FEATURES

Those infixations are a whole nother story

WHEN we first notice something unusual we often think that we must be the first person to have seen or heard it. I have heard comments that speakers are starting to break up the word "another", typically inserting "whole", as in "that's a whole nother story". Some of these comments show excitement at hearing something so innovative, but other commentators are less enthralled by what they see as yet another perversion of the English language.

This phenomenon has been around for quite some time, and not just in New Zealand, but also in the United States, Britain, Australia — in fact, pretty much wherever English is spoken. At least four descriptions have been offered. One is that we have a cute example of how

Paul Warren

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linguistic innovation in children's speech can persist in adult speech. This implies that we are more likely to find this in children's speech, but there appears to be little supporting evidence.

The next description is that "another" is really "a + nother" and not "an + other". There is some support for this in

historical documents, reflected in entries in the Oxford English Dictionary. This lists "nother" with meanings including "different" and "second".

A 14th-century source has "on a nother day", but this could reflect inconsistency in writing down the spoken form "another", particularly given the lack of stability in the written forms of English at the time. However, this explanation would not hold for the 17th-century citation "one laugh'd, the nother swore, and the third preach'd".

The third description is related to the nother (ie second) one, and involves the observation that in the history of English there are instances of words where "a + n" has become "an +". For example, instead of "a napron" ("napkin" is a related word), we now say "an apron" and Shakespeare used "nuncle" for what is

now "uncle". This reanalysis goes both ways: the small amphibian now known as "a newt" used to be "an ewt", and "a nickname" used to be "an ekename" ("also-name").

"Orange" is interesting — it entered European languages (probably French or Italian first, though some claim a Spanish route) from Arabic, where it was "naranj". It lost its "n" in French by a similar effect to that noted in the English examples above — the "n" was absorbed into the preceding "une", which in its spoken form already ended with the "n" sound. It was after this loss of the "n" that the word entered English, but in 19th-century Scots English, the "n" reappears: "an orange" becoming again, albeit locally and briefly, "a nirrange".

A reanalysis description of "a whole nother" would be that "an other" has

been reinterpreted as "a nother" so that instead of "a whole other" we get "a whole nother".

A final description is in terms of infixation, or inserting a meaningful element into the middle of a word. This is common in many languages, but only occurs in very restricted cases in English, and most frequently with swear words as the infix, as in "kanga-bloody-roo", or Eliza Doolittle's "abso-bloomin-lutely" in *My Fair Lady*. So the suggestion is that the analysis is a-whole-nother story.

It is interesting that there is a highly restricted set of words that appear in the "a nother" construction. "Whole" is the most frequent — a Google search gave around 724,000 hits, many more than "complete" (746), "entire" (623), "f ... in(g)" (582) or "total" (166). The possibility that "nother" is an adjective

(like "different") is supported by the finding that it can be modified by an adverb: there were 304 hits for "a completely nother", 228 for "totally", 208 for "entirely", and 51 for "wholly".

Which is the most accurate description? It is difficult to say. The fact that there is just a limited set of words that can occur in the "a nother" construction highlights a similarity to the situation for swear word infixation in English, but the instances with adverbs makes more plausible the analysis of "a nother" as a sequence of article and adjective. Maybe this is one nother case of a set of factors conspiring to make a linguistic phenomenon more likely.

✉ *Paul Warren is at the school of linguistics and applied language studies at Victoria University. Send your questions about language to* **words@dompost.co.nz**