

THE  
MOTHER  
TONGUE

ENGLISH &  
HOW IT GOT THAT WAY  
BILL BRYSON

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# 5.

## WHERE WORDS COME FROM

IF YOU HAVE A MORBID FEAR OF PEANUT butter sticking to the roof of your mouth, there is a word for it: *arachibutyrophobia*. There is a word to describe the state of being a woman: *muliebrity*. And there's a word for describing a sudden breaking off of thought: *aposiopesis*. If you harbor an urge to look through the windows of the homes you pass, there is a word for the condition: *cryptoscopophilia*. When you are just dropping off to sleep and you experience that sudden sensation of falling, there is a word for it: it's a *myoclonic jerk*. If you want to say that a word has a circumflex on its penultimate syllable, without saying flat out that it has a circumflex there, there is a word for it: *properispomenon*. There is even a word for a figure of speech in which two connotative words linked by a conjunction express a complex notion that would normally be conveyed by an adjective and a substantive working together. It is a *hendiadys*. (But of course.) In English, in short, there are words for almost everything.

Some of these words deserve to be better known. Take *velleity*, which describes a mild desire, a wish or urge too slight to lead to action. Doesn't that seem a useful term? Or how about *slubberdegullion*, a seventeenth-century word signifying a worthless or slovenly fellow? Or *ugsome*, a late medieval word meaning loathsome or disgusting? It has lasted half a millennium in English, was a common synonym for *horrid* until well into the last century, and can still be found tucked away forgotten at the back of most unabridged dictionaries. Isn't it a shame to let it slip away? Our dictionaries are full of such words—words describing the most

specific of conditions, the most improbable of contingencies, the most arcane of distinctions.

And yet there are odd gaps. We have no word for coolness corresponding to warmth. There is no word for the indentation on your upper lip. We are strangely lacking in middling terms—words to describe with some precision the middle ground between hard and soft, near and far, big and little. We have a possessive impersonal pronoun *its* to place alongside *his*, *her*, and *their*, but no equivalent impersonal pronoun to contrast with the personal *whose*. Thus we have to rely on inelegant constructions such as “The house whose roof” or resort to periphrasis. We have a word to describe all the work you find waiting for you when you return from vacation, *backlog*, but none to describe all the work you have to do before you go. Why not *forelog*? And we have a large number of negative words—*inept*, *disheveled*, *incorrigible*, *ruthless*, *unkempt*—for which the positive form is missing. English would be richer if we could say admiringly of a tidy person, “She’s so sheveled,” or praise a capable person for being full of ept or an energetic one for having heaps of ert. Many of these words did once have positive forms. *Ruthless* was companioned by *ruth*, meaning compassion. One of Milton’s poems contains the well-known line “Look homeward, Angel, now, and melt with ruth.” But, as with many such words, one form died and another lived. Why this should be is beyond explanation. Why should we have lost *demit* (send away) but saved *commit*? Why should *impede* have survived while the once equally common and seemingly just as useful *expepe* expired? No one can say.

Despite these gaps and casualties, English retains probably the richest vocabulary, and most diverse shading of meanings, of any language. We can distinguish between house and home (as, for instance, the French cannot), between continual and continuous, sensual and sensuous, forceful and forcible, childish and childlike, masterful and masterly, assignment and assignation, informant and informer. For almost every word we have a multiplicity of synonyms. Something is not just big, it is large, immense, vast, capa-

