The story of e-[1]

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A discussion of the nature and productivity in Internet vocabulary of the prefix *e-* as in *e-mail*

Introduction

As chair of the Language Attitudes and Popular Linguistics section of the Popular Culture Association, I occasionally receive phone calls from people, mostly reporters, looking for information and/or expert opinions on some aspect of language in the real world – slang, for example. The most recent call of this sort was from a reporter interested in getting background on an Internet-related phenomenon she had noticed, the pervasive use of *e-* as a prefix on ordinary words to convert them to Internet-specific equivalents. I came up with some observations off the top of my head, considering the nature of slang and jargon in general and what I'd seen of *e-* (as an obvious clipped form of *electronic*) in particular, but after the call was over, my curiosity continued to be piqued, and so I conducted a follow-up literature search of my own.

As it turns out, while a number of computer-term dictionaries (e.g., Raymond, 1993; the *Microsoft Press Computer Dictionary*, 1994; and Spencer, 1997) and articles about Internet- and computer-related neologisms and jargon (e.g., Nilsen & Nilsen, 1995, and Nilsen, 1999) have appeared over the past several years in the popular press (especially in newspapers and business or news magazines), I have not been able to find a single one, popular or scholarly, on the prefix *e-* (including anything by the reporter who interviewed me). Li Lan (2000) does mention the frequent appearance of "e-words" (p. 28) in e-mail correspondence and gives several examples, but her brief comments are made in passing as part of a larger consideration of Standard English use in e-mail.

The project

Given this lack of e-coverage, I decided to pursue my own analysis of the prefix *e-*. What follows are some observations on the productivity of *e-*, the variety and nature of the vocabulary taking this prefix, the frequency and distribution of *e-* prefixed words in texts, the exploitation of words already beginning with *e* or other prefixes for punning or other creative effects, and, to a lesser extent, the appearance of other Internet-related one-letter prefixes (primarily *i-*, but others as well).

My database was built simply by noting tokens of e-words in any source which offered them. I started with material likely to contain Internet-related articles, my prime database being seven issues of *Time Digital* (now *On* magazine), but I also looked at several issues of *TIME* magazine (especially the Internet and business articles), and frequently happened upon examples in other publications, from my alumni magazines to power-company mailings and advertisements of all sorts. From these sources, I built a list of e-words, as well as i-words and a small set of words beginning with other one-letter prefixes, noting each word's source, the context in which it was used, and its meaning (if not already clear from its form and context). In this way, I accumulated over 200 e-words, 60 i-words, and 20 words using other

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401004035 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. Distribution of most common e-words in seven *Time Digital* issues

Issue	9/6/99	10/4/99	11/1/99	11/29/99	5/00	6/00	7/00
Total E- words (n)	59	90	201	120	264	152	145
Most common E-word (n, %)	e-mail 34 (58%)	e-mail 38 (42%)	e-commerce 69 (34%)	e-mail 48 (40%)	e-mail 132 (50%)	e-mail 29 (19%)	e-mail 84 (58%)
Second most common E-word (n, %)	E*Trade 7 (12%)	e-commerce 16 (18%)	e-mail 42 (21%)	e-cology 13 (11%)	eBay 46 (17%)	edeal 20 (13%)	eletter 11(8%)

one-letter prefixes (not counting morphologically related forms, like *e-bill* and *e-billings*, separately).

It is clear that *e-* is a prolifically productive morpheme. Contrary to what Sallquist (2000) claimed – that "the e-trend may be on its last legs" (p. A13) – English speakers have for years been affixing *e-* to any noun, verb, adjective and even interjection whose relevance to the Internet is desired to be efficiently indicated, and new examples are still cropping up in recent language sources I run across.

Nature of e-words and distribution

The vast majority of e-words are nouns (unsurprisingly, since the *e-* prefix is clipped from an adjective), from *e-author* to *e-zine*, with the most common noun being *e-mail*. But many are used as adjectives as well (just as many nouns are); one actually appears as an interjection (*e-Gads!*); and a few are used as verbs, although only one, *e-wash*, appears solely as that part of speech. (While IBM ads also offer the verbs *e unearth* and *e boogie*, the obviously creative nature of this series of ads offers an abnormal context of use for its e-words and phrases; witness other neologisms from these ads, such as *e chiaroscuro*, *e cloud nine*, *e fix-it*, *e outdoors*, and *e sole mio*.) The morpheme *e-* even occurs four times in my corpus as a noun or verb by itself: as a noun in the phrases "the attic of e" and "City of e," and as a verb in the phrases "e til you drop" and "to e or not to e" (in the Internet address www.to-e-or-not-to-e.time.com).

