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CLIPPING, BLENDING, AND ACRONYMY IN INTERNET ENGLISH: WORD-FORMATION PROCESSES AS RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL MEANING IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This article examines three shortening and compounding processes that are highly visible in computer-mediated communication (CMC): clipping, blending, and acronym or initialism formation. Drawing on the morphological literature and on sociolinguistic work on digital language, it argues that these processes, long described in English word-formation scholarship, take on distinctive functions online. Specifically, the article proposes that internet English exploits them not merely for economy of expression but as resources for indexing stance, group membership, and register. It reviews structural accounts of each process, considers how their productivity is shaped by platform affordances and community norms, discusses semantic and pragmatic drift using the case of lol, and addresses the persistent claim that digital shorthand harms literacy. The article closes by outlining a research agenda, including corpus-based and diffusion-oriented methods, for testing the framework proposed here.

Keywords: word-formation, clipping, blending, acronyms, initialisms, computer-mediated communication, internet linguistics, sociolinguistic variation, language change

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются три процесса сокращения и словосложения, особенно заметные в компьютерно-опосредованной коммуникации (КОК): усечение, контаминация (блендинг) и образование аббревиатур и инициальных сокращений. Опираясь на морфологическую литературу и социолингвистические исследования цифрового языка, автор утверждает, что эти процессы, давно описанные в научных работах по английскому словообразованию, приобретают в интернете особые функции. В частности, предлагается рассматривать их использование в интернет-английском не только как средство экономии языковых усилий, но и как ресурс для выражения позиции, групповой принадлежности и регистра. В статье обобщаются структурные описания каждого из процессов, рассматривается, как их продуктивность определяется возможностями платформ и нормами сообществ, анализируется семантический и прагматический сдвиг на примере lol, а также обсуждается распространённое утверждение о вреде цифровых сокращений для грамотности. В заключение намечена исследовательская программа, включающая корпусные методы и методы изучения диффузии, для проверки предложенной концептуальной модели.

Ключевые слова: словообразование, усечение, контаминация, акронимы, инициальные аббревиатуры, компьютерно-опосредованная коммуникация, интернет-лингвистика, социолингвистическая вариативность, языковое изменение

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada kompyuter vositasidagi kommunikatsiyada (KVK) ayniqsa yaqqol ko‘zga tashlanadigan uchta qisqartirish va so‘z yasash jarayoni — kesish (klipping), kontaminatsiya (blending) hamda akronim va initsial qisqartmalar hosil qilish tahlil qilinadi. Morfologik adabiyotlarga hamda raqamli tilga oid sotsiolingvistik tadqiqotlarga tayanib, muallif ingliz tilidagi so‘z yasalishi bo‘yicha ilmiy ishlarda uzoq vaqtdan beri tavsiflab kelingan bu jarayonlar internetda o‘ziga xos vazifalarni bajarishini ilgari suradi. Xususan, maqolada internet inglizchasida ulardan nafaqat ifoda tejamkorligi uchun, balki munosabat, guruhga mansublik va registrni ifodalash vositasi sifatida ham foydalanilishi taklif etiladi. Maqolada har bir jarayonning strukturaviy tavsiflari ko‘rib chiqiladi, ularning unumdorligi platformalarning imkoniyatlari va jamoa me’yorlari bilan qanday belgilanishi muhokama qilinadi, lol misolida semantik va pragmatik siljish tahlil etiladi hamda raqamli qisqartmalar savodxonlikka zarar yetkazadi degan keng tarqalgan da’vo ko‘rib chiqiladi. Xulosa qismida taklif etilgan konsepsiyani sinab ko‘rish uchun korpusga asoslangan va diffuziyani o‘rganishga yo‘naltirilgan usullarni o‘z ichiga olgan tadqiqot rejasi belgilab beriladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: so‘z yasalishi, kesish (klipping), kontaminatsiya (blending), akronimlar, initsial qisqartmalar, kompyuter vositasidagi kommunikatsiya, internet lingvistikasi, sotsiolingvistik variativlik, til o‘zgarishi

English has always shortened and recombined its words. Forms such as bus (from omnibus), brunch (breakfast + lunch), and radar (an acronym for radio detection and ranging) are so established that their origins are rarely noticed. What distinguishes the current period is not the existence of these processes but the speed, visibility, and social salience with which they operate in digital environments. Forms such as sus, rando, hangry, stan, FOMO, and ICYMI circulate rapidly across platforms, and their use is routinely read as a marker of age, community affiliation, or communicative intent.

