

# Productivity of Demonym Suffixes in American English

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will analyze the common suffixes used in English demonyms (adjectives relating a group of people to a particular place). These suffixes are not consistent across the English language; various ones include “-an/-ian” (ex: American), “-i” (ex: Israeli), “-ish” (ex: English), and “-ese” (ex: Chinese). I will examine the etymology of each of these suffixes and look for patterns in which cases each suffix is used, based on the time period during which the suffix was first used, the root word (i.e. the name of the place), and the locations of the places/people that the suffix applies to. I will gather my information by using etymological dictionaries to determine the origins of the suffixes (Oxford English Dictionary, Etymonline) and when they began being used with Google Ngram. I will also use a questionnaire to determine the productivity of each suffix. I will structure this project by analyzing the origins and evolution of each suffix in order of when they started being used for background, then explaining my survey and analyzing the data to come to a conclusion about the productivity of the suffixes.

## Introduction

This paper will analyze the development, productivity, and usage of various demonym suffixes in the English language, specifically “-an” or “-ian,” “-ese,” “-i,” and “-ish.” English has had a variety of linguistic influences over the millennia (Bryson 2016):

1. Latin: Latin had a significant impact on English due to the Roman occupation of Britain. Latin words entered the English language through various channels, such as trade, religion, and academia. Many English words have Latin origins, especially those related to law, medicine, and science (Bryson 2016).
2. French: The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 introduced French influences to the English language. French became the language of the ruling elite, and English borrowed extensively from French, particularly in the areas of government, law, and the arts. This period resulted in a significant increase in the number of French-derived words in English (Bryson 2016).
3. Scandinavian: The Viking invasions of Britain in the 8th and 9th centuries brought Old Norse, a Scandinavian language, into contact with Old English. As a result, Norse words became integrated into English, particularly in the areas of everyday vocabulary and place names (Bryson 2016).
4. Greek: English has borrowed many words from Greek, especially in scientific, medical, and technical terminology. This influence can be attributed to the ancient Greeks' contributions to philosophy, mathematics, and other fields (Bryson 2016).

These influences can be seen in English country names and demonyms, with many early ones stemming from Old English and later Latin (Oxford 1966). English demonyms end in a variety of suffixes, and I

will be examining how each of them came about, when each tends to be used, and which one is most productive. I used a combination of analyzing existing English country demonyms and surveying to test the productivity of each suffix.

In linguistics, productivity refers to the degree to which a linguistic rule or pattern can be applied to create new words, phrases, or constructions in a language. It measures the ability of speakers to generate and understand novel expressions based on existing linguistic patterns. Testing this not only involves examining existing linguistic patterns within the language, like how often a word or morpheme occurs, but also its ability to be applied in multiple cases (Bauer 2001).

## Literature Review

Bill Bryson's *The Mother Tongue: English and How it Got That Way* provided information on the origins and development of the English language and was used for historical background on how English became a product of Latin, French, Germanic, and Celtic influences. The demonym suffixes that were analyzed came from these languages, so a chronological history of the English language can provide insight into how the root word's language of origin and the time period during which the demonym was developed influences the suffix used. To conduct my study, I used the paper, *Gentile suffixes in Mexican Spanish. Rivalry and Applicability Restrictions* by Shaila Lisett Esquivel Brizuela as a framework. In this study, Brizuela analyzes the productivity of demonym suffixes in Mexican Spanish. She does this by measuring the occurrence of each suffix in the Mexican Spanish lexicon and seeing how many of those occurrences are demonyms (Brizuela 2017). She also measures the occurrence of each suffix in all demonyms. Both methods result in the same conclusion, that "-ense" is the most widely used of the suffixes. To corroborate this information, Brizuela conducted a survey which included 20 little-known or made-up place names and asked participants to come up with their own demonyms for them. Most participants chose "-ense" and "-eno" as their preferred suffixes (Brizuela 2017).

