

January 1913

INDEFINITE COMPOSITES AND WORD-COINAGE.

Louise Pound
University of Nebraska

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Pound, Louise, "INDEFINITE COMPOSITES AND WORD-COINAGE." (1913). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 6.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

INDEFINITE COMPOSITES AND WORD-COINAGE.

RECOGNITION of 'blending' as a mode of word-formation, the telescoping of two or more words into one, as it were, or the superposition of one word upon another, is not new among etymologists, although the subject has never been given separate or very elaborate treatment. Some instances of these factitious amalgam forms, the 'portmanteau words' of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the blend or fusion forms of etymologists or lexicographers, are *dumbfound* from *dumb* and *confound*, *dang* from *damn* and *hang*, *gerrymander* from Elbridge Gerry and *salamander*, *electrocute* from *electric* and *execute*; probably *boost* from *boom* and *hoist*, *lunch* from *lump* and *hunch*, *luncheon* from *lunch* and the now obsolete *nuncheon*, *scurry* from *skirr* or *scour* and *hurry*, *squirm* from *squir* and *swarm*; also numerous mongrel slang or dialect forms, often jocular in intention, like the American *slantendicular*, *solemncholy*, *happenstance*, *grandificent*, *sweatspiration*, or the English dialectal *rasparated*, *boldacious*, *boldrumptious*. Blend forms have been noted for French, German, and other European languages, and probably have an antiquity which it would be futile to try to trace. Wiclif and other writers, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, use *austern*, a composite of *austere* and *stern*; Shakespeare uses *bubukle* from *bubo* and *carbuncle*, and *porpentine*, which may be a crossing of *porcypine* and *porpoint*; and undoubtedly many such forms have won acceptance, from time to time, in the history of the language; although, in most cases, they would be difficult to solve, after use long enough for the striking or whimsical quality which gave them vogue to become dimmed.

Nevertheless it is safe to affirm that factitious blends are being made with the greatest frequency, and have their widest diffusion, at the present time¹. For one thing, the modern bent toward conscious analysis of language, the persistent interest in etymology, and the

¹ In a forthcoming study entitled *Blends: their Relation to English Word Formation* to be published in the 'Anglistische Forschungen' series, the author expects to illustrate fully their vogue and the frequency of their coinage at the present time, and to note their various usages and characteristics.

increased knowledge of the processes of word-formation, have led to increased self-consciousness in the handling of language. They have brought greater relish of peculiar or characteristic usages, and hence more effort—sometimes desperate and varied effort—to reach new linguistic effects. Other factors that may have helped to give special impetus to the present inclination toward fusion forms are the popularization of writing of all kinds through the spread of education and the multiplication of readers, the creation of a class of professional humorous, or semi-humorous writers, mainly journalistic, and lastly the growth of realism, which has swept into print a mass of dialect forms, whimsical, perverted, and fantastic, such as never crossed the linguistic horizon of the average reader of a hundred years ago. Especially frequent of creation at present, and accepted in standing, are blend-formations in scientific nomenclature, as *chloroform*, or *formaldehyde*, and designations created for various newly invented articles in trade, as *Nabisco* wafers, made by the National Biscuit Company, *Sealpacker-chief*, for a sealed package of pocket-handkerchiefs, *Pneu-Vac*, for a vacuum cleaner, or *Locomobile*, for a certain variety of automobile.

But there has not been recognition, at least not specific or definitely formulated recognition, of the fact that vague or indefinite blending exists as a mode of word-formation alongside the more obvious and intentional amalgamation which has challenged and monopolized attention hitherto. The suggestion may be speculative or conjectural, rather than concretely demonstrable; but the hypothesis here put forward, if valid, sheds light in a few dark corners of the etymological field. The most usual modes of creating folk-words at the present time are through imitation of natural sounds, as *fizz*, *kersplash*, *chug-chug*; through analogical extension or enlargement, as *judgmatical* or *splendiferous*; through curtailments, like *bus* from *omnibus*, *auto* from *automobile*; through the creation of new words from proper names, as *mercerize*, *mackintosh*, *pasteurize*, *boycott*, and the like. Alongside these familiar methods of language creation or modification, many words peculiarly perplexing to etymologists probably originate in a sort of indefinite or eclectic fusion of certain vaguely recollected words, groups of words, or elements in words, already existing in the language. Nor is it unlikely that echoic composites of this class may equal or outrank, in number and importance, the more intentional and recognizable fusion forms which have hitherto attracted the attention of linguists.

