

Processes of Word Formation

Dr. Rafal Hassoon Obaid

It has been estimated that the English language contains more than a million words, of which fewer than half are included in unabridged dictionaries. It is natural to wonder where all these words came from. The answer is not difficult to find.

First of all, our language contains a core of words that have been a part of it as far back as we can trace its history, 5000-plus years. A few examples are these words: sun, man, foot, father, eat, fire, I, he, with, of.

Second, English has been a prodigious borrower of words from other languages throughout its history, and a vast number of borrowed words are now in our language. This has come about through invasions, immigration, exploration, trade, and other avenues of contact between English and some foreign language. Below are a few examples of these borrowings. In many cases a word may pass, by borrowing, through one or more languages before it enters English. A case in point is the Arabic plural noun hashshashin, hashish eaters, which entered French in the form assassin, and from French was borrowed into English.

A look at the etymologies in your desk dictionary--they are the part of each entry enclosed in brackets--will give you an idea of the amount of borrowing that has taken place in English and of the many languages that have contributed to make the English word-stock rich and full.

Apart from borrowing, English gets new words by means of easily definable processes employed by users of English. It is to these that we shall now turn our attention.

A. Compounding

Compounding is simply the joining of two or more words into a single word, as in hang glider, airstrip, cornflakes, busybody, downpour, cutoff, skywarn, alongside, breakfast, long-haired, devil-may-care, high school.

As the foregoing examples show, compounds may be written as one word, as a hyphenated word, or as two words. Occasionally it is hard to say whether or not a word is a compound; compare, for instance, despite with in spite of and instead of with in place of.

B. Derivation

Derivation is the forming of new words by combining derivational affixes or bound bases with existing words, as in disadvise, emplane, deplane, teleplay, ecosystem, coachdom, counselorship, re-ask. Words like these, some of which you have never heard before, are often formed in the heat of speaking or writing. You will note that they are immediately understandable because you know the meaning of the parts.

C. Invention

Now and then new words are totally invented, like kodak, nylon, dingbat, floosy, goof, quark, and blurb, but few of these find their way into the common vocabulary.

D. Echoism

Echoism is the formation of words whose sound suggests their meaning, like hiss and peewee. The meaning is usually a sound, either natural like the roar of a waterfall or artificial like the clang of a bell. But the meaning may also be the creature that produces the sound, like bobwhite. Examples: moan, click, murmur, quack, thunder, whisper, lisp, chickadee, bobolink. The vulgar "four-letter" words of English are largely echoic; and at the other end of the cultural scale are the echoic words called onomatopoeic in literary studies, which are frequent in poetry.

E. Clipping

Clipping means cutting off the beginning or the end of a word, or both, leaving a part to stand for the whole. The resultant form is called a clipped word. The jargon of the campus is filled with clipped words: lab, dorm, prof, exam, gym, prom, math, psych, mike, and countless others. As these examples suggest, the clipping of the end of a word is the most common, and it is mostly nouns that undergo this process. Clipping results in new free forms in the language and sometimes in the creation of new morphemes, like prof and mike. Less common than the back-clipped words, like the foregoing, are those words that lose their forepart, like plane and phone.

Only a very few words have been formed by both fore and aft clipping. Four common ones are flu, Liz, still (apparatus for distilling hard liquor), and fridge.

Clipped words are formed not only from individual words but from grammatical units, such as modifier plus noun. Paratrooper, for example, is a clipped form of parachutist trooper. In cases like this it is often the first part that is shortened while the second part remains intact. Also, two successive words may be clipped to form one new word, as in sitcom (situation comedy).