

An Overview of the Characteristics of English Acronyms

Xiaolin Mao

College of International Education, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

Email: 1851@shisu.edu.cn

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to bring acronym under a closer review. As an exceptionally creative way of forming new words, acronyms have long been marginalized in the study of English word-formation and easily confused with initialisms. This essay is an effort to investigate some unique characteristics of acronyms, including its economy and convenience, fun of word play, unpredictability and creativity, as well as to pinpoint the subtle difference between acronyms and initialisms, thereby unfolding its special roles and peculiarities in English word-formation process.

Keywords

Acronym, Initialism, Economy, Convenience, Word Play, Unpredictability, Creativity

1. Introduction

English word-formation has been an area of academic interest as well as an area of controversy owing partly to its nature of complexity. Wilhelm von Humboldt remarked that word-formation is the “deepest, most secret part of language”, which still makes good sense even today, despite considerable advances in the study of word-formation (Bauer, 1983). Meanwhile, not too much agreement has been reached on which method should be the most convincing one to study English word-formation. And traditionally, the study of word-formation was not paid enough attention to by linguists. Even half a century ago, word-formation was generally ignored by most linguists. Then there came a change when Chomsky (1957) published his seminal work *Syntactic Structures*. This study diverted the traditionally dominant approach to language to a new direction—syntax, which dramatically changed the condition of English word-formation. The study of

word-formation became more salient and important within Chomsky's Transformational Generative Paradigm (Chomsky, 1970). "It was in this paper that the dichotomy between the 'lexicalist' and the 'transformationalist' approaches to lexical insertion was set up as one of the major divisions within the transformational school. This dispute brought the data of word-formation into the center of linguistic interest, although no change was made in the basic assumption that the words formed were special kinds of sentences whose internal shape was determined by the phonology" (Bauer, 1983). Today, even the study of word-formation seems to be in a state of flux but generally it is expanding. One evidence is that a lot more books on word-formation are published than that of 50 years ago. For instance, books on many other languages like Russian (Townsend, 1975), Swedish, Turkish, Chinese (Packard, 2011) and Japanese (Kageyama & Kishimoto, 2016) word-formation also mushroomed. Štekauer et al. (2012) even published an ambitious book to explore word-formation in the world's Languages. The book by Plag (2018) is a good effort to incorporate new developments in English morphology at both the methodological and the theoretical level.

Unlike many other languages, English has its own unique ways of forming new words. For example, by adding a prefix to the base of a word (*mono* lingual) or a suffix after the stem of a word (*terror*ism), a vast number of new words can be created. Also, a noun can be used as a verb through *conversion*. Conversion involves the change of a word from one word class to another. For example, the verbs to email and to microwave are formed from the nouns email and microwave. If two or more existing roots or stems are combined to make a new word, it is called "*compounding*." Nouns like "rainbow," adjectives like "poorhouse," and adverbs like "pickpocket" are all created by *compounding*. The way that the words like "*edit*" (from editor) and "*orient*" (from orientation) are formed is called "*back-formation*." Words coming from names like "*gargantuan*" and "*jumbo*" are called *eponyms*. Words like "*smog*" (smoke and fog), "*motel*" (motor and hotel), and "*escalator*" (escalade and elevator) are created by *blending* (Murray, 1995). And words like Kodak, Kleenex and Jell-o are formed through *inventing*.

So, what are acronyms and how to distinguish between acronyms and initialisms? On the one hand, both initialisms and acronyms are a type of abbreviation (Crowley, 1992). Murray (1995) claimed that "when all the words that are combined have been shortened and to such an extent that only the initials or first few letters of each remain, an acronym has been formed." Murray's definition of acronym deserves some merit, but he failed to distinguish *initialism* from *acronym*. On the other hand, Bauer (1983) gave a definition that drew a clear distinction between initialism and acronym, thus making more sense. Bauer (1983) claimed that "an acronym is a word coined by taking the initial letters of the words in a title or phrase and using them as a *new word*, for example Strategic Arms Limitation Talks gives SALT. It is true that some lexicologists may regard acronym as a kind of initialism, but still they are different in a strict sense. Acronyms are contrastive with the initialism. Initialism is basically restricted to abbreviations that

are pronounced only as *sequences of letters*. However, to be an acronym the new word must not be pronounced as a series of letters, but as a word. Thus if Value Added Tax is called /vi ei ti/, that is an initialism, but if it is called /væt/, it has become an acronym.” In other words, we see acronyms as a subtype of initialism, formed when the initial letters of two or more words are combined in a way that produces consonant and vowel sequences found in words and they are normally pronounced as words while initialisms are “unpronounceable.”

2. Categories of Acronyms

Based upon morphological structure and its intended pronunciation, acronyms could be classified into mainly three groups. The first group is *letter* acronyms, such as AIDS, NATO, radar and laser. The second is *syllabic* acronyms, such as *sitcom* (situation comedy). The third is a *hybrid* of the two, such as *CoSIRA* (Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas) and *MATCON* (Microwave Aerospace Terminal Control).

