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# FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY FRANK BRAMLETT, PH.D.



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## What Are Functional Shifts?

In last month's column, I wrote about variety in word formation processes, the phenomenon of having more than one word form to represent the same concept, illustrated by word pairs like *analysis/analyzation*, *summary/summarization*, and *intensity/intenseness*. There is, of course, the other side of the coin. We also use single word forms to represent an array of meanings.

### The grammar mavens

Some years ago, a friend of mine started complaining about the way people use the English language. One of her main points was the word *journaling*. This word is sometimes used in university composition programs to refer to the practice of asking students to write journals. But my friend went on and on about the horrors of taking a perfectly good word like *journal* and turning it into a verb. (My word-processing software doesn't like *journaling*, either — there's a bright red underline indicating my supposed error.)

The fact is, though, that all English speakers use words like *journal* in two or more different categories with no trouble. For example, *Stevie*

*Nicks* writes all of her songs with a pen. Regardless of whether it is fountain pen or a ball-point Bic, the word *pen* is a writing implement; grammatically, it's a noun. It would be just as feasible to create the sentence in this way: *Stevie Nicks pens all of her songs with a quill*. The single form *pen* acts both as a noun (the object that we write with) and as a verb (the action of composing something, like a poem or song). This process of borrowing a word from one grammatical category and using it in a different one is called *functional shift* — the function of the word changes but the shape/sound of that word remains relatively constant.

### Verbal furniture

A productive source of these functional shifts is the semantic category *furniture*. For example, we eat at a table, and sometimes we sit around a table for a meeting. If at this meeting we encounter a topic that we don't want to discuss, then we *table* the item for later discussion. Similarly, people in meetings tend to sit

at the table in chairs. The person who runs the meeting is called the *chair* or *chairperson*. (The "correct" term used to be *chairman*, when most of the meeting-directors were men.) When a meeting needs to be run or a committee needs to be directed, then we ask a person to *chair* the committee or *chair* the meeting.

Other examples of verbal furniture: The senator bought a *couch* that won't fit into his living room. Sarah *couched* her argument about a new car in terms of her good grades.

### Metaphoric meaning

Many of the examples of functional shift illustrate a metaphoric meaning, a more-or-less fictional or fantastic application of the more "concrete" words.

The builders won't *floor* the bathroom until next week.

Dr. Watson's discovery *floored* Sherlock Holmes.

Jeff Gordon *floored* it to win the final race of the season.

Another very rich source of words that undergo functional shift come from the domain of *body parts*. Like verbal furniture,

these sentences also exhibit a degree of metaphoric extension:

How long must the minister *shoulder* this financial burden?

Shane's boss promised to *back* him on the new daycare proposal.

Eve *elbowed/kneed* her attacker and got away safely.

A deflated Mick had to *foot* the bill for the entire meal.

The sergeant demanded that all her soldiers *toe* the line.

Lindsey *eyed* the dessert table but decided just to have coffee.

That Congressional committee always *noses* into nominees' privacy.

I'm sure there are lots of other examples. My point here is that it is a very common practice in English to borrow words from specific grammatical categories and use them in sundry ways.

### Knowing the right meaning of a word

All words have a property that some linguists call "situated meaning." That is to say, a word only has "real" meaning when it's used in a "real life" situation. As a child, when I came across an unfamiliar word, I would sometimes ask one of my parents what it meant. Without fail, they would say, "Read the sentence to me." My parents knew (instinctively?) that they could only define the word appropriately if they also knew the context of that word. James Gee, an expert in linguistic discourse theory, uses the example of *coffee*. What's the "real" definition of coffee? It depends on the situation. Gee uses the following two examples to make his point: "The coffee spilled, get a mop" and "The coffee spilled, get a broom." Without knowing the situation, we can only know a word's meaning in a general, vague way.

As I said in last month's column, the people who try to tell us about what does or does not constitute a word (or a word's usage) are only ever partially correct. As for my friend who didn't like the word *journaling* — if enough people outside the university scene who keep journals use the term *journaling* to refer to their personal writing habits, then that form will eventually become a permanent, uncontroversial part of the language. But by then, I'm sure there will be something else for the mavens to complain about.