

Nominal suffixes in the process of affixation

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Abstract

The existence of words is usually taken for granted by the speakers of a language. The average speaker knows thousands of words, and new words enter our minds on a daily basis, thus, language is in a continuous process of development. The word is a speech unit used for the purposes of human communication, materially representing a group of sounds, possessing a meaning, susceptible to grammatical employment and characterised by formal and semantic unity.

The term vocabulary is used to denote the system of words and word-groups that the language possesses. Vocabulary means the sum of all the words in the language. Good knowledge of the rules of word-formation, origin and history of words help us to discover the meaning of new-formed words, to master the standards of their usage, and to prevent mistakes.

Keywords : *language, vocabulary, word, affixation, nominal suffixes.*

Introduction

This paper deals with the internal structure of complex words, words that are composed of more than one meaningful element. A word may consist of a single morpheme (for example: girl, page, red, quick, run, expect), or several (girls, pages, redness, quickly, running, unexpected), whereas a morpheme may not be able to stand on its own as a word (in the words just mentioned, these are -s, -ness, -ly, -ing, un-, -ed). A complex word will typically include a root and one or more affixes (girl-s, red-ness, quick-ly, run-ning, un-expect-ed), or more than one root in a compound (black-board, fastfood). In this paper, I will focus on the nominal affixes, those morphemes which help some nouns to be formed.

Nominal suffixes

Nominal suffixes are often employed to derive abstract nouns from verbs, adjectives and nouns. Such abstract nouns can denote actions, results of actions, or other related concepts, but also properties, qualities and the like. Another large group of nominal suffixes derives person nouns of various sorts. Very often, these meanings are extended to other, related senses, so that practically, each suffix can be shown to be able to express more than one meaning, with the semantic domains of different suffixes often overlapping.

-age

This suffix derives nouns that express an activity (or its result) as in *coverage, brokerage, heritage, brakeage, drainage, marriage*, and nouns denoting a collective entity or quantity, as in *acreage, baggage, language, village, voltage*. Due to inherent ambiguities of certain coinages, the meaning can be extended to include locations, as in *orphanage*. Base words may be verbal or nominal and are often monosyllabic.

-al

A number of verbs take *-al* to form abstract nouns denoting an action or the result of an action, such as *arrival, recital, referral, renewal*. Base words for nominal *-al* all have their main stress on the last syllable.

-ance (with its variants *-ence/-ancy/-ency*)

Attaching mostly to verbs, *-ance* creates action nouns such as *absorbance, riddance, surveillance*. The suffix is closely related to *-cy/-ce*, which attaches productively to adjectives ending in the suffix *-ant/-ent*. Thus, a derivative like *dependency* could be analyzed as having two suffixes (*depend-ent-cy*) or only one (*depend-ency*). The question then is to determine whether *-ance* (and its variants) always contain two suffixes, to the effect that all action nominals would in fact be derived from adjectives that in turn would be derived from verbs. Such an analysis would predict that we would find *-ance* nominals only if there are corresponding *-ant* adjectives. This is surely not the case, as evidenced by *riddance* (**riddant*), *furtherance* (**furtherant*), and we can therefore assume the existence of an independent suffix *-ance*, in addition to a suffix combination *-ant-ce*.

The distribution of the different variants is not entirely clear, several doublets are attested, such as *dependence, dependency*, or *expectance, expectancy*. Sometimes the doublets seem to have identical meanings, sometimes slightly different ones. It appears, however, that forms in *-ance/-ence* have all been in existence (sic!) for a very long time, and that *-ance/-ence* formations are rather interpreted as deverbal, *-ancy/-ency* formations rather as de-adjectival.

-ant

This suffix forms count nouns referring to persons (often in technical or legal discourse, cf. *applicant, defendant, disclaimant*) or to substances involved in biological, chemical, or physical processes (*attractant, dispersant, etchant, suppressant*). Most bases are verbs of Latinate origin.

-cy/-ce

As already mentioned in connection with the suffix *-ancy*, this suffix attaches productively to adjectives in *-ant/-ent* (e.g. *convergence, efficiency, emergence*), but also to nouns ending in this string, as is the case with *agency, presidency, regency*.

Furthermore, adjectives in *-ate* are eligible bases (*adequacy, animacy, intimacy*). The resulting derivatives can denote states, properties, qualities or facts (*convergence* can, for example, be paraphrased as ‘the fact that something converges’), or, by way of metaphorical extension, can refer to an office or institution (e.g.

presidency). Again the distribution of the two variants is not entirely clear, although there is a tendency for nominal bases to take the syllabic variant *-cy*.

