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Why are we linguists and not linguisticians?

The term ‘linguist’ is, as is well-known, ambiguous. It can mean ‘one who is skilled in the use of languages’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*) or ‘a student of language’ (ibid). The former meaning is the one which is most often known by lay people, the second tends to be almost an in-group term used by students of language to describe themselves. This no doubt partly accounts for the type of conversation in which we have all taken part: ‘I’m a linguist.’ ‘Oh. How many languages do you speak, then?’ Given the exasperation with which such conversations are treated by students of linguistics, it is perhaps surprising that this terminological impasse has not been avoided by the use of some other term. An examination of why this has not happened provides an interesting study in word-formation and linguistic change in word-formation in its own right.

One possible solution, used by linguists who are students of language, is to call linguists who are skilled in the use of languages ‘polyglots’ — people who speak a lot of languages. The word is listed in many dictionaries, but is not widely used in the community. It is probably the case that lay people, not seeing the ambiguity, perceive no problem with the available term *linguist*, and thus see no need for *polyglot*. It is only students of linguistics who wish to draw a distinction; but not only are linguists as a profession loath to prescribe, it seems unlikely that such a minority group could achieve the imposition of a new term. After all, the Scots have had enormous difficulty in getting outsiders to distinguish between *Scots* and *Scotch*, and even a large group like women have not (yet) been entirely successful in removing terms like *master key* and *man-made*, despite the added authority of political correctness.

A rather more possible solution would thus seem to be to find a new word for people who do Linguistics. Some people have suggested ‘linguistician’. Unfortunately, this term is almost universally rejected by the people to whom the label is supposed to apply. They find it totally unsuitable, apparently because of the form of the word (despite the fact that some of them may be proud to call themselves ‘phoneticians’ or ‘syntacticians’). The reason for this rejection of the word *linguistician* shows something of the complexity of dealing with words.

First, consider the use of the term *linguist* to describe a student of language. *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites Jespersen (1922: 64) as saying

I think I am in accordance with a growing number of scholars in England and America if I..apply the word ‘linguist’ by itself to the scientific student of language (or of languages). Jespersen implies here that the term is relatively new in the early twentieth century, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* also cites earlier uses of *linguist* in this sense going back to the seventeenth century. Some of these are not clearly intended to have the ‘student of language’ meaning, but at least one seems to carry this meaning, especially once we consider more of the context in which it appears than the *Oxford English Dictionary* has space for.

As the sight and sound of words, impressed upon us on common occasions, do not all suggest the original of these words from simple letters, this being a light in which grammarians and linguists alone consider words, so the complex pleasures and pains may ... not be considered by [men] as mere combinations, unless they be peculiarly attentive and inquisitive in this respect (Hartley 1749: 320).

While not even such an example may be conclusive, there is evidence to suggest that *linguist* had the meaning of ‘student of language’ before the term *linguistics* was in use. *Linguistics* has its earliest attestation listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* from 1847, some fifteen years after the term *linguistique* is first attested in French: there are competing first dates given for *linguistique* by Martinet (1969: 202), Robert (1959) and *Trésor de la langue française*, but they are all within a few years of 1830. Parenthetically, it may be worth noting that the French dictionaries see *linguistique* as being based on a German model; if so, it must surely have been an attempt to translate German *Sprachwissenschaft*, since *Linguistik* in German would seem to be based on the French word.

Now let us turn to consider words like *linguistician*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists about 150 nouns which end in *-ician* or *-itian*, and which refer to people we might view as working in some technical or academic area: words like *cybernetician*, *hydrostatician* and *logician*. If we look at the number of these introduced at different periods in the history of English, it would appear that a general increase in such words is temporarily reversed in the eighteenth century (see Figure 1). However, if instead of looking at raw numbers we look at the raw numbers as a function of the number of neologisms listed by the *Oxford English Dictionary* for each century, this dip turns out to be a result of the number of eighteenth century words attested by the dictionary. (The number of neologisms in each period is taken from the sample of one sixth of the first edition of the dictionary reported in Biese (1941: 490). The number presented in the horizontally striped bars in Figure 1 is obtained by applying the function

$$\frac{n}{m} \square 100$$

where n is the number of *-ician* words first attested in a particular century, and m is the number of neologisms listed for that century by Biese — who does not give figures for before the fourteenth century or for the twentieth century.) If we also

bear in mind that the last new *-ician* word cited in the dictionary originates from 1981, so that the figures probably cover only four-fifths of the twentieth century, we seem simply to have a generally increasing trend towards using the suffix *-ician*. This makes it hard to understand why *linguistician* should not be a perfectly acceptable word. To see why that should be, we need to consider the individual uses of *-ician*.

