



That most applicable and malleable of suffixes



WHAT do Norwich in England, Dubuque in the United States and Porirua have in common? They were all Gold Award winners, in their respective categories, in 2010's "liveable communities" awards. Well done to them and the other communities acknowledged in this way.

Whenever I drive past the Porirua city sign celebrating its status as a "liveable community", some grammar-focused devil within me tries to revolt. This is the devil that wants consistency in the patterns of language – a loveable dog, it says, is a dog that someone can love, and a drinkable wine is one that we can happily drink, but it makes little sense to say that a liveable community is a community that we can live.

A liveable life, perhaps, but a liveable community?

But although language largely does conform to general patterns (and if it did not, then it would be much more effortful to use than it is), it is not constrained by them.

We all understand that a liveable community is one that it is easy or pleasant or rewarding to live in, just as liveable earnings are sufficient for us to live on, or off.

I have also come across reference to a liveable person, meaning someone whom it is possible to live with (probably not me when possessed by the grammar devil).

These examples show that there is an understood missing preposition in expressions like liveable community.

Most often we use -able as an ending that goes on a verb to make an adjective.

This is usually in cases where the adjective can be used to describe something, living or otherwise, on which we can carry out the action of the verb.

There is typically also a sense that it is easy, pleasant, or appropriate to carry out the action of the verb on this person, animal or thing. So an adorable baby is one that it is easy to adore, a trainable horse can be easily trained, a rentable property is one fit to be rented.

The liveable community does not quite fit this pattern, but it is close

enough for us to be able to understand. Liveable is not alone in this respect, as a laughable situation is not one that we can laugh. Again, there is an understood missing preposition – the situation is one that we laugh at or about.

The -able ending can also be added to nouns – think of examples like marriageable, knowledgeable, and companionable. However, there are not many such examples, which suggests that -able can more easily be added to verbs.

A few years ago, Laurie Bauer and I tested this idea. We asked some of our students to look at some existing words ending in the affix -able, as well as two sets of nonsense forms that we invented.

The existing words had -able on bases that were either verbs (conceivable) or nouns (companionable). For one set of nonsense words we added -able to existing verbs and nouns that do not currently have corresponding forms with -able (such as entrenched and omissionable). For the other set we added -able to nonsense forms that looked like they might be verbs or nouns (so entrulchable from the nonsense form entrulch and arissionable from the nonsense form arission).

Our students had to decide for each word that they saw whether it was a real word of English or not. They had little difficulty in accepting the set of existing words like conceivable and companionable, and in rejecting the second set of nonsense words like entrulchable and arissionable. More difficult was the first set of nonsense words, and in particular the forms where -able had been added to an existing verb.

More than two-thirds of our students' responses to these verb-based forms were that they were real words, though these responses were slower than the same responses for existing words like conceivable. In contrast, less than one-third of the noun-based forms like omissionable were accepted as real words.

We take this as evidence that the -able ending is still productively used in English to make adjectives, but that this

24-Aug-2011

Page: 5

Opinion

Market: Wellington

Circulation: 84047

Type: Metro

Size: 273.59 sq.cms

MTWTF--


back



happens more readily with verbs than with nouns.

It is good to see that the English language is still addable, or should that be add-to-able?

Paul Warren is at the school of linguistics and applied language studies at Victoria University.