

LINGUISTIC UNITS AND *-EN* VERBS IN ENGLISH^[*]

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Abstract. The paper begins with a consideration of theoretical and methodological issues relating to the identification of linguistic units and, in particular, to the morphology/syntax distinction using a functionalist approach. It further considers the class of *-en* verbs in English from the points of view of their history, grammar and semantics. There is a consideration of their register differences from verbs of similar meaning. It reviews their treatment in earlier grammars, considers some deficiencies of those treatments and suggests some alternative analyses. The paper suggests that the verbs are unusual for English because of their morphological structure and present some linguistically interesting properties, such as the sporadic nature of word formation in English and the contrast with synthetic or syntactic alternative expressions.

Theoretical Preamble

In order to make descriptive statements about any language, we must be clear about the units and relations we are operating with. The definition of units (*phoneme, sign, morpheme, syntactic complex, etc.*) and relations (*is dependent on, is in construction with, etc.*) is a theoretical matter. We cannot define linguistic units from experience of particular languages without circularity, because the identification of particular linguistic units (phonemes in Chinese or syntactic constructions in English) presupposes a method of classification and the definition of theoretical terms such as those above. In morphology, it is tempting to define units purely in terms of the linguistic form of expressions. Such an approach means, however, that homonyms cannot be distinguished, as Mulder and Hervey (1972, 26-7) point out. Thus, if we look only at the question of form, there is a single linguistic unit, *put ... out* and a single unit *relay* in English. However, that will be the same unit in

she put the cat out (placed it outside the house)

she put the fire out (extinguished it)

They are re-laying the carpet (laying it again)

They are relaying the information (transmitting it).

(The hyphen is irrelevant except in writing.)

If we wish to recognise two units with the form *put out* and two with the form *relay*, we must use a **form-meaning** criterion, and we will have units of a different sort, namely signs of the Saussurean type. If we do the latter, then it will be clear that *put out*¹ and *re-lay*¹ are grammatically complex (consisting of two separately meaningful units *put* and *out*

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and *re-* and *lay*, respectively) and *put out*² and *relay*² grammatically simple because the meaning of the whole is, in each case, not a function of the meanings of the assumed parts. The examples show that homonyms may be of different grammatical types (see also Harris, 1973, chapter 3) and that the grammatical relations we recognise in a structure depend on the units we identify in analysis, i.e. in the first case there is a grammatical relation between *put* and *out* and between *re-* and *lay*, and in the second there is none because *put out*² and *relay*² are “pseudo-composites”; they are not genuinely constructions at all, but only have the appearance of being complexes because of their form and, perhaps, a comparison with genuine homonymous complexes. It is commonly the case with phrasal verbs in English that there may be two or more homonymous units, each with a different grammatical status, e.g. *take out*, *take in*, *set down*, *put back*, etc. The same is true of the much less extensively studied *-en* verbs below.

Furthermore, we must ask whether the complex units we recognise are all of the same type. Traditionally, morphological complexes are distinguished from syntactic ones, but the demarcation is normally very unclear. I will take the following approach (see Rastall, 1998, 139 ff.). A sign is morphologically complex, i.e. not functionally ordered, if and only if

- a. it functions as a single unit
- b. it consists of two or more simple signs
- c. there is no possibility of commuting either component sign with a complex sign
- d. there is no possibility of permutation of the component signs and additionally
- e. neither sign separately contracts syntagmatic relations with other signs in a syntagm. (E.g. the morphological complex *dogs* in *I like dogs* is related as a whole to *likes* – no component in the complex *dogs* can be separately bracketed with *dog* or *-s*.)

Otherwise, signs are syntactically ordered. This approach is in line with a long tradition in functionalist linguistics and is explained in Martinet (1975 and 1989) and especially in Mulder and Hervey, 1972, 20-25; 1980, 122-49). “Units” or “linguistic entities”, as indicated above, may be of varying degrees of complexity and may occur at all levels of analysis. They can be defined as “elements or analytical properties of elements” (Mulder, 1980, p. 42). This means that “units” are those constructs which we set up through the processes of analysis to account for aspects of the complex process of speech communication. In functionalism, it is insisted that all units must have *separate* communicational relevance. This corresponds to the communication theorist’s principle that “information implies choice”. Without clarity over the position of a term such as “morphological complex” or “grammatically simple unit” and the corresponding methodology, it is impossible to know what an analysis is saying and what might be a refutation.

