

Methods of Word Formation with Particular Reference to Popular Music and Politics

Daniel B. RIBBLE

English

Abstract. This paper examines different common methods of word formation and then looks at words from two specific areas of culture, the diverse areas of popular music and politics, to see what are the most commonly used methods of word formation. New words can result from various processes, including derivation, where derivational affixes combine with free morphemes to form new words, from compounding, where two separate items join together to make a new word, from conversion, which involves a change in word class, from the creation of acronyms, that is, taking the initial letters of words in a phrase and combining them, from blending, where the beginning of one word is combined with the end of another word, from coinage, the invention of completely new vocabulary items, from back formation and clipping, which are forms of abbreviation, and from calque or loan translation, where the elements of a word are directly translated into the borrowing language. The study of how words are formed is important to language learners as they can use that information in helping them to guess the meanings of new words.

Introduction

“Most new words are not new at all, they are simply additions to existing words or re-combinations of their components,” says author Jean Aitchison in her book *Words In the Mind* (Aitchison, 1994, p.158). She goes on to note that the writer of a book on word formation was only able to find six words invented out of nothing, though she states that a seventh candidate may be the word googol, meaning a figure followed by 100 zeroes, which a mathematician apparently made up upon hearing the sounds his baby grandson was making. So, if most new words are not new at all, how are they formed? In this paper I would like to look at the different common methods of word formation in general and then look at words from several specific areas of culture, the quite diverse areas of popular music and politics, to see what sort of word formation methods seem to be most commonly used. Following that, I would like to comment briefly on the importance the study of word formation may have for language learning.

The “Lexical Tool – Kit”

Linguist Aitchison notes that there are many possible word formation devices but says that only a few of these are usually used in most situations, and she gives the term ‘lexical tool – kit’ to these productive processes, which she says are attached to the mental lexicon. The mental lexicon is a term for the stored mental picture of what people know about their language. The lexical tool kit supposedly contains back – up mechanisms for the mental lexicon which give instructions on how to make up new words if they are necessary.

Let’s take a look at these “lexical tool kits” (hopefully the tools are all there !) in more detail and see what methods of word formation are open to us as speakers of the English language. First, let us note that words can be grammatical or lexical. Grammatical words fall into a limited number of closed sets where membership is usually fixed (for example, the, and, of, to) and they have no independent meaning. Lexical words are the information bearing words, and they include adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs. They can be added to and change and so fall into open sets, and they are the words which we will be dealing with when we talk about word formation.

Word Derivation/Affixation

New words can result from the process of derivation, or as it is termed by Jean Aitchison, affixation. In this process, derivational affixes combine with free morphemes to form new words. A morpheme is the term used for the minimal unit of meaning in a language. A free morpheme, or word which can stand alone at word level, can be referred to as the root of a word when it is joined by one or more bound morphemes ; bound morphemes cannot stand alone as words. Bound morphemes can be inflectional or derivational. Inflectional morphemes perform a grammatical function and show us whether a word is singular or plural (band/ –s), whether a verb is past tense or not (play/ –ed), or if a word is comparative or superlative (hard/ –er and hard/ –est). In English, inflectional morphemes are always suffixes, but derivational bound morphemes, the morphemes which are used to make new words, can be suffixes or prefixes (In talking about word formation, we’ll only be dealing with derivational bound morphemes, not the inflectional morphemes). An affix can be either a suffix, which is added to the end of a word, or a prefix, which is added to the beginning of a word. If we look at a musical term, the word guitarist, for example, guitar is

called a free morpheme and the suffix -ist is called a bound morpheme, because the -ist cannot stand alone as it has no independent meaning. According to linguist Steven Pinker, English is “genuinely crude” compared to other languages when it comes to inflectional morphology, and the modification of the form of a word to fit its role in a sentence, but he notes that English “holds its own” when it comes to derivational morphology, and that it is “free and easy” with compounding, as we shall see when we look at some examples from popular music and politics (Pinker, 1994, p. 128 – 129).

