



English Vocabulary: A Constant Variable

Time changes all things: there is no reason why language should escape this universal law.

Ferdinand de Saussure, linguist (1857-1913)

Languages are in a state of constant change. English is a good example. The Old English of *Beowulf* (about 1000), or the Middle English of *The Canterbury Tales* (about 1388) looks completely foreign to modern English speakers. While “Whither goest thou?” or “I’m three score years and ten” would sound archaic today, people having difficulty understanding Shakespeare (1564 - 1611) would be surprised to learn that he wrote in (Early) Modern English.¹

Indeed English is a most creative and changeable language, and the emergence of new words is one of the most palpable changes in it. The main sources of new words include loan words from other languages, semantic change of existing words and word-building with Latin, Greek or English roots.

The English language is no stranger to borrowing from foreign tongues, notably French and Italian. Loan words usually refer to foreign things that become popular in Britain or the United States. Would you like to try picking some of the loan words from the following passage?

Before I went to the cinema, I ate a pizza in the restaurant in the food forum. The decor is pleasant and you can have a buffet there at the weekend. The entrées and main courses from the à la carte menu are also very good so it’s a great place for a rendezvous with your friends. But beware, if you are a gourmet, you will certainly need a siesta afterwards!²

Many of these loan words are about food and eating. When it comes to food words, Chinese has much to offer, to name a few: *soy*, *dim sum*, *ketchup*, and, of course, *chop suey* and *tofu*. Loan words from other cultural aspects include *feng shui*, *kung fu*, *tai chi* and *tai pan*.

With the Internet spreading English far and wide, new words are added to the language every year. How are these words invented? Susie Dent, a language expert, has the answer: “The extraordinary thing about new words is that probably only about one percent of them are new.³ Most are old words revived and adapted”. Semantic change of an old word, namely specialisation, generalisation and metaphorical change of a word, is a common way of coining new words. For example, *liquor* originally meant any liquid. Over time

it narrowed in scope to mean strong alcoholic drink. *Grasp* originally referring to holding something in the hand came to mean comprehend. *A bureau* was once a woollen covering used to cover a desk. It eventually came to mean the desk itself and then the office that used the desks.

Apart from semantic change of an old word, word-building by affixation (e.g. *debug* and *ageist*), abbreviation (e.g. *British Broadcasting Corporation* yields *BBC*) and blending (e.g. *brunch* (breakfast + lunch) and *infotainment* (information + entertainment)) is a major source of new words. Some new words such as *body count* and *joyriding* are formed to describe new events while others such as *chairperson* and *follically challenged* are created to suit the current mood of political correctness. In addition, technological development, scientific discovery, the worlds of computing and communications, as well as environmental concerns also contribute constantly to the English word bank.

Affixation is the most common type of new word formation. It is the formation of words by adding prefixes and suffixes to a root, or to existing words, to give a new meaning. Examples of prefixation include *cybercrime* (the prefix *cyber* + *crime*) meaning criminal activities carried out on computers or the Internet, and *astrobiology* (the prefix *astro* (referring to stars and to outer space) + *biology*) meaning the branch of biology concerned with the discovery or study of life on other planets. Examples of suffixation include *satphone* (*sat* (derived from *satellite*) + the suffix *phone*) meaning a telephone that transmits its signal via a geostationary communications satellite, and *dot-commer* (*dot-com* + the suffix *er*) meaning one who works, especially in a professional or managerial capacity, for an Internet business.

English has been the fastest-moving language for 100 years. The world is changing all the time, and so is the English language. New words are always invented to meet temporary needs and many of them disappear soon after they are coined. Those that have managed to achieve permanence in a dictionary must be the ones that came into popular use or have enjoyed a vogue for a given period. While *celeb* (1913), *ceasefire* (1918), *pop culture* (1921), *megabucks* (1946) and *Internet* (1992) are still very much alive today, the bulk of coined words have sunk into oblivion. Nevertheless, each new word, however short its life may be, tells a story about its environment and says something about the concerns and trends of its time.



¹ Modern English can be dated back to 1500, when the English language was transitioning from Middle English to Modern English. The principal distinction between Early- and Late-Modern English lies in vocabulary. Pronunciation, grammar and spelling are largely the same, but Late-Modern English has many more words.

² Loan words from
Italian: pizza
Spanish: siesta
French: decor, buffet, entrées, à la carte menu, rendezvous, gourmet

³ The word *Okay*, for example, did not exist before the 20th century and now has global usage in many languages.