
Changes to the lexicon

INTRODUCTION

Words are the most observable part of any language, and people are generally fascinated by curious facts having to do with the ins and outs of the lexicon (or the vocabulary) of their language. There are websites devoted to the “most irritating words”, “favourite words”, “dead words”, “new words”, “peculiar words” and “clichés” – and many other topics, all revealing people’s interest in vocabulary. There is always considerable media attention when dictionaries announce their word of the year. Articles flourish on the meaning of the winner, its origin, and even its worthiness of the award. There is nowhere near the same excitement with other aspects of the language; there were no breaking news stories when linguists announced developments affecting the conjunction *because* (e.g. *I’ve been missing out on sleep because the “Breaking Bad” series* or *I missed the ending because I fell asleep*). Dictionary editors are almost the new celebrities, answering questions like: What is the longest word in the language? Is there a word to describe someone who drinks their own bathwater? How many words do speakers know? And perhaps the thorniest question of all – when does a new expression enter the dictionary?

Dictionary making was much more straightforward for early lexicographers, who sourced their new words almost exclusively from books. It was formal written language that typically made it into dictionaries. The words were written on cards each time a new instance of their usage was discovered, and when there was a substantial collection of cards, it could be established that a word was in general usage. So, these were largely respectable words, and anything else that managed to sneak through would be well and truly branded (originally with symbols such as the dagger (†), the double dagger (‡), the asterisk (*) and even the fleur-de-lis (♣), and later with more precise usage labels such as “low”, “(im)proper”, “ludicrous”, “barbarous” or “vulgar”, as appeared in Samuel Johnson’s 1755 dictionary). These days, it is all very different. Lexicographers have to consider an array of different text types, including newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, menus, memos, TV and radio broadcasts and, of course, emails, chat-room discussions and blogs. And the approach today is more democratic and more descriptive, even though, as works of reference, dictionaries inevitably have an element of prescription (and dictionary users may interpret descriptive usage symbols or labels as normative, turning lexicographers – whether they like it or not – into censors).

The internet, particularly social networking platforms, makes it much easier for dictionary makers to track a word and to test its currency, but it is also the trigger for huge numbers of new words to be created and the reason that they are taken up so

quickly. Just like funny videos, celebrity gossip and other internet “memes”, within a matter of hours they have worldwide visibility. There are hundreds of neologisms specific to the internet – these include dignified specialist terms such as *software*, *network*, and *interface* as well as slang such as *twitterholic*, *twaddiction*, *celebritweet/twit* and *twitterati* – to give a few of the “tweologisms” that Twitter has spawned. People love to play with language, and when communicating electronically they have free rein (with an alleged average of 500 million tweets each day, Twitter has considerable capacity not only to spawn new expressions but to spread them, as do Facebook, Instagram and other social networking platforms).

So, how do we create new words? Rarely are they created from scratch, and it is hard to find examples of true coinages (new expressions that haven’t been built on pre-existing elements). The technical word *quark* is often cited as an example of a coinage. It first appeared in James Joyce’s book *Finnegans Wake* and was later taken over by physicists to describe some sort of elementary particle of matter. It’s not based on *quark* ‘the call of a gull’ and doesn’t seem to have any links with any previous existing word. Such examples are rare. Usually they involve proper names and so are peripheral to the language. But often there are lexical associations lurking in the background of even these coinages. Take *Kodak*. George Eastman, who came up with the name and the product, claims it is not based on any other word – the inspiration was simply his love of <k>, which he described as “a strong, incisive sort of letter”. However, Eastman’s biographer, reports that this fondness probably came from his mother’s name Kilbourn, so the two appearances of this letter in *Kodak* are not entirely accidental.

This chapter is concerned with etymology, the area of study that examines the history of the forms and meanings of words such as *Kodak* (not to be confused with entomology, the branch of zoology that studies insects). While Chapter 3 addresses aspects to do with the meaning of words, here we cover the major methods languages have of creating expressions. Though our examples come largely from English, we emphasize here that these processes are found in languages around the world, although there are usually differences in significance and liveliness when it comes to word creation in individual languages. We will also consider the other end of the life cycle of words – their disappearance.

2.1 GAINING WORDS – LEXICAL ADDITION

These days dictionary updates comprise a hotch potch of sedate terms-of-art (*pharmacovigilance* ‘the monitoring of medical drugs after they have been licensed for use’ and *in silico* ‘(of scientific research) conducted by means of computer simulation’), boisterous slang (*amazeballs* ‘extremely good’ and *FML* ‘fuck my life’) and lexical frippery (*spit take* ‘an act of spitting out liquid while being drunk in reaction to something funny or surprising’ and *douchebaggery* ‘obnoxious or contemptible behaviour’). Some entries appear so newly minted you might wonder at the wisdom of the editors in including them at all (*adorbs* ‘adorable’ and *ship* ‘to endorse a romantic relationship’). But we know that these expressions have been scrutinized

within an inch of their lives – they wouldn't be there unless they "had legs" (to quote John Simpson, former editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED)). Small wonder people are so fascinated by words.

People love creating new ones. In fact, a recent team of scientists has discovered that learning the meaning of new words can stimulate exactly those same pleasure circuits in our brain as sex, gambling, drugs and eating (the pleasure associated region called the ventral striatum). *Neologasm* says it all – defined by the *Urban Dictionary* as 'the intensely pleasurable sensations generated by using, hearing or coining a new word or phrase (that doesn't suck)'. *Leximania* starts in childhood and stays with us as we grow up. The majority of these creations are one-offs, spur-of-the-moment and short-lived. But many people end up sending their inventions off to dictionary editors, in the hopes they might make it onto their lists. However, for this to happen there needs to be some indication of general usage. *Telecrastination* 'the act of always letting the phone ring at least twice before you pick it up, even when you're only six inches away', *glarpo* 'the juncture between ear and skull where pencils and pens are stored' and *sloovers* 'the remnants of soap too small to use, but too big to throw away', like all of comedian Rich Hall's creations, fill a need, but they haven't yet made it – they remain *sniglets* 'words that should be in the dictionary, but aren't' (another of Rich Hall's creations).

Hothouse words and mountweazels

Dictionary makers have also been guilty of leximania. "Hothouse words" are ghost words that have never really existed but are the creations of lexicographers. Many hothouse sprouts were cultivated in early English dictionaries, especially during the 17th century. How reupting for compilers to invent words, plop them into the dictionary and watch them grow. Perhaps they felt such erudite sounding words as anatiferous 'producing ducks' and decacuminated 'having the top cut off' should exist, or perhaps they wanted to show off their knowledge of Greek and Latin. No doubt some were also planted to catch plagiarists. It was commonplace for lexicographers to pilfer entries from other works. In fact, Jonathon Green describes plagiarism as a "lexicographical necessity" – it wouldn't make sense to start a dictionary from scratch. And once in the protective environment of a dictionary, these creations often survive. Authority after authority repeats the erroneous word until no one would dare doubt its provenance. Quite simply, it must be a word because it's in the dictionary.