cious, bulky, massive, whopping, humongous. No other language has so many words all saying the same thing. It has been said that English is unique in possessing a synonym for each level of our culture: popular, literary, and scholarly—so that we can, according to our background and cerebral attainments, rise, mount, or ascend a stairway, shrink in fear, terror, or trepidation, and think, ponder, or cogitate upon a problem. This abundance of terms is often cited as a virtue. And yet a critic could equally argue that English is an untidy and acquisitive language, cluttered with a plethora of needless words. After all, do we really need *fic tile* as a synonym for  *moldable*,  *glabrous* for  *hairless*,  *sternutation* for  *sneezing*? Jules Feiffer once drew a strip cartoon in which the down-at-heel character observed that first he was called poor, then needy, then deprived, then underprivileged, and then disadvantaged, and concluded that although he still didn't have a dime he sure had acquired a fine vocabulary. There is something in that. A rich vocabulary carries with it a concomitant danger of verbosity, as evidenced by our peculiar affection for redundant phrases, expressions that say the same thing twice:  *beck and call*,  *law and order*,  *assault and battery*,  *null and void*,  *safe and sound*,  *first and foremost*,  *trials and tribulations*,  *hem and haw*,  *spick-and-span*,  *kith and kin*,  *dig and delve*,  *hale and hearty*,  *peace and quiet*,  *vim and vigor*,  *pots and pans*,  *cease and desist*,  *rack and ruin*,  *without let or hindrance*,  *to all intents and purposes*,  *various different*.

Despite this bounty of terms, we have a strange—and to foreigners it must seem maddening—tendency to load a single word with a whole galaxy of meanings.  *Fine*, for instance, has fourteen definitions as an adjective, six as a noun, and two as an adverb. In the  *Oxford English Dictionary* it fills two full pages and takes 5,000 words of description. We can talk about fine art, fine gold, a fine edge, feeling fine, fine hair, and a court fine and mean quite separate things. The condition of having many meanings is known as  *polysemy*, and it is very common.  *Sound* is another polysemic word. Its vast repertory of meanings can suggest an audible noise, a state of healthiness (sound mind), an outburst (sound off), an inquiry (sound out), a body of water (Puget Sound), or financial

stability (sound economy), among many others. And then there's *round*. In the *OED*, *round* alone (that is without variants like *rounded* and *roundup*) takes 7½ pages to define or about 15,000 words of text—about as much as is contained in the first hundred pages of this book. Even when you strip out its obsolete senses, *round* still has twelve uses as an adjective, nineteen as a noun, seven as a transitive verb, five as an intransitive verb, one as an adverb, and two as a preposition. But the polysemic champion must be *set*. Superficially it looks a wholly unseemingly monosyllable, the verbal equivalent of the single-celled organism. Yet it has 58 uses as a noun, 126 as a verb, and 10 as a participial adjective. Its meanings are so various and scattered that it takes the *OED* 60,000 words—the length of a short novel—to discuss them all. A foreigner could be excused for thinking that to know *set* is to know English.

Generally polysemy happens because one word sprouts a variety of meanings, but sometimes it is the other way around—similar but quite separate words evolve identical spellings. *Boil* in the sense of heating a pan of water and *boil* in the sense of an irruption of the skin are two unrelated words that simply happen to be spelled the same way. So are *policy* in the sense of a strategy or plan and the *policy* in a life insurance policy. *Excise*, meaning “to cut,” is quite distinct in origin from *excise* in the sense of a customs duty.

Sometimes, just to heighten the confusion, the same word ends up with contradictory meanings. This kind of word is called a *contronym*. *Sanction*, for instance, can either signify permission to do something or a measure forbidding it to be done. *Cleave* can mean cut in half or stick together. A sanguine person is either hotheaded and bloodthirsty or calm and cheerful. Something that is fast is either stuck firmly or moving quickly. A door that is bolted is secure, but a horse that has bolted has taken off. If you wind up a meeting you finish it; if you wind up a watch, you start it. To ravish means to rape or to enrapture. *Quinquennial* describes something that lasts for five years or happens only once in five years. Trying one's best is a good thing, but trying one's patience is a bad thing. A blunt instrument is dull, but a blunt remark is pointed. Occasionally when this happens the dictionary makers give us different

spellings to differentiate the two meanings—as with *flour* and *flower*, *discrete* and *discreet*—but such orthological thoughtfulness is rare.

So where do all these words come from? According to the great Danish linguist Otto Jespersen words are for the most part formed in one of four ways: by adding to them, by subtracting from them, by making them up, and by doing nothing to them. Neat as that formula is, I would venture to suggest that it overlooks two other prolific sources of new words: borrowing them from other languages and creating them by mistake. Let us look at each in turn.