* Figure 1 about here *

About half of the words listed in *The Oxford English Dictionary* refer to people working in just a few specialised fields (although the general definition still holds): there are words referring to people connected with mathematics, such as *arithmetician* and *mathematician* itself; there are words referring to people connected with religion, like *rubrician* and *liturgician*; there are words connected with people in the medical professions like *physician* and *obstetrician*; there are also a number of words which are either jokes, or are put-downs, or are dismissive, in some way, perhaps because they appear to exaggerate the importance of the people denoted: words like *picnician*, *diplomatician* and *beautician*. Finally there is a set of words which are formed by adding prefixes to earlier words rather than by adding *-ician* to anything. These are words like *geomagnetician*, *psychoacoustician*, and so on, where *geo-* is added to an existing *magnetician*, for example. Now the point is that these different sub-types of *-ician* words are not formed randomly through history, as we can see if we put the numbers of words in these various categories on a graph.

* Figure 2 about here *

There is a constant trickle of *mathematician*-type *-ician* words from the fourteenth century to the present day. The number of words for people connected with religion falls away in the seventeenth century, and then even more in the twentieth (after a slight rally). The number of medical *-ician* words increases in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (as one might expect). This can be seen in Figure 2.

The number of words formed by adding prefixes increases suddenly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: this becomes the most usual way of forming new *-ician* words in the twentieth century. But note also that there is an increase in the jokey or depreciative words in the nineteenth century, starting with *picnician* ('a member of the picnic club') in 1802. The sudden recent growth of this type can be seen in Figure 3.

* Figure 3 about here *

Linguistician was introduced in 1895, that is at a period when these new styles of *-ician* words were catching on, and the trivialising *-ician* formations were at their height. The word seems to have been (and indeed, to remain) controversial. Hall (1949: 59-60) comes out strongly in favour of its use (although he evidently

thinks it to have been coined far more recently than the *Oxford English Dictionary*!). In response, Haugen (1950:1) says

To ... *linguistician*, I not only cannot subscribe, but feel that any attempt on our part to use such a term and to persuade others to use it will only make us seem ridiculous. It is true that the term *linguist* is ambiguous, but so is the suffix *-ician*. It has not only the meaning of ‘a practitioner of a science’, but also that of ‘a member of an occupation which is seeking for higher status’. This meaning, exemplified by such words as *mortician* and *beautician*, implies pretentiousness rather than precision.

The word *semantician*, introduced in 1921, appears similarly never to have overcome *semanticist*, although *phonetician*, introduced in 1848, which might have seemed equally in danger, has persisted, perhaps because it was established before the depreciatory sense of the suffix became too strong.

The point I want to make here is that in asking why *linguistician* is not an approved term among linguists, there is no use in citing as suitable models earlier forms such as *logician*, *mathematician* or *physician* — forms which today seem unexceptionable, and have no depreciatory feeling attached to them. Speakers know more about words than just what models are available and what new words refer to: they also know how particular patterns are being used at the time of speaking, and they can react to current stylistic values as well as to established patterns. Speakers know that ways of making words can have different stylistic values at different times. The connotations of words in *-ician* (at least, of those words not clearly related to a few specific areas such as medicine) changed abruptly in the nineteenth century, and *linguistician* is still caught up in that linguistic change.

It might seem that there is a more parsimonious explanation of why *linguistician* has never really caught on: blocking (Aronoff 1976). According to the principle of blocking, a new word should not be coined if it is (a) derived from the same base as an existing word and (b) synonymous with that existing word. We have seen that *linguist* existed with an appropriate meaning before *linguistician* was coined, and since the two share a base, the prerequisites for blocking are met, and we might predict that *linguistician* would not be a successful coinage.

However, while there are many words where these predictions do hold up, there are also many where something else happens. Taking Volume IX of the *Oxford English Dictionary* at random, we can find examples such as

<i>lorication</i>	1706	outlives the attack of	<i>lorification</i>	1730
<i>lubricate</i>	1623	outlives the attack of	<i>lubricitate</i>	1706
<i>lupine</i> ‘resembling a wolf’	1660	outlives the attack of	<i>lupous</i>	1840
<i>Machiavellian</i>	1579	outlives the attack of	<i>Machiavellic</i>	1838
<i>maintenance</i>	1369	outlives the attack of	<i>maintainment</i>	1485

These are all according to the predictions of blocking. Other examples, however, do not fit the predictions:

<i>Luciferian</i>	1570	takes over from	<i>Luciferous</i>	1554
<i>Lucullan</i>	1857	takes over from	<i>Lucull{e/i}an</i>	1601
<i>luxuriance</i>	1728	takes over from	<i>luxuriancy</i>	1648
<i>macaronic</i>	1638	takes over from	<i>macaronical</i>	1585

Given that the two sets of words do not obviously share features which set them apart from each other, we cannot predict *a priori* whether *linguistician* might be expected to conform to the predictions of blocking or not. It seems that we are better off saying that *linguistician* is blocked because of the stylistic values that words in *-ician* had acquired at the period at which it was first formed.

