

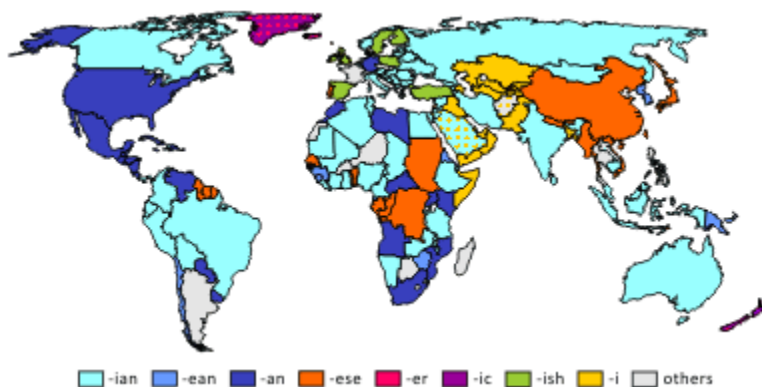
So many nationality suffixes

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After posting my other article [So many negative prefixes](#), I received very positive feedback and many readers apparently found the article interesting and useful. Indeed, these little affixes (prefixes and suffixes) can be puzzling when they are similar in meaning but nevertheless non-interchangeable. That makes people ask why they are what they are: is there a subtle rule beneath all the messy superficial distribution, or things just happen by chance?

Not long ago, a friend asked me whether there are rules governing the usage of those suffixes of nationality, such as *-ese*, *-ian* and *-ish*. I thought about it for a while, then I remembered that years ago I read a post on the Internet, saying that *-ese* is a derogatory ending used only on those countries that the western world thought to be inferior, so we have adjectives like *Chinese*, *Vietnamese* and *Burmese*. After all, many of the Asian countries do form their adjectives in *-ese*. But I had doubts, don't the westerners just love *Japanese* stuff? And why *Korean*, *Indian*, *Malaysian* and *Indonesian* then? So I decided to look for the answer myself.

I fetched a list of nationality adjectives from [NationMaster.com](#), then I started to color the world map according to the suffixes used to form their respective nationality adjectives. Finally I got this map:



Suffixes of Nationality

From the list, I find 8 major suffixes, they are:

1. **-ian** (Italian, Norwegian)
2. **-ean** (Chilean, Korean)
3. **-an** (American, Mexican)
4. **-ese** (Chinese, Japanese)
5. **-er** (Icelander, New Zealander)
6. **-ic** (Icelandic, Greenlandic)
7. **-ish** (English, Irish)
8. **-i** (Iraqi, Pakistani)

Looking at the map, we can probably notice some distributive patterns right away. For instance, *-ish* is mainly used for European nations, *-i* is for nations in the Middle East, *-ic* and *-er* seem to occur only after the word *-land*, but the others seem to be more random.

Not satisfied with the mere geographical picture, I decided to trace the histories of these suffixes.

Suffix	Origin
-ian	Latin
-ean	Latin
-an	Latin
-ese	Latin → Italian
-er	Latin → Germanic
-ic	Latin → Germanic
-ish	Germanic
-i	Arabic

-ian / -ean / -an

It should not be surprising to find out that *-ian*, *-an* and *-ean* actually have a common origin. In fact, the suffix *-ia* is frequently used in Latin to name places, thus giving birth to names like *Romania*, *Bulgaria* and *Australia*, and *-ea* and *-a* are two other grammatical suffixes used on Latin nouns. The final *-n* is an adjectival suffix that turns a noun into an adjective. Hence, adjectives that end in *-ian*, *-ean*, or *-an* were either borrowed directly from Latin, or modelled after Latin in English. They are the standard suffixes now in English. The distribution of them follows a rule that is rather neat and tidy. Basically it goes as follows:

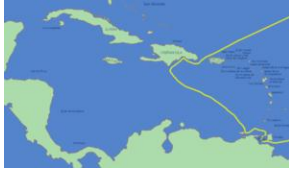
1. If the place name ends in *-ea* or a silent *-e*, then use *-ean*;
2. If the place name ends in a vowel, then use *-an*;
3. Otherwise, use *-ian*.

As you have probably noticed, there are some exceptions or complications, but let us not be concerned about that here. After all, the general picture is clear and unambiguous.

-ese

Let us now turn to the controversial suffix *-ese*. You could well say that there does not seem to be a pattern geographically. Countries using *-ese* are scattered everywhere in Asia, Africa, South America, and we also have Portugal in Europe! But my attention turns to Italian when I give this suffix some more thought.

