

Neologasming

Topics in Modern English Word Formation

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Abstract

How do we coin new words in English? In this paper I investigate the morphological and sociological processes surrounding a variety of novel word formation methods, particularly in the context of the internet age. I cover a variety of subtopics; libfixes, an abstract affixal part of a blend that is used frequently; mimetic word formation, i.e. the process of making words by analogy to others; imaginyms, words that like *gruntled* that are ‘implied’ by the removal of prefixes ; un-words, how the prefix *un-* can combine with words to create a variety of interesting meanings; and a brief look at how the turmoil of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 created a variety of new words. For each topic I describe the observed phenomenon, summarize prior research on it, provide a morphological analysis, and attempt to find the limits of its productivity. In doing the above I endeavor to further our understanding of English’s lexicon, specifically how intentional, creative use of language and wordplay can contribute to new developments.

1 Introduction

How do we coin new words in English? Having spoken English for over twenty years now, I have often found myself pondering this question. Beyond adding derivational affixes like *-able* or borrowing words from other languages, English speakers employ a variety of interesting techniques to come up with terms for novel concepts. Many of these techniques will be familiar to speakers, but often they are *metalinguistic*, i.e. they involve thinking about the language in an abstract sense, beyond just speaking it. These neologisms are also frequently designed to be amusing and quirky, to call attention to the cleverness of the speaker and to make the hearer or reader think about words. In this essay I will discuss a few of the ways we as speakers create new words, with a specific focus on the playful and creative processes that are utilized. In §2 I discuss the phenomenon of *libfixes*, parts of blends which get used so frequently they become lexicalized. §3 looks at how large scale geopolitical events like Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic spawned new words through mimesis. §4 describes the prefix *un-*, which has acquired a variety of new meanings in the last half century. §5 introduces the concept of *imaginym*s, or words that are ‘implied’ by the removal of a prefix from an existing stem. §6 goes into the concept of the *Euphemism Treadmill*, how we find ourselves constantly updating stale euphemisms, and the implications of this fact.

2 Libfixes: The Thinking Man’s Portmanteau

Along this paper’s central theme of “How can English Speakers coin new words”, we can observe that, more or less obviously, one of the ways to create new words is by combining existing words and morphemes in new ways. The first of these, known as *blends* or *portmanteaux* (s. portmanteau), combinations of pieces from two (or occasionally three) words that retain the semantic

meaning and parts of the phonology of the prior two. But what about morphemes themselves? It turns out that after blending (portmanteauing?) two words, or in some cases just in regular words, it is possible to chop off the front or back and create new affixes.

Examples of these affixes abound, but some of my favorites include *-nomics*, from *economics*, which gives us words like *Reaganomics*, i.e. Ronald Reagan's economic policy of lower taxes and deregulation,¹ and *happynomics*, the framing of economics around happiness. We also have *-erati* from *Literati* 'intelligentsia', giving us *Glitterati* 'beautiful celebrities', *digerati* 'the digital elite', and *Twitterati* 'the twitter elite/influencers'. From *universe*, we have the *multiverse*, used in a scientific context to describe the set of all universes that do or could exist, and has since been extended been extended to a wide range of popular science fiction contexts. There is also the *Twitterverse* 'the set of twitter users' (or more often, a small and vocal subset of these), and the *Whoniverse*, the name for all the fictional media related to the television program(me) *Dr. Who*. The above are all suffixes, which seem more common, but prefixes also exist like *cyber-*, i.e. *cybercrime* 'online crime', *cyberspace* 'the interconnected digital environment', *cyberattack* 'a form of hacking';² and *eco-*, as in *ecocapitalism* 'the philosophy that market based methods can solve environmental issues' and *ecoterrorism* 'attacks against corporations harming the environment'.³ The term

¹George H.W. Bush called this 'voodoo economics' (as noted in Ferris Bueller's Day Off), but a more recent coinage is Hillary Clinton's phrase 'Trump-ed up Trickle-Down'

²There are a [lot](#) of these

³There are also a lot of [these](#). This prefix also allows for the extremely interesting case of *Economics* (stress on the first syllable and an [i] instead of an [ɛ]), as in economics where the focus is on the environment. For whatever reason, the prefix *eco-* is pronounced differently in economics and ecology, despite being from the same root. These roots can also be recombined into *economology*, which the internet tells me is a real thing despite my never having seen it. Personally, *Eco-nomics* seems like a cool term for it.

for this phenomenon, as coined in Zwicky (2010), is a *libfix*, itself a combination of ‘liberated’ + ‘affix’. The term was originally used to describe the word *Avatard* ‘someone obsessed with the 2009 James Cameron film *Avatar*’ and similar words like the immensely popular (in conservative circles) *libtard* ‘a derogatory term for someone with left-wing beliefs, specifically in the U.S.’ .

