
The ABC's of Lexical Additions to American English

Edward M. Anthony*

Abstract

The article describes and illustrates three types of lexical additions to American English--the adaptation of existing words, the borrowing of words from other languages, and the creation of new forms within the linguistic constraints of English phonology and grammar.

Examples illustrating lexical change are cited from various contemporary and historical sources, but the primary data for the paper consist of ten of each type taken from *6,000 Words*, a 1976 dictionary which provides attested addenda to Merriam Webster's 1961 *Third New International Dictionary*. Conclusions are drawn relating to the three categories.

Prologue : Mayuri Sukwiwat

I have had the high privilege of knowing Mayuri Sukwiwat since 1955. She was teaching English at what was then the College of Education, Prasarnmitr, when I arrived in Bangkok for the first time as an innocent young Fulbrighter accompanied by my wife, also a Fulbright teacher, and two small daughters. That was a long time ago--so long ago that one of the girls now professes French at Dartmouth, and has made me a grandfather; the other does intricate genetic research in Texas. But neither will ever forget "the Bangkok years." A much later son has now reached maturity, and eagerly awaits an opportunity to spend some time in Thailand, as, in fact, do his parents.

The fact that an entire family has warm and positive feelings about Thailand

can largely be attributed to first impressions. Being received there by a young lady English teacher then recently returned from England who was friendly, helpful, and hospitable in the extreme, was largely responsible for those first impressions. Her tremendous contributions to the field of English teaching in Thailand are well-known. Even more significant is the extent to which she has represented the best of Thailand to those who are not Thai. No one who has known Mayuri could have an ill opinion of Thailand.

From thousands of miles away I salute her, and offer this minor contribution to the volume in her honor.

Introduction

Over the centuries all living languages change in pronunciation, grammar, and lexicon. Grimm's law chronicles the changes

* I am indebted to my wife Ann T. Anthony, with whom I shared "the Bangkok years," for her careful reading and editing of this manuscript.

over time from Proto-Indo-European voiceless stops to Proto-Germanic voiceless fricatives. In the area of Thai language studies, Marvin Brown (1965) describes how the phonology of Thai has shifted over the centuries and in his preface he also appropriately offers Mayuri Sukwiwat special thanks for her assistance.

Instances of grammatical changes over time are also easily found. The Lord's Prayer in Old English began with *Faeder ure* but changed in syntax (as well as in pronunciation and spelling) to become Modern English *Our Father*. Chaucer wrote in acceptable Middle English in the *Canterbury Tales*:

He neuere yet no vileonye ne sayde
In al his lyf vn to no maner wight.

This can be translated into Modern English (literally but *not* acceptably) as:

He never yet no profanity not said
In all his life to no type person.

Should it appear in a freshman essay today, such grammar usage would be incorrect, and merit the liberal use of a red pencil.

However it is not changes in the areas of grammar and phonology that ordinarily force the issuance of new dictionaries, but rather the shifts of lexicon. While grammatical and phonological shifts occur slowly and systematically over a long period and are largely unobserved except by specialists, lexical change is swifter, widely noted, and commented upon.

This paper is intended to classify and illustrate examples of recent additions to the American English lexicon and to draw a few conclusions. The limitation to American English does not exclude the extension of these additions to other dialects of English.

Indeed, some certainly have entered other varieties of English, but data and conclusions relate solely to an American variety.

Perhaps before dealing with the additions of the title, it might be fitting to put lexical change into an even larger context by commenting briefly on *subtractions* as well. The lexicon of a language is constantly in a state of increase, decrease, and modification which accompany shifts in the culture of those who use it. As groups of people encounter new experiences and change or abandon old activities, as they change their mode of life and their views of the universe, their language follows along obediently to change its ways as well. Some words grow faint—they cast off some meanings and may disappear entirely from the lexicon. Others grow in import.

This historical perspective is exemplified by Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary which cites some words which are no longer with us: *fulimart* "kind of stinking ferret," and *ponk*, "nocturnal spirit," for example. (The definitions are Johnson's.) Some entries are composed of parts we recognize, and may even have meanings we could still use, but the words are gone: Who has not known "one who contrives to give himself vexation"? Johnson's entry for this meaning is a *seeksorrow*. It is pleasant to report that *mancipate*, meaning "to enslave" in Johnson's time, now usually appears only as part of its opposite—*emancipate*, though *mancipate* still appears in unabridged dictionaries.