The pronunciation of letter acronyms has given rise to two tendencies in abbreviated spellings. One is to get rid of the points between initials, just like NATO rather than N.A.T.O. and NASA rather than N.A.S.A. The other is to use lower-case letters instead of upper ones, e.g. *radar* rather than RADAR and *laser* rather than LASER and *scuba* (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) rather than SCUBA. As a result, an acronym may become so fully a word that its letter-based origin may not be remembered or ignored, just like “radar.” Even sometimes, the lower-case ones and the upper-case ones could be contrasting ones: *radar* and *RADAR* (Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation) could be two different words today. Further, sometimes, there could be variations, inconsistencies, and idiosyncratic practices in presenting letter acronyms. For example: the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization could be contracted to U.N.E.S.C.O. But UNESCO is more commonly used. Occasionally, some forms of spellings of letter acronyms could be presented as proper nouns, just like the usage of Unesco and Gatt by the western media.

However, syllabic and hybrid acronyms basically do not have points like what letter acronyms have, like *sitcom*. They could be lower-case, upper-case, or mixed, and sometimes have capitals between. For example, *HoJo* (Hotel-and-Restaurant Group Howard Johnson). Syllabic acronyms are fashionable in many languages besides English. Sometimes, syllabic acronyms are related to another way of word-formation: blending. Such examples are “*brunch*” and “*electrocute*.” Some two-syllable and three-syllable forms are: “*Amex*” for American Express; “*Amoco*” for American Oil Company; “*Conoco*” for Continental Oil Company; “*Asda*” for Associated Dairies; “*ConEd*” for Consolidated Edison; “*ComEd*” for Company Edison; “*Sitcom*” for situation comedy; and “*NABISCO*” for National Biscuit Company, etc. (Feldman & Feldman, 1994: p. 21). The usage of computers, telegraphic addresses, the naming of scientific and technical inventions and labeling of commercial products, etc., help the spreading of syllabic acronyms.

3. Characteristics of Acronyms

3.1. Economy and Convenience

Through morphological analysis and by drawing upon empirical research evidence, we can easily conclude that the prime underlying principles of creating acronyms are out of economy and consequently, convenience. It is part of human nature to strive for maximum efficiency, even in the field of language using. Using acronyms can accelerate communications by saving both time and space, either in speaking or writing. When a long phrase becomes as short as a word, efficiency in human communication is achieved. For instance, since acronyms are pronounceable and could be easily created, they could be widely used in the field of note-taking, shorthand labels, mnemonic aids, and slogans. One of such shorthand acronyms is Disney's *EPCOT/Epcot*: Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (in Florida). Mnemonic acronyms are usually homonyms of existing words that help fix events and ideas: *SALT*, which has nothing to do with the real salt, it means 'Strategic Arms Limitation Talks'; *SQUID*, which has nothing to do with the sea and means "Super-conducting Quantum Interference Device."

3.2. Fun of Word Play

Another underlying principle of forming acronyms exists in fun of word play, which can also be attributed to our desire to have fun while using a language for communication. For example, the word *snafu* was originally an army slang in WWII for *Situation Normal, All Fucked Up*. Acronyms were then being used more frequently in the military and soldiers just coined *snafu* in an apparent parody of this overused device, which produced black humor popular among soldiers. Slogan acronym "*MADD*" (Mother Against Drunken Drivers) is closed associated with the words we are using daily 'mad' and it vividly captures the emotional state of a painful mother who lost his son in a drunken driving. Just like NOW (National Organization of Women), some acronyms are coined to prompt an action. And some other acronyms are fabricated to send warnings, such as ASH for "Action on Smoking and Health" and DUMP for "Disposal of Unused Medicines and Pills". In addition, mnemonic and slogan acronyms are particularly subject to the fun of word play, especially so in headlines, e.g. Can *START* be stopped? The acronym here means "Strategic Arms Reduction Talks" and like many other similar ones: it produces certain whimsy.

3.3. Unpredictability

Different from some other methods of forming new words, one of the features of an acronym is that it generally lacks predictability. Bauer (1983) argues that the first reason is that "the phrase from which the acronym is taken is treated with a certain amount of freedom to permit the acronym to arise." For example, in BASIC, *only* the first part of a compound could be included for the acronym. While in WASP both letters (A and S) from two parts of Anglo-Saxon could be included for the acronym. Similarly, in RADAR (radio detection and ranging),

two letters are included from “radio” for the acronym while there is only one letter included for the rest of the words. Further, Sometimes, a particle could be included for an acronym like GRAS (Generally Recognized As Safe), but sometimes not, like “of” in *laser* (Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation). Sometimes, a conjunction is included for an acronym as “and” in RADAR and sometimes not so, like UNESCO (United National Educational, Scientific, *and* Cultural Organization).

Another embodiment for acronyms’ lack of predictability is that “not every abbreviation which could be an acronym is treated as one, and there seems to be no reason why some abbreviations should be ignored” (Bauer, 1983). For example, JAL (Japanese airlines) is pronounced in a letter sequence and thus not treated as an acronym. But IJAL (International Journal of American Linguistics) is pronounced as /ai jæl/ and it is an acronym.

