



## Distinguished Scholars Lecture Series in Linguistics

# Lecture Two

## Competing Suffixes in English Word Formation



### Prof. Mark ARONOFF

Distinguished Professor of Linguistics,  
Stony Brook University

**Date:** 3 April 2019 (Wednesday)

**Time:** 4:30 - 6:15p.m.

**Venue:** Room 220 of Fung King Hey Building,  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

### Abstract:

Research over the last decade has shown the value of Darwinian competitive exclusion for understanding the distribution of rival morphological realizations in terms of linguistically-defined ecological niches. For example, a number of suffixes in written English form abstract nouns from adjectives: e.g., *-ness*, *-ity*, *-th*, *-ce*. To a great extent, their distribution is determined morphologically by the final suffix of their bases, as competitive exclusion predicts. Most of the niches that have been identified to date are morphological or phonological. In principle, though, any systematic linguistic distinction may serve as a niche: semantic, syntactic, social, pragmatic, or stylistic.

Competitive exclusion predicts that two or more realizations that begin as synonymous may become semantically distinctive, allowing both to flourish. Although historical cases have been discussed (e.g., English *-hood*, *-ship*, and *-dom*), research to date has not uncovered the emergence in progress of any current instances. We will report on the English privative 'suffix' *-free*, which appears to have become productive since the beginning of the 21st century. Competition-based morphological theory would predict that this new pattern must have found a niche. We will show that the niche for the newly emerging *-free* pattern is semantic. The research employs use novel computational and web-based methods, which are interesting in and of themselves.

### Speaker:

Mark Aronoff is Distinguished Professor of Linguistics at Stony Brook University, State University of New York. He has been on the Stony Brook faculty since receiving his Ph. D. from MIT in 1974. His research touches on almost all aspects of morphology and its relations to phonology, syntax, semantics, and psycholinguistics. He has used a wide variety of methods in his work, ranging from traditional morphological analysis of both primary and secondary data from a wide variety of languages to lexical decision experiments to dictionary-based counting. He maintains a research interest in writing systems, especially how they relate to spoken language and linguistic awareness. For the last fifteen years he has been a member of a team studying a newly-created sign language, Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language. Mark Aronoff is author or editor of ten books and more than 100 scientific articles. He has served as Editor of *Language*, the *Journal of the Linguistic Society of America*, and as President of the Society. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and LSA. He is a member of the United States National Commission on Language Learning.

#### Enquiries:

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