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A FREQUENCY AND DISTRIBUTION ANALYSIS OF SELECTED NEOLOGISMS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENGLISH

Abstract

This paper delves deeper into the linguistic behavior of neologisms in terms of their frequency of use across different genres and time periods. The focus is on a selection of neologisms that were included in the online dictionaries of American English in 2020. The corpus analysis was conducted using the NOW (News on the Web) and COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) data. It was determined that the target neologisms not only display different frequency counts across different time periods prior and post their inclusion in the dictionaries, but also show different distributions across the analyzed genres. Specifically, genres such as the web and blogs, or the spoken genre, show higher frequency counts compared to the remaining ones. At the same time, while certain neologisms show a continuous increase in frequency and stability throughout the analyzed time periods, others appear to be virtually nonexistent or maintain relatively low frequency counts. The results of this research have potential applications in certain lexicographic and teaching practices, as well as in more specific investigations of the latest linguistic phenomena.

Keywords: *neologisms, corpus, analysis, frequency, genre.*

ANALIZA UČESTALOSTI I RASPODJELE ODABRANIH NEOLOGIZAMA U SAVREMENOM AMERIČKOM ENGLESKOM

Sažetak

Ovaj rad se bavi istraživanjem jezičkog ponašanja neologizama u smislu njihove učestalosti upotrebe kroz različite žanrove i vremenske periode. Fokus je na odabranim neologizmima dodanim u online rječnike američkog engleskog jezika tijekom 2020. godine. Korpusna analiza je urađena na primjeru NOW (News on the Web) i COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) korpusa. Utvrđeno je da ne samo da odabrani neologizmi pokazuju različitu učestalost upotrebe kroz različite vremenske periode prije i nakon njihovog dodavanja u rječnike, nego oni također pokazuju različitu raspodjelu po analiziranim žanrovima. Preciznije, žanrovi kao što su web i blogovi, ili govorni, pokazuju veću učestalost upotrebe neologizama u poređenju sa preostalim žanrovima. Istovremeno, dok određeni neologizmi pokazuju stalno rastuću učestalost upotrebe i stabilnost kroz analizirane vremenske periode, drugi neologizmi se čine gotovo nepostojećim ili zadržavaju relativno nisku učestalost upotrebe. Rezultati ovog istraživanja imaju potencijalne primjene za određene leksikografske i metodičke prakse, ali i preciznija istraživanja najnovijih jezičkih fenomena.

Ključne riječi: *neologizmi, korpus, analiza, učestalost, žanr.*

Introduction

As Algeo (1991) states, linguistic change accompanies the changes in all facets of human life and, in that sense, our lexicon represents a testament to the time period under investigation. Therefore, linguistic change as expressed through the emergence of new words, that is, neologisms, is not an exclusively linguistic matter nor is it bound to a single point in time. This belief is voiced directly by Simpson (2007, p. 147) who describes neologisms as "a window both on language change and continuity". Consequently, the unpredictability of the emergence of new words and the fact that they are not just linguistic novelties but markers of broader historical, cultural, and social changes and developments, are just some of the reasons why they attract significant scholarly attention. For these reasons, among others, neologisms represent an unavoidable segment of the English language and lexicographers understandably show great interest in these words. In fact, dictionary publishers and lexicographers carefully and continuously categorize and add new words to printed and online dictionaries. Of course, this is not an arbitrary process and only words that are widespread and frequent enough and have a meaningful use can find themselves on the newly added lists.

