

WORD FORMATION (WORD-BUILDING) IN ENGLISH

By Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy

Vietnam National University of Agriculture

1. Introduction

Lexicology which can be defined as ‘the study of the vocabulary items (LEXEME) of a language, including their meanings and relations, [...] and changes in their form and meaning through time (Richards *et al.*, 1992, p. 212), is an obligatory subject in English BA programme at Vietnam National University of Agriculture. One of the main subject matters of lexicology is word-formation or word-building which means ‘the creation of new words’ (Richards *et al.*, 1982, p.407). In another word, word-formation is the process of building new words from the material already existing in the language according to certain structural and semantic patterns and formulae. In English, there are several ways of creating new words including the addition of an affix (affixation), the removal of an affix (back-derivation), the shortening of an old word, as when *Vietnam National University of Agriculture* becomes *VNUA*, the building of a new word by joining two or more words (compounding), the imitation of natural sound (onomatopoeia), the repetition of a word or part of a word (reduplication), the building of a new word in a different part of speech without adding any element (conversion), the formation of a new word by changing the root vowel or consonant of the old word (sound interchange), the creating of new words by using proper names as common nouns (eponymy), and so on.

The subject matter of word-formation is, of course, not simple words but the ones that are analyzed structurally and semantically, i.e. derived and compound words. Thus, word-formation goes into such words as “*teacher, mouthy, bread-maker*” but not “*teach, mouth, bread*” and “*make*”.

2. Word-formation

2.1. Affixation: is the formation of new words by adding derivational affixes to different types of bases. Affixes consist of prefixes and suffixes, therefore affixation is divided into prefixation and suffixation. Both prefixes and suffixes can be grouped according to the lexicogrammatical character of the base into: deverbal (derived from verb), denominal (derived from noun) and deadjectival (derived from adjectival).

Prefixes:

Denominal: e.g. *ex-president, subway, subsoil, disadvantage, disapproval, superstructure, pre-war, post-listening, foreknowledge, outnumber, ultrasound, submarine, contraception, overnight*, etc.

Deverbal: e.g. *revisit, uncover, untie, disorientate, decentralize, overwork, maltreat, disconnect, superimpose, mispronounce*, etc.

Deadjectival: e.g. *unhappy, unbearable, non-scientific, incorrect, illegal, intercontinental, transatlantic, pseudo-intellectual, irregular, impatient, retroactive, antisocial, untidy*, etc.

Suffixes:

Denominal: e.g. *jobless, windy, rocky, wooden, woolen, poisonous, racism, kitchenette, heroism, kingdom, authorship, mountaineer, bookish, helpful, childhood, novelty, lioness, horsemanship, troublesome, beautify, lengthen, Vietnamese, weekly, budget-wise, seaward, skyward, twentyish, bearded, talented, monkeyish*, etc.

Deverbal: e.g. *winner, approval, drinkable, visible, explanation, delivery, accessible, inventor, appearance, marriage, trainee, suggestive, dependence, assistance, storage, management*, etc.

Deadjectival: e.g. *widen, shorten, deepen, likeliness, industrialize, modernize, solidify, darkish, greenish*, etc.

2.2. Compounding (or word-composition) can be defined as “a combination of two or more words which functions as a single word” (Richards et al, 1982, p. 72). A compound word (or just “compound” for short) is therefore a word that consists of at least two root morphemes: E.g. *school-boy; red-tapeism; happy-go-lucky; easy-going; whole-heartedly*, etc.

There are a number types of compounds classified according to the parts of speech such as compound nouns, compound adjectives, compound verbs, compound adverbs and compound prepositions.

Compound nouns: A compound noun is often a fixed expression which is made up of more than one word and functions as a noun. Such expressions are frequently combinations of two nouns, e.g. *door-handle, address book, human being, mother-tongue, lady-killer, black-board*. A number of compound nouns are related to phrasal verbs, e.g. *pin-ups, break-up, walk-out, crack-down, break-out, shake-up, turnover, outlets, check-out, cutbacks, output, dropout, printout, breakthrough, outlook, drawbacks, feedback, setup, bypass*, etc.