1. WORDS ARE CREATED BY ERROR. One kind of these is called ghost words. The most famous of these perhaps is *dord*, which appeared in the 1934 *Merriam-Webster International Dictionary* as another word for density. In fact, it was a misreading of the scribbled “D or d,” meaning that “density” could be abbreviated either to a capital or lowercase letter. The people at Merriam-Webster quickly removed it, but not before it found its way into other dictionaries. Such occurrences are more common than you might suppose. According to the First Supplement of the *OED*, there are at least 350 words in English dictionaries that owe their existence to typographical errors or other misrenderings. For the most part they are fairly obscure. One such is *messuage*, a legal term used to describe a house, its land, and buildings. It is thought to be simply a careless transcription of the French *ménage*.

Many other words owe their existence to mishearings. *Buttonhole* was once *buttonhold*. *Sweetheart* was originally *sweetard*, as in *dullard* and *dotard*. *Bridegroom* was in Old English *bryd-guma*, but the context made people think of groom and an *r* was added. By a similar process an *l* found its way into *belfrey*. *Asparagus* was for 200 years called *sparrow-grass*. *Pentice* became *penthouse*. *Shamefaced* was originally *shamefast* (*fast* here having the sense of lodged firmly, as in “stuck fast”). The process can still be seen today in the tendency among many people to turn *catercorner* into *catty-corner* and *chaise longue* into *chaise lounge*.

Sometimes words are created by false analogy or back-formation. One example of this is the word *pea*. Originally the word was

*pease*, as in the nursery rhyme "pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold." But this was mistakenly thought to signify a plural and the word *pea* was back-formed to denote singularity. A similar misunderstanding gave us *cherry* (from *cerise*). Etymologically *cherries* ought to be both singular and plural—and indeed it once was. The words *grovel* and *sidle* similarly came into English because the original adverbs, *groveling* and *sideling*, were assumed to contain the participle *-ing*, as in walking and seeing. In fact, it was the suffix *-ling*, but this did not stop people from adding a pair of useful verbs to the language. Other back-formations are *laze* (from *lazy*), *rove*, *burgle*, *greed* (from *greedy*), *beg* (from *beggar*), and *difficult* (from *difficulty*). Given the handiness and venerability of the process, it is curious to note that language authorities still generally squirm at the addition of new ones to the language. Among those that still attract occasional opprobrium are *enthuse* and *donate*.

Finally, erroneous words are sometimes introduced by respected users of the language who simply make a mistake. Shakespeare thought *illustrious* was the opposite of *lustrous* and thus for a time gave it a sense that wasn't called for. Rather more alarmingly, the poet Robert Browning caused considerable consternation by including the word *twat* in one of his poems, thinking it an innocent term. The work was *Pippa Passes*, written in 1841 and now remembered for the line "God's in His heaven, all's right with the world." But it also contains this disconcerting passage:

Then owls and bats,  
Cows and twats,  
Monks and nuns in a cloister's moods,  
Adjourn to the oak-stump pantry!

Browning had apparently somewhere come across the word *twat*—which meant precisely the same then as it does now—but pronounced it with a flat *a* and somehow took it to mean a piece of headgear for nuns. The verse became a source of twittering amusement for generations of schoolboys and a perennial embarrassment to their elders, but the word was never altered and Browning was allowed to live out his life in wholesome ignorance

because no one could think of a suitably delicate way of explaining his mistake to him.

