English Linguistics Essay, Research Paper

English Linguistics

Words and word-formation processes in the English Language

1. Introduction

In our daily use of language we often are not aware of word-formation processes

which create, invent, produce or form new words in a language. Most of the times we have no problems with understanding these new words (=neologism). Furthermore we know immediately the various forms of that new word and include them all in our vocabulary. Sometimes we even may build them ourselves.This ability to adopt, understand, and use such a new word results from the fact that these word-formation processes are based on certain rules and regulations. Some of them are mentioned and explained at the following pages and examples are given of how the results of those processes are used in the English language.

2. Word-Formation Processes

These processes have been at work for some time, and many words in daily use today were, at one time, considered to be misuses of the language. Nowadays it is quite difficult to understand why in the early nineteenth century a word like handbook was called a tasteless innovation . Yet many terms we create cause similar outcries. But nevertheless, these processes are very important for a language and ist users, because the constant creation of new terms and new uses of old terms are a sign of vitality, flexibility, and creativeness. They shape and change a language by strengthen ist ability to express things.

2.1. Borrowing

One of the most common ways to produce new words is the process called borrowing, which is the taking over of words from other languages. The English language has always been adopting so-called loanwords from other languages. Some examples are alcohol (Arabic origin), croissant (French origin), yogurt (Turkish origin), pretzel and kindergarten (both German origin). Vice versa it is just the same. The Japanese use the word suupaamaaketto ( supermarket ) and rajio ( radio ). In Hungaria people talk about sport, klub and futbal, and the French discuss problems of le stress, over a glass of le whiky, during le weekend. The Germans really love to adopt foreign words, especially English ones, in their language. Words like Bungee-jumping , Rollerskates , Playstation , Skate-board , Mountainbike and Walkman have become more and more a part of the German vocabulary.

A special kind of borrowing is called loan-translation, or calque, which means that each individual meaningful part (morpheme) of a word is translated literally and put together as a new word. A very good example is un gratteciel, a French term, whose literal in comparison to its exact translation skyscraper would be a scrape-sky’. Furthermore the English term superman is a loan-translation of the German word xbermensch. Not at least the expression loan-word itself is probably derived from the German term Lehnwort. Nowadays, some Spanish speakers eat perros calientes (literally dogs hot ), or hot dogs.

2.2. Compounding

In some examples we have just considered, that the joining of two separate words often produces a neologism with a single form. In German, as we have seen, the words Lehn and Wort are combined to produce Lehnwort. This process of combining or joining, technically known as compounding, is in contrast to languages like French and Spanish frequently used in languages like German and English. Furthermore it can be found in languages like Hmong, which is spoken in South East Asia.

English examples would be bookcase, doorknob, waterbed, birdbath, handsaw, textbook, and football. The German equivalences would be B cherregal, T rklinke, Wasserbett, Vogelbad, Hands ge, Textbuch und Fuxball. An example from Hmong would be hwj (meaning pot ) and kais (meaning spout ) which are joined to create hwjkais (meaning kettle’). The forms pajkws ( flower + corn = popcorn ) and hnabloojtes ( bag + cover + hand = glove ) are recent creations.

2.3. Backformation

A very specialized kind of word-formation process is called backformation. Normally one type of a word is changed to produce a different type of the same word. Usually a noun is reduced to a verb. For example the verb to televise’ was produced from the noun television. Moreover to donate was created out of donation, to babysitt from babysitting and so on.

One rule of backformation seems to be first to take a noun with the ending -er or a similar ending like -or, second to take this last syllable away and third to create the correspondending verb like e.g. painter – paint or editor – edit. In Ausralian and British English a particular process known as hypocorisms is very popular. lt means that a word is reduced to one syllable and after that -v or -ie is added to its end. Terms such as movie (originally running moving pictures), telly (originally running television), and hankie (meaning handkerchief) have been formed by this way.

2.4. Conversion

A relatively new and therefore mainly productive process in modern English is known as conversion., category change or functional shift. In contrast to backformation a word changes its grammatical form without being altered at all. Nouns as e.g. paper, butter and vacation are used as a verb. According to this rule you can paper a wall, have buttered your slice of bread and vacationed in Norway. Furthermore verbs including phrasal verbs can be used as nouns (a guess, a must, a printout, a takeover) or become adjectives (a see-through material), and adjectives can work as verbs or nouns (to dirty, to empty, a crazy, a nasty). Not to forget words like up and down can be used as nouns, too, e.g. to up the prices.

Most of the conversions are accepted by all kinds of people immediately without any difficulties. One exception is the new creation to impact, resulting from the noun impact. Last of all it must be mentioned that some converted forms change essentially in their meaning. In some contexts the verb to doctor e.g. has a negative meaning, like for examle to falsify or to adulterate. The same is with to total, which may mean to wreck, and with the expression to give sb a runaround, which means to pull the wool over sb’s eyes.