Compound adjectives: A compound adjective is an adjective which is made up of two parts and is usually written with a hyphen, e.g. *hot-tempered, well-dressed, never-ending, shocking-pink, burn-out, duty-free, hand-made, last-minute, world-famous, record-breaking, second-class, time-consuming, top-secret, off-peak, part-time, so-called, long-standing, interest-free, sugar-free, easy-going, two-faced, quick-witted, up-and-coming*. A number of compound adjectives are special with the second part as a preposition, e.g. an *all-out* strike, a *burn-out* car, a *broken-down* bus, a *built-up* area, a *hard-up* student, *cast-off* clothes, *worn-out* shoes, *well-off* bankers, a *run-down* area.

Compound verbs: Most compound verbs originally have the collective meaning of both components, but some of them later gain additional meanings that may predominate the original, accurate sense. Some examples of compound verbs are: *whitewash, breastfeed, bottle-feed, tape record, overrate, underline, outrun, downsize, upgrade, blacklist, foul mouth, browbeat, sidestep, manhandle, out-fox, team-teach*.

Compound adverbs: *whole-heartedly, self-confidently, therein, herein.*

Compound prepositions: *onto, into.*

2.3. Shortening (or clipping) is the word formation process which consists in the reduction of a word to one of its parts (Marchand, 1969). Shortening is also a very productive way of building words in English. New words formed by shortening appear continuously. Shortening is especially productive in colloquial speech and advertisement. It can be considered a good way of creating roots (root morphemes) since new morphemes are used as free roots and can take endings, e.g. *exam, flu, ad, bike, fridge, movie, TV, V-day, smog, brunch.*

The following are the specific types of shortening.

(i) **Acronyms:** are words built from the initial letters of multiword expressions and read as regular words, e.g. *NATO* /'neɪ.təʊ/ (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), *UNO* (United Nations Organization), *BBC* (The British Broadcasting Corporation), *VOA* (the Voice of America), *UNESCO* (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), *VIP* (a very important person), *PM* (Prime Minister), *MP* (Member of Parliament), *OPEC* (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), *AIDS* (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), *AWOL* (absent without leave), etc.

It is interesting to include here two special cases of acronyms: monograms and homonymy-based acronyms. Monograms are two or more letters combined in one design. They are usually used in handkerchiefs, notepaper and in Vietnam, very common in wedding invitation cards. Homonymy-based acronyms are based on the use of identical sounds of words and letters, e.g. *I. O. U* (I owe you), *CU* (see you), *HAND* (Have a nice day), *NGU* (Never give up), *DIY* (Do it yourself), *MNOP* (Meet now or pause), *WYSIWYG* (What you see is what you get), *PTO* (Please turn over), *BBL* (Be back later), *MIA* (missing in action), etc.

(ii) Clipping

- Initial clipping: the first part of a word is clipped: *phone, car, plane.*

- Final clipping: the last part of a word is clipped: *exam, lab, sis, uni, prof.*

- Initio - final clipping: both the first and the last parts are clipped: *fridge, fly,* etc.

- Medial clipping: the medial part is clipped: *maths, specs, V-day, H-bomb.*

- Elliptico - conversational clipping (phrasal clipping: this is a special case in which there is a combination of ellipsis, conversion and clipping, e.g. *sitdown* (a sitdown demonstration); *pop* (popular music); *pub* (public house); *perm* (permanent wave); *prelim* (preliminary examination))