2. WORDS ARE ADOPTED. This is of course one of the glories of English—its willingness to take in words from abroad, rather as if they were refugees. We take words from almost anywhere—*shampoo* from India, *chaparral* from the Basques, *caucus* from the Algonquin Indians, *ketchup* from China, *potato* from Haiti, *sofa* from Arabia, *boondocks* from the Tagalog language of the Philippines, *slogan* from Gaelic. You can't get much more eclectic than that. And we have been doing it for centuries. According to Baugh and Cable [page 227] as long ago as the sixteenth century English had already adopted words from more than fifty other languages—a phenomenal number for the age. Sometimes the route these words take is highly circuitous. Many Greek words became Latin words, which became French words, which became English words. *Garbage*, which has had its present meaning of food waste since the Middle Ages, was brought to England by the Normans, who had adapted it from an Italian dialectal word, *garbuzo*, which in turn had been taken from the Old Italian *garbuglio* (a mess), which ultimately had come from the Latin *bullire* (to boil or bubble).

Sometimes the same word reaches us at different times, having undergone various degrees of filtering, and thus can exist in English in two or more related forms, as with *canal* and *channel*, *regard* and *reward*, *poor* and *pauper*, *catch* and *chase*, *cave* and *cage*, *amiable* and *amicable*. Often these words have been so modified in their travels that their kinship is all but invisible. Who would guess that *coy* and *quiet* both have the same grandparent in the Latin *quietus*, or that *sordid* and *swarthy* come jointly from the Latin *sordere* (to be soiled or dirty), or that *entirety* and *integrity* come from the Latin *integritus* (complete and pure)?

Occasionally a single root gave birth to triplets, as with *cattle*, *chattel*, and *capital*, *hotel*, *hostel*, and *hospital*, and *strait*, *straight*, and *strict*. There is at least one quadruplet—*jaunty*, *gentle*, *gentile*, and *genteel*, all from the Latin *gentilis*—though there may be more. But the record holder is almost certainly the Latin *discus*, which has given us *disk*, *disc*, *dish*, *desk*, *dais*, and, of



course, *discus*. (But having said that, one native Anglo-Saxon root, *bear*, has given birth to more than forty words, from *birth* to *born* to *burden*.)

Often words change meanings dramatically as they pass from one nation to another. The Latin *bestia* has become variously *biscia* (snake) in Italy, *bitch* (female dog) in England, *biche* (female deer) in France, and *bicho* (insect) in Portugal. [Cited by Pei, page 151]

We in the English-speaking world are actually sometimes better at looking after our borrowed words than the parents were. Quite a number of words that we've absorbed no longer exist in their place of birth. For instance, the French do not use *nom de plume*, *double entendre*, *panache*, *bon viveur*, *legerdemain* (literally "light of hand"), or *R.S.V.P.* for *répondez s'il vous plaît*. (Instead they write: "Prière de répondre.") The Italians do not use *brio* and although they do use *al fresco*, to them it signifies not being outside but being in prison.

Many of the words we take in are so artfully anglicized that it can be a surprise to learn they are not native. Who would guess that our word *puny* was once the Anglo-Norman *puis né* or that *curmudgeon* may once have been the French *coeur méchant* (evil heart), or that *breeze*, so English-sounding, was taken from the Spanish *briza*, or that the distress signal *mayday* was lifted from the French cry *m'aidez* (meaning "help me") or that *poppycock* comes from the Dutch *pappekak*, meaning "soft dung"? *Chowder* came directly from the French *chaudière* (cauldron), while *bankrupt* was taken literally from the Italian expression *banca rotta*, meaning "broken bench." In the late Middle Ages, when banking was evolving in Italy, transactions were conducted in open-air markets. When a banker became insolvent his bench was broken up. Sometimes the foreign words came quietly, but other times they needed a good pummeling before they assumed anything like a native shape, as when the Gaelic *sionnachuighim* was knocked into *shenanigan* and the Amerind *raugroughcan* became *raccoon*.

This tendency to turn foreign sounds into native speech is common. In New York, Flatbush was originally *Vlacht Bos* and Gramercy Park was originally *De Kromme Zee*. British soldiers in World War I called Ypres *Wipers* and in the 1950s, American

soldiers in Japan converted the song "Shi-i-Na-Na Ya-Ru" into "She Ain't Got No Yo-Yo."