In examining my corpus of e-words, it becomes obvious that while the creation and exploitation of such words is frequent, very few of the words so coined have actually earned a permanent place in the English lexicon. There can be no doubt that *e-mail* is the single most commonly used example; it is ubiquitous and certain to remain so, and it is likely the oldest (appearing, for example, in my 1991 edition of the Random House *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, though not in my department's 1981 Merriam-Webster unabridged *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*). In fact, in a tally of e-words in seven recent issues of *Time Digital*, *e-mail* is the most frequent word used in six of them, occurring as 19% to 58% of the total e-words in each issue, as shown in Table I. Only in one issue (11/1/99) did another word appear more frequently: *e-commerce* (69 times vs. *e-mail*'s 42 times, still the second largest percentage). Furthermore, the second most common e-word in those six issues was still much rarer in each case than *e-mail* and varied across issues, as Table 1 also shows. Other frequent and potentially long-lived words include *e-book*, *e-business*, *e-commerce*, *e-shopping*, and *e-tailer*, but the popularity of such coinages as *e-ballot*, *e-grocer*, *e-zine*, and many others remains to be seen.

In fact, given that large numbers of e-words were created to give names to e-companies and their websites and products, the permanence of the words may well depend on that of their eponymous businesses and the goods or services they sell. In my corpus, for example, 57 out of 200 e-words (29%) were found only in company and/or website names, including *eBay*, *eBizjets*, *eHow*, *eParties*, *eSmarts*, *eToys*, and many others, while 19 e-words (10%) named specific products (e.g., *e-Bible*, *E-Cam*, *eMap*, *eTower*, and others).

It seems certain, then, that some of these e-names will die with their companies or products, without ever securing a permanent niche in our vocabulary. Nevertheless, other e-names, as well as generic e-words, are so common today (*eBay* and *eToys*, as well as *e-mail*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401004035 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and *e-commerce*) that it is hard to imagine them not surviving even the demise of their namesakes and making it into the dictionary, if only as genericized words whose meanings have broadened from their proper-noun origins (just as *kleenex* and *aspirin* already have). Time will tell.

Humorous uses of e-words

Several of my e-tokens are clearly produced purely for creative and/or humorous effects, and violate morphological restrictions of English in the process. One class of such productions exploits words which already start with the letter *e*. The larger subclass (ten words) simply separates an initial *e* standing alone as the first syllable and already pronounced [i] from the rest of its word by a hyphen (instead of adding an *e* to the existing word), thus treating the actual first letter and syllable of the word as if it *were* a separate morpheme. Thus, one sees *e-berts* (as part of a reference to online movie reviewers as "cyber-Siskels and e-berts"), *e-cology* (the field of analysing Internet dynamics), *e-conomy* (relating specifically to Internet business concerns), *e-gads!* (in a *Time* photo caption for Jeff Bezos); *e-lection* (referring to presidential-candidate websites), *e-limination* (as part of the article title "Learn E-business or Risk E-limination"), *e-merging* (part of a dissertation title about personal web sites: *E-merging Strategies of Identity: The Rhetorical Construction of Self in Personal Web Sites*), *e-normous* (in the phrase "e-normous assistance," referring to car-computer travel information), *e-qual* (in the phrase, "not all e-brokers are created e-qual"), *e-victed* (in a protest sign about rising rents in dotcom-heavy business districts) and *e-volution* (in the article title "The Next E-volution," on business bots). One more example also follows this pattern, although the first syllable is normally pronounced [ɛ]: *e-ducation* (in an article on Internet-based education). But not everyone takes advantage of such an initial *e:* witness *e-easy*, used in a Compaq ad.

