

Here Come the Newbies!

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 *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 simple *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 *web* 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 adopted, 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 equally descriptive and fabulous *tortive* and *vastidity* have passed into oblivion.

Activity 1

Read the definitions below and the text. Then find the words or expressions that best fit.

- 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) _____

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Activity 2

Read paragraph 1 again and answer these questions. Check your answers in the Macmillan Online Dictionary.

- a. What does the phrasal verb *make up* mean? What other meaning does it have?

- b. What is the meaning of the following phrasal verbs?

1 *make up for*

2 *make it up to*

Activity 3

Complete the sentences with the correct verb: *make up*, *make up for* or *make it up to*.

- a. Apologies for missing your birthday party, I'll _____ you!
b. She always _____ excuses not to go to the party.
c. Presents will never _____ lost time.

Activity 4

To expand your vocabulary, look up other definitions in the Macmillan Online Dictionary:

- Search the words given below. Read the definitions and the examples.
- Explore the different meanings and write your own examples below.
- Read your examples to a partner and ask them to guess the meaning used in each sentence.

- a. mundane

- b. load

- c. oblivion

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Activity 5

What do the words and expressions below mean? Discuss with a partner and use the Macmillan Online Dictionary to check your answers.

- 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

Ask and answer the questions with a partner.

- a. Which new words in your language have been formed by compounding, borrowing, giving new meaning and shortening?
- b. Do you know any other new words or expressions in English? What about in your language?