Hothouse words are a type of "mountweazel", the general term for fictitious entries in reference works, including encyclopaedias and even maps. The name comes from a famous bogus entry in the *New Columbia Encyclopedia* in 1975 for Lillian Virginia Mountweazel (an American fountain designer and photographer who accidentally blew herself up while researching an article for the magazine Combustibles). In the words of one of the encyclopaedia

editors, “[i]t was an old tradition in encyclopedias to put in a fake entry to protect your copyright [...] If someone copied Lillian, then we’d know they’d stolen from us” (*New Yorker*, 29 August 2005). From then on, *mountweazel* came to describe any sort of ‘ghost or false entry’. And it seems that modern dictionaries still occasionally use a *mountweazel* to flush out cheats. One famous made-up word, *esquivalience*, appeared in the 2001 edition of the *New Oxford American Dictionary*. The word was (appropriately) glossed: ‘the willful avoidance of one’s official responsibilities [...] late 19th cent.: perhaps from French *esquiver*, “dodge, slink away”’

In 1991 John Algeo completed a study of new words over a 50-year period (1941–1991), sourcing his neologisms from the collection “Among the New Words” that appears each year in *American Speech*, the journal of the American Dialect Society. For each of the major types of word formation processes, he found the following percentage of new words:

Type	Percentage
Compounding	40
Affixation	28
Shifting	17
Shortening	8
Blending	5
Borrowing	2
Creating from scratch	below 0.5

This study shows affixation and compounding as the major sources for the new words, and blending and borrowing to be insignificant. As we discuss these processes, consider whether you think Algeo’s breakdown still holds true. (And in the exercises we suggest you replicate the study and find out.)

2.1.1 Compounding

Compounding is a word formation process that is found extensively in languages around the world; indeed, Laurie Bauer (1983) claims there is no known language that does not have compounds. The process involves the combination of two (occasionally more) free-standing forms; for example *hot dog*, *dog-collar* and *neckbeard*. In some languages this closeness is easy to spot because compounds are written as one word. But as these examples show, English compounds often appear as two words (with or without a hyphen). But you can still hear the “one-wordedness” because of the main stress on the first element. It is easier to illustrate this with an example that can occur both as a compound and as an ordinary string of two free words.

Take *hot* and *dog*. We can combine them and put the stress on the first element only (we use underlining to indicate stress here) as in hot dog. In this case it has the

quite specific meaning of a frankfurter served in a long soft bread roll'. On the other hand, if we put stress on both parts as in hot dog, then it refers to any old canine, quadruped that just happens to be hot. This example also illustrates a second property of compounds; the meaning is often more specific than just the sum of the two parts, and it may often also become figurative. A dog-collar, for instance, is not just the kind of collar that a dog would wear; it can also refer to the white collar worn by some ordained clergy. Some compounds have highly idiosyncratic meanings – bag lady, spaghetti western and black sheep. Again their unified meanings show that we are thinking of these expressions as single units.

Often it's the newer compounds, like air punch 'act of thrusting a fist up into the air' and side-eye 'a side-long glance of disapproval', that appear as separate words or hyphenated; well-aged compounds, like breakfast and cupboard, usually appear as single words. Many now write hotdog solid. While there are some general guidelines for how to write compounds, it remains a tricky (and often disputed) aspect of English. Neckbeard 'growth of hair on a man's neck' is a recent word, but it is written solid. The semi-soft frozen dessert icecream has been around since the 1600s, but the parts are still normally separated using spaces or hyphens, as ice-cream or ice cream. Other languages are more consistent. In the German writing system the parts of the compound are joined to form one word (sometimes even with a connecting element between the parts, as in Verbesserungsvorschlag 'suggestion for improvement' from Verbesserung 'improvement' + s + Vorschlag 'suggestion').

The "one-wordedness" of compounds also becomes obvious when we look at the way they behave in the grammar. For example, the compound still-life has a normal plural form (still-lives) compared to the irregular plural of life (lives). Similarly, people would say jack-in-the-boxes, rather than jacks, in-the-box, which means they are thinking of jack-in-the-box as a fused word. (Note how the heavy stress falls on the first syllable and the following parts are all squashed together: Jack-in-the-box.)

Compounding has always been a major word formation process in Germanic; 1,000 years ago it was one of the most important sources of new lexical items for English, and there are some wonderful examples, especially in poetry (bān 'bone' + hūs 'house' = 'skeleton', brēost 'breast' + cofa 'cove, chamber' = 'heart, affections'). New creations are still appearing: seagull manager 'a manager who flies in, makes a lot of noise, craps on everything and then leaves' (*Urban Dictionary*); hot mess 'when someone's thoughts or their looks are in a state of disarray, but they maintain an undeniable attractiveness'; humblebrag 'a supposedly modest or self-deprecating/critical statement but the actual purpose is to boast'.

The longest German word – a record set to be broken

The opportunity for compounding in German makes for some very long words, sometimes known as *Bandwurmwörter* 'tapeworm words' (e.g. the kitchen device known as the *Eierschalensollbruchstellenverursacher* lit. 'egg-shell-necessity-break-spot-causer'). Indeed, in his 1880 essay "The

Awful German Language”, Mark Twain describes compounding as “one of the most notable features” of German; he concludes that “[s]ome German words are so long that they have a perspective”. One with a particularly impressive perspective is Germany’s officially longest word: *Rindfleischetikettierungsüberwachungsaufgabenübertragungsgesetz* (lit. ‘cow-meat-labelling-monitoring-responsibility-delegation-law’). The word died when the law was repealed after the European Union lifted a recommendation to carry out tests on healthy cattle for BSE (*bovine spongiform encephalopathy*, the technical name for ‘mad cow disease’, and itself not a bad compound). In the *Telegraph* report of the news piece (27 July 2013), the journalist observed: “In theory, a German word can be infinitely long. Unlike in English, an extra concept can simply be added to the existing word indefinitely.”

He’s correct about there being no theoretical limit to the length of German compounds. *Eierschalensollbruchstellenverursachergerät* shows *Gerät* ‘device’ tacked on the end, and we can keep doing this. But what about English? Certainly some varieties of English produce extremely complex clumps of words; chemical compounds and nasty lung diseases (e.g. *pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis* ‘a lung disease caused by inhaling very fine dust’), as well as compounds found in super-literate varieties like Bureaucratese (e.g. *prototype crisis shelter development plans, occupational choice-vocational interest congruency*). And in English, as in German, there is also no actual limit to the length of these “alphabetical processions” (Twain’s description). English has *anti-missile missiles* and even *anti-ballistic missile defence countermeasures* ‘strategic actions to evade anti-ballistic missiles’, but when a missile is deployed against *anti-missile missiles*, we have *anti-anti-missile-missile missiles*. And we can keep playing this game (as comics have shown), as long as we have one more *missile* than *anti-* (otherwise, there wouldn’t be anything to blow up).

Theoretically, words and parts of words can combine and recombine in this way to form an infinite number of different words. German and English here illustrate the structural complexity and creativity that distinguish our communicative behaviour from that of animals. The infinite capacity to express and understand meaning is probably not found in the language of any other species (see Pinker 2000).

2.1.2 Affixation

Affixation is a similar process to compounding except that it involves parts of words that can’t stand alone. They include prefixes that are added at the beginning (*un-*, *mis-* and *re-* as in *unhappy*, *misfortune* and *reapply*), suffixes that are added at the end (*-ish*, *-ness* and *-ic* as in *blackish*, *happiness* and *linguistic*) and (though rare) infixes that occur somewhere in the middle of the stem (Homer Simpson’s *-ma-* infix in words such as *edumacation*, *sophistimacated* and *viomalin* – the inspiration

for “Homeric infixation” probably comes from expressions like *whatchamacallit* and *thingamabob*).

