

MEANING AND USAGE OF ADJECTIVES ENDING IN *-ABLE/-IBLE*

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A. Introduction

The study on *-able* and adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* (Munandar, 1999:74-82) was done based on historical analysis. The study revealed the role of etymology of words in the divergence of the suffix *-ible* and *-able*. It discusses that in the course of its development, English got influences from Latin, French, Scandinavian, and other languages. The most outstanding influences, however, are those of Latin and French. From Latin and French, English had adopted many words and other elements to fulfil the need for adequate expressions. These borrowings are preserved to their strong influence (high productivity) up to the present use.

The origin of words is, thus, worth knowing not only of its possible explanation for the rule of deriving adjectives with the suffix *-able/-ible*, but also of its relationship to determine the meaning of adjectives formed from words which are not of current use. This is in line with Marckwardt (1960:177) who assumed that the etymology of a word may serve as a guide to its proper use and meaning, although current usage is the only scientifically valid criterion to define the meaning.

The presentation of meaning and usage in this article will demonstrate how that assumption works. Some adjectives are assigned with meanings in present usage different from those of the etymology of basewords. While some others whose basewords are not found in current use are

recognized after the origin of the basewords are revealed. The tracking of origin is done by looking up two dictionaries: The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* and The *Old English Dictionary*. The findings are cross-checked with the current meaning and usage in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*.

B. Meaning of Adjectives Ending in *-Able/-ible*

This part focuses on searching for the possible meanings of derivative adjectives ending in *-able/-ible*, the shade of meaning in them and grouping the adjectives according to these classifications. The presentation begins with general meaning followed by passive and active senses of meaning to finally be concluded by possible meanings of adjectives in *-able/-ible*. It is supplemented with the discussion of potential mistakes in understanding the meaning of the adjective.

B. 1 General Meaning

The fact that adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* are derived from two different classes of baseword results in two general classifications. The first classification is adjectives which are derived from verb, and the second classification is adjectives from noun. According to Cobuild (1991:1), adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* derived from verb usually describe someone or something that is affected by the action or process

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described by the verb. For example, if someone has "admirable" qualities, he has qualities that other people admire, and if something is "avoidable", it can be avoided. Other examples of adjectives in this class are:

comparable 'that can be compared',
desirable 'causing desire, worth having',
dispensable 'that can be done without; not necessary',
imaginable 'that can be imagined', and
profitable 'bringing profit; beneficial'.

On the other hand, derivative adjectives from nouns describe something or someone as having qualities or characteristics referred to by the original noun. For example, if something is *comfortable*, it gives comfort; if particular style of clothing is *fashionable*, it is in fashion (Cobuild, 1991:2). Some adjectives belonging to this group are:

honorable 'possesses or showing the principal of honor',
knowledgeable 'well-informed, having such knowledge',
pleasurable 'giving pleasure', and
valuable 'of great value, worth of use'.

Some exceptions are taken, however, by some adjectives from *action*, *size*, *companion*, and *person*. These adjectives do not conform to the above meaning because they undergo what is called meaning shift. A meaning shift may happen because of the surrounding context in which a word is found, or because of long historical processes.

B.2 Passive and Active Sense of Meaning

Adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* have two senses of meaning, those are passive and active senses of meaning.

B.2.1 Active Sense

The frequent use of adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* now is in passive sense of meaning as it is mentioned by Onion (1966:3-

4), but some adjectives still preserve their active sense, as always formerly possible. The active meaning is seen in *agreeable*, *comfortable*, *companionable*, *durable*. The analysis result shows that those which are derived from noun and intransitive verb usually have active sense of meaning, expressed in one of the following phrases: 'likely to have the process or action described by the baseword', 'having something/showing quality described by the baseword', 'liable to have the process or action described by the baseword', and 'can /able to have the process or action described by the baseword'.

