Center *for* Language Science

Newsletter

PennState
College of the Liberal Arts

Winter/Spring 2022

Letter from the Editors

Dear Friends,

We are delighted to share with you the winter/spring 2022 issue of our Center for Language Science/Bilingualism Matters at Penn State newsletter. This issue explores the question of how words come into existence, which is a very rich topic, and with the recent emergence of new words such as "zoombombing" and "maskne,"we thought this would be a good time to share with you some of what language scientists have observed and discovered about how words come to be. Our main research summary describes how words get borrowed from one language into another and some of the interesting linguistic and social factors that shape the ways in which this occurs (spoiler alert: bilinguals play a very big role in this!). In our featured partner interview, you'll have the chance to learn how College of Education faculty member Amy Crosson tackles word learning with young language learners, and you'll also get a sneak preview of her new research examining how the shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic affected young bilinguals in U.S. schools. And don't miss our fun word formation quiz to test your knowledge of new and old words, while you learn about word formation processes along the way! As always, we welcome your questions, comments, and ideas, and we wish you a productive spring semester full of new words and experiences.

Sincerely,

Frances Blanchette, Alexis Chin (editor-in-chief),
Yi Ting Hsueh, Simone Luchini, Anna Serrichio and Cole Callen

Inside This Issue:

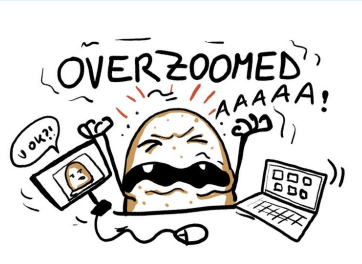
Language is Continuously Evolving!

by Simone Luchini

Have you ever considered how new words and phrases come to be? Word formation in the English language is a never-ending phenomenon that is shaped by our desire to communicate. There are a multitude of ways word formation may occur, but one thing is for certain:
The diversity of human interactions is at the center of it all.

Keeping up with the ever-changing English vocabulary can certainly seem like a daunting task.
How well do you think you will do in recognizing some of the more recently formed words in our language?

We collected a few relatively new words that you may or may not have encountered before. Check out some of these up-and-coming words and try to guess their origin and meaning! We've split them into different categories to help you along. (Answers can be found at the bottom of page 3.)



Compounding

Where do the words below come from, and what do they mean?

1. Zoombombing
2. Overzoomed

Tip: With **compounding** we find that two words have been joined together to amalgamate their respective meanings. This is the most common type of word formation in English. Here's how these words might be used in a sentence:

- *"Did you hear John zoombombed our weekly meeting?"*
- *"Fridays are always the hardest; I feel so overzoomed."*

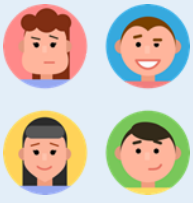
Abbreviation

Where do the words below come from, and what do they mean?

1. FYI
2. WFH

Tip: **Abbreviation** refers to the transformation of phrases into acronyms, by taking the first letter of each word in the phrase. This type of word formation is particularly popular in Internet culture. Here's how these words might be used in a sentence:

- *"FYI, the class notes will be posted in the online platform."*
- *"I will have to WFH this week, since my dog will need surgery."*



Borrowing

Where do the words below come from, and what do they mean?

1. Avatar
2. Emoji

Tip: **Borrowed** words are taken directly from another language. When words are borrowed, they tend to retain their spelling, but their pronunciation may change drastically. The medical field has been known to rely on numerous borrowed words, especially from Latin.

- *"I changed my avatar's hair color to pink today!"*
- *"The way you send emojis is so creative!"*

Blending

Where do the words below come from, and what do they mean?

1. Maskne
2. Hangry

Tip: **Blending** happens when two words are abbreviated and then merged into a single word. Much like with compound words, the meaning of the new word tends to stand at an intersection of the two blended words. This type of word formation is commonly adopted by today's younger generations.

- *"I don't mind the distancing, but this maskne is driving me crazy!"*
- *"It's so late in the day; I'm getting really hangry!"*

Backformation and Affixation

Where do the words below come from, and what do they mean?

1. Emote
2. Vaccinate

Tip: **Backformation** is when an existing word is modified by removing its affix. The word is effectively shortened and largely retains its original meaning. The opposite of backformation is **affixation**, where a word is turned into a longer version of itself.

