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Small is beautiful: from initials to words

Ingrid Fandrych

1. Background and terminology

Acronyms seem to have an ‘image problem’, as exemplified by the following quotation from the British National Corpus:

The rise of the acronym is perhaps one of the most important, if regrettable, linguistic phenomena of the modern age and their metamorphoses tell us a considerable amount about expert discourses. (BNP Acronym query, Match No. 81, JOV 2229)

This aptly summarises the misgivings and unease many speakers experience when they come across acronyms. On the other hand, acronyms are common and they are useful, being one of the most creative mechanisms we have in language. In addition, they can be funny or ridiculous, they can be descriptively accurate yet compact and manageable, or they can be to-the-point and, at the same time, obfuscating.

Some thirty-seven years ago, the American linguist Algeo made a beautiful declaration of love:

Acronyms are one way language has of paying homage to its written mode. They are works of art to be constructed and secrets to be unraveled. They communicate in the briefest possible way. They are secret passwords by which the user can identify himself as one of the ingroup. They are playthings for the poet, icons for the mystic, tools for the bureaucrat and data for the linguist. And anything that can serve all those ends has its future assured. (Algeo 1975 : 232)

Acronyms are a sign of the times, and they are amazingly creative. Therefore, I must admit that I love them—for their creativity, for breaking all the rules, for being colourful and creative, compact and comprehensive, disrespectful and domineering (see Algeo 1975 above and Cannon 1994 below). This paper is about acronyms and their use—it is, therefore different in focus from studies such as Philps (2011), which investigate submorphemic elements such as phonæstheses and their contribution to

word-formation and word-creation. In a way, my topic is more prosaic in that it attempts to discuss the more ‘mechanical’ production of words from initials.

But let us start by defining submorphemic, or non-morphematic, word-formation, i.e.

[...] any word-formation process that is **not morpheme-based** [...], that is, which uses at least one element which is not a morpheme; this element can be a splinter, a phonæstheme, part of a syllable, an initial letter, a number or a letter used as a symbol. (Fandrych 2004: 18; emphasis in original)

Words resulting from the combinations of submorphemic elements, that is acronyms, blends and clippings and onomatopœic processes, can be grouped together. In the present case, the focus will be on one of these processes only, namely acronymy, as this process is, arguably, the most creative of the set and therefore deserves special attention.

In what follows, I will use the term ‘acronym’ as an umbrella term (see Fandrych 2004: 19ff and 2007)¹ for the various words formed from the initials of longer word groups or phrases; this category can then be subdivided into ‘acronyms proper’, which are pronounced as words, for example, *radar* (‘radio detection and ranging’), *Nato* (‘North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’) and *PIN* (‘Personal Identification Number’), and ‘abbreviations’ or ‘initialisms’, for example, *CPU* (‘Central Processing Unit’), *UN* (‘United Nations’) and *VAT* (‘Value-Added Tax’). This distinction makes sense in view of the fact that there are some cases which can either be pronounced as words or letter-by-letter, such as *VAT* and *UFO* (‘Unidentified Flying Object’).

Acronyms make use of the initial letters of longer words or phrases; in some cases, all the available initials are used (*Nato*—‘North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’), in others, function words are omitted (for example, *Cites*—‘Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora’). However, in many cases, function words and combining forms also provide initials (see *ASP*—‘Anglo-Saxon Protestant’, and Cannon 1989: 108).

Not all linguists would agree that acronymy actually produces new words (see Fandrych 2004 for a review). The facts that acronyms are relatively irregular and that initialisms are not pronounced as words certainly makes them unusual. Nevertheless, the process is very common in English (and a number of other languages, such as Russian), and acronyms also display word-like ‘behaviour’, such as plural forms (for example, *UFOs*, *CPUs*) and the capacity to become part of new complex lexemes (embedded acronyms, e.g. *yuppification*).

Cannon characterises acronyms as “the most writing based of all categories of English word-formation” (1989: 116), and observes that many of them are “deliberate creations” (1989: 118). As their production is not governed by word-formation rules, he prefers the term ‘word creation’. Cannon (1989: 121) emphasises their productivity, their contribution to linguistic economy, and the fact that they can function as bases for further word-formation processes. However, according to him, they are not in-group markers because of their contextual nature and they are rarely formed by analogy—statements with which many linguists would disagree. Creativity is a major factor:

Acronyms are among the most creative, freewheeling creations in vocabulary today. They differ from most other items in that they are never lapses and are seldom formed by analogy, but are consciously made. Organizations sometimes choose a proper-sounding name by assembling a sequence of words to effect the desired collocation [...] (Cannon 1994: 81)

So, what makes acronyms special and distinguishes them from all other word-formation processes is their production or generation in the written mode (see also Fandrych 2008a: 111f). This mode of production opens up new avenues for creativity and playfulness (reverse acronyms)—and for ironic reinterpretations (backronyms)—most of which are deliberate formations (see also Algeo 1975 and Kreidler 2000: 957):

[I]n many cases, the full forms of acronyms are often lost rather quickly; this can be exploited through the formation of consciously formed ‘reverse’ acronyms which are homonymous (or, sometimes, homophonous) with existing words [...]. Reverse acronyms, such as *ABC*, *PLAN*, *whizzo* and *yummies* are playful and ironic and have a strong mnemonic effect. This loss of primary motivation through the severed link between the full form and the acronym is evident in compounds such as *PIN* (‘personal identification number’) *number* and *PESP* (‘Pre-Entry Science Programme’) *programme*. The pleonastic repetition of one element of the acronym as head of the new compound is a clear indication that speakers are not aware of the underlying phrase which formed the basis of the acronym. (Fandrych 2008a: 112)

