

Keep your English up to date

Dis(s)

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Prefixes, almost by definition, don't occur as separate words. I mean, that's what they're for: they're for modifying a word, occurring before a word, and making it change its meaning - happy, un-happy, national, de-nationalise and all this sort of thing. They don't normally occur as words on their own. But occasionally they do.

You've perhaps heard 'anti' - he's very 'anti' something, a-n-t-i. Or he's very 'pro' something -- well they're prefixes which have suddenly become different words. Now they've been around a long time. A recent one, an absolutely fascinating one, is this prefix 'dis': d-i-s, or sometimes d-i-s-s. It's from the word 'disrespect', to show disrespect to somebody, from the noun, by insulting language, or insulting behaviour. It means basically to put somebody down.

It's American, black English slang really, and it's been around since about 1980. And what's happened, it's come to be used as a full verb. You can say now 'I dissed him' - to diss, I dissed him - or 'stop dissing her'. And that's the interesting thing, that it's the prefix that's become the verb! It's a most remarkable development.



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