One of our more inexplicable habits is the tendency to keep the Anglo-Saxon noun but to adopt a foreign form for the adjectival form. Thus fingers are not fingerish; they are digital. Eyes are not eyeish; they are ocular. English is unique in this tendency to marry a native noun to an adopted adjective. Among other such pairs are *mouth/oral*, *book/literary*, *water/aquatic*, *house/domestic*, *moon/lunar*, *son/filial*, *sun/solar*, *town/urban*. This is yet another perennial source of puzzlement for anyone learning English. Sometimes, a Latinate adjective was adopted but the native one kept as well, so that we can choose between, say, *earthly* and *terrestrial*, *motherly* and *maternal*, *timely* and *temporal*.

Although English is one of the great borrowing tongues—deriving at least half of its common words from non-Anglo-Saxon stock—others have been even more enthusiastic in adopting foreign terms. In Armenian, only 23 percent of the words are of native origin, while in Albanian the proportion is just 8 percent. A final curious fact is that although English is a Germanic tongue and the Germans clearly were one of the main founding groups of America, there is almost no language from which we have borrowed fewer words than German. Among the very few are *kindergarten* and *hinterland*. We have borrowed far more words from every other European language, and probably as many from several smaller and more obscure languages such as Inuit. No one has yet come up with a plausible explanation for why this should be.

3. WORDS ARE CREATED. Often they spring seemingly from nowhere. Take *dog*. For centuries the word in English was *hound* (or *hund*). Then suddenly in the late Middle Ages, *dog*—a word etymologically unrelated to any other known word—displaced it. No one has any idea why. This sudden arising of words happens more often than you might think. Among others without known pedigree are *jaw*, *jam*, *bad*, *big*, *gloat*, *fun*, *crease*, *pour*, *put*, *niblick* (the golf club), *noisome*, *numskull*, *jalopy*, and countless others. *Blizzard* suddenly appeared in the nineteenth century in America (the earliest use is attributed to Davy Crockett) and *rowdy* appeared at

about the same time. Recent examples of this phenomenon are *yuppie* and *sound bites*, which seem to have burst forth spontaneously and spread with remarkable rapidity throughout the English-speaking world.

Other words exist in the language for hundreds of years, either as dialect words or as mainstream words that have fallen out of use, before suddenly leaping to prominence—again quite mysteriously. *Scrounge* and *seep* are both of this type. They have been around for centuries and yet neither, according to Robert Burchfield [*The English Language*, page 46], came into general use before 1900.

Many words are made up by writers. According to apparently careful calculations, Shakespeare used 17,677 words in his writings, of which at least one tenth had never been used before. Imagine if every tenth word you wrote were original. It is a staggering display of ingenuity. But then Shakespeare lived in an age when words and ideas burst upon the world as never before or since. For a century and a half, from 1500 to 1650, English flowed with new words. Between 10,000 and 12,000 words were coined, of which about half still exist. Not until modern times would this number be exceeded, but even then there is no comparison. The new words of today represent an explosion of technology—words like *lunar module* and *myocardial infarction*—rather than of poetry and feeling. Consider the words that Shakespeare alone gave us, *barefaced*, *critical*, *leapfrog*, *monumental*, *castigate*, *majestic*, *obscene*, *frugal*, *radiance*, *dwindle*, *countless*, *submerged*, *excellent*, *fretful*, *gust*, *hint*, *hurry*, *lonely*, *summit*, *pedant*, *obscene*, and some 1,685 others. How would we manage without them? He might well have created even more except that he had to bear in mind the practicalities of being instantly apprehended by an audience. Shakespeare's vocabulary changed considerably as he aged. Jespersen notes that there are some 200 to 300 words to be found in the early plays that are never repeated. Many of these were provincialisms that he later shed, but which independently made their way into the language later—among them *cranny*, *beautified*, *homicide*, *aggravate*, and *forefathers*. It has also been observed by scholars that the new terms of his younger years appeal directly to the senses (*snow-white*, *fragrant*, *brittle*) while the coinages of the

later years are more often concerned with psychological considerations.

