

Word Formation Processes

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Objectives

This chapter aims at developing your knowledge of the word formation processes that exist in the English language.

Upon the completion of this activity you will be able to identify different mechanisms involved in the creation of new words.

Introduction

Have we already seen any word formation processes in this course? Take a minute to reflect upon this question.

I Derivational Affixation

Derivational affixation is one of the most productive word formation processes in the English language. It consists in adding a *derivational affix* to the base.

Example

For example, we can use the word 'active' as a base to create a number of other words by adding different derivational affixes:

activ**ate**

activ**ation**

activ**ity**

activ**ism**

activ**ist**

We have discussed this phenomenon in detail in chapter 2, so we are not going to dwell on it here.

II Compounding

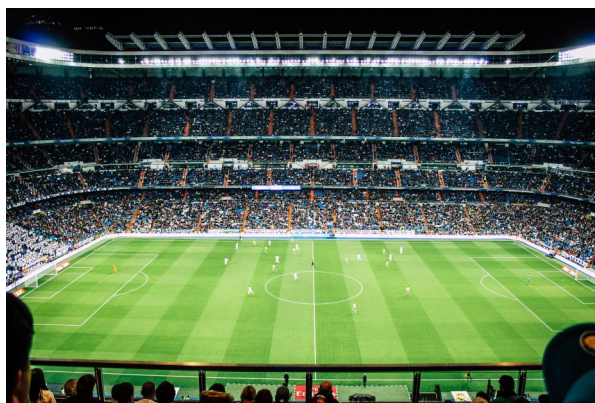
1. Definition

Have a look at the following words:

SEASICK

FOOTBALL

Do they share any common features in their internal structure?



2. Discussion

You have, probably, noticed that both words consist of two elements:

SEA + SICK → SEASICK

FOOT + BALL → FOOTBALL

Both elements can function as words by themselves (sea, sick, foot, ball). Therefore, these are *free root morphemes*, and not affixes.

Definition

Words that consist of more than one root morpheme are called *compounds*. The corresponding word formation process is known as *compounding*.

Warning

There are words whose structure is both complex and compound, which means that they contain two or more root morphemes as well as affixes:

WRONG (root) + DO (root) + ER (suffix) → WRONGDOER

HOT (root) + BLOOD (root) + ED (suffix) + NESS (suffix) → HOT-BLOODEDNESS

Such words are called *compound-complex*.

3. Criteria for Distinguishing Compounds

Roots in English are mostly free, and there are *very few inflections*. How can we tell, then, if a sequence of roots is a compound word or a phrase?

Compare:

a green house



A Green House

a greenhouse



A Greenhouse

Which of these lexical items is a phrase and which one is a compound?

Linguists have come up with a number of criteria* that help to differentiate between these two phenomena.

💡 *Fundamental:CRITERION 1: Stress*

Compounds in English are generally *stressed on the first constituent*, whereas phrases are stressed on the last one or carry a level stress:

a 'greenhouse vs. a green 'house

a 'blackboard vs. a black 'board

BUT! The position of stress in isolation may differ from that when such words are pronounced in a sentence (e. g. if some contrast is being implied - see the picture below). As a result, taken alone this criterion is not very reliable.

They live in a 'green house (not a yellow one)!



💡 *Fundamental:CRITERION 2 : Spelling*

Compounds tend to be spelled either as one word or hyphenated:

greenhouse

snowman

in-depth

father-in-law

BUT! Spelling in English is inconsistent. The same sequence of lexical items can occur in all three variants:

green house

green-house

greenhouse

Is it a compound or a phrase?

💡 *Fundamental:CRITERION 3: Syntax*

1. *Inseparability*

A complex form is a compound if *no other element can be inserted between the two constituents*:

Doesn't this *green stone house* look magical? (*a phrase*)



Doesn't this *stone greenhouse* look magical? (*a compound*)



2. *The inability to modify the first element of a compound*

a *very green house*



a *very greenhouse**



3. *The inability to replace the second element of a nominal compound with one*

I saw a pink house and *a green one*.