As we have seen, acronymy makes use of submorphemic elements, in this case the initial letters of phrases. These initials ‘stand for’ or ‘represent’ **entire** words. In some cases, additional letter(s) or even syllables are used, such as *Nabisco* (‘National Biscuit Company’) or *Soweto* (‘South-Western Townships’). Here, the additional letters supply vowels which make the resulting syllabic acronyms pronounceable, or which turn what would otherwise have been abbreviations or initialisms into acronyms. Sometimes the initial letters/syllables are even rearranged in order to yield a pronounceable item, for example:

MISHAP—‘Missiles High-Speed Assembly Program’

↑ ____ ↑

(*Time*, 28 July 1961: 39)

It is their potential for creativity and irony that can lead to the formation of backronyms (such as *Fiat*—see below) and colloquialisms, such as *snafu* (‘situation normal, all fouled up’), *TGIF* (‘Thank God It’s Friday’) and *OTT* (‘over-the-top’). Backronyms reinterpret the original formation’s full form by providing a jocular second expansion, for example *Fiat* ‘Fix it again, Tony’ for the original ‘Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino’.

Finally, acronyms and abbreviations can also become parts of new, multiple formations (embedded acronyms—see below for further examples):

Acronymy	<i>USAID</i> (‘U.S. Agency for International Development’)
Blending	<i>AIM</i> (<i>AOL</i> + <i>IM</i> , with <i>AOL</i> —‘America Online’ and <i>IM</i> —‘Instant Messenger’), <i>Y2.1K</i> (Year 2000 + 2.1 + K for 1,000)
Conversion	(to) <i>R.S.V.P.</i> (‘répondez, s’il vous plaît’), (to) <i>TKO</i> (‘technical knock-out’)
Prefixation	<i>Un-PC</i> (‘politically correct’)
Suffixation	<i>yuppification</i> (‘young urban/upwardly mobile professional people’ + <i>ies</i>)

Thus,

[...] initials, the smallest graphemic units in the English language, are the building blocks for one of the most creative word-formation processes in the language. As

we have seen, initials represent entire words—that is, they are not, strictly speaking, ‘meaningful units’. This frequently leads to loss of primary motivation. Maybe it is this ‘independence’ of initials which permits language users to form creative new lexemes and which leads to the common loss of primary motivation, thus opening the door for homonymy, reinterpretation and irony. (Fandrych 2008a, 112)

Most research about acronyms seems to have been conducted in the 1980s and 1990s and many studies were concerned with categorisation and classification—an ambitious endeavour, as acronyms are so ‘random’ (at least at first sight) and multifarious. Aspects such as their use and perception were often neglected (with the exception of Fandrych 2004 and 2008b—see below for a brief review). Their reception and their effect largely went uncommented. The present paper attempts to fill this gap by means of a corpus study.

2. Functional aspects

A multi-level approach to the analysis of non-morphematic word-formation processes reveals that they “[...] mirror [...] our fast-lived and hectic lifestyle, in which attention, ‘packaging’ and efficiency seem to be of utmost importance” (Fandrych 2008b: 80). This is particularly true of acronyms used in information technology and electronic communication, that is in “Netspeak”, where

[...] the functions of words in communication—imparting and highlighting information, condensing it, categorising it, but also veiling it or even distorting it—are of particular importance, and competent speakers need to be aware of the multiplicity of roles words can play in order to act accordingly on the highly commercialised global stage. More than ever, critical competence is needed in order to sift through the flood of information (and misinformation) language users are overwhelmed by as consumers. On the other hand, those who ‘produce’ information need to be informed about the functional load of words in order to use them responsibly and ethically. (Fandrych 2008b: 80)

The ‘electronic revolution’ and globalisation have led to the creation of new types of acronyms (Fandrych 2007), such as “emoticons”², “netcronyms” or “e-abbrevs” (McArthur 2000: 40). In addition to numerous ‘traditional’ acronyms, such as WAP (‘Wireless Access Protocol’), *btw* (‘by the way’) and *lol* (‘laughing out loud’), we find forms such as *i18n* (‘internationalization’ = i + 18 letters + n), which require insider information in order to be able to decode them properly. Some items need to be (mentally) pronounced, for example, *10Q* (‘thank you’), *cu* (‘see you’), or they integrate numbers, such as *l8r* (‘later’). In some cases, such as *BCNU* (‘be seeing you’) and *ICQ* (‘I seek you’), the pronunciation of letters is split and rearranged: in this case, the letter <q> belongs to “the tail of the second word and the onset of the third word ([kju:] becomes [-kju:])” (Fandrych 2007: 149).

In modern scientific and technical writing, the traditional neo-classical technical terms are becoming less common and are replaced by acronyms, metaphors and blends—a trend which entails a certain degree of democratisation:

Technical vocabulary is characterised by increased accessibility and the technical terms provide a pool of elements which can be re-adopted into the mainstream much more easily than the neoclassical terms of old. (Fandrych 2007: 150).

Thus, the commonly observed contradiction between the technical preciseness, descriptive completeness and neutrality of acronyms on the one hand, and their

compactness on the other hand is complemented by two further aspects, namely their accessibility on the one hand, and, on the other hand, emotionality and playfulness, in some cases even ironic reinterpretations.