But let us return to *additions* in forms and/or in meanings. The ABC's of my title are: adaptation, borrowing, and creation. I shall deal only with words and meanings that are in current use. I will, however, take up borrowing first, then creation, then

adaptation. The most felicitous title for an article does not always reflect the most appropriate order for tackling the subject.

In this essay I intend to show how lexical addition continues today by reference to a 1976 volume called *6,000 Words*. Its preface states that the book "is essentially the most recent Addenda section of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*." *Webster's Third* first appeared in 1961; *6,000 Words* in 1976. The later volume basically includes entries that in 1976 had become widely accepted as part of the American variety of English but had not yet attained that status in 1961. In the present paper, all of the examples from this point on appear in upper case letters if they are to be found in *6,000 Words*. Some of them simply were not encountered in 1961 even as forms; others existed, but were not widely used or have added meanings since then.

Borrowing

English has from its beginnings been lexically acquisitive. Its multiple early borrowings from Norman French are famous. American English, especially in place names like *Michigan* and *Ohio*, animals like *raccoon* and *chipmunk*, and trees like *hickory* and *sequoia*, reflects the influence of various American Indian languages.

Borrowing implies contact with the cultures within which those languages were used. This contact may be adjacent in time or space, or far removed. American English has borrowed from the Spanish of contiguous Mexico (MARGARITA "a drink"), from ancient Rome (HOMO HABILIS "able man, an early humanoid"), from ancient Greece (TELEDIAGNOSIS "the diagnosis of ailments

based on data received from a patient by means of telemetry and closed-circuit television") and from both ancient Greece (*bio-*) and Rome (*-cidal*) (*BIOCIDAL* "destructive to life"). Such words arrive in English sometimes directly, at other times through geographically and temporally removed intervening languages or dialects, e.g.: COSMODROME, for a Soviet space establishment, derived from Greek, but taken into English from Russian.

Here, with comments, is a random sampling of ten recent borrowings into English from ten different languages. The upper case main entries appear in *6,000 Words*, and the definitions (here and elsewhere) are shortened excerpts from the same volume. Languages other than the ten cited of course also contributed to modern American English.

1. Greek: ACROLECT "most prestigious dialect of a community"

Borrowings from classical Greek are often used for specialized and scientific terminology and frequently for experiences with which the ancient Greeks and Romans were unfamiliar. The prefix *tele*, for example, meaning "distant," is now used in words like *telephone*, *telekinesis*; and the surgical suffixes *-ectomy* "cut out," or *-tomy* "incision" form part of such words as *appendectomy* and *lobotomy*.

2. Yiddish: NOSH "to eat between meals"

Yiddish, a Jewish dialect of German, supplies American English with many informal, sometimes derisive, words: *shlemiel*, "a fool," *CHUTZPAH*, "effrontery, audacity" *KLUTZ*, "clumsy person." Some, like "*CHUTZPAH*," came into Yiddish from Hebrew before they entered English.

3. Swedish: OMBUDSMAN "one who investigates complaints"
4. Yoruba: DASHIKI "bright colored . . pullover garment"

This African borrowing appeared during the decade in which the push for civil rights was at its height, and reflected the pride that Black people take in their African heritage.

5. German: GLITCH "a failure to function properly"

The word is often used in connection with computer technology, and can perhaps be classified under the rubric 'scientific German.' The German language has contributed scholarly words as well. *Seminar* and *semester*, first borrowed by the Germans from Latin, were taken into American English as educational terms. *Festschrift*, literally "celebration writing," now means "a publication in honor of a person."

6. Italian: CIAO "utterance at meeting or parting"

A jet-set goodbye--ultimately derived from *schiaivo*, "... your slave."

7. Spanish: MACHISMO "strong sense of masculine pride"

This has now become a pejorative term in English.

8. Japanese: HONCHO "a boss or leader"

Other Japanese words in English include, of course, *Honda*, *Mitsubishi*, *Sony*, *Toyota*, and *SUSHI*, *sukiyaki*, *sashimi*, *wasabe*, which reflect the rise and popularity of "Japan, Inc." and of Japanese cuisine in our late twentieth century world.