Many libfix words were originally created for playful or jocular purposes but have since become quite common, like *cosmonaut* ‘russian astronaut’, *wargasm* ‘excitement for war’ or *gaydar* ‘the ability to tell if a person is gay’. Regardless of their popularity, however, it is quite easy to neologize via this method, and more importantly, it is grammatical. The initial reaction to many words created in such a fashion may be negative due to perceptions of artificiality (but then again all words are made up). I believe the highly mimetic nature of the internet and the speed with which it proliferates new forms has increased the quantity of new blends and libfixes within recent years. Evidence from Norde & Sippach’s (2019) network analysis of libfixes seems to support this hypothesis, as does Wiktionary, although more diachronic data would be useful.

2.1 Observations

One interesting observation I have made is that the prefix-type libfixes (called *prelibfixes* by Zwicky) seem to be more ‘formal’, or at least less facetious, like *helipad* ‘a landing space for helicopters’ and *syngas* ‘synthetic gasoline’. Many, but not all are written with an explicit hyphen, as in *alt-rock* ‘non-mainstream rock music’ (ironically now more mainstream than rock music) and *alt-right* ‘a form of more explicitly racist U.S. conservatism’ or *electro-pop* ‘electronic dance music in a pop style’. This may be merely a stylistic choice, stemming from doubt on how to combine the stems, or a fear that the words will not be taken as seriously without the qualifying dash.

However plenty of prelibfixes exist without hyphenation. A personal favorite of mine is the prefix *Franken-*, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. From this we get *Frankenburger* 'lab-grown beef', *Frankenstorm* 'a superstorm combination of many smaller storms', and of course the *frankenword* 'a portmanteau', along with [many others](#).

There exists a sub-class of libfixes which are derived from specific proper nouns and thus retain a semantic association from the original, the most notable of which is the Watergate scandal-inspired *-gate*. Besides clones of this like *Deflategate* (A scandal around Tom Brady's allegedly deflated football) and the notorious *Pizzagate* (A conspiracy theory about Hillary Clinton and a sex trafficking ring), there have also been attempts to do the same thing with the Benghazi affair, replacing the NFL scandal with *Ballghazi*. Interestingly, these have been copied in other languages like for the Italian *Tangentopoli* (lit. 'kickback city') scandal involving judicial corruption, and Mandarin Chinese uses the suffix *-men*, meaning 'gate' as a calque of the English expression. Though the various *gates* have been the most successful, we also find *-stock* from the *Woodstock* concert, *-zilla* from *Godzilla*, and, more recently, *Brexit*, whose social ramifications spawned an entire category of words we will examine at length in the next section.

2.2 Towards a Typology of Libfixes

As it turns out, not all libfixes were created equal. The extent of the 'liberation', as it were, differs from libfix to libfix, in that the semantic range of the created word seems to be limited by some of the libfixes. Let us look at a few examples.

2.2.1 Type I: Strict

Consider the libfix *-cation*, formed from the original *vacation*. There exist all kinds of *x-cations*.

Commonly attested ones include

- (1) a. *staycation* : a vacation in which one stays at home
- b. *workcation* : a vacation in which one does work, alternatively a business trip
- c. *girlcation* : a vacation taken by a group of women or centered around women's interests

These are just some of the most frequently used, though one could conceive of myriad new *x-cations*. I could go on a *Jackcation*, a vacation centered around me, Jack, or a *beercation*, in which I drink a lot of beer, or even a *Californicationcation*, a trip centered around alternatively the Red Hot Chili Peppers' song/album or the (criminally underrated) late-aughts television series starring David Duchovny. Essentially, since the concept of taking a break or a trip can be extended to any person, place, or activity, there are no limits as to the type of *x-cations* one could form. However, all of these new blends have something in common. They are all vacations, i.e. more or less the definition of the original word. One might quibble about whether a *workcation* is actually a vacation or not, but in a more literal semantic sense, all of the blends with the *-cation* libfix are just types of vacations. Further evidence for this can be seen in the morphology. While *vacation* also works as an intransitive verb, i.e. "We vacationed in the South of France", none of the blends can do this felicitously;

- (2) */? Sarah and her friends girlcated in the Bahamas last summer.

There is no semantic reason why this formation could not exist, i.e. this situation makes logical

sense, but the morphology seems to forbid this.⁴

2.2.2 Type II: Medium

There exist libfixes with greater freedom of meaning than their bases provide, but are still limited.

The *-gasm* suffix, liberated from *orgasm*, has created a number of interesting blends:

- (3) a. *eyegasm* : Something enjoyable to look at
- b. *cheesegasm* : feeling of excitement or enjoyment relating to cheese
- c. *boregasm* : an uninteresting event, a snoozefest

Once again, this suffix is extremely productive. In theory anything that could be enjoyed or anyone who could enjoy things in a specific way could have an *x-gasm*. Similarly we have the *-tastic* libix, giving us:

- (4) a. *mantastic* : exceptional in a masculine way
- b. *Eighties-tastic* : exceptionally eighties-like
- c. *craptastic* : exceptionally bad

Like *-gasm*, anything that has some sort of quality unique to it can be made *-tastic*, forming an adjective regarding that quality to a higher degree. For both of these libfixes, the new blends are generally *positive* terms, like the original words. Most types of *x-gasms* are good feelings or events associated with the specific thing, and most things that are *x-tastic* are great in the way the *x*

⁴It is also particularly interesting that I almost always perceive ‘vacation’ as a verb to be extremely elitist compared to ‘take a vacation’, almost on par with a similar verbal usage of ‘summer’. However, if one were to ‘girlcation in the hamptons’ if such a thing is possible, I would read it more as cheeky and subversive.

is great, but this is not always true. As evidenced by *craptastic* or *boregasm* these can be negative things as well. Furthermore the negative meaning is productive, as in:

(5) The pundits over at Fox News had a real xenophobiagasm last night.