Word Compounding

Another method of word formation is compounding. In compounding, two separate items are joined together to make a new single item. A word from one word class can join with a word from the same word class (noun + noun, for example) or with a word from another word class (adverb + verb, for example). Taking some other examples from music, we have the terms bluesmen or jazzmen (adjective + noun) used for people who play blues or jazz. Blues and jazz are commonly used as nouns describing a kind of music, but in this case they are adjectives describing musicians who play the blues or jazz. The rule for compounding is that if the morphemes are from different word classes, the new word usually belongs to the same class as the second of the compounding items. Aitchison states that a new compound must specify further information and that the relationship between the parts of a compound is expected to be a “permanent or habitual one.” (Aitchison, p. 160)

Word Conversion

Another process of word formation is conversion, which refers to a change in word class, for example, a noun might come to be used as a verb, or a verb as a noun. Nowadays the word jazz is usually used to refer to a style of music, that of improvised music, and so is a noun. But it may have started off as a verb or as several verbs. Author Donald Clarke notes that the word jazz may have come from the French jaser, meaning to converse, perhaps indiscreetly (Donald Clarke, 1995, p. 68). Musician Clarence Williams claimed to be the first person to use the word on sheet music (as a noun) around 1915. He said he heard a woman say the words “Oh jazz me, baby,” while he was playing music. So perhaps the word jazz underwent several changes, from a verb meaning to converse, to a verb with sexual connotations, to a noun describing a kind of music.

In a similar vein, the term rock'n'roll had been applied to sex and dancing among black Americans before it was popularized by Cleveland deejay Alan Freed as an expression describing the kind of rhythm and blues music which he was trying to popularize in 1951. Of course one can rock or "rock out" to rock music, so perhaps the word has converted again, since the 1950's (though there may be some connection with another word rock, meaning to move from side to side). The word swing, a noun which has been used since 1935 to describe a kind of music usually associated with the Big Bands of the 1930's and 1940's, may have developed from a verb describing the rhythmical motion or feeling of motion that the band members had while playing swing. As to what swing was exactly, Louis Armstrong was hesitant to cooperate with those who wanted an easy definition, making statements like "If you don't know what it is, don't mess with it," and "If you gotta ask, you'll never know" (Donald Clarke, 1995, p. 82.).

Acronyms

Another method of word formation which seems to be especially popular these days is the creation of acronyms, that is, taking the initial letters of words in a phrase and combining them. Two acronyms which are quite commonly seen in the media are AIDS and BSE, which most people are probably more familiar with than the original terms Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy.

Back Formation, Clipping, Coinage, and Calque

There are other methods of word formation, including back formation, where a word of one word class is shortened to create a word belonging to a different word class, clipping, which is a form of abbreviation which can mean a change in stylistic level or degree of formality, and blending, which combines the beginning of one word with the end of another word. There is also coinage, the invention of completely new vocabulary items, which can be common if we take trade or product names into account, and calque or loan translation, where the elements of a word are directly translated into the borrowing language. Linguist Jean Aitchison also mentions the method of reanalysis, where people form new words by analyzing existing ones into segments and then detach one segment, which can then be added to other morphemes. She gives the word sputnik, with a detachable -nik as an example. Other words from the era of sputnik are beatnik and peacenik; one assumes they

took their – niks from sputnik.

Now I'd like to look at some common vocabulary in the areas of popular music and politics, and see what sort of word formation methods are used, and if they tend to coincide with the popular methods mentioned by Aitchinson (and by the authors of the CELS Lexis module).

Word Formation in the Area of Popular Music

We have already seen that conversion is a process of word formation used in regard to some musical terms such as jazz, rock, and swing. The term rap, used to describe a type of music where the words are spoken in time with the musical beat, is from black slang, and in the 1960's was a word for conversation, so it can also be seen as resulting from a process of conversion, from a verb to a noun. Aitchison notes that there are many more nouns than verbs, and states that the conversion of a noun to a verb is considerably more common than the conversion of a verb to a noun, but in the area of music, conversion from verb to noun seems more prevalent, or perhaps the examples are just more prominent. Word production by the creation of acronyms is also in evidence; we have R&B for rhythm and blues, and DJ for disc jockey (and deejay from DJ?, a process of lengthening?)

There are a number of words in the area of popular music which have a foreign origin. The word banjo comes from the African word banjar. Discotheque is from the French for 'record library,' (and disco is formed by abbreviating or clipping that word). Carol, as in Christmas carol, comes from the medieval French carole, a round dance, and ballad comes from the Latin ballare, "to dance." Another term, 'jouk' or 'juke' meant to dance, and the words jukebox and juke joint, were formed by compounding. The origins of the term juke go back to the Gullah (English based creole used in the American southeast) 'juke' or 'joog' originally meaning disorderly or wicked, and perhaps ultimately from the African Wolof 'dzug,' to live wickedly (Clarke, p. 230).