Affixes come and go. English has a long history of having fun with infixes and a very early example is *-de-* (originally mock French) in *flibberdegibbet* ‘evil spirit’, *grizzledemundy* ‘grinning stupid person’ and *slubberdegullion* ‘miserable worthless wretch’. But these words are now found only in literature, and the infix is no longer useful. In comparison, some other affixes become highly productive and achieve almost voguish popularity. The prefix *Mc-* has now severed all ties from the fast-food giant McDonalds to give us new (disparaging) expressions such as *McJob* ‘unstimulating, low paid jobs with few prospects’ (the first *McCoinage*), *McBesity* ‘fatness relating to the consumption of junk food’, *McMansions* ‘housing developments made up of large, cookie-cutter houses’, *Baldy McMullet* ‘mullet worn with very little or no hair on the front and sides’, *McGarbage* ‘waste created by disposable dishes, cutlery and packaging’, *McBooks* ‘quickly produced mass-market books’, *McMovies*, *McShopping*, *McMedicine*, *McPrisons* and even *McGod* ‘the god of TV evangelists’ (not all will survive, but the flourishing of such creations shows the success of the affix). Another new prefix, *uber-* ‘super, mega’ (from German), is churning out neologisms – *ubergeek*, *ubermodel*, *uberfan* and *uberdork* are just some.

Some affixes have died out completely and survive only in relic form; *and-* ‘against’ is fossilized in a word like *answer*. Others may no longer be productive but survive intact in words in common usage; *-th* was once used to form abstract nouns like *stealth*, *filth*, *wealth* and *truth*. Still others appear to move in and out of fashion; the old suffix *-dom* was raised from the dead in the last century, and new forms are being created all the time: *riddledom*, *filmdom*, *moviedom*, *blokedom*, *hackerdom*, *professordom*, *parentdom*, *stuffed-shirtom* and *lawnmowerdom* are just a few of the around 300 (currently appearing in lists such as *Wiktionary*). Some of these may be one-off creations (or “nonce” words), but they attest to the liveliness of the suffix.

2.1.3 Backformation

Backformation is the opposite strategy to affixation. It can happen that words exist with prefixes and suffixes, but not without them – so speakers *backform* them (*backform* has been created in this way from *backformation*). *Empath* ‘person or being with the paranormal ability to perceive the feelings of another’ is a recent creation from *empathetic*. In two-player games (such as chess or backgammon), the word *ply* (from *reply*) is sometimes used for a turn that is taken by one of the players. This process has given English many of its standard words, especially verbs like *burgle*, *shoplift*, *babysit*, *edit*, *afflict*, *enthuse*, *laze*, *aggress*, *grovel*, *televise*, *manhandle*, *eavesdrop*, *househunt* and *jell*.

In some of these cases, speakers have removed something they believe to be an affix (but it isn’t) to create the new word. A fairly recent example is the verb *to verse* (as in *England is versing Australia*), where speakers have reanalysed the word *versus* as the verb form *verses*. So they have removed what looks to be a verb ending to create a new verb. Such backformations are more likely to occur with very strongly entrenched patterns, and they also have the effect of filling an apparent void – if

there is a noun *butler* then there should be a verb *to butle* (in fact there once was, but it didn't survive). In the same way, the word *to beg* was created from *beggar*, the final *-ar* wrongly interpreted as the same *-er* suffix as in *bake*, *baker* (the word *beggar* comes from Beghard, a member of a medieval Christian brotherhood).

2.1.4 Conversion

Conversion (or shifting, as it is labelled in Algeo's chart) changes one part of speech to another without anything being added; for example the new verb *to toilet-paper* 'to cover (a building, trees etc.) with toilet paper'. In English, conversion usually involves the major word classes: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The most common conversions are:

verb → noun (*a guess; a call; a think; a read; an ask*);
 noun → verb (*to bottle; to bridge; to trash; to network; to leaflet*);
 adjective → verb (*to better; to empty; to open; to total [a car]*);
 adjective → noun (*a roast; a weekly; a regular; a given; a nasty*).

Conversion is extremely productive in languages like English because the basic form of words is identical and so they can move with ease between different classes. There are even examples of conversion from minor word classes like prepositions and conjunctions. The prepositions *up* and *down* can transform into verbs (*to up the stakes / to down tools*), nouns (*on the up / to have a down on someone*), adjectives (*he's up today / a down experience*) and adverbs (*to go up and down*).

Conversion is more difficult in languages whose words carry grammatical affixes. Though English and German are close relatives, German conversion is restricted on account of the fact that words have retained more inflections. The most common conversions involve creating nouns from basic verbs; for example the noun *das Sprechen* 'the act of speaking' from the verb *sprechen* 'to speak'. Otherwise, affixation is the more common process; e.g. *der Sprecher* 'the speaker' and *der Sprechende* 'the man who is speaking'.

2.1.5 Abbreviation

Abbreviation covers truncated forms or clipped words. The Oxford Dictionaries "Word of the Year 2014" was *to vape* (from *vapour* or *vapourize*); it describes the action of inhaling and exhaling the vapour produced by *e-cigarettes* (or *e-cigs*). Sometimes shortened forms end up replacing the longer versions (e.g. *mob* for *mobile vulgus* 'movable or fickle common people', *cab* for *cabriolet* and *bus* for *omnibus* 'motor vehicle for paying passengers'). But often the longer and shorter forms coexist as stylistic variants (*vax* alongside *vaccine* or *vaccination*), and with time the meanings can diverge, as has happened with (mobile) *app* versus (computer) *application*; old examples include *hussy* versus *housewife*, *stroppy* versus *obstreperous*, *grotty* versus *grotesque*. The use of the shorter colloquial forms in casual contexts often leads them down separate semantic tracks, thus creating two radically

different words as the long and the short part company. Special cases of shortenings arise when initial unstressed syllables are lost (*cos* from *because*), and this can also give rise to separate words with very different meanings (*fence* – *defence*; *cute* – *acute*; *squire* – *esquire*; *ticket* – *etiquette*).

Some shortened expressions involve other processes. Both *adorbs* (from *adorable*) and *totes* (from *totally*) show the addition of the diminutive (or hypocoristic) *-s* ending. Like other hypocoristic endings, such as the *-ie* in *breakie* 'breakfast' and *-o* in *arvo* 'afternoon' (the earmark of Antipodean varieties of English), the suffix suggests informality and a friendly attitude. It shows an expressive use of the original plural *-s* ending that first appeared in pet names (such as *Legs*, *Susykins* and *Cuddles*) and nursery creations (such as *dindins* and *beddie-byes*). It now tags many slangy creations like *whatevs* (from *whatever*), *probs* (< *probably*), *awks* (< *awkward*) and *fabs* (< *fabulous*), and makes regular appearances in internet slangs like LOLspeak (though often spelled <z>, as in *muahz* 'kisses').

2.1.6 Acronyms

Acronyms illustrate another kind of abbreviated expression, one that really took off in the 20th century (see Chapter 1). This time, words are formed only from the initials of other words – the word *acronym* comes from Greek *acro* 'tip, point' and *onym* 'name'. Dictionaries are incorporating new examples of these words all the time: *BOBO* 'burnt out but opulent', *YOLO* 'you only live once', *PAL* 'parents are listening', *POS* 'parents over shoulder'. Technically, for something to be an acronym the resulting word has to be pronounceable like other ordinary words in the language. Examples that are pronounced as strings of letter names such as *KPC* 'keep parents clueless', *SMH* 'shaking my head' and *LMIRL* for 'let's meet in real life' are not acronyms but rather initialisms (or alphabetisms).

Occasionally, acronyms are based on successive syllables of just single words, as in the oldies *TV* from 'television' and *PJs* from 'pyjamas'. Other variations incorporate more of the words than simply the initial letters. This might involve, for instance, using the first consonant and vowel, usually to make the acronym pronounceable, as in the case the well-established acronym *sonar* from 'sound navigation and ranging'. Some acronyms use even larger chunks. Something like *modem* takes the first syllable from the two words *modulator* and *demodulator*; *hi-fi* is something similar. These words fall somewhere between being acronyms and blends (which are coming up next). *Hi-fi* also smacks of a bit of wordplay (akin to reduplicated forms like *bow-wow*, *hob nob* and *nit wit*).

