

ON BLENDING AND CLIPPING IN ENGLISH

The abstract

Forming new words in English is a collection of different processes. This paper looks more closely at blending and clipping, which result in new words for old meanings, reflecting on lexicalisation and distinction between clipped forms and blends in some cases. Expression of both new and old meanings in new forms of words is a direct effect of language change, which, in turn, is closely related to the changes in societies. The paper attempts to show that English possesses remarkable flexibility and adaptability as far as formation of new words is concerned.

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Forming new words in English is a collection of different processes. This paper looks more closely at blending and clipping, which result in new words for old meanings.

One of the causes of language change, according to Hudson (2000: 411), is expression of new meanings. With the changes in societies, there is a need to express not only new meanings but also to express old meanings in new forms of words.

Bauer (1983: 30) gives the following definition of the term *word-formation*:

“Word-formation can be defined as the production of complex forms. ‘Complex’ is used by other scholars to mean ‘produced by derivation’. Thus, word-formation can be divided, in the first instance, into derivation and compounding (although there are other categories which do not fit neatly under either of these headings.”

Obviously, any discussion of word-formation makes two assumptions: that there are such things as words, and that at least some of them are formed. Bauer argues that the definition

of the word has been, for a long time, a major problem for linguistic theory because, however the term “word” is defined, there are some items in some languages which speakers of those languages call ‘words’ but which are not covered by the definition.

Adams (1973: 7) agrees that there is a failure of general linguists to provide a consistent definition of the word across languages, which has shown that it can only be defined with respect to a particular language.

Both Adams (1973: 7) and Bauer (1983: 8) agree that, regardless of the difficulties the notion *word* may carry, it has a certain psychological validity, and that there are good reasons for operating with such a notion. To illustrate this, they claim that speakers of a language, even illiterate speakers, (must) have a feeling for what is, or is not, a word. Sapir (1921: 34) reports that speakers of languages that have never been written have no difficulty whatsoever in determining words, although they have some difficulty in learning to break up a word into its constituent sounds. Repeating the sentences, “word for word”, therefore, is not a problem for such speakers. As an exception to this rule, there are words in English that divide English speakers into those who claim that they should write *all right* as opposed to those who opt for *alright*, but in general terms this holds true.

LEXICALISATION

There are several stages a lexeme goes through, ranging from the so-called nonce formation, through institutionalisation to, finally, lexicalisation. On its path, a lexeme may start as a new complex word-form designed by a speaker simply to meet some immediate need, the next stage emerging when the nonce formation starts to be accepted by other speakers as a known lexical item. Quite typical of this stage, Bauer argues (1983: 48), is “...that the potential ambiguity is ignored, and only some of the possible meanings of the form are sued (sometimes only one). Thus, for example, there is nothing in the form *telephone box* to prevent it from meaning a box shaped like a telephone, a box which is located at/by a telephone, a box which functions as a telephone, and so on.”

As it appears, it is only because the item is familiar that the speaker-listener knows that it is synonymous with *telephone kiosk*, in the usual meaning of *telephone kiosk* (institutionalisation).

Bauer (1983: 48) concludes that the lexeme enters its final stage when it takes on a form which it could not have if it had arisen by the application of productive rules. This is the stage when the lexeme is lexicalised.

CLIPPING

In simple words, *clipping* is shortening or clipping the spoken form of a word. This definition excludes the terms traditionally called *abbreviations* which relate to shortening just the written form of words, as in *Mr./Mr* for ‘mister’, *attn* for ‘attention’, and *i.e.* for ‘id est’. It is not frequently the case that these replace the long forms, rather they substitute them. Noteworthy is that AmE abbreviations ordinarily end in fullstops, as opposed to BrE which lacks the fullstop after an abbreviation which keeps the final letter of the word abbreviated, as in *Dr* (*doctor*), *Mrs* (*mistress*). The same applies to common scientific abbreviations, e.g. *cm* ‘centimetre’. Abbreviations often have the sort of spelling which would be rather unsuitable for English words, such as *Eng.*, and *govt.* for ‘English’ and ‘government’.

