsinger; and you would reason, perhaps unconsciously, that on the analogy of these forms the word feeper must have a parallel verb feep. Likewise, centuries ago, after the introduction of the nouns peddler, beggar, swindler, and editor into our language, speakers followed the same analogy and created the verbs peddle, beg, swindle, and edit. This process

is just the reverse of our customary method of word formation, whereby we begin with a verb like speak and, by adding the agent morpheme {ER n), form the noun speaker. The process is called back-formation. It may be defined as the formation of a word from one that looks like its derivative. An example is hedgehop, from the noun hedgehopper. Back-formation is an active source of new words today.

I. Folk Etymology

The tennis term let ball affords a good illustration. In this context let has retained the obsolete meaning of "prevented," common in the language of Shakespeare.¹ A let ball is one which has been prevented from taking its true course by touching the top of the net. It is an entirely different word from the let that means "allow." But a neophyte, hearing the word on the tennis court, may understand it as net, because /l/ and /n/ are not far apart in sound and net makes sense to him whereas let does not. Thus he may use the term net ball until corrected by a more knowledgeable player. Such a process--changing a word, in part or in whole, to make it more understandable and more like familiar words-is known as folk etymology.

J. Antonomasia

Antonomasia means the formation of a common noun, a verb, or an adjective from the name of a person or place. For example, the word frisbee comes from the Frisbie Bakery in Bridgewater, Connecticut, whose pie tins were used for a throwing game. The term vandal derives from the Vandals, a Germanic people who overran southern Europe 1500 years ago and sacked and looted Rome in the fifth century. Names from history and literature have given us many common nouns. A lover, for instance, may be called a romeo, a don juan, a casanova, or a gay lothario. If he is too quixotic, he may meet his waterloo at the hands of some sheba or jezebel.

K. Reduplication

Reduplication is the process of forming a new word by doubling a morpheme, usually with a change of vowel or initial consonant, as in poohpooh, tiptop, and hanky-panky. The basic, originating morpheme is most frequently the second half, like dilly-dally, but it may be the first half, like ticktock, or both halves, like singsong, or neither half, like boogie-woogie. Since the word reduplication has three meanings relevant to our discussion-the process, the result of the process (that is, the new word), and the element repeated-let us avoid confusion by calling these words "twin words."

Twin-words can be divided into three classes, leaving only a small residue of irregular forms.

1. The base morpheme is repeated without change.

Examples: clop-clop, tick-tick

This is the smallest class. The twin-words in this group are often onomatopoeic that is, they represent sounds, like gobble-gobble and chug-chug.

2. The base morpheme is repeated with a change of initial consonant.

Examples: fuddy-duddy, tootsie-wootsie, razzle-dazzle, roly-poly, teeny-weeny, heebie-jeebies, hootchy-kootchy.

3. The base morpheme is repeated with a change of vowel.

Examples: chitchat, tiptop, criss-cross.

The first vowel is usually the high front lax vowel /ɪ/, and the second is a low vowel /æ/, /a/, or /ɔ/.

Examples: zigzag, ticktock, pingpong