The process of word-coinage which, for expediency in classifying the words involved, or in characterizing their manner of origin, I have

called in this paper *indefinite blending*, or *reminiscent amalgamation*, borders not only upon blending or fusion proper—definite blends of few and easily recognizable elements being the more likely to be conscious formations and to retain unimpaired the potency in implication of their various elements—but also upon *onomatopœia*, or direct imitation of natural sounds, and upon the *unconscious symbolism of sounds*¹. The latter arises partly from the nature of the sounds themselves; for example from the difference in suggestive power between open or close, high or low vowels; in the quality of certain consonant combinations; in the difference between explosives and continuants, between voiced consonants and voiceless. Poets in particular are likely to avail themselves of this principle to attain what is called ‘tone color.’ But the symbolism may also arise, or find its suggestive power, partly through *association* with familiar established words in which these sounds occur. The subtle suggestion of combinations of letters is a subject as yet little investigated.

To proceed to specific illustration, it is obvious that certain consonant groups are likely to retain the associations of prominent words in which they are found; as the initial *sq-* of *squeeze*, *squelch*, *squirt*, *squirm*, may unconsciously convey the idea of impetus or motion, rather violent motion, perhaps. The final *-sh* of *crush*, *crash*, *splash*, *wash*, *gush*, *dash*, *squash*, *mash*, *swash*, etc., also suggests motion, in this case motion which is continuous, as symbolized by the final spirant. The factitious English and American *squish*², or *squush*, and the English *squish*, which have these sounds, may be direct blendings, the one of *squeeze* and *crush*, the other of *squeeze* and *swish*; but it seems more likely that they are indefinite or eclectic composites, which derive their suggestive power from the associations or symbolism of their prominent elements. *Squish* is defined in Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary* as used in the sense of *squeeze*, *squirt*, *squash*, *gush*, *mash*, and these words, vaguely recollected, may well have entered into its composition. Similarly, take the case of the initial *sn-* of *sniff*, *snout*, *snuff*, *sneeze*, *snore*, etc., words associated with the nose, or the sense of smell. The fairly recent

¹ For a suggestive passage on the symbolism of sounds, having some bearing on the matter under discussion, see L. P. Smith, *The English Language*, pp. 102—105 (1912). ‘Echoic composites’ might be a better name than ‘indefinite composites’ for the type of blends treated in this paper, were it not for the fact that ‘echoic’ is usually employed by philologists not in its primary meaning—that which it would have here—but in the meaning of onomatopoeic, given it by Dr Murray, Mr Bradley, and others. But see especially H. Bradley, *The Making of English*, pp. 156—159 (1904).

² ‘If I went fust down th’ ladder I could click hold on him and chock him over my head, so as he should go squshin’ down the shaft, breakin’ his bones at every timberin’... Kipling, ‘On Greenhow Hill,’ in *Soldiers Three and Military Tales*.

snuzzle, now admitted into the dictionaries, may be a combination of this *sn-* with the ending of *nuzzle*, *muzzle*, *guzzle*; although *snuzzle* might be solved as a direct blend of *snuff* and *nuzzle*; or merely as the latter word with adscitious initial *s*. The factitious *slosh*, also admitted to the dictionaries, gains probably from the associations or symbolism of the group *slush*, *gush*, *wash*, *splash*, etc. The occasionally appearing *squdged*¹, or *squudged*, implies *squeeze*, *crush*, *crowd*, *scrouge*, and the like.

In general it is obvious that in words so formed there would arise a feeling of natural and inherent fitness for the idea expressed. Vague conflation of this sort is an easy and tempting method of word creation², and it accounts readily enough for many forms for which the zealous have vainly sought foreign originals or cognates. There might be doubt as regards which words so arose; a fixed list of 'indefinite composites' might not be possible; but there can hardly be doubt of the existence of the method itself.

Distinctive of this variety of blends, if they may be called such, is the fact that they so often suggest or involve onomatopœia, as the words cited have shown; also the fact that they are not felt as specific composites, as are recognized fusion forms; e.g., *promptual*, *fdgituted*, *insinuendo*, *sneakret*, the *universanimous* of Lowell's *Biglow Papers*, or Wallace Irwin's *kissletoe-vine* and *nightinglory bird*³. There is always the sense of intrinsic fitness for the idea expressed, but not a sense of definite elements in amalgam. However, the line between blends proper and conjectural or indefinite blends is sometimes hard to draw. The now well-established though lately formed *squawk* may be a welding of *squeak* and *squall*, but *squeal*, *shriek*, *hawk*, etc., may have haunted the mind also in its creation. *Scurry*, of doubtful etymology, may be a 'portmanteau form' from *scour*, older *skirr*, and *hurry*; but, were it a recent instead of an older word, one would be tempted to think that *scud*, *scoot*, etc., might have played some part in its formation. Into *splurge*, for which no etymology has been proposed, might enter the elements of *splash*, with its variants *splatter*, *splutter*, and *large*.