There are terms that come from peoples' names. Dr. Robert A. Moog built the first synthesizer in 1964, now sometimes referred to simply as a Moog. Les Paul, whose real name was Lester Polfus, taught himself to be a great guitar player, and created a famous type of electric guitar which is called the Les Paul. The Dopyera brothers, who may have changed

their name to Dopera, created a guitar with a metal body which is now commonly called the dobro. A man named Wurlitzer may have created the first Wurlitzer jukebox.

Some musical terms appear to have an onomatopoeic origin. The terms bebop and rebop, referring to a style of jazz which came out in the mid-1940's, may have originated onomatopoeically from the offbeat accents of the music. They were shortened to bop (clipping?), and from bop we get boppers (derivation). Also related to bebop are hard bop, an example of compounding, and cubop, a term used to describe a mix of Cuban music and bebop. One can view cubop as an example of blending, as it is created from a combination of the words Cuban and bebop. Then again, there is the claim that the Spanish term *arriba* was the original source of the term bebop. A similar sounding musical term, hip-hop, describing a musical style which later became known as rap music, also may have had something of an onomatopoeic origin, as it may have originated from the phrase on a Lovebug Starsky record, "To the hip, hop, hippedy-hop" (Clarke, p. 550).

And what about that instrument, the gong?

Some of the musical terms noted in the preceding paragraphs originated from a process of compounding, which appears to be a very common method of word formation.

The term ragtime, for a style of music which became popular to dance to in the 1920's, may come from a description in 1886 of the dancing in Congo Square in New Orleans, described as being in 'ragged' time, so perhaps ragtime can be said to have been formed by a process of compounding. The first ragtime tunes composed by people such as Scott Joplin on piano, initially perhaps to imitate the banjo, were called 'rags (a process of clipping?).'

There are names of many styles of music which appear to be formed by compounding, including free jazz, jazz rock, acoustic jazz, world music, worldbeat, soul jazz, "cool" jazz, progressive rock, easy listening, modal jazz, freebop, hard rock, art rock, punk rock, rhythm and blues, Christian rock, Celtic rock, Latin rock, blue grass, jazz fusion, country and western, blues-rock, Chicago blues, Delta blues, folk rock, country rock, and heavy metal, although the last term may be something of an exception, as the words 'heavy metal' come from the term 'heavy metal thunder' in the band Steppenwolf's hit "Born to Be Wild," and the band took those words from a William Burroughs novel (Clarke, p. 498). So sometimes word origins can become rather complicated affairs where it might be hard to put a specific label on the final product. But compounding is very much in evidence in terms related to popular music, and is probably the most common method of word formation if the

words concerned are those used specifically in relation to popular music. In addition to the term popular music itself, we have rock musician, jazz musician, rock artist, rock band, electric guitar, rock concert, studio musician, record label, big band, jazz festival, rock opera, counterculture, horn player, harmonica player, pop artist, country artist, white noise ad infinitum.

Regarding terms commonly used when talking about popular music, the only method of word formation which could possibly come close to compounding is derivation, or affixation. Suffixes such as -ist and -er and their variations, added to free morphemes give us words like guitarist, bassist, keyboardist, percussionist, violinist, flutist, trombonist, saxophonist, artist, trumpeter, player, rocker, roller, synthesizer, drummer, bopper, dancer, and performer. And if we venture into areas where words tend to tilt toward the area of slang, we can look at words with suffixes such as -ie, -y, -ster, and find words such as junkie, roadie, hippie, hipster, popster, groadie, gnarly, hippy, funky, punky, punkster, folksy, bluesy, jazzy, spacey, and grungy. But for every -ist or -er word, one can probably compound it with another word, as we have blues guitarist, rock bassist, jazz percussionist, tenor saxophonist, bass player, soul artist, reggae singer, and break dancer (the break originally came the fact that amateur Djs broke into street lamps for electricity in New York, and kids would listen to the music and dance).

