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# UNIT 4: WORD-FORMATION IN ENGLISH-3

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## Structure

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## 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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At the end of this unit, you should be able to distinguish

- five minor processes which are used in English for coining new words — back-formation, reduplication, blending, clipping and acronym-formation — from each other and from the major processes described in earlier units, and
- three processes of meaning change — generalization, specialization and change in connotations — and appreciate the way in which these processes lead to new uses for old words.

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The processes of word-formation we have discussed so far—inflection, derivation, conversion and compounding — are the most productive ways in which new words are created in English. There are, however, a few other, relatively minor, processes as well, which have nevertheless contributed to the enrichment of the English word-store in the past and which are still resorted to by English users wishing to express themselves concisely, accurately and creatively.

We can divide these minor processes into two broad types: **Coining** and **Meaning Change**. The difference between the two types is somewhat like the difference between

derivation and conversion: in derivation we add affixes to an existing word to create a new word; in conversion we just change the category of the word, use it in a different way, and get a new word. Similarly, in coining a new word we perform various kinds of operations on existing words, while in **Meaning Change** we change the use of a word by extending or narrowing its meaning. Both processes result in the creation of new lexical words, which are usually listed separately in the dictionary in those cases where the operations, or the meaning change, result in words with differences sufficient to defy an easy guess. The special importance of these processes lies in the fact that, without resorting to affixation, compounding or conversion, and simply by recycling the existing resources of the language, they supply the English language with a bonanza of new words.

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## 4.2 COINING

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The coining processes that we shall discuss are back-formation, reduplication, blending, clipping and acronym formation.

### 4.2.1 Back-formation

Back-formation reverses the normal process of word-formation by affixation: it creates new words by dropping, instead of adding, affixes. It drops affixes for two reasons: either because what it takes to be an affix is not in actual fact (historically speaking) an affix, or because when the word was first introduced in the language it came fully armed with an affix. Examples of the first type are **beg**, **burgle**, **edit**, **hawk**, **peddle** and a host of other verbs which are historically derived from nouns of a particular type. The special characteristic of these nouns is that they all have endings like **-er**, **-ar** or **-or**, all pronounced alike as /ə/. For example, **beg** comes from **beggar**, descended most probably from the word **beghard**, the name of a mendicant brotherhood of the middle ages. Similarly, the words **burglar**, **editor**, **hawker**, and **pedlar** existed before the corresponding verbs were derived from them by dropping the endings. This most probably happened under the impression that their endings were agentive suffixes, the same that we find in nouns like **singer**, **dancer**, **worker**, **writer**, etc., and that the nouns were agentive nouns. The impression must have been undoubtedly reinforced by the fact that the endings were pronounced in the same way. In actual fact, the nouns were not agentive nouns but nouns describing occupations; moreover, they were monomorphemic and their endings were not suffixes at all. But once the nouns had been interpreted as agentive nouns, they were naturally expected to conform to the pattern of all agentive nouns. Now agentive nouns all have corresponding verbs (naturally, because they have been derived from them by adding the agentive suffix **-er**) and they are equal to the agentive noun minus the suffix. So these 'whole' words too were given corresponding verbs by dropping the 'suffixes'. Thus while the nouns **singer** and **dancer** were 'formed forwards' from the verbs **sing** and **dance**, the verbs **beg** and **burgle** were 'formed backwards' from the nouns **beggar** and **burglar**. This was the result of misinterpreting monomorphemic words as bimorphemic.

This type of back-formation can also be seen in words like **televise** ← **television** on the pattern of **revise** → **revision**. But note that the arrow in the former case points the other way, indicating that whereas **revision** is derived from **revise** by suffixation, **televise** is derived from **television** by back-formation, since it was the word **television** that came first. It was derived by adding the prefix **tele-** (meaning 'distant') to the word **vision** (seeing) and had no connection, except through the common Latin root, with the word **revision**. Some other examples of back-formation of this type are the following:

abduct <- abduction  
 automate <- automation  
 donate <- donation  
 investigate <- investigation

appreciate <- appreciation  
 create <- creation  
 grovel <- grovelling  
 non-cooperate <- non-cooperation