(iii) **Blendings (Blends):** also called fusions, portmanteau-words are words that are created from parts of two already existing items, usually the first part from one and the second part from the other, e.g. *brunch* (from breakfast & lunch), *smog* (smoke & fog), *motel* (motor & hotel), *subtopia* (suburban & utopia), *moped* (motor-assisted pedal-cycle), *heliport* (place where helicopters take off and land), *muppet* (marionette + puppet), *numeracy* (literacy + numbers: good basic knowledge of mathematics), *blog* (web + log), *high-tech* (high + technology), *staycation* (stay + vacation), *emoticon* (emotion + icon), *sitcom* (situation + comedy), *spam* (spiced + ham), *chunnel* (channel + tunnel), *aerobicize* (aerobics + exercise), *bit* (binary + digit), *Reaganomics*, *Oxbridge*, *netizen*, *infotainment*, *medicare*, *Brexit*, *Sci-fi*, *infotech*, etc. Obviously, the mechanism of blending is characterized by certain productivity,

which is well demonstrated by such new coinages as rockumentary, infomercial, etc., and is indicative of the tendency towards brief expression and multiplicity of notions fusing to form a complex one.

2.4. Conversion: is the formation of a new word in a different part of speech without adding any element. Conversion is also called “functional change” or “zero derivation”, e.g. *lecture* → *to lecture*; *hand* → *to hand*; *to drop out* → *a drop out*; *to go* → *a go*; *up* → *to up*.

The difference between the words in each pair is morphological, syntactic and semantic:

- **Morphological:** the verb “*to arm*”, for example, has a new paradigm (the system of forms): *arm* - *armed* - *arming*.

- **Syntactic:** the function of “*to arm*” is new, it is predicate: ‘*Nobody knows who is arming the terrorists*’

- **Semantic:** the verb “*to arm*” has a completely new meaning: *to furnish or equip with weapons*, but “*arm*” is part of the body.

Conversion may be said to be most productive in forming verbs: *arm* → *to arm*; *elbow* → *to elbow*; *foot* → *to foot*; *skin* → *to skin*; *bottle* → *to bottle*; *honeymoon* → *to honeymoon*, *monkey* → *to monkey*, etc..

2.5. Sound imitation (onomatopoeia): is the way to form words by imitating sounds that resemble those associated by objects or actions or things to be named, or that seem suggestive of its qualities. Sound imitating or onomatopoeic words are motivated with reference to the extra-linguistic reality, they are echoes of natural words. This is also called phonetical motivation. Examples of onomatopoeic words in English include *cock-a-doodle-do*, *quack-quack*, *croak*, *mew*, *meow*, *moo*, *low*, *lullaby*, *twang*, *babble*, *blob*, *bubble*, *flush*, *gush*, *splash*, *whiz*, etc. Some names of animals, birds, and insects are produced by sound-imitation, e.g. *crow*, *cuckoo*, *humming-bird*, *whip-poor-will*, *cricket*, etc.

Thus, we can classify onomatopoeic words according to the source of sounds:

Verbs denoting sounds produced by human beings: e.g. *giggle*, *babble*, *grunt*, *chatter*, *grumble*, *murmur*, *whisper*, etc.

Sounds produced by animals, birds, insects: e.g. *cackle*, *buzz*, *croak*, *hiss*, *honk*, *mew*, *neigh*, *purr*, *bray*, *heehaw*, *chirp*, *coo*, *click*, *hoot*, *rat-tat*, *whinny*, *squeak*, *moo*, *roar*, *howl*, *crow*; *jargon*, *gabble*, *cuckoo*, etc.

Verbs imitating water, metallic things, forceful motions: e.g. *flush*, *splash*, *bubble*, *clink*, *tinkle*, *clash*, *crash*, *whip*, *whisk*, *echo*, *sizzle*, *patter*, *murmur*, *eddy*, *babble*, etc.

2.6. Back-derivation (back-formation): is the building of new words by subtracting a real or supposed affix from existing words. This is the opposite process to affixation. For instance, “*to beg*” was built from “*beggar*”, “*to baby-sit*” from “*baby-sitter*”. This means that the nouns “*beggar*, *baby-sitter*” appeared before the verbs formed from them hence the name **back-derivation**. Some common words built by back-derivation are: *to house-keep* (from *house-keeping*), *to edit* (from *editor*), *to escalate* (from *escalator*), *to televise* (from *television*), *bustle* (from *bustler*), *double-gaze* (from *double-gazing*), *to type-write* (from *type-writer*), *to explete* (from *expletive*), *to accreditate* (from *accreditation*), and so on.