Essentially, anything that is negative (and as long as both speaker and recipient agree on that judgement) combined with *-gasm* will get the meaning of ‘extreme example of that thing happening in an obscene way.’ Likewise with *-tastic*:

(6) Since meeting with the doctor last week I’ve been positively lung-cancer-tastic.

Where here we get the reading of ‘great in the way that lung cancer is great’, which is to say not great at all. However, the suffix still gives the meaning of ‘great in the way *x* is great’ like for positive things. In this case the reader is then left to infer the sarcasm. For both of these examples, we see that the new form does not necessarily share a direct semantic relation with the original word. A *craptastic* situation is not fantastic, it is the opposite, unless we are understanding it in a sarcastic fashion. Similarly, a *cheesegasm* is not literally an orgasm (I truly hope not, anyways), but it “is” an orgasm in a figurative sense. Also in contrast to the stricter case, many of these libfixes can undergo further derivation, as evidenced by the existence of *craptastically* and *eyegasmic*. The *-gasm* class can also function as verbs, as in ‘I just *nerdgasmed* in the middle of the new Spider-Man movie’.

2.2.3 Type III: Free

The final category of libfixes of those which are completely figurative in their association with the original words. One of the best examples of this is the *-dar* libfix, originally from *radar* and used commonly in the following:

- (7) a. *gaydar* : the ability to detect if someone is gay
- b. *humordar* : the ability to detect if someone is joking
- c. *Jewdar* : the ability to detect if someone is Jewish

Although there are fewer attested versions of this form, there are no reasons in principle why one could not have *fooddar*, the ability to detect food nearby, *evendar*, the ability to detect when a surface is flat or not, or even *Raydar*, the ability to detect when someone named Ray is nearby. Essentially any type of specific measurement or detection ability could have an associated *x-dar* with it, well beyond the bounds of reason. None of these things are actual physical devices like radar, but rather they refer to the metaphorical detection ability of radar. Similarly we get the *-tini* libfix from *martini*, giving us such cocktail creations as the *chocotini* and the *appletini*.⁵ Generally these refer to cocktails served in a martini glass, but the use extends to anything that could be considered a cocktail, even one without alcohol, like a *juicetini* or a *mocktini*.

Related only by coincidence, another of the freest libfixes is *-(o)holic*, from *alcoholic*. One could be a *chocoholic*, a *cakeoholic* or a *sportsoholic*, basically any activity one could be addicted to. Like *-tini* and *-dar*, most *x-oholics* are not addicted to the thing in the same way as alcoholics are addicted to alcohol, i.e. it is not usually a term for people with a problem, for which the catch-all *addict* is normally used. Instead, *-oholic* is generally used facetiously to denote someone who likes something a lot.

It is worth mentioning that all of the prelibfixes seem to be in this category. *Frankenburghers* are not burgers made from Frankenstein, they are made from fake meat, which is considered unnatural.⁶ Likewise most *cyber-* things are just related in some way to computers or the internet,

⁵Fun Fact! All of these drinks are terrible but each in a distinct way.

⁶I also think an unholy union of hotdog and hamburger could be considered a Frank-n-burger.

and anything can be an *eco*-thing if it pertains to the environment in some way. These prefixes are in a way the complement of the strict libfixes, in that in both the suffix is more or less the literal meaning of the blend while the prefix provides semantic color to it. Essentially, *ecocapitalists* are still capitalists just like a *staycation* is still a vacation.

3 Brexit and Covid: Mimetic Word Formation

Coinciding with the rise of the internet has been an increase in outlets for linguistic creativity. Despite often describing important or serious matters, many of the words coined are jocular, using the most salient phonological features to create terms that sound like other words, rather than combining the most precise words in an unwieldy way. This increase in neologisms may have to do with the social value of creating clever words corresponding to more popularity online, or it may simply be that people have always been coining interesting new words and the internet is simply better at distributing them to a wider audience. It is likely a combination of the two. With the widespread adoption of social media in the last decade, important geopolitical events that have garnered long-term attention have spawned whole hosts of new words to describe related ideas. I will be looking at two events in particular, the UK referendum to leave the European Union around 2014, known as *Brexit*, and the coronavirus pandemic beginning early 2020, given the moniker *covid*.⁷

⁷As of writing, the pandemic is still ongoing. Sigh.

3.1 Attack of the (Brexit) Clones

Of the many blends coined in recent years, one of the most interesting is *Brexit* [Britain + exit], originating from *Grexit* [Greece + exit] (Lalic-Kristin and Silaski 2018), a related idea for Greece which never came to pass. The term has had a widely documented and extremely productive set of *clones*, new words that copy the form, structure, or function of the original word. Many of these have far exceeded the original set of meanings associated with either Britain or leaving the EU. Following work by Lalic-Kristin and Silaski (2018), we will see that there are three types of neologisms based around *Brexit*. It is used alternatively as a model, a source word, or an inspiration.