Adjectives meaning 'likely to have the process or action described by the baseword' are *changeable* 'likely to alter', *enviable* 'likely to excite envy', *mutable* 'likely to change'. Adjective meaning 'having/showing quality described by the baseword' are *capable* 'having capacity', *honorable* 'having or showing the principle of honor', *reasonable* 'having ordinary common sense', *knowledgeable* 'having much knowledge'. Adjectives meaning 'giving quality described by the baseword' are *enjoyable* 'giving joy, pleasant', *favorable* 'giving approval, helpful', *discreditable* 'giving discredit'. Adjectives meaning 'can/able to have the process or action described by the baseword' are *serviceable* 'able to give good service', *rentable* 'able to yield a rent', *compatible* 'able to exist'.

As seen from the data, there are some adjectives which can not easily be grouped under one of those meanings. This problem also happens in the discussion of the spelling rule of *-able/-ible* (Munandar, 1999:76). Although such adjectives are comparatively few, it is worth knowing them. Even, this highlights the importance of understanding the etymology of adjectives to achieve better understanding of meaning shift. Through its very long historical process, a word has often changed, especially in their meaning. Only by referring back to their original meaning can we understand how or why these adjectives acquire their present

meaning, which often times is far different from its origin. Among others in the group of these adjectives are:

companionable 'friendly',
peaceable 'not quarrelsome, free from fighting',
personable 'handsome, pleasing in manner',
perishable 'quickly or easily going bad',
and
considerable 'great, much, important'.

Therefore, it is wise to always remember that derivative adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* have their own history: some adjectives are borrowed directly from Latin/French with either their meaning preserved, or shifted.

B.2.2 Passive Sense

The passive sense of the adjectives is expressed by one of the following phrases: 'that can/be able to be affected by the process or action described by the baseword', 'suitable/fit for something', 'worthy of/deserving something described by the baseword'.

Adjectives meaning 'that can /able to be affected by the process or action described by the baseword are *accessible* 'able to be used, reached', *adjustable* 'that can be adjusted', *believable* 'that can be believed', *certifiable* 'that can be certified', and *convertible* 'that can be converted'. Adjectives meaning 'suitable/fit for something' are *arable* 'suitable for ploughing', *drinkable* 'fit for drinking', *eatable* 'fit to be eaten', *liveable* 'fit to live in', *potable* 'fit to drink', and *portable* 'designed to be easily carried or moved'. Adjectives meaning 'liable to noun/adjective' are *fineable* 'liable to a fine', *indictable* 'liable to be indicted', *vulnerable* 'liable to damage', and *fallible* 'liable to error'. Adjectives meaning 'worthy of/deserving something described by the baseword' are *acceptable* 'worth accepting', *contemptible* 'deserving contempt', *esteemable* 'worthy of esteem', *lovable* 'worthy of love, and *remarkable* 'deserving to be remembered'.

Similar to the first group, adjectives with passive sense of meaning also leave several others which are difficult to be included into one of the above meaning classifications. There are *impressible* 'easily seen or noticed', *friable* 'easily crumbled', *excitable* 'easily excited', *breakable* 'easily broken', and *plausible* 'seeming to be right or reasonable'.

Context usually helps to build the sense of meaning for these adjectives. Therefore, the use of these adjectives in context will show which sense prevails over the other. Three sentences which contain adjectives in *-able/-ible* are presented in the following to offer example how the sense of meaning become more identifiable.

- a) *Death caused by reckless driving are avoidable* (Cobuild, 1991:1).
- b) *Acrylic blankets and shawls are both warm and washable* (Cobuild, 1991:2)
- c) *Her progress was slow in spite of her admirable determination* (Cobuild, 1991:2)

Avoidable in a) and *washable* in b) suggest passive sense. They will easily be understood as 'that can be avoided' and 'that can be washed'. Whereas *admirable* in c) is rather ambiguous.

In cases where the meaning is ambiguous, a careful analysis is necessary to avoid misunderstanding. *Admirable determination* in c) suggests an active sense of meaning 'determination which is admiring', not as 'determination which can be admired'. Sentence c) implies that *she* made a brilliant determination to do something. A brilliant determination is normally admiring, not only 'can be admired'.

To determine the most appropriate meaning from the above possible meanings, three steps of analysis should be taken. First, analyzing the class of the baseword to decide whether it is a noun or a verb. Derivative adjectives from a verb describe someone or something that is affected by the action or process described by the verb. Whereas

ones from a noun describe someone or something as having the qualities or characteristics described by the baseword. Second, analyzing the passive and active sense of meaning to get more specific meaning. Third, deciding the suitable one from possible meanings.