2.7. Sound interchange: is a very unproductive way of word forming. The new word is built by changing the root vowel or consonant of the old word, e.g. *food* (n) -> *feed* (v), *sing* (v) -> *song* (n), *speak* (v) -> *speech* (n), *life* (n) -> *live* (v), *blood* (n) -> *bleed* (v), *breath* (n) -> *breathe*, *believe* (v) -> *belief* (n), *sit* (v) -> *seat* (n), etc.

It may be combined with affixation, e.g. *strong* (adj) -> *strength* (n) -> *strengthen* (v); *long* (adj) -> *length* (n) -> *lengthen* (v); *wide* (adj) -> *width* (n) -> *widen* (v); *deep* (adj) -> *depth* (n) -> *deepen* (v); *short* (adj) -> *shortage* (n) -> *shorten* (v); *high* (adj) - *height* (n) -> *heighten* (v); and so on.

2.8. Stress interchange: is also very unproductive in English word formation. The new word is built by changing the place of the stress on the old one, e.g. ‘*export* (n) → *ex’port* (v); ‘*perfect* (a) → *per’fect* (v); ‘*present* (n) → *pre’sent* (v); ‘*record* (n) → *re’cord* (v), ‘*import* (n) *im’port* (v), etc.

In modern English we cannot build new words by sound and stress interchange. It is a diachronical problem.

2.9. Eponymy: is a process of creating new words by using proper names as (mostly) common nouns, e.g. *biro* [ball-point pen] named after Laszlo Biro, its Hungarian inventor; *wellingtons* (after the Duke of Wellington), *braille* [name of a raised writing system used by blind people] from the name of its French inventor, Louis Braille. A number of words in English have originated from the names of people, e.g. *watt* [unit of power] from the 18th century Scottish inventor, James Watt; *boycott* [refuse to deal with or a refusal to deal with] after a landlord in Ireland who made himself unpopular by his treatment of his tenants and was socially isolated; *saxophone* [musical instrument] invented by the Belgian, Adolphe Sax; *mentor* [loyal and wise adviser] from Mentor, friend to Odysseus, etc. Sometimes, an eponym is created by adding a suffix to the proper name, e.g. by adding the suffix *-ism* - *Stalinism*, *Leninism*, *Maoism*, etc., or it becomes a different word class, e.g. by adding the suffixes *-ize*, *-ian*, etc. - to *pasteurize* (the French scientist Louis Pasteur), *Victorian* (after Queen Victoria), etc.

Quite a few names of types of clothing, particularly hats, originate from the people who invented them or made them popular, e.g. *bowler*, *triby*, *cardigan*, *busby*, *wellingtons* or *wellies*, *stetson*, *mackintosh* or *mac*, *leotard*, etc. A number of other words in English come from place names, e.g. *bedlam*, *Spartan*, *canter*, *gypsy*, etc.

2.10. Reduplication: is a word-formation process in which two phonetically similar or identical morphemes or pseudo-morphemes are combined. Reduplication can be considered to be a special kind of compounding, although the individual components of reduplicatives are often meaningless and emotionally/ stylistically colored. Reduplicatives may be divided into **rhyming** (e.g. *hocus-pocus*, *walkie-talkie*, *hurry-scurry*, etc.) and **non-rhyming** (e.g. *tip-top*, *chit-chat*, *zigzag*, etc.), or **full** (the two morphemes are identical in every aspect), e.g. *chop-chop*, *goody-goody*, *no-no*, *poo-poo*, *bye-bye*, etc. and **partial** (the two morphemes are not identical), e.g. *sing-song*, *tittle-tattle*, *hoity-toity*, etc.

3. Conclusion

In English language teaching and learning, having a good demand of lexicology in general and word-formation or word-building in particular is of great importance. The above ten ways of word-formation (affixation, compounding, shortening, sound imitation, conversion, back-derivation, sound & stress interchange, eponymy and reduplication) can be a great help for learners and teachers when learning and teaching English so that they can use the language to communicate correctly, effectively and flexibly.

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