I saw a grey house and *a green one*.*



Unfortunately, this criterion works only for nouns.

💡 *Fundamental:CRITERION 4: Semantics*

The *meaning* of a compound is *unpredictable* and cannot be deduced from the meanings of its constituents.

A greenhouse is not a house that is green, but rather a specific type structure used for growing plants.

A rainbow is not a bow made of rain, but rather a natural phenomenon famous for its colours.



⊕ *Complement: A Topic for Discussion*

Read the following sentence and look at the picture. Is the lexical item '*flower pot*' a phrase or a compound here? Provide your arguments.

Plant carrots in a flower pot.



4. Exercice

[solution n°1 p.33]

Divide the following words into *simple*, *complex* and *compound*:

- firsh tank
- cornflakes
- overcoat
- glorious
- bread
- movement
- brush
- reach
- unable

lipstick

compound	complex	simple

5. Exercice

[solution n°2 p.33]

Match the following words to create compounds. Then use these compounds to fill in the gaps below:

1. *rattle, sun, moon, ear, day, fire, water, cross;*
2. *lobe, melon, snake, dream, walk, flower, light, works.*

1. She was wearing a matched pair of earrings, one earring on each .
2. If you are caught with while celebrating the New Year, you could be fined up to \$2,500.
3. You can also freeze cubes of to use as edible ice cubes on a hot day.
4. Ben Barnes loves to and to live in his own world of fantasies.
5. Before modern landscape lighting, gardeners relied on to make plants and outdoor spaces come alive at night.
6. bites are rarely fatal.
7. Plant seeds in spring after the danger of frost has passed.
8. I have seen cars speed through that .

III Conversion

Definition

Conversion is a word formation process in which a word is *assigned to a new word class without any change in form*.

Example

They were given a **green** light. (*adjectif*)

They wanted to **green** the neighbourhood. (*verb*)

The kid pushed aside the **greens** on the plate. (*noun*)

The lexical item 'green' in these sentences functions as different parts of speech. Its form, however, does not change. This word formation process is very productive in modern English.

Provided below are the most frequent types of conversion.

Noun → Verb conversion:

chair a meeting

mask intentions

air opinions

stage a protest

Verb → Noun conversion:

be in the **know**

provide **help**

in one **go**

give something a **try**

Adjective → Verb conversion:

obscure the facts

smooth the hair

Note: Diatonic Words

There is a special case of conversion which preserves the sounds, but *changes the stress*^{*}. It is a relatively recent pattern of derivation without suffixation.

The last syllable is stressed in the verbs: convict, present, refuse, torment, rebel, record, permit etc.

The first syllable is stressed in the corresponding nouns: convict, present, refuse, torment, rebel, record, permit etc.

⊕ Extra

All the previously discussed word formation processes are **regular***: we use already existing items (affixes or words) to create new lexical items according to more or less predictable patterns.



Some processes generate new words in more unexpected and creative ways, being a **highly individual personal matter**. In such cases components of the new items are not easily recognizable or predictable.

IV Exercise

[solution n°3 p.33]

Click on words that were created by conversion:

1. She recently texted to tell me of something one child was doing.
2. My parents went to this show and sometime during the show my father called me and said " Brian is on five tonight! "
3. Andrea tells us about the emotional ups and downs of her journey and what it means to have a child.
4. When I started, I literally had to enter my points (which didn't have much money in it).

V Coinage

Definition

Coinage is creation of a new word without basing it on some pre-existing word or part of a word. Such formations are *arbitrary*.

Example

The following words* appeared relatively recently in the English language. They cannot be divided into recognisable meaningful units - they were created from scratch (**coined**).

FLABBERGAST = to amaze

BLURB = a short publicity notice (on a book jacket)

BYTE = a unit of computer information

DITSY or DITZY = silly and not reliable

Completely new words **often start as trade-marks**:

NYLON = a strong artificial substance that is used in making plastic and cloth

TEFLON = a type of plastic often put on pans to prevent food from sticking to them

SKYPE = to communicate with sb using the Skype software

VI Blending

Definition

In **blending**^{*}, parts of two familiar words are yoked together (usually the first part of one word and the second part of the other) to produce a word which combines the meanings and sound of the old ones.