This is made possible by the almost instantaneous demotivation of acronyms (see also Fandrych 2004: 21, 122, 132, and Ungerer 1991a and 1991b), which enables processes such as remotivation, backronymy and playfulness. These can be exploited for special effects, such as attention catching and mnemonic purposes, which, in turn, can be used in the context of language teaching. These aspects will be discussed in section 4 below.

3. BNC queries

In order to determine how acronyms are used and perceived in discourse, a small corpus study was conducted, using the British National Corpus. Here is an overview of the BNC queries.¹ The following terms were searched for and they yielded the following results:

The query “acronym” returned 85 matches in 74 different texts (in 97,626,093 words; frequency: 0.87 instances per million words); of these: 7 in spoken texts.

The query “abbreviation” returned 96 matches in 64 different texts (in 97,626,093 words; frequency: 0.98 instances per million words); of these 13 in spoken texts.

The query “PIN number” returned 16 matches in 9 different texts (in 97,626,093 words; frequency: 0.17 instances per million words).

The query “RAM memory” returned 1 match in 1 text (in 97,626,093 words; frequency: 0.01 instances per million words).

The query “yuppie” returned 102 matches in 76 different texts (in 97,626,093 words; frequency: 1.04 instances per million words).

The discussion below will be based on items retrieved from the BNC in order to demonstrate the following aspects:

- Terminology, meta-comments and functional aspects
- Circularity, irony and humour: reverse acronyms, backronyms and motivation
- Circularity continued, or using acronyms in discourse: *PIN number* and *RAM memory*
- Circularity again: embedded acronyms

For the purposes of this study, circularity will be defined as the ‘recycling’ of material, that is, for cases where linguistic material is re-used or re-interpreted, for example in reverse acronyms (*PIN*), backronyms (*Fiat*) and embedded acronyms (*yuppification*), involving several layers or a multiplicity of processes.

4. Terminology, meta-comments and functional aspects

The following section will highlight some issues of terminology, that is, how acronyms and abbreviations are perceived and discussed (meta-comments) and some related issues, that is, the concept-forming and naming functions of acronyms, lexicalisation and institutionalisation.

Not surprisingly, the terminology is confusing. In the corpus, there are several references to ‘acronyms’ which are actually abbreviations and vice versa. An alternative interpretation would be to say that the cases labelled as ‘acronyms’ are actually cases of abbreviations or initialisms (see above) as a subcategory of the acronym. The ‘abbreviation’ example below could be interpreted as the ‘generic’ use of the term ‘abbreviation’—technically, this is a ‘real’ or ‘proper acronym’. Below is a small sample of how the terms are used by non-linguists.

Match No.	File	Acronym
34	CBX 2151	Nobody has yet decided what abbreviation or acronym we will use to describe these operations.
37	CJE 1435	Not all hereditary ailments are apparent at birth, and one of the more serious is progressive retinal atrophy, often referred to under the acronym PRA.
41	CSD 399	DEC declares gnomically of AXP, which combines letters from Alpha, VAX and PDP, that “it has meaning, but it’s not an acronym ”.
50	F9T 2167	Nor did it prevent the preservation of this category in the language of special education many years after its legal obliteration, in the acronym MLD (moderate learning difficulties), used in many of the same contexts for many of the same purposes, but without, as yet, the abusive tone that came to be associated with its predecessor.
75	HRD 1181	Indeed, in the training industry the acronym CBT meaning “computer based training” is from time to time reinterpreted to mean “computer based trouble”.
Match No.	File	Abbreviation
22	CAU 1620	What is the meaning of the abbreviation “EAT”?

With regard to how acronyms are perceived, I would like to turn back to the quotation given earlier, as an opener for the discussion of meta-comments on acronyms and abbreviations. So, let us have a look at this corpus quotation again:

The rise of the acronym is perhaps one of the most important, if regrettable, linguistic phenomena of the modern age and their metamorphoses tell us a considerable amount about expert discourses. (BNP Acronym query, Match No.81, JOV 2229)

The above quotation from the British National Corpus Query originated in an unpublished text entitled “Electronic information resources and the historian”. It is typical of a common negative attitude which the use of acronyms and abbreviations frequently generates. Even in cases where the attitude expressed is not outright negative, acronyms still seem to trigger comments, sometimes tongue-in-cheek—but hardly ever neutral. The next set of items drawn from the BNC presents a number of examples which include meta-comments about acronyms.

Some of these items comment on the (lack of) appropriateness of the chosen terms (items 22 and 31 below). But negative attitudes are not the only type of meta-comment found in the BNC: another interesting feature is that acronyms are often seen as belonging to the ‘corporate’ or ‘institutional’ world; they seem to have achieved a status similar to that of logos, mastheads, advertising slogans and the like. Items 5 and 52 demonstrate this assessment, and example number 40 ends in “but they can’t find a snappy **acronym** to fit the words.” In other words, if only a suitable acronym could be found, the process would be really complete.

The opinion expressed here shows that acronyms lend themselves to the naming of institutions and organisations. This naming function is similar to what Leech (1974, 31) calls the “concept-defining role” of the word and the “institutionalizing effect of neologism” (32), which can also lead to “jargonization”, that is, “[t]he simplifying and stereotyping effect of conceptual categories” (34). What is true of neologisms in general seems to be particularly true of acronyms, especially those which are used to name institutions, companies and technical concepts: the acronym seems to have taken the concept-forming quality and, at the same time, the jargonising devaluation of concepts to new heights. The fact that acronyms are so particularly useful as labels and names might be related to the fact that they are often coined to do precisely that.