Word Formation in the Area of Political Terminology

Looking at a very different area, that of political terminology, (which is not to say that there is no connection between rock'n'roll and politics but we don't have time to discuss that here), we also see that some English language, or I should say American English language political terms have foreign origins. The term caucus, meaning a meeting of people in a political party who come together to decide on political plans or to choose representatives in an election, comes from an Algonquian word for counselor, which dates from the early 17th century (Bill Bryson, 1994, p.287). The term mugwump, which from the 1880's was used to describe a political maverick, also came from the Algonquian word for chief or leader. The word tariff comes from the Spanish town of Tarifa, from the days when the Barbary pirates used to make ships pay for their passage through pirate controlled waters. Some words have quite complicated histories, for example, the term filibuster, meaning to try and delay legislative action by making long speeches, originally came from the

Dutch *vrijbuit*, meaning pirate, which was converted by the Spanish to *filibustero*, and then borrowed by the French as *filibustier*, and reborrowed by the English as *filibuster*, and then imported by the Americans where it was first used to refer to Americans who formed private armies trying to take over Latin American countries, people such as William Walker (1824 – 1860), who managed to take over Nicaragua for about a year, but later met death in front of a firing squad after failing to take over Honduras. By the time of Walker's death, the word was being used to describe disruptive debating tactics in Congress. (Bryson, p. 290).

Since the second World War, or rather, since the administration of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s, the American government seems to have had an affection for acronyms. Many of the New Deal (formed by compounding) terms such as the Tennessee Valley Authority probably became more well known by their abbreviations, in this case, the TVA, than by the original terms. During the New Deal, there were also the WPA (Works Progress Administration), the PWA (Public Works Administration), and the OPA (Office of Price Administration, among many others. When the U.S.A. (also an acronym) started worrying about the actions of the Germans and the Japanese during the WWII days, the American government created the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), which later turned into the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). And of course the F.B.I. (Federal Bureau of Investigation) keeps watch over America. There are organizations such as NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the U.N. (United Nations), and treaties such as SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks).

There are also terms having to do with politics which have been formed by reanalysis. The break – in to the Watergate complex by Nixon's burglars in the 1970's inspired a flood of other – gate words such as Irangate, Lancegate, and Koreagate, though few of these has stood the test of time.

Many political terms have been formed by compounding, as for example, the term pork barrel (which dates from the 1800s, and currently refers to the money that a congressman can get for his home state from Washington) cold war (first used by the statesman Bernard Baruch in a speech in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1947, as opposed to a "hot" war, or an actual military engagement) iron curtain (meaning an imaginary barrier, a term used since 1819, but later attributed to Winston Churchill), domino theory (meaning that if one

nation fell to communism, other nations in the immediate area would start to collapse), lame duck (an 18th century London stock market term for a defaulter, which by mid 19th century was used in American to describe a politician who is serving out his/her term in office and waiting for her/his successor), egghead (inspired by American Presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson's head shape and becoming a term used to describe intellectuals from late 1952), and more recently, and ominously, ethnic cleansing (coined by Russian observers in Yugoslavia, and first reported in the July 9, 1991 issue of the Times of London, to refer to the use of violent methods to force certain groups of people out of an area or country) (Bryson, pp. 289 – 293).

In political terminology, one can find examples of calque or loan translation, where the parts of a word are directly translated into the borrowing language, as with the term brainwash, a literal translation of the Mandarin Chinese hsi nao. And relating to the above term, there are words the government comes up with to convince us that everything is under control, euphemisms such as peacekeepers for nuclear warheads and pacification for eradication.

Some political terms refer back to people's names, for example, the term gerrymander, meaning to redraw electoral boundaries to favor a particular political party, refers to a former governor of Massachusetts, Elbridge Gerry, whose last name was suggested as the replacement for the sala – in salamander when artist Gilbert Stuart began sketching a head and legs over a U.S. county map (Bryson, p. 288). The terms Thatcherite and Reaganite also come to mind, which brings us to derivation.

In the area of politics, I would venture to say that derivation or affixation is probably the most common method of word formation. If we take the words left, right, and center, words we use to describe the political sentiments of politicians or the politicians themselves, or possibly our own sentiments, we find that these terms originated from the seating arrangement in the French National Assembly, where the more radical common people sat to the left of the president, and the more conservative clergy sat to his right. If we use the suffix –ist we can get the words leftist, rightist, and centrist. We can find this combination in the names for many political parties, or political labels, for example, communist, socialist, populist, fascist, anarchist, royalist, militarist, pacifist, Toryist, and Islamicist. Then there is the word politics itself, which has its origin in the Greek polis, for city or state, from which the

Greek *politicus*, pertaining to citizens, is derived, and later the 14th century French term *politique*, going through various other changes to arrive at the modern word *politics*, which is defined as the science and art of government. (Oxford English Dictionary, Vol VII, p.1074). Many suffixes and the occasional prefix combine with this term to form various terms such as *political* (-al), *politically* (-ally), *politician* (-cian), *politicize* (-cize), *politico* (-o), *apolitical* (a-), and *nonpolitical* (non-). A bound morpheme which is commonly used in politically related words is -ic; we have *democratic*, *aristocratic*, *plutocratic*, *communistic*, *socialistic*, *fascistic*, and *anarchistic*, and the prefix *anti-* can combine with all of the above mentioned free morphemes.

