

The Meanings of Prefix “Over”

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Abstract

The rules of word formation undergo changes from day to day. Prefixes become productive or lose their productivity. The aim of this paper is to examine the various meanings of prefix over- in English. Although it has its specific distinct meaning which is 'excessive' or too much, it can also imply other meanings. The prefix over- is used to form many different words, so it is very productive in constantly forming new words. Some of the words with over- represent recent coinages and some are very old dating back to the 16th century.

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Introduction

According to Plag (2002: 123), prefixes in English can be classified semantically into four groups. In the first group are the prefixes that quantify over their base and have the following meanings:

'one' (*uni-*, *unilateral*), 'two' (*bi-/di-*, *bilateral*, *ditransitive*), 'many' (*multi-/poly-*, *multi-purpose*, *polyclinic*), 'half' (*semi-*, *semi-detached*), 'all' (*omni-*, *omnipotent*), 'small' (*micro-*, *microwave*), 'large' (*macro-*, *macroeconomics*), 'to excess' (*hyper-/over-*, *hyperactive*, *overestimate*), 'not sufficiently' (*undernourish*).

In the second group are numerous locative prefixes such as:

'circum'around' (*circumscribe*), counter'against' (*counterbalance*), endo'internal' (*endocentric*), epi, 'on, over' (*epiglottis*), inter'between' (*intergalactic*), intra'inside' (*intravenous*), para-'along with' (*paramedic*), retro'back' (*retrospection*), trans-'across' (*transcontinental*).

In the third group there are temporal prefixes expressing notions like 'before' (*ante-*, *pre* and *fore-*, as in *antechamber*, *premedical*, *forefather*), 'after' (*post-*, *poststructuralism*), or 'new' (*neo-*, *neoclassical*).

A fourth group consists of prefixes expressing negation (*a(n)-*, *de-*, *dis-*, *in-*, *non-*, *un-*).

Numerous prefixes do not fit into any of the aforementioned groups, however, and express diverse notions, such as 'wrong, evil' (*mal-*, *malfunction*), 'badly, wrongly' (*mis-*, *misinterpret*), 'false, deceptive' (*pseudo-*, *pseudo-intellectuals*), 'together, jointly' (*co-*, *coeducation*), 'in place of' (*vice-*, *vice-captain*) etc.

The large majority of prefixes do not change the syntactic category of their base words. Moreover, they can be attached to more than one kind of syntactic category (verb, adjective, or noun) and do not influence the stress placement of their bases.

On Prefix "*Over*"

There are three master patterns of word formation in English: affixation, conversion and compounding. In the process of affixation, prefixes and suffixes are added to the bases to form a new word. They may change syntactic category of the base form. Conversion allows transformation of one category into another without changing the base form while compounding allows adding one word to another to form a new word. Even though the word formation relies on certain rules, the rules themselves may be subject to change. Some affixes may become more productive, and some may lose their productivity. For example, old English affix *-th* is no longer used in formation of new words, but it is kept in nouns such as *warmth*, *width*, etc.

Apart from Latin and Greek prefixes, English uses German prefixes to create new words. The most productive German prefixes are *in-*, *out-*, *up-*, *down-*, *under-*, and *over-*. One of the characteristics of these prefixes in standard English is their mutual exclusiveness. But it would be wrong to say they are always mutually exclusive. The exception to the rule is found in spoken English. For example, if we imagine a person who is supposed to be overdressed but does not reach that degree of overdress, we might describe that person as *underoverdressed* (Lehrer 144). According to the same author, if one wants to emphasise the meaning of these German prefixes, they can double the prefix and make a word like *overoverachiever*.

Even though the original meaning of German prefixes is local, they can have other meanings too. Our intention here is to show all possible meanings of prefix *over-*.

Prefix *over-* appears in old English. Back then it was used in a combination with verbs as in *oferclimban*, with nouns *oferslop*, with adjectives *oferceald*. At the time, it appeared in the form of *ofer-*, but also in the form of *ouer* as in *ouerbide* (survive), commonly in the verb formation.

The majority of old English forms disappeared in the Middle Ages, and the forms with prefix *over-* we use today appeared after 1550 (Brenda 2014: 70). Yet, in that period there were still words formed with prefix *ouer-*: *ouerfilm*, *ouerfine*, *overfloate*.

Prefix *over-* has always been used for formation of new verbs in English, the verbs Biber (Biber et al 2007: 403) claims are rare. Consulting *The Oxford Dictionary* he gives the examples of verbs derivationally formed by prefix *over-*, and divides them into:

the ones that appeared before 1650: *overeat*, *overfeed*, *overpay*, *overshoot*, *overstay*, *overstrain*, *overtax*, *overweigh*, the ones that appeared after 1920: *overextend*, *overgraze*, *overprotect*, *overprovide*.

