

WORD FORMATION AND CREATIVITY IN AMERICAN ENGLISH¹

Isabel de la Cruz Cabanillas

UNIVERSIDAD DE ALCALÁ

Against the general belief of American English being a conservative variety, we defend the creativity of American English regarding word formation. America is the leading country in most fields related to science, technology or new concepts in life, so many of the terms that are coined in these areas happen to be of American origin. The present article will focus on the linguistic devices that are used in American English regarding lexis to form new words. We will concentrate on those uses that can be considered Americanisms in contrast with others prevailing in British English or other varieties of English. The analysis of the data will reveal how American English is quite active regarding word formation. The processes devised are varied, but some of the most creative ones are the use of specific American affixes, blends, shortenings, abbreviations and acronyms.

1. Introduction

American English has very often been regarded conservative due to the preservation of some features, which have gone out of use in the standard speech of Britain. This is a general belief which has not been sufficiently contrasted, as American English turns out to be quite more creative at forming words or using new linguistic devices, for instance.

America is the leading country in most fields related to science, technology or new concepts in life, so many of the terms that are coined in these areas happen to be American, although the English speaking community assimilates them quite easily

regardless of their origin. Some linguists already realised the tendency of the American variety towards creativity through different mechanisms. In the lexical field Craigie points out how this trend manifests itself in: "(1) the addition of new senses to existing words and phrases, (2) the formation of new derivative forms and attributive collocations or other compounds, (3) the introduction of words not previously in use" (1940, 6).

We will focus on the last two points in order to discover which linguistic devices are used in American English to form new words and highlight those uses that can be considered proper Americanisms.

1. I want to acknowledge the grant endowed by the John Fitzgerald Kennedy-Institut in Berlin thanks to which this article was written.

2. American Neologisms

The use of old words to refer to new concepts was definitely used in America, when the first explorers and settlers applied some lexical items to name different entities discovered in the New World. Some other times, they needed to borrow from the native languages, as no similarity could be found between the new flora and fauna or landscape and the one they had at home. In this respect, terms like *raccoon*, *moose* or *skunk* can clearly illustrate how the traditional English word-stock was enlarged.

Different scholars have already mentioned how creative American English turns out to be, if compared to British English. For instance, Ferguson follows this view (1981, xxxvii), although Marckwardt extrapolates this idea to extend it to a wider concept: "The freedom with which certain English grammatical and lexical patterns were treated in America reflects this independence of spirit and lack of regard for accepted tradition" (1958, 108). Partridge even states that the difference between British and American English lies on the fact that "science and democracy, work with less restraint in the United States than in Great Britain" (1968, 205). Though clearly these opinions are far from being objective, it does not seem exaggerate to point out that many of the new words, which have come into use in English in the last twenty years, are of American origin somehow. That means, they were created in the United States, even if they use the traditional methods of word formation. The American origin is undeniable when we refer to some specific fields, like computing, where every new application, program or development seem to have sprung there. However, one must bear in mind that some of these terms are not exclusive of the computing jargon any longer, as computers, Internet and other devices are part of the daily life of the majority of industrial population.

Before attempting to classify the collected lexical items, one must be absolutely aware of how ephemeral some of these terms can be. This is particularly true when dealing with technology, since such a changeable environment like Internet—which is constantly evolving—will make some of these new creations useless in a couple of years.

Others refer mainly to an event that took place at a specific period of time and will grow out of use very soon.

3. New meanings for old words by extension or transfer

This is a necessary and recurrent device not only in English, but also in any other language, as the vocabulary of a specific language would become excessively large otherwise. Old items acquire new meanings. That is what Maurer and High call *neosemanticism*, as they are "words or groups of words already in the language that acquire fresh meanings by use in new situations" (1980, 184). A recent example of this is *beta*, which is now used to mean "experimental use of software by consumers during its final stage of development" (Algeo 1996, 87). In the same way, we have modified our conception of *surf* and *navigate* which can be done not only in the usual environment, but also on the web now. Likewise, *viruses* and *vaccines* have also extended their original field of application.

4. Affixation

Some of the affixes in Americanisms are usual in British English. However, a group of them seem to be peculiar or more recurrently used in American coined terms.

4.1. Prefixes:

Techno- is widely used, as in *technogovernment*, *technopolitics*, *technocandidacy*. In the same way, *tele-* seems to be quite a productive prefix in *telectorate*, *teledemocracy*, *telepolitician*, *telepolling*, *tele-populist* or *televoting*.

Three-peat and *four-peat* coined after *repeat*, where *re-* was interpreted as two or twice.