¹ 'They've put us into boots,' said Una, 'Look at my feet—they're all pale white, and my toes are squdged together awfully.' Kipling, 'Cold Iron,' in *Rewards and Fairies*.

² A decade or more ago (see Leon Mead, *How Words Grow*, xii, 1902), the London Academy offered prizes for four new words. Among those suggested were *snumble*, to signify a child's effort to express the sensation felt in the nostrils when one drinks an effervescing mineral water, *screel*, the sensation produced by hearing a knife-edge squeal on a slate, *scrungle*, the noise made by a slate pencil squeaked on a slate, *twink*, a testy person full of kinks and cranks, and several similar formations obviously having their origin in a sort of reminiscent amalgamation.

³ 'Letters of a Japanese Schoolboy,' in *Collier's Weekly*, vi, viii, xix, vols. 41, 42.

Flaunt has been thought to blend the elements of *fly*, *flout*, *vaunt*¹, etc. The *myowl*, used by Kipling and others, may combine *meow* and *yowl*, but it involves also the suggestive power of *howl*, *wail*, *yell*, etc. Perhaps, if it is expedient to attempt to draw a definite line at all, blend words proper may be defined as, or restricted to, those having two, or at most three, elements in combination; as the mongrel *quituate* from *graduate* and *quit*, *interturb* from *interrupt* and *disturb*, or *compushity* from *compulsion*, *push*, and *necessity*, or *compushency* from *compulsion*, *push*, and *urgency*, or *boldrumpitious* from *presumptuous*, *bold*, and *rumpus*. Those that recall, or seem vaguely to have the potency of four words or more, might then be classed as indefinite blends. In factitious words of the first type, the elements are often deliberately and consciously chosen. In words of the second type this is by no means to be implied. But much emphasis should not be placed on the *number* of elements entering into blends. Of more importance surely is the distinction that coinages of the type treated in this paper are created under the influence of indefinite rather than definite suggestion. Many words which are properly to be classed as indefinite composites might depend on no more than two or three words vaguely present in the user's mind.

To some, the words under discussion are 'imitative words²' or 'imitative variants' of existent established words. In the sense that the onomatopoeic factor enters into many, as already noted, the name is often valid; but it is less good if 'imitative' is meant to imply that they are made in direct imitation of other words. The impelling motive in their creation is less conscious imitation than vague recollection, with resultant fusion, of certain elements in other words; elements which have come—largely through association or reminiscence—to have a certain symbolic power.

To attempt a fixed or exhaustive list of indefinite blends would no doubt, as already noted, prove neither very successful, nor perhaps very profitable. The short list which follows—a list which might have been indefinitely extended—is meant to be suggestive only; it supplements the illustrative words already cited. Unless entry otherwise is made, the forms listed are from Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary*, and

¹ L. P. Smith, *op. cit.*, *supra*, p. 106.

² See *slump*, originally meaning to fall or sink in a bog or swamp. The *New English Dictionary* calls this word 'probably imitative' in origin; but compare the group *slip*, *swamp*, *plump*, *thump*, *bump*, etc., from which it might well have been built. The *Century Dictionary* enters words of the character of *croodle*, *flump*, etc., as perhaps 'imitative words.'

no etymology, or theory of origin, was given for them there. The list is purposely confined mainly to contemporary dialect words. After all, it is these words which one approaches with fewest predilections, and concerning which, since they are contemporary, our *Sprachgefühl* ought to be most reliable. As has been often pointed out, the processes of living dialect speech are often much more important for the investigation of the problems of linguistics, than is investigation of the literary language.

bash, strike, beat, smash. 'Aa bashed me head,' 'Ye've bashed yer hat.' Barrère and Leland, *Dictionary of Slang*, following the *New English Dictionary*, suggest Scandinavian origin, and compare Swedish *basa*, strike; but note the group *beat, bang, mash, smash, crush*, etc.

blash, a sudden blaze or flame. 'Light sticks only make a blash,' 'His een blashed fire,' 'A fire into which paraffin had been thrown was said to blash up.' Note *blaze, flare, flash*, etc.

bumble, bungle, blunder, halt, stumble. 'He bummed on an' spoiled his work.' Note *bungle, fumble, jumble, stumble*, etc.

