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NEW WORD FORMATION IN ENGLISH: ACRONYMING AND BORROWING

THE ABSTRACT

Human languages have always changed in the past and they will certainly maintain the tendency of change. It may be argued that one of the causes of language change is expression of new meanings. With societal changes, there is always a need to express new meanings in languages, both through new words and old forms. It is the characteristic of openness that enables languages readily to create new words to express new things, events, and ideas that come along. The present paper attempts to show that English has been, and still is remarkably flexible and adaptable when it comes to various mechanisms that help enlarge its lexis. More specifically, the paper reflects on acronyming and borrowing in English in particular.

The English language appears to abound in mechanisms that help enlarge its lexis. This paper aims at outlining two available means of getting new words in English - acronyming and borrowing. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to provide an exhaustive survey of English word-formation, as this has already been done by many authors. Rather the intention is to reflect on the theory of word formation in English, and highlight the effects of acronyming and borrowing in particular.

Word-formation is nowadays perceived to be such a confused area of study that it would not be possible to write an uncontroversial introduction to the subject. Bauer recognises that much of the confusion in word-formation studies is terminological, in addition to an increasingly high interest the word-formation is gaining amongst theoretical linguists

particularly because of the light it throws on other aspects of language.

The ways in which new words are formed, and the factors which govern their acceptance in the language, are generally taken very much for granted by the average speaker. To understand a word, it is not necessary to be aware of how it is constructed, or whether it is simple or complex. Human beings are only able to use a word which they find new if they learn the new word together with objects or concepts it denotes. On the other hand, when new coinages are met, like *shutup-ness*, *talkathon* etc, our reactions to them may not be readily explained. We may find them acceptable and in line with our own feelings about how words should be built up, or they may seem in some way contrary to the rules.

Bauer (1983) claims that there is no single “theory of word-formation”.

“Interest in word-formation has probably always gone hand-in-hand with interest in language in general, and there are scattered comments and works on the subject of word-formation from the time of Panini, who provided a detailed description of Sanskrit word-formation, right up to the present day.”

According to Bauer, the study of word-formation is currently in a state of flux. There appears to be no doctrine on the subject which attracts many new researchers precisely because of the nature of word-formation.

Simplistically speaking, word-formation can be understood to mean a collection of different processes – borrowing, compounding, affixation, acronyming, back-formation, blending, and so on, about which, as a whole, it is slightly difficult to make a general statement.

Bauer concludes that, obviously, the rules that must be established for forming words depend on what counts as a word in any given language. There are words that are formed by rules of syntax, whereas formation of words may be considered as being explained not by syntactic rules but by rules that depend on syntactic factors. ‘Word-formation’ is a traditional label, and one which is useful, but it does not generally cover all possible ways of forming everything that can be called a ‘word’.

Languages have always changed in the past and they will certainly maintain the tendency of change. According to Hudson

(2000: 411), one of the causes of language change is expression of new meanings. With the changes in societies, there is always a need to express new meanings in languages. Hudson argues that it is the characteristic of openness that enables languages readily to create new words to express new things, events, and ideas that come along.

Acronyming

Hudson (2000: 242) defines acronyming as “a sort of clipping (shortening the spoken form of a word) in which a phrase is replaced by a word based upon the first letters of its words”.

Bauer (1983: 237) essentially agrees with that definition by saying 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*.”

However, not every abbreviation necessarily counts as an acronym: to be an acronym the new word must not be pronounced as a series of letters, but as a new word. Bauer (1983: 237) gives the following example here: if Value Added Tax is called /vi: ei ti:/, that is an abbreviation, but if it is called /vɛt/, it has become an acronym.