3.1.1 Brexit models

As public interest around *Brexit* increased, people coined words to describe the hypothetical scenarios in which other European countries were to leave the EU. Most of these used *Brexit* and *Grexit* as a *model*, being of the form [country + ‘exit’]. This first wave included *Auxit* [Austria + exit], *Czexit* [Czech + exit], *Frexit* [France/French + exit], and many more European countries. As more of these clones were coined, the meaning began to expand beyond just ‘country leaving the EU’, to a more symbolic ‘entity leaving a political union’, which allowed for *Calexit* [California + exit], *Texit* [Texas + exit], and *Scexit/Scexit* [Scotland + exit].⁸ With these entries there was room for even further abstraction, giving us *Mexit* [Messi+exit], i.e. Messi’s retirement from soccer, and *Trexit* [Trump + exit] ‘leaving the US because of Donald Trump’, to even *Brexit* as any departure by something related to Britain, like LA Times headline “No ‘Brexit’ for Andy Murray, who wins

⁸Obviously the Texans have had a foot out the door since they joined, but the Californians apparently have also been [discussing this recently](#) .

second Wimbledon title in 4 years”. The *Trexit* example is particularly interesting because it could also be interpreted as Donald Trump himself leaving the US, but the fact that it is also a departure *from* something opens up a whole new set of possibilities. For this class, it is possible to analyze *-exit* as a type I libfix, but there are reasons not to do so. For one thing, *exit* is a whole word that can exist on its own, and for another, not all of these, particularly the more figurative ones, can be analyzed as a ‘x exit’. All the type I libfixes, like *workcation*, cannot express privation, i.e. a vacation from work. In many cases *Brexit* itself is merely a ‘British (thing) exiting’, not just the geopolitical event. Furthermore, we will see that *Brexit* as a whole word can combine with many others to form more complex compounds.

3.1.2 Brexit-Sourced Words

The second type of *Brexit* words do not use *Brexit* as a model, but instead a source word (Lalic-Kristin and Silaski 2018). Not all of these must be analyzed as [Brexit + word], many of the prefixes could be *Britain* or *British*. Beyond more straightforward derivational suffixes like *Brexit-iter/Brexit-iteer* ‘one who Brexits’, or *Brexit-escape* ‘Brexit-like’, and neoclassical compounds like *Brexitography* ‘The geography of Brexit’, *Brexitology* ‘the study of Brexit’, and *Brexitophobia* ‘the fear of Brexit’, there are many blends of *Brexit* and other words. Some of my favorites include *Branger* [Brexit + anger], *Bre-do* [Brexit + redo], *Brexitential (crisis)* [Brexit + existential], *Brexitshit* [Brexit + Shit], the infix *Debrexit* [depression + Brexit], and the suffixed *regrexit* [regret + Brexit].

These last few are noteworthy for a couple reasons. First of all, blends are not often used to form other blends, as these can be quite confusing. However, as Lalic-Kristin and Silaski suggest, this is likely because of how concrete a meaning *Brexit* has acquired, akin in many ways to *Wa-*

tergate. Secondly, it is unlikely that *Brexit* is a libfix because of the fact that it is used as a prefix and a suffix, as well as occasionally an infix, which I have not seen among other libfixes. Further evidence for this is seen by increased derivational morphology among these words, which most libfixes do not undergo. We know of at least three Brexit-sourced nouns that are regularly used as verbs, namely *bregret* [Brexit + regret] (I *bregret* my vote after paying more for everything), *Brexit* ([67 ways your life may change if the UK 'Brexit'](#)) and *regrexit*, as well as the shortened *brex* (Don't go Brexin' my heart). Other Brexit compounds that undergo further derivation include *bregret* to *bregretter*, and *bremain* to *bremainer*.

3.1.3 Brexit-Inspired Words

Rather than just being limited to words that have some part of *Brexit* in them, Lalic-Kristin and Silaski (2018) also highlight a class of words that are inspired by the spirit of *Brexit*. These utilize similar words to *exit* like *leave*, giving us *Italeave* [Italy + leave] and *Caleaveifornia* [California + leave], as well as *Departugal* [depart + Portugal], *Quitally* [quit + Italy], *Czechout* [Czech + (check)out], *Oustria* [oust + Austria], *Retireland* [retire + Ireland], and my favorite, *Texodus* [Texas + exodus]. All of these are blends of some kind, and many 'work' better in a euphonic sense than their *-exit* counterparts. There is effectively no semantic distinction between *Italexit*, *Itexit*, *Italeave* and *Quitally*, but there is more phonological overlap between the two words being blended in the latter two examples, making them catchier. Others, like *Byegium* [bye + Belgium] don't necessarily overlap that much phonologically, even compared to *Bexit* [Belgium + exit], but are more similar to their source words orthographically. More to the point, all of these are intended to be clever and rather amusing, and when discussing geopolitical happenings, especially hypothetical ones, the more memorable the better. Here economy and creativity are more important than precision;

it's not like Texas is making an actual biblical exodus, but the thought of such a thing conjures a powerful image. As we will see in the next section, this type of contextual creativity is not limited to any particular event, and it covers a wide range of topics.