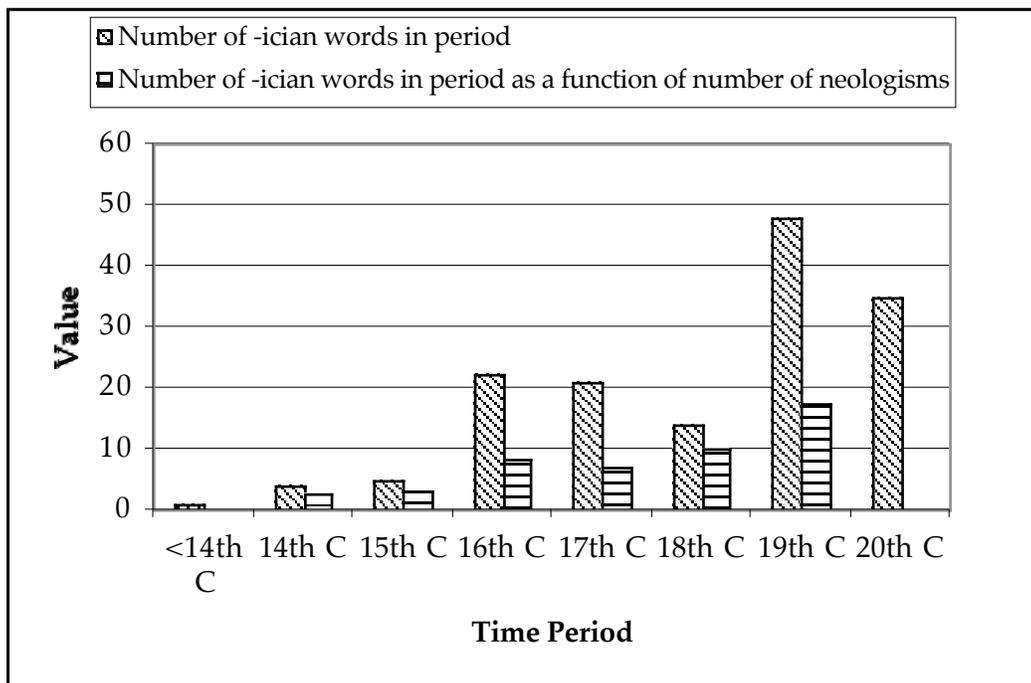
This brief example shows a number of things. First, it illustrates linguistic change in the pragmatic value of derivational affixes at a relatively recent date. Second, it shows that derivational affixes can have different values in different contexts, and that speakers can react to these values. Both of these conclusions, in terms of on-going change and in terms of text-type, are illustrated in other contexts by Görlach (1999). Third, it shows that the blocking principle can be aided by connotation. And fourth, it explains why many linguists think that the word *linguistician* is an insult.

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Figure 1: Words in *-ician* in the history of English



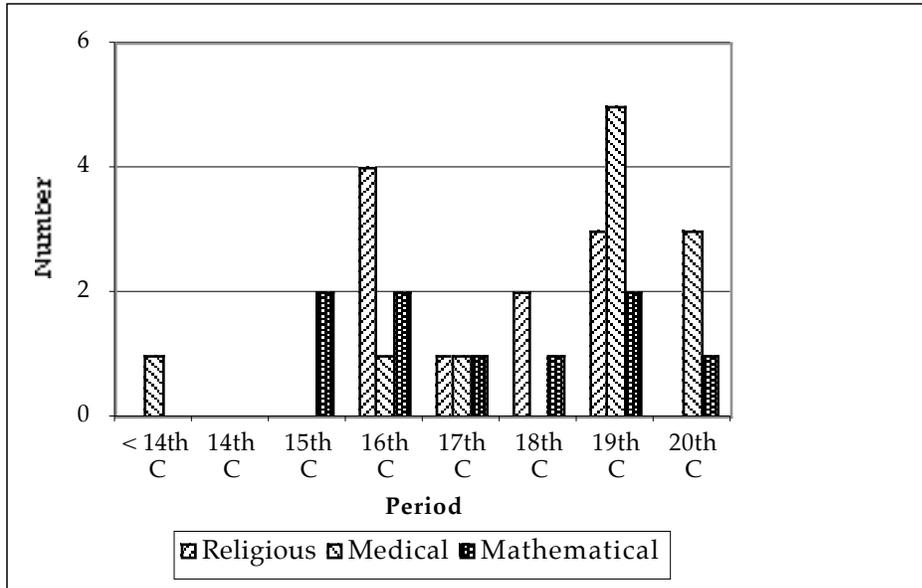


Figure 2: Words in *-ician* from three semantic fields

Figure 3: Words in *-ician* derived by prefixation and jocular *-ician* words