cangle, quarrel, wrangle, haggle, cavil. 'We may not stay now to cangle.' Called 'perhaps onomatopoeitic,' in the *New English Dictionary*. Noted in *The Century Dictionary* as apparently a voiced frequentative of a verb *cank*, from *camp*, with possible Icelandic cognates. But cf. the group *cavil, quarrel, wrangle, jangle, haggle*, etc.

chelp, chirp, squeak, yelp, chatter. 'Children nowadays will chelp at you and sauce you,' 'The magpie chelps at ye.' Cf. *chirp, cheep, chatter, yelp*.

chirl, chirp, warble. 'The laverock chirt his cantie sang.' Cf. *chirp, cheep, trill, shrill*, etc.

chittle, twitter, warble. 'The birds are chittlin' bonnily.' Cf. *cheep, chirp, twitter, warble*.

criggle, wiggle, creep, crawl, wriggle. 'I can feel 'un (the devil) just as if he was a-crigglin' and a-crawlin' in my head.' Cf. *creep, crawl, wiggle, wriggle*.

croodle, huddle, crouch, curl, cringe, cuddle, fondle. 'The lads croodled down,' 'Come to mother and 'er'll croodle yo.' Cf. *crouch, cuddle, huddle*, etc.

crunkle, rumple, crease. 'A yellow crunkled scrap.' Cf. *crinkle, crumple, crease, wrinkle, rumple*, etc.

flawp, go about vulgarly and ostentatiously dressed; also a name given an awkward slovenly person. 'Flaupen aboot frae mornin' ta neet,' 'A girt idle flawp.' Cf. *flaunt, flout, flip, flop, flirt, awkward*, etc.

flaze, flare up, blaze. 'This floor can't flaze, for it's made o' poplar.' Cf. *flare, flame, flash, blaze*, etc.

flerk, jerk about, flourish, flip or flop. 'Don't keep flerking that in my face.' Cf. *flourish, flip, flop, jerk*.

flump, fall heavily, or headlong; a fall accompanied by a noise. 'He went down such a flump,' 'A hawk flumps or flops as a bird'; 'He fell down full flump.' Cf. *fall plump, thump, bump*, etc.

friddle, trifle, potter, waste time. 'He was friddlin' on at his work.' Cf. *fritter, trifle, fiddle, frivol*, etc.

glumpish, glum, gloomy, sullen. 'Mary is glumpish to-day.' Noted in *The Century Dictionary*. Cf. *glum, gloomy, lumpish, dumps*, etc.

scrawk, scratch, scrawl, mark; also squeak, shriek, scream. 'Just scrawk yer pen through this.' 'Wha'dgee scrawk fur?' Cf. *scratch, mark, scrawl; scream, squall, squawk, shriek*, etc.

screek, shriek, scream, creak, make a grating noise. 'She skreek'd oot like a cat yawlin',' 'It skreeks so it gets my teeth on edge.' Cf. *shriek, scream, squeak, creak*, etc.

screel, cry, shriek, squeal, scream. 'What wi' screalin' wimmin.' Perhaps built from *scream, shriek, shrill, squeal*, etc.

scrowge, squeeze, press, crowd, crush. 'Such pushing and scrooging, you never seen the like,' 'What be all you childern a scrowgin' on that ther vorm vor?' Note *squeeze, screw, crowd*, etc.

snaggle, giggle, snicker. "'It must be a very fine game to have such a large score," I snaggle.' *Letters of a Japanese Schoolboy*, xxxvii, by Wallace Irwin. Cf. *snicker, giggle, gag, haggie*, etc.

snuddle, nestle, cuddle. 'Snuddled together like birds in a nest.' Built from *snuggle, cuddle, huddle*, etc.

troddle, toddle, go. 'The young things trodlin'.' Note *trudge, trip, trot, toddle*.

That words of this type are the special product of modern times or contemporary conditions is by no means to be assumed. They are likely to be as old in language history as are fusion forms, or hybrids, or composites in general. The words in the list cited are aggressively dialectal, it is admitted. Like all indefinite blends they tend to be telling, forceful words, not neutral; also they are predominantly rather ugly or unbeautiful formations. In words of special folk or dialect coinage there seems in general to be little striving for the attractive or agreeable. There is marked tendency toward the jocular; but still more characteristic is the focussing of interest in the *expressive*.

It is probable enough that the words in the short illustrative list cited are not especially well selected from the many that suggest themselves. No doubt some among them may be in origin direct amalgams, or contaminations; others may not really be amalgams at all; they may have had, for example, a purely onomatopoetic origin, or they may be loan words; or they may be mere accidental or capricious perversions of forms already in existence. But some are surely obscure blendings, or reminiscent amalgams, of the type under discussion.

LOUISE POUND.

LINCOLN, NEBRASKA, U.S.A.