There are different theoretical approaches to defining and understanding of neologisms. Rets (2016) lists these as stylistic, denotative, structural, etymological, and lexicographic. However, one of the main contributing factors in all of the aforementioned theories is the idea of novelty, be it in meaning or in form and meaning combined. In other words, as Mair (2006, p. 38) states: "the most salient type of neologism is a word which is new in its form (...) and which refers to a concept which is new". Of course, not all neologisms are entirely new words in terms of their form. Many neologisms evolve from the existing words that acquire additional semantic layers, thereby contributing new lexemes to the language. Therefore, neologisms can be described as new words or phrases whose novelty may be expressed through their form or new senses. In other words, the novelty can be formative or semantic. In fact, there are many ways in which a word or a phrase is created within a language and English especially continues to expand its lexicon through a wide range of morphological processes. For example, according to Algeo (1991), the author of a specialized dictionary of neologisms, there are six main types of new word formation, and these include creating, borrowing, combining, blending, clipping, and conversion (shifting), along with the new words stemming from unknown sources. While many different word-formation processes can be used for neologism creation, certain types are used more frequently, and existing research tends to highlight compounding and affixation (Algeo, 2010, p. 245), but blending, clipping, acronyms, borrowing, and conversion are also relatively common word-formation processes. They can also be more complex than that, such as in examples where we can encounter dual word-formation types, e.g. blend-affixation (Ratih and Gusdian, 2018).

According to Bauer (1983), nonce formation, institutionalization and lexicalization are the main three steps in the process of new word formation and development. If a new word goes through the institutionalization process, it becomes a neologism. In other words, these initial *nonce formations* are very important as they are the actual new word forms that turn into neologisms if they survive the entire new word formation process (Crystal, 2008, p. 329).

However, outside of the mainly undisclosed analyses that take place for lexicographic purposes, research into neologisms in terms of their rightful place in the language, that is, in terms of their distribution and behavior, is surprisingly limited. For example, Kerremans (2015) touches upon lexicography as part of the process of full adaptation of new words, but, in general, similar studies are few and far in between leaving the link between neology and lexicography unexplored to its entirety. In fact, Mair (2006, p. 36) quite directly criticizes this

lack of research stating that "if there is one feature of the rich literature on neologisms in English which occasionally leaves the reader dissatisfied, it is that too often the focus is on individual words rather than general trends in the vocabulary".

Furthermore, with globalization, technical advances and scientific discoveries, as well as various social and cultural events and developments, neologisms in widespread languages such as English are on the rise. Consequently, printed and especially online dictionaries see constant additions of new words. This, in conjunction with the fact that it is not enough to simply recognize and index neologisms with no investigation into their process of change and adaptation (Simpson, 2007) or later behavior, makes any research of this nature particularly useful in the more general linguistic landscape of investigations into the ongoing linguistic changes. To illustrate, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred some of the more recent studies into neologisms as the whole, or with a more specific focus on their linguistic development (Asif et al., 2021; Al-Haj Eid et al., 2024).

Hence, this paper focuses on the analysis of a selected number of neologisms in terms of their frequency and distribution across different genres and time periods prior to their inclusion in the dictionaries. In addition, a separate part of the analysis will focus on the behavior of neologisms within the web news corpus throughout different time periods following their inclusion in the dictionaries. This makes it possible to investigate not only multiple genres in terms of neologism frequency counts leading up to their dictionary inclusion, but also the stability of frequency counts of neologisms post inclusion which is often a neglected segment of analysis. It is hypothesized that certain genres, which are generally more conducive to changes and adaptation of new knowledge and concepts, will reflect that tendency through higher frequency counts of neologisms. Namely, higher frequency of neologisms can be expected in the *web* and *blog* genres along with the relatively stable figures in the *spoken* and *TV/movies* genres.

Each of these genres inherently facilitates the adoption of neologisms. For example, the *spoken* genre often represents the initial stage in the practical application, that is, the actual use, of neologisms following their emergence through word formation processes. As Kerremans (2015) notes, certain neologisms undergo the full institutionalization process by spreading through the speech community and being accepted by the majority of it, becoming established in spoken language first. Once this occurs, the next step of the process, *diffusion*, takes place as the newly coined expressions extend across different text types (Kerremans, 2015). The *web* and *blog* genres frequently emulate spoken use of language, are constantly updated, and, most importantly, have the added element of existing in a virtual space that is at the forefront of technological and other advancements (Mitchell, 2008). In this sense, *web* and *blogs* are also conduits of modern communication so, in that sense, they might be the first of the written genres to accept any novel terminology. In fact, science and technology have time and time again been recognized as the most contributing sources of neologisms (Crystal, 2002; Mitchell, 2008). At the same time, newspapers are also lauded as good sources of neologisms and good starting points for research into linguistic changes (Mair, 2006).