The prevailing popular explanation holds that such forms exist for the sake of typing efficiency, a legacy of early text-messaging character limits and the pace of synchronous chat. This article argues that the efficiency account, while not wrong, is incomplete. Online language is frequently more effortful than standard orthography requires, as in letter lengthening (sooooo), and some of the shortest available forms (a bare k) can convey coldness rather than neutrality (cf. Crystal 2008; McCulloch 2019). If economy were the sole driver, such patterns would be unexpected. A more adequate account must incorporate the social work these forms perform.

The article makes three contributions. First, it synthesizes structural descriptions of clipping, blending, and acronymy and identifies where internet data strain or extend those descriptions. Second, it proposes a signaling-oriented framework in which each process is analyzed for its capacity to index stance and group membership. Third, it identifies methodological directions for testing that framework empirically. The article is conceptual and does not report new corpus data;

where it refers to specific forms, these are offered as illustrative rather than as the product of systematic sampling.

Word-formation in English

Standard treatments of English morphology classify clipping, blending, and acronymy as marginal or "minor" word-formation processes, in contrast to the major processes of affixation, compounding, and conversion (Bauer 1983; Plag 2003). The label reflects their lower productivity in the traditional lexicon and their relative lack of rule-governed regularity rather than any lack of importance. Because the processes are less predictable in form, they have attracted comparatively less theoretical attention, though a substantial descriptive literature exists, especially on blends (Algeo 1977; Kemmer 2003; Gries 2004).

Language and computer-mediated communication

Research on CMC since the 1990s has documented a range of orthographic and lexical innovations in email, chat, text messaging, and social media (Crystal 2001; Danet 2001; Baron 2008). Early work frequently framed these innovations as consequences of technological constraint. Later scholarship has emphasized that users deploy them strategically and that their meaning depends on community context (Androutsopoulos 2011; Tagliamonte 2016). This shift, from constraint to resource, motivates the framework proposed in Section 6.

Style, indexicality, and social meaning

The article draws on third-wave approaches to sociolinguistic variation, which treat linguistic forms as resources that index social meanings such as stance, persona, and group identity, rather than as passive correlates of demographic categories (Eckert 2012). On this view, choosing a clipped or acronymic variant over a full form is a stylistic act that contributes to the speaker's self-presentation and to the interactional framing of the message.

Clipping

Clipping involves the shortening of a longer lexeme without a change in grammatical category, usually retaining the initial portion (back-clipping: info, demo), less often the final portion (fore-clipping: bot from robot), and occasionally a medial portion (flu from influenza is often analyzed as a combination of back- and fore-clipping). Clippings in English frequently conform to a preferred prosodic shape, typically a monosyllable or a disyllable ending in a consonant or in a vowel added by hypocoristic suffixation (cf. rando, totes, obvi).

Clipping online

Two patterns are noteworthy in internet usage. First, many clippings have lexicalized to the point of obscuring their source (app, bot, mod, admin, vid), and their dictionary status is secure. Second, a more recent layer of clippings, often ending in the vowel suffix -o, -i, or -s (rando, obvi, totes), carries pronounced evaluative or playful meaning. These forms are not simple abbreviations of their bases: rando denotes not merely a random person but one regarded with mild bemusement or wariness. The clipped form thus encodes stance as part of its lexical meaning.

This observation supports a general claim: when clipping is used as a marker of informality, the shortened shape itself becomes a signal. The clipped variant contrasts with its full counterpart in register, and that contrast is available for strategic use.

Blending

Blends combine parts of two source words, typically the beginning of the first and the end of the second, into a single form whose meaning draws on both (brunch, smog). Quantitative work on English blends indicates that their formation is not arbitrary: source words tend to be of similar length, and the point of splicing tends to correlate with phonological and orthographic overlap between sources (Gries 2004). Experimental work further suggests that blends are interpretable in part because hearers can recover the source words from partial cues (Lehrer 1996).

Blending online

Digital communication has been a productive site for blending, partly because many new technologies and practices require new labels. Examples include blog (web + log), podcast, emoticon, netiquette, vlog, and infodemic. A second, socially oriented group includes mansplain, hangry, bromance, and frenemy, which compress complex social or affective categories into single, easily circulated items.

The communicative appeal of such blends lies in semantic compression combined with playfulness. A blend signals wit, since its transparency depends on the audience's ability to decode the splice, and it allows a speaker to name a recurrent experience with a single memorable form. This helps explain why blends often spread rapidly through social media: they are compact, shareable, and rewarding to decode. Some forms have contested or reconstructed etymologies. The word stan, for instance, is commonly described as derived from a 2000 song of the same name, with a popular secondary association with a stalker + fan blend, and the evidence for such folk etymologies should be treated cautiously.

Acronyms and initialisms

The literature distinguishes acronyms, pronounced as words (FOMO, NASA), from initialisms, pronounced letter by letter (BRB, IRL, DM). Some forms exist in both pronunciations, and some mixed types (JPEG, CD-ROM) combine letter names with a syllabic reading. For present purposes both are treated under the umbrella of acronymy, with the distinction noted where relevant.