Example

SMOG = *smoke* + *fog*

MOTEL = *motor* + *hotel*

New **technical terms** are often created by **blending**.

MEDICARE = *medical* + *care*

MEDICAID = *medical* + *aid*

URINALYSIS = *urine* + *analysis*



Extra

Can you recognize the initial words in the following blends? You will find the answer at the end of this chapter.

CAMCORDER

SPORK

MOPED

INTERNET

FORTNIGHT

Blending

JEGGINGS

EMOTICON

VII Clipping

Definition

Clipping* is a way of shortening words or phrases by clipping off some part of a word and throwing away the rest. Technically speaking, such clippings are not 'new' words, but stylistic variants of existing words.

Example

FLU (from *infl*uenza)

MOB (from *mobile* vulgus 'fickle commoners')

ZOO (from *zoological* gardens)

AD or **ADVERT** (from *advert*isement)

QUIZ (from *inquis*itive)

VIII Exercice

[solution n°4 p.34]

Match words on the left to their clippings on the right:

inquisitive gasoline business mobile vulgus influenza handkerchief

mob	quiz	biz	flu	gas	hanky
-----	------	-----	-----	-----	-------

IX Exercice

[solution n°5 p.34]

Use the following clippings to fill in the gaps: **mob, quiz, biz, flu, gas, hanky**.

1. Would you encourage your kidsto take over your family [] ?
2. On her way there she sneezed 4 times into her [] and blew her nose.
3. He got attacked by the angry [] after he had stabbed a young man.
4. We drove for 24 hours to Sydney in one go and only stopped to fill up with [] on the way.
5. Then you can check your understanding with a [] .
6. Colds and [] are two notable viral infections for which some doctors send their patients to the drugstore.

X Back-Formation

Definition

If the part of the word that is clipped off is a recognizable affix, the process is called **back-formation**. Basically, this process is opposite to the derivational affixation.

Example

The American Heritage Dictionary* (cited in Donka & Stockwell) has the following discussion of the origin of the word 'edit' in English.

Edit is not the source of editor, as dive is of diver, the expected derivational pattern; rather, the reverse is the case. Edit in the sense 'to prepare for publication,' first recorded in 1793, comes from editor, first recorded in 1712 in the sense 'one who edits.' There is more to the story, however. Edit also comes partly from the French word éditer, 'to publish, edit,' first recorded in 1784. In the case of edit, two processes, borrowing and back-formation, occurred either independently or together, perhaps one person originally taking edit from French, another from editor, and yet a third from both.

A dictionary entry from the American Heritage Dictionary

According to this dictionary entry the verb 'edit' in English is very likely to be the result of back-formation. It was created from the noun 'editor' by removing the suffix -or.

Other examples of back-formation:

burglar → to burgle

conversat*ion* → to converse

typewriter → to type-write

baby-sitt*er* → to babysit

XI Abbreviations

1. Acronyms

Definition

Acronyms are a special type of shortening which takes the first sound from each of several words and makes a new word from those initial sounds. If the resulting word is *pronounced like any other word* it is a **true acronym**.

Example

NASA (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.31*) (**N**ational **A**eronautics and **S**pace **A**dmistration)

NATO (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.31*) (**N**orth **A**tlantic **T**reaty **O**rganization)

LASER (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.31*) (**L**ight **A**mplification by **S**timulated **E**mission of **R**adiation)

SNAFU (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.31*) (**S**ituation **N**ormal **A**ll **F****ed **U**p)

RADAR (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.31*) (**r**adio **d**etecting **a**nd **r**anging)

Follow the links and listen to the pronunciation of these words.

2. Imitative or Reverse Acronyms

Sometimes the creators start with a word they want as their name and then they work from its letters to find words which represent something like the idea they want to be associated with. It results in **reverse acronyms**.