Certain words with prefix *over-* were introduced in English by eminent English theologians and writers. For example, J.Wycliffe(1320-1384), famous British theologian and reformer, translating the Bible, brought into English the following words: *overabound*, *overcarry*, *overcover*, *overgive*.

J.Milton (1608-1674), one of the most important English writers used the following *over-* words in English: *overarch*, *overripe*, *overstudy*. He made the verb *overbody* (to give too much body to someone) from the noun *overbody*, and the adjective *overawful* (too full of awe toward someone) from the verb *overawe*.

W. Shakespeare (1564-1616) enriched the English language adding the following *over-* words to it: *overblow*, *overcool*, *overcount*, *overcredulous*, *overeye*, *overglance*, *overhang*, *overhold*, *overpost*, *overred*, *oversize*, *oversnow*. Like Milton, Shakespeare first used the word *overearnest* (although the word was first introduced by Sidney in *Arcadia* in the form of adverb), the word *overcharged* (from verb *overcharge*) and many other.

Quirk (1985:1542) classifies prefix *over-* under prefixes of degree and size claiming that his primary meaning is 'excessive'. When it means 'too much', *over-* freely combines with verbs and adjectives as in: *overeat*, *oversimplify*, *overconfident*, *overdressed*. In his second-common meaning 'from above' it is usually added to verbs: *overflow*, *overshadow*, etc.

In a great number of examples analysed for the purpose of this study prefix *over-* meant 'too much' and it was combined with verbs (1) and (2), nouns (3) and (4), adjectives (5), adverbs (6) and numbers (7):

1. Like olive oil, though, rapeseed oil needs to be used with care as its unique flavour can **overpower** a dish or dressing.
2. The FDA's decision came on the heels of the discovery that American women were routinely **overdosing** on Ambien.
3. Pennycook is trying to turnaround the Co-op which lost £2.5bn in 2013 after the problems in the bank and an **overexpansion** of its supermarket arm.

“Reluctant governments should realise that **overemphasising** the ‘pull effect’ is not only factually incorrect but also morally indefensible,” said the Centre for European Reform thinktank on Thursday.

4. 5. Without this, patients will continue to turn up at A&E in desperation, and will place more pressure on an already **overstretched** service.

6. Kickstarter-funded adventure Broken Age told two stories in old-school “point and click” style: one about a boy stuck on a spaceship with an **overbearingly** maternal AI, the other featuring a girl about to take part in a ritual called the Maiden’s Feast in which she gets fed to a monster.

7. More top-slicing is likely and there is the possibility that Whittingdale will revisit the idea of the BBC paying £500 cost of free TV licences for the **over-75s**.

8. Although the commonest meaning of prefix *over-* is ‘*excessive*’, *there are some other meanings that can be conveyed with this prefix such as local, temporal, general, meanings of failure, meanings of limit, meanings of power and metaphorical meanings:*

With Luis Suárez out with a calf strain, Pedro then tried an **overhead** kick but missed the ball and Dani Alves drew a save from Jan Oblak from 30 yards.

9. Soak the beans **overnight** and cook per instructions on packet or click here for the River Cafe recipe. In a large thick-bottomed pan, heat 2 teaspoons of olive oil.

10. 11. While its revenue has grown consistently, peaking at \$75bn in 2013, its **overall** profit has remained flat due to heavy reinvestment of income from mature services into growing areas.

12. Rules that were made to defend the rights of the less wealthy are being **overlooked**.

It has transformative properties too: even on an **overcast** day, this gilded beacon casts a warm aura over the entire site.

13. 14. During one very speedy visit to a factory where we were asked to wear blue **overalls**, one minister thought it funny to say: “It would be better if you weren’t wearing anything underneath.”

My clothes are tatty. My face is too spotty and my laugh too loud. I **overhear** friends asking why I put up with it.

15. Calling for a complete **overhaul** of how the project is managed, the report stated: “Proper planning must be in place and managed, which is not the case presently.”

16. 17. His comments had stated that, instead of feeling sorry for themselves and dwelling on the segregation and racism they faced in the past, African Americans should work harder to **overcome** their troubled history.

The pivotal year, when hip-hop went **overground**, was perhaps 1988, when Yo! MTV Raps aired and beamed it across middle America. Nelson George (old school: “before 1985”), a hip-hop commentator since the genre’s infancy, remembers first hearing the term “in the 1990s when the west-coast scene was happening and there was a sense of eras passing”.