More extreme manipulations of initial syllables also occur, perhaps as much for poetic as humorous effects. Eight neologisms actually change the initial syllable to *e* from totally different opening sequences: *e-llowance* (referring to digital cash cards) replaces an initial *a*; *e-frigerator* (a wired fridge) and *e-tail* replace an initial *re-*; *epinions* (in the company name epinions.com, a car-comparison website) replaces an initial *o*; *ePocrates* (an online drug database) replaces an initial *Hy*; *Ethentica* and *Ethenticator* (a fingerprint-reader maker for PCs and part of one model's name, respectively) replace *au-*; and both *e-centives* (a company providing online coupons and other offers) and *e-vite* (part of evite.com, an online invitation service) replace an initial *in-*.

And I have found three examples which actually separate an initial *e-* from following consonants in the same syllable, presumably for visual effect only, as the word would still have to be pronounced without a separate [i] at the beginning. The three words are *e-mptor* (in the article title "Caveat E-mptor," relating to online auction complaints); *E-nglish* (in the e-book title *The Gigawit Dictionary of the E-nglish Language*); and *e-vesdropping* (in the title of an article on FBI e-mail snooping).

Other computer/electronic-related one-letter prefixes

As mentioned before, while the *e-* morpheme is by far the most common one found attached to computer- and electronic-related words, the prefix *i-* (most likely clipped from *Internet*) also occurs a substantial number of times (60 in my corpus), though as a distant second to *e-*. A comparison of the two morphemes reveals considerable parallels between them in their productivity, patterning with different parts of speech, distribution in generic vs. proper-name uses, and exploitation for humorous or poetic effects.

First, *i-* is fairly productive, though much less so than *e-* (but more so than any other one-letter prefix, as will be discussed later). Second, *i-*, like e-, is used with many different words and even parts of speech, as in *i-lazy*, an adjective; *i-bank*, a noun; and *igive*, a verb. Third, *i-* occurs in even higher proportion as part of a company or product name than does *e-*: of 60 i-words, 33 are company names exclusively, while 20 are product or service names. This fact means, however, that very few i-words are created as generic or all-purpose labels or descriptors, a difference from how *e-* is frequently used.

And last, *i-* is also used playfully, in ways both similar to and different from *e-*. While my corpus offers no examples where *i-* replaces an initial syllable [ay], [i] or [I],[2] the morpheme can be found to replace another initial syllable in *i-*

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bates (*i-* replaces *re-*; compare *e-tailer* and *e-frigerator*) and to take over the first part of a syllable in *iCEBOX* (a wired TV model; compare *emptor*, *E-nglish*, and *e-vesdropping*). In addition, *i-* is used to represent three different words pronounced [ay] as part of other i-words, to punning effect: in the company or website names *iCrave*, *iFeel*, *igive*, *igo*, *iprint*, *iPublish*, *iSmell* and others, the *i-* appears to be standing in for the pronoun *I* before a word normally used as a verb; in *i-opener* (a dedicated Internet device), the morpheme is clearly punning on the word *eye*; and in the company name *iicaptain* (a marine outfitter), the *i-* stands in for *aye* (twice).

Ten other single-letter prefixes appear in 20 words in my corpus, though none more than four times, and their status as viable morphemes is questionable in all cases. For one thing, the rarity of such words in my corpus suggests that none of these other one-letter word beginnings is at all productive; they might be seen more accurately as attempts to make company names or products unique and memorable than as legitimate morphological creations, a view supported by the fact that all but four of my examples are company or product names, the exceptions being *m- commerce* (m = mobile), *p-book* (p = printed), *t-commerce* (t = television), and *X-appeal* (a pun on "sex appeal" used about Microsoft's X-box). Also, 13 of the 20 words fail to separate the prefix from the base with a hyphen, obscuring the function of the initial letter as a separate morphological unit, especially when a capital letter does not head the next morpheme (consider, for example, *cdeals* and *rdesk* vs. *mPower*, *uBid*, and *zBubbles*).

In fact, five of these words seem to have been coined specifically as plays on or shorthand references to other words, with no probable intention to establish a new morpheme. Thus, *mPower* (online retirement-planning software) evokes "empower"; *uBid*, *uPublish!* and *ureach* (all company names) depend on *u-*'s sounding like the pronoun you; and *XPress* (part of the name QuarkXPress, desktop publishing software) plays on "express." And in the case of *X-box*, Microsoft's new game machine is shaped like an X, so the prefix here is pure description. I suspect the other words in my corpus (*cdeals*, *cnet*, *G.lite*, *O-Link*, *Opass*, *O-Zone*, *rdesk*, *Xdrive*, *zBubbles*, and *zShops*) might exploit the first letters of words associated with the companies or products named, but I lack information about their significance.