Shakespeare was at the center of this remarkable verbal outburst but not alone in it. Ben Jonson gave us *damp*, *defunct*, *clumsy*, and *strenuous* among many other useful terms. Isaac Newton coined *centrifugal* and *centripetal*. Sir Thomas More came up with *absurdity*, *acceptance*, *exact*, *explain*, and *exaggerate*. The classical scholar Sir Thomas Elyot fathered, among others, *animate*, *exhaust*, and *modesty*. Coleridge produced *intensify*, Jeremy Bentham produced *international* (and apologized for its inelegance), Thomas Carlyle gave us *decadent* and *environment*. George Bernard Shaw thought up *superman*.

Many new coinages didn't last—often for obvious reasons. Jonson's less inspired efforts included *ventositous* and *obstupefact*. Shakespeare gave us the useful *gloomy*, but failed with *barky* and *brisky* (formed after the same pattern but somehow never catching on) and failed equally with *conflux*, *vastidity*, and *tortive*. Milton found no takers for *inquisiturient*, while, later still, Dickens tried to give the world *vocular*. The world didn't want it.

Sometimes words are made up for a specific purpose. The U.S. Army in 1974 devised a food called *funistrada* as a test word during a survey of soldiers' dietary preferences. Although no such food existed, *funistrada* ranked higher in the survey than lima beans and eggplant (which seems about right to me, at least as far as the lima beans go).

According to Mary Helen Dohan, in her absorbing book *Our Own Words*, the military vehicle the tank got its name because during its secretive experimental phase people were encouraged to think it was a storage receptacle—hence a tank. The curiously nautical terminology for its various features—*hatch*, *turret*, *hull*, *deck*—arises from the fact that it was developed by the British Admiralty rather than the Army.

4. WORDS CHANGE BY DOING NOTHING. That is, the word stays the same but the meaning changes. Surprisingly often the meaning becomes its opposite or something very like it. *Counterfeit* once meant a legitimate copy. *Brave* once implied cowardice—as indeed

*bravado* still does. (Both come from the same source as *depraved*.) *Crafty*, now a disparaging term, originally was a word of praise, while *enthusiasm* which is now a word of praise, was once a term of mild abuse. *Zeal* has lost its original pejorative sense, but *zealot* curiously has not. *Garble* once meant to sort out, not to mix up. A *harlot* was once a boy, and a *girl* in Chaucer's day was any young person, whether male or female. *Manufacture*, from the Latin root for hand, once signified something made by hand; it now means virtually the opposite. *Politician* was originally a sinister word (perhaps, on second thought, it still is), while *obsequious* and *notorious* simply meant flexible and famous. Simeon Potter notes that when James II first saw St. Paul's Cathedral he called it amusing, awful, and artificial, and meant that it was pleasing to look at, deserving of awe, and full of skillful artifice.

This drift of meaning, technically called *catachresis*, is as widespread as it is curious. *Egregious* once meant eminent or admirable. In the sixteenth century, for no reason we know of, it began to take on the opposite sense of badness and unworthiness (it is in this sense that Shakespeare employs it in *Cymbeline*) and has retained that sense since. Now, however, it seems that people are increasingly using it in the sense not of bad or shocking, but of simply being pointless and unconstructive.

According to Mario Pei, more than half of all words adopted into English from Latin now have meanings quite different from their original ones. A word that shows just how wide-ranging these changes can be is *nice*, which was first recorded in 1290 with the meaning of stupid and foolish. Seventy-five years later Chaucer was using it to mean lascivious and wanton. Then at various times over the next 400 years it came to mean extravagant, elegant, strange, slothful, unmanly, luxurious, modest, slight, precise, thin, shy, discriminating, dainty, and—by 1769—pleasant and agreeable. The meaning shifted so frequently and radically that it is now often impossible to tell in what sense it was intended, as when Jane Austen wrote to a friend, "You scold me so much in a nice long letter . . . which I have received from you."