3.4. Incredible Creativity

Languages by nature are very creative, so is acronyming. However, creativity differs from productivity. Just as Bauer (1983) pointed out that creativity is the native speaker’s ability to extend the language system in a motivated, but unpredictable (non-rule-governed) way. Today, acronyms are numerous and more and more are constantly being created. As a result, they are often collected, with other abbreviations, in dictionaries of acronyms and abbreviations. Although many acronyms are functional, others have a touch of whimsy and humor about them, such as *BOMFOG* (Brotherhood of Man, Fatherhood of God), a term used by American journalists for pious and platitudinous speeches. The length of the acronyms could be part of the humor, as with *ABRACADABRA*, a funny mnemonic acronym used as the title of a US list of abbreviations published by the Raytheon Company in the 1960s; it stands for ‘Abbreviations and Related Acronyms Associated with Defense, Astronautics, Business and Radio-electronics.’ And the name associated with fairy or historical figures could be very whimsical as well. In 1987, there was a system that was called the Oxford English Dictionary Integration, Proofing, and Updating System, its acronym is *OEDIPUS* (tragic figure in Greek legends who married his mother by killing his father). In order to avoid this inauspicious omen, the publishers named it *OEDIPUS LEX* later instead.

As Murray (1995) argues that the creativity of acronyms gives rise to large numbers of neologisms. You will get an idea of how creative the acronyms could be just by taking a glance of the following interesting examples:

ARISTOTLE: Annual Review of Information and Symposium on the Technology Of Training and Learning and Education.

SOCRATES: System for Organizing Content to Review And Teach Educational Subjects.

PLATO: Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations.

SOLOMON: Simultaneous Operation Linked Ordinal Modular Network.

CLEOPATRA: Comprehensive Language for Elegant Operating System And

Translator Design.

More examples follow below:

BUPPIE: British Urban Professional and Black Urban Professional.

HUPPIE: hippie + yuppie.

SKOTIE: Spoiled Kid Of the Eighties (the offspring of yuppie).

SKIPPIE: School Kid with Income and Purchasing Power.

WOOPIE: Well-off Older Persons.

PIPIE: Person Inheriting Parents' Property.

DINK: Double Income, No Kids.

DINKY: Double Income, No Kids Yet.

DIK: Double Income, Kids.

IACOCCA: I Am Chairman Of the Chrysler Corporation of America.

ASSASSIN: Agricultural System for Storage And Subsequent Selection of Information.

4. Conclusion

A vast majority of acronyms are coined and used in our daily lives, mostly on informal occasions. Most acronyms stay outside the door of official English lexicon. According to a study conducted years ago, there were only more than a dozen acronyms in total that have entered the English lexicon as normal words, and most of which are technologically related (Feldman & Feldman, 1994). These acronyms are: *sofar* (Sound Fixing And Ranging), *radar* (Radio Detection and Ranging), *sonar* (Sound Navigation And Ranging), *laser* (Light Amplification and Stimulated Emission and Radiation), *maser* (Microwave Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation), *rem* (Roentgen Equivalent Man), *rep* (Roentgen Equivalent Physical), *alnico* (Aluminum, Nickel and Cobalt), *jato* (Jet-Assisted Takeoff), *scuba* (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus), *tokamak* (Toroidskaya Kamera Magnet-ichesKaya), *snafu* (Situation Normal, All Fouled), *loran* (Long Range Navigation), *Gestapo* (Geheime Staatspolizei) (Tulloch, 1991).

Though often marginalized or unofficially acknowledged, acronyms play a significant role in English word-formation. Compared to other ways of word-formation, acronyms may seem a bit uncommon even weird. Izura & Playfoot (2012) argue that acronyms represent a significant and idiosyncratic part of our everyday vocabulary and the demands of a highly technical society have significantly increased the proportion of acronyms in our everyday language. Acronyms nowadays can be easily found in scientific and nonscientific journals (e.g., DNA, EEG, CD-ROM, DVD, radar, sonar, VAT, CPI, OXO, NATO, NHS, etc.) and are actively used in text messages and e-mail communications (e.g., lol, MYOB, BW, etc.). Since acronyms could be used so fully as a word sometimes, as a result, they sometimes could become part of further acronyms. For example, *AIDS* (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is the "A" in "ARC" (AIDS-Related Complex) and "DIFA" (Design Industries Foundations for AIDS).

All in all, acronyms can be seen as the most dynamic area of the lexicon in

English Language. Together with other ways of word-formation, acronyms will continue to contribute to an ever-expanding English vocabulary repertoire. The first edition (1960) of the *Acronyms, Initialisms and Abbreviations Dictionary* (AIAD) comprised 12,000 headwords, while the 16th edition (1992) included more than 520,000 headwords (Izura & Playfoot, 2012). Owing in large part to the creativity and productivity of acronyms, tens of thousands acronyms are being created every year and they will be always an intriguing and indispensable part of the English vocabulary. On the other hand, due to its unpredictability and fickleness, a suggested future research on acronyms should focus our efforts on exploring other ways of acronym-formation and its underlying rules of forming new acronyms.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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