- *"She used an emote and her in-game character started dancing."*
- *"I hope the doctor is able to vaccinate me before the holidays."*

Recent Events

The Happy Valley Latin Festival was hosted on Saturday, October 9 by Juana's restaurant and co-sponsored by the Borough of State College, with the goal of celebrating family, community, and Hispanic heritage through music, food, arts and crafts, and many other activities representative of the culture. The festival also sought to bring camaraderie among the people of State College in general while raising awareness of the influence of Latin culture on the community. CLS graduate students Jessica Vélez Avilés, Estilita María Cassiani-Obeso, and Tiffany Rodriguez-Cruz and lab manager Sarah Schaech were there to represent our branch of Bilingualism Matters, sharing games and spreading the word about the benefits of linguistic diversity!

Answers

Zoombombing—The act of raiding a Zoom call, usually on school-related calls by posting pornography or otherwise offensive content
Overzoomed—Stressed because of too many video calls
FYI—For your information
WFH—"Work from Home"—a concept popularized from COVID-19—where everyone is self-quarantined, resulting in many working from home
Avatar—The image or icon which represents a character (e.g., a website user). The word has been borrowed from the Sanskrit language, where it originally meant "incarnation," typically referring to incarnations of deities in human form, or to gurus and spiritual leaders.
Emoji—(from Japanese 絵文字, read えもじ) (plural: emoji) Tiny pictures people often use in texts. With increased use of texting, the word "emoji" became widespread.
Maskne—Acne produced by wearing face masks
Hangry—When you haven't eaten in a while, and then you become really angry; hungry+angry=hangry
Emote—Derived from the word "emotion"; to portray emotions in a theatrical manner. Also used in video games to refer to commands that will make a character express an emotion.
Vaccinate—To give a vaccine

FEATURED PARTNER

Dr. Amy Crosson
Assistant Professor of Education

Interviewed by Yi Ting Hsueh

Could you briefly summarize the research you have been focusing on most recently at Penn State?

In my most recent project, I have been carrying out a study to understand how the shift to remote instruction during COVID-19 affected teachers' literacy instruction practices with emergent bilinguals (EBs). In the winter of 2020—at the height of the pandemic in the United States—I worked with fifty teachers of EB children in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Teachers submitted smartphone-based diary entries about their day-to-day literacy instructional practices during COVID-19. We included teachers from a wide range of contexts to capture variation in the ways that they navigated online literacy instruction with EBs. Teachers were from ten different states and taught in schools located in urban, suburban, and rural contexts; they taught in instructional programs that were both English-only and dual-language; and teachers were racially and ethnically diverse. My findings have revealed that there were major reductions to all aspects of literacy instruction for EBs in these classrooms during COVID-19, as reported by teachers while they were providing remote instruction. Interestingly, the smallest reductions were seen in critical "code-focused" foundational skills, such as decoding. Most importantly, we found that the largest declines were in "language-focused" literacy practices such as extended writing, vocabulary instruction, and teaching reading comprehension strategies. These findings have major implications for educators and policy makers as we recuperate from COVID-19 learning loss. For young EBs, immediate investment in additional time and resources for intensified literacy instruction—especially for language-focused practices—is urgently needed.

In addition to the COVID study, my long-term research agenda focuses on development of classroom-based interventions to support vocabulary learning, metalinguistic awareness, and reading comprehension among emergent bilingual students from early childhood through adolescence. I have collaborated with researchers and teachers to develop interventions that will support EB students to develop the kind of deep, flexible word knowledge that we know is critical for comprehension and academic writing, in a project called *English Learners' Robust Academic Vocabulary Encounters*. An underlying principle of this work is that EB students learn best when they are supported to draw on all of their linguistic resources for word learning, development of metalinguistic awareness, and reading comprehension.

Could you tell us a little about the particular challenges that multilingual students and their teachers might face around vocabulary learning, and how teachers' instructions might affect learning in this regard?

Absolutely! One of the major misconceptions about vocabulary learning is that it calls for "drill and kill" approaches in which students are presented with definitions and tested on how well they learned those definitions. Unfortunately, there is a lot of that type of practice out in the world. But effective instruction looks very different! Effective instruction involves guiding students through *analysis* of word meanings and *interaction* around words in multiple and varied contexts. For example, teachers can select a few high-impact and interesting target words for instruction, then guide EB students to generate and justify examples of how a target word is used in a wide range of ways that are personally meaningful to them. Teachers can also guide students to analyze target words cross-linguistically. For example, in *English Learners' Robust Academic Vocabulary Encounters*, we guide students to analyze Latin-based roots in English words and to make meaningful connections to words they know in other languages such as Spanish, Portuguese, French and Haitian Creole. We have found that EB students take up this analytical perspective and they use it to problem-solve meanings of unfamiliar words.