In item 85, on the other hand, the full form seems to have got lost; the acronym, however, sticks, it has become institutionalised and even lexicalised²—and, in the process, it has suffered from loss of primary motivation and is remembered because of its homonymy with an existing English word, and due to the fact that the first initial must have something to do with elections.

Here is a selection of examples from the query:

Match No.	File	Acronym	Comment	
5	A5R 476	Information on the IRA threat flows through a myriad of British and West German organisations -- each with its own headquarters, staff and acronym .	naming, meta	
8	AAF 879	Today the answer could be encapsulated in one word, the programmer’s acronym , gigo: or garbage in, garbage out.	meta	
22	AR7 1374	A Standing Medical Advisory Committee with the unfortunate acronym of SMAC, has warned against such testing (as well as “impromptu testing by General Practitioners with machines borrowed from drug companies”, (British Medical Journal, July 21, 1990).	meta	reverse, irony
25	B3D 517	PLATO is the acronym for Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations.	meta	reverse

31	CAT 726	This presaged by 20 years that apt acronym CREEP (Committee to Re-Elect the President), whose coffers financed the Watergate scandal which led to jail for ten aides and to Nixon's resignation in 1974 to avoid impeachment.	meta	reverse, irony
33	CBC 8724	Rather than being an acronym for European Currency Unit, the name is a revival of an 11th-Century gold coin which sported a shield motif.	meta	reverse
40	CP3 309	The mania for forming industry consortia is getting so out of hand that a group of leading manufacturers, software developers and vendors are coming together to make some sense of it and eliminate duplicated effort by creating a single consortium to which everyone will be invited to belong: there is no confirmation of suggestions that the idea was the first initiative from new IBM Corp chief Louis Gerstner, who accedes to the top job today, but we hear that the army of companies is still bogged down arguing about what to call the thing -- the best they've dreamed up so far is the Consortium for Object-oriented Methods and Programming for the Unix Terminal and Enterprise-wide Recasting of Interactive Networked Database Undertakings with Software Transitioning and Revision for Y'all, but they can't find a snappy acronym to fit the words.	meta	
52	FAV 1824	Other departments have installed similar systems, complete with acronym.	meta	
81	J0V 2229	The rise of the acronym is perhaps one of the most important, if regrettable, linguistic phenomena of the modern age and their metamorphoses tell us a considerable amount about expert discourses.	meta	
82	J1J 1442	All this talk about scum reminded me that over here (Montreal) scum is an acronym for a um er feminist group called the Society for Cutting Up Men ... they are a nice bunch of girls and would probably be Man U fans if they watched football.	meta	reverse, irony
85	JTF 324	It's a <"clears throat"> it's a thing called <pause> EARS er which is an acronym for <pause> Starts with Election anyway. <laugh> <laugh>	meta	
Match No.	File	Abbreviation	Comment	
15	B2P 1611	Several of the dubious cases of jurists such as Ulpian have been explained as the product of compilatorial abbreviation .	meta	

66	H9L 2786	"I don't even want to hear you saying his name again, especially that ridiculous abbreviation you keep using."	meta	
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As the last two items—examples of abbreviations—show, there is not a lot of difference in the way acronyms and abbreviations are treated: negative attitudes are common, but so is irony. Many language users do not seem to tire of expressing their scorn for acronyms and of blaming them for all sorts of stylistic and semantic aberrations—to the extent that negative opinions about acronyms get repetitive and tiresome. In order to shed some light on the reasons for the negative attitudes towards acronyms, a sociolinguistic survey would have to be conducted; however, this is beyond the scope of this paper. The negative attitudes might, however, have to do with the fact that acronyms often lose their primary motivation rather quickly and are thus perceived to be 'secretive' and semantically opaque—a feature which can be exploited for humorous effect, as the next section will show.

On the other hand, many acronyms are coined intentionally and with obvious joy—and they are also appreciated by many language users and linguists (see, for example, Algeo 1975 and Cannon 1994 above), especially for their potential for irony and humour. This aspect will be addressed in the following section.

5. Circularity, irony and humour: reverse acronyms, backronyms and motivation

By 'demotivation' or 'loss of motivation' I understand the fact that, once coined and in general usage, most acronyms are no longer perceived as such or, at the very least, language users no longer know what the acronym refers to. This is certainly true of acronyms such as *NATO* (or: *Nato*), *radar*, *laser* ('Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation'), *PIN* (*number*), etc. In other words, these forms quickly become unrelated, arbitrary lexical items. The vacuum left by this loss of motivation can be filled through reinterpretation and, in the case of reverse acronyms, through homonymy with existing words. Such consciously 'engineered' formations, such as *FAIT* ('Families Against Intimidation and Terror') and *SMAC* ('Standing Medical Advisory Committee') quickly become associated in the minds of speakers with the homonymous 'prop' words. Some consciously formed, intentional acronyms are coined for effect by exploiting the homonymy with existing words which are seen as semantically related and/or which give the acronym an additional semantic (and often ironic) 'twist'. Examples from the BNC include *SCUM* ('Society for Cutting Up Men') and *CREEP* ('Committee to Re-Elect the President'). And, just for the record, there are, of course, also reverse abbreviations, such as *ABC* ('A Better Chance'—see Appendix).

