

## Etymology and Word Decoding



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The vocabulary or lexicon of a language is a system rather than a list. Its elements interrelate and change subtly or massively from generation to generation. It increases through borrowing from other languages and through word-formation based on its own or borrowed patterns. It may decrease or increase in certain areas as interests change. Whole sets of items may vanish from general use and awareness, unless special activities serve to keep them alive.

Historically, the word-store of English is composite, drawn in the main from the Indo-European language family. The base is predominantly Germanic (mainly Old English and Old Norse) with a super-structure of Romance forms (mainly French and Latin) with a technical stratum contributed by Greek (mainly through Latin and French). In addition, there are many acquisitions from languages throughout the world.

The great number of borrowings gave way to the existence of the phenomenon bisociation in English, i.e. the occurrence in a language of pairs of words with similar meanings, one member of each pair being native to that language (such as everyday English *sight*), the other being a loanword from an influential foreign source (such as *vision*, a loanword from Latin). In English, the vernacular members of such pairs are mainly Germanic (usually from Old English or Old Norse), while the loanwords are mainly classical (usually from Latin, often mediated by French), as in: *freedom/liberty*, *hearty/cordial*, *go up/ascend*, *go down/descend*. Bisociation in English has often been remarked on. Simeon Potter, for example, observes: “We feel more at ease after getting a hearty welcome than after being granted a cordial reception” (Potter 1950:66). Similarly, Thomas Finkenstaedt has noted: “Apparently the Elizabethans discovered the possibilities of etymological dissociation in language: amatory and love, audition and hearing, hearty welcome and cordial reception” (Finkenstaedt 1973). This kind of semantic parallelism has also occurred in Latin, which has absorbed many words from Greek, creating such pairs as Latin *compassio* and Greek *sympathia*. In many instances, such pairs have passed into English, leading to trisociation, as with Germanic *fellow feeling*, Latinate *compassion*, and Greek-derived *sympathy*. There are scores of such correspondences in English, the Germanic material tending to be part of everyday usage (as with *newness*), the Latinate tending to be more formal and “educated” (as with *innovate*), and the Greek tending to be highly technical and even arcane (as with *neophyte*).

In fact a great part of the Latin and Greek borrowings doesn't form a part of our active vocabulary thus hindering their perception. However, it's impossible to escape the

necessity of recognizing the latter since we often come across texts pertaining to different scientific domains.<sup>1</sup>

As it was mentioned above, the contact of English with various foreign languages has led to the adoption of countless foreign words and word parts. These parts were no doubt originally independent words. They came into English ready made and preserving their old meaning became suffixed or prefixed to full English words. There are many prefixes used in scientific terminology, which have come into the language through borrowings. These prefixes are still very productive, especially in scientific vocabulary and are used in scientific terminology.<sup>2</sup>

Prefixes or suffixes, or both are added to a root-form already in existence, and form a new word. These foreign affixes may be used with English roots. They make entirely new types unknown in the language from which they are adopted.

These affixes retain their original forms. As a consequence hybrid types of words are composed: a foreign word is combined with a native affix as in *clearness* or *unbutton* and a foreign affix with a native word as in *breakage* or *growth*.

Thus, one good approach is to learn how to build up or to tear apart words. A knowledge of these word parts and their meanings can help us to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words belonging to highly specialized areas of the vocabulary. For example the word *amorphous* which means *shapeless* according to Berger and Bowen can be divided into the following parts: *a* (*without, not*) and *morph* (*shape, form*) with the addition of the suffix *ous* (*having the qualities of*) (Berger, Bowen 2000:71).

Many other words such as *biennial* or *perennial* can easily be differentiated by the meanings and by choice of affixes:

*biennial* – every two years (*bi* = two; *ennial* = year)

*perennial* – present all year (*per* = present; *ennial* = year)

The role of the etymological factor in the analysis of English words (and not only English) is very important.

The result of our study is a list of common English and foreign prefixes, roots and suffixes that may come in handy.