Using the principle of relevance, we can distinguish cases in which a unit has two or more separately relevant component units from those cases where this is only apparently so. *Put out*¹ is a syntactic complex using these criteria (because, among other things, *out* can be commuted with complex adverbials such as *in the garden*, *further away*, etc.)

She put the cat in the garden/further away

and *re-lay*¹ is a morphological complex (there is no possibility of commutation with complexes or permutation). It is “unordered”. (That is, there is no possibility of an ordering relation between the component units – unlike in syntax. One should not confuse “order” in

this sense with “sequence”: see Mulder and Hervey, 1980, p. 122 *ff.*) *Put out*¹ and *relay*¹ function as single units because, though clearly internally complex, they commute with simple verbs,

I feed/put out the cat at night.

They clean/re-lay the carpet every year.

However, *put out*² and *relay*² are not complex at all.

-EN Verbs

The English verbs in *-en* form an interesting class because they may be morphologically simple (in the sense adopted here), morphologically complex (meeting the criteria above), or there may be homonymy of morphologically simple and complex signs. Furthermore, there are relations of synonymy of verbs in *-en* with regular syntactic structures. Verbs in *-en* also show typical features of morphological combinations, such as the sporadic nature of their composition. They also show some interesting regularities of register.

In English, the formation of morphological complexes by prefixation or suffixation (word formation by derivation in traditional terms), while clearly not absent, does not constitute a particularly rich system compared with other languages such as Russian or Latin. The formation of morphological complexes can be seen as an intermediate case between a synthesis of meaning in a grammatically unanalysable sign and the analytic expression of meaning by *syntactically* analysable signs (see, for example, Potter, 1950, 10 *ff.*). In English, it can even be noted that some derivational affixes may cross the borderline into syntax (e.g. *up-and-down-ness*, *pea-soup-y*, *etc.* – see Rastall, 1993, 143 *ff.* and 1998, 35 *ff.*). English has, of course, inherited a significant number of signs which contain fossilised forms derived from historical prefixes (perhaps in other languages or earlier forms of English). Such ancient affixes as *be-*, *for-*, *a-*, *re-*, in *believe*, *behind*, *forget*, *forfend*, *again*, *away*, *return*, *reduce*, *etc.* (extensively listed by Nesfield, 1898, p. 378 *ff.* for example) have not been productive for a very long time and cannot be considered as separately meaningful units in the modern language. Such signs as those mentioned are, therefore, synchronically simple. They are “synthetic” in the sense given above. One might compare the syntactically analysable *go back* and *make less* with the grammatically unanalysable (in synchronic terms) *return* and *reduce*^{*1}. There are, of course, some productive affixes. *-ise/-ize* is one in *computerise*, *centralise*, *hybridise*, *etc.* As Quirk *et al.* (1985, 1557) say,

“Only a few verb-forming suffixes occur with any great frequency in English, and only *-ize* is highly productive.”^{*2}

^{*1} “Complexity” here involves the combination of at least two formally different and separately meaningful form-meaning units in a construction. Morphology in this sense must be distinguished from synchronic “allomorphy” (variation in form) and the synchronic vestiges of earlier morphological processes found in “fossils” or “pseudo-composites”, i.e. simple units, whose meaning is **not** a function of the *apparent* parts.

^{*2} This is not the place to discuss compounds, which are outside the scope of this paper, but I have taken the view elsewhere that compounds in English are either syntactic or pseudo-composites and therefore not “morphological” in the sense defined above (see Hervey and Mulder, 1980 and Rastall, 1994, 1998).

Verbs formed with the suffix *-en*, however, are especially interesting in a number of respects. It is unfortunate that modern grammars and reference works have little to say about them.

Verbs in *-en* (once known as verbs with a nasal ending – the reduced vowel represented by [ə] historically simply maintains the syllable) include, for example, *harden*, *soften*, *freshen*, *smarten*, *dampen*, *lighten*, *lengthen*, *hasten*, *gladden*, etc. They are of interest for a number of reasons. Firstly, although the *-en* suffix is clearly not productive and has not been so for a long time, it is still generally a separately meaningful sign in most cases (but not in *listen*, *happen*, *open*, for example). As Sweet (1891, 467) and Jespersen (1965, 350-58) point out, most of the modern verbs in *-en* were first recorded in the Middle English or Early Modern English periods and only a few new formations (which are mainly either non-standard or have not survived) are recorded from the 18th and 19th Centuries, e.g. *loaden*. Secondly, very few verbs in *-en* have fossilised in such a way as to be only apparently complex (additional examples are *glisten*, *listen*, *chasten* (in its usual sense of “punish”)). Thirdly, the existing signs show only sporadic formation with the suffix. That was also noted by Bradley (1904, 130-31). *-En* suffixation is a clear case of the unpredictable and rather inefficient nature of morphological complexity in English. All language systems contain numerous anomalies of detail (see Rastall, 2006) even though there are overall systemic regularities. Fourthly, *-en* verbs show some interesting grammatical and semantic properties by comparison with the purely synthetic or syntactically analytic means of expressing similar meanings. Finally, as Jespersen showed, the *-en* formation seems to have appeared *ex nihilo* as a meaningless alternative and to have become meaningful later through differentiation of function.

History

The view expressed by Sweet (1891, 467) that verbs in *-en* derive from a Scandinavian formative *-na*, and that “*-na* is a Scandinavian suffix forming weak transitive verbs, mostly inchoative, from verb roots and adjectives” is open to objections. As Sweet himself points out, most of the *-en* verbs were formed in the Middle English period, long after the effects of Scandinavian influence. Furthermore, *-en* verbs have always been also transitive and causative, as well as intransitive. It is more likely that the meaningless *-en* suffix inherited into Middle English in various combinations acquired significative functions and became differentiated as the suffix we recognise now. It was attached to adjectives and nouns to create new meaningful complexes *ex nihilo*, as Jespersen (below) pointed out. It should be noted, however, that the forms in *-en* from Old English and Scandinavian were available as material for new formations.

As noted by Jespersen (1933, 76), verbs can be formed from adjectives with the suffix *-en*. That is quite a large class. We can list, for example, – *blacken*, *whiten*, *redde*n, *darken*, *lighten*, *brighten*, *deafen*, *tighten*, *loosen*, *sweeten*, *slacken*, *soften*, *harden*, *weaken*, *broaden*, *roughen*, *shorten*, *widen*, *quicken*, *sharpen*, *flatten*, *toughen*, *stiffen*, *smarten*, *thicken*, *quicken*, *quieten*, *straighten*, *dampen*, *moisten*, *ripen*, *sadden*, *freshen*, *flatten*, *fatten*, *gladden*, *sicken*, *lighten*. It will be noted that all of the adjectives from which the verbs

are formed are of one syllable (noted by Kruisinga, 1935, 176). We do not find, **happyen*, **bitteren* (two syllable adjectives).

Nevertheless, many mono-syllabic adjectives still do not take the *-en* suffix to form verbs. We do not find **colden*, **youngen*, **olden*, **dryen*, **wetten*, **warmen*, **coolen*, **gooden* (? **gedan*), **palen*. Furthermore, although we find, *whiten*, *blacken* and *redde*, we do not find **brownen* and **greenen*. Similarly, there is *deafen*, but not **blinden* and *roughen* but not **smoothen*. The system seems never to have had more than a sporadic efficiency. The gaps are partially explained by Jespersen (1965, 350-58). He points out that, firstly, adjectives ending in nasal consonants, vowels or diphthongs or (historical) /r/ do not form combinations with *-en* (a possible exception is the rare 19th Cent. form *dimmen*, “to make dim”). Secondly, he shows that the verbs in *-en* were originally alternative forms (used especially with further endings) of monosyllabic, causative verbs formed from adjectives. Thus, *whiten* was an alternative to (to) *white*, *shorten* was an alternative to (to) *short*, *open* to *ope* etc. In Gray’s line “Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife”, we find the old causative (to) *mad* and not the modern *madden*. Shakespeare uses both *ope* and *open*. Where no simple causative verb existed, no alternative was formed. (The absence of **blinden* cannot be explained that way because of the existence of the causative short verb, (to) *blind*.) Generally, the *-en* form has survived and has subsequently become interpreted as a causative formative, although it was originally meaningless and seems to have spread from other meaningless alternative *-en* forms in nouns, adverbs, adjectives and participles (hence the idea that the meaningful, causative construction is *ex nihilo* even if existing forms were used). The function of *-en* in such cases may have been to give greater prominence to otherwise monosyllabic signs. *-En* verbs are thus a way of analysing an originally synthetically expressed meaning.

Historically, the now homophonous *-en* was similarly an alternative in *maid/maiden*, *oft/often*, etc. and readers will remember that Tom (the Piper’s son) *was beat* after the pig *was eat* (not *beaten*, *eaten*) in the nursery rhyme. Jane Austen sometimes used the past participles *broke*, *forgot*, *spoke* (in *Pride and Prejudice*, e.g. 1969, 66, 173, 201 etc.) rather than the “second” participle, *broken*, *forgotten*, *spoken*, which are now standard, although *broke*, *forgot* and *spoke* are still found as non-standard participles in (northern) British English dialects. (*Broke* has also become differentiated to mean “without any money, impecunious” as a basilectal expression.) The forms with and without *-en* appear to have been in free variance, although dialectal and sociolectal differentiation was setting in by Jane Austen’s time. The forms without *-en* are generally correlated with less formal situations and less respected characters in her novels (see Phillipps, 1970, and Page, 1972). While the *-en* participle must be distinguished from the *-en* verb-forming suffix, the process of differentiation of function is similar in both cases. The *-en* participle *is not separately relevant*, so participles containing it are only apparently complex (as explained above). The same is true of other sporadic occurrences of the form *-en* in *often*, *maiden*, *golden*, etc. Furthermore, the participial *-en* shares only the form of the *-en* verb forming suffix and not its meaning. It, therefore, does not have the same identity. The discussions in Sweet and Jespersen (quoted above) are thus rather misleading on this point (synchronically speaking), although it is likely that all of the *-en* forms are derived from a single historical source.

There are also two verbs formed from the comparative adjective – *lessen*, *worsen*. As Jespersen says, those are the only comparatives not ending in an original /r/. There are also

verbs formed from nouns where no simple verb existed – *strengthen, lengthen, heighten, hasten, hearten*, i.e. there were no *verbs (to) strong, long, high, haste, heart* (in the latter two cases, the signs which might have served as a basis do not have suitable corresponding adjectival forms). Those points are noted by Jespersen in the work quoted and by Kruisinga (1935, 176), but not by Quirk *et al.* who say (1985, 1557) only that, “-EN combines with adjectives as in *deafen, sadden, tauten, quicken, ripen, widen, harden*”. Those points are also missed by Bauer (1983, 223) who says only that, “a third suffix deriving verbs is *-en* as in *shorten, whiten, widen*. This suffix is only marginally productive, if at all”.

A few verbs have the prefix *em/en-* alone (*empower, ensure, enfeeble, endear*) or discontinuously with the *-en* suffix in the formation – *embolden, enliven, enlighten*, i.e. *em/en-...-en + adjective*. According to Jespersen, the prefix *em-/en-* is the same form as the suffix *-en* (although there may have been some influence from the Romance *en-* prefix in *encourage, engage, etc.* and those forms should be distinguished from the *en-* in verbs such as *endeavour, endanger* from (*mettre*) *en devoir, en danger*). Whatever their origin, in the above cases, then one can propose allomorphic variants, *en-*, *-en* and *en- ...-en* of the verb-forming *-en* we are discussing.

A few verbs have become fossils (“pseudo-composites”), i.e. originally complex signs which are now simple but which retain evidence of their one-time complexity – *chasten, hasten*, (not really “make chaste” or “make haste” now but “punish” and “hurry”), *liken*, (i.e. “compare”, not “make like”), *deaden* (i.e. “make dull/numb”/“anaesthetise”) and, perhaps, *gladden*. Sweet (1891, 467) pointed out that *awaken* and *fasten* are reinterpretations

“not formed direct from *wake* and *fast*, but the O.E. weak verbs *a:waecian, faestnian* are formed from the nouns *waecen* “watching”, *faesten* “fastness”, “fort”, which are of course derivatives of *waecan* “wake” and *faest* “fast”, “firm””,

a view with which Jespersen concurs.

It is noticeable that some of the verbs formed from adjectives form pairs of antonyms – *soften/harden (stiffen), tighten/loosen (slacken), weaken/toughen, darken/lighten (brighten), weaken/strengthen, shorten, lengthen*. But we do not find – *sweeten/*souren, lessen/*moren, thicken (fatten)/*thinnen, roughen/*smoothen, etc.* This is just another case of the sporadic nature of the formation in *-en*. Some, but not all, of the absences can be explained by Jespersen’s rules, as he himself points out.

Some *-en* verbs have had only a marginal existence or have disappeared altogether, e.g. *ridden, shapen, milden, brisken, dullen*, mentioned by Jespersen and found in the *OED*. One occasionally hears *neaten* nowadays in the sense of “to make neat or tidy”. However, most *-en* verbs contain morphological complexity in the above sense of complex signs whose meaning is a function of the meanings of the component signs.

Syntax

Nearly all verbs in *-en* can be used as main verbs in two syntactic contexts. Jespersen (1933, 358) mentions that they can be used transitively or intransitively and Quirk *et al.* say,

“as well as being causative “to make...”, many of these [verbs] can also be used intransitively, “to become...”: *the news saddened him – His face saddened.*”

To be more precise these verbs can appear as main verbs with an agentive (usually, but not always, animate or instrumental) subject and an obligatory direct object –

They tightened the bolts
He loosened his tie
She quickened her pace
They fattened their animals
We straightened our ties
The sight sickened her
The water softened the mixture, etc.

They can also be verbs in a “middle voice” with a non-agentive (generally, but not always inanimate) subject and no direct object. This intransitive usage is called “inchoative” by Sweet and Jespersen.

The tomatoes ripened
The wind freshened
The pace quickened
She reddened
He was sickening (for something)
He straightened
He frightens (easily)
They quietened (down), etc.

There are some exceptions, especially with fossilised *-en* verbs. One should note that *hasten* occurs without a direct object (intransitively) in *He hastened to the bank, She hastened to get ready*, but not as a “middle voice” verb – **The pace hastened* – and *hearten* also cannot be used in that way **The crowd heartened*.

Meaning

The *-en* verbs show the usual latitude of indeterminacy of meaning shown by all signs (see Rastall, 1997 and 2000, 237 *ff.*). Where verbs derived from adjectives occur with direct objects, they have the following patterns of meaning, where *x* is the direct object and *y* is the adjective –

– **render *x y***

e.g.
They roughened the surface (rendered the surface rough)
He flattened the can (rendered the can flat)
The story saddened me (rendered me sad)

– **render *x y in a greater degree***

e.g.
She darkened the picture (rendered the picture darker)
They weakened the currency (rendered the currency weaker)
They widened the road (rendered the road wider)

This also applies, of course, to verbs from comparatives –

They lessened their demands (rendered their demands less)

The boss worsened the conditions of work (rendered the conditions worse)

– **render x y to the necessary or maximum degree**

The sun ripened the tomatoes (rendered the tomatoes to the correct degree of ripeness)

He sweetened his tea (rendered his tea sufficiently sweet)

The explosion deafened him (rendered him completely deaf)

He tightened the bolt (rendered it as tight as necessary)

A similar latitude of indeterminacy applies to verbs derived from nouns, but, of course, it is the adjective related to the noun which we place in the position marked by y –

He strengthened his position (rendered the position stronger or as strong as necessary)

They lengthened the runway (rendered it longer or as long as necessary).

Where a non-agentive subject is used with a “middle voice” verb and no direct object occurs (intransitive cases), the range of meanings is as follows (for verbs derived from adjectives and nouns)

– **to become y to a higher degree**

The wind freshened (became fresher)

Her eyes widened (became wider)

His pace quickened (became quicker)

(for verbs derived from comparatives)

Conditions worsened (became worse)

– **to become y to the necessary or maximum degree**

The tomatoes ripened (became sufficiently ripe)

His resolve strengthened (became sufficiently strong)

The mixture thickened (became as thick as possible)

The sky blackened (became completely black)

Some verbs in *-en* can form combinations with prefixes (*dishearten*, *unfasten*, *re-moisten*) and with adverbs to form phrasal verbs, often with metaphorical meanings or sometimes pleonastically, *sharpen up*, *dampen down*, *widen out*, *roughen up*, *smarten up*, although it is generally verbs without *-en* which show a stronger tendency to combine with adverbials to form phrasal verbs, *rough out/up*, *black out/up*, *slack off/up*, etc. Certain *-en* verbs, of course, have metaphorical meanings of their own –

They blackened his character

She flattened his argument

He hardened his heart, etc.

The verb, *sicken*, has a latitude of meaning which includes both the predictable meaning – **render x sick** and **become sick** – and the fixed transferred meaning “nauseate”, “revolt”. It is (probably) gradually losing its morphological complexity and becoming predominantly a simple sign (fossil) with the latter meaning. It is an example of the normal process of fossilisation through the development of metaphorical meaning, but is interesting because it is at a stage where we might speak of homonymy between the morphologically complex and the grammatically simple verbs, *sicken*¹ and *sicken*².

The morphologically simple verbs from adjectives which were once synonyms of the verbs in *-en* have tended to disappear or to be differentiated in meaning from the verbs in *-en*. The old causative verbs, *damp*, *deep*, *sharp*, *bright*, for example, have disappeared and *(to) short*, *black*, *slack*, etc. have become differentiated from *shorten*, *blacken* and *slacken*. The simple verbs have sometimes developed specialised, non-transparent meanings (*to short*, *slack*), although in the case of *black/blacken*, it is *blacken* which has the metaphorical meaning.

Final Remarks

It should be quite clear that for every morphologically complex verb in English there is a syntactically complex synonymous expression (*sadden/make sad*, *worsen/make worse*, *strengthen/make stronger*, etc.). Occasionally, there is also a simple sign which synthetically expresses the meaning – *lessen / make less / reduce*, *weaken / make weaker / debilitate*, *lengthen / make longer / elongate*, *frighten / make frightened / terrify/scare*). The grammatically simple verbs are often fossilised signs borrowed from other (especially Romance) languages and are generally, and for that reason, recognised as of a higher, more literary, style. The syntactically analytic expressions belong correspondingly to a more familiar, spoken style. The *-en-* verbs seem to be stylistically intermediate and, occasionally, somewhat technical because of their common contexts of occurrence (e.g. *tighten/loosen*, *lengthen*, *strengthen*, etc.)

In view of the *general* tendency of English to dispense with morphological complexity (while noting the productivity of a limited number of prefixes and suffixes) and to express complex meanings by means of syntactically analysable signs or by incorporating simple signs with a synthetic meaning into a syntactically complex arrangement, the development and preservation of the *-en* verbs is particularly noteworthy. It may be due in part to the integration of the verbs with relatively common adjectives and nouns, and a correspondingly relatively high frequency (particularly in given contexts) and in part to the transparency of the construction. It is interesting that, in this case, English has retained three different grammatical means for similar ends including morphological complexity, which is rather contrary to the general direction of development of the language. One might speculate that the clearly defined semantic content of the genuine sign *-en* has contributed to the survival of the morphological complexes.

Finally, it is disappointing that information on this topic is so scanty in the most recent standard publications, whereas works of an earlier generation (which are probably less frequently consulted nowadays) are significantly more informative and more accurate.

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