Hudson (2000: 242) underlines that clippings, on the other hand, have spellings which have the appearance of English words and can be pronounced in English. Hudson goes on to claim that (2000: 242):

“With the passage of time, clippings may fully replace their original longer forms.”

Some of his examples include:

- a. *pub* ‘tavern’, in BrE the clipped form of ‘public house’. Americans, for example, may recognise and use the term *pub* without knowledge of its original ‘public house’ form, illustrating that such clippings are not just abbreviations but may become new words
- b. *fan* ‘devoted follower’, as of sports’ is clipped from *fanatic*. It is highly likely that most users of this word are not aware of the origin of the word as a shortened form. It is also very likely that most fans will tell us that they are not fanatic, so *fan* has become a new word completely separate from *fanatic*.

- c. *pet* ‘loved household animal’ is thought to have been clipped from French *petite* ‘small’.

Hudson (2000: 242) further recognises that some clippings, such as *econ*, *intro*, and *lab*, are in wide use on college campuses nowadays with no tendency of replacing their source-words. Those who use them continue to recognise them as abbreviations. Other clippings, perhaps, *condo*, *flu*, and *fax*, have most likely established themselves as new words, independent of their origins as *condominium*, *influenza* and *facsimile*, respectively. The clippings are generally known to have become more common than the long forms, probably for reasons of economy of language, and are sometimes to the exclusion of the long forms, which may eventually drop out of the language.

Bauer (1983: 232) defines clipping as “a process whereby a lexeme (simplex or complex) is shortened, while still retaining the same meaning and still being a member of the same form class.” He argues that clipping frequently results in a change of stylistic level. The only unpredictability concern may arise in relation to the way in which the base lexeme is shortened. Bauer concludes that the main pattern is for the beginning of the base lexeme to be retained as in the recent examples

bi < *bisexual*,
binocs < *binoculars*,
mike < *microphone*,
jumbo < *jumbo jet*,
deli < *delicatessen*, etc.

Bauer recognises that it is not easily predictable how many syllables will be kept in the clipped form (except that there will definitely be less than in base lexeme), whether the final syllable will be open or closed, and whether the stressed syllable from the base lexeme will be included or not.

The most common type of clipping is that which retains the initial part of the word. However, there are others, too. In examples (Bauer) like

Cong < *Viet Cong*,
‘Fro < *Afro*, and
loid < *celluloid*,

it is the final part of the base lexeme which has been retained.

A much rarer type is where the middle of the word is retained, with both ends being clipped, as in (Bauer) *jams* (< *pyjamas*) and *shrink* (< *head-shrinker*).

Clipped forms are also used in compounds, as in (Bauer) *op art* (< *optical art*), and *org-man* (< *organisation man*). In some cases, Bauer argues, it is not easy to know whether the resultant formation should be treated as a clipping or as a blend as the border between the two types is not always clear. One easy way to draw the distinction, he further argues, is to say that the forms which retain compound stress are clipped compounds, whereas those that take simple word stress are not. This criterion applied, *bodbiz*, *Chicom*, *Comsymp*, *Intelsat*, *midcult*, *pro-am*, *sci-fi* (Bauer) are all compounds made of clippings.

BLENDING

Hudson (2000: 244) accepts the universally-accepted definition of blending as “replacing two words of a phrase with parts of both, ordinarily the first part of the first and the last part of the other”. In comparison to clippings and acronyms, blends can be said to start out as simple abbreviations, but given their appearance which is more word-alike, they can become new words with the passage of time. Examples are:

- a. *motel* ‘motor hotel’, *motor* + *hotel*
- b. *chunnel* ‘tunnel under the English Channel’, *channel* + *tunnel*
- c. *glassphalt* ‘highway paving material made of glass and asphalt’, *glass* + *asphalt*
- d. *brunch* ‘a meal between breakfast and lunch’, *breakfast* + *lunch*

The result of blending takes the form of blends of both form and meaning. Cases like *motel*, *motor* + *hotel*, and *smog*, *smoke* + *fog*, whose origins as blends are probably unknown to many who freely use them, are there to show potential of blending to create new words and not just clever abbreviations.

