

Where do new words come from?

Where do new words come from? Who makes them up? How do they enter the language? New words have several sources, but the rather mundane answer to these questions is that most new English words are derived from other English words, and not made up at all. In fact, two thirds of all new English words come about by joining existing words in a new combination – a process called compounding. Words such as *website*, *screensaver*, *airport*, *hatchback* and *football* are everyday examples of this.

The second most popular method of acquiring new words is to take them from other languages. This is euphemistically known as 'borrowing', although few are ever handed back. Borrowing occurs primarily when the concept is supposedly alien and therefore not easily expressed in homespun English. Examples of this are *schadenfreude* (pleasure derived from others' misfortune) from German, *loiter* (to hang around with bad intent) from Dutch and the more innocuous *shampoo*, *veranda* and *pyjamas* from Hindi.

A third method is to load new meaning onto an existing word. These days a *desktop* is at the same time both on your computer and the surface your computer sits on. And a *mouse* is attached to your computer while a *virus* wreaks havoc inside it. Today's young describe something they do not like as *pants* and something very good as *wicked*. A presumably similar process a few hundred years ago resulted in *brave*, which originally meant cowardly, taking on the opposite meaning it has today.

Another common method of coinage is the shortening of existing words. These days we take *exams*, work out at the *gym*, spend the evening in front of the *telly*, surf the *Net* and send *emails*. The latter is an example of a word which has very rapidly come about as the result of both shortening and compounding.

Once a word has been coined, speakers familiar with it start adapting its forms by adding an affix here and there and using it as a different part of speech and so on. Eventually, any new word will either survive and find itself in the next edition of the dictionary or disappear without trace. And there is usually no telling which words will suffer which fate. After all, who would have thought four hundred years ago that *monumental*, *majestic* and *excellent* would be among the fifteen hundred or so words that Shakespeare invented that are in use today, while his equally descriptive and fabulous *tortive* and *vastidity* have passed into oblivion.

► Activity 1

Find words or expressions in the text with the following definitions.

- a** invents (paragraph 1) _____
- b** ordinary and not interesting or exciting (paragraph 1) _____
- c** happen (paragraph 1) _____
- d** talked about without mentioning the thing or idea itself (paragraph 2) _____

- e** simple and produced 'at home' (paragraph 2) _____
- f** to put something into or onto something else (paragraph 3) _____
- g** (creating) a new word or phrase (paragraph 4) _____
- h** a new part that is added to the beginning or end of a word that changes its meaning (paragraph 5) _____

i with no sign that it was ever present (paragraph 5) _____

j a situation in which something has been completely forgotten (paragraph 5) _____

► Activity 2

Read paragraph 1 again and answer these questions. Check your answers in the dictionary.

a What does the phrasal verb *make up* mean?

b What other meanings does it have?

c What is the meaning of the following phrasal verbs?
1 *make up for*

2 *make it up to*

► Activity 3

Guess the meaning of the following euphemisms. Check in the dictionary if you have guessed correctly.

a to pass away

b to spend a penny

c to sleep with someone

► Activity 4

What is the meaning of the word or expression in italics?

a I was *loaded down* with shopping.

b That's a *loaded question*.

c The gun wasn't *loaded*.

d Ask him for some money – he's *loaded*.

► Activity 5

Here are some new words and expressions in English. What do they mean?

a 24/7 _____

b doh _____

c spam _____

d bad hair day _____

e the full monty _____

f retail therapy _____

g off-message _____

h slacker _____

For discussion

1 Are new words in your language formed in the same ways as described in the text?

2 Which new words in your language have been formed by compounding, borrowing, giving new meaning and shortening?

3 Do you know any other new words or expressions in English? What about in your language?