As for high-impact words that are best to target with EB students, we focus on general academic words that are used across disciplines and often are important for communicating concepts, such as *facilitate*, *ambiguous*, and *diminish*. These words are abstract and important for making meaning, so it's worth drawing students' attention to them and highlighting them for vocabulary instruction. We also focus on multiple meaning words that carry discipline-specific and everyday meanings, such as *volume* and *area*.

What are the quantitative and qualitative methods or techniques you use to conduct classroom-based studies?

In my research, I like to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques to analyze ways in which instructional interventions are effective for different EB learners. To develop instructional interventions, I work over time and iteratively in classrooms, and I employ design-based research methods. To understand how emergent bilingual students are making sense of the instruction and what they find engaging or challenging, I employ interviews, think aloud protocols, and surveys. To make causal inferences about the relationships between instructional interventions and student learning outcomes, I collaborate with colleagues in education psychology and statistics to carry out randomized, controlled, and quasi-experimental studies.

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What would you say are the main differences between traditional classroom and online classroom learning settings for multilingual students? What are some of the challenges multilingual students and their teachers might face in online settings?

In my COVID study, I have noticed a couple of major differences that I think are important, at least for working with EB children in the primary grades. A major challenge was that teachers found it very difficult to engage EB students in discussion, and it was particularly difficult to structure opportunities for small group instruction and peer-to-peer discussion. Therefore, opportunities for talk—whether in children's home languages or in English—were greatly diminished.

On the positive side, online instruction opened some doors for communication and collaboration with families that emerged as new possibilities in the online environment. For example, many teachers quickly adopted new technologies to translate chat and text messages, allowing for more regular and immediate communication than they had previously. In some cases, parents were able to sit with the child during online instruction and would ask teachers to explain the purpose of an instructional activity or would ask teachers for extensions for their child. These were some unexpected benefits that may be leveraged post-COVID.

FEATURED RESEARCH

Where did that word come from?

A behind-the-scenes exploration into how and why languages borrow and lend words

By Alexis Chin and Anna Serrichio

You don't have to be a linguist to be able to identify certain well-known "borrowed" words—words that are adapted from one language into another. After all, who hasn't enjoyed a tasty *croissant* for breakfast, been confused by a strangely familiar *déjà vu* experience, or gotten lost by accidentally driving down a *cul-de-sac*? In this piece we discuss why and how words enter one language from another.

Borrowing from French to English

French has a strong presence in English. Aside from the commonly known borrowings from French mentioned above, there are many more French words hiding in the English language, some of which may surprise you. Some examples include honesty (from the Old French *onesté*), advice (from the French word *avis*, or opinion, as in "*a mon avis*…") and habit (from Old French *habit*, which is *habitude* in contemporary French) [1].

Historically, English began borrowing words from French in 1066 after the conquest of England [2]. French became the language associated with nobility, and English became the language associated with commoners. This situation led to many French words being borrowed into English, in part because the French language was considered more prestigious. Power dynamics between speaker groups like this often play a role in the borrowing process. The process happens naturally, and bilinguals are often unconscious of the fact that they are bringing new words into the language, as well as the power dynamics that shape their language use.

The role of bilingualism

Bilinguals often have a stronger language and a weaker language. When words get borrowed, they often get borrowed from the stronger language [3]. But not all words become established borrowings, so how can we tell when a word is truly integrated into another language [4]? For this we look to the speakers themselves: If use of the word is widespread and frequent, and if speakers generally accept the word as the label for a particular meaning, then we can consider it an official borrowing. Truly borrowed words word will often replace the original word and take on the new language's sounds and grammatical markings (e.g., *croissant* is pronounced very differently in American English as compared with Parisian French!) [4].

Processes for word borrowing

One way that linguists have categorized the different ways words become integrated into a new language is in terms of "importation" and "substitution." Importation occurs when speakers adopt the original word along with its meaning. One example of this the English word *tortilla*, which carries the original meaning and sounds (e.g., the 'y' sound written as "ll") from Spanish. Substitution occurs when speakers borrow a word's sounds and grammatical markers but change its meaning. For example, the German word for "skyscraper" comes from a translation of the word for "cloud" and "scraper" [5].