One of the usual characteristics of blends is that they overlap in their forms, as *channel* and *tunnel* at *-nnel* /nəl/. However, there are cases in which the whole first word is used, e.g. *glassphalt*. Some blends, like *iff* ‘if and only if’, used by logicians, look like a blend but in fact they are a blend only as a spelling – they must be pronounced fully – ‘if and only if’. On the other hand, blends like

sitcom and *edutainment*, Hudson (2000: 244) points out that the overlap mentioned above does not exist: *situation* + *comedy*, and *education* + *entertainment*. In *sitcom*, the blend involves the first part of two words instead of the first of one and last of another. These are a subtype of blends that may be called clipped compounds.

Following is Bauer's (1983: 234) introduction to the discussion of blends:

"When Alice asked Humpty Dumpty to explain the poem 'Jabberwocky' to her, part of his explanation ran as follows:

Well, "slithy" means "lithe and slimy". "Lithe" is the same as "active". You see it's like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed up into one word.¹"

Bauer (1983: 234) says that portmanteau words like *slithy* and *mimsy* are also called blends. These are the clearest examples of blends, where the etymological root of the word is only clear when specifically explained. Some recent examples (Bauer) include *ballute* (< *balloon* + *parachute*) and *shoat* (< *sheep* + *goat*).

Another kind of blend, according to Bauer, is that where the two words used as the bases are both present in their entirety in the blend, though there is overlap. It should be noted that the overlap may appear in pronunciation, in spelling or both. In addition to *glassphalt* above, a couple of more recent examples (Bauer) include *octopush* and *wargasm*, as well as several others, like *balloonatic*, *guestimate*, *slanguage* and *swelegant* (Adams).

A third type of blend, according to Bauer, is the type where the new lexeme looks as though it is or might be analysable in terms of other word-formation processes (as a neo-classical compound). Recent examples are

arcology < *architectural ecology*,
autocide < *automobile* + *suicide*,
electrodelic < *electro* + *psychodelic*,
molecism < *molecule* + *organism*,
pornotopia < *pornography* + *utopia* and
stagflation < *stagnation* + *inflation*.

These examples are not always easily recognised as blends by the people who hear them, even if they are clearly seen as blends by those who coin them.

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 1872, ch VI

Finally, there is a set of formations under the rubric of blends which function like blends but which keep one of the two bases intact. As a result, Bauer argues (1983: 236), “it is not clear whether they are in fact blends or compounds composed of one instance of clipping and one unaltered lexeme.” Some examples (Bauer), like *cremains* (< *cremate* + *remains*) and *carbecue* (< *car* + *barbecue*), have very much the effect of blends, while others, like *mocamp* (< *motor* + *camp*) and *frontlash* (< *front* + *backlash*), seem more like compounds. To further complicate the situation, there is a whole range of those in between, where it is difficult to take a decision, such as *Amtrack* (< *American* + *track*), *boatel* (< *boat* + *hotel*), *Nixonomics* (< *Nixon* + *economics*), etc.

Bauer (1983: 236) concludes by saying that “generally speaking, the category of blends is not well-defined, and blending tends to shade off into compounding, neo-classical compounding, affixation, clipping and acronyming.” However, “it is a very productive source of words in modern English, in both literary and scientific contexts.”

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BLENDING I CLIPPING U ENGLSKOM JEZIKU

Sažetak

Tvorba novih riječi u engleskom jeziku je skup različitih procesa. Ovaj se prilog bavi procesima nastajanja novih složenica u engleskom jeziku, i to putem *blending*-a i *clipping*-a (dva dijela izraza čine novi, uglavnom početni dio prve riječi i krajnji dio druge: skraćivanje riječi). Oba procesa rezultiraju novim riječima kojima se izražava postojeće značenje riječi ili izraza. Izražavanje novih i starih značenja u novim oblicima riječi je izravna posljedica promjena u jeziku, koje su u bliskoj vezi s promjenama u društvu. U prilogu se pokušava naznačiti da engleski jezik raspolaže fleksibilnošću i prilagodljivošću u oblasti nastajanja novih riječi.