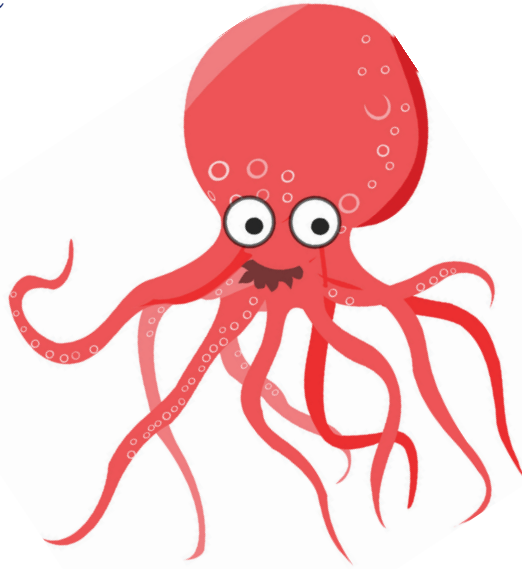


## Our Quirky Mother Tongue

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“armful” ≠



Without its regularities, how many of us would have caught on to the English language? A common mistake made by toddlers learning the language is to assume that English is more regular than it actually is. Having discovered the rule whereby the plural of a noun may be formed by suffixing the singular with an “s” (but not yet knowing all of the rule’s exceptions), they are likely to create some regular and very cute but non-English plurals such as “mouses,” “sheeps,” and “knives.” Still, there are many patterns in English that apply in enough cases to make its basics learnable by nearly all persons as a first language and by a sizable fraction of the more linguistically gifted as a second or third one when acquired in adulthood.

The primary concern of most users of English, or of any language for that matter, is with understanding other users and being understood by them. An analysis of the structure of the language is less essential to getting along in a workaday society, and, once the language becomes an unconscious habit, most of us can leave analyses to the experts. But when we have enough leisure time to read or write essays such as this one, some thought given to the inside workings of English may be excusable. Since suffixes have already been mentioned, let’s start with them.

The idea exploited by a suffix is that of the off-the-shelf part. By tagging a standard syllable or two onto the end of a word, a second word is formed, one that has a standard relationship with the first word. Publishers of abridged dictionaries have taken advantage of the economies made possible by this idea and often enter alphabetically and define only the simple, root word, merely listing the suffixed forms within the same entry. Thus, my collegiate-sized dictionary lists and provides seven definitions for the adjective, “quick,” with the noun, “quickness,” and the adverb, “quickly,” appearing in the same entry without comment. This pattern of an adjective, “x,” a noun, “xness,” and an adverb, “xly,” is a common one in English and one that benefits not only the compilers of small dictionaries. As an instance of a uniformity, a consistency, a regularity, it also helps one in fathoming the language. Unfortunately, it is not a universal pattern holding in all cases. There are also irregular cases that hinder the understanding of the language.

Some of these irregularities are explicable. Others are not. Take the attribute of color, for instance. While it is useful to be able to speak of that attribute as an entity, only a poet would feel a need to assign it to an action. Thus, our language includes the noun, “redness,” but not the adverb, “redly.” But why is “quick” the root

of one of these regular trios of words, while its synonym, “fast,” isn’t? My unabridged dictionary does list the noun, “fastness,” but not in any sense related to speed. The adverb, “fastly,” is described as obsolete in all of its senses. Maybe there is something about the sound of the adjective, “fast.” (Would we prefer our language to have silly rules rather than it to have none?) Two other adjectives that rhyme with “fast,” that is, “last” and “past,” also fail to fit the regular pattern. “Last” has its matching adverb, “lastly,” but “lastness” does not appear as its noun. “Past” lacks both of its regular partners. But, alas, a third rhyming adjective, “vast,” is completely regular.

So, English provides a standard suffix, “ness,” by which regular adjectives can be converted to nouns. Does it have the means for the opposite transformation? Indeed, it does, and with two different intentions. If we add the suffix, “ful,” to any of a large class of nouns, we get an adjective signifying that the noun it modifies has a full measure of the stated quality; if we add the suffix, “less,” the result denotes the absence of that quality. This gives us such pairs of adjectives as “harmful/harmless” and “charming/charmless.” But look out for “armful/armless.” “Armful” does not have the meaning that the naive might expect. And not many of us would consider “thankless” to be the antonym of “thankful.” We are much more likely to hear “ungrateful,” a *prefixed* word using a different root. This root, “grateful,” may appear to be one of these suffixed adjectives that we are discussing; but, if it were, its root noun would be “grate,” which expresses little of the notion of thanks. Nor are you apt to find “grateless” in your Funk and Wagnalls.