Backronyms go one step further in that they reinterpret regular words or acronyms by giving them new, often humorous, expansions or full forms. An example from the BNC is 'For unlawful carnal knowledge' as a reinterpretation of the notorious F-word (see item 28 below). Many of these forms are purely jocular, of course, and many are the stuff of folk-etymologically inspired legends. Here are some selected items from the BNC in context:

Match No.	File	Acronym	Comment	
22	AR7 1374	A Standing Medical Advisory Committee with the unfortunate acronym of SMAC, has warned against such testing (as well as “impromptu testing by General Practitioners with machines borrowed from drug companies”, (British Medical Journal, July 21, 1990).	meta	reverse, irony
28	BP4 254	There are still some people who believe that the word began as an acronym : in the Middle Ages, when a couple were convicted of fornication, the bailiff would enter in his book—“For unlawful carnal knowledge”, which, as business as brisk and prosecutions plenty, was usually abbreviated to F.u.c.k.	meta	backronym
31	CAT 726	This presaged by 20 years that apt acronym CREEP (Committee to Re-Elect the President), whose coffers financed the Watergate scandal which led to jail for ten aides and to Nixon’s resignation in 1974 to avoid impeachment.	meta	reverse, irony
45	EBU 2692	Until 15 June the exhibition “F.A.I.T.” (acronym for Families Against Intimidation and Terror, a neutral protective organisation in Northern Ireland) by Danish artist Claus Carstensen features green and white flags, photographs and designs relating to Carstensen’s interest in what he calls “a third force” in both politics and art ...	meta	reverse
51	FAN 1276	This was the situation in 1965 which triggered off the “30th September Movement”: (invariably called in Indonesia by another acronym Gestapu , for Gerkang (movement) September, and Tigapolu (thirtieth).	meta	reverse, irony
65	HOY 2034	The word “basic” is a [sic] acronym of British American Scientific International and Commercial.	meta	reverse
77	HXR 36	The report considers which level of geographical unit is most suited to analysing regional problems in the Community from the three levels defined in the mid-1970s and subsumed under the French acronym , NUTS levels I, II and III.	meta	reverse, irony
82	J1J 1442	All this talk about scum reminded me that over here (Montreal) scum is an acronym for a um er feminist group called the Society for Cutting Up Men ... they are a nice bunch of girls and would probably be Man U fans if they watched football.	meta	reverse, irony

On the other hand, backronyms are often used for mnemonic purposes, as the following examples (pointed out to me by my colleague, Christina Sanchez-Stockhammer, who collected them from her students in a grammar class) show:

fanboys—‘for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so’ as coordinating conjunctions

The subjunctive is WEIRD:

- Wishes
- Emotions
- Impersonal expressions
- Recommendations
- Desire, doubt, denial

Stock & Strapparava (2005: 137) even mention the “HAHAcronym, a project devoted to humorous acronym production”, based on “computational humor” (138). This function is frequently exploited in advertising, headlines and for mnemonic purposes. In the case of mnemonics, I feel very tempted to coin the term *AHAcronym* in analogy to Stock & Strapparava’s formation as mnemonic formations of the kind mentioned above can lead to a deeper understanding of complex subject matters (triggering “aha!”-utterances) and they can help to memorise these.

Not surprisingly, the number of instances involving circularity in abbreviations is much smaller:

Match No.	File	Abbreviation	Comment	
23	CAY 82	The abbreviation “mAH” used above stands for milliamphours.		reverse
88	JSA 751	Now nice abbreviation for thought patterns is thop <voice quality: spelling> T H O P <end of voice quality> <pause> when we talk about thought patterns or thops <pause> a method of gathering ideas a meth-- a method of getting things down on paper so we don’t lose them but not in a linear way in a spatial way a right brain activity.	terminology	reverse? ono- matopoeia?

Examples for back-abbreviations are *CNN* (‘Cable News Network’—‘Chicken Noodles Network’) and *PC* (‘patriotically correct’) (see Appendix).

As we have seen in the above section, circularity is a function of reinterpretation, in this case, the creation of reverse acronyms and backronyms. But there are more aspects which can be interpreted in the light of circularity, as the next section will show.

6. Circularity continued, or using acronyms in discourse: *PIN number* and *RAM memory*

The query “PIN number” returned 16 matches in 9 different texts (in 97,626,093 words; frequency: 0.17 instances per million words). The first striking thing when looking

through the results of this query is that only six instances are spelt *PIN number*, the majority (10 instances) are spelt in lower case, as *pin number*. This might be due to the fact that samples from spoken texts in the BNC were transcribed by student assistants, which, in turn, is an indication that *PIN/pin* has lost its primary motivation and is no longer perceived as acronym. The item has become institutionalised and it just happens to be homonymous with another lexical item.

Despite the fact that the query “RAM memory” only returned 1 match in 1 text (in 97,626,093 words; frequency: 0.01 instances per million words), the fact that it does occur is an indication that both *PIN* (‘personal identification number’) and *RAM* (‘random access memory’) have lost their primary motivation: users seem not to be aware of the acronymic origins of these elements. They are now leading independent ‘lives’ as elements which only ‘receive’ meaning—or get disambiguated in context—that is, in combination with the second parts of their respective combinations (compounding). Here is a selection of BNC samples which contain *PIN number* and *RAM memory*:

Match No	File	PIN number	Comment
1	CEN 1902	A GANG of five teenagers stole a 20-year-old woman’s cash card and then tortured her to give them the pin number .	spelling
2	CH2 567	One victim is a city housewife who revealed the PIN number of her husband’s account.	
4	K4M 1559	POLICE have warned people to be on their guard after a smooth-talking gang conned an elderly woman into giving her bank cash card away and disclosing her PIN number .	
8	KBM 405	And you won-- <“clears throat”> cos I haven’t got a pin number .	spelling
12	KCK 1348	if it was a machine and you can only use your own pin number you see to do everything	spelling
15	KE3 3331	I use my bank pin number , that way I don’t forget it <laugh>.	spelling
17	KE3 3366	Oh, no I put a six where a five should be, in my pin number , that’s all I did, but I just, I just stood there and my mind just completely went blank, I couldn’t remember it at all.	spelling
Match No	File	RAM memory	Comment
1	ALW 1090	It has a 25 MHz clock speed, 4 megabyte RAM memory and 160 megabyte hard disk and is compatible with all current TA Instruments modules and software.	