3.2 Maskholes and Covidiots

As anyone who has been alive the past two years has likely noticed, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed a lot of aspects of daily life. Some of these changes (to-go cocktails) have been for the better, most (zoom, masks, death) have been for the worst. Regardless of their likability, however, we have needed new ways to describe the often hellish world around us, and like with *Brexit*, people have clearly risen to the task. Following the descriptions in Zimmer et al. (2021), we can see more examples of creative wordplay coming into the popular lexicon.

One of the most prolific new coinages is *quaran-*, one of the newest libfixes to be minted. A shortening of *quarantine* it effectively adds the meaning of ‘during quarantine’, especially during the first few months of pandemic shutdowns in spring of 2020. Some of the best expressions of this are *quaranteam* ‘the people you are quarantined with’, *quarantigue* ‘fatigue from being quarantined’, and *quarantini* ‘a cocktail made in quarantine’.⁹ There is also *quaranteen* ‘a teenager living through quarantine’ (homophonic to *quarantine*), *quaranbeard* ‘a quarantine beard’,¹⁰ and *quarandating* ‘dating during quarantines’.¹¹ Many of these words did not have as much phonological overlap, demonstrating how free the affix really is.

Far more akin to *Brexit* in terms of morphology than *quaran-*, the prefix/modifier *zoom*, derived

⁹This is a good example of a ‘double libfix’ (per Larry Horn’s comment to me), in which two libfixes make a blend.

These seem to be fairly common, given that most prelibfixes are of the free type.

¹⁰I tried.

¹¹This sucked.

from the not so recently unheard-of videoconferencing service of the same name, was utilized to create all sorts of new words and phrases to describe our newly online life. We have the fairly self-explanatory *Zoom fatigue*, *Zoom party* and *Zoom school*, but also *Zoombombing* ‘a form of trolling in which a Zoom session is interrupted’,¹² *Zoomed-out* ‘a feeling of being on zoom for too long’, and *Zoombie* ‘a person feeling zoomed-out’. It is important to note that *zoom* seems to have taken on a wider meaning than just the specific video-conferencing software, becoming a *proprietary eponym* like *google* for ‘search engine’ or *kleenex* for ‘tissue’, replacing or substituting for *Skype* and *FaceTime*.¹³ At least during the height of the pandemic, *zooming* with someone did not necessarily mean going on *Zoom* (TM) itself, but any video call. Beyond even this, *zoom* became somewhat emblematic of the shared hyper-online-ness of the pandemic, and the suffering that went along with that, causing a reanalysis of the term *zoomer*, originally to parallel *boomer*, for a member of Gen Z.

For another particularly useful word that began a fruitful morphological life of its own, we get the term *mask-*, referring specifically to a face covering to reduce the spread of viral disease. Some good examples include *masklessness* ‘the state of not wearing a mask’, *maskne* ‘acne from wearing a mask’, *mask break* ‘like a cigarette break but for taking your mask off’, and *maskulinity* ‘macho refusal to wear a mask’.¹⁴ For the insults section we also find *maskhole* ‘a person flagrantly refusing to wear a mask’, which is related to *covidiot* ‘someone ignoring public health protocols’,

¹²See also the far more nebulous [Love Bombing](#).

¹³[Proprietary eponyms](#) are a quite interesting class of words in their own right, and sit at the intersection of word formation and word popularization. Further research on this topic could yield insights into both areas.

¹⁴See also *petromasculinity* ‘a uniquely man-like need to burn gasoline’, along with *toxic masculinity* ‘basically just traditional masculinity but somehow worse’, and the related *mansplain* ‘explain condescendingly like a man’. We now have lots of great new ways to describe the bad stuff men do.

and *moronavirus* ‘foolish behavior or ideas related to the coronavirus’. All of these were quite popular due to our collective desire for new insults, but my favorite is still the Spanish word *pandejo* [pandemic + pendejo ‘asshole’].

3.3 Mimetic Word processes

Like so many of the topics in this paper, the above examples centered around *Brexit* and *covid* demonstrate an active desire to play with language in fun and interesting ways. As Stekauer (2002) argues, it is not the longevity or lexicalization of the newly coined words that really matter to us as linguists, the sole important factor is that such words are demonstrated in a productive capacity by a language. All of these examples demonstrate the incredible productivity according to a template in English, as well as the effect contemporary political events can have on word formation.

4 The *Un*-word

Since as far back as Shakespeare the prefix *un-* has been one of the most productive morphological processes in English, the last half century or so has seen its usage expanded beyond its traditional role as a simple negation or reversative. As Zimmer et al (2011) note, Shakespeare coined dozens of such words that we still use today, such as *unaware*, *uncomfortable*, and *uneducated*, as well as some verbs like *unswear* “Unswear faith sworn, and on the marriage-bed” (King John Act III scene i. 245), and notably *unsex*, in a soliloquy by Lady Macbeth “Come, you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here” (Macbeth Act I, scene v. 40-41).