CORE (**C**ongress of **R**acial **E**quality)

NOW (**N**ational **O**rganization of **W**omen)

MADD (**M**others **A**gainst **D**runk **D**river)

AID (**A**gency for **I**nternational **D**evelopment)

AIM (**A**merican **I**ndian **M**ovement)

HOPE (**H**ealth **O**pportunity for **P**eople **E**verywhere)

Extra

Choose a short word that appeals to you and think of what its first letters might stand for. Post your ideas in the forum.

3. Initialisms

Definition

If the **letters** which make up the abbreviation are **individually pronounced**, such abbreviations are called **initialisms**.

Example

COD (cash on **d**elivery)

BBC (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.31*) (**B**ritish **B**roadcasting **C**ompany)

FBI (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.31*) (the **F**ederal **B**ureau of **I**nvestigation)

USA (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.31*) (the **U**nited **S**tates of **A**merica)

IRS (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.31*) (**I**nternal **R**evenue **S**ervice)

DMV (*cf. p.*) (*cf. p.32*) (**D**ivision of **M**otor **V**ehicles)

Follow the links and listen to the pronunciation of these words. Compare them to acronyms from the previous section.

XII Eponyms

Eponyms are new words based on names.

Example

WATT: a unit of power named after *James Watt*

NOBELIUM: a chemical element named after *Alfred Nobel*

SANDWICH: after British nobleman, *the Earl of Sandwich*

DAHLIA: after *Anders Dahl*, a Swedish botanist

CARDIGAN: after *Earl of Cardigan*

BIKINI: the islands where an atom bomb was tested in 1946; presumably gets its meaning from the shock that the minimal beach-wear originally produced

XIII Exercice

[solution n°6 p.34]

Fill in the gaps using the following **EPONYMS**: *watt, nobelium, sandwich, dahlia, cardigan, bikini*.

1. [] plants bring life and beauty back to your landscape in late summer.
2. The 290 [] motor is what makes this mixer a powerhouse.
3. The first claim for the discovery of the element [] was made in Sweden in 1957.
4. But in Canada in winter, you will NOT get vitamin D from October through March, even if it is warm and sunny and you go sit outside in a [] .
5. I wore it with a red cashmere [] and red shoes.
6. You're all invited over to Morgan's house for a complementary fish [] .

XIV Onomatopoeic Words

Definition

Onomatopoeic words have come from efforts to *imitate the sounds* of what they stand for.

Example

BANG

BUZZ

COCK-(A)-DOODLE-DOO (to crow)

MOO (to bellow)

BAA (to bleat)

BOW-WOW (to bark)

OINK (to grunt)

XV Reduplication

Definition

In **reduplication**, part or all of a word is **repeated**.

Example

- Based **rhyming**
ITSY-BITSY or **ITTY-BITTY** (very small)
HOITY-TOITY (elevated in style or manner)
HELTER-SKELTER (in a hurry and without planning)
- Based on **alliteration**, i.e. start with the same sound
MISHMASH (a confused mixture of things)
SHILLY-SHALLY (indecisive behaviour)

XVI Answers

CAMCORDER= *camera* + *recorder*

SPORK= *spoon* + *fork*

MOPED= *motor* + *pedal*

INTERNET= *international* + *network*

FORTNIGHT= *fourteen* + *night*

JEGGINGS= *jeans* + *leggings*

EMOTICON= *emotion* + *icon*

XVII Exercice

[solution n°7 p.35]

Identify the word formation process for the words in bold:

- a. It almost happened in 2009 but for a technical **snafu**.
- b. It sounds interesting. Let's give it a **try**.
- c. Yesterday we went to the **zoo**.
- d. Eat up your **sandwich**.
- e. The dogs sprang **helter-skelter** from the wood.
- f. In March flower seeds may be sown in the **greenhouse**.
- g. The restaurant is open for dinner and **brunch**.
- h. There was a loud **bang**, which I thought was a gunshot.

