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Lexical and Semantic Neology in English

Introduction

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Introduction

Denis Jamet and Adeline Terry

It is fair to say that the very notion of “neology” may appear fuzzy and hard to define; consequently the definitions will vary according to linguists. That is the reason why the 12th issue of *Lexis – Journal in English Lexicology* has decided to focus on **lexical and semantic neology in English**, from a **synchronic** and **diachronic** approach. Why is this linguistic concept so difficult to define despite the various studies that have been devoted to this phenomenon? Neology is traditionally defined by lexicologists as the “incorporation of new items in the lexicon of a language” (“l’incorporation d’éléments nouveaux dans le lexique d’une langue” (Humbley [2006: 91]), but neology is not so easy to delimit and define, as one of the characteristic features of neologisms seems to be that they exist in “discourse” (“parole”) but not in “language” (“langue”), as they are not (yet) recorded in dictionaries (see Humbley [2006: 92], Pruvost & Sablayrolles [2003: 6]).

Depending on the speakers, but also on the discourse where the candidate to neology has emerged, there exists a “neological sentiment” which may vary. Therefore, it seemed interesting to focus on both **the linguistic and the extralinguistic contexts which surround the creation of neologisms** in this issue, with a special emphasis on three main areas of research found, to varying degrees, in the five papers of this issue:

- The first area of research tackles the **definition** and the **motivation** of neology by focusing on English, or by adopting a contrastive analysis between English or French;
- The second area of research focuses on the issue of **productivity**, especially the productivity of the various word-formation processes and mechanisms for lexical creativity, be they about lexical or semantic neology, either by analyzing a specific word-formation process, or a combination or comparison of several;
- The third area of research deals with the **diffusion** and the **success** of neologisms in English, by focusing on how neologisms are perceived, how they may evolve and how they thrive (how lexicographers, institutions, speakers, authors, etc. react to them).

The three areas of research account for the difficulty to delimit and define clearly neology and neologisms: first, the **definition** depends on the fact that the linguistic realizations of neology – i.e. “neologisms” – are given different reactions according to

speakers: some would consider a given occurrence a neologism, some a nonce-formation or hapax, when others would consider the occurrence a lexicalized word. A neologism is generally defined as a new lexeme or phrase entering a given language, or a new meaning taken by an existing lexeme or phrase in a given language; yet, neologisms are not always so easy to define, because when does a neologism cease to be a neologism? There is no clear-cut answer to the question, because, depending on lexicologists and lexicographers, the answer may vary: it may be before the lexeme or phrase is officially recorded in dictionaries, or when it is recorded in dictionaries. But if we choose the latter option, a question immediately arises: how long does a neologism remain a neologism? A neologism ceases to be a neologism when it ceases to be perceived as such, i.e. when the novelty accompanying it is no longer perceived by speakers of a given language – although different speakers may not have the same perception.

The **reasons** and **motivations** behind the creation of neologisms may also vary, and account for the difficulty to clearly delimit the concept: a neologism is created either to fill in a lexical gap (a new object, a new concept is invented or discovered and needs to be named), to fine-tune an existing notion (a phenomenon which is possibly often accompanied by a slight semantic shift), but also because of a desire to play with language (be humorous, feeling of in-groupness, etc.). Neologisms in standard English – mostly found in teenage speech, as they are linked to generational criteria and as the main motivations do not seem to be to fill in a lexical gap – therefore need to be distinguished from neologisms in English for specialized languages – such as political and institutional neologisms, among others –, which are linked to the emergence of new concepts, of new disciplines requiring new terminology or lexicon.

Broadly speaking, four different cases account for the creation of neologisms according to Pruvost & Sablayrolles [2003]:

1. **A new signifier with a new meaning** (i.e. *ex-nihilo* lexical creations: there are no examples for taboo language, as words referring to people of size already exist);
2. **A new meaning for an existing signifier** (i.e. widening or narrowing of meaning via metaphor, metonymy, semantic shift, etc.);
3. **A new signifier for an existing meaning** (i.e. a new signifier is either invented, or borrowed from the actual lexicon, with a new meaning);
4. **An existing signifier is reintroduced** (i.e. a rare case when an existing form which was out of usage is used again, with or without the same meaning).

The two main types of neology, **semantic neology** (a new meaning for an existing signifier) and **lexical neology** (a new signifier for an existing or non-existing meaning) correspond to cases #2 and #3.