B.3 Misunderstanding of Meaning

Misunderstanding of the meaning of adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* often happens, and it may owe to one of the following three factors: 1) mistake in identifying the baseword, or 2) meaning shift from baseword in the derivative meaning, or 3) false concept of synonyms.

Mistake in identifying the baseword is very likely due to the fact that there are words having high similarity. For example, *credible* is wrongly associated with *creditable*. *Credible* is from Latin *credibilis* from infinitive *credere* 'to believe'. Therefore, the meaning of *credible* is 'capable of being believed, trustworthy'. Meanwhile, *creditable* is from *credit*, thus, 'bringing credit, honor or esteem'. Another example is *equable* and *equitable*. *Equable* is from Latin *equabilis* from infinitive *aequare* 'make level or equal', having the meaning 'free from variations, uniform'. *Equitable* is from *equit*, and the meaning is 'just and right, fair, reasonable'. It is used to describe decision, for example. *Equable* may be used in describing temperament or climate which are not easily disturbed: *equable temperament* or *equable climate*.

The reason why meaning shift may lead to mistake in understanding of meaning can be referred to Potter. On meaning shift, Potter (in Anderson, 1962: 116-117) states that the most obvious semantic category is that involving specialization or narrowing. When a speech-form is applied to a group of object or ideas which resemble one another in some respect, it may naturally become restricted to just one object or idea, and if this particular restriction gains currency in a speech community, a specialized meaning prevails. He gives an example of the word *wed* meaning 'a pledge of any kind'. In conjunction with the

suffix *-lock* forming nouns of action, it has come to be restricted to 'the marriage vow or obligation'.

Similarly, meaning shift in derivatives adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* is also observed and analyzed in the following. From the analysis it is evident that the meaning of some baseword is different from the derivative meaning. For examples, *action* 'process of doing things; movement' becomes *actionable* 'giving just cause for legal action' which is usually used only in legal term; *agree* 'consent, say yes' becomes *agreeable* 'pleasing, giving pleasure'; *admit* 'allow (somebody or something) to enter, let in' becomes *admissible* 'that can be allowed as judicial proof' also used only in legal term; *companion* 'person who goes with' becomes *companionable* 'friendly'; *person* 'an individual human being' becomes *personable* 'handsome, pleasing manner'.

Finally, false concept of synonymous words leads to misunderstanding when one thinks two words are exactly of the same meaning and can replace one another. English is rich in synonyms. There are many words and phrases which mean very nearly the same. However, Wren (1952:35) argues that on closer examination there are no words in the same language with congruent meaning. There is always some slight shade of differences in mood, sense, or suggestiveness between one word or phrase and another.

The pairs of *eatable-edible*, *habitable-inhabitable*, *readable-legible*, *amiable-amicable* will be the evidences. Although both *edible* and *eatable* have meaning 'fit to be eaten', there is a shade of meaning. *Edible* 'fit to be eaten, not poisonous' refers to anything which may normally be eaten, for example, an edible plant. *Eatable* 'fit to be eaten, good to eat' is used for something which is agreeable to the taste', as in these sentences:

- a) *The burnt porridge was barely eatable* (Baillie, 1970:108), or
- b) *The prison food was scarcely eatable* (Hornby, 1986:275).

Habitable and *inhabitable* both mean 'able to be lived in, but habitable is usually applied to buildings, houses, flats, etc. For example, *Much work was necessary to make the flats habitable*. On the other hand, *inhabitable* generally refers to much larger area, for example, *Desert regions are not usually inhabitable*. *Legible* and *readable* both may be used to mean 'capable of being read'. *Legible* means 'clear enough to be read', but *readable* normally means 'interesting enough to be read' (Baillie, 1970:250). The last pair, *amiable* and *amicable* both are very similar in meaning. *Amiable* is used only when referring to people and means 'having good natured disposition', whereas *amicable* means 'friendly or peaceable' and refers to arrangement, settlement and attitudes'. For example:

- i) *He proved to be a most amiable companion* (Baillie, 1970:28) and
- ii) *They come to an amicable agreement* (Baillie, 1970:28).