Another BNC query, namely *ATM machine*, did not yield any results, possibly because *ATM* (‘Automatic Teller Machine’) is an American English term for the (British English)

cash point or *hole in the wall*. However, this case is interesting in that it constitutes a case of a redundant abbreviation. *ATM machine*, *PIN number* and *RAM memory* are examples of, strictly speaking, redundancy or pleonasm (in that the last constituent of the acronym is repeated as head of the compound), of circularity—and of embedding, which we will turn to now.

7. Circularity again: embedded acronyms

The query “yuppie” returned 102 matches in 76 different texts (in 97,626,093 words; frequency: 1.04 instances per million words). What is striking here is that, in most instances, *yuppie*, which most certainly started out as a noun, is either used as a (denominal) adjective or as a constituent (in most cases the first/modifier constituent) of compounding³. This means that we are faced with multiple word-formation, that is, conversion, in the case of adjectival use, and compounding in the latter. There is also one case of blending (*gypkie* < *green* + *yuppie*). Both conversion and compounding are, of course, very common word-formation processes in English. Here are some examples from the BNC query:

Match No	File	yuppie	Comment
1	A0L 1281	“See you,” I say and escape to City Road, where an off-licence is opening and looks up surprised to see an office yuppie (his definition) among the line of winoes so early in the morning-o!	head of cpd
8	A3H 30	“Henry V offers (Branagh), better than any other play in the repertoire, what might be called a yuppie dynamic, a mythology of success and self-definition rather than of struggle ...”	adj
15	AB3 1006	Both share a policy of ostentatious self-neglect, that’s an unarticulated, instinctive reaction against contemporary yuppie culture’s ideals of health and self-realization.	adj/cpd
19	ABJ 697	The financial problems at some ski resorts suggest that skiing -- the quintessential 1980s yuppie holiday -- is no place to put your 1990s money.	cpd
32	AS3 1294	“Would you like yuppie windsurfing men, bearded grim-faced mountain men, or the model aeroplane men with flat caps and quilted waistcoats?”	adj
35	BN8 437	Why has the LDDC changed the presentation of itself from that of a “ yuppie ” development agency to an inner city concern “working for the community” ?	adj
36	BNH 896	The company’s launch campaign through WCRS moved away from its yuppie connotations to emphasise recyclability.	adj

45	CBF 2045	A TEACHER made legal history yesterday by becoming the first person to win damages for so-called yuppie flu.	cpd
96	K1Y 3643	The two volumes with their half a million definitions will set you back £120 -- but will reveal the secrets of a wobbly -- a fit of panic, a cereologist -- one who studies crop circles and a guppie -- a green yuppie .	blend

In addition, the ‘acronym’ query gives us the following unusual acronymic formation (however, I would not agree with the opinion expressed in the sample):

Match No.	File	Acronym	Comment
41	CSD 399	DEC declares gnomically of AXP, which combines letters from Alpha, VAX and PDP, that “it has meaning, but it’s not an acronym ”.	abbr + acro in acro

In my opinion, this item is an acronym (rather than a blend) as it combines single letters—despite the fact that one of them, namely X, is not an initial and that we do not know which P in PDP was used to form AXP.

Further examples of embedded acronyms taken from the Fandrych (2004) database are acronyms which have become parts of new complex lexical items, such as acronyms, blends and suffixations (see Appendix for full forms and sources):

acronym/abbreviation	embedded in
ABB < ASEA (‘Allmänna Svenska Elektriska Aktiebolaget’) + BBC (‘Brown Boverie et Cie.’)	blend from two (foreign) abbreviations
Absa-lute < Absa (‘Amalgamated Banks of South Africa’) + absolute	blend from acronym + adjective
ACT UP = ‘AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power’	Acronym within reverse acronym
AIDS-free < Aids (‘Acquired immune deficiency syndrome’) + free	acronym in compound/with combining form
AIM < AOL (‘America Online’) + IM (‘Instant Messenger’)	blend from two acronyms
AmeriCares < America + CARE (‘Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere’) + s	blend from name and acronym
AMERIKKKA < America + KKK (‘Ku Klux Klan’)	blend from name and abbreviation
BMWenz < BMW (‘Bayerische Motorenwerke’) + [Mercedes] Benz	blend from abbreviation and (clipped) name
MUDder(s) < MUD (‘Multi-User Dungeon’) + -er(s)	suffixation from acronym

<i>Y2.1K [compliant]</i> < <i>Year 2000 (Y2K) + 2.1 [compliant]</i>	blend from acronym with numbers and engine size (2.1)
<i>Y</i> < YMCA ('Young Men's Christian Association'); <i>pl. Ys</i>	acronym/clipping from abbreviation
<i>yuppification</i> < <i>yuppie</i> ('young upwardly mobile people' + <i>-ie</i>) + <i>-ify</i> + <i>-ation</i>	double suffixation from blend