Another difficulty is that the time-span between an individual, discursive neologism to an accepted, lexicalized neologism can vary from several months to several years, depending on the **diffusion** and **success**, i.e. on the frequency of use of the neologism. Some factors favor the propagation and the potential success of neologisms, but the success of a given neologism paradoxically leads to its demise, as the frequency of use and lexicalization are synonymous with the loss of the neological sentiment for this ex-neologism to be. The lifespan of a neologism is difficult to predict, even if some neologisms are more suitable to enter the English lexicon according to the semantic field, the period, the register, etc.

Then, even if the very concepts of “neology” and “neologisms” are tricky to define, they both play a major role in the creation and expansion of the lexicon, and exhibit one of the fundamental dimensions of lexical creation and expansion: creativity.

The papers included in this issue are based on English and French; they are organized from the most discursive, individual, non-lexicalized occurrences of neologisms to the more collective, stabilized, lexicalized occurrences of neologisms, i.e. those recorded in dictionaries.

In her paper entitled “Neology in children’s literature: A typology of occasionalisms”, **Cécile Poix** investigates neology in literary contexts. Her basic assumption is that literary texts contain many neologisms as the principle of poetic license allows writers to deviate from linguistic norms. She argues that word formation in literary texts deserves to be addressed as writers often take liberties. Her paper more specifically focuses on the status of neologisms in the specific discursive context of children’s literature and provides an analysis of those neologisms. Moreover, the author also uses Tournier’s classification of matrices of lexicogenesis [2007] and a corpus of children’s books to provide a typology of nonce formation processes for those occasionalisms.

The second paper of the volume discusses the aspects of word-formation processes of euphemisms for illness in English and French, by resorting to a comparative analysis. In “The Neological Functions of Disease Euphemisms in English and French: Verbal Hygiene or Speech Pathology?”, **Denis Jamet** aims to show that taboo language plays a significant role in the expansion of the lexicon as new euphemisms are constantly created. Euphemisms exhibit one of the fundamental factors in the evolution of any language: creativity. The author also argues that the process of creating new euphemisms to circumvent taboo is cyclic, and that the story of euphemistic language is never-ending as once euphemisms run out of euphemistic power and can no longer soften the threat of a disease, new euphemisms are created to replace them.

In the third paper of the volume, “The Complementarity of Crowdsourced Dictionaries and Professional Dictionaries viewed through the Filter of Neology”, **Franck Sajous**, **Amélie Josselin-Leray** and **Nabil Hathout** provide a comparison between dictionaries compiled by professional lexicographers and dictionaries written by the general public, through the filter of neology. Their study shows that it can prove quite difficult to deal with neologisms in dictionaries – mostly because there is no real consensus on the neological status of lexical units – and that the phenomena which can lead to linguistic change are numerous and complex. They conclude that crowdsourced dictionaries complement professional dictionaries and that amateur dictionaries have much potential in the study of neologisms – both lexical and semantic – as they cover a variety of specialized fields and record words that are not found in professional dictionaries.

Océane Foubert and **Maarten Lemmens** in “Gender-biased neologisms: the case of *man-X*” investigate *man*-neologisms such as *man bun* or *manspread* and reveal that those neologisms carry a gender-specific meaning rather than a generic one; a semantic analysis points to the fact that there are various representations of gender in language and more specifically in *man*-neologisms. The authors argue that there are four main motivations behind the coinage of neologisms: the strengthening of differences, the confirmation of gender stereotypes, the reappropriation of domains generally associated with women, and the naming of unwelcome male behaviors. The neologisms

aiming at the first two categories are less likely to be diffused than the last two, which however seem to be less numerous.

The last paper of this issue, “Where do new words like *boobage*, *flamage*, *ownage* come from? Tracking the history of *-age* words from 1100 to 2000 in the *OED3*” is a diachronic lexicographic study which deals with the morpho-semantic behavior of *-age* forms in the *OED3*. **Chris Smith** aims to determine the patterns of formation of *-age* forms to explain the diachronic processes that enable a loan form to become an independent productive pattern of derivation. She argues that the pattern of *-age* derivation has remained stable since around 1200: *-age* forms have been very productive, and the predictability of the relation between base word and derivative may explain this continued productivity through centuries. Finally, the author found that *-age* forms are not likely to be lexicalized and provides two possible explanations: because they are transparent or because of their productivity.

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