The second type of back-formation is found mostly in the case of verb compounds (like *stage-manage* <- *stage-m-anager*, *globe-trot* <- *globe-trotter*, *house-keep* <- *housekeeper*), all back-formed (like this word itself) from noun compounds. In this type, the source word does have an affix, a suffix, and it is dropped too to form the verb, but before this is done, the suffix undergoes a sort of status change. For example, in the words cited above, the agentive deverbal noun suffix *-er* belongs to the second word, and is in construction with the verb stem, a relationship which we can depict as follows:

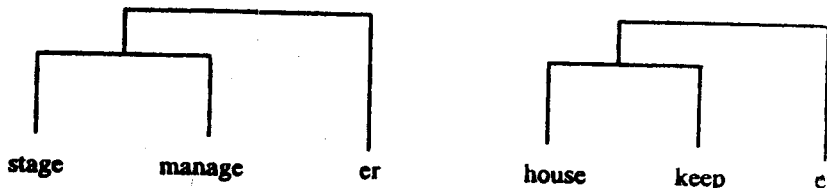


The compound noun is derived by combining this derived noun with another noun, as follows:



Accordingly, these compounds are seen to have their sources in the sentences 'X manages the stage' and 'X keeps house' respectively.

Now, when the suffix is dropped, it is treated as if it belonged not to the root verb ('manage' and 'keep' respectively) but to the compound verb as stem, as though the compound verb existed before the compound noun did. In other words, the structure of the compound noun is interpreted not as given above but as follows:



Only by reinterpreting the structure of the compound noun can the suffix be dropped to yield the verbs *stage-manage* and *housekeep* with the intended meanings.

Back-formations of this kind are not confined to agentive noun compounds only. They are also to be found with instrumental noun compounds (*type-write* <- *typewriter*; *tape-record* <- *tape-recorder*), gerundive noun compounds (*sleep-walk* <- *sleep-walking*, *sight-see* <- *sightseeing*), and various other kinds of noun and adjective compounds (*self-destruct* <- *self-destruction*, *back-form* <- *back-formation*, *dry-clean* <- *drycleaned*, *hand-wash* <- *handwashed*, and so on). The somewhat dubious nature of the verbs derived in this way is clear from the fact that not all of them seem to enjoy the full status of a verb. Thus, while some of them now have full inflectional paradigms (e.g., *tape-recording*, *tape-recorded*; *self-destructing*, *self-destructed*; *sleep-walking*, *sleep-walked*), others still seem to lack it: for example, *type wrote* and *sight-saw* are still not quite acceptable.

Despite this hesitation, back-formation as a creative device of word-formation continues to enjoy great popularity. Some more recent, and striking, instances of back-formation are *laze* (verb) from the adjective *lazy*, *kudo* (meaning 'praise') from the noun *kudos*

mishmash	ping-pong	pitter-patter	tiptop
riff-raff	ding-dong	shilly-shally	flip-flop
dilly-dally	sing-song	tittle-tattle	seesaw

If we were to classify reduplicatives on the basis of the meanings they suggest, we could put them in the following four categories (Quirk et al: 1579):

- (i) Compounds which imitate sounds: **tick-tock, bow-wow**, etc.
- (ii) Compounds which suggest alternating movements: **seesaw, flip-flop, ping-pong**
- (iii) Pejorative compounds, which suggest instability, nonsense, insincerity, vacillation, etc.: **hanky-panky, harum-scarum, helter-skelter, higgledy-piggledy, mumbo-jumbo, nitwit, wishy-washy, dilly-dally, shilly-shally**
- (iv) Compounds which intensify: **tiptop, teeny-weeny**

It should also be noted that most reduplicatives are highly informal or familiar words and are generally avoided in the formal style of speech and writing. In fact, quite a good number of them are confined to the sphere of child-parent talk.

### 4.2.3 Blends

Blends are words coined by combining elements from two other words. We have all come across such words in advertisements, since advertisers and copy-writers are rather fond of this device for creating new brand-names and their descriptions. Thus, a new two-wheeler is called **Fantabulous**, which blends elements from the two words **fantastic** and **fabulous**; a new swimsuit is advertised as a **swimsation**, combining elements from **swimsuit** and **sensation**; a gramophone into which you can dictate letters to be recorded is called a **dictaphone**; computer accessories are called **compucessaries**, and so on. However, blends created by playful copywriters do not usually enjoy a long life and are often criticized as jargon.