9. Polynesian: MAI TAI "a cocktail which includes rum, curacao, fruit juices"

Maitai in Polynesian, a language family which includes Hawaiian, means

"good." (No doubt Acharn Mayuri, who spent some years in Honolulu can provide other examples of Tahitian borrowings.)

10. Chinese: SHIH TZU "a kind of dog."

A Shih Tzu is an old variety of Chinese dog which has enjoyed a recent popularity in the United States.

As shown, words are taken into American English from a great variety of source languages--the above listing is a mere sample--and reflect the history and the types of contacts with other cultures and other languages which English speakers have had.

A final comment: there are many borrowings of a more regional nature. Americans who have the good fortune to live in Thailand, even though they may not speak Thai, use some Thai words freely every day, e.g.: *soy*, *maj pen ray*, *klong*, *samlor*. Of these, *klong* seems nearest to adoption into a more general variety of English.

Creation

Some words seem just to appear suddenly in the language. No one has established for such words a genetic relationship to the parent languages of English--the pre-historic Indo-European or its later Germanic branch. These words have been created in conformity with the phonological and grammatical constraints of the language, yet their history is limited and at times obscure.

Sometimes one can identify the person who coined the words: George Eastman, for example, invented *Kodak*--trade mark name for a kind of camera; and Gelett Burgess in 1907 is credited with *blurb*, which *Webster's Third* defines in part as "a short highly commendatory and often extravagant publicity notice." Both of these nouns are still with us.

Acronyms, made up of initials or word parts, substitute for prolix descriptions. *Radar* has become a word on its own, as has *scuba*. We may or may not know that the former gets its origin from the cumbersome phrase “radio detecting and ranging,” (which is also its meaning) and that the latter means and derives from “self contained underwater breathing apparatus.”

Occasionally one finds an acronym whose source is not generally realized because it did not originate in English. As an instance, *flak* illustrates both borrowing and a type of creation. The word comes from the beginnings of three German words: *FLieger Abwehr Kanonen*, “aircraft protection cannon,” and has come to mean both the shells which such weapons actually shoot, and, metaphorically, “strong criticism or opposition.”

The following are ten examples of creation from *6,000 Words* with commentary.

1. QUARK “a hypothetical particle...held to be a constituent of known elementary particles”

This, we are informed, was coined by an American physicist named Murray Gell-Mann, within the phonological, grammatical, and orthographic systems of English, so that physicists would be able to refer easily to a complex scientific concept.

QUARK is scientific and impeccable. But some created words, or words presumed created because the origin has been impossible to find, are imitative of sounds, either imagined or real, and are quite informal. They may be pejorative to the point of vulgarity and sometimes beyond, and do not always describe pleasant circumstances.

Created words are perhaps more the result of conscious effort on the part of the speakers of the language than are the borrowings above or the adaptations that are to be taken up next. If this is so, one might reasonably ask what characteristics of mankind’s nature or his cultural nurture lead to the invention of so many words within the realms of science and unpleasantness.

2. GLOP “a thick sticky liquid”
3. BARF “to vomit”
4. ZILCH “nothing...zero”
5. ZONKED “under the influence of alcohol or a drug”
6. BLAHS “feeling of boredom” or of “general dissatisfaction”
7. GRUNGY “dirty or uncared for”
8. SCAM “a swindle”
9. CHUG-A-LUG, “to drink a whole container...without pause”

This is an example of a made-up expression that has been around for a long time. It was, for example, commonly used in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the 1940’s, but only earned admission to dictionaries after 1961.

10. GIGO

It is probably fitting to complete this section with a word that is both scientific and pejorative. GIGO, an acronym from the initials of the phrase “garbage in, garbage out,” reflects the fact that a computer can produce high quality output only if what is put into it is also of high quality.

Adaptation

By far the most prevalent and least noticed way in which the American variety of English has changed is through adaptation. One can defend the proposition that each time a lexical item is used it is employed

in slightly different circumstances. As those circumstances diverge, the meaning of a word changes.

I have elsewhere used the term *lexical spectrum* to describe the total set of circumstances in which a word is used and suggested that such a spectrum of meanings is open-ended "in the sense that it comes equipped with what we might call an extrapolatory domain" (Anthony 1975). Within this extrapolatory domain, adaptation occurs.