4.1 The *un-* classification

Today, we have a number of distinct usages of *un-*, including:

4.1.1 *Un+* adjectives

In one of the most common and productive usages, *un-* can attach to some adjectives and most participles to negate their meaning somehow, i.e. *unattractive* ‘not attractive’ and *unannounced* ‘not announced’.

4.1.2 *Un+* verbs

Still fairly common, the prefix also attaches to verbs to reverse their meaning, such as *unlock* or *undress*. Note that this is not negation in the sense of (i.), it is reversal. To undress is not the negation of to dress, if one was not wearing any clothes one could either dress or not dress, but one could not undress. When this attaches to verbs of removal like *thaw* or *decipher* it does not negate them, nor reverses the reversal, but rather reinforces the reversative meaning. To *unthaw* a frozen pizza is semantically equivalent to thawing it. We also have an additional usage, which is for verbs that entail irreversible actions, like *unkill* ‘reanimate’ or *unring*, as in “you can’t unring a bell”. By forming a sentence as “you can’t *un-x*”, the prefix can attach to a lot of previously forbidden verbs.

4.1.3 Verbal *un+* nouns

Un- infrequently attaches to nouns (which are usually also verbs) to form verbs of depriving or removal, like *uncage* and *untangle*, in a similar sense to (ii.). It mostly works for containers, and occasionally, like with *unbox*, the positive form does not exist (I can *unbox* a new video game but I cannot *box* it, although I can *box it up*).

4.1.4 Nominal *un+* nouns

Rarely, but still conventionally, nouns to form nouns like *uncertainty*, *unconformity*, *unluck*, *unfriend*. This last category is particularly interesting. Besides the nominalizations of specific adjectives like *uncertain*, most of these nouns get an unsettling, rather Orwellian reading. Apparently (an) *unfriend*, as in an enemy, has existed in English for a millennium, as has *untruth*. However, in the context of the terrifying unreality in which we all live, an *untruth* is not a lie per se (cf. ‘alternative facts’), but a reformulation of one. There is also *unperson* ‘someone erased from history by the government,’ taken directly from *1984*, in which a totalitarian government has complete control over history. A related concept is the *unword* of the year (from German ‘unwort’), which highlights the most atrocious usage of language to further inhumane or undemocratic ideals, like the phrase ‘ethnic cleansing’ instead of genocide (originally in German).

4.2 The new *un-*word

However, a fifth (and arguably sixth) category of *un-* words has become increasingly common, likely spurred by a popular advertisement campaign in the late 60s by 7UP. This campaign branded the lemon-lime soda as the “Uncola”, describing its product in opposition to popular colas like Coke and Pepsi. Although earlier attestations to similar constructions do exist, this slogan brought the idea of an *un-*noun to the minds of many Americans. Specifically, an *Uncola* is not the opposite of a cola, whatever that might be. Rather, it is a member of the class of soft drinks, like cola, that lacks specific key aspects (its cola-ness). The idea of such a construction also begot *unpoliticians*, the *unschool*, *unmarketing*, and the *unhotel*. Notably, the last of these is still a hotel, it’s just not a stereotypical example of one (Not a HOTEL hotel, to use Horn’s (2005) phrase). According to

Horn, these fall into two categories. The first, including the *Uncola* and its ilk, lack the structure of the category member but share a function, evoking a superset category of which both X and unX are members. The second class, including *unhotel* along with *unwoman* ‘an Atwoodian term for a woman who cannot bear children’, and *unbreakfast* ‘a breakfast of nontraditional breakfast foods’, share the structure of the category member but is a “bad” or peripheral member.

These *un*-words can also come attached to proper names, like the *un-Clinton*, and the *un-Oscars* (the Golden Globes), which generally fall into the first category. There are also commonly used *un*-words in the adjectival sense as above, but are much more akin to the newer usage of the prefix. These include (so) *undesert*, (very) *un-Florida*, (too) *un-rock-n-roll*, and are essentially just nouns that could be understood with a *-like*, *-an* or *-esque* suffix, but are generally also fine adjectivally without the *un*-.

4.3 Recent *un*-developments

In recent years we have seen the advent of many *un*-words spawned by the internet, like *undo*, *undelete*, *unitalicize*, as well as *untweet*, *unpost*, *unfollow*, *unlike*, *unsubscribe* and *unfriend*. Notably we also get *defriend*, or the more specific *deboyfriend*. But while *unfriend* and *defriend* are essentially identical, the comparable *unboyfriend* does not really exist, as a NYT piece from 2011 suggests; “You cannot de-boyfriend yourself” (Zimmer et al. 2011). However, if one were to describe their significant other as *deboyfriendable*, as in ‘able to have their boyfriend status revoked’, that would likely be salient. Furthermore, it contrasts with the term *unboyfriendable*, as in ‘unable to be saddled with a boyfriend,’ seen in a Magnetic Fields song (Merritt 1999) nearly a decade earlier.