Sometimes the changing connotations of a word can give a new and startling sense to literary passages, as in *The Mayor of Cas-*

*terbridge* where Thomas Hardy has one of his characters gaze upon "the unattractive exterior of Farfrae's erection" or in *Bleak House* where Dickens writes that "Sir Leicester leans back in his chair, and breathlessly ejaculates." [Taken from "Red Pants," by Robert M. Sebastian, in the Winter 1989 issue of *Verbatim*]

This drift of meaning can happen with almost anything, even our clothes. There is a curious but not often noted tendency for the names of articles of apparel to drift around the body. This is particularly apparent to Americans in Britain (and vice versa) who discover that the names for clothes have moved around at different rates and now often signify quite separate things. An American going into a London department store with a shopping list consisting of vest, knickers, suspenders, jumper, and pants would in each instance be given something dramatically different from what he expected. (To wit, a British vest is an American undershirt. Our vest is their waistcoat. Their knickers are our panties. To them a jumper is a sweater, while what we call a jumper is to them a pinafore dress. Our suspenders are their braces. They don't need suspenders to hold up their pants because to them pants are underwear and clearly you don't need suspenders for that, so instead they employ suspenders to hold up their stockings. Is that clear?)

Sometimes an old meaning is preserved in a phrase or expression. *Neck* was once widely used to describe a parcel of land, but that meaning has died out except in the expression "neck of the woods." *Tell* once meant to count. This meaning died out but is preserved in the expression *bank teller* and in the term for people who count votes. When this happens, the word is called a *fossil*. Other examples of fossils are the italicized words in the following list:

short *shrift*  
*hem* and *haw*  
*rank* and *file*  
*raring* to go  
not a *whit*  
out of *kilter*  
*newfangled*

at bay  
 spick-and-span  
 to and fro  
 kith and kin

Occasionally, because the sense of the word has changed, fossil expressions are misleading. Consider the oft-quoted statement "the exception proves the rule." Most people take this to mean that the exception confirms the rule, though when you ask them to explain the logic in that statement, they usually cannot. After all, how *can* an exception prove a rule? It can't. The answer is that an earlier meaning of *prove* was to test (a meaning preserved in *proving ground*) and with that meaning the statement suddenly becomes sensible—the exception tests the rule. A similar misapprehension is often attached to the statement "the proof of the pudding is in the eating."

Sometimes words change by becoming more specific. *Starve* originally meant to die before it took on the more particular sense of to die by hunger. A deer was once any animal (it still is in the German *tier*) and meat was any food (the sense is preserved in "meat and drink" and in the English food mincemeat, which contains various fruits but no meat in the sense that we now use it). A forest was any area of countryside set aside for hunting, whether or not it was covered with trees. (In England to this day, the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire is largely treeless, as are large stretches of the New Forest in Hampshire.) And *worm* was a term for any crawling creature, including snakes.

5. WORDS ARE CREATED BY ADDING OR SUBTRACTING SOMETHING. English has more than a hundred common prefixes and suffixes—*-able*, *-ness*, *-ment*, *pre-*, *dis-*, *anti-*, and so on—and with these it can form and reform words with a facility that yet again sets it apart from other tongues. For example, we can take the French word *mutin* (rebellion) and turn it into *mutiny*, *mutinous*, *mutinously*, *mutineer*, and many others, while the French have still just the one form, *mutin*.

We are astonishingly indiscriminate in how we form our com-

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pounds, sometimes adding an Anglo-Saxon prefix or suffix to a Greek or Latin root (*plainness*, *sympathizer*), and sometimes vice versa (*readable*, *disbelieve*). [Examples cited by Burchfield, *The English Language*, page 112]. This inclination to use affixes and infixes provides gratifying flexibility in creating or modifying words to fit new uses, as strikingly demonstrated in the word *incomprehensibility*, which consists of the root *-hen-* and eight affixes and infixes: *in-*, *-com-*, *-pre-*, *-s-*, *-ib-*, *-il-*, *-it-*, and *-y*. Even more melodic is the musical term *quasihemidemisemiquaver*, which describes a note that is equal to 128th of a semibreve.