## Etymologies

I will list the etymologies of the suffixes in chronological order of development and usage.

"-ish" came from Old English "-isc" meaning "of the nativity or country of. It was derived from Proto-Germanic "-iska." The suffix was later attached to words to mean "of the nature or character of." Cognates include Old Saxon "-isk," Old Frisian "-sk," Old Norse "-iskr," Swedish and Danish "-sk," Dutch "-sch," Old High German "-isc," German "-isch," Gothic "-isks," and Greek "-iskos" (Oxford 1966).

"-ese" was adopted into English through Old French "-eis," or Modern French -ois, -ais, from Vulgar Latin, from Latin -ensem and -ensis, meaning "belonging to" or "originating in" (Oxford 1966).

"-an" came into English via Latin "-anus." "-ianus" emerged as a variant, with the "i" originally coming from the stem of the word but later used as a means of connecting the stem and suffix. This turned into English "-ian" and Middle English "-ien" via French (Oxford 1966).

"-i" is a suffix of Semitic origin, coming from Arabic "-iyy" or Hebrew "-i" (Notzon and Neesom 2005). By the 19th century, "-i" had become a productive suffix (Google Ngram).

## Methodology

First, I determined the extent to which each suffix was used in the context of country demonyms by compiling a list of demonyms for each of the 195 countries recognized by the US according to the CIA World Factbook. I then observed how many each of the 4 suffixes were applied to, which helped determine which was most

productive. Additionally, grouping the demonyms by suffix also demonstrated patterns between countries that use the same suffix and helped determine whether these patterns influence suffix usage.

**Table 1.**

| -ish    | -ese        | -i          | other             |
|---------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Danish  | Beninese    | Azerbaijani | Afghan            |
| Finnish | Bhutanese   | Bahraini    | Argentine         |
| French  | Burmese     | Bangladeshi | Thai              |
| Irish   | Chinese     | Iraqi       | Turkmen           |
| Dutch   | Gabonese    | Kazakhstani | Motswana/Botswana |
| Polish  | Guyanese    | Kuwaiti     | Burkinabe         |
| Spanish | Japanese    | Kyrgyzstani | Czech             |
| Swedish | Lebanese    | Omani       | Cypriot           |
| Turkish | Maltese     | Pakistani   | Swazi             |
| British | Marshallese | Qatari      | Swiss             |
|         | Portuguese  | Somali      | NiVanuatu         |
|         | Sammarinese | Tajikistani | Seychellois       |
|         | Senegalese  | Emirati     | SolomonIslander   |
|         | Taiwanese   | Uzbekistani | Filipino          |
|         | Timorese    | Yemini      | Nigerien          |
|         | Togolese    |             | Montenegrin       |
|         | Vietnamese  |             | Malagasy          |
|         |             |             | Liechtensteiner   |
|         |             |             | Luxembourger      |
|         |             |             | Basotho           |
|         |             |             | Kosovar           |
|         |             |             | i-Kiribati        |
|         |             |             | Greek             |

The remaining 129 country demonyms use the “-an/-ian” suffix (CIA 2023).

Note: “Swazi” and “i-Kiribati” were not included in the group of demonyms ending in “-i” because the suffix was not added to the country name to create the demonym (Britannica 2023).