-dom

The native suffix *-dom* is semantically closely related to *-hood*, and *-ship*, which express similar concepts. *-dom* attaches to nouns to form nominals which can be paraphrased as ‘state of being X’ as in *clerkdom*, *bachelordom*, *dukedom*, or which refer to collective entities, such as *wifedom*, *studentdom*, or denote domains, realms or territories as in *kingdom*, *cameldom*, *villadom*.

-ee

The meaning of this suffix can be rather clearly discerned. It derives nouns denoting sentient entities that are involved in an event as non-volitional participants. Thus, *employee* denotes someone who is employed, a *biographee* is someone who is the subject of a biography, and a *standee* is someone who is forced to stand (on a bus, for example). Due to the constraint that the referents of *-ee* derivatives must be sentient, an *amputee* can only be someone who has lost a limb and not the limb that is amputated. Phonologically, *-ee* can be described as an auto-stressed suffix, it belongs to the small class of suffixes that attract the main stress of the derivative.

-eer

This is another person noun forming suffix, whose meaning can be paraphrased as ‘person who deals in, is concerned with, or has to do with X’, as evidenced in forms such as *auctioneer*, *budgeteer*, *cameleer*, *mountaineer*, *pamphleteer*. Many words have a depreciative tinge. The suffix *-eer* is autostressed and attaches almost exclusively to bases ending in a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

-er (and its orthographic variant *-or*)

The suffix *-er* can be seen as closely related to *-ee*, as its derivatives frequently signify entities that are active or volitional participants in an event (e.g. *teacher*, *singer*, *writer* etc.). This is, however, only a sub-class of *-er* derivatives, and there is a wide range of forms with quite heterogeneous meanings. Apart from performers of actions we find instrument nouns such as *blender*, *mixer*, *steamer*, *toaster*, nouns denoting entities associated with an activity such as *diner*, *lounger*, *trainer*, *winner* (in the sense ‘winning shot’). Furthermore, *-er* is used to create person nouns indicating place of origin or residence (e.g. *Londoner*, *New Yorker*, *Highlander*, *New Englander*). The semantics of *-er* should be described as rather underspecified, simply meaning something like ‘person or thing having to do with X’. The more specific interpretations of individual formations would then follow from an interaction of the meanings of base and suffix and further inferences on the basis of world knowledge.

-Er is often described as a deverbal suffix, but there are numerous forms (not only inhabitant names) that are derived on the basis of nouns (e.g. *sealer*, *whaler*, *noser*, *souther*), numerals (e.g. *fiver*, *tenner*), or even phrases (*four-wheeler*, *fourthgrader*).

The orthographic variant *-or* occurs mainly with Latinate bases ending in /s/ or /t/, such as *conductor*, *oscillator*, *compressor*.

-(e)ry

Formations in *-(e)ry* refer to locations which stand in some kind of connection to what is denoted by the base. More specific meanings such as ‘place where a specific activity is carried out’ or ‘place where a specific article or service is available’, for example, *bakery, brewery, fishery, pottery* or *cakery, carwashery, eatery*.

In addition to the locations, *-(e)ry* derivatives can also denote collectivities (as in *confectionery, cutlery, machinery, pottery*), or activities (as in *summitry* ‘having many political summits’, *crookery* ‘foul deeds’).

-ess

This suffix derives a comparatively small number of mostly established nouns referring exclusively to female humans and animals (*princess, stewardess, lioness, tigress, waitress*). The OED lists only three 20th century coinages (*hostess, burgheress, clerkess*).

-hood

Similar in meaning to *-dom*, *-hood* derivatives express concepts such as ‘state’ (as in *adulthood, childhood, farmerhood*), and ‘collectivity’ (as in *beggarhood, Christianhood, companionhood*). As with other suffixes, metaphorical extensions can create new meanings, for example the sense ‘area’ in the highly frequent *neighborhood*, which originates in the collectivity sense of the suffix.

-an (and its variants -ian, -ean)

Nouns denoting persons and places can take the suffix *-an*. Derivatives seem to have the general meaning ‘person having to do with X’ (as in *technician, historian, Utopian*), which, where appropriate, can be more specifically interpreted as ‘being from X’ or ‘being of X origin’ (e.g. *Bostonian, Mongolian, Scandinavian*), or ‘being the follower or supporter of X’: *Anglican, Chomskyan, Smithsonian*. Many *-(i)an* derivatives are also used as adjectives.

