

Negotiating toward New Meanings

Why do languages need new words?

Because the range of relevant things in our lives continues to expand, we need new nouns to define the new things. The range of things we can do also continues to expand, so we need new verbs; and the ways we can describe or qualify also continues to grow, so we need new adjectives and adverbs.

But the main reason we invent new words is because we can! Innovation is fun: we often test the limits of our negotiation toward meaning with our listeners and readers as part of the game of language. When you read an academic paper that is full of complex terms and constructions, remember that the authors are trying to pre-select their audience with their lexis: they are playing the game of language. It is not, as they would say at Macquarie, that they are a bodgy bunch of bludgers coming the raw prawn and taking you for a nong.

English words and meanings coined in the last few years include: **bitcoin**, **gaybourhood**, **selfie**, **al desko**, **bromance**, **memristor**, **vajazzle**, **gigabit**, **freakonomics**, **cybermoney**, **paleo diet**, **cloud store**, and **denisovan**.

How do languages make new words?

Languages make new meanings and new words in several different ways. Twelve of them are listed here.

- **Metaphorical extension:** A word can take on new meanings because of identified similarities between what it describes and a new object (e.g. a newspaper **column** is long and thin, like the architectural feature).
- **Redefinition:** a word can migrate between semantic fields (e.g. **nice** formerly meant accurate [*a nice shot*]; accurate is good, so *nice* began to mean pleasing, and then polite. However, as social refinement began to lose its importance, *nice* began to be associated with being fussy or overpolite. Similarly, **help** used to refer to the provision of assistance when needed; then came Microsoft, and it now refers to a random aphorism offered in response to a direct request, followed by “was this information helpful?”).
- **Novel memes:** new terms can be invented for restricted codes (cant or groupspeak) and can then escape into general usage (e.g. **gazump**, **blade**). Sometimes a new word can be deliberately used to replace an older, devalued term (e.g. **gay**, **black**). Sometimes trademarks can become too popular, and are associated with a product rather than a company (e.g. **hoover**, **memory stick**, **PC**). All of these involve the creation of new sound-meaning combinations, but the new terms also have to “catch on” with the general public – they have to become “language memes” to get distributed widely.
- **Blends:** Blends (or portmanteau words, or sometimes melds) are the merging of two words to create a new meaning. Sometimes this new meaning is unrelated to either of the old meanings. Blends can be loose (e.g. **bridgework**, **weekend**) or tight (breakfast+lunch=**brunch**).
- **Borrowings:** other languages are constantly being raided for new terms (e.g. **schadenfreude**). Sometimes they become so nativised that their source is forgotten (e.g. George W. Bush’s famous utterance, “The problem with the French is that they don’t have a word for entrepreneur”).
- **Reductions:** sometimes words look like they contain morphemes when they don’t. The non-existent morpheme is removed and a new word appears (e.g. *editor* generated the verb **edit**; *burglar*, to **burgle**; but not *master*, to *mast*).
- **Onomatopoeia:** while most natural sounds have long been lexicalised, new sounds do appear that need description (e.g. the motor **chugged**; the helicopter **thwocked**). Otto Jespersen believed that all the sounds in a word related back to its meaning in some way, and new words were established on the

same basis. He called this **phonosemanticism**. (One example of a new onomatopoeic coining is something I heard on the London Underground: a **dum-dum squatter** is a person who sits in a seat on the tube when someone less able is standing, listening to the insistent backbeat from their sound system tell them that they are dumb-dumb-dumb-dumb ...)

- **Normalisation:** where a word from one root is given rules from another (e.g. *macintosh*, the name of the inventor of the item, was first applied to the item, then it was shortened to *mac*, and then it was normalised as **mack**).
- **Error:** sometimes we just lose meanings and find new uses for the sounds (e.g. the meanings of **effect** and **affect** are merging because nobody remembers the rules differentiating them).
- **Initialisations:** sets of initials can lose contact with the words they initialise, and then become recognised as words in their own right (e.g. **Nato**, **snafu**, **radar**).
- **Morphemic extension:** English has a rich set of morphemes which can be used to change word type or to add to meaning (e.g. **en-cultur-is-ation**: *culture* can be applied to *culturise* something, and we call that process *culturisation*; if it is done deliberately then it is *enculturation*. **Anti-dis-establish-ment-arian-ism**: The Church of England was *established* by law in 1534, so it is part of the *establishment*; some people want to end this legal state and *disestablish* the Church; these people are known as *disestablishmentarians*; the people who oppose this are *antidisestablishmentarians*; however, the arguments on both sides have become so formalised that both views can be seen as *-isms*.)
- **Functional shifts:** Recently, there has been a tendency to ignore morphemes and just use the word in a new way. Verbs get used as nouns (e.g. That's a big **ask**); prepositions as verbs (e.g. you must **up** your game); nouns as verbs (e.g. **policing** the district) ... The process is sometimes referred to as *verbing* and *nouning*.