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# What Really Makes a Word

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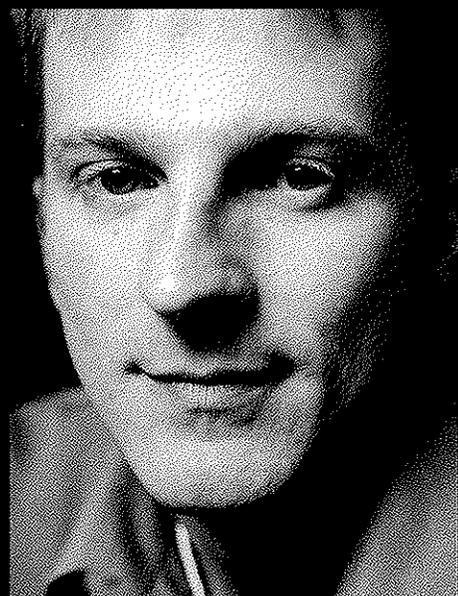
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# FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY FRANK BRAMLETT, PH.D.



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## 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 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 they sounded and sort of laughed it all off.

Often, people can get very worked up about whether something is or is not a word. During my first year as a professor, I got a phone call from a man who wanted to know if *reify* was a word. I said yes it is; I had encountered words like *reify* and *reification* in my graduate studies. But the man challenged me on this, saying that *reify* wasn't in his dictionary. I don't remember which one he was using; in any event, I wasn't able to convince him of its legitimacy.

Turn-about is always fair play. Recently, I had occasion to call my mortgage company about my homeowner's insurance. I spoke with a teleservice representative (let's call him Sam)

because I needed some information about my account. While Sam was talking, he used the term "escrow analysis" to tell me that the mortgage company was going to send me a statement about the condition of my escrow. When I asked him what that meant, he said that it would tell me how my mortgage payment would change as a result of adjustments to my homeowner's insurance premium and the rise in property taxes. What fascinated me, though, was that Sam used *analyzation* to describe the outcome of the "escrow analysis."

Some readers of this column are probably now screaming at the top of their lungs (either aloud or silently), "*Analyzation* is NOT a word!" At first, I didn't believe it myself. But my American Heritage Dictionary lists it under *analyze* as a word that can be derived from the main form. Clearly, Sam isn't the first person 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

variants 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*, and *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 towards 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/writed/have writed* 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 make them authoritative 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.