Blending however has a long history and one can find literary writers resorting to blends even during Shakespeare's times. Dean Colet (c. 1512) used the blend 'blatterature' to describe what he thought was the bad and 'blind' literature of his times; Robert Greene (c. 1590) lampooned the 'foolosophers' and the 'foolosophy' of his times; Samuel Purchase (c. 1613) talked about the 'knavigations of false dicoverers', and so on. Some of the most well known blends of English come from Lewis Carroll's 'Through the Looking Glass' (1872) where Humpty Dumpty refers to them as 'portmanteau words': 'two meanings packed up into one word.' Some of these portmanteau words are **slithy** (*lithe* + *slimy*), **mimsy** (*flimsy* + *miserable*) and **chortle** (*chuckle* + *snort*).

Till the twentieth century however blends were used mostly for fun as puns or terms of mockery. It was only towards the middle of the twentieth century that blends started to be coined consciously to produce serious and permanent additions to the vocabulary. And already English has a large store of them.

These blends can be classified into three types:

- (a) **Phonaesthetic blends:** *flimmer, shumbling, squeelch, squirrel*
- (b) **Compound blends:** *aerobatics, brunch, Oxbridge, smog*
- (c) **Group forming blends:** *cavalcade, motorcade, execute, electrocute*

#### Phonaesthetic blends:

J.R.Firth, the British linguist, used the term 'phonaesthesia' to refer to the occurrence of

persisted and now the word has been generalized from a type of person to a type of mentality as expressed in 'too much concern with material possessions and social prestige, a desire for conservative respectability, lack of imagination and indifference towards the arts', etc.

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## 4.4 LET US SUM UP

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1. Coining and meaning-change are two other ways in which new words have been added to the English language.
2. There are five coining processes which have been particularly fruitful: back-formation, reduplication, blending, clipping and acronym formation.
3. Back-formation refers to the process by which a word is derived from another word by dropping an affix, sometimes a supposed affix.
4. Reduplication involves repetition of the whole or part of the root. Reduplication of the whole root in a word usually conveys repetition, continuation, disparagement or disapproval. Partially duplicating compounds are of two types: rhyme motivated or ablaut motivated.
5. Blends are words coined by combining elements from two other words. Blends are of three types: phonaesthetic, compound and group-forming.
6. Clipping, means shortening of a word by dropping some part of it. There can be three kinds of clipping: Fore-clipping, Back-clipping and Fore-and-Aft clipping.
7. Acronyms are words formed from the first letters of a series of words usually constituting a name, provided these letters form a pronounceable 'word', the letters are called 'alphabetisms' or 'initialisms'. Frequently used acronyms tend to acquire the status of words. They are written in small letters, without periods, and in some cases tend to undergo the same word-formation processes as do normal words.
8. Meaning change is a non-morphological process of word formation. It does not create new phonological words but does at times create new lexical words. Mostly, however, it simply increases polysemy by adding new senses to existing words.
9. Meaning-change is of three types: generalization, specialization and change in connotations.

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## 4.5 KEY WORDS

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**Acronym:** An acronym is a 'letter word' i.e. a word formed from the first letters of a series of words constituting the name of an organization, a scientific product, process, etc., if it is pronounced as a single word and not as a series of letters.

**Alphabetism (or Initialism):** A 'letter word' which is pronounced as series of letters and not as a single word

**Back-formation:** The process by which a word is derived from another word by dropping an affix, sometimes a supposed affix.

**Compound Blends:** Compounds blends are consciously constructed compounds in which parts of two words are combined in such a way that the second element of the compound represents the main meaning and the first element a modification.

Phonologically too, the compounds have the stress pattern of the word that contributes the second word.

**Group-forming blends:** Group-forming blends are blends containing a group-forming element. A group-forming element is an affix that imposes a specific meaning on the stems and thus gives the resulting words a characteristic which marks them as a member of a group. Grouping can also be phonological.

