

# English Etymology

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# What is etymology?

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Loosely put, the history of words.

This includes both lexical and semantic developments.

That is, how the vocabulary of a language grows and/or shrinks (and in what ways)

And how the meanings of words change over time

# What are words and how do they change?

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Words are made up of *phonemes*

- Phonemes are the individual sounds of a language

This is NOT the same as letters (graphemes)

Letters are merely symbols for phonemes

English has 26 individual letters to represent approximately 40 sounds

Phonemes come together to make *morphemes*

# Morphology

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*Morphemes* are the smallest meaningful linguistic units of a language

Morphemes are NOT the same as phonemes, syllables, or words

- There may be correspondence at times, but not synonymity

Consider:

*Dog* is one syllable, one morpheme

*Dogs* is one syllable, TWO morphemes

The *-s* is a meaningful linguistic unit meaning “more than one”

Likewise, *apple* consists of two syllables, but only ONE morpheme

# Morphology

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Morphemes are broadly categorized into *free* and *bound* morphemes

Free morphemes are morphemes that can stand on their own as words in a language.

- *Dog* is a free morpheme

Bound morphemes are morphemes that **MUST** be attached to other morphemes.

The *-s* on *dogs* is a bound morpheme

# Morphology

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Morphemes are also categorized according to their function

Base morphemes are just that—they function as the base of words

Most base morphemes in English are free

Yet some are bound: consider the base of *intercept* (from Latin *captus*)

# Morphology

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Inflectional morphemes are those that show the grammar of words

In earlier stages of English, inflectional morphemes were much more prevalent

Relatively few remain:

- -s to show plurality
- -'s to show possession
- -s 3<sup>rd</sup> person present singular verb ending
- -*ed* as a marker for the past tense and past participles
- -*en* as a marker for past participles
- -*ing* as a marker for present participles
- -*er* for the comparative degree
- -*est* for the superlative degree

# Morphology

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Derivational morphemes are much more numerous and much more varied in their meanings and uses

Derivational morphemes are affixed to a word to change the meaning of a word, its part of speech, or both

They do NOT show grammar; they only relate to meaning

English has a vast array of such morphemes from both the native word stock and borrowings from other languages, especially Latin and French

# Morphology

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In English we use combinations of derivational and inflectional morphemes to change words and use them grammatically.

Consider:

*Act* (verb) + *-ive* = *active* (adj.)

*Active* + *-ate* = *activate* (verb)

*Activate* used in the past tense: add *-(e)d*: *activated*

Want to negate the meaning? Add the prefix *de-* to yield *deactivated*

# Morphology

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*Allomorphs* are morphemes that display variant pronunciation based on phonetic environment

- Singular *wolf* compared to plural *wolves*
- The base morpheme in BOTH is *wolf*
- In the plural, the phonetic environment of Old English pronunciation of the plural compelled a change in the pronunciation of the base morpheme when the inflectional morpheme for plurality was added
- The base morpheme of both the singular and plural is the same
- Likewise the *-(e)s* on *dogs* and *cats* and *kisses*

# Morphology

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*Homonyms* are morphemes that appear to be the same, but are not

Consider the *-er* on *brighter* and *teacher*

The first is an inflectional morpheme indicating the comparative degree

The second is a derivational morpheme that transforms the verb *teach* into a noun

# Semantic change

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Derivation often alters the semantics of word, but often the meanings of words simply change over time on their own

This is often clear when we compare English words to cognate words in other languages

- Consider English and German *gift*.
- In English it means a present
- In German it means poison

# Semantic change

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## Types of semantic change

- Narrowing: the meaning of a word becomes more precise
- OE *deor* “animal” and PDE *deer*
- Broadening: the meaning of a word becomes more general
- ME *mill* “a place for grinding grain” now means generally a place of production
- Pejoration: the connotations of a word become more negative
- *Lewd* originally referred to people outside of the clergy, then came to mean “ignorant,” and finally “obscene”
- Amelioration: the connotations of a word become more positive over time
- In 14<sup>th</sup> century English, *nice* meant “frivolous”
- Transfer of meaning: words take on more metaphoric and/or abstract meanings
- Taboo and euphemism

# So where does English lexicon come from?

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Native words

Compounding

Affixation/derivation

Borrowing

# Open vs. closed class words

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“Open class” refers to kinds of words that we are still adding to English

- Nouns
- Verbs
- Adjectives
- Adverbs

Open class words are still subject to several means of lexical and semantic development, including...

Derivation/affixing

Borrowing

Functional shift of nouns and verbs

# Open vs. closed class words

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“Closed class” refers to types of words that we are no longer adding to the language

- Prepositions
- Conjunctions
- Pronouns
- Articles

Some of the oldest words in English

- “over” has meant and been pronounced the same way for more than 1000 years

Some of these groups were more open in earlier stages of the language, however

- In ME, pronoun system was changing, and new ones such as the “th-” pronouns were borrowed from Old Norse
- Many of our PDE prepositions clearly arise from derivational affixing (*e.g.*, *aboard* or *along*) and some are actually compounds (*onto*)

# The origins of English

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One of the Indo-European languages

A large “family” of related languages that stretches geographically from western Europe to India

English is in the Germanic “branch” of the family tree

This includes English

- German

- Dutch

- Scandinavian languages

# The origins of English

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Other I-E branches of significance:

Italic (Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese)

Hellenic (Greek)

Celtic

Balto-Slavic (Russian, Polish, etc.)

Indo-Iranian (Farsi/Modern Persian, Sanskrit, Hindi)

# Cognate words

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Words with a common origin

Can be between I-E languages from different branches:

- English “foot” and Latin “ped”

Can be within languages of the same branch:

- English *foot* and German *Fuß*