4.4 The limits of *un*-productivity

How far can the productivity of this prefix go? There is some evidence for *un-un*-words, a form of recursion. *Ununlock* is attested, and judgements from speakers seem to support many of these being productive. What is important to note is that for some *un*-words, such as *unlock* and *undress*, admit multiple meanings when they undergo further derivation. Compare *(undress)-able* ‘able to be declodged’ with *un-(dressable)* ‘not able to be clothed’. This issue is taken further when another *un* is added, giving us the alternate readings: *un - ((undress) - able)* ‘impossible to be declodged’ vs. *un-(un-(dressable))* ‘not impossible to be clothed / re-dressable’. From what I have gathered it is only possible to get the first of these readings. I believe this has to do with the fact that at the level of *undress* or *unlock*, the *un* has a reversative meaning, distinct from negation. When a second *un* is added, it can only take the negation sense. It makes sense to negate a reversative, but it does not seem to make sense to negate a negation on the semantic level within a word. On the pragmatic level we can construct sentences like “The dog acted not unlike a cat,” or “She didn’t say she wasn’t coming,” but these have specific implications. The second sentence importantly does not imply that she said she was coming. Within a word, two negative affixes seem to be unable to cancel each other out, prohibiting the second reading of *ununlockable* ‘not not able to be locked = able to be locked.’

5 The Un-Unword: A brief aside on the so-called ‘Imaginym’s’

Related to both the mimetic words of §5 and the *un*-words of §6, we find a small class of *un*-words, mostly adjectives, that have been “orphaned” from their antonyms (To use the terminology of Horn 2005). Consider the words *unassuming*, *unruly*, *unkempt*, *uncouth*, *unparalleled*,

unheard-of, untoward, unscathed and *unprecedented*, most of which do not have regularly defined meanings when the ‘*un-*’ is removed. These are generally known as ‘unpaired words’, and are an example of a morphological gap (Quinion, 1996). Some of these pairings are better than others in certain contexts; one could certainly speak of a *precedented* decision or a *paralleled* product, but describing children as *ruly* or *kempt* might raise an eyebrow. Most commonly this type of word is used in direct contrast to its pair as a form of wordplay; perhaps the best example is a humorous *New Yorker* article by Jack Winter (1994), which employs *chalant, sipid, petuous, gruntled*, and *consulate*. These examples rely not only on the *un* + ADJ template, but also *iN* + ADJ, *non* + ADJ, and *dis* + ADJ. If we look at this as an abstract type of back-formation wherein there are ‘implied’ negations or other morphological patterns, we can take this idea much further, getting us forms like *feckful* from *feckless*, *whelmed* acting as a midpoint between *overwhelmed* and *underwhelmed*, *prepone* from *postpone*, and *asperate* from *exasperate*.¹⁵ This phenomenon has existed in English for at least a century, as there are attestations to (facetious) usage of *gruntled* from the 30s (Wodehouse, 1938), which remains one of the more common forms.

Although they have not been found in any official literature due to their scarcity, unpaired words came to some prominence on TikTok in late 2021, and were dubbed ‘imaginymys’ by ‘Just a Guy on a Phone’ (2021).¹⁶ He proposed that any words that could be formed by completing a common morphological pattern should be considered imaginymys until they were accepted into the lexicon. I would argue, however, that imaginymys are words in their own right, due to their analyzability by native speakers. As Winter’s (1994) piece suggests, it would be hard to imagine that someone relatively familiar with the word *uncouth* would be perplexed by a description of a *couth* habit,

¹⁵For a non-exhaustive list of these see the [Wikipedia page for unpaired words](#).

¹⁶Special thanks to Delia McConnell, who sent me this TikTok, thus allowing me to cite it in an academic paper.

especially if it made sense in context. It is possible, however, that some of these words, especially those usually prefixed with *un-* or *iN-*, would be understood with identical meanings to their pairs, like with flammable vs. inflammable. As noted earlier (cf. Horn 2002), this is a relatively common occurrence, we also get it with *unloosen* and *unthaw*. Given how some of the extant imaginymns were formed, it could also be the case that words like *couth* act as a root, which is then combined with the negative prefix and subsequently the adjectival suffix. Further investigation is required, and I would especially like to see a study comparing speaker comprehension of various proposed imaginymns.

There are a few cases of imaginymns in this style becoming part of the popular lexicon (via the classical measure of success as having a Wikipedia page). We have the term *herstory*, i.e. a retelling of events from a female or feminist point of view, which was made via comparison to *history* (Just a Guy on a Phone, 2021). Despite the fact that there is no etymological relation between *history* and the pronoun *his*, it would seem that some speakers have analyzed the word as a compound of ‘his’ + ‘story’.¹⁷ Given that much of history has been written by and for men, it is not entirely surprising that we find the need for such a word to exist. The term *Herstory* is credited to feminist Robin Morgan in 1970 (Via the OED), and in its day spawned similar words like *femistry* ‘chemistry with a feminist perspective’ and *galgebra* ‘algebra, and hence math, from a feminist perspective’, which I would consider mimetic.¹⁸

Another imaginym that has come into prominence for similar reasons is *abled*, the counterpart

¹⁷Critics, see [Etymological fallacy](#).