Some pairs of negative adjectives deserve to be considered for support as well. There are *illegible - unreadable*, and *inedible - uneatable* side by side. *Illegible* refers to the quality of handwriting or printed words, which are difficult to perceive. *Unreadable* refers to the contents of a text as a whole which may be too technical, learned or ill conceived to be understood, or just too boring. *Inedible* usually refers to something which could not be eaten under any circumstances, for example in *There are many inedible plants* (Baillie, 1970:296). *Uneatable* means 'unpalatable' and is generally applied to something which could in normal circumstances be eaten, for example in *The cold stew was uneatable* (Baillie, 1970:296).

Previously, Jespersen (1954:403) mainly saw that the two synonymous words are usually of Latin origin and the other is derivative of English base words. The originally Latin word is the official word belonging to the literary language, whereas the native word is often colloquial.

The awareness of the causes of mistakes and other erroneous usage would contribute to a better understanding and correct usage of adjectives ending in *-able/-ible*. To offer a thorough understanding of adjectives ending in *-able/-ible*, the following part will discuss the usage of the derivative adjectives in sentences.

C. USAGE IN SENTENCE

The usage of adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* is divided into three functions: as an adjective, as a noun (either with or without further derivation) and as an adverb through derivation.

C.1 As an adjective

Derivative adjectives in *-able/-ible* have the same function as pure (non-derivative) adjectives. They modify noun. As modifiers they take different positions in word order. They are present *pre-nominally* or *post-nominally*, but they are most commonly found before the noun.

C.1.1 Pre-nominal position

In this position, adjectives ending in *-ble* precede the noun. For examples in;

- i) *Edward is a mischievous but lovable child* (Cobuild, 1991:1)
- ii) *The phrase might make an acceptable title*
- iii) *She was amused by his incredible story*
- iv) *Disreputable clubs*
- v) *Disposable panties*
- vi) *Detachable lining*
- vii) *Collapsible chair*.

C. 1.2 Post-nominal position

In this position adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* follow the noun. Swan (1989:16) writes that words ending in *-able/-ible* may come after the noun they modify, and the rules for position are similar to those for participles. For examples:

- i) It's the only solution possible.
- ii) Are there any tickets available?
- iii) *I'd like to speak to the person responsible.*

These sentences can be paraphrased according to the rules of participles to become as in the following:

- i) It's the only solution which is possible.
- ii) Are there any tickets which are available?
- iii) *I'd like to speak to the person who is responsible.*

Sometimes, adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* is used as compound words in idiomatic expression such as *machine readable* '(of data) in a form that a computer can understand' and *mission impossible* 'name of a unit of the armed forces assigned to do difficult tasks'. Therefore, these compounds cannot be paraphrased as they are when the constructions follow the rules of participle although they have post nominal position.

To prove that these compounds are used as idiomatic expressions and that cannot be paraphrased is to see the difference between *mission impossible* and *person responsible*. *Person responsible* means 'person who is responsible' with still of the same meaning. While *mission impossible* means 'mission which can only be done by a certain agent due to its danger and difficulties', which is obviously different from *impossible mission* 'mission which is impossible'.

It is even possible to form adjectives ending in *-ble* from groups of adjective + noun as in *common-sensible* and *small talkable* (Jespersen, 1954:403). Of course, the existence of *sensible* and *talkable* has facilitated these formations.

C.1.3 Position After Inchoative Verb

Derivative adjectives ending in *-ble* may also come after inchoative verbs following the verb pattern 2D (VP 2D). Inchoative verbs are those expressing the beginning of an action or state. The pattern is S + V1 + adjective.

The adjective functions as complement. For examples:

- i) *The story sounds incredible*
- ii) *His jokes are becoming risible*
- iii) *She feels miserable.*

Like any other adjectives, adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* can be derived further into other parts of speech: noun and adverb.