Aitchison's statement about the conversion of a noun to a verb as being considerably more common than the conversion of a verb to a noun certainly seems to hold in the area of politics, as for example we can get *politicize* from *politic* (al), *liberalize* from *liberal*, *radicalize* from *radical*, *democratize* from *democrat*, and *socialize* from *social* (but there are exceptions, such as *communize*, which was formed by back formation from *communization*). And of course there are the -isms, which have probably increased in number by leaps and bounds in the last few decades, including *socialism*, *communism*, *anarchism*, *fascism*, *republicanism* (*republic* itself is a compound from *res*, meaning thing or affair, and *publicus* - public), *environmentalism*, *Catholicism*, *Buddhism*, *Marxism*, *totalitarianism*, *conservatism*, *liberalism*, *individualism*, *feminism*, *utopianism*, *rationalism*, *ecumenicism*, *libertarianism*, *humanism*, *radicalism*, *nihilism*, *secularism*, *existentialism*, *capitalism*, *materialism*, *relativism*, and that ultimate word, *antidisestablishmentarianism* (meaning the opposition to the withdrawal of state support from an established church, especially in reference to the Anglican Church in the 19th century [Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1979, p. 64]) which also has prefixes *anti-*, and *dis-*, as well as suffixes *-ment*, and *-arian*, in addition to the -ism. With words like that, derivation has to come out on top.

Utilizing Word Formation in Learning a Language

There is the question of how to utilize word formation in learning a language. Learning how words are made up may be important to language learning as the learner can use that information when he or she comes up against new words. In the area of medical English, learning affixes can be instructive, as students can guess at the meaning of new words they come across in reading medical articles if they know prefixes and suffixes which are com-

monly used in medical literature. Many of the affixes found in medical English come from Latin, and if the student knows them, he or she can guess what kind of medical condition is being referred to, or where the condition being referred to is located in the body. Knowing something about word formation may enable us to arrange vocabulary in a more suitable order for teaching or learning. McCarthy notes that a knowledge of the processes involved in word formation can be useful as an aid to memorizing words, in some cases, by helping us to organize vocabulary (McCarthy, 1990, p.5). According to research by Craik and Lockhart (1972), oral repetition alone is not always an effective way of learning new words; recalling the form of a word was found to have better results (Carter and McCarthy, 1988, p.13). By letting learners experiment with word formation, we may encourage more creativity in the learning process, for example, by helping learners to explore the language for new formations when the available vocabulary doesn't provide the words for what the students want to say. One can also learn about the history of words and how language changes over time through the study of word formation, and it can be enlightening at times, as well as entertaining. With our "lexical tool kits" we have the ability to continue to make new connections between words and sometimes make up new ones, if the need arises. As Aitchison points out, the word formation ability that we possess shows us that the mental lexicon is not "a fixed dictionary with a set amount of information about each word, but an active system in which new links are perpetually being formed" (Aitchison, p.167).

Bibliography

- Aitchison, Jean, 1994, *Words In the Mind : An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon*. Blackwell.
- Bryson, Bill, 1994, *Made In America : An Informal History of the English Language In the United States*. William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Carter, Ronald, 1987, *Vocabulary : Applied Linguistic Perspectives*. Routledge.
- Carter, R., and McCarthy, M., *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*. Longman.
- Clarke, Donald, 1995, *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music*. Penguin.
- Crystal, David, ed. , 1992, *An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages*. Penguin.
- Fordham, John, 1993, *Jazz*. Dorling Kindersley Limited.
- Heylin, Clinton, ed. , 1992, *The Penguin Book of Rock & Roll Writing*. Penguin.
- Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, 1992. Longman.
- McCarthy, Michael, 1990, *Vocabulary*. Oxford University Press.

- Oxford English Dictionary, Volumes III, VII, and VIII*, 1993. Oxford University Press
- Pinker, Steven, 1994. *The Language Instinct*. HarperPerennial.
- Stern, Jess, ed., 1979, *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, The Random House.
- Theroux, Paul, 1995, *The Pillars of Hercules*. Penguin.