4.2. Preference or productivity of certain suffixes:

-*ee*: *usee*, as "a female user", *takee*, *shotee* or *squeegee*, referring to "the person who wipes the screenshield of a car stopped at a traffic light".

-*iefy*: *preppie*, *veggies*, *webbie*, *whole-foodie* or *loosie*, but it can also be applied to followers of a politician like in *bushie*, or to people who frequent a shopping mall, as in *mallie*. The variant with -*y* is also very much found, as in *Kissy-kissy* (motif);²

-*ista*: Most of them are eponyms denoting a particular political tendency, as in *Evanista*, *Perotista*, *Clintonista*, *Sandinista* or *Somocista*, some of which are of Spanish origin, but not exclusively, as the first three refer to the followers of Evan Mehan, Perot and Clinton respectively.

Rodríguez claims that "because of the intimate contact of Spanish with English in the US, Spanish has also left an imprint on English derivational morphology, and this is something that cannot be said of most other living languages" (1995, 421). We have observed how this is true in the previous examples with *-ista*, but it can also be applied to other languages like German and Russian. In *uber-agent*, *überbarber*, *überbimbo*, *überczar*, *uberenterteiner*, *über-Father*, etc., all of them come from the German prefix *über* or the anglicised variant *uber*. From the Russian suffix *-nik*, we have *Bushnik*, *freezenik*, *nerdnik*, *returnik* or *spacenic*;

- *ite*: Chernobylite, reaganite, clintonite;

- *ize/ization*: Based on *sneakers*, *sneakerize* was created to mean "to increase greatly the number of options available for a product" (Algeo 1995, 210). From the verb emerged the noun *sneakearization*, used not only for products, but for any other services.

5. Compounding

5.1. Nouns

Most of the compounds that have been coined belongs to this word group. Some adjectives can also be found, like *netsmart* or *Mac-like*, but compound verbs are practically non-existent. Within the noun group we have *Montanabahn*, the second item comes from German, as in *infobahn*; Mexican people tended to be called *wetbacks*, that is why they now call *dryback* to those Americans who work in a Mexican joint-venture; or others like *Betazoid* applied to someone eager to test the beta version of a software application.

5.2. Unusual collocations: *mouse potato*, *starter marriage*; *retirement pregnancy* and *retirement baby* both referring to the fact of getting pregnant and delivering a baby being a post-menopausal woman; *granny dumping* or abandoning the elderly at hospitals.

6. Conversion or functional shift

6.1. From adjective to nouns:

From *recumbent* (bicycle), by omission of the second element, the adjective ends up being used as noun.

6.2. Back-formations or verbs from nouns:

to lase < *laser*, *to telnet* < *tele+net*. *Bookmark* is recorded first as a noun, but as a verb appears in 1996 according to Algeo (1996, p. 424). Some of these new formations will not live long, like *to bobbit* or *to O.J.*, meaning "to beat up in a domestic dispute". *To_trunk* "to lock the owner of a stolen car in its trunk before joyriding and abandoning it" (Algeo 1996, 97).

2. This phenomenon does not seem to be exclusively American, as Crowley reports on how fond Australian and New Zealand English are of the addition of this suffix (1997, 160).

A special case of back-formation is that of *to out*, from *to come out of the closet*, *to out* implies to deliberately reveal the homosexuality of someone.

6.3. Nouns from verbs:

A curious case is that of *wannabe*, as synonym of someone or something that even trying to work their way out fails to succeed. In this sense, it is employed by Algeo, when talking about words that did not achieve to survive: "These wannabes fall into several semantic areas" (1993, 190).

6.4. Others:

make nice, where *nice* functions as an adverb.

7. Blends

Apart from the traditionally acknowledged American blendings or the recent ones like *Newseum*, *guesstimate* or *glitzy*, others seem to be emerging and are created by means of: 1) Clipping of one item or both: *Met-car/metcar* (metal-carbon), *vactor* (virtual actor), *Teleporn* (television pornography), *asylee* (asylum and refugee), *afrobics* "aerobics with African and Caribbean music", *softoholic* (software + -oholic) or *softrat* (software + rat); 2) clipping and aphesis: *gustnado* (gust + tornado); 3) clipping, overlapping and aphesis: *neverendum* (never end referendum), *screenager* (screen + teenager) "a person for whom television and computer screen are a part of daily life"; 4) aphesis of one of the items: *webaholic* coined after *workaholic*, or *videorazzi* for those *paparazzi* who use video cameras.

8. Eponyms

The word is named after a person's name, the discoverer or inventor usually, as in *armalcolite* from the names of the three American astronauts Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins. More recent ones

are *bobbit* or *O.J.*, used both as nouns and verbs and mentioned above. A new acquisition as well is the *Anita Hill-stress-syndrome*, as she seems to have been one of the first women who dared to talk about sexual harassment on part of some politicians or judges.