Once they have been around for a while, acronyms lose their capital letters and enter the language as ordinary words, such as *sonar*. Even where this hasn't happened, the original source words are usually forgotten – *HIV* stands for 'human immunodeficiency virus', yet people commonly refer to the *HIV virus*; compare *ATM machine* 'automatic teller machine machine' and *PIN number* 'personal identification number number'. (Examples like *PIN-Nummer* in German have given rise to an acronym to describe the practice: *RAS-Syndrom* (*Redundantes-Akronym-Syndrom-Syndrom* 'redundant acronym syndrome syndrome'), a joke that works equally well in English.)

Backronyms

There has been an interesting twist in the formation of acronyms in recent times. These expressions are backronyms (or reverse acronyms). *WIMP* and *MACHO*, for example, are technical acronyms. *WIMP* stands for 'weakly interacting massive particle' and *MACHO* for 'massive astrophysical compact halo object'. Of course, it could be a happy coincidence that the initials in these phrases made for such apt and cute sounding words as *WIMP* and *MACHO*, but more likely the creators of these acronyms fudged and fiddled until they came up with the right sequences of words.

A lot of reverse acronymy goes on in the names of organizations and agencies. A bunch of people might cook up a word that stands for something they want their group to be associated with, let's say, *HOPE*. Then, on the basis of the letters that make up this word, they concoct a plausible sounding string of words that is also appropriate to their activities and concerns. In this case, it might be 'Health Opportunities for People Everywhere'. Some linguistic cookery undoubtedly went on when the Microsoft Corporation announced a new program called *Windows DNA* standing for 'Windows Distributed inter-Net Architecture'; there is no doubt they were deliberately cashing in on the famous initialism *DNA* (in this case, 'deoxyribonucleic acid'). People have a lot of fun with this kind of reverse acronymy. Clearly the phrase *A CYA Operation* 'a cover your arse operation' was a deliberate pun on the US Central Intelligence Agency (the CIA).

2.1.7 Blending

This process refers to the creation of new words from the combination of two (or occasionally more) existing words. The new portmanteau word then incorporates meaningful characteristics from both. While blending was an insignificant process in Algeo's study, the process has taken off in recent years. Dozens of new portmanteaux are entering English on a regular basis, and blends like the following abound in lists of new words: *listicle* 'an article on the internet presented in the form of a numbered or bulleted list', *zonkey* 'a hybrid (literally) of a donkey and a zebra' and *mansplain* '(of a man) to explain something (usually to a woman) in a condescending way'.

The nature of the mixing process is also changing. Rather than combining splinters of words, the newer blends tend to be more like *vodkatini* - a complete word with part of another. It might be that the front is intact, as in *vodkatini* and *shoefiti* ('the practice of decorating overhead wires with shoes'). Many of the modern blends involve some sort of overlap, as in *guesstimate* 'to estimate by guessing'. American economic and cultural expansion is now often described as *cocacolonization*. This is a clever fusion of part of *Coca-Cola* and *colonization*. Very occasionally, the full word appears in the middle of the blend. In the case of *ambisextrous* 'bisexual', the

word *sex* is squashed and blended inside *ambidextrous*. These words are somehow catchier and more playful because they overrun each other. Occasionally, the overlap is total, as in *sexploitation* 'sexual exploitation' and *bagonize* 'to wait anxiously at the baggage carousel for luggage to arrive', which retain both words intact. But more usually only parts coincide; *affluenza* 'the disease of being too rich' combines a bit of *affluence* and a bit of *influenza* (the <fluenz> part is common to both source words, *affluence* and *influenza*). In this way the blend echoes more effectively their individual meanings.

2.1.8 Commonization

In Chapter 3 we describe special cases of semantic broadening, where proper names extend from a specific case and end up referring generally to the whole class of items. In terms of word formation, this is called commonization.

Personal names frequently lose their capital letter and enter the general lexicon as household words, as in the *mountweazels* 'fictitious entries' mentioned earlier. There are the usual eponyms (< *epi-* 'upon' and *onym* 'name') such as *cardigans* and *sandwiches* from the Earls of Cardigan and Sandwich (in fact, English has amassed more than 35,000 such expressions), and new ones are appearing all the time, though they don't always survive. When Lorena Bobbitt famously cut off her husband's penis in June 1993 the verb *to bobbitt* suddenly appeared in newspapers around the world to describe this and similar events, and continues to appear (perhaps because the alternative *depenistrate* is a little less memorable). Peter Gilliver, the associate editor of the *OED* at the time, stated that "[i]f 'bobbitt' turns up in several different stories over a period of time, this suggests it should go in the dictionary" (cited in *The Age*, 7 February 1994, p. 11). The word hasn't yet secured an entry but continues to make regular appearances in the media.

There are also eponymous phrases that arise spontaneously in everyday language. Someone in a fringed rhinestone studded suit might be described as *doing an Elvis*. Most are short-lived, it is true, but their pervasiveness speaks to the value of names. Ours is a culture that promotes personal names.

Brand names also provide a common source for new words. *Google* has been "verbed"; *to google* even refers to any search, not simply a Google search, so it illustrates both conversion and commonization.¹ Place names also enter the language as ordinary words in this way. *Jeans* have their origin in the town of Genoa, where a type of heavy cotton fabric (resembling denim) was once made; *denim* itself derives from Nîmes, the name of a city in southern France (originally *serge de Nîmes* 'serge (cloth) of Nîmes').

2.1.9 Reduplication

Reduplication is a repetition process where all or part of the stem of a word is reiterated, and the resulting form is a kind of compound. This is a peripheral process in English compared to some other languages (and we give examples from Māori below). Nonetheless, over the years it has produced some thousands of words, and

occasionally new ones appear (*cray cray* 'really crazy' is a recent addition). In English, there are basically three types of reduplicated compounds. One involves repetition of the whole stem (*goody-goody*, *hush-hush*). Many of these are confined to nursery language (*choo-choo*, *gee-gee*). A second type involves the repetition of the rhyme. Sometimes both stems are existing words (*brain-drain*, *tin-grin*), but usually only one, or sometimes none, of the elements is independently meaningful (*argy-bargy*, *artsy-fartsy*) – it can happen that the words become obscure through sound change, or else they might simply drop out of use (*willy-nilly* derives from the expression *will I nill I* based on earlier verbs *willen* 'want' and *nillen* 'not want'). A third (now rather rare) type of reduplicative compound involves some sort of modification of the stem vowel (*mish-mash*, *flip-flop*).

In many languages reduplication has emotional functions; the repetition is more expressive than ordinary speech. We repeat things to beef them up (*I'm ok*, *I'm ok*); this can be for emphasis, to get across a sense of conviction or urgency. But it gets more interesting than this. An example found more usually in American English (and inspired by Yiddish) is "schm-reduplication". It produces expressions like *school-schmool* and *fancy-schmancy*, where the second part of the phrase is a nonsense word, beginning with the same <schm> cluster. It's fully productive (almost any word can be cloned in this way), and the meaning is dismissive, the linguistic equivalent of a snort or a sniff; *school-schmool* means something like 'school – who cares!'

English also has something called "contrastive focus reduplication" (Ghomeshi et al. 2004). You might say, "You mean he's GONE gone" (there's a heavy stress on the first instance of the repeated word, and it contrasts with the second mention). The question asked here is whether the person had actually gone for good, as opposed to just ducking out for a short while. The copied expression always points to the real or true meaning of the item referred to, and the expression can usually be rephrased using modifiers (instead of *he's GONE gone*, you could say *he's really gone*).