**Phonaesthetic Blends:** Phonaesthetic blends are blends which combine phonaesthetic elements from two other words.

**Clipping:** The shortening of a long word by dropping some part of it.

**Back-clipping:** When the shortening is achieved by dropping the end part of the word, it is called back-clipping.

**Fore-and Aft clipping:** When the shortening is achieved by dropping parts from the beginning and the end of a word and retaining only the middle part, it is called fore-and-aft clipping.

**Fore-clipping:** When the shortening is achieved by dropping a part from the front of the word, it is called fore-clipping.

**Coining:** Creating new words through processes like back-formation, blending, acronym formation, reduplication, clipping, etc.

**Meaning Change:** A non-morphological process of word-formation. Though no new words are created, the old words acquire new uses, which is equivalent to getting new words.

**Amelioration:** A case of meaning change through change in connotations: when the change leads to the meaning of the word becoming less negative or more positive, the change in meaning is said to be ameliorative.

**Generalization:** When the meaning of an existing word is extended to apply to a new situation or experience, we have generalization.

**Generification:** when the meaning of a proper noun is extended to denote a generic product or activity, we have generification. It is a special case of generalization.

**Pejoration:** Another case of change in meaning through change of connotations: when the change of connotations leads to the meaning of the word becoming more negative, the meaning change is said to be pejorative.

**Specialization:** Specialization occurs when the meaning of a word changes to become narrower than before. It is the reverse of generalization.

**Reduplication:** A process of word-formation. In this process a new compound word is created by repeating the whole or part of a root.

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## 4.6 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**On Back-formation:** Adams: Ch. 7; Akmajian et al: 34; Jespersen: Sec. 29.3; Katamba: PP. 183-4; Marchand: Pt. VI; McArthur: Entry for 'Back-formation'; Quirk et al: I. 71

**On Reduplication:** Jespersen: Ch. X; Katamba: P. 79; Marchand: pt. VIII; McArthur: Entry for 'Reduplication'; Sapir: p. 76

**On Blends:** Adams: Chs 11,12,13, Katamba; pp 184-5; McArthur: Entry for 'Blends'; Marchand: Pt.X

**On Clipping:** Adams: Ch. X; Katamba: pp. 180-82; Marchand: pt ix; Quirk et al: I. 74

**On Acronyms:** Adams: Ch. 10; Akmajian et al: pp. 23-4; Katamba: p. 182; McArthur: Entry for 'Clipping'; Quirk et al: I. 75

**On Meaning Change:** Akmajian et al: pp. 24-5,42; Katamba: pp. 173ff.; McArthur: Entry for 'Semantic Change'; Ullman: Ch. 8 (Advanced)

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## 4.7 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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1. With the help of a good dictionary, find out the meanings of the following words and then comment on the way the words were formed:  
Con (verb); deli (noun); donate; enthuse; intuit; liase; piano; pro (as in 'a tennis pro'); walkie-talkie; workaholic
2. Give the source words for the following clippings and identify the type of clipping:  
brolly; bus; flu; gym; limo; movie; perm; porn; pub; van
3. What do the following reduplicatives mean? Identify (a) the particular shade of negative meaning that you find associated with each and (b) the type (rhyme-motivated or ablaut motivated) of compounding involved.  
goody-goody; higgledy-piggledy; hocus-pocus; namby-pamby; wishy-washy
4. We have mentioned cr-, st- and -sh as phonaesthetic consonant clusters. Give examples of at least two more clusters of this type. Support your answer by citing at least four words containing the cluster and the special shades of meaning associated with them.

5. Identify the blend type and give the source words:  
aerobatics; astrodome; chunnel; oceanaut; seascape
6. What do you think the following blends mean/denote: Give the source words:  
bionic; CocaColonization; daymare; Hinglish; Quasar; smothercate; solemncholy;  
stagflation
7. We have given several examples of metaphoric extensions of word meanings from one area of experience to another, e.g., from sea voyage to space exploration, from food to ideas, etc. Give two similar examples from your own experience.
8. What do you think does the word 'meat' mean in the word 'sweetmeat'? This meaning of 'meat' survives from old English. Considering this, does the modern meaning of the word 'meat' represent a case of generalization or specialization of meaning?
9. The following English words have been derived from the Latin originals are given below with their meanings. Knowing the current meaning of the descended English words, what kind of semantic change do you notice from Latin to English?

