

## Synonymy: Not the Sole Cause of Blocking

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Aronoff claims that “the lexicon is arranged according to stems, and that for each stem there is a slot for each canonical meaning . . . [and] there cannot be more than one item in each meaning slot” (Di Sciullo & Williams 1987:10; henceforth D&W). Aronoff cites the example of *gloriousness* and *gloriosity*, where *gloriousness* is grammatically correct and located in the lexicon, but *gloriosity*, a possible synonym, is blocked. D&W claim (1987:10) that “a word is blocked only by the existence of a synonym.” But, synonymy doesn’t appear to be the sole cause of blocking.

D&W expand Aronoff’s claim of synonymy (1987:11) by stating that “blocking occurs across the syntax/morphology boundary.” They cite the following English comparative formation rules and examples (1987:11):

- (1) Morphologic: Add the suffix *-er* to monosyllables or disyllables ending in *-y*
- hot → hotter                  happy → happier                  **blocked:** colorful → \*colorfuller

and,

- (2) Syntactic: Adjoin the adverb *more* to a multisyllabic adjective

more colorful    **blocked:** \*more hot

These examples allow D&W to make the claim that the second comparative rule (syntactic) is blocked by the first rule (morphologic) and that “blocking is characteristic, not of words in particular, but potentially of any kind of unit.” (1987:11-12)

The claims of these authors might lead us to believe that **anytime** *-ness* affixation occurs, *-ity* affixation with the same stem is blocked due to synonymy; and the adjunction of the adverb *more* to a monosyllabic adjective is blocked due to semantic and functional synonymy, as is *-er* affixation to multisyllabic adjectives not ending in *-y*.

Consider the following words:

**dense** → *denseness* (n.)                  The *denseness* of the fog obscured our vision.  
**timid** → *timidness* (n.)                  The *timidness* of the rabbit disappeared quickly.

**dense** → *density* (n.)                          The *density* of the fog obscured our vision.  
**timid** → *timidity* (n.)                          The *timidity* of the rabbit disappeared quickly.

These examples show that *-ness* affixation to the same stem does not block *-ity* affixation, despite synonymy.

Further, adjunction of the adverb *more* to a monosyllabic adjective is also grammatical.

**dense** → *more dense*            This cake is much *more dense* than that.

And, *-er* affixation to multisyllabic words not ending in *-y* are also grammatical.

**timid** → *timider*                This child is *timider* than a rabbit.

In conclusion, the synonymy of words doesn't seem to be the only cause for blocking with *-ness* and *-ity* affixation. Nor does semantic and functional synonymy be the only cause for blocking of *-er* affixation with multisyllabic adjectives not ending in *-y* or the adjunction of the adverb *more* with monosyllabic adjectives. There must, therefore, be a deeper cause for the blocking of these forms.

### References

Di Sciullo, Anna-Maria, and Edwin Williams. 1987. *On the Definition of Word*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.