

Word Formation

Derivation is one process that allows us to introduce new words into a language. While derivation is generally assumed to be the most productive word formation process, there are several others.

Compounding

Compounds are possibly those multimorphemic words that we most readily identify as consisting of several parts. In a compound several free morphemes are combined, resulting in a word that often derives its meaning from the combination of its components.

classroom = *class* + *room*

skyscraper = *sky* + *scraper*

wallpaper = *wall* + *paper*

In English, compounds are often not written as single words but separated or combined by a hyphen (e.g. *dry cleaner*, *on-line*). In contrast to this, German compounds are usually spelled as a single word and compounding is an extremely productive word formation process in German (e.g. *Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*, *Karnevalswochenende*, ...).

Note that while noun + noun compounds are frequent, other combinations also abound and the result must not be a noun.

talkshow

verb + noun = noun

tightrope

adjective + noun = noun

overshadow

preposition + noun = verb

Many compounds exhibit a so-called **modifier-head structure**, with one part specifying the other in terms of meaning. Thus a *blackboard* is a kind of board and a *talkshow* is a kind of show (not a kind of *black* or a kind of *talk*). The modifier may function in different ways, e.g. a *raincoat* is not a coat for but against rain.

While the abovementioned examples are **endocentric** (i.e. the meaning of the compound is derived from the meaning of the parts) there are some compounds where this is not the case. A *redhead* is not a type of head but a person with red hair. Such compounds are called **exocentric**, because their meaning is not strictly contained in the components.

Conversion

Another highly productive word formation process is conversion, which is the term used to describe a word class change without any morphological marking.

party (noun) -> *party* (verb)
We will be at the party
They like to party

must (verb) -> *must* (noun)
You must eat your soup
It is a must that you call him

Note that we only speak of conversion when it is clear that a word has been “copied” from one word class to another. Frequently words appear similar without having been converted (at least not recently) - for example, English *like* exists as a verb, a noun, an adjective or a filler/discourse marker.

Borrowing

When a word is imported from another language we describe this process as borrowing. While German also has a large and increasing number of borrowings, especially from English, English itself is well-known for its mixed vocabulary and overall affinity for foreign words. Some words from Latin and Greek (e.g. *strata* - *street*, *episkopos* - *bishop*) were imported into a large number Indo-European languages before English even existed, emphasizing that borrowing is in no way a novel process. A few examples that illustrate the mixed vocabulary of English:

avalanche - from [Romansch](#) via French

bizarre - from [Basque](#) via French

candy - from Arabic and possibly [Sanskrit](#) via French

coffee - from Arabic via Turkish and Italian

ketchup - from Malay via [Amoy Chinese](#)

schadenfreude - from German

French has contributed a very large portion of English loan words and often borrowed words take on different meanings due to competition with indigenous terms (cf. Old English *great* with Norse *big* and French *large*).

Clipping

Shortening longer words is a popular strategy for conserving breath when speaking and space when writing or typing. Clipping or trimming words in the front or back (and sometimes both) is thus another word formation process in English.

air plane -> *plane*
front clipping

advertisement -> *ad*
back clipping

influenza -> *flu*
front and back clipping

Blending

Blends are combinations of two or more words in which the sound patterns overlap. Often parts of either or both words are reduced or lost in the blend, though usually the initial components are still recognizable.

brunch = *breakfast* + *lunch*

motel = *motor* + *hotel*

smog = *smoke* + *fog*

Initialisms and Acronyms

Other forms of shortenings are initialisms (also called alphabetisms) and acronyms, which reduce each component word to its initial letter. The difference between the two types lies in how the resulting word is pronounced in spoken language, namely letter by letter or without intermission.

Initialisms: TV, CD, MP3, SUV, YMCA, STFU

Acronyms: UNESCO, NATO, LOL, WYSIWYG, KISS

Back-formation

Sometimes speakers of a language will analyze a word as containing affixes where none are present. By removing these assumed affixes a lexeme can be back-formed.

editor
to edit

babysitter
to babysit

“Morphological oddities”

When critically looking at what you’ve learned about morphology and word formation to this point, you are bound to notice that the harmonious abstractions of the terminology aren’t entirely perfect. Some phenomena such as cranberry morphemes (see below) demonstrate that morphemes are idealized and do not always correspond neatly with atomic units of information. The following “oddities” stand out in English:

Zero morphs

A zero morph is a morph that should analytically be there, but that is not represented. A zero (\emptyset) is often used to indicate the “invisible” morph.

two cats = (ROOT) + -s (PLURAL)
two sheep = (ROOT) + \emptyset (PLURAL)

I like = (ROOT) + \emptyset (Non-3. Pers. sing.)
She likes = (ROOT) + -s (3. Pers. sing.)

Note that regarding noun plurals, one should not confuse zero morphs with **mass nouns**. Mass nouns such as *water* or *metal* simply do not have a plural, whereas *sheep* merely has no visible marking of the plural.

Portmanteau morphs

Some inflectional morphemes encode more than just a single grammatical property. These are called portmanteau morphs, because they contain several items inside a single shell (a *portmanteau* is a large suitcase).

he sleeps
+ 3. person
+ singular
+ present tense

my cat
+ 1. person
+ singular

Note that this is not to be confused with distinct morphemes which are realized with similar-looking morphs, such as -s as the realization of the plural morpheme vs. -s indicating third person singular.

Cranberry morphemes

Sometimes we encounter morphemes which are neither affixes nor genuine free morphemes. Such unique morphemes (which are occasionally also called cranberry morphemes) pose problems for analysis.

blackberry

strawberry

blueberry

cranberry

mulberry

Black, *straw* and *blue* are lexical morphemes - but what's a *cran* or a *mul*? Cranberry morphemes are most often introduced into a language via borrowing or dialectal variation and therefore only occur in a fixed morphological constellation. They are sometimes described as *fossilized terms* due to the fact that they can no longer be separately analyzed or used productively to form new words.