Prefix	Meaning	Example	Illustration
<i>a</i>	<i>without</i>	<i>amoral</i>	<i>without moral sense</i>
<i>ante</i>	<i>before</i>	<i>antecedent</i>	<i>preceding event or word</i>
<i>anti</i>	<i>against</i>	<i>antibody</i>	<i>against harmful bacteria</i>
<i>auto</i>	<i>self</i>	<i>autobiography</i>	<i>person's life written by himself</i>
<i>bene</i>	<i>good</i>	<i>beneficial</i>	<i>having good effect, helpful</i>
<i>bi</i>	<i>two</i>	<i>bicycle</i>	<i>two-wheeled vehicle</i>
<i>circum</i>	<i>around</i>	<i>circumspect</i>	<i>to look around</i>
<i>com</i>	<i>with, together</i>	<i>combine</i>	<i>merge with</i>
<i>Co</i>		<i>coeditor</i>	<i>joint editor</i>
<i>col</i>		<i>collateral</i>	<i>connected</i>
<i>con</i>		<i>conference</i>	<i>meeting</i>
<i>cor</i>		<i>corroborate</i>	<i>confirm</i>
<i>Di</i>	<i>two</i>	<i>dichotomy</i>	<i>division into two parts</i>
<i>dis</i>	<i>apart</i>	<i>disparity</i>	<i>condition of inequality</i>
<i>hyper</i>	<i>above</i>	<i>hyperthermia</i>	<i>high temperature</i>
<i>hypo</i>	<i>below</i>	<i>hypothermia</i>	<i>low temperature</i>
<i>inter</i>	<i>between</i>	<i>interstate</i>	<i>between states</i>
<i>mal</i>	<i>bad</i>	<i>malevolent</i>	<i>wishing to do evil, bad to others</i>
<i>micro</i>	<i>small</i>	<i>microscopic</i>	<i>extremely small</i>
<i>mis</i>	<i>wrong</i>	<i>mispronounce</i>	<i>to pronounce wrongly</i>
<i>multi</i>	<i>many</i>	<i>multiplication</i>	<i>a given number of times</i>
<i>neo</i>	<i>new</i>	<i>neophyte</i>	<i>beginner</i>
<i>poly</i>	<i>many</i>	<i>polytheism</i>	<i>worship of more than one God</i>
<i>re</i>	<i>again</i>	<i>redo</i>	<i>to do again</i>
<i>retro</i>	<i>back</i>	<i>retrogress</i>	<i>to go or move backward</i>
<i>se</i>	<i>away, aside</i>	<i>secede</i>	<i>withdraw</i>
<i>semi</i>	<i>half</i>	<i>semiannual</i>	<i>every six months</i>
<i>uni</i>	<i>one</i>	<i>unison</i>	<i>oneness of pitch</i>
<i>tele</i>	<i>far</i>	<i>telemetry</i>	<i>measurement from a distance</i>

Root or stem	Meaning	Example	Illustration
<i>agri</i>	<i>field</i>	<i>agrarian</i>	<i>one who works in the field</i>
<i>alt</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>altitude</i>	<i>height</i>
<i>anim</i>	<i>mind,soul</i>	<i>unanimous</i>	<i>of one mind</i>
<i>bio</i>	<i>life</i>	<i>biology</i>	<i>study of living things</i>
<i>celer</i>	<i>swift</i>	<i>accelerate</i>	<i>increase swiftness</i>
<i>cord</i>	<i>heart</i>	<i>accord</i>	<i>agreement(from the heart)</i>
<i>derm</i>	<i>skin</i>	<i>dermatology</i>	<i>study of skin</i>
<i>ego</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>egocentric</i>	<i>revolving about self</i>
<i>fin</i>	<i>end,limit</i>	<i>confine</i>	<i>keep within limits</i>
<i>gam</i>	<i>marriage</i>	<i>monogamy</i>	<i>marrage to one person</i>
<i>domin</i>	<i>to rule</i>	<i>dominate</i>	<i>have power over</i>
<i>helio</i>	<i>sun</i>	<i>heliotrope</i>	<i>flower that faces the sun</i>
<i>labor</i>	<i>to work</i>	<i>laborious</i>	<i>difficult</i>
<i>leg</i>	<i>law</i>	<i>legitimate</i>	<i>lawful</i>
<i>man</i>	<i>hand</i>	<i>manuscript</i>	<i>written by hand</i>
<i>mon</i>	<i>to warn</i>	<i>monitor</i>	<i>watcher, warner</i>
<i>nav</i>	<i>ship</i>	<i>navigate</i>	<i>sail a ship</i>
<i>omni</i>	<i>all</i>	<i>omniscient</i>	<i>all knowing</i>
<i>path</i>	<i>desease</i>	<i>pathology</i>	<i>study of disease, tissue</i>
<i>path</i>	<i>feeling</i>	<i>antipathy</i>	<i>hostile feeling</i>
<i>psych</i>	<i>mind</i>	<i>psychopath</i>	<i>mentally ill person</i>
<i>rapt</i>	<i>to break</i>	<i>interrupt</i>	<i>break into</i>
<i>sect</i>	<i>cut</i>	<i>bisect</i>	<i>cut into two pieces</i>
<i>somn</i>	<i>sleep</i>	<i>insomnia</i>	<i>inability to sleep</i>
<i>term</i>	<i>end</i>	<i>interminable</i>	<i>endless</i>
<i>urb</i>	<i>city</i>	<i>suburban</i>	<i>outside of city</i>
<i>vac</i>	<i>empty</i>	<i>evacuate</i>	<i>compel to empty an area</i>
<i>vol</i>	<i>wish</i>	<i>voluntary</i>	<i>of one's own will</i>