18. Tory sources say the significance lies in the **overlapping** remits of Gove’s new department and that of Theresa May’s home office.

19. 20. Industry experts estimate that around 62% of young adult fiction is bought for **over-18s**.

21. Later in the same month he and his wife, who used to sing his songs delightfully, gave some piano and song recitals in London; while in August he conducted the performance of his **overture** “In Autumn” at the Birmingham Festival.

22. Techno-optimist Kevin Kelly of Wired celebrates the coming of our robot **overlords**, arguing that they will free us to do more fulfilling and higher-value jobs in the future.

The meaning of *over-* from the phrase *overhead kick* (8) is local and means the kick from above someone's head; *over-* in *overnight* (9) has temporal meaning and means during the night, but it can also denote something that happens suddenly; *over-* in *overall profit* (10) means total; *over-* in *overlook* (11) means to miss but in can also mean to have a view of something usually from above; *over-* in *overcast* (12) means dark with clouds; *over-* in *overalls* (13) denotes a piece of clothing worn over other clothes to protect them; *over-* in *overhear* (14) to hear what other people are saying unintentionally, *over-* in *overhaul* (15) means to change to improve; *over-* in *overcome* (16) means to control something that prevents you from achieving something; *go overground* (17) has a metaphorical meaning and means become popular, *over-* in *overlapping* (18) means selective inclusion; *over-* is combined with a number (19) to form a noun which is always in plural and refer to people who are older than the number mentioned; *over-* in *overture* (20) denotes the introduction into a large piece of music; *over-* in *overlord* (21) is combined with a noun to denote someone who has power. Usually *over-* of this type is combined with nouns and verbs to form new verbs. Verbs formed in this way express the idea that someone has power over someone else as in : *overcome*, *overpower*, *override*, *overrule*, *overrun*, *overthrow*, *oversee*, *overturn*, *overwhelm*. Nouns with this power impact are combined with king, lord, ruler: *overking*, *overlord*, *overclass*, *overruler*.

Some words with prefix *over-* have a meaning ‘to go beyond’: *overtake*, *overtime*, *overshoot* while some mean to fail: *overbalance*, *overlook*, *oversight*.

The study we conducted also comprises words with prefix *over-* pertaining to

English for specific purposes¹. The great majority of *over-*words in the field of business English means ‘excessive’ or ‘too much’ as in: *overcapacity*, *overleveraged*,

overproduction, overspent, overload but the prefix *over-* in some words have other meanings too, for example, word *overheads* used in business English refers to indirect costs (not related to production but to administration).

Words with prefix *over-* combine with nouns and adjectives in medicine. Words formed in this way indicate that the quality exists in immense amounts: *overactive, overdiagnosis, overdose, overexertion, overhydration, overnutrition, oversensitive, overstimulation, overweight*. Here again, some words with prefix *over-* have a meaning that is not that of excess like the word *overbite* which describes a condition in which someone's upper teeth are too far in front of their lower teeth, or the word *over-the-counter* which is usually combined with drugs or remedies (drugs that can be obtained without a prescription).

In the language of law, certain words with prefix *over-* mean to change: *override, overrule, overturn*.

In the language of sport, words with prefix *over-* may have local meaning (*overarm, overhead*), some can have the meaning 'too much' (*over-swing and over-club*) or the meaning do pass or to do better than, after catching up with someone (*overhaul*). The word typical of newspaper reporting is *over-by-over*, which is also found in our corpus.

Prefix *over-* combines more willingly with certain semantic items which are classified in the following table:

Garment Power Feelings Food Cover IT Colour Biology

*overalls overclass oversad overdrink overlay overlocking overgreen overstorey
overblouse overking overconcern overeat overpaint overscan overred overplant
overcoat overlord overdear overcook overglaze overtyping overbright oversee
overshoe oversensitive overdo overdyer overcolour overcrop
overskirt overeager over-egg overprint overgrass
overdress overfussy overboil oversite overharvest
overgarment oversup overwrap overcultivation
overclad overgild
overknee overveil*

Conclusion

Although linguists (Quirk 1985, Plag 2002) argue that the main meaning of prefix *over-* is 'excess', there are other meanings conveyed with this prefix: temporal, local, metaphorical etc. *Over-* can be freely added to different syntactic categories which makes it a very productive prefix. Almost all possible meanings of the prefix *over-* are

illustrated in the previous headings. Yet, there are some other meanings that may be conveyed with this prefix but they are not exemplified here.

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1. The analysis is based on the texts taken from English vocabulary in use