So,

[i]t comes as no surprise that the advertising industry has taken these innovative word-formation techniques up and makes use of their eye-catching qualities. For example, *Y2.1K compliant* was the only written text in an advertisement which appeared just before the beginning of the new millennium for the Audi A6, accompanied only by a photograph. It is a clever puzzle, combining *Y2K* ('Year 2 Kilo' = 'Year 2000') and a number of compounds and blends based on this acronym (*Y2K compliance*, *Y2K compliant* and *Y2K compliant*), and then blending it with the engine size of the advertised car. (Fandrych 2007: 149)

Multiple formations involving acronyms, in some cases even acronyms involving other acronyms and/or abbreviations, are obviously circular in the sense that they are recursive or involve several layers: we can conclude that acronyms behave just like 'regular' words when it comes to word-formation in that they can be constituents in other word-formation processes, such as compounding, suffixation or blending. This means that they are clearly seen as new lexical units which can be institutionalised and lexicalised like other neologisms. I have no doubt about the fact that there are many more interesting formations in store for us in the future, especially in the domains of advertising and information technology.

8. Summary and outlook

We started this review of acronymy with a brief outline of the most relevant terminology, followed by a brief discussion of functional aspects, including the use of acronyms in electronic communication. In order to discuss aspects of use and circularity, a number of queries were conducted from the British National Corpus. The results were analysed with regard to terminological aspects and meta-comments on acronyms, that is, their perception by language users, and aspects of circularity, that is, reverse acronyms, reinterpretations/backronyms, motivation, and embedded acronyms.

We can conclude that this word-formation process displays an impressive amount of flexibility and variability. These qualities are due to the multifunctionality of initials as the smallest word-formation elements below the morpheme level: the submorphemic elements 'stand for', or represent, the entire longer words in the phrases from which they were taken. At the same time, they are independent enough to be used in new interpretations and new combinations. This, in turn, leaves a lot of space for humour and irony, attention-getting mechanisms, mnemonic uses, and novel formations. In some cases, such as my all-time favourite *Y2.1K* (see Appendix), there are several levels or layers which need to be unravelled for a satisfactory analysis. We can safely assume that language users have more exciting formations in store for us in the future.

Obviously, there are also overlaps between acronymy and neighbouring word-formation processes, in particular blending and clipping. These formations, as well as borderline cases, such as syllabic acronyms (such as *Nabisco* ‘National Biscuit Company’), clipped compounds (such as *satnav* < *satellite navigation [system]* and *camcorder* < *camera + recorder*), and clippings (to *e* < *[to]* *email* < *electronic mail*, *Y* < *YMCA*) will provide numerous opportunities for future research.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix: Database (extracted from/based on Fandrych 2004)

ITEM	WF Type	SOURCE
10derly = 'tenderly'	SMS	LINGUIST, Oct. 1996
10Q = 'thank you'	SMS	Clubcard, Spring 2001, p. 91
1derful = 'wonderful'	SMS	LINGUIST, Oct. 1996
2day = 'today'	SMS	LINGUIST, Oct. 1996
2gether = 'together'	SMS	LINGUIST, Oct. 1996
2morrow = 'tomorrow'	SMS	LINGUIST, Oct. 1996
2sum = 'twosome'	SMS	LINGUIST, Oct. 1996
ABB < ASEA + BBC (‘Allmänna Svenska Elektriska Aktiebolaget’) + (‘Brown Boverie et Cie.’)	Inis in blend	Wirtschaftswoche/Karriere Nr. 30, 20.07.90, p. K 3
ABC = ‘A Better Chance’	Reverse abbr	Time, Oct. 5, 1992, p. 55
Absa-lute < Absa + absolute	Acro in blend	Sawubona, April 1998, p. 124
ACT UP = ‘AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power’	Acro in acro	Time, July 16, 1990, p. 38
AIDS = ‘Acha Inuiwe Dawa Sina’ (“I have no medicine, so let it kill me”)	Backronym	Time, July 23, 1990, p. 52
AIDS = ‘Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome’	Acro	Time, July 2, 1990, p. 42/43
AIDS = ‘America ignores drugs and sexuality’	Backronym	NYC, 1993
AIDS-activist	Acro in cpd	NYC, 1993
AIDS-free	Acro in cpd	NYC, 1993
AIM < AOL + Instant Messenger	Acro in blend	Internet, 2003

AmeriCares < America + CARE ('Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere') + s	Acro in blend	Time, Dec. 24, 1990, pp. 2 + 32 ff
AMERIKKKA < America + KKK ('Ku Klux Klan')	Acro in blend	Tom McArthur, English Today 1, p. 12
AOL = 'America Online'	Acro	Internet, 1990s
BCNU = 'be seeing you'	SMS	Sky Briefs, July 2000, p. 10
BMWenz < BMW + [Mercedes] Benz	Acro in blend	SZ, 11.04.91, S. 1
CNN = 'Cable News Network'; 'Chicken Noodles Network'	Backronym/abbr	Time, Jan. 6, 1992, p. 25
ESPRIT = 'European Strategic Programme for Research and Development in Information Technology'	Reverse acro	Time, Nov. 12, 1990, p. 47
FAIT = 'Families Against Terror and Intimidation'	Reverse acro	Die Presse, 27.04.94, p. 5
FAST = 'Federation Against Software Theft'	Reverse acro	Evening Standard
FAST = 'Forecasting and Assessment in Science and Technology'	Reverse acro	Thiel, p. 117, 132f, 170, 210
FIAT = 'Fehler in allen Teilen'; 'Fix it again, Tony';	Backronym	Zeit, 30.04.93, p. 37
gr8 < great	SMS	chat.msn.co.za/features/chatlingo.asp
i18n = internationalization = I + 18 letters + n	SMS	computer jargon, personal communication
ICQ = 'I seek you'	SMS (NB pron!)	McArthur (2000: 4)
k < okay	Abbr x 2	chat.msn.co.za/features/chatlingo.asp
K = 'one thousand', 'one kilometre'	Minimal abbr/clipping	
l8r < later	SMS	Clubcard, Spring 2001, p. 91
laser = 'Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation'		
MISHAP = 'Missiles High-Speed Assembly Program'	Reverse acro	Time, July 28, 1961, p. 39
MUD = 'Multi-User Dungeon'	Reverse acro	Time, Sept. 13, 1993, p. 61
MUDder(s) < MUD + -er(s)	Acro + sfx	Time, Sept. 13, 1993, p. 61