Complementary resources

>

[cf.]

>

[cf.]

>

[cf.]

>

[cf.]

>

[cf.]

>

[cf.]

>

[cf.]

>

[cf.]

>

[cf.]

>

[cf.]

Exercises solution

> Solution n° 1

Exercice p. 11

Divide the following words into *simple*, *complex* and *compound*:

compound	complex	simple
lipstick	movement	bread
cornflakes	glorious	brush
overcoat	unable	reach
fish tank		

> Solution n° 2

Exercice p. 12

Match the following words to create compounds. Then use these compounds to fill in the gaps below:

1. *rattle, sun, moon, ear, day, fire, water, cross;*
2. *lobe, melon, snake, dream, walk, flower, light, works.*

1. She was wearing a matched pair of earrings, one earring on each earlobe.
2. If you are caught with fireworks while celebrating the New Year, you could be fined up to \$2,500.
3. You can also freeze cubes of watermelon to use as edible ice cubes on a hot day.
4. Ben Barnes loves to daydream and to live in his own world of fantasies.
5. Before modern landscape lighting, gardeners relied on moonlight to make plants and outdoor spaces come alive at night.
6. Rattlesnake bites are rarely fatal.
7. Plant sunflower seeds in spring after the danger of frost has passed.
8. I have seen cars speed through that crosswalk.

> **Solution n°3**

Exercise p. 15

Click on words that were created by conversion:

1. She recently **texted** to tell me of **something** one **clod** was **do3g**.
2. My **pa20ts** went to this **sh4w** and sometime **during** the show my father **ca7ed** me and said " Brian is on **f8e** tonight! "
3. A **n18ea** tells **13** about the emotional **u9s** and **do10s** of t**12r** journey and what it **me11s** to have a **child**.
4. When I **st15ed**, I **lit19ly** had to **er14y** my **po16ts** (which didn't have much **m17ey** in it).

> **Solution n°4**

Exercise p. 20

Match words on the left to their clippings on the right:

mob	quiz	biz	flu	gas	hanky
mobile	inquisitive	business	influenza	gasoline	handkerchief

> **Solution n°5**

Exercise p. 21

Use the following clippings to fill in the gaps: **mob, quiz, biz, flu, gas, hanky**.

1. Would you encourage your kidsto take over your family **biz**?
2. On her way there she sneezed 4 times into her **hanky** and blew her nose.
3. He got attacked by the angry **mob** after he had stabbed a young man.
4. We drove for 24 hours to Sydney in one go and only stopped to fill up with **gas** on the way.
5. Then you can check your understanding with a **quiz**.
6. Colds and **flu** are two notable viral infections for which some doctors send their patients to the drugstore.

> **Solution n°6**

Exercise p. 26

Fill in the gaps using the following **EPONYMS: watt, nobelium, sandwich, dahlia, cardigan, bikini**.

1. **Dahlia** plants bring life and beauty back to your landscape in late summer.
2. The 290 **watt** motor is what makes this mixer a powerhouse.
3. The first claim for the discovery of the element **nobelium** was made in Sweden in 1957.
4. But in Canada in winter, you will NOT get vitamin D from October through March, even if it is warm and sunny and you go sit outside in a **bikini**.

5. I wore it with a red cashmere **cardigan** and red shoes.
6. You're all invited over to Morgan's house for a complementary fish **sandwich**.

> **Solution n°7**

Exercise p. 30

Identify the word formation process for the words in bold:

- a. It almost happened in 2009 but for a technical **snafu**. **acronym**
- b. It sounds interesting. Let's give it a **try**. **conversion**
- c. Yesterday we went to the **zoo**. **clipping**
- d. Eat up your **sandwich**. **eponym**
- e. The dogs sprang **helter-skelter** from the wood. **reduplication**
- f. In March flower seeds may be sown in the **greenhouse**. **compound**
- g. The restaurant is open for dinner and **brunch**. **blending**
- h. There was a loud **bang**, which I thought was a gunshot. **onomatopoeia**

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