Apart from the hypothesized genre distribution of neologisms, their frequency counts throughout the analyzed time periods are also expected to differ. Naturally, an increase of neologisms is expected in the period preceding the actual dictionary inclusion, but significant differences in the overall frequency counts between different neologisms, as well as their stability after the inclusion, are expected as well. This is important because, as Mair (2006, p. 44) states, "the 'successful' neologisms are those whose statistical distribution closely follows the trend for general textual growth after the irregular first years of institutionalization with its

externally determined wild ups and downs". In fact, it is implied that a lot of neologisms which survive the entire formation process disappear from active use, and consequently from dictionaries, relatively quickly.

The chosen methodological approach is that of corpus analysis as it allows us to analyze large quantities of authentic language from a diachronic point of view and as such is a good window into the changes happening in a language. Flowerdew (2009) states that "no dictionary or grammar is able to describe the language" (p. 329) and this is precisely why corpora as sources of authentic language should be used to investigate frequency and diffusion of neologisms as they allow us to check for pre and post-lexicographic presence of the target lexical items across genres and time periods.

Methodology

A combination of newly added words to the Merriam-Webster dictionary and Dictionary.com from 2020 was used to create a list of neologisms for further analysis. Although there was some overlap between the two sources, all neologisms identified by either source were included in the final list, which therefore contains both shared and unique items. However, it is important to mention that some words were excluded from the list, as their potential polysemous meanings could detract from the aim of the current analysis. An example is the word *GOAT,* added to the dictionary in 2020 with the meaning of *the greatest of all time* as its abbreviation. For this target word, corpus searches inevitably include the results for the meaning of *goat* as an *animal* and therefore, the frequency and distribution figures are not useful for the current research. The same reason applies to the other excluded words, and these are: *icon, Pride, ace, ratio,* and *twitch.* They all have established meanings and, without a comprehensive semantic analysis, their frequency counts cannot be reliably used for neologism research. Another set of excluded neologisms included those related to COVID-19, which were, in fact, contained in a separate list of newly added items for 2020 and included expressions such as *COVID-19, social distancing, contact tracing*, and *physical distancing*. It is important to note that such neologisms related to COVID-19 have already been analyzed in depth (Asif et al., 2021; Al-Haj Eid et al., 2024) and therefore did not warrant further examination in this study.

The final selected neologism list included forty expressions. The study uses data from two separate corpora developed by Davies (2008; 2016). The Corpus of Contemporary American English (the COCA corpus available at https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/) is a one-billion-word corpus with eight genres and covering American English from 1990 to 2019, while the corpus of NEWS on the Web (the NOW corpus available at https://www.english-corpora.org/now/) is a 20+ billion word corpus created from online, digital newspapers and magazines and it is regularly updated on yearly basis starting from 2010 up until today.

First, all the expressions were individually used as query terms within the COCA with *sections* option selected. This resulted in total frequency and distribution counts for all neologisms across the following COCA genres (*web, blogs, TV and movies, spoken, academic, magazines, newspapers*) and three distinct time periods (*1990-1999, 2000-2009, 2010-2019*). Frequency counts in COCA and NOW are calculated based on the absolute count of occurrences and this is the integrated *raw frequency* option within the search bar interface. The results were presented in a tabular form.

The reason why newly added neologisms from 2020 are the ones under consideration is the fact that COCA has been updated up until 2019, so adding more recent neologisms would not

make it possible to examine a significant and important section of their development over the years, especially leading up to their actual inclusion in the dictionary. However, the NOW corpus does have later additions, and all the target neologisms were checked against this corpus as well, which made it possible to examine their development even post dictionary addition. It is important to note that, due to the size of the NOW corpus, it was not possible to search for some highly frequent terms, as the interface does not allow it. One such example is the neologism *service animal*. These expressions were left blank in the tabular overview as were cases where zero frequency counts were determined.

