

tema
10

Lexicon. Characteristics of word-formation in english. Prefixation, Suffixation, and Compounding.



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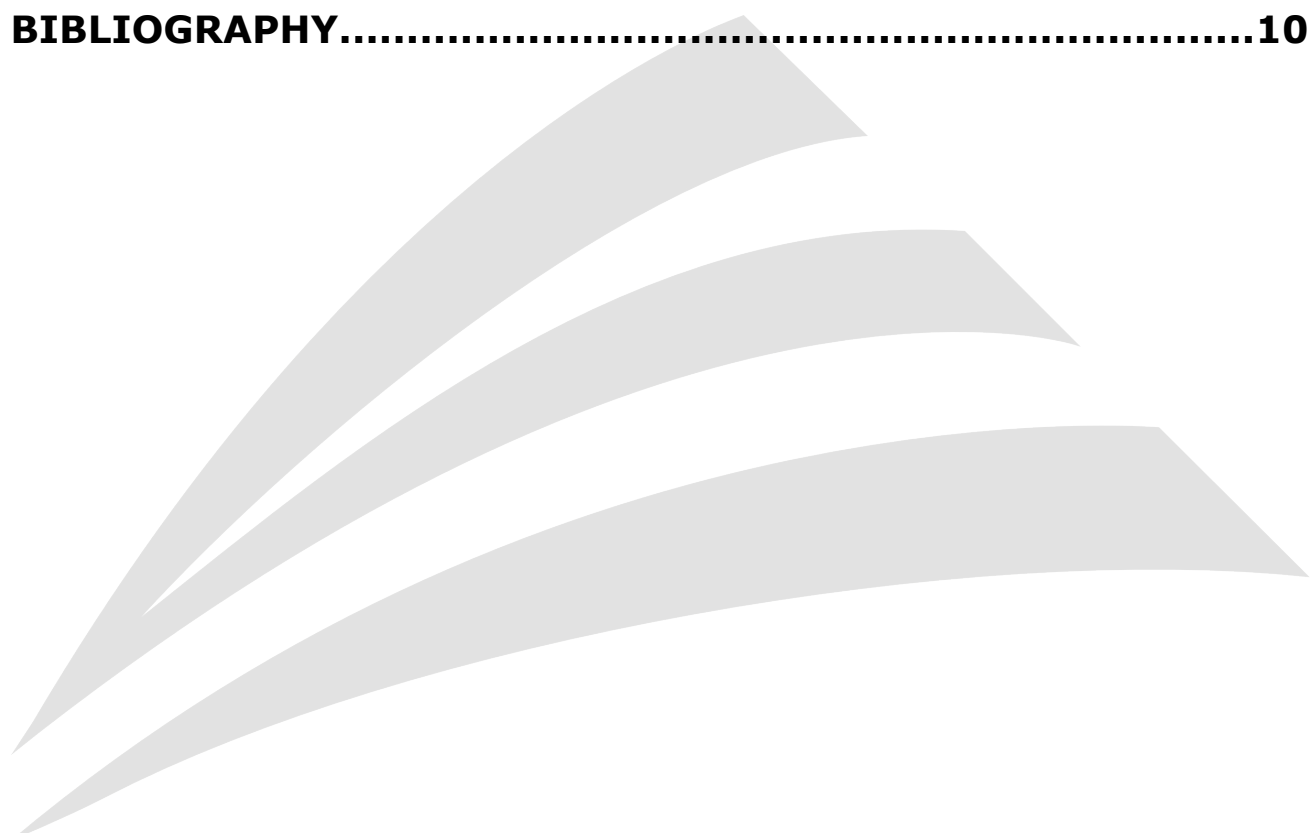
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INTRODUCTION

Paul J. Meyer's statement "Communication, the human connection, is the key to personal and career success", encapsulates a fundamental truth about the essence of human interaction and achievement. In fact, communication by means of language is one of the most frequent and relevant actions in our daily lives, since we communicate through speech as in face-to-face situations, video calls, interviews and also through written texts such as emails or messages. According to our current legislation **Organic Law 3/2020**, the teaching of a foreign language must be based on the basic knowledge of communication, multilingualism and interculturality. Likewise, **RD 217/2023** emphasizes the importance of the development of plurilingual competence, highlighting the acquisition of strategies to make our students aware of the importance of linguistic aspects that help in our interpretations of meaning.

This being so, and particularly in the case of learning English as a second language, students must learn how words are formed and how they can build their own lexicon, since word-formation may help them acquire a higher command of the said language. As Chomsky argued, languages are composed of a limited set of rules which, combined with lexical categories, allow learners and speakers to express an unlimited range of meanings. It is precisely these categories, words, which interest us.

This topic aims to provide an account of what lexicon is and how words are formed through major and minor processes. In addition, we will see how word-formation can be implemented into FL classroom settings, and finally, a sharp conclusion will be offered.

1. LEXICON

The vocabulary of any language is a living entity, and anyone should bear in mind that the word stock of a language is in constant change. This means that new words are continuously coming to any language (*neologisms*) while others are no longer used (*archaisms*).

In a broad sense, the lexicon of a language is defined as the set of lexical items that constitute the vocabulary of a language. Nonetheless, it is true that the vocabulary of a language is an accumulation of words, it is not merely a list of random items. In fact, languages are not a single inventory of unconnected, isolated elements, but rather they have a structure. In order to set off with this unit, we shall first focus on lexicography.

The term **lexicography** refers to the procedure which deals with arranging and describing items of vocabulary in such works as dictionaries, glossaries, thesaurus and so on. Traditionally, it has been divided into two further categories namely **alphabetic lexicography**, whose best-known products are *dictionaries*, and **thematic lexicography** with *thesaurus*. Thus, focusing on the evolution of the modern dictionary, it is hard to ascertain what the first dictionary in history was because we find lists of words as far back as the Middle Ages. These lists were two-language dictionaries: Latin words with English translations. The first English-English word list was published in 1603, and it is usually regarded as the first English dictionary under the title of “**A Table Alphabetical**”, created by Robert Cawdrey (1603) and containing 2500 difficult words.

As the 17th century progressed, dictionaries grew larger and larger, adding other contributions such as **etymologies**. Yet, the figure of Dr. Samuel Johnson has been considered the greatest in lexicography during the 18th century. In fact, his dictionary intended to regulate the English language, compiling words based on use in literature as well as strong and clear definitions. Albeit it did not achieve its goal, it contributed enormously to the growth of lexicography with some innovations such as separating and numbering word meaning, and citing context to demonstrate the meaning of a word or its particular usages.

Nevertheless, the greatest lexicographical effort in England was that of the **Oxford English Dictionary**, published in the 19th century including historical evidence, etymologies and documented uses of words throughout the history of English. Moreover, it compiled all words in use since the year 1100 up to the date of publication. The main idea was the dictionary would draw its data from English writing and would not only give word meanings but rather cite contextual evidence to verify the meaning that had been given.

On American ground, Noah Webster is known as the pioneer of lexicography. He brought out his greatest effort in 1828 under the title “**An American Dictionary of the English Language**” which, in a sense, meant to be an American counterpart of Johnson’s dictionary.

Considering the linguist Saussure, language is not a system of signs but rather a structure of interdependent elements, being external and internal. In a bid to better understand the process of word formation in English, in the forthcoming sections the main processes will be analysed.

2. MAIN WORD-FORMATION PROCESSES IN ENGLISH

Whereas **lexicography** refers to the procedure of arranging items in dictionaries, **morphology** is the domain of linguistics that deals with the study of the internal structure and construction of words. A **morpheme** refers to the essential minimal unit of grammatical analysis, that is to say, the smallest unit of meaning. Thus, we can find different word-formation processes in English following Bauer (1983) and Pyles and Algeo (1982). In this section, we are going to focus on some of the processes to end up with the analysis of the two major processes of word-formation, compounding and derivation, in the last section.

- a. **CREATING NEW WORDS:** processes whereby new terms have been coined, not deriving or based on already existing ones. This group includes: **Root creations**, which are very rare as they do not relate to any formerly existing word (*kodak*). **Echoic words**, commonly known as onomatopoeias, which are sound-based (*cuckoo*). Finally, **ejaculations** are vocal responses to different emotional situations such as *ouch*, expressing pain or surprise.
- b. **SHORTENING WORDS:** a process whereby an existing word is reduced in form (signifier) and thus presents two signifiers standing for the same signified. This group includes: **Clipping** when a lexeme is shortened but retaining the same meaning and same word class (brother > *bro*, laboratory > *lab*). **Acronyms**, they consist of picking out the initial letter of some words and thus form a new one (*EU*-European Union, *UK*-United Kingdom). **Aphetic forms**, a phenomenon in which there is a sound change as a variety of ellipsis, when the initial unstressed syllable is lost (because > *cause* and about > *bout*). **Back Formation** is the elimination of part of a word to form a new one (*baby-sitter* (N) > *baby-sit* (V)). Last, **abbreviation**, a shortened form of a word or phrase (e.g. *Dept.* - *Department* or *Mr.* - *Mister*).
- c. **BLENDING WORDS:** this process refers to the creation of a new lexeme from parts of two or more other words. Thus, two existing words are blended in order to create a new one, related to the meaning of the former words such as *brunch* formed out of breakfast and lunch or *motel* out of motor and hotel.
- d. **CONVERSION:** this process involves the change of a word from one word class to another with no change in form. It is also known as **zero-morpheme** and it is an extremely productive way of producing new words in English (for instance, *mail* as a noun or *to mail* as a verb).
- e. **BORROWING:** this process refers to a word or phrase adopted from one language into another (*curriculum* from Latin or *siesta* from Spanish). Moreover, within this group we may find **calques**, which are loan words where lexemes are translated item by item into their equivalent in the target language. English has received as well as provided many calques, for instance the word '*milky way*' has its origin in the Latin term '*via lactea*' or the Spanish word '*rascacielos*' which comes from its English equivalent '*skyscraper*'.

However, Aronoff (1976) stresses that word-formation rules are always optional. This means that it is always possible to avoid using a process of word-formation by providing for instance a description (paraphrase). As an example, we can use the word-formation *arrestee* or use a description such as *the person who was arrested* (the head word is a noun and the description is a relative clause). Now, the following section of the unit will be devoted to the major word-formation process: affixation.

3. DERIVATION OR AFFIXATION

Within derivation we may find two main devices in order to achieve the combination of words, **prefixation** and **suffixation**, which are both regarded as **affixation**. As far as **prefixation** is concerned, prefixes are placed before the base and they usually modify meaning without changing the word class, that is to say, they have a **lexical function**. Thus, according to Greenbaum (1996), the semantic classification of English prefixes shows the following categories:

- **Time and order:** *fore-*, *pre-* meaning before as in *pre-war* or *foretell*; *post-* meaning after as in *post-war*; *ex-* meaning former as in *ex-president*, and *re-* meaning again as in *rewritten*.
- **Number:** *uni-/mono-* meaning one as in *unilateral*, *unisex* or *monosyllable*; *bi-/di-* meaning two as in *bilateral* or *dichotomy*; *tri-* meaning three as in *tripod*; and *multi-/poly-* meaning many as in *multilateral* or *polysemy*.
- **Place:** *super-* meaning over or above as in *superstructure*; *sub-* meaning under or beneath as in *subway*; *inter-* meaning between or among as in *international* or *interpersonal*, and *trans-* meaning across as in *transatlantic* or *transoceanic*.
- **Degree or size:** *arch-* meaning highest or supreme as in *archbishop*; *super-* meaning more than or above as in *superwoman*; *out-* meaning doing something better as in *outrun*; *sur-* meaning over or above as in *surplus* or *surpass*; *sub-* meaning under or lower than as in *substandard*; *over-* meaning too much as in *overdo*, *overwhelmed* and *oversized*, among others.
- **Reversative:** *un-* meaning to reverse as in *undo*; *de-* meaning reverse as in *decode* and *deforestation*, and *dis-* meaning reverse as in *discontent* or *disinfect*.
- **Negative:** *un-* as in *unwanted*; *non-* as in *non-smoker*; *in-/im-/il-* as in *incredible*, *impolite* or *illegal*; *dis-* as in *dislike* and *a-* as in *amoral*.
- **Pejorative:** meaning bad or wrong as in *maltreat*, *malnutrition* or *misfit*.

Similarly, **suffixation** can be said to be one of the most productive procedures for word-formation in English. A suffix is added to the base to form new words and unlike prefixes, a typical phenomenon and device within the use of suffixes is that of changing the word class, depending on the suffix added. Therefore, a word can experiment with different changes, from one class to another. According to Greenbaum, it is convenient to group them by attending to the class of base to which they are added.

- **Denominal:** from noun to adjective as in *childish* and *hopeful*; or from noun to adverb as in *wonderful* or *stainless*.
- **Deadjectival:** from adjectives to noun as in *happiness* and *criminal*, and from adjectives to adverbs as in *beautifully*.
- **Deverbal:** from verb to nouns as in *participant* and *refusal*, and from verbs to adjectives as in *readable* or *understandable*.

4. COMPOUNDING

Compounding is the second most productive word-formation process and it is defined as the combination of two or more lexemes together in order to form a new word with a meaning in some way different from that of its elements. There are different criteria for compounding classification:

1. **ORTHOGRAPHIC**: in which there are three different types. **Hyphenated**: two forms joined together by a hyphen (*front-page*). **Solid**: two forms with no separation (*outgoing*). **Open**: two forms separated (*ice cream*).
2. **PHONOLOGICAL**: a more significant characteristic of compounds is their tendency to be more strongly **stressed** on one or the other of their elements. In compound nouns, it is usually the first element that gets the primary stress as in *`makeup*, *`greenhouse* and *`hotbed*. In compound adverbs and prepositions, the primary stress usually falls on the last element as in *wi`thout*. In compound verbs and pronouns, it is impossible to generalise as it varies as in *fulfill*. Another class within this category is **rhyme-motivated compounds** in which the rhyme between two elements is the major motivating factor in the formation as in *nitty-gritty* or *hokey-pokey*. Similar to this case, we find the **ablaut-motivated compounds** where a vowel change or alteration between two elements appears. The most common patterns are **i > æ** as in *zig-zag* and **i > o** as in *tick-tock*.
3. **SEMANTIC**: regarding its meaning, we can find some words in which the meaning is related, such as *darkroom*, or whose meaning is not related as in *greenhouse*.

We can classify compounds in different groups depending on their formation:

- **Nouns**: two nouns (*boyfriend*), ADJ+N (*fast-food*, *blackboard*), Particle+N (*undercooked*), N+V (*sunshine*), Phrase compounds (*mother-in-law*).
- **Adjectives**: ADJ+N+ed (*cross-eyed*), ADV + PP (*high-paid*, *well-known*), ADJ+PP (*good-looking*, *easy-going*).
- **Verbs**: N+V (*babysit*, *proofread*), V+V (*stir-fry*), Particle + V (*overlook*, *overcook*, *underestimate*).

There are other elements which seem to be borderline between affixation and compounding which are termed **combining words** (for instance, *electro-*, *hydro-*). However, it can be said that this type of combining forms cannot be normal affixes, because they behave differently from other affixes. So they can be considered for what they are etymologically: elements of the classical languages which are used in English word-formation. Recent examples are: *Anglophone*, *biocrat*, *electrophile*.

5. DIDACTIC INTERVENTION

The didactic implications of this topic are closely related to the development of learner's lexical competence, which constitutes a fundamental component of communicative competence. In accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), vocabulary acquisition plays a key role in enabling students to understand and convey meaning effectively in a wide range of communicative situations. Therefore, vocabulary should not be taught as a mere collection of isolated words, but rather as an interconnected system that allows learners to gradually expand their lexical repertoire.

Consequently, classroom practice should include activities aimed at promoting lexical awareness, such as *word families*, *semantic maps*, *vocabulary notebooks*, *lexical networks* and *contextualised reading tasks*. Furthermore, fostering students' ability to infer meaning from context and recognise patterns within the language contributes to the development of learner autonomy and plurilingual competence, both of which are emphasized in the current educational framework. In this way, vocabulary instruction enhances not only linguistic knowledge but also effective communication in real-life situations.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this topic, we have learnt what the lexicon is and how word-formation in English deals with various ways in which new words are created and existing ones are modified. Likewise, it involves understanding the processes of affixation, compounding, conversion and other linguistic mechanisms. In the same line, we should realize that language is not a closed, abstract system of signs; but rather a living corpus, integrated by human beings which awaken language in its everyday activities. The existence of word-formation procedures in languages as well as the relevance of borrowings from other languages is just a minor part of the dynamics of life.

As a matter of fact, this topic is particularly relevant in the teaching and learning of English because vocabulary constitutes the basis of communicative competence. Understanding how words are formed enables learners to expand their lexical repertoire, improve reading comprehension and develop greater accuracy in both oral and written production. Ultimately, word formation reflects the dynamic and creative nature of language, allowing English to continuously adapt to the communicative needs of its speakers while providing learners with effective tools for lifelong language development.

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