My reaction to these non-*e-* one-letter word openers, then, is that *i-* has become fairly well established as a possible computer/electronic-related prefix to use as an alternate to *e-*, especially in proper names, but the other potential morphemes in my corpus seem to offer little promise of becoming even as entrenched as *i-*, much less *e-*. They offer *e*-entrepreneurs the opportunity to flaunt creative names for their companies and products while also exploiting the parallel-electronic-world associations triggered first by use of e-, but these other prefixes (in some cases, probably just initials) are unlikely to gain in popularity, either in addition to or at the expense of *e-*. Certainly, English has no prohibition against adding new morphemes to the language, especially derivational ones, as *e-* itself attests, but simplicity and economy are still likely to win out in the end: *e-* was here first (aside from the longer prefix *cyber-*, which still seems to be losing out to *e-*) and is the most firmly established.[3]

Conclusion

This survey of words using *e-* makes it quite clear that this prefix is here to stay. Its versatility as a derivational morpheme ensures that *e-* can and will continue to be used to turn any word, of any part of speech, into its electronic/computer/Internet-related equivalent, and more economically than its closest rivals, *cyber-* or *i-*. And if some people, like Downey (2000), have grown tired of e-age prefixes, suffixes, and jargon in general, their venting may provide amusing reading but will assuredly have as little success in redirecting the course of language change as most other prescriptive grumblings of the past.

Even should *e-* cease being productive tomorrow, a number of current words are so popular and so entrenched in the vocabulary of computers and the wired world that it is impossible to imagine them disappearing. Moreover, given the continued appearance of new e-words, seemingly every day, and especially the frequent use of *e-* spontaneously by individuals in private communication as well as by writers and media figures,[4] I would argue that this morpheme is in no immediate danger of losing its appeal and becoming unproductive. Its origin is still transparent, its use is easy to understand and to extend to new domains, and its potential for punning and language humor is

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far from being exhausted. To *e-* or not to *e-*, indeed – the answer is clearly the former. ■

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2001 Popular Culture Association Conference, Philadelphia, April 11–14.
2 One example, *i-rritating*, does occur in the title of Michael Downey's article (Downey, 2000), but I came across it after my analysis was completed.
3 One audience member at my Popular Culture Association conference presentation of this paper suggested that *e-* might function as one of Richard Weaver's "charismatic terms," words such as "progress" or "freedom" which "have a power which is not derived, but which is in some mysterious way given" (Weaver, 1953: 227); further, "the charismatic term is given its load of impulsion without reference, and it functions by convention" (p. 228). However, neither characterization seems to me to apply to *e-*, with its transparent origin and clear reference to things electronic- and Internet-related. I am rather more inclined to see *e-* as simply benefiting from the extreme ubiquity of *e-mail*, itself less a charismatic term than an indispensable and precise label for an extremely popular form of correspondence, and a word which is a magnetically attractive model for the creation of other computer- or Internet-related vocabulary.
4 For example, a friend not long ago referred to herself as an "e-slacker" for taking so long to reply to an e-mail of mine; Li Lan (2000) also cites several e-words she observed in e-mail (p. 28).

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SNIPPETS 2

To avoid or not avoid?

(From the letters section of *The Linguist* 40:4, 2001: 'American English: to avoid or not to avoid?', Christine Pocock FIL, TransNet Coordinator)

In my role as a coordinator of IoL's TransNet, I quite regularly have queries about what to do about being asked to translate into or out of 'American English'. This is becoming a frequent dilemma in view of the Internet and it is a highly risky business offering to translate into American English, if your native language is British English.

They are simply not the same and my advice, based on previous difficulties encountered in my own business, is not to take it on.

We have in the past offered to render a text in 'mid-Atlantic' English which can sometimes be an acceptable compromise, as long as agreed in advance with the client; it is not, however, without its pitfalls, as clients can assume that actually, you are really going to come up with 'proper' American English and what is that exactly?

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