Latin Word	Meaning	English word
Spiritus	'breath'	'spirit'
delirare	'to go out of the furrow' 'lira'='furrow'	'delirium'
definire	'to set bounds to' (a field)	'define'
eliminare	'to put out of the threshold'	'eliminate'

10. Identify the type of change in the connotations in the following cases:
  - (a) The words 'cavalary' 'chivalry', etc. can be traced to the French word 'cheval' meaning 'horse', which comes from the Latin 'caballus' meaning 'workhorse'.
  - (b) The word 'knave' can be traced to Old English 'cnafa', meaning 'boy'.
11. The English word 'baron' (French 'baron') can be traced to Old Latin \baron\ meaning 'strong man'. In Classical Latin, this word came to mean 'a lout', because Latin intellectuals looked down on physical strength. Still later, in Italian, the word came to mean 'scoundrel' or 'knave'. When the word was borrowed in French, it revived the 'strong man' meaning under the influence of feudalism, and later began to be used as a title of the nobility, the use which it has in English. Identify the type of connotation change (a) from Old Latin to Classical Latin and Italian, and (b) from Italian to French and English.

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## NOTES ON QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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1. 'con' = To cheat, to play a confidence trick. From 'confidence trick' -> (a) con (noun) by back clipping; conversion to 'con' (verb)
- 'deli' = 'shop selling unusual and imported prepared foods'. From 'delicatessen' by back clipping.
- 'donate' = 'to give voluntarily. From 'donation' by back-formation.
- 'enthuse' = 'show great interest and eagerness'. From 'enthusiasm' by back-formation.
- 'intuit' = 'to sense by intuition'. From 'intuition' by back-formation.



- 'liase' = 'act as a link or go-between'. From 'liaison' by back-formation.
- 'piano' = 'a musical instrument'. From 'pianoforte' by back-clipping.
- 'pro' = 'a professional'. From 'professional' (noun) by back-clipping.
- 'walkie-talkie' = 'small portable radio transmitter and receiver' ('talk as you walk'). A case of rhyme-motivated reduplication.
- 'workaholic' = 'person who works obsessively'. A blend of 'work' and 'alcoholic'
- 'brolly' : From 'umbrella' by back-clipping
- 'bus' : From 'omnibus' by fore-clipping
- 'flu' : From 'influenza' by fore-and-aft clipping
- 'gym' : From 'gymnasium' by back-clipping
- 'limo' : From 'limousine' by back-clipping
- 'movie' : From 'a moving picture' by back-clipping
- 'perm' : From 'permanent wave' by back-clipping
- 'porn' : From 'pornography' by back-clipping
- 'pub' : From 'public house' by back-clipping
- 'van' : From 'caravan' by fore-clipping
- goody-goody : 'person who behaves so as to appear good and virtuous'  
(a) Insincerity (b) Rhyme motivated
- higgledy-piggledy: 'mixed up', 'not in any order'. (a) 'lacking orderliness' (b) Rhyme motivated
- hocus-pocus : 'nonsense' (a) Deception (b) Rhyme motivated
- namby-pamby: 'lacking in any definite colour, ideology, character, etc.'  
(a) feebleness, indecision (b) Ablaut motivated

Several answers are possible.

- aerobatics : Group-forming; aeronautics + acrobatics
- astrodome : Group-forming; astronaut + aerodrome
- chunnel : Compound blend; channel + tunnel
- oceanaut : Group-Forming; ocean + astronaut
- seascape : Compound blend; sea + landscape

biotic : 'using artificial materials and methods to produce a human activity or movement'. **biology & electronic**

CocaColonization: 'Americanization of values and life styles'; Coca Cola+ colonization

daymare: 'nightmare during the day'

Hinglish: 'the type of English spoken, written, etc. by Hindi-speaking people

quasar: 'the centre of a very distant group of stars, producing a large amount of energy'; quasi and stellar

smothercate: 'suffocate by smothering'

**solemn**: 'solemn' and 'melancholy'

**stagflation**: 'an economic condition marked by reduced production, no economic growth and rising prices; from stagnation and inflation.'

7. Open Question.
8. Specialization.
9. Metaphoric extension, a case of generalization.
10. (a) ameliorative (b) pejorative
11. (a) pejorative (b) ameliorative