All words belonging to this category are stressed on the syllable immediately preceding the suffix, causing stress shifts where necessary (e.g. *Húngary - Hungárian, Égypt - Egýptian*).

-ing

Derivatives with this deverbal suffix denote processes (*begging, running, sleeping*) or results (*building, wrapping, stuffing*). The suffix is somewhat peculiar among derivational suffixes in that it is primarily used as a verbal inflectional suffix forming present participles. Examples of pertinent derivatives are abundant since *-ing* can attach to practically any verb.

-ion

This Latinate suffix has three allomorphs: when attached to a verb in *-ify*, the verbal suffix and *-ion* surface together as *-ification* (*personification*). When attached to a verb ending in *-ate*, we find *-ion* (accompanied by a change of the base-final consonant from [t] to [S], *hyphenation*), and we find the allomorph *-ation* in all other cases (*starvation, colonization*). Phonologically, all *-ion* derivatives are characterized by having their primary

stress on the penultimate syllable, which means that *-ion* belongs to the class of suffixes that can cause a stress shift.

Derivatives in *-ion* denote events or results of processes. As such, verbal bases are by far the most frequent, but there is also a comparatively large number of forms where *-ation* is directly attached to nouns without any intervening verb in *-ate*. These forms are found primarily in scientific discourse with words denoting chemical or other substances as bases (e.g. *sediment - sedimentation*).

-ism

Forming abstract nouns from other nouns and adjectives, derivatives belonging to this category denote the related concepts state, condition, attitude, system of beliefs or theory, as in *blondism, Parkinsonism, conservatism, revisionism, Marxism*, respectively.

-ist

This suffix derives nouns denoting persons, mostly from nominal and adjectival bases (*balloonist, careerist, fantasist, minimalist*). All nouns in *-ism* which denote attitudes, beliefs or theories have potential counterparts in *-ist*. The semantics of *-ist* can be considered underspecified ‘person having to do with X’, with the exact meaning of the derivative being a function of the meaning of the base. Thus, a balloonist is someone who ascends in a balloon, a careerist is someone who is chiefly interested in her/his career, while a fundamentalist is a supporter or follower of fundamentalism.

-ity

Words belonging to this morphological category are nouns denoting qualities, states or properties usually derived from Latin adjectives (e.g. *curiosity, productivity, profundity, solidity*). Apart from the compositional meaning just described, many *-ity* derivatives are **lexicalized**, i.e. they have become permanently incorporated into the mental lexicons of speakers, thereby often adopting idiosyncratic meanings, such as *antiquity* ‘state of being antique’ or ‘ancient time’, *curiosity* ‘quality of being curious’ and ‘curious thing’. All adjectives ending in the suffixes *-able, -al* and *-ic* or in the phonetic string [Id] can take *-ity* as a nominalizing suffix (*readability, formality, erraticity, solidity*).

-ment

This suffix derives action nouns denoting processes or results from (mainly) verbs, with a strong preference for monosyllables or disyllabic base words with stress on the last syllable (e.g. *assessment, endorsement, involvement, treatment*).

-ness

Quality noun forming *-ness* is perhaps the most productive suffix of English. With regard to potential base words, *-ness* is much less restrictive than its close semantic relative *-ity*. The suffix can attach to practically any adjective, and apart from adjectival base words we find nouns as in *thingness*, pronouns as in *us-ness* and frequently phrases as in *over-the-top-ness, all-or-nothing-ness*.

-ship

The suffixe *-ship* forms nouns denoting 'state' or 'condition', similar in meaning to derivatives in *-age*, *-hood* and *-dom*. Base words are mostly person nouns as in *apprenticeship*, *clerkship*, *friendship*, *membership*, *statesmanship*. Extensions of the basic senses occur, for example 'office', as in *postmastership*, or 'activity', as in *courtship* 'courting' or *censorship* 'censoring'.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed about nominal suffixes, but the process of suffixation, in general, is the most productive in English and the use of affixation has a significant proportion.

English is one of the most flexible and versatile languages in the world. While we think in concepts rather than words, concepts can only develop when the vocabulary is available for the thought. The English language enables us to think about vast numbers of concepts and ideas because it allows us to create new words from the old ones. The English language gained its flexibility by adopting words or parts of words from other languages. We borrowed freely from the Latin and Greek languages, especially in our development of affixes. By using parts of words, we can create untold new words, thereby increasing our ability to develop new concepts.

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