Other languages are better known for their use of reduplication. Sometimes it relates more to the grammatical life of the language; in Māori, for example, some nouns lengthen the first vowel to indicate plurality (e.g. *waahine* 'women' from *wahine* 'woman'). More usually, however, it concerns expansion in the lexicon. Partial reduplication of verbs can either strengthen the meaning (*paki* 'pat' becomes *papaki* 'slap hard' and *pakipaki* 'applaud'; *kimo* 'blink' becomes *kikimo* 'close eyes firmly' and *kimokimo* 'blink repeatedly') or encode reciprocity (*piri* 'stick, cling' becomes *pipiri* 'cling together'; *patu* 'strike' becomes *papatu* 'beat each other') (see Harlow 2007).

2.1.10 Borrowing

The examples we've looked at so far have illustrated language internal processes; in other words, ways languages enrich their vocabulary by drawing on sources already available to them. Another way is to look to external sources – to expand the lexicon via what is usually called "borrowing", the process whereby a language takes and incorporates some linguistic element from another language. As described in

Chapter 1, lexical borrowing is the most usual, although any part of the grammar can be “on loan”. English is an enthusiastic borrower and has adopted material from as many as 120 different languages.

German is one that has been making important contributions over many years. Recent borrowings include *Kummerspeck* (lit. ‘grief bacon’), a word to describe the excess weight gained from emotional overeating, and *Fachidiot* (lit. ‘subject idiot’) ‘someone who knows a lot about their special area but little else’. The newness of these borrowings is reflected in the fact that they haven’t yet lost the capital letter required by German. Compare them to golden oldies in the area of food and drink: *noodle* (< *Nudel*), *pretzel* (< *Brezel*), *muesli* (< Swiss German *Müsli*), *Delikatessen* (< *Delikatessen*), *gummy bear* (< *Gummibär*), *schnapps*, *lager* and of course the *frankfurter* and *hamburger* (adjectives/nouns formed from the place names Frankfurt and Hamburg).

Sometimes an idea is borrowed, but not the actual word. English stole the semantics of the German *Ohrwurm* (lit. ‘earworm’) to describe that really annoying little bit of music that rattles around inside a person’s head, sometimes for days. This expression *earworm* retains the German idiom but converts it into English. This kind of borrowing where the meaning of a phrase is borrowed and expressed using existing words in the borrowing language is known as a calque (or loan translation). An earlier example is the expression *power politics*, which is a calque on the German word *Machtpolitik*, a compound of *Macht* ‘power, strength’ and *Politik* ‘politics’.

Most of these lexical aliens have been naturalized – they fit the English sound and spelling system (e.g. no capital letter), and they have been integrated into the grammatical system (they take the English plural ending *-s*). Sometimes this assimilation process changes the loanwords beyond recognition. *Hamburger* is a good illustration. The first part of the word happens to correspond to a type of meat in English, and the word has been reinterpreted or “reanalysed” as a compound *ham* + *burger* (even though there is no ham involved). This false analysis has spawned many new compounds such as *Aussie lamburger*, *eggburger*, *cheeseburger*, *chickenburger*, *steakburger* and so on.

The fact that English has expanded way beyond its original mother tongue countries has triggered a burgeoning of diversity in the form of hybrids, dialects, nativized varieties, pidgins and creoles, all influenced by the many different environments and languages it has come in contact with; this has opened up many more potential borrowing sources (for example the local vernacular languages, which may or may not be the first language of speakers of these contact Englishes). For example, mainstream dictionaries now contain words from Philippine English (such as *carnap* ‘to steal a car’ and *presidentiable* ‘a person who is a likely or confirmed candidate for president’), and also loanwords that have come via Spanish (*estafa* ‘fraud’) and Tagalog (*barkada* ‘group of friends’).

To see more closely what aspects of words can be borrowed, consider some of the borrowings, this time from English into German, shown in Table 2.1.

You can see that some of these borrowed words are used in ways that most English speakers wouldn’t even recognize; what the German call a mobile (or cell) phone shows a very different use for the adjective *handy* ‘useful’.

Table 2.1
Examples of English borrowings into German

What has been borrowed	Words	Translation
Form and meaning	<i>crashen</i>	'to crash (of a computer)'
Form and meaning	<i>chatten</i>	'to chat (online)'
Form and (almost) meaning	<i>Peeling</i>	'facial/body scrub'
Form	<i>Smoking</i>	'dinner jacket'
Form	<i>Handy</i>	'cell phone'
Meaning (=calque)	<i>Liebe machen</i>	'make love'
Meaning (=calque)	<i>Seifenoper</i>	'soap opera'

2.1.11 Sound symbolism

Finally we consider the creation of words that come about via some sort of sound symbolism. All of you can likely think of examples of onomatopoeic words; words like *cuckoo*, *whoosh*, *cheep* and *plop*, which all somehow echo their senses. It can also happen that speakers start to associate certain sounds or sound sequences with particular meanings, and these then can be used in the formation of new words when the patterns get extended. Such sound sequences are called *phonesthemes*. They occur either at the beginning of words (e.g. *tw-*, *gl-*, *fl-*) or in their rhymes (e.g. *-ash*, *-ump*, *-itter*). They symbolize a certain meaning, although it is often not easy to pin down exactly what this meaning is. Consider words that rhyme with *stodge*: *splodge* ('a thick, heavy, or clumsy splotch'), *podge* ('short, stout, thick-set'), *wodge* ('a bulky lumpy mass'). Words with the *-odge* rhyme denote something solid, bulky or lumpy, and this has been the inspiration for new words such as *stodge* (the word that denotes a particularly thick, heavy, starchy, lethally fattening type of English food). It is a good example of how speakers manipulate language for their own ends.

We could also include here imitative expressions such as *ouch*; in other words, those that convey the sort of involuntary noisy responses we make to express some sort of emotion. They include automatic noises like *kerchoo*, *burp*, *hack*, *hiccup* and so on. Such words start life being rather inadequate attempts to represent the actual sound being made; *ha-ha*, *hardy-har*, *yuk-yuk*, *haw-haw* and *te-he* don't sound much like actual laughter. But over time, as these written forms become more and more familiar, they are conventionalized as ordinary vocabulary items. So, when we encounter *ha-ha* or *haw-haw* in a text, it seems a perfectly normal representation of laughter.² *Yackety-yak* seems a perfectly good way to represent someone talking. These words then start functioning as ordinary nouns and verbs. For example *They ummed and ahhed*; *She hemmed and hawed*; *He pooh-poohed my memo*. Once these expressions develop their own spelling pronunciations, this removes them even further from the original noises they're supposed to represent. *Tut-tut* and *tsk-tsk* don't sound much like the curious clicking sound we make to express impatience or disapproval, and yet *tsk-tsk* now seems a reasonable way to represent this noise. What's more, so completely do we come to accept these as somehow natural, they then become the actual noises we make. We might even say *tsk-tsk* when we're ticking someone off.

2.1.12 A final word on the processes

Chapter 5 will discuss two important processes in morphological change: reanalysis (the reinterpretation of structure) and analogy (or attraction to structure). The focus in that chapter will be on the grammatical existence of words. But since both processes are major driving forces in the creation of new words, we also mention them briefly here.

Speakers often reinterpret boundaries within words (= reanalysis) to give their structure more meaning. This can create new morphemes that then get extended to form new expressions (= analogy). We saw this already with the restructuring of *hamburger*. In what is sometimes referred to as folk etymology (see Chapter 5), the “correct” morpheme boundary is ignored and reassigned to where it makes most sense. The word *bikini* derives from the name of a Pacific Ocean atoll. The first part of the word happens to coincide with the prefix *bi-* in English meaning ‘two’, and of course the swimsuit happens to be made of two pieces. This is all the encouragement speakers need to start forming new creations like *mankini*, *microkini*, *monokini*, *seaweed kini*, *macramé kini*, Chanel’s *eye-patch kini* and even the *dental floss kini* (where the bikini bits are held together by something resembling the thread used to remove food from teeth). *Kinis* of all shapes and sizes now abound in lingerie catalogues, everything from the *G-kini* with minimal coverage to the more generously proportioned *high-cut kini* or *hi-kini*. Whether or not these new *kini* creations will survive is not clear; most will probably disappear. However, they nicely illustrate the kind of inventive restructuring and generalization that is so much a part of speakers’ wordplay. And many creations do endure.

