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by Maureen Bouey & Dahlia Miller

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Secret #6

by Maurenn Bouey

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SECRET #6: ANALYZE THIS!

Secret # 6 is like the movie with Billy Crystal – only different. (Don't worry we don't want to analyze your character. The only thing about your character which is important in language learning is your determination to succeed. If you have that, you WILL succeed.) In any case, this is about analyzing language – the English language.

Have you ever played with blocks or lego™? These games have lots of little pieces – different sizes and colours of plastic or wood – and you can put them together in different ways to make different things. Then you take them apart and put them back together in another way to make something different. It's fun!

Well in some ways, the English language is a lot like that. You have a whole bunch of bits and pieces and you can put them together in different ways to make different words. Instead of analyzing how to work with things, we analyze how to work with words.

This week's lesson is about how one aspect of English can help you to build a larger vocabulary (and NOT by trying to memorize a ton of words). We will briefly talk about the mechanics and origins of the English language, and then look at how analyzing English words – by taking them apart and putting them back together again – can help you to increase your vocabulary.

Are you interested in having a larger vocabulary? I hope so because it is a valuable and important goal which will help you on your path to becoming a fluent speaker of English.

Some people say that there are more words in the English language than in any other language in the world. It's impossible to know exactly how many words there are, but there have been estimates of around three million – or more.

Yikes!

Ah, but don't worry! Of these, only about 200,000 are in general use today. And while an educated English speaker has a vocabulary of about 20,000, he/she only uses about 2,000 in a week's conversation. Certainly it is possible to get by with a lot fewer than 2,000 words per week.

Anyway, back to our topic: the mechanics of English or **AFFIXATION**. I'll explain. Mechanics, in language terms, means the adding and subtracting of words or groups of letters to 'roots', or base words. Root words are the origins or beginnings of the words. I'll give you an example.

Let's look at the word 'television'. There are actually two parts to this word: 'tele' and 'vision'. The first part, 'tele' means distant; the second part, 'vision' means sight, or the power of seeing. Put together, the new word means: seeing from a distance.

Now, imagine you are reading an English magazine and you come upon the word 'telephone'. Imagine this is a new word for you – you don't know what it means. Do you immediately turn to your dictionary and look it up? NO! You don't need to. You already know what the word television means and so you can work out what 'telephone' means. Since you already know that 'tele' means distant, if you also knew that 'phon' meant sound, then you would know that 'telephone' means sound from a distance.

This is an example of affixation. 'Affixation' is adding a letter, or a group of letters, to a word to change its meaning.

In the last example, the four letters, 'tele', do not make a word. Rather, 'tele' is a prefix. A prefix is a group of letters which goes in front of a word (just like 'pre', itself is a prefix).

A suffix is a group of letters which goes at the end of a word (like 'ly' added to adjectives to form an adverb, or '-s' added on to countable nouns to make plurals). For example, we can change the word 'quick' to 'quickly' by affixing the suffix '-ly' to the root 'quick'.

Studying root words is a huge topic all on its own. You probably already know that English is a language with varied roots (actually quite a hodgepodge ()). In order to help you understand root words, here is just a very brief HISTORICAL OVERVIEW of how the English language came together.

The English language is a combination of a number of other languages. English originated in northern Europe as battling groups moved in and conquered each other. English is basically a Germanic language. There are also many 'borrowed' words from the Danish and Norse Viking languages that came originally from the Romans. The French language entered in 1066 when the Normans conquered Britain. (Greek also had an influence, which came later.)

Throughout its history, many new words have been, and continue to be, created. Shakespeare alone is said to have invented over 1600 new words. Then, as the British began colonizing after the 16th century, more and more borrowed words from other languages came into the English language. Just some of the languages which have contributed to English are: Latin, Greek, French, German,

Arabic, Hindi (from India), Italian, Malay, Dutch, Farsi (from Iran and Afganistan), Nahuatl (the Aztec language), Sanskrit (from ancient India), Portuguese, Spanish, Tupi (from South America) and Ewe (from Africa). Wow! No wonder it's confusing.

So, to sum up, why study root words and affixation? Studying root words, prefixes and suffixes can really help you build and expand your vocabulary. It will allow you to guess at the meanings of words when you're reading, thus preventing you from always going for your dictionary. This is just a small taste of this large subject.

Maureen Bouey is an ESL teacher and author living in Victoria, BC, Canada. She is the co-author of Smart English Grammar – Real English Listening – Intermediate with Dahlia Miller.

(1) A hodgepodge is a mix or variety of something.

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