Suffix	Meaning	Example	Illustration
<i>able, ible</i>	<i>capable of</i>	<i>portable</i>	<i>able to be carried</i>
<i>ary</i>	<i>like, connected with</i>	<i>dictionary</i>	<i>book connected with words</i>
<i>ate</i>	<i>to make</i>	<i>consecrate</i>	<i>to make holy</i>
<i>ation</i>	<i>that which is</i>	<i>irritation</i>	<i>annoyance</i>
<i>fic</i>	<i>making, doing</i>	<i>terrific</i>	<i>arousing great fear</i>
<i>ism</i>	<i>doctrine, belief</i>	<i>monotheism</i>	<i>belief in one god</i>
<i>ity</i>	<i>state of being</i>	<i>annuity</i>	<i>yearly grant</i>
<i>ive</i>	<i>like</i>	<i>expensive</i>	<i>costly</i>
<i>oid</i>	<i>resembling</i>	<i>anthropoid</i>	<i>resembling man</i>
<i>ose</i>	<i>full of</i>	<i>verbose</i>	<i>full of tears</i>

Thus, by mastering basic word parts through etymology we will be able to unlock the meaning of numerous words. The list of foreign prefixes, suffixes, roots and stems may be several times as much as the above mentioned list but it is not unlimited. Whatever is within limit is not difficult to learn. Moreover, it is very interesting to go

deeper into these studies enlarging our understanding of the vocabulary. “Learning thirty key word parts can help you unlock the meaning of over 10 000 words. Learning fifty key word parts can help you unlock the meaning of over 100 000!” (Green 1998:242).

#### Notes:

1. This often results in serious problems in the teaching process as students sometimes have great difficulties in decoding scientific terms. Every word derives from its context and only the context will fix the exact meaning of the word which may be too vague or too ambiguous to make sense by itself. Sometimes the students succeed in figuring out a word’s meaning by using their knowledge of context clues or by judging them, but very often they fail.
2. One of the commonest and also oldest methods of word-formation – derivation, is found in almost all languages and is considered a general linguistic phenomenon.

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### Ծագումնաբանություն և բառի վերծանում

Լեզվի բառապաշարը մի համակարգ է, որն աճում է հիմնականում բառակազմության շնորհիվ: Վերջինս տեղի է ունենում սեփական կամ փոխառնված բառամասնիկների (արմատ և ածանց) միջոցով, որոնք, անկասկած, նախկինում եղել են ինքնուրույն բառեր և, ներթափանցելով անգլերենի բառապաշար, կազմել են նոր բառեր՝ պահպանելով հին իմաստը: Լատիներեն և հունարեն փոխառությունների մեծ մասը ակտիվ բառապաշարի մաս չեն կազմում. դրանք հիմնականում վերաբերում են գիտական տերմիններին: