

SAN ANTONIO TALK

I recently overheard for the umpteenth time someone refer to the *Mexicanness* of something in San Antonio. Actually, what I overheard was another complaint about our airport--how it "lacked any of the expected *Mexicanness* or *Spanishness* in its decor."

I probably would have dismissed the creativeness (coining of the non-dictionary words *Mexicanness* and *Spanishness*) of the speaker with only slight notice, except for the fact that I had just been reading the spring 1996 issue of *Language*, the academic journal published by the Linguistic Society of America. In that issue Harold Baayen (Netherlands) and Antoinette Renouf (England) discuss this very practice of creating new words in English--especially creating new words by affixing endings like *-ness* and *-ly* and *-ity* and beginnings like *in-* and *un-*.

The two linguists used an analysis of all words used in the prestigious London Times newspaper, over a three year period (1989 through 1992). Especially relevant to Harold and Antoinette's research were those words that appeared only once. (Linguists have a fancy name for such words, "hapax legomena.")

During these three years of data gathering, the London Times staff created 739 hapax legomena (words that appeared only once) ending in the suffix *-ness*. That is, about once every three days London Times readers would potentially encounter two new words that ended in the suffix *-ness*. Of particular interest to me, however, were the 450 "*-ness*" hapax legomena that did not and do not) exist in Merriam-Webster's III International Dictionary.

Heavens forbid! Words like *Mexicanness* and *Spanishness* appearing not only in *San Antonio Talk*, but also in the *London Times* (*olde-worlde-ness, joyness*)! What has the world come to?

Well, I certainly don't know what the world has come to; but I do know that I am not surprised at the data--neither in *San Antonio* nor in *London*. Consider three important facts: (1) newspaper writers glean most of their information from spontaneous, informal, verbal communication; (2) clearly the majority of communication in any given day (some scholars estimate as much as 80%) occurs in such spontaneous, informal, verbal communication, and (3) dictionary makers glean most of their words from the limited corpora of standard written English--making disparaging remarks about any words that offend their concept of "formal." And you can bet that words like *Mexicanness* and *Spanishness* and *olde-worlde-ness* do not feel very formal.

Harold and Antoinette's *London Times* data also contained 560 non-dictionary hapax legomena that ended with the suffix *-ly* (*lizardly*); 450 non-dictionary hapax legomena that began with the prefix *un-* (*unsay*); 143 that ended in the suffix *-ity* (*analidity*); and 15 that began with the prefix *-in* (*inequal*).

For you scholars of the English language, the importance of these findings lies in the origin of these affixes. The least productive affixes are of Latin origin: *-ity* and *-in*; the most productive affixes are of Germanic origin: *-ly*, *un-*, and, yes, *-ness*.

Germanic roots still nourish English, not Latin roots.

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