C.2 As A Noun

Some derivative adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* can function as noun in their plural form, either accompanied by definite article or not. For example:

- i) *Your account has distorted my risibles and given my sides a hearty shake* (OED, 1933:712)
Risibles means risible faculties or muscles.
- ii) *Put out our boats and filled them with ponderables alongside.*
Ponderable means heavy articles.

The following are adjectives which are often used as noun in the current use:

- combustibles* 'combustible material',
- comestibles* 'food',
- breakables* 'breakable objects such as glasses, cups, etc.',
- perishables* 'perishable goods',
- drinkables* 'drinkable materials',
- potables* 'potable materials', and
- valuables* 'precious possession, small personal objects of value such as jewelery, etc'.

Exception not in the plural form is seen in *inevitable* 'something which is sure to happen'.

- e.g. *From the time a fatal disease is diagnosed until the time the patient dies, there are periods of denial of the inevitable.*

Derivative adjectives ending in *-able/ible* can function as noun after further derivation with the suffixes *-ity* or *-ness* meaning 'the quality or state of being as described by the

baseword'. For examples: *accessibility* 'the quality of being accessible', *advisability* 'the quality of being advisable', *compatibility* 'the state or quality of being compatible', *mutability* 'the quality or state of being mutable', *sociableness* 'the state or quality of being sociable'.

Gleason (1961:108) explains that *-ness* and *-ty/-ity* all have much the same meaning and are used in similar ways to form nouns from adjective stems. However, there are some derivative adjectives ending in *-ble* take the suffix *-ity* to form their noun, while some others take the suffix *-ness*. Bradley (in Anderson, 1962:95) explains that *-ity* is confined to words taken either from Latin or French, or at least formed from French or Latin. Whereas *-ness* is known to be the native one.

Both *-ity* and *-ness* are now used interchangeably without such constraints. *Risible* which came into English from Latin has the form of *risibility* (subject to the rule *-ity*), and *risibleness* emerged later. Many others have two forms such as *sociability* and *sociableness*. The explanation of this double form is based on Baugh's (1935:3) argument that this may result of gradual phonetic modification or they may result from desire of uniformity commonly felt where similarity of function or use is involved.

Examples of noun derivation of adjective in *-ble* in sentences are:

- i) *Doing things for yourself develops independability.*
- ii) *Such arguments can have little plausibility.*

C. As an Adverb

To function as adverb, derivative adjectives ending in *-ble* have further derivation with the suffix *-ly*, mostly meaning 'in a manner described by the adjective' or other variety seen in the following examples: *admirably* 'in admirable manner', *compatibly* 'in a compatible manner', *possibly* 'by any possible means', *probably* 'very likely, with probability', *reasonably* 'in a reasonable manner'.

The use of derivative adverbs from adjectives in *-able/-ible* can be seen in the following examples:

- i) *The circumstances and processes were probably the cause of his problems.*
- ii) *The difficulties in choice of words were admirably illustrated by the survey.*

Thus, the discussion has revealed that derivative adjectives ending in *-able/-ible* have the positions and functions similar to those of non-derivative adjectives.

D. Conclusion

Adjectives ending in *-able* are proved to have the same range of meaning as those ending in *-ible*. This evidence further supports the previous finding (Munandar, 1999:85) that the divergence of *-able/-ible* is merely orthographic. The meaning of adjectives has been generalized into the active and passive senses of meaning. The active sense of meaning is expressed by phrases: '*likely to have the process or action described by the baseword*', '*having something/showing quality described by the baseword*', '*liable to have the process or action described by the baseword*', and '*that can have the process or action described by the baseword*'. Whereas the passive sense of meaning is expressed by the phrases: '*that can be affected by the process or action described by the baseword*', '*suitable/fit for something*', '*worthy of/deserving something described by the baseword*'.

The most appropriate meaning, however, must be determined in its relation with the whole context, not as an individual word to avoid misinterpretation. Such interpretation is likely due to a) the failure of associating the derivative adjectives with the proper word, b) meaning shift from basewords into the derivation, and c) false concept of synonymous word.

In some cases the usage of adjectives ending in *-ble* in sentences also determines the meaning. The position of the adjectives

in the word order is inalterable, such as in *mission impossible* and *machine readable*. The alteration into pre-nominal position will result in meaning confusion.

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