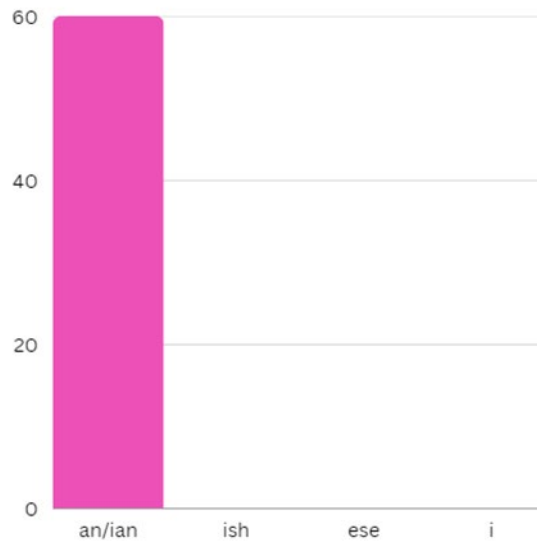
By looking at the occurrence of each suffix alone, we can see that “-an/-ian” is the most productive. While being a Latin suffix, it is applied to names that did not originate from Latin, such as “Iranian” and “Bruneian,” demonstrating its versatility. The “-ese” suffix mostly applies to places that were occupied by the French during the period of the French Union (Pons 1954). This, as well as the etymological history of “-ese” being derived from French “-eis” shows that it has entered the English language through French. Without French derivation, the “-ese” suffix is not used as much. The “-i” suffix applies mostly to country names of Arabic or Semitic origins. The “-ish” suffix (and variants such as “-ch” and “-tch”) applies mostly to countries in close proximity or contact with England when the “-ish” suffix was developed. Because it is from Old English, this would have been around c. 450 CE to c. 1150 CE, shortly after the Norman Conquest (Bryson 2016).

To corroborate these results, I conducted a multiple-choice survey in which I chose place names of Latin, Semitic, Germanic, and East Asian origins that I made up or whose demonyms were not widely known or used. I used Google Translate and merged words in these languages to construct the made-up names. Participants were all native American English speakers between the ages of 15 and 50. They were not given the

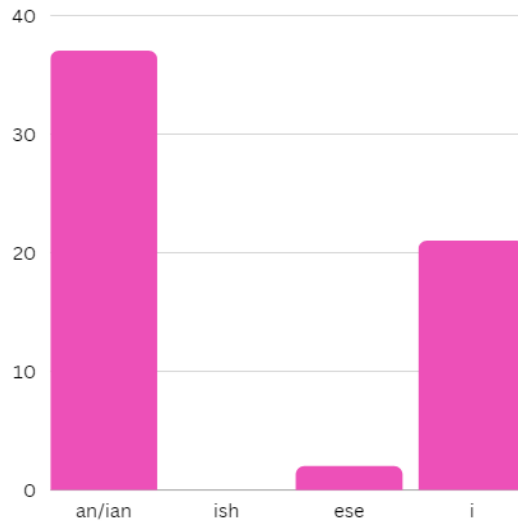
demonyms' languages of origin. The expectation based on my analysis of existing country demonyms was that words of Latin origin would receive the “-an/-ian” suffix, Semitic would receive the “-i” suffix, Germanic would receive the “-ish” suffix, and East Asian names would receive the “-ese” suffix. In the table below are all of the words included in the survey and their languages of origin.

**Table 2.**

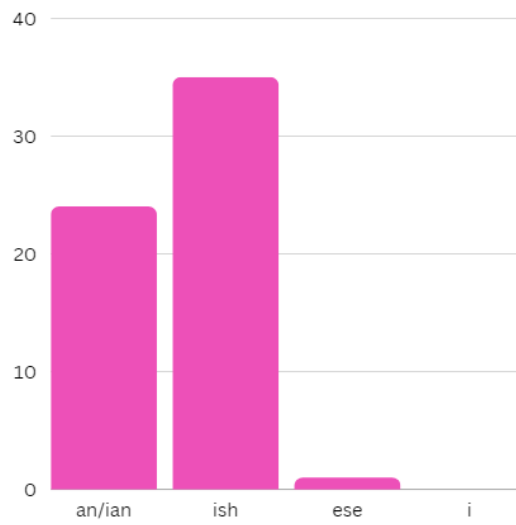
| Latin     | Germanic   | East Asian | Semitic   |
|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Pulcra    | Vasserland | Liang      | Aspan     |
| Gramen    | Corn       | Yuan       | Amman     |
| Verona    | Melbourne  | Semai      | Jerash    |
| San Diego | York       | Busan      | Tatarstan |