Hudson breaks acronyms into three groups, as follows:

1. Word acronyms,
2. Spelling acronyms (alphabetisms), and
3. Two-level word acronyms

1. Word acronyms

The ordinary pronunciation of *word acronyms* is that of ordinary words, not as spellings. For example (Hudson a-c; Bauer d-g, Crystal h-i),

- a. *UNICEF*, originally 'United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund' – the *I* is preserved here even though the word 'International' has now been dropped from the name of the agency.
- b. *scuba* 'self-contained underwater breathing apparatus'.
- c. *RAM* 'random access memory'.
- d. *BASIC*, 'Beginners' All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code'

- e. REM, 'Rapid Eye Movement'
- f. WASP, 'White Anglo-Saxon Protestant'
- g. GRAS, 'Generally Recognised as Safe'
- h. NATO, 'North Atlantic Treaty Organisation'
- i. ROM, 'Read-Only Memory'

Some other cases include *laser* 'light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation', *NASA* 'National Aeronautics and Space Administration' etc. Given that different people have different levels of knowledge of such words as originally acronyms, one useful clue that people in general may have is when the spelling is with upper-case letters, as in *NASA*, so there is high probability that the word is an acronym, without even knowing its phrasal form.

2. *Spelling acronyms (alphabetisms)*

As opposed to word acronyms, *spelling acronyms* are both read and pronounced as spellings, as a sequence of letters, so their acronymic origin tends to be obvious. Hudson (2000: 243) argues that "still, if they are useful as abbreviations, they may become much more common than the phrase they are based on, and some people may forget their phrasal, original, forms". Examples include (Hudson a-e, Crystal f-h):

- a. *PR* 'public relations'
- b. *TLC* 'tender loving care'
- c. *IQ* 'intelligence quotient'
- d. *MA* 'Master of Arts'
- e. *ID* 'identification'. Here the acronym is not based on a phrase but on a single word *identification*, which was very likely felt awkward, too long and/or too formal given its original purpose: to show your *ID* when entering particular places.
- f. *FBI*, 'Federal Bureau of Investigation'
- g. *UFO*, 'Unexploded Flying Ordnance'
- h. *SRB*, 'Solid Rocket Boosters'

It is worth noticing here that there is some similarity and difference at the same time between spelling acronyms and ordinary written abbreviations. Both do not appear as words and cannot be pronounced as words, but spelling acronyms lack the fullstop at the end of most abbreviations, and are read as a

sequence of letters; *Mr/Mr.*, for example, is not read 'M-R'. However, these words do not entirely belong into the realm of word formation proper.

Some examples of re-spelled abbreviations include humvee, deejay, veep, emcee, and so on.

It may also be interesting to mention here the reference Crystal makes to the use of acronyms in *Netspeak*. He defines *Netspeak* as a brand new medium of linguistic expression, "the novel amalgam of properties of the two traditional mediums, speech and writing, and adding to them further properties which were unavailable to either". This new medium is realised by means of the Internet. Acronyms seem no longer to be restricted to short phrases, but can be sentence-length (Crystal, 2002: 136):

- a. *GTG*, 'Got to go'
- b. *CIO*, 'Check it out'
- c. *AYSOS*, 'Are you stupid or something?'
- d. *WDYS*, 'What did you say?'

3. *Two-level word acronyms*

In addition to word and spelling acronyms, there is another, increasingly important sort of acronym which concerns the names of public interest groups and organisations. Most of these are named so that the name is suitable as an acronym that spells a word suggesting some aspects of the purpose of the organisation. In that way, Hudson (2000: 244) argues that "the acronym expresses meaning on two 'levels': as an acronym and as a simple word". This simple word that partly motivates the meaning is often called the prop word. Hudson exemplifies this phenomenon with *NOW* 'National Organisation of Women', which suggests that members of the organisation are getting impatient.

Other examples include *CARE* 'Cooperative for American Relief to Europe', *WAR* 'Women Against Rape', *BASIC* 'Beginner's All-Purpose Symbolic Instruction Code' etc.

Borrowing

In simple terms, borrowing is taking a word from another language. The words that are borrowed from other languages are called loanwords. Some consider it a bit misleading to call this

'borrowing', simply because the borrowed words cannot be returned.

According to Crystal, English vocabulary has a "remarkable range, flexibility, and adaptability". Thanks to the periods of contact with foreign languages and its readiness to coin new words out of old elements, English seems to have far more words in its core vocabulary than other languages. For example, alongside *kingly* (from Anglo-Saxon) we find *royal* (from French) and *regal* (from Latin). He compares English to a vacuum-cleaner in that English has always borrowed words from other human languages, perhaps far more than some other languages.