“Shameful” and “shameless” are a problem pair. “Ralph’s behavior was absolutely shameful,” expresses the idea that Ralph committed an act of which the community strongly disapproves. “Ralph’s behavior was absolutely shameless,” does not express the opposite idea—that Ralph committed an act of which the community strongly approves. Instead, it makes the same

claim as the first assertion and something more! This “something more” is that Ralph has an additional character flaw, a flaw not even hinted at in the first assertion. It is claimed that Ralph is so depraved that he feels no guilt for his reprehensible act.

The standard prefix is another device for bringing regularity into our language. Unfortunately, we may have more than one “standard” prefix to express a single idea. Four of them that express negation are “dis,” “in,” “non,” and “un.” If English has a rule for which of these prefixes is correct in any instance, I don’t know what it is. When I have doubts, I often try several, hoping that my ear will recognize the more common form. This method is of little use to someone just learning the language. It works fairly well for me with familiar words. “Inappear,” “nonappear” and “unappear” are not likely to *appear* in my writing, and would be made to *disappear* if they did. Sometimes two or more forms are allowed, thereby decreasing our chances of guessing wrong(ly). “Inacceptable” and “unacceptable” both are acceptable to the editor of my pocket dictionary. “Inability” and “disability” are both listed but not as synonyms. Oddly, the approved corresponding negative adjectives are “unable” (not “inable”) and “disable.” My collegiate-sized dictionary lists both “discontinuous” and “noncontinuous” as meaning that gaps are present. A few of the other duplicates listed in the same book are “nonbreakable/unbreakable,” “incombustible/noncombustible,” “nondemocratic/undemocratic,” and “nonsinkable/unsinkable.”

I had a friend who collected words that appear and function as if they are negatively prefixed words but for which no corresponding unprefixed, positive words seem to exist. I don’t have his list, but could “disrupt,” “dissipate,” “inane,” “incognito,” “incorrigible,” “inept,” “inert,” “inhibit,” “nonchalant,” “nonplus” and “uncouth” be examples?

Although English is not considered to be an inflected language where the meanings of its words and phrases depend critically on the pitch or tone of the speaker's voice, it can make some use of inflection. Consider the difference in meanings of that last clause when pronounced, "...it *can* make some use of inflection," "...it can make *some* use of inflection," or "...it can make some use of *inflection*." If I tell you, "You can't thank him too much," I may be warning you not to overly express thankfulness, or I may be commenting on your inability to express as much thankfulness as he deserves. Which of these two meanings would be understood depends more on the context in which the statement is made than on any inflection given it. Try explaining these subtleties to a 60-year-old who has spoken nothing but Urdu all of his life.

The notorious hodge-podge of schemes in English spelling has retarded education more than has dyslexia and nearly as much as has tenure, but less will be done about it than about the weather. Our language is rampant with both kinds of spelling quirks—a given pronunciation may be spelled in more than one way, and a given spelling may be pronounced in more than one way. Without straining anything, I could think of five different ways that the long-A sound is spelled. These are "ay," "ae," "ey," "eigh," and

simply "a" (when followed by a consonant and what preschool phonics books call a "magic" e). I could also think of four ways that the one-letter spelling, "a," is pronounced. These are as in "radio," as in "retard," as in "bad" and as the ubiquitous schwa, as is the second "a" in "anomaly." But complaints about spelling are too commonplace to be included in an essay as fascinating as this one. Besides, if spelling were to be reformed, wouldn't we produce citizens who could not read anything written before the said spelling reformation? What would happen if the English-speaking population were cut off from history?

The peculiarity of English, in all of its aspects, is sometimes defended on the grounds that this adds to the language's richness. A better defense might be that much of the irregularity and much of the richness found in English result from the same cause. English is a *mélange* of elements lifted from a half-dozen other languages, and, while this may give it the means to express a wide range of ideas and feelings, it also enlarges the number of governing and contradictory rules it has in effect. But you and I have managed to learn enough of English to get by with, so why should we make it any easier for those thankless future generations? **Ω**

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*“Remember... i before e except after c or  
when your weird foreign neighbor Keith  
receives eight counterfeit beige sleighs from  
feisty caffeinated weightlifters.”*

*—Anonymous*