7-2003

What Really Makes a Word

Frank Bramlett

*University of Nebraska at Omaha, fbramlett@unomaha.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/englishfacpub](https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/englishfacpub)

Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/englishfacpub)

**Recommended Citation**

[https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/englishfacpub/43](https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/englishfacpub/43)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.
What Really Makes a Word

On the 2003 season finale of the HBO drama "Six Feet Under," viewers are left wondering whether Keith and David will be able to stay together as a couple. They were sitting at the kitchen table and eating cake, getting into one of their ritualized tiffs where David feels like Keith picks on him. The substance of their conversation, though, turned to the silly when David said "adjacently." Keith said, "Adjacently is not a word." They soon realized how petty it is to say it.

It's moments like this that remind me how common it is for any given word in English to have one or more variant forms. Stevie Nicks uses the noun "intensity" ("Seven Wonders" from "Tango in the Night," 1987) and the noun "intenseness" ("No Questions Asked" from "Fleetwood Mac Greatest Hits," 1988). These two songs were released just one year apart, providing strong evidence that both of these words are commonly used, existing side-by-side in the minds of the speakers who use them. There are countless other instances of lexical variation. From the adjective clear are derived at least two nouns: clarity and clearness. Likewise, from the adjective extreme come the two nouns extremity and extremeness.

There are several linguistic principles that my students struggle with over the course of a semester. One is that all languages change. When linguists talk about language change, they talk about change in a number of different structures: changes in pronunciation, changes in word forms, changes in sentence structure. The change from analysis to analyzation is a change in word form, a very common word ending. -ation, is put on the end of analyze to create a more regular word, according to the linguistic rules of English. Very commonly, we take verbs and put -(t)ion on the end of them to make nouns: substitution, demolition, reservation, are just three instances.

What Sam did, then, when he said analyzation, was to make that word form based on analogy. He was simply using a more common word-formation procedure and using it on a not-so-common word form. I suspect that using both the noun analysis and the verb analyze will become too cumbersome for some speakers to use. Therefore, the verb analyze will take on the suffix -ation to become analogous with other VERB + -tion combinations. Quite possibly the noun analysis will fall out of usage and become obsolete and, later, archaic.

What makes tendencies toward regularization even more fascinating is that these "new" word forms — because they're longer — take more work to pronounce. It's much faster to say analyze than it is to say analyzation. But the trade-off is ultimately beneficial for the speaker. The words are easier to process cognitively because they operate by regular (i.e., the most common, most predictable) word formation rules. In other words, they don't exist as "irregular" forms that instead have to be remembered. For example, the verb to write is an irregular verb, meaning that speakers have to know all the forms rather than using the set of rules applicable to all regular verbs. So instead of using write/writes/wrote/have written, English speakers could regularize the verb and use write/writes/wrote/have written as the regular forms on analogy with kick/kicks/kicked/have kicked and design/designs/designed/have designed. (A good book to read that discusses psychology and linguistics is "The Language Instinct" by Steven Pinker, especially the chapter called "Words, Words, Words.")

My conversation with Sam about my escrow account prompted me to consult a dictionary about the status of a word. One of the more complex cultural practices of literate societies is that we rely on books to tell us about a word's existence, spelling, meaning, and usage. In a way, this is a comforting practice because people seem to care that they're using their language in socially preferred ways. Conversely, dictionaries are only authoritative because the people who write them have that authority and the people who use dictionaries expect them to be so. Boards of editors (what we call usage experts) determine definitions, accepted usages, accepted pronunciations, etc. No dictionary, though, can ever be complete. There will always be words that dictionaries don't contain, and there will always be dictionary entries that almost no one uses.

In sum, a dictionary can only sometimes be the final authority on word usage because it only represents some people's understanding of the English language. My conversation with Sam reminded me that linguistic variety is indeed the spice of life.