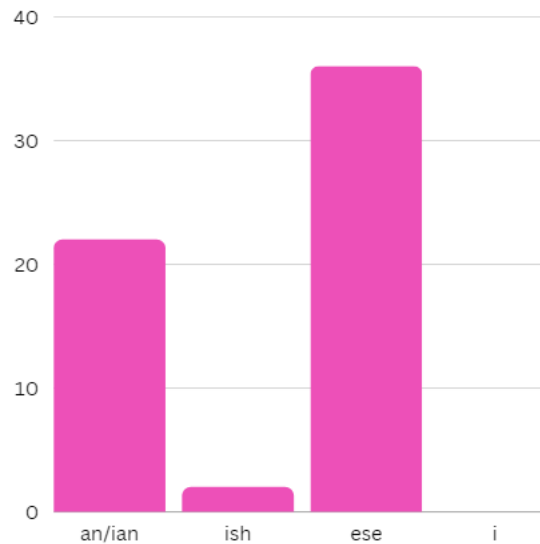
**Figure 1.** Number of Times Each Suffix Was Chosen for Latin Demonyms



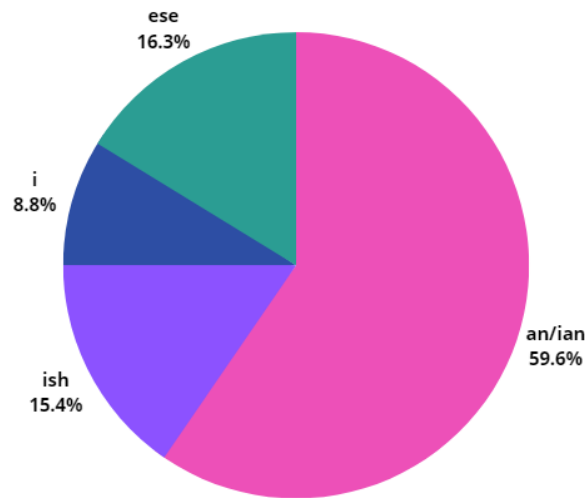
**Figure 2.** Number of Times Each Suffix Was Chosen for Semitic Demonyms



**Figure 3.** Number of Times Each Suffix Was Chosen for Germanic Demonyms



**Figure 4.** Number of Times Each Suffix Was Chosen for East Asian Demonyms



**Figure 5.** Percentages of Suffixes Chosen for All Demonyms

## Conclusion

From my studies, I have concluded that “-an/-ian” is the most productive suffix. Not only is it most widely applied in current American English vocabulary to country demonyms, but it is also most versatile in creating new demonyms. The survey results provide evidence of a strong linguistic tendency among participants to associate the “-an/-ian” suffix with country names, regardless of their linguistic heritage. This preference may stem from the widespread use and recognition of demonyms such as “American,” “Canadian,” and “Indian,” which have become well-established in the English language. The familiarity and consistency associated with the “-an/-ian” suffix may contribute to its perceived suitability for denoting nationality. The productivity of the

"-an/-ian" suffix for country demonyms can have implications for various domains, including linguistics, cultural studies, and international relations. Linguistically, this finding may highlight the morphological patterns and preferences present in the formation of demonyms. Moreover, in international relations, a consistent and widely recognized suffix for country demonyms can enhance communication, mutual understanding, and the promotion of cultural exchange. While this study focused primarily on the historical, geographical, and etymological factors that influence the usage of four suffixes ("-an/-ian," "-ish," "-ese," and "-i"), further research could explore how the morphology of the root word contributes to the productivity and preference for a particular suffix. Understanding and acknowledging the linguistic and cultural implications of suffix selection can contribute to effective communication, accurate representation, and a deeper appreciation of the diverse national identities that exist around the world.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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