Some of these become used widely enough to be admitted to the newer dictionaries: A type of plant, GRASS, comes to mean "marijuana." The opening which allows us to see through a wall, WINDOW, metaphorically extrapolates to mean an aperture "...at the limits of the earth's atmosphere through which a spacecraft must pass for successful re-entry."

Below, again with commentary, are ten words or phrases which have been with us for some time, yet now are used to describe relatively new and specific experiences of the people who use American English. The first ten cited are informal and quite close to slang. Some are subjectively labeled and commented upon by the author, but the definitions are quoted or excerpted from *6,000 Words*.

1. BAG "something suited to one's taste . . . specialty"

Examples: Tennis is my bag. Bowling isn't my bag. Informal, possibly less used recently.

2. APE "beyond restraint"

Example: He went ape over the new movie star. Informal.

3. PIG "a policeman"

Highly pejorative, and disappearing from use.

4. PLASTIC "artificial, phony"

Example: The plastic subculture of southern California.

5. CLOUT "power, influence"

Example: The dean has a great deal of clout in Washington.

6. FLIP "to lose self-control"

That fellow really flipped over the movie BATMAN. Informal, used by younger people, perhaps disappearing from wide use.

7. FAR-OUT "marked by a considerable departure from the conventional"

Example: Hey man, that rock concert was far-out. Used informally by younger people.

8. HANG-UP "a source of mental or emotional difficulty"

Example: Johnny has a hang-up about riding in airplanes. Widely used.

9. MICKEY MOUSE "lacking importance, trivial, insignificant"

Example: The mayor's speeches are often about Mickey Mouse subjects.

10. TAD "a very small amount"

Example: I'll have a tad more ice-cream. Now in general use.

Some examples are less informal. Many old words have acquired new meanings from their use in relation to the computer, and are listed in *6,000 Words*, and appear here without meaning tags because they are well known or the meanings are easily inferred in the computer age: GRAPHIC, INFORMATION RETRIEVAL, DATA BANK, MONITOR. For those in the fields of language study, no explanations are necessary for these: TARGET LANGUAGE, TAGMEMIC GRAMMAR, even a new adjective-CHOMSKIAN.

Conclusion

We can infer much from the way a group of people enriches its language. Even if we didn't know that the Norman French invaded England in 1066, we could infer from the large number of French words in English that extensive contact had occurred between Norman and Anglo-Saxon.

We could also fairly accurately describe the kind of relationship that existed between the two cultures from the types of words that found their way into English. The invaders, for example, added to the English language words for meat they ate but not for the animals that provided it. The Norman conquerors ate the *beef* and *mutton*, but the conquered Anglo-Saxons took care of the *cows* and the *sheep*!

In America, the names of natural features like rivers--the *Mississippi*, the *Monongahela*

--testify that the Indians were there first and that the settlers borrowed words from them. The Spanish came along later, bringing to a *ranch* culture *mustangs* which they took from the *corral* to ride among the *arroyos* on their way to the *rodeo*.

The need to communicate the more earthy aspects of life is shown by the creation of words like *ZAP*, *ZINGER*, and *sleazy*, as well as of words which reflect the technical aspects of American society. Finally, as I have tried to demonstrate, older words have an innovative capacity to adapt and take on new meanings.

Like any group, the people who use English must change their linguistic ways of describing a changing world. Like any group, they are both eager and obliged to communicate with one another, and their language remains quite as capable of changing as those who use it.

The Author

Edward M. Anthony received three degrees from the University of Michigan and rose to the rank of full Professor of Linguistics during his twenty-four years in Ann Arbor. While there, he and his wife Ann were awarded Fulbright Lecture grants in 1955 to what was then the College of Education, Prasarnmitr. Later he became Chief of Party of the University of Michigan/U.S.A.I.D. Southeast Asian Regional English Project with headquarters in Bangkok. Still later he was Director of a Rockefeller Foundation project intended to improve English instruction at Thammasat, Mahidol, and Kasetsart Universities.

Since 1964 he has been Professor of Linguistics at the University of Pittsburgh, founding the Department of General Linguistics and serving as its Chairman for a decade. He is currently Director of the Language and Culture Institute at that University.

Author of a number of books and articles, including *Foundations of Thai* with Dr. Udom Warotamasikkhadit, Deborah French, and Jackson T. Gandour, Dr. Anthony looks forward to becoming a Professor Emeritus in 1990, and to a number of writing projects, and possible assignments abroad.

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