Results and discussion

Table 1 below shows total frequency counts across the four time periods for all the target neologisms across the entirety of COCA. As can be seen, figures vary substantially. While certain terms such as *deadname* had no resulting matches, others were used more frequently. Interestingly, there were many examples showing a rather sudden spike in the frequency of use such as in the case of neologisms *deepfake* and *service animal*. It is precisely these examples that can be of more interest for the diachronic segment of analysis of initial neologisms to check their stability in the target language over time. There were also many words showing stable, but definitely not linear, frequency figures across the analyzed time periods, such as *MeToo* or *contouring*.

Table 1. *Frequency and distribution of individual selected neologisms across COCA.*

New word/phrase	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	MAG	NEWS	ACAD	90-94	95-99	00-04	05-09	10-14	15-19
MAGA	301	16	6	30	31	52	66	36	8	13	45	8	17	188
WHITESPLAIN	1					1								1
BROWNFACE	14	9			2	2		1			1	1		3
METOO	140	3	8	36	72	15	4			2	1		23	103
JANKY	9	1		2	5		1		1			1		6
AFRO-LATINO	7	1			2		2	2			2	1		3
ZHUZH	5			3	2							2	2	1
SWOLE	48	6		25		1			5	7	4	8	10	8
JABRONI	14			6		8					1	2	1	10
NOTHINGBURGER	24	12	3		3	3	2						2	7
AMIRITE	93	70	15			7	1							8
BATTLE ROYALE	205	37	32	15	14	77	15	2	4	4	7	30	13	78
CONTOURING	172	6	12	11	11	73	6	46	29	16	24	30	27	28

DUNNING-KRUGER EFFECT	33	18	15										33	
DGAF	7	3	3			1								1
GENDER REVEAL	32	5		3	14	8	1						1	26
INFORMATION BUBBLE	6	2	4										6	
WORLD-BUILDING	128	39	38			36	4	11	1	2	5	3	1	39
ISH	658	178	129	104	27	30	56	16	30	39	33	39	119	91
TECHLASH	4					4								4
OFF-GRID	223	61	33	11	4	82	9	23	5	15	19	24	49	17
SERVICE ANIMAL	184	4	165	1	2	4	3	3		1		1	3	10
BIROMANTIC	1					1								1
DEEPFAKE	25			2	2	21								25
TRUTHINESS	140	61	29		11	20	16	3				24	5	21
NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING	131	20	20		2	25	4	60	1	2	2	1	12	73
COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT	91	22	38			4	17	10	4	2	7	3	1	14
AGILE DEVELOPMENT	51	22	15		1	1	1	11					1	13
ECOANXIETY	3					3								3
BOMBOGENESIS	5	1			3		1						1	3
CAP AND TRADE	768	211	286		169	43	39	20		2	1	151	109	8
GENDER-INCLUSIVE	31	6	6			7	1	11	3	1	1	2		12
IMPOSTER SYNDROME	11			6		3		2		1			1	9
FINNA	63	3	3	56				1		1	1		6	49
ZONKEY	3				3								3	
IATROPHOBIA														
AFRICAN PYGMY ELEPHANT														

DEADNAME	
HODOPHOBIA	
UNIVERBATION	

The next table, Table 2, shows the total frequency distribution of neologisms across the various genres of COCA and it reveals that certain genres tend to be more conducive to the use of neologisms. For example, *web, blog*, and *spoken* genres stand out as genres that were also hypothesized to show this increase confirming one of the working hypotheses. At the same time, there are some cases where semantics seem to be a deciding factor as to the genre distribution so, for example, *natural language processing* shows the highest frequency in the *academic* genre, as can be expected for a specialized term belonging to a professional jargon.

Table 2. *Total frequency and distribution of selected neologisms across COCA.*

ALL	***BLOG***	***WEB***	***TV/M***	***SPOK***	***MAG***	***NEWS***	***ACAD***	***90-94***	***95-99***	***00-04***	***05-09***	***10-14***	***15-19***
3631	***817***	***860***	***311***	***380***	***532***	***249***	***258***	***91***	***108***	***154***	***331***	***446***	***863***

Finally, Tables 3 and 4 give us an insight into the NOW corpus revealing even more interesting results. While many of the selected neologisms remain somewhat stable, and some of these new expressions even show continuous increase in frequency over the years, there are some examples that show very clear decreasing trends of use over the analyzed time periods confirming the last working hypothesis. To illustrate, *brownfaced* and *Afro-Latino* showed a significant decline over the years whereas *MAGA* and *janky* are on the increase.