In Italian, *-ese* is a much more common suffix of nationality than in English. Words that use *-ese* in Italian but not in English include *danese* (Danish), *finlandese* (Finnish), *francese* (French), *inglese* (English) and *islandese* (Icelandic). In fact, *-ese* (from Latin *-ēnsis*) is the next most common suffix after the Latin triplet *-ian/-ean/-an*.



The Third Voyage of Christopher Columbus

It turns out that words ending in *-ese* in English actually come from Italian. Recalling that Marco Polo and other Italian traders were the first Europeans to reach the Far East, it is therefore no surprise that many Asian countries use *-ese*. In addition, the countries using *-ese* in South America are all very close to where Christopher Columbus, himself an Italian, first landed on the continent. But of course, why some countries in Africa and the Americas use the Italian suffix, while others use French or Spanish suffixes is a result of their long and complicated colonial histories.

-er / -ic

Both *-er* and *-ic* are originally Latin suffixes which later entered the Germanic languages and subsequently English. Among the two hundred countries in the world, *-er* and *-ic* are used only after the words *land* and *island*, both of which are Germanic in origin. The suffix *-er* is used on nouns to denote persons of a certain place of origin, while *-ic* is used to form adjectives with the meaning of “having some characteristics of”. Therefore, *Icelander* is normally used to denote a person from Iceland (i.e. a noun), whereas *Icelandic* is used when it is used as an adjective.

-ish

This is a native Germanic suffix with the sense of “belonging to”. Since English has been much influenced by French and Latin, the suffix is not as productive as it used to be. However, in other Germanic languages, such as German, its usage is far more common. Nationalities which use *-ish* in German (*-isch*) but not in English include *Italienisch* (Italian), *Chinesisch* (Chinese), *Isländisch* (Icelandic) and *Irakisch* (Iraqi). Its Germanic origin explains why nationalities that use *-ish* are all in Europe, and belong to Germanic nations around Germany and Scandinavia. This is even clearer if you consider two more facts:

1. The word *German* does not end in *-ish*, because the united nation of Germany did not exist until relatively recently. The word *German* comes from a Latin word referring to the people in that region.
2. Both *French* (from *Frencisc*) and *Dutch* (from *Diutisc*) in fact contain the suffix *-ish*, although in both cases, the suffix has been fused with the base to form a new, irregular adjective.

-i

The suffix *-i*, with the meaning of “belonging to”, comes from Arabic. This explains why almost all countries that use *-i* are Islamic and/or use Arabic as one of the major languages.

Geographically, the center of this group of nations is in the Middle East, and extends to Central Asia to the north, and to East Africa to the south. A notable exception in this area is Iran, which had a long history of contact with the West before they gradually converted to Islam.

Summary

After seeing the distribution of the suffixes of nationality on a world map, and studying the origins of these suffixes, I think we should be reasonably convinced that the choice of suffix is not entirely a matter of chance or taste. Instead, there are historical and linguistic factors which determine why one suffix is used for a certain nationality but another suffix for a second one.

English is a Germanic language, its native suffix for nationality is *-ish*, which accounts for the names of nearby nationalities. But before English had gone global and applied its suffix to other nationalities, it was influenced by Latin and French. The default suffix of nationality used in the language was replaced by the Latinate *-ian/-ean/-an*, so more recently coined nationalities made use of them instead. Later, the contact between Italy and the Far East, together with the European colonization of Africa and South America, brought in some nationalities ending in *-ese*. Then, Islamic countries near the Middle East retained their Arabic *-i* when their names entered English. Lastly, a few places that end in *-land* or *Island* make use of the suffixes *-er/-ic*.

On second thought, the whole picture is just that simple.

Nationality Adjectives by Suffix

Benin	Beninese
Bhutan	Bhutanese
Burma	Burmese
China	Chinese
Congo	Congolese
East Timor	Timorese
Faroe Islands	Faroese
Gabon	Gabonese
Guyana	Guyanese
Japan	Japanese
Lebanon	Lebanese
Malta	Maltese
Marshall Islands	Marshallese
Nepal	Nepalese
Portugal	Portuguese
San Marino	Sammarinese

Senegal
Sudan
Suriname
Taiwan
Togo
Vietnam

Senegalese
Sudanese
Surinamese
Taiwanese
Togolese
Vietnamese