9. Clippings or abbreviations

Gov for "Governor", *Rep* for "Representative", *Sen* for "Senator", *Prez* for "President", *biz* for "business", *e-mail* for "electronic mail" and based on this many others, like: *e-cash*, *e-money*, *e-paper*, *e-text*, *e-therapy* or *e-file*. Others originated in the US are: *prep*, *telco*, *narc*, *bi*, *deli*, *sitcom*, *decaf*, *vegan*, *sci-fi*. *Bio*, short for *biography* (or *biological*).

Others are quite prolific, like *ob* (obese) in *ob gene*, *ob mouse* or *ob protein*. Not so common are *fabber* (fabbricator) "Stereolithographer, a machine for making a three-dimensional copy of an object" (Algeo 1996, 91), *N-site* (nuclear site), *multiculti* (multicultural) and quite frequently we can find *rehab* (rehabilitation) for a problem with drugs.

10. Acronyms

This device, even if it may seem rather new due to the increasing use which is undergoing in Modern American English, turns out to be an old one. Romans used it in Latin in widely known examples like *DNS* for *Dominus* or *INRI* for *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*. The practice was preserved during the Middle Ages, but it is now when we are living a flourishing period for acronyms.

From a clear American origin are *yuppie* and *yumpie* and based on them *rumpie*, "rural upwardly mobile professional". By the end of the eighties there was a creative fever regarding this particular device, so one could also find *buppie* (black yuppie), *suppie* (Southern yuppie) or *skippie* (school kids with income and purchasing power). Some other acronyms are coined by homonymy such as *EGG* (evaporating gas/gaseous globule), *PC* which serves to mean both "personal computer" and "politically correct",

SEAL (Naval) "Sea Air Land commando force" or a member of it.

Some taxonomies have been established according to what extent the acronym needs to be read as a sequence of letters, letters and a word, or is properly adopted as a word. So we can distinguish between: 1) Lineation or initialisms: *ftp*, *html*, *PC*, *www*, *IP*, *DNS*, *DRV* (daily reference value), *RDI* (reference daily intake), *NRI* fraud (never received issued fraud) which implies "the theft and use of a newly issued credit card before it reaches the intended cardholder". 2) Mixed types: *CD-ROM*, *MS-DOS*. 3) Acronyms: *SoHo/SOHO* (small office, home office), *ToHo* (tiny office, home office) or *ILYA* (Incompletely Launched Young Adult), *WORM*.

11. Trade names

Rollerblade, was originally a trade mark name that have become synonymous with in-line roller skates. *Roofie* or *Bib Roche* both refer to "rohypnol, brand name of the Hoffmann-La Roche company for flunitrazepam, a strong Valium-like sedative that produces confused memory" (Algeo 1997, 193).

12. Nonce-words

Some of the scientific terms make use of none of the above mentioned devices or probably of a combination of several. In this respect, *leptin* "a hormone that removes fat from the body", made up of a Greek etymon *leptos* meaning "thin" and a particle *-in*. Taken from Greek etymons as well, *patholysis* was a term coined by Dr. J. Devorkian to designate the assisted suicide.

13. Conclusions

American English seems to be quite active regarding word formation. The processes devised to do so are varied, but some of the most creative ones are the use of specific American affixes, blends, shortenings, abbreviations and acronyms. This short review of

the tendencies regarding word formation contradicts the widespread belief of American English being conservative and archaic. If we talk about the creation of new words, American English seems to be one of the most productive within the varieties of English, both for quantity and for the wide range of devices employed.

Works cited

- ALGEO, J., & A. ALGEO. "Among the New words". *American Speech* 68 (1993): 178-204.
- "Among the New words". *American Speech* 70 (1995): 200-10.
- "Among the New words". *American Speech* 71 (1996): 86-97; 421-34.
- "Among the New words". *American Speech* 72 (1997): 183-97.
- CRAIGIE, W. A. *The Growth of American English*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1940.
- CROWLEY, T. *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- FERGUSON, C. A., & S. HEATH. *Language in the USA*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.
- MARCKWARDT, A. H. *American English*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1958.
- MAURER, D. W., & E. C. HIGH. "New Words - Where do they come from and where they go?" *American Speech* 55 (1980): 184-94.
- PARTRIDGE, E., & J. W. Clark. *British and American English since 1900*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1968.
- RODRIGUEZ, F. "Spanish influence on English word-formation: the suffix -ISTA". *American Speech* 70 (1995): 421-29.