¹⁸Femistry also has a newer usage as ‘(sexual or platonic) chemistry between women’. I personally want to add *Shenglish* ‘feminist literature’ to this list to complete a high school curriculum, but I am open to better suggestions for nomenclature.

to *disabled*. Until somewhat recently we only had the ability to describe a marked category of persons as *disabled*. Out of a desire to create a newer category in opposition to this, we now have *abled*, which replaced the older *able-bodied*. (Quinion, 1996). Interestingly, the term *differently-abled* was also coined around the same time, but it has fallen out of style.¹⁹ Criticism has also been lobbied towards the term *disabled*, as it (etymologically) implies that the person has ‘no’ ability, when in reality many people with disabilities do not lack ability entirely. This leaves only *abled* as an appropriate term, in an unforeseen turn of events. (In a later section I discuss this in relation to the ‘Euphemism Treadmill’.) At any rate, we can safely say that imaginymys such as these give us yet another avenue for new coinages, especially for concepts we wish to revisit with updated social attitudes. While they are not all immediately obvious, with a little bit of thought most are analyzable, certainly more so than nonce words, and probably around the same level as novel portmanteaux. I am quite grunted with their progress and find them a sensical addition to the English language.

6 The Euphemism Treadmill

In a 1994 New York Times op-ed raging against the newly founded PC police – who are coming to get everyone that says ‘oriental’ or ‘crippled’ – linguist Stephen Pinker lamented our society’s constant need to change terms for things, omitting the fact that many are reductive and inaccurate (Pinker, 1994). He employs the phrase ‘euphemism treadmill’ to describe how polite words for offensive things constantly get replaced as their associations get tainted. A classic example of this is *latrine* being replaced with *water closet*, then *toilet*, then *bathroom*, then *restroom*. The frequent

¹⁹See the [Disability Language Style Guide](#) entry on ‘differently-abled’ for more on the history of these terms.

updating of terms is used as an attempt to make taboo topics acceptable, but eventually the reality of what is being described catches up with the word. Fundamentally, this process rests on the assumption that what we say effects the way we feel about the thing.

This idea, that language can shape thought, is known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, the strong version of which holds that the language people speak *determines* their thoughts (Whorf, 1956).²⁰ There is a lot of evidence to suggest this is not the case, as Pinker points out in reference to Orwell, but he neglects the weaker version of this idea. The weak version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, known as *linguistic relativity*, has far more evidence, stating that language can only *influence* thought, not determine it. But as Orwell notes in *Politics of The English Language* (Orwell, 1946) and makes ample use of in *1984*, this influence can be extremely dangerous. He describes how the bombing of defenseless villages and the murder of their inhabitants is called *pacification*, which both omits the nature of the atrocity and implies that the people who were senselessly killed deserved to die. This form of euphemism is especially relevant in today's hyper-polarized society, where one media outlet might describe 'enhanced interrogation techniques' on 'terrorists' and another might call the same process 'torture' of 'freedom fighters'.²¹

Of course, there is such a thing as scale, and I doubt anyone would say that using the term 'oriental' is equivalent to referring to the holocaust as 'resettlement to the East' as the Nazis did. However, there is a clear reason to not use 'oriental', namely that it reinforces a worldview centered around Europe, lumps a large number of distinct groups into one category, and in doing so

²⁰This is a misnomer, these linguists did not collaborate on this, nor did either formulate it as a 'hypothesis', and the strong/weak distinction was not made until later.

²¹See also Zimmer et al. (2021) for the phrase *officer-involved shooting* 'murder by a police officer' for another of countless examples.

can justify hatred or reinforce biases towards these groups. Using such a word does not make you a bigot, as Pinker suggests, but if there is a less offensive, more accurate way of describing something, why not use that word instead?

Pinker argues that what we need to do is fix our societal issues rather than continually refreshing the words for them, but I believe this is an oversimplification. Yes, the terms ‘colored’, ‘Negro’ and ‘black’ might *literally* mean the same thing, but the reason we use the latter and not the others is not because we are renaming things with ‘equal moral force’ as he claims. There is an obvious difference in description between ‘person of color’ and ‘colored person’, not least of which is the fronting of personhood. To say that these terms are euphemisms is simply inaccurate, and miss many of the nuances and connotations of terminology.

Eventually, the taboos associated with certain concepts may be accommodated, as was the case with *restroom* and *bathroom*. Both of these are perfectly acceptable while once euphemistic, likewise with *family planning*, *birth control*, and *contraception*.²² Because we all know that these words refer to a specific thing, there is no longer any contextual ambiguity and they are effectively no longer euphemisms. But until such a day comes when ‘we have achieved equality and mutual respect’, as Pinker suggests, I expect we will continue to deploy new euphemisms to disguise and distract from topics that range from making us uncomfortable, to being downright evil. The issue is not that terms like ‘black’ are recycling the same concept, it is that they are inherently more accurate and less offensive than the ones that came before. As our understanding of the world is constantly updated, so too must be the words we use to describe it.

²²I look forward to the day we become so comfortable discussing our bodily functions that we can return to using ‘the shitter’, as was once the case in Proto-Germanic.

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