

Do you speak 2017? Aspects of Contemporary English

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Where do new words come from?

Where do new words come from? Who makes them up? How do they enter the language? New words have several sources, but the rather mundane answer to these questions is that most new English words are derived from other English words, and not made up at all. In fact, 5 two thirds of all new English words come about by joining existing words in a new combination – a process called compounding. Words such as *website*, *screensaver*, *airport*, *hatchback* and *football* are everyday examples of this.

The second most popular method of acquiring new words is to take them from other languages. This is euphemistically known as 'borrowing', although few are ever handed back. 10 Borrowing occurs primarily when the concept is supposedly alien and therefore not easily expressed in homespun English. Examples of this are *schadenfreude* (pleasure derived from others' misfortune) from German, *loiter* (to hang around with bad intent) from Dutch and the more innocuous *shampoo*, *veranda* and *pyjamas* from Hindi.

A third method is to load new meaning onto an existing word. These days a *desktop* is at 15 the same time both on your computer and the surface your computer sits on. And a *mouse* is attached to your computer while a *virus* wreaks havoc inside it. Today's young describe something they do not like as *pants* and something very good as *wicked*. A presumably similar process a few hundred years ago resulted in *brave*, which originally meant cowardly, taking on the opposite meaning it has today.

20 Another common method of coinage is the shortening of existing words. These days we take *exams*, work out at the *gym*, spend the evening in front of the *telly*, surf the *Net* and send *emails*. The latter is an example of a word which has very rapidly come about as the result of both shortening and compounding.

25 Once a word has been coined, speakers familiar with it start adapting its forms by adding an affix here and there and using it as a different part of speech and so on. Eventually, any new word will either survive and find itself in the next edition of the dictionary or disappear without trace. And there is usually no telling which words will suffer which fate. After all, who would have thought four hundred years ago that *monumental*, *majestic* and *excellent* would be among 30 the fifteen hundred or so words that Shakespeare invented that are in use today, while his equally descriptive and fabulous *tortive* and *vastidity* have passed into oblivion.

Like

A certain postmodern fondness for not knowing what you think about anything is perhaps reflected in the North American speech habit of inserting the word 'like' after every three or four words. It would be dogmatic to suggest that something actually *is* what it is. Instead, you must introduce a ritual tentativeness into your speech, in a kind of perpetual semantic slurring.

Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (2003)

TIP

You may hear people using the question tag *innit?* (a form of *isn't it?*). Many people consider this to be incorrect English, but it is quite common, especially in informal speech.

It's a great film, innit?

Some people also use it irrespective of the tense and subject of the preceding statement.

Kris's coming with us, innit?

Jon Hird, *Oxford Learner's Pocket Verbs and Tenses* (2013)

Portmanteauing

- referendum after referendum until the required result is obtained
- online socialising from the comfort of your own living room
- someone with entrepreneurial ambitions
- the anniversary of becoming FB friends
- camping which is luxurious and glamorous
- a holiday/vacation where you live
- a chair piled high with your clothes
- a photo that both a selfie and of what's in front of you
- the ☺ feeling you get when you run out of coffee

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ADVANCED USES OF VERBS

110 Verbing

A Verbing is the creation of a verb from a noun without making any changes to the form of the noun. It makes what we say shorter.

*I hope to get an **audition** for the part.*

*I hope to **audition** for the part.*

*I'll send you an **email**.*

*I'll **email** you.*

B The conversion of nouns to verbs has been a feature of the development of the English language for hundreds of years. Ancient verbs such as *rain* and *thunder* and more recent conversions such as *access*, *chair*, *debut*, *diagnose*, *highlight*, *host*, *impact*, *oil*, *pressure*, and *referee* were all originally nouns only.

*Alex **highlighted** the key problems.*

*Can you **oil** the bike chain?*

*Who **chaired** the meeting?*

*Harris **refereed** the game very well.*

C Some recent examples of nouns being converted to verbs include:

*Many children are not **parented** very well.*

*I was **conferencing** around Italy last month.*

*We're **hoping** that at least ten of our athletes will medal.*

*Ronaldo was **red carded** in the 85th minute.*

Jon Hird, *Oxford Learner's Pocket Verbs and Tenses* (2013)