Table 3. *Frequency and distribution counts of individual selected neologisms across NOW.*

New word/phrase	ALL	2010	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
MAGA	81205	**77**	**80**	**124**	**90**	**100**	**123**	**305**	**523**	**1149**	**2565**	**4372**	**5651**	**10045**	**8126**	**16650**	**31225**
WHITESPLAIN	21							3	3	1	3	3	5		1	2	
BROWNFACE	1285	3	16	3	5	15	11	16	24	12	638	267	85	98	33	27	32
METOO	5617	2	5	1		1	2	10	122	1752	844	475	570	689	326	394	424
JANKY	3159	9	8	20	22	14	39	77	81	112	269	385	389	389	320	446	579
AFRO-LATINO	1006	3	2	2		7	11	42	1	18	43	143	366	169	71	81	47
ZHUZH	774				2	1	3		3	11	23	84	91	100	130	170	156
SWOLE	1189		7		3	3	7	13	20	32	176	250	269	143	60	75	131
JABRONI	182		3	1	3	1	16	7	9	3	18	23	19	10	39	22	8
NOTHINGBURGER	682	2		2	4	1	6	18	48	32	54	75	57	99	79	69	136

AMIRITE	1292	8	11	41	45	27	24	86	83	51	154	212	223	125	84	71	47
BATTLE ROYALE	33987	**45**	**43**	**199**	**103**	**80**	**81**	**204**	**682**	**3580**	**4677**	**7107**	**5379**	**3367**	**2177**	**2698**	**3565**
CONTOURING	7018	44	65	49	70	112	221	675	475	327	483	536	786	830	752	801	792
DUNNING-KRUGER EFFECT																	
DGAF	408	1		10	3	3	21	43	30	14	67	51	41	44	23	38	19
GENDER REVEAL																	
INFORMATION BUBBLE																	
WORLD-BUILDING	9654	25	49	54	67	73	110	237	273	290	658	991	1355	1201	995	1386	1890
ISH	**15852**	**111**	**97**	**135**	**193**	**206**	**199**	**1369**	**1201**	**1244**	**1414**	**1815**	**1633**	**2411**	**2047**	**989**	**788**
TECHLASH	390							1		54	74	108	75	49	17	11	1
OFF-GRID	**21476**	**92**	**140**	**228**	**274**	**321**	**487**	**1248**	**1367**	**1580**	**2103**	**1761**	**1783**	**2486**	**2090**	**2336**	**3180**
SERVICE ANIMAL																	
BIROMANTIC	124				1	2	3		1	1	8	9	57	27	2	5	8
DEEPFAKE	23187								**1**	**258**	**1601**	**1647**	**1637**	**1560**	**4281**	**7397**	**4805**
TRUTHINESS	742	36	27	42	26	34	35	126	106	42	66	75	47	30	18	28	4
NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING																	
COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT																	
AGILE DEVELOPMENT	1980	22	44	34	63	65	62	162	127	97	162	276	379	204	106	82	95
ECOANXIETY	66		1						1		16	2	4	13	8	9	12
BOMBOGENESIS	477			1		2	3	9	22	95	41	18	20	151	33	75	7
CAP AND TRADE																	
GENDER-INCLUSIVE	2214	2	5	14	7	15	20	47	64	51	135	177	373	352	271	279	402
IMPOSTER SYNDROME	8196	1	10	2	27	16	32	130	114	234	420	676	1217	1528	1388	1149	1252
FINNA	1034	2	7	10	4	9	9	24	25	33	95	135	161	114	77	151	178
ZONKEY	97	4	1		13	4	2	3	3	10	2	39	4	5	5	2	
IATROPHOBIA	22			1		1						2	2	11	4	1	
AFRICAN PYGMY ELEPHANT	3							1	2								

DEADNAME	544							4	3	7	14	63	101	98	92	121	41
HODOPHOBIA	6												2	1	3		
UNIVERBATION	6											2	4				

In fact, the incredible increase in the frequency of use for some of the selected neologisms not only makes up for the ones on the decrease but it manages to continuously keep the frequency counts on the rise as Table 4 below clearly shows. For example, neologisms *MAGA* and *off-grid* are some of those incredibly frequent and stable examples.