A clear example is *helicopter*, from Greek *helic* ‘spiral’ > and the root *pter* ‘wing’ (the *-o-* is a linking device). Of course English speakers wouldn’t know what to do with a word beginning with <pt> so they make the cut after *heli-*, giving rise to the shortened form *copter*, as well as compounds such as *helipad*, *heliport* ‘terminal for helicopters’ and *gyrocopter* ‘light single-seater autogiro’, *hoppicopter* ‘backpack helicopter’ and most recently *hexacopter* ‘unmanned helicopter having six rotors’.

Reformations of this kind often result from an original blending process; if there are enough blended combinations, it allows the speakers to reinterpret and to restructure in the way we’ve just seen, and this gives rise to new morphemes (either words or affixes), which can then extend (via analogy) to become productive new affixes. For instance the *-holic/-aholic/-oholic* ‘addict’ suffix describes one who habitually consumes whatever the first part of the word denotes, as in *chocoholic*, *footballaholic*, *golfaholic*, *newsaholic*, *junkaholic*, *icecreamaholic*, *potatochipoholic*, *beefaholic*, *bookaholic*, *sleepaholic* and so on. The source for these new formations was 18th century *alcoholic* ‘pertaining to alcohol’ (*alcohol* + *ic*). The sense shifted in the 20th century to ‘person addicted to alcohol’, and in the 1970s this led to the blend formation *workaholic/workaholism*. Blends like these then allowed for the reinterpretation of *-oholic* as a suffix. ✓

Many new suffixes have evolved in this way: *-athon* originally from blends with *marathon* (e.g. *swimathon*, *bikathon*, *telethon* and *showerathon*, which denote events showing endurance and usually for charity); *-gate* originally from blends

with *Watergate* (e.g. *choppergate*, *nipplegate*, *dianagate* and *prisongate*, which denote some sort of scandal); most recently *-(a)licious* originally from blends with *delicious* (e.g. *babelicious*, *bootylicious*, *funalicious*, *partylicious* and *scrumptilicious*, which denote something or someone very attractive).

Particularly interesting from the perspective of analogy and reanalysis is the process by which phrases become set in the language, and eventually become new words; for example the nouns *wannabe* 'poser, follower' (from *want to be*) and *dru-ther* 'preference' (from *(I)d rather*), verbs *to don* (from *do on*) and *doff* (from *do off*), and even the creation of more grammatical words such as the conjunction *because* (from the prepositional phrase *by cause*). These are called amalgamations (sometimes also lexicalizations, though this label covers other types of word formation). We will be revisiting examples such as these both in Chapters 5 and 6.

These amalgamations illustrate the reduction that also takes place in well-established compounds. Consider the condensed pronunciation of *breakfast* [brɛkfəst] (as in 'breaking the fast') and *cupboard* [kʌbəd] ('board for cups'). Here the spelling has preserved the original compounds, but this is not always the case – only the real word enthusiast will be aware that *nostril* began life as a compound (Old English *nosbyrel* 'nose thirl [= hole]'). Frequency is a driving force here (and we will revisit this theme in many parts of this book). More unusual compounds don't show the same sort of reduction. Compare the full pronunciation of infrequent words such as *handspike* and *handstroke* with the more common *handkerchief* [hæŋkətʃɪf].

2.2 LOSING WORDS – LEXICAL MORTALITY

We've just seen the many ways in which languages can extend their lexicon, but there are many ways they lose words too. Dictionary editors of course have to be aware of the endangered words. They need to make decisions all the time as to whether they classify a word as "archaic" or "obsolete" or even whether they'll bother to include it at all. It's a difficult decision – words may no longer be relevant for modern speakers; yet they are important for people reading texts of the past. Influential works of literature act rather like artificial life support systems for words that otherwise disappeared from people's active lexicons, sometimes hundreds of years ago. Here are just some of the main reasons that words will drop out of use.

2.2.1 Obsolescence

This is probably rather obvious – if objects, ideas and institutions no longer form a part of the speakers' mental world then they will be forgotten. In areas such as food, lexical obsolescence is probably a matter of course. We no longer recognize medieval words like *pottage* (porridge-like dish of vegetables and/or meat), *mortrews*, *buknade* (pottages), *civet* (stew), *frumenty*, *losyns* (porridge-like dishes), *rapey*, *doucetes* (desserts) and *letelorye* (savoury custard). The tendency in those times to macerate, smash into pulp and spice food beyond recognition makes few of the dishes appealing to modern palates. Clothing shows a similar high turnover of

vocabulary. Battle fashions have changed, and we no longer require medieval terms for armour like *vambrace*, *rerebrace*, *crinet* and *peytral*. (Of course such words can remain useful for members of “living history” societies.)

Disappearing words often tell of societal change. Most of us have given up the habit of interpreting omens by the appearance of entrails or the behaviour patterns of birds, rendering words such as *augury* ‘divination’ and more specifically *pyromancy* ‘divination by fire’ and *tyromancy* ‘divining by the coagulation of cheese’ no longer terribly useful. The traditional vocabulary of sin and virtue provides a more immediately relevant example. As Geoffrey Hughes (1989) describes, words such as *honour*, *virtue*, *temperance*, *modesty*, *chastity* and *virginity* are by no means dead, but (driven by changing mores and attitudes) they no longer form part of people’s active moral lexicon.

2.2.2 “Verbicide”

Examples like these also illustrate another fact of lexical life – words wear out. There are certain areas of our vocabulary, like terms of abuse, that are more prone to weakening than others. It’s no longer effective to insult someone by calling that person a *slubberdegullion druggel* or a *fondling fop*, a *blockish grutnol* or a *grout-head gnat-snapper*. *Mangy rascal*, *drowsy loiterer*, *flouting milksop*, *base loon*, *scoffing scoundrel* and *ruffian rogue* just don’t pack much punch anymore. Expressive words will become insipid, and alternatives have to be found. More recent disappearances include *bounder*, *cad* and *rotter* – even *ratbag*, *rogue*, *rascal*, *scallywag* and *scoundrel* (once highly offensive) are rarely heard. We see this in many areas of vocabulary. Speakers are always on the lookout for new, exciting ways to express themselves, and inevitably many expressions just fall away.

2.2.3 Reduction

It seems that words have to have a certain amount of phonetic saliency if they are to function as a useful part of the vocabulary (what we are saying here refers to lexical words – grammatical words, such *he*, *the* and *of*, are by their nature short). As we will see more vividly in Chapter 4, sound change is generally reductive. Severe mutilation can reduce a word to a fragment of its former self, and it then simply drops by the wayside. Old English *ǣ* ‘law’, *ēa* ‘river’ and *īeg* ‘island’ didn’t survive (except among Scrabble players who find knowledge of such words as *ai* ‘a three toed South American sloth’ quite handy). Interestingly, *īeg* got a new lease of life when speakers expanded the word to *īgland*, modern *island* (the <s> here was introduced in the 1500s because people connected it to *isle*).

2.2.4 Intolerable homonymy

It can happen that through change two originally distinct words come to have the same form but different meanings (= homonyms). Old English *hrūm* ‘soot’ collided with *rūm* ‘room’ after the [h] dropped off, and it subsequently dropped out of use. One of the most famous examples comes from Gascon (a variety of Occitan spoken

in south-western France). It involves the Latin words *gallus* 'rooster' and *cattus* 'cat'. In some rural dialects sound change meant that these two words ended up merging. Imagine the disastrous potential in a farming context – picture the poor farmer unable to distinguish whether a cat or a rooster had got into the hen house (see Hock 1991: 298).

It can even happen that words with completely contradictory meanings collide in this way. Typically, speakers then end up replacing one of the homonyms. For example, in Old English there were originally two verbs *lāettan* 'permit' and *lettan* 'stop, hinder'. Sound change left these two verbs homophonous: *let* 'to permit' and *let* 'to stop'. The second *let* has now disappeared except for relics like *without let or hindrance* and *let ball* (in tennis). The same thing happened with Old English *cleofian* 'to stick together' (compare modern related forms *glue* and *clay*) and *clēofan* 'to split apart' (compare modern *cleaver* and *cleft*). Sound change left the one word *cleave* with either the meaning 'to stick together' or 'to cut in half'. The latter sense now predominates.

For collisions to cause problems, the words must usually belong to the same sphere of ideas and occur in similar contexts. German *arm* 'poor' and *Arm* 'arm' are different parts of speech and have very different meanings; they are not likely to be confused. But very different contexts of use do not always ensure survival. In the case of taboo, homonyms of taboo terms will quickly disappear. The phonological collapsing of *arse* and *ass* in some varieties of English, for example, caused considerable problems for the animal now generally referred to as a *donkey*. The Early English word *coney/cunny*, meaning 'rabbit' (and rhyming with *honey*), dropped out of use when it collided with the tabooed female body part *cunt*. Words can even disappear if they sound a little too much like taboo words. Many single syllable words beginning with <f> and ending in <k> have disappeared from the English language. During the Victorian era we lost *feck*, meaning 'efficiency'; *feckless* must have sounded different enough that it lingered a little longer. Typically, we will drop words like hot cakes if they sound too much like expressions that are offensive or embarrassing. Such is the power of taboo.

Some disappear for no good reason

We've examined some of the reasons words drop out but have to admit that huge numbers of English words disappear for no obvious reason at all. *Fnast* 'to snort' bit the dust, as did all other <fn> words, such as *fnese* 'to sneeze'. True, some words seem spectacularly useless (hothouse *peristeronic* 'suggestive of pigeons' and *gymnologize* 'to dispute naked'), and we can perhaps understand why these didn't endure. Others seem handier, like *supernaculum* 'the act of drinking the very last drop from a glass or bottle' and *velleity* 'a sense of desire that doesn't come with any action'.

Over the years many seemingly useful expressions have disappeared without a trace: *multiscious* 'knowing many different things' and *nod-crafty* 'with

an air of great wisdom'; once people could have *gone* 'wit, tact', *ruth* 'compassion', *ert* 'skill' and *list* 'joy', they could also be *wieldy* 'agile'. The *symposiast* 'the banquet lover', the *wine-knight* 'one who drinks valiantly' and the *gastrophilanthropist* 'benevolent purveyor for the appetites of others' might be *conjugilant* 'filled with good cheer' and with *vitativeness* and *felicificability* or 'love of life'. English has lost many effective insults too: the *buffleheaded booby*, the *cuddy clotpoll* and *clodplate*, the *jobbernowl jolthead* and the *noddy ninnyhammer*.

It is a fact of lexical life that words will wear out, some faster than others (insults will lose their wounding capacity, swearing its pungency, and slang its vibrancy). But like in the fashion industry, people want to change their language (especially vocabulary), just as they want to change the hemlines on the trousers and dresses they wear. There is a constant tug of war in language between people's desire for new, exciting ways of saying things and the tendency for words and structures to become routine; this is most obvious in vocabulary changes, but as we'll see later in Chapter 6 it also happens in grammar.

2.3 ETYMOLOGY – STUDY OF THE ORIGIN OF WORDS

Etymology is the study of the origin and history of words. It's a subject that fascinates most people – and it's often full of surprises. Dictionary makers and dictionary users can have quite different ideas about how an expression has come into being. Many speakers have stories about the history of certain words, and they're often shocked (even irritated) when they find no mention of these in the dictionary. Lexicographers do rain on people's picnics with their cautious labels "of uncertain origin" or "etymology unknown".

The expression *OK* (or *okay*) is one that has spawned an extraordinary array of imaginative etymologies based on languages from all over the world. One even derives it from a boxing term *KO* (or *kayo*), an abbreviation for 'knock out'. If the boxer wasn't *kayoed*, then he was *OK*. A good story but there is no evidence, and the chronology is wrong – *kayo* appeared more than 80 years after *OK*. This time it seems the story that is best supported by documentary evidence and wins the approval of the dictionary makers is one that bases it on an acronym. *OK* originates from a jokey misspelling *oll korrekt* in the 1830s of the expression *all correct*. Compare other phrases like *oll wright* or *OW*.

The majority of lexical creations don't endure – so how do we explain those that do? Clearly they have to fill a need, but dictionary makers track thousands of new useful expressions every year and only a fraction survive. Why did the expression *OK* take off and not *OW*? It turns out that the prosperous creations often have mongrel origins; in other words, a number of influences come together to establish the meaning of the form and to secure its currency.

It seems that *OK* was also used for many other jokey abbreviations, including *out of kash*, *oll koming* and *oll konfirmed*. But what really helped to popularize the expression was the fact that it was adopted as an election slogan by supporters of the Democratic candidate Martin Van Buren (1782–1862). Born in Kinderhook (New York State), he was dubbed Old Kinderhook, and his supporters then formed the Old Kinderhook Club or the *OK Club* to solicit money for campaigns. People's elaborate etymological tales probably also have a place in the history of this word. West African, Greek, German, American Indian and French origins have been proposed for *OK* – even Scots *och aye* has been suggested as a likely source. The stories surrounding people's favourite words might be phony, but if an expression captures the imagination in this way, it probably has a much better chance of becoming established and surviving. The term *OK* took off in the 20th century to become a truly international word.

Etymological fallacies can have unfortunate consequences. In June 2003 a British Government minister was severely criticized for his use of the phrase *nitty-gritty* at a police conference because of its supposed racist overtones. He had told his audience apparently that it was high time to “get down to the nitty-gritty” in training officers. It seems that the expression *nitty-gritty* is prohibited in the British police service lexicon because people believe it to have originally been used in reference to those in the lowest reaches of slave ships. This etymology is false. There is nothing linking *nitty-gritty* with the early slave trade. It appears in fact to have entered English only sometime during the 1960s, probably via Black English and initially as a bit of popular music slang.

Since the 1990s there have been similar controversies sparked by the use of the word *niggardly*. In 1999 an employee in the Washington, DC mayoral office, David Howard, told his staff that, in light of cutbacks, he would have to be “niggardly” with funds. Many connected this word with the taboo word *nigger*, and the uproar that followed resulted in Howard's resignation. In 2002 Stephanie Bell, a fourth grade teacher at Williams Elementary School (Wilmington, Indiana), taught the word *niggardly* to her students. At least one parent wanted her fired.

These examples are popular etymologies that have no linguistic basis. However, in issues to do with language, it often doesn't matter what the linguistic facts suggest – what really matters to speakers is how they perceive their language to be. The reality that *nitty-gritty* and *niggardly* have absolutely no etymological connections with the *N*-word is of no consequence, and if people do make these etymological connections, then this will be the kiss of death for these words. *Fuk* ‘sail’ and *feck* ‘purpose’ had absolutely nothing to do with the *F*-word either, but that didn't save them. And although *country* shows no sign of falling to the power of the *C*-word, *coney* [kani] ‘rabbit’ has disappeared.

SUMMARY

This chapter has been all about changes to words. It has examined the various methods by which people expand the lexicon by creating new expressions, word formation processes such as affixation, compounding, acronymy, blending and folk

etymology, conversion, backformation, wordplay and borrowing. Words are also disappearing and for all sorts of reasons – obsolescence (of ideas, objects, institutions and so on), sound change, intolerable ambiguity and taboo. Most of the time, speakers don't realize a word is on the way out. Ironically, they only become aware of this when for some reason the word makes a re-appearance.

The transmission of linguistic forms is sometimes reminiscent of the spread of thought contagions (or memes) – fads that spread from person to person within a culture. Expressions are particularly infectious, and successful ones disseminate rapidly through speech communities, especially virtual communities. Celebrity endorsement can help to propel them to success. The verb *to dog* didn't take off until Shakespeare used it, and neither did *to twerk* until Miley Cyrus "twerked into history". Perhaps we will now see a spike in the use of *conscious uncoupling* since Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin announced their wilful unyoking on 25 March 2014. Clearly social media helps to spread these linguistic cults and trends – within a matter of hours they can have a worldwide following. The internet gives them a cachet, a respectability. But the progression of change is much more exciting and revealing than the introduction of a few new expressions for reasons of fashion. One of the most exciting areas in historical linguistics now involves the research that looks at the social use of language and its role in language change, and this is something we focus on in Chapter 7.

Vocabulary is the most unstable aspect of a language, and dictionary makers are constantly having to redraw the admission and exclusion boundary for marginal vocabulary items. *Meh* is a modern interjection to convey indifference; it was in use online in the early 1990s, but it was almost 15 years before it appeared in mainstream dictionaries. *Yeah-no* is about the same age, but it is still missing from most dictionaries. It is almost impossible for printed dictionaries to keep up with the protean nature of vocabulary these days – not just new expressions, but old expressions changing their appearance, their meaning and their grammatical behaviour, and this is all happening at breakneck speed. We live in interesting linguistic times.

FURTHER READING

Specific treatments of English words and word formation are offered by Bauer (1983), Katamba (1994), Stockwell and Minkova (2001) and Carstairs-McCarthy (2002); and cross-linguistic perspectives are offered by Haspelmath and Sims (2010), and several new handbooks on word formation (e.g. Štekauer and Lieber 2006; Lieber and Štekauer 2011, 2014; Müller et al. 2015–16).

If you are interested in specifically slang and the creativity of the lexicon, some recent studies include Adams (2009) and Coleman (2012); Kwon and Round (2015) deals specifically with phonestemes. For historical accounts of English words see Hughes (1989) and Liberman (2005), and for an overview of etymology and the key debates we recommend Mailhammer (2014).

Much has been written recently on the relevance of dictionaries in the 21st century. We suggest you log on to www.ted.com/index.php/speakers/view/id/143

and also <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/The-Power-of-the-Dictionary-Sus> to hear lexicographers Erin McKean and Susan Butler talk about the place of print dictionaries in modern times. Historical linguist Anne Curzan also appears on TED and talks about how and when words change: https://www.ted.com/talks/anne_curzan_what_makes_a_word_real.

EXERCISES

1 English (or any other language you choose) – word formation processes

Many websites devoted to new words have recently appeared for English (the *OED*, for example, updates four times a year and publishes lists of the new words each year). There will also be dictionaries of new words in your library. Consult any of these sources to come up with an example for each of the processes we've identified in this chapter for creating new words (examples could also come from your own slang, but make sure you explain them). Note: Give the word together with the process. You could choose examples from a language other than English; just make sure you explain these examples so that the word formation processes are clear (to a non-speaker).

You might also consider word formation processes found across languages and how they differ in importance and liveliness. For example, take two languages (one can be English) and compare the strategies by which new lexical items are formed in each language. Outline any similarities or differences in word formation processes. Give plenty of examples (make sure you explain these examples so that the word formation processes are clear to non-speakers).

Another way to go about this exercise is to examine product names; for example, go out and browse through the supermarket shelves and collect examples of product names that illustrate each of the processes we have looked at in this chapter.

2 Attitudes to lexical change

In 1712 Jonathan Swift published what is his famous *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, of which the following is an extract.

The English Tongue is not arrived to such a Degree of Perfection, as, upon that Account, to make us apprehend any Thoughts of its Decay: And if it were once refined to a certain Standard, perhaps there might be Ways to fix it for ever [. . .] I see no absolute Necessity why any Language should be perpetually changing; for we find many Examples of the contrary [. . .] But what I have most at Heart, is, that some Method should be thought on for Ascertaining and fixing our Language for ever, after such Alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite [. . .] What Horace says of Words going off, and perishing like Leaves, and new ones coming in their Place, is a misfortune he laments, rather than a Thing he approves: But I cannot see why this should be absolutely necessary.

Briefly (in around 300–350 words), describe Swift's attitude to language change expressed here. As part of this discussion, include the goal that Swift sets up. How desirable is it? How practical?

3 Linguistic fossils

When linguistic changes occur they often leave behind some sort of trace – a relic of the original set-up. Words don't just disappear; there is typically something left over. This is what prompted the Dutch linguist Van der Tuuk to once describe language as "something of a ruin". Modern languages are full of relic forms that we can use to reconstruct features of vocabulary (sometimes even sounds and grammar) from earlier times. The following words are historically compounds. Identify the elements from which each word was formed.

- (a) *werewolf* (b) *cobweb* (c) *gossip* (d) *hatred* (e) *midriff* (f) *garlic*
(g) *lukewarm* (h) *daisy* (i) *window* (j) *tenterhooks*

4 Backformation

- a The following words are the result of backformation. Investigate the etymology of these words, and identify whether the backformations involve a derivational or inflectional ending.
(i) *burial* (ii) *to burgle* (iii) *greed* (iv) *grovel* (v) *edit* (vi) *pea* (vii) *couth* (viii) *dishevel* (ix) *liaise* (x) *cherry*
- b Investigate the etymology of the following four words. Describe why the process of word formation that is common to all of them is really the opposite of backformation. Note: Give just one general statement here that applies to all four words.
(i) *bodice* (ii) *chintz* (iii) *quince* (iv) *news*
- c The English word *incident* is on a similar path of development, evident in the non-standard plural form *incidentises*. Why do you think this is happening?

5 Research project: word formation processes in English

As we described in this chapter, John Algeo's 1991 study showed affixation and compounding way out ahead, and blending and borrowing to be insignificant sources for new words in English. Your task is to determine whether this is still the case. Take a random sample of around 100 expressions; you could use the same source as Algeo (the "Among the New Words" publications), or you could select another means of collecting neologisms. If you have access to the *OED* online through your library, you will find on the homepage under "What's New" links to lists of new words for different years. (Be careful to focus on brand new expressions, and not the new senses that established expressions have sprouted.) An even better source is the *Oxford Dictionaries Online* (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/>), since this dictionary is much faster to include the quirks and fads of the vernacular.

Your report should be in connected prose, not bullet points, and should be approximately 1,000 words in length. A good idea is to provide an appendix to include your findings (rather than have them in the body of the text).

NOTES

- 1 Interestingly, the Google corporation went through several lawsuits to protect its name from becoming a verb (<http://arstechnica.com/uncategorized/2006/07/7198-2/>), and finally established that even though *google* can be used as a verb, it is still not a generic (and hence unprotected) term but remains a trademark: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericgoldman/2014/09/15/google-successfully-defends-its-most-valuable-asset-in-court/#48cfd57a3f05>
- 2 However, there is considerable variation in the representation of laughter across cultures and languages; see <http://forum.wordreference.com/threads/laughter-haha-hehe.419591/>.