English examples (Hudson):

- a. *disco* 'light rock music especially intended for dancing'. Probably clipped from the French word *discothèque*, 'dance hall with recorded music played on *discos* (from Italian?) 'records, disks with recorded music'.
- b. *gung-ho* 'spirit, enthusiasm'. From Chinese, in which language it means 'work together'. How it came to describe the ideal military fighting spirit, in 1940s World War II, seems to be unknown.
- c. *passé* 'out of style, old fashioned', borrowed from French, a favourite source of new English words having to do with style and fashion. In writing, the accent on the final vowel reveals this as a borrowed word.

When discussing borrowing, it must be borne in mind that loanwords provide evidence of the nature of political, social, or cultural relations between language groups. Here is an example (Hudson: 2000: 247):

French words in English. Many languages have food vocabulary borrowed from French, like English's *mutton*, *pork*, *beef* (compare *sheep*, *pig*, and *cow*, the native English words, whose meanings now exclude the eaten forms of these animals). These examples suggest that the French have been very influential in the realm of cuisine (another French word).

Nativisation, ordinarily discussed in the context of borrowing, is the change of pronunciation of borrowed words in order to conform to the pronunciation rules of the borrowing language. Examples (Hudson) include the Japanese baseball

vocabulary (the Japanese were introduced to baseball through the United States), such as *sutoraiku* 'strike'. There is also nativisation of spelling (Hudson), as where the accent on vowels of borrowings from French are dropped, for example, *saute* from *sauté*.

English history in loanwords

Depending on their history, certain languages are believed to have borrowed words more than others. At different stages of its making, English has borrowed many words from Latin, Danish, French, American Indian, and other languages. According to Hudson (2000: 248), over 60% of the words of most English texts were borrowed since 500 AD.

Inhabited since prehistory by speakers of Celtic languages, following the Roman influence (mostly religious vocabulary), Britain was invaded by West Germanic tribes, including the Angles and Saxons, from about 450 AD, whose Anglo-Saxon dialects evolved into Old English. The next major stage in the development of language and the influence of foreign languages on it was the emergence of another wave of Germanic tribes, coming from Denmark (Danelaw, before 900). Then came the Norman French invasion in 1066, the last in the series of invasions of the British Isles, when the French influence became pervasive. French then became the language of the court and the second language of educated Britons. French loanwords from this period document the French influence in political and economic affairs. Most European languages, including English, freely borrowed Latin and Greek words until the 16th century (the Renaissance), because these were the languages of educated people. In America, with the encounter of a New World, most names of places, animals and plants were kept (see below). Following are some examples of borrowed words from the above-mentioned languages (Hudson):

- a. From Latin: *monk, school, martyr, creed, ounce, purse, mass,*
- b. From Danish: *sky, sister, thing, odd, egg, both.*
- c. From French: *duke, rent, market, cost, labour, calendar, pay.*
- d. From Latin and Greek: *legal, popular, necessary, solar, gravity, telescope, history.*

- e. (in America) From Native American languages: *Michigan, Chicago, Illinois, Texas, maize, tobacco, moose, cougar, skunk.*

Overall, one may conclude that there is definitely reason for studying language and its lexis, as Chomsky puts it (1976: 4), "it is tempting to regard language, in the traditional phrase, as a 'mirror of mind'", simply because language with its lexis is a never-ending process, governed by principles that are universal by biological necessity.

References

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TVORBA NOVIH RIJEČI U ENGLESKOM JEZIKU: PUTEM AKRONIMA I POSUĐIVANJA IZ DRUGIH JEZIKA

Sažetak

Ljudski jezici su uvijek doživljavali promjene, a sasvim izvjesno je da će tendenciju promjena i zadržati. Može se zauzeti stav da je jedan od uzroka takvih promjena izražavanje novih značenja. Slijedeći društvene promjene, uvijek postoji potreba za izražavanjem novih značenja u jezicima, i putem novih riječi i putem postojećih oblika. Upravo zbog otvorenosti jezika, nove riječi mogu nastati kako bi se njima izrazili nove stvari, događaji i koncepti. U prilogu se pokušava pokazati kako je engleski jezik bio i jeste izvanredno fleksibilan i prilagodljiv, kad se radi o različitim načinima putem kojih se njegov leksikon može uvećati. Prilog se posebno bavi metodama nastajanja novih riječi putem akronima i posuđivanja riječi iz drugih jezika.