PLAN = 'Prevent Los Angelization Now'	reverse acro	Time, June 10, 1991, p. 27
PC = 'patriotically correct'	Backronym/ abbr	Time, Feb. 3, 1992, p. 46
PC = 'Police Constable'	abbr	
PC = 'politically correct'	abbr	Time, April 1, 1991, p. 64

NOTES

1. BNCweb © 1996-2004 Lehmann/Hoffmann/Schneider. Data cited herein have been extracted from the British National Corpus, distributed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the BNC Consortium. All rights in the texts cited are reserved (BNC World 2001).

2. I will adopt the following definition of the terms institutionalisation and lexicalisation: "[...] an item will be defined as lexicalised once it has achieved full acceptance by the speech community and is integrated into the lexicon, a stage that is usually marked by phonological and/or graphemic changes (for example, stress and capitalisation), and/or semantic-stylistic changes (for example, *exam* versus *examination*). Items which have gained partial acceptance, that is, items which are accepted as part of jargons by certain **groups** of users **within** a speech community, will be considered to be institutionalised, for example, ADN - 'Advanced Digital Network'". (Fandrych 2004, 137f)

3. Of course, this distinction is not always clear-cut. For the purposes of the present study, the distinction was made on the basis of stress: level stress can be interpreted as a criterion for noun phrase, primary stress on first element for the status of compound.

ENDNOTES

1. For a more comprehensive review of the relevant literature, please refer to Fandrych (2004, 2008a and 2008b).

2. See also Fandrych (2007: 149): "Emoticons are borderline formations which are iconic and do not, strictly speaking, belong to word-formation. However, they do fulfil certain communicative functions and thus carry meaning, despite the fact that they consist mostly of punctuation marks (and in some cases letters) to produce 'emotive icons' which are read vertically, such as :D ('laughing'), :-X ('My lips are sealed'), {*} ('a hug and a kiss') and ;-)' ('winking')".

ABSTRACTS

With the ‘electronic revolution’ and the internationalisation of English, we are witnessing a rapid increase of acronyms and abbreviations. These forms fulfil a vital function of modern communicative needs: they are compact (in their short form), yet precise (in their full form), they can be mysterious and esoteric, yet common and widespread. Using a corpus study approach, this paper will discuss how one of the most productive and creative word-formation processes in modern English makes use of the initials of longer phrases to form new words, with particular attention to circularity. The main focus will be on how these formations lend themselves to ironic reinterpretation by language users once they have lost their primary motivation, such as *Fiat* ‘Fix it again, Tony’. Another aspect which will be discussed is the creation of reverse acronyms, such as *PIN* and *PEN*, as intentionally created, that is, ‘engineered’ formations. The semantic flexibility of acronyms can be used for mnemonic purposes and for effect, and it might explain why acronymy has recently experienced such a surge in popularity, especially in the media and in electronic communication. This flexibility and variability relies on the multifunctionality of initials as the smallest word-formation elements below the morpheme level: the submorphemic elements ‘stand for’ the longer words they represent but they are, at the same time, independent enough to be used in new interpretations.

Depuis la révolution électronique et l'internationalisation de la langue anglaise, nous sommes témoins de l'augmentation rapide de sigles et d'abréviations. Comme elles sont à la fois compactes et précises, ces formes contribuent énormément à la communication moderne; elles peuvent être mystérieuses et ésotériques, mais aussi d'usage courant et répandu. S'appuyant sur une enquête du British National Corpus, l'article suivant examine comment l'un des processus les plus productifs de la langue anglaise utilise les initiales d'une expression pour former des mots nouveaux, et pour démontrer l'aspect de circularité. L'objectif principal est de montrer comment ces formations peuvent être réinterprétées de façon ironique une fois qu'elles ont perdu leur référence (*Fiat* ‘Fix it again, Tony’). Les formations ‘forcées’ (*PIN* et *PEN*) montrent un autre aspect de circularité. La flexibilité sémantique des sigles peut être utilisée pour obtenir un effet mnémotechnique, et c'est peut-être à cause de cette flexibilité que les sigles sont devenus si populaires dans les domaines de la technologie et de la communication électronique. Cette flexibilité repose sur la multifonctionnalité des initiales qui sont les éléments submorphémiques les plus petits de la langue et qui, tout en représentant les mots entiers de la phrase, arrivent à devenir les éléments dans de nouvelles combinaisons.

INDEX

Mots-clés: siglaison, motivation, circularité

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