Acronymy online

Internet English has produced and popularized a large inventory of such forms, including LOL, OMG, IMO, SMH, AFK, ICYMI, ELI5, AMA, NSFW, and TL;DR. Some, such as FYI and ASAP, predate digital media and have been extended by it. Many are tied to specific platform conventions: ELI5 and AMA originate in particular discussion-forum practices, and AFK in gaming contexts.

Semantic and pragmatic drift: the case of lol

The trajectory of lol illustrates how an acronym's function can diverge sharply from its source expansion. Although it derives from laughing out loud, it is commonly used where no laughter is implied. McCulloch (2019) characterizes its present role as pragmatic, functioning to soften utterances and signal a relaxed or non-serious stance. Utterances such as see you at five lol are not jokes; the particle modulates the tone of the message. This is consistent with broader claims in the CMC literature that text-based speakers use lexical and orthographic devices to supply interactional cues that are carried by prosody and gesture in speech.

The example is useful for the framework developed here because it demonstrates that the form of an acronym and its social function can come apart. Acronymy provides a compact,

conventionalized form, and the community then assigns to it a pragmatic role that may bear only a historical relationship to the original expansion.

It is noteworthy that clipping, blending, and acronymy can be productively analyzed along three dimensions.

Economy. The form reduces the effort or space required relative to a full alternative. This dimension is the most commonly invoked and is most relevant to synchronous, constrained media.

Stance. The form carries or modulates attitude, as with the evaluative tone of rando or the softening function of lol. Here the choice of form shapes how an utterance is interpreted, independent of its propositional content.

Affiliation. The form signals membership in a community of practice or generational cohort. Knowledge of and appropriate use of forms such as fr, rn, or sus can function as a marker of community competence, and misuse or overuse can be read as outsider status. Differences in how the same form is interpreted across age groups illustrate this dimension: the same token may carry different social meanings in different speakers' mouths.

These dimensions are not mutually exclusive, and a single form may serve all three. The framework's central claim is that economy alone underpredicts the observed distribution of such forms, including the coexistence of lengthened and shortened variants and the fact that shortest forms may be pragmatically marked (Crystal 2008). Whether economy, stance, or affiliation predominates in a given case is an empirical question that depends on platform, community, and context.

Diffusion

Social media provides unusually rich data for studying the spread of lexical innovations. Computational work has shown that the diffusion of new lexical items across online communities is shaped by geographic and demographic factors (Eisenstein et al. 2014), suggesting that the social structure of online communities influences which innovations spread and where. Many items that began as peripheral online forms, such as selfie, meme, and blog, have since entered general usage and mainstream lexicography, indicating that the boundary between internet English and English more broadly is permeable.

Public discourse has frequently expressed concern that digital shorthand degrades writing ability. The empirical evidence does not strongly support this view. Studies of adolescent instant messaging, for example, found that young people's online language was innovative but systematically structured and that its features did not simply replace standard forms (Tagliamonte and Denis 2008; see also Thurlow 2003). The more defensible interpretation is that users command multiple registers and shift among them according to context. Research on the relationship between texting and literacy outcomes remains mixed in its details, and claims in either direction should be assessed against the specific design and population studied.

This article is conceptual, and its examples are illustrative rather than systematically sampled. Several lines of future work would test and refine the framework.

1. Corpus-based studies. Large social-media corpora could be used to compare the frequency and contexts of clipped, blended, and acronymic forms against their full counterparts, and to examine whether use correlates with platform, topic, and interlocutor.

2. Perception experiments. Controlled studies could test whether the use of specific forms shifts readers' judgments of a writer's tone, sincerity, or group membership, building on work on the interpretive effects of punctuation and other orthographic cues in text messaging (Gunraj et al. 2016).

3. Diachronic and diffusion analyses. Time-stamped data would permit tracking of the life cycle of individual forms, including drift of function as with lol, and the conditions under which items persist or disappear.

4. Cross-linguistic comparison. Parallel processes in other languages and in multilingual online settings would show which features of the framework are specific to English.

In conclusion, clipping, blending, and acronymy are long-standing resources of English word-formation, and internet communication has not replaced them but intensified and repurposed them. The evidence reviewed here suggests that these processes serve social as well as economic ends: they allow speakers to compress meaning, modulate stance, and signal membership in communities. The framework proposed here, distinguishing economy, stance, and affiliation, offers a way of organizing the existing literature and of generating testable predictions. Rather than treating digital shorthand as a symptom of linguistic decline, scholars are better served by treating it as a visible and well-documented instance of ordinary language change, operating under new technological and social conditions.

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