Table 4. *Total frequency and distribution counts of selected neologisms across NOW.*

ALL	***2010***	***2011***	***2012***	***2013***	***2014***	***2015***	***2016***	***2017***	***2018***	***2019***	***2020***	***2021***	***2022***	***2023***	***2024***	***2025***
223895	***489***	***621***	***973***	***1025***	***1113***	***1527***	***4860***	***5414***	***11090***	***16823***	***21779***	***22785***	***26349***	***23658***	***35565***	***49824***

Conclusion

To conclude, even though new words seem to emerge daily, spurred by trends, creativity and general public needs, only some of them become permanently integrated into the vocabulary and their use remains stable or strengthened throughout the years, whereas many others remain only temporarily before fading from use. In addition, their use across genres also differs a lot. In this sense, as previously identified conduits of modern digital communication that increasingly blur the boundaries between the spoken and written language, web-based and blog genres display some of the highest frequency counts of neologism use. Conversely, the more traditional and conventional genres, such as academic writing, display the lowest frequency counts. From a diachronic perspective, the data further reveals that not all of the neologisms undergo the full institutionalization process as their frequency of use across time periods is often unstable and many show a noticeable decline.

Therefore, as the results reveal that some terms fade quickly after the early surges while others become widely adopted, research such as this can be of use for lexicographers to further enhance and refine their dictionary inclusion criteria, as well as to revisit some of the earlier choices much sooner than anticipated. English language teaching and learning can also benefit from studies such as this one as they allow for better informed creation of teaching materials and allow for educators to stay current and keep up with the changes. Linguistically speaking, investigations into the predominant word formation process resulting in neologisms can propel forward general language studies, especially combined with semantic and register analysis.

Zaključak

Kao zaključak, iako se čini da se nove riječi pojavljuju svakodnevno potaknute trendovima, kreativnošću i potrebama javnosti, samo neke od njih se trajno integrišu u vokabular i njihova upotreba ostaje stabilna ili čak jača godinama, dok su druge tu samo kratko i onda nestanu iz upotrebe. Pored toga, njihova upotreba po žanrovima se također dosta razlikuje. U tom smislu, web i blog žanrovi, kao ranije prepoznati kanali savremene digitalne komunikacije koji sve više brišu granice između govornog i pisanog jezika, pokazuju neke od najviših vrijednosti učestalosti upotrebe neologizama. Nasuprot tome, tradicionalni i ustaljeni žanrovi, poput akademskog pisanja, bilježe najniže vrijednosti učestalosti. Iz dijahronijske perspektive, podaci

dodatno otkrivaju da svi neologizmi ne prolaze kroz cjelokupan process institucionalizacije, budući da je njihova upotreba kroz vremenske periode često nestabilna, a mnogi pokazuju i primjetan pad učestalosti upotrebe.

Stoga, budući da rezultati pokazuju kako pojedini izrazi brzo nestaju nakon ranog porasta, dok su drugi opće prihvaćeni, istraživanja poput ovog mogu biti od koristi leksikografima za dodatno poboljšanje i unapređenje kriterija dodavanja novih riječi u rječnike, kao i za ponovno preispitivanje nekih ranijih izbora, i to mnogo ranije nego što bi se očekivalo. Područje podučavanja i učenja engleskog jezika također može imati koristi od istraživanja poput ovog jer ona omogućavaju izradu bolje utemeljenih nastavnih materijala i dozvoljavaju predavačima da ostanu u toku i u korak s promjenama. U lingvističkom smislu, istraživanja o glavnim procesima tvorbe riječi koji rezultiraju neologizmima mogu unaprijediti opća jezička istraživanja posebno u kombinaciji sa semantičkom analizom i analizom registra.

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