

LING 21000: Morphology

Assignment 4

1 Zero derivations

Zero derivation is a productive process in English that results in two words of different categories without any overt morphological marking distinguishing them. Consider the English examples below, which can be either nouns or verbs (for the assignment, you can assume all the verbs are derived from the nouns):

(1)	A	B
	hammer	tape
	shower	email
	ferry	rollerskate
	bottle	staple
	shoehorn	walk
	drum	handcuff
	coat	phone
	paddle	wax
	mirror	sail
	cradle	knot
	bleach	key
	wrench	sweat
	brush	radio
	corner	spoon*
	shop	button
	glue	bike

*not in the metaphorical, physically intimate sense

- What is the crucial difference between the words in column A versus the ones in column B? If you disagree with some of where some of the words are, explain why you think they belong in the other group, providing clear examples.
- Given the explanation you've provided, which group do you think the following words belong in? Explain your decisions, providing examples where necessary:

(2) knife, google, text, friend (in the Facebook sense), bag, nail

- Think of at least 10 more examples of zero derived noun-verb pairs in English, and explain which group they fall into and why, providing examples where necessary.
- Provide a rudimentary analysis that accounts for the difference between group A words and group B words. Be explicit as possible about what theoretical assumptions you are making (i.e. the Lexicon, compositional meaning, roots & affixes, etc)

2 Bushisms

George W. Bush was well known for unconventional utterances – ie. words, phrases, pronunciations, etc – which have since become known as Bushisms. These Bushisms have been used to paint a caricature of Bush as an inept president, highlighting his usage of strange, if not entirely ungrammatical, linguistic constructions as a sign of his sub-par intelligence and/or usage of language.

A few examples of Bushist words include *misunderestimate*, *trustworthiness*, and *embettered*. These words are widely considered to be ungrammatical/unacceptable despite having been formed by seemingly regular productive morphological processes. **Find at least 15 more unconventional word constructions of this sort – they do not necessarily have to be uttered by Bush, but please provide sources¹ – where regular productive morphology has resulted in a word that seems unconventional or ungrammatical.** Provide a paraphrase of what each word is supposed to mean in its context.

Given this list of words, what do you think the source of their ungrammaticality/unacceptability is? Is it a competence vs performance issue, or do you think that is the wrong way of framing things? Why else might these words be considered bad? For example, if you think it's a matter of semantic blocking, then what are the synonymous words that are blocking these neologisms? If you think it is a matter of social or pragmatic usage, specify how exactly you think this leads to restrictive morphological productivity in each case.

3 Synonymy in blocking

One of the primary intuitions behind blocking is that the existence of synonymous, and possibly more frequent, form prevents the grammaticality/usage of a different potential neologism. Thus, **pianoer* is blocked by *pianist*, just as **drummist* is blocked by *drummer*.²

If we take this explanation seriously, why should we have synonyms at all? If synonymous words block productive morphological processes, what explains the existence of synonyms like *big* and *large*; *small* and *little*; *far* and *distant*; and so on? Furthermore, think back to the conclusions you made about Bruce Lee's names, and alternative (nick)names in general; why should or shouldn't we expect blocking in these cases? Keep in mind that there is failure of blocking in more obviously morphologically complex synonyms as well, such as *piety* and *piousness*.

More generally, do you find this synonymy account of blocking to be weird given that we don't really see anything else like it in other grammatical components? For example, we know that complementizer *that* is optional in English, and many languages allow subject(/argument) dropping (i.e. Spanish, etc), resulting in alternate complex (multi-morphemic/word) structures that are completely identical in meaning (3-4). The same might be said about the active-passive alternation, which seem to express the same meaning but are generally considered to have different syntactic structures (5).

(3) George W. Bush feels (that) the public *misunderestimates* his talent as a painter.

(4) (Nosotros) *comemos muchos burritos*.

'We eat many burritos.'

¹The internet is not only an acceptable place for research, but also, as usual, a treasure trove of weirdness.

²Note that these examples also show that it's not about a semantic class involving musical instruments; and while this specific example may potentially have a phonological explanation, there are many examples where phonology doesn't seem to be the deciding factor.

- (5) a. George W. Bush painted a stunning portrait of Putin.
b. A stunning portrait of Putin was painted (by George W. Bush)

However, the existence of one sentence doesn't block the other synonymous sentence. Note that a frequency-based explanation of blocking, as Haspelmath & Sims mention, is not in principle restricted from applying to syntactic constructions like phrases and sentences (and indeed, we often talk about canonical/unmarked sentence structures in languages).

Given this, do you think that this synonymy account of blocking is still a good one? Why or why not? If not, what is a reasonable alternative? If so, why does it not seem to apply within the realm of syntax?