2.5. Derivation

The most frequent word-formation process is known as derivation, which is achieved by adding affixes to any kind of word. Affixes, which are bound morphemes, can be divided into prefixes, suffixes and infixes. In the English language only the first and the second type of affixes appears. The third one is rather common in several other languages like e.g. Kamhmu, which is spoken in South Asia.

2.5.1. Prefixes

Affixes which are added to the beginning of a word are called prefixes. Some very common examples arc con-, in-, dis-, mis-, and pre-. Thus words like confident, confuse, information, indifference, disgust, disharmony, miscalculation, mistake, prediction, and preparation are coming to existence.

2.5.2. Suffixes

Suffixes are affixes which are added to the end of a word. Some very popular examples are

-able, -al, -dom, -ful, -ness, and -ous. Those words like comparable, durable, criminal, portrayal, freedom, wisdom, kindness, greatness, dangerous, and mysterious are created.

2.5.3. Infixes

If an affix is inserted into another word it is called an infix. As already mentioned above it normally doesn’t occur in English, but there are some exceptions in spoken English. If ,,someone is very ,much annoyed it may happen that he utters an oath such as Absogoddamlutely or ,,Unfuckingbelievable”

Instead some regular examples can be observed in Kamhmu. In order to change a verb into a noun they incorporate ihe letter combination ,rn after the very first letter of the verb. In this way they change ,see’, meaning to drill, into ,srnee’ ,meaning a

drill. Another example is ,toh’, which means to chisel, and ,trnoh’, which means a chisel.

2.6. Coinage

One of the least common word-formation processes in English is coinage, which means the invention of totally new words. The most typical sources are trade names for a company s product which become general terms. Examples are aspirin, nylon, Levi`s, kleenex and teflon. Sometimes there may be a technical origin [e.g. te(tra)-fl(uor)-on] for such terms, but after their first coinage, they tend to become everyday words in the language.

2.7. Blending

Another way of combining two seperate forms in order to produce a new word is called blending. It is achieved by taking only the beginning of one word and joining it to the end of the other word.

Examples: In some parts of the USA, there is a product which is used like gasoline, but it is made from alcohol, so its blended term is gasohol;

To combine the effects of smoke and fog, you talk about smog. Some other examples are bit (binary/digit), brunch (breakfast/lunch), motel (motor/hotel), and the Chunnel (channel/tunnel) which connects England and France.

Our modern life has given many possibilities for blending: someone who is crazy about video is called a videot; Infotainment (information/entertainment) and simulcast (simultaneous/broadcast) are also new blends from life with television.

To describe the mixing of languages , people refer to Franglais (French/English) and Spanglish (Spanish/English). Everyone who has a computer knows the term modem (modulator/demodulator).

2.8. Clipping

Clipping is a process in which the element of reduction is even more apparent than in blending. It occurs when a word of more than one syllable (facsimile) is reduced to a shorter form (fax). This is often used in casual speech. Gasoline is called gas, advertisement is clipped to ad, brassiere to bra, cabriolet to cab and condominium to condo. A fanatic person is a fan. Other common examples are flu, plane, phone and sitcom ( situation comedy ).

English speakers often clip each other s names, as in Al, Ed, Mike, Sam, Sue and Tom. Educational terms seem to encourage clipping because nearly every word gets reduced, as in exam, gym, lab, math, chem, and prof.

2.9. Acronyms

Acronyms are formed from the initial letters of a set of other words, such as CD (compact disk) or VCR (video cassette recorder). A more typical way is to pronounce acronyms as single words, as in NATO, UNESCO, AIDS or NASA. These acronyms have kept their capital letters, but many acronyms lose their capital letters to become everyday terms such as laser (radio detecting and ranging) and zip (zone improvement plan) code. Names for organizations are often designed to have their acronym represent appropriate term, as in Women Against Rape (WAR). The acronyms of recent innovations in banking are regularly used with one of their elements repeated, as in I sometimes forget my PIN (personal identification number) number when I go to the ATM ( automatic teller machine) machine .

2.10. Multiple processes

There are some expressions which have become a new term by the combination of more than one word-formation process.

Examples: deli is a combination between borrowing [delicatessen (from German)] and clipping of the borrowed form. Forms which begin as acronyms can also undergo other processes, as in the use of lase as a verb, the result of backformation from laser. An acronym that never seems to have had capital letters comes from young urban professional plus the -ie suffix, to produce the word yuppie. The formation of this new word was made with a quite different process, known as analogy, whereby words are formed to be similar in some way to existing words.Yuppie was made possible as a new word by the earlier existence of hippie and the other short-lived analogy yippie.

Many of such forms can have a very short life-span. However, they are generally accepted in a language when they appear in a dictionary.

Reference

Yule, George The study of Language , 2nd ed; Cambridge University Press 1997