As well as showing flexibility it also promotes confusion. We have six ways of making *labyrinth* into an adjective: *labyrinthian*, *labyrinthean*, *labyrinthal*, *labyrinthine*, *labyrinthic*, and *labyrinthical*. We have at least six ways of expressing negation with prefixes: *a-*, *anti-*, *in-*, *il-*, *im-*, *ir-*, *un-*, and *non-*. It is arguable whether this is a sign of admirable variety or just untidiness. It must be exasperating for foreigners to have to learn that a thing unseen is not invisible, but invisible, while something that cannot be reversed is not irreversible but irreversible and that a thing not possible is not nonpossible or antipossible but impossible. Furthermore, they must learn not to make the elementary mistake of assuming that because a word contains a negative suffix or prefix it is necessarily a negative word. *In-*, for instance, almost always implies negation but not with *invaluable*, while *-less* is equally negative, as a rule, but not with *priceless*. Things are so confusing that even native users have shown signs of mental fatigue and left us with two forms meaning the same thing: *flammable* and *inflammable*, *iterate* and *reiterate*, *ebriate* and *inebriate*, *habitable* and *inhabitable*, *durable* and *perdurable*, *fervid* and *perfervid*, *gather* and *forgather*, *ravel* and *unravel*.

Some of our word endings are surprisingly rare. If you think of *angry* and *hungry*, you might conclude that *-gry* is a common ending, but in fact it occurs in no other common words in English. Similarly *-dous* appears in only *stupendous*, *horrendous*, *tremendous*, *hazardous*, and *jeopardous*, while *-lock* survives only in *wedlock* and *-red* only in *hatred* and *kindred*. *Forgiveness* is the only example of a verb + *-ness* form. Equally some common-seeming



prefixes are actually more rare than superficial thought might lead us to conclude. If you think of *forgive*, *forget*, *forgo*, *forbid*, *forbear*, *forlorn*, *forsake*, and *forswear*, you might think that *for-* is a common prefix, but in fact it appears in no other common words, though once it appeared in scores of others. Why certain forms like *-ish*, *-ness*, *-ful*, and *-some* should continue to thrive while others like *-lock* and *-gry* that were once equally popular should fall into disuse is a question without a good answer.

Fashion clearly has something to do with it. The suffix *-dom* was long in danger of disappearing, except in a few established words like *kingdom*, but it underwent a resurgence (largely instigated in America) in the last century, giving us such useful locutions as *officialdom* and *boredom* and later more contrived forms like *best-sellerdom*. The ending *-en* is today one of the most versatile ways we have of forming verbs from adjectives (*harden*, *loosen*, *sweeten*, etc.) and yet almost all such words are less than 300 years old.

Nor is there any discernible pattern to help explain why a particular affix attaches itself to a particular word or why some creations have thrived while others have died of neglect. Why, for instance, should we have kept *disagree* but lost *disadorn*, retained *impede* but banished *expede*, kept *inhibit* but rejected *cohibit*? [Cited by Baugh and Cable, page 225]

The process is still perhaps the most prolific way of forming new words and often the simplest. For centuries we had the word *political*, but by loading the single letter *a* onto the front of it, a new word, *apolitical*, joined the language in 1952.

Still other words are formed by lopping off their ends. *Mob*, for example, is a shortened form of *mobile vulgus* (fickle crowd). *Exam*, *gym*, and *lab* are similar truncations, all of them dating only from the last century when syllabic amputations were the rage. Yet the impulse to shorten words is an ancient one.

Finally, but no less importantly, English possesses the ability to make new words by fusing compounds—*airport*, *seashore*, *footwear*, *wristwatch*, *landmark*, *flowerpot*, and so on almost endlessly. All Indo-European languages have the capacity to form compounds. Indeed, German and Dutch do it, one might say, to excess. But English does it more neatly than most other languages,

eschewing the choking word chains that bedevil other Germanic languages and employing the nifty refinement of making the elements reversible, so that we can distinguish between a houseboat and a boathouse, between basketwork and a workbasket, between a casebook and a bookcase. Other languages lack this facility.