Some reasons for borrowing

Why do words get borrowed? Sometimes borrowing happens because a language needs a label for something. For example, the German language contains the word "computer", a relatively recent borrowing from English, since computers did not previously have a name in German. Borrowing may also fill gaps in vocabulary that emerge when other word meanings change. For example, the Latin word for "animal" filled in the gap when the Old English word for "deer" shifted in meaning from referring to animals more generally to the specific type of animal we now know as "deer" [6].

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Social factors affecting borrowing

Word borrowing is a cultural phenomenon, and it is therefore shaped by certain social dynamics, such as the power dynamics between French and English discussed above [2]. In modern times, English is widely used across the globe, which positions it as a source of borrowing for many languages. But speakers' attitudes toward the language(s) may also affect the rate of borrowing [5]. For example, French speaking societies in Europe have demonstrated a strong resistance to the spread of English, and a reluctance to adopt its vocabulary.

Linguistic factors affecting borrowing

Characteristics of languages themselves may also influence borrowing. For example, languages that sound similar such as Dutch and German may borrow more from each other than languages that sound very different from each other [9]. The grammatical properties of a word may also determine whether it is likely to get borrowed. For example, words that can be classified as nouns (e.g., "computer") and verbs (e.g., "to tweet") are more likely to be borrowed than more functional words like determiners (e.g., "the") [6]. Frequency of meaning also plays a role: words with meanings that tend to be commonly used, like 'night' tend to have a lower rate of borrowing than words with less frequently used meanings, like 'to stab' [10]. Finally, words that refer to things that tend to vary by culture, such as clothing, tend to be borrowed more often than words with less cultural significance (e.g., words for body parts) [11].

Individuals' impact on borrowing

Borrowing can also be affected by individual language learning trajectories, and proficiency in a language. When people acquiring a new language learn new words early in the learning process, they are less likely to try to borrow those words from their first language [12]. At the same time, more proficient bilingual speakers have more knowledge of their foreign language to draw from and integrate into their conversation, and so they may contribute more borrowings [4].

Summing up and looking forward

Word borrowing is one of the many phenomena contributing to a state of constant linguistic change—as linguist Dennis Preston likes to say, languages have a hard time "sitting still." In this piece we discussed just a handful of the many factors shaping this constant movement. While it is natural to sometimes be resistant to change, we hope that by sharing insights from language science on how and why these changes happen, we can promote a welcoming attitude toward the natural diversity and innovation that emerges when people from different groups interact.

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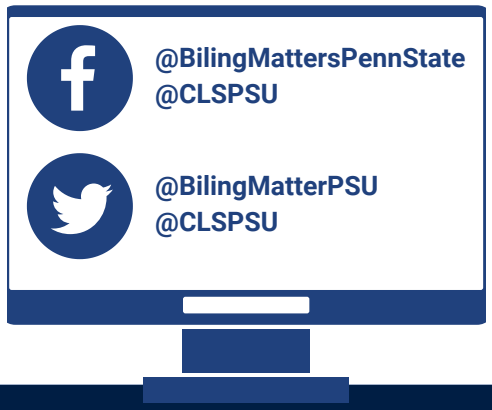

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The Penn State **Center for Language Science (CLS)** is an interdisciplinary research group of linguists, psycholinguists, applied linguists, speech-language pathologists, speech scientists, and cognitive neuroscientists who share an interest in language acquisition and bilingualism.

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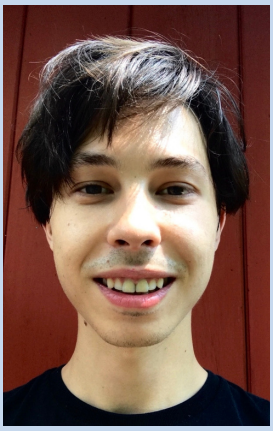

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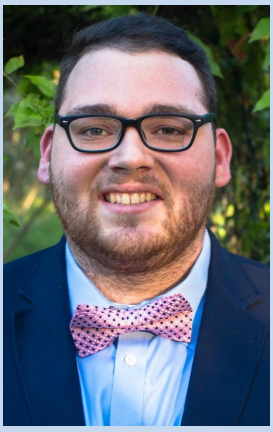

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