
The Cult of Abbreviation

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If lexical abbreviation is no more than a fringe to vocabulary proper, it is a most diverse and dynamic fringe



IN SEPTEMBER 1986, the American reference publishers Gale Research Company sent out a press release that began: What is the fastest growing language in the world? The answer then provided was: 'abbrevomania' or 'initialese'.

The purpose of the press release was to promote the second edition of the *International Acronyms, Initialisms and Abbreviations Dictionary*, the short form of whose title is the *IAIAD*. This epic has 911 pages, claims over 110,000 entries, costs \$160.00, and is edited by Julie E. Towell and Helen E. Sheppard. It also has a companion epic, the *Reverse IAIAD*, which orders the entries by the full forms of the abbreviations, and costs \$175.00.

These American products dwarf a British equivalent, the *Everyman Dictionary of Abbreviations* (or *EDOB*), whose second edition also appeared in 1986. This work is published by Dent, edited by John Paxton, costs £10.95, has 389 pages, and contains over 25,000 entries; that is, it has fewer than a quarter of the items covered by Gale's *IAIAD*. If there were no demand for such works of reference, publishers and compilers would not engage in the awful toil of producing them. There is a demand, however, and as a result they stand as a testimony to the success and significance of abbreviation in English.

The nature of abbreviation

The following is an extract from *Time* magazine (7 July 86): 'Last December CGE seemed to have concluded a joint venture with AT&T and its Dutch partner Philips. In that deal, AT&T-Philips would have taken over 16% of France's telephone network in return for helping a CGE subsidiary, Alcatel, market telephone equipment in the US.'

At least five factors are relevant to the discussion of this or any similar extract:

1. Short forms like 'US', 'AT&T', 'CGE' and 'Alcatel' range, in terms of our understanding, from the transparent to the opaque. Most people know some abbreviations well

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(like 'US'), know others in a hazier fashion (perhaps like 'AT&T'), and are ignorant of many more (such as 'GCE' and 'Alcatel'). Here, *Time* expands 'CGE' to 'Compagnie Générale d'Electricité', but provides no gloss for 'Alcatel', although it is presumably like 'Amoco' or 'Ameritech'.

2. Of those abbreviations that we know, some are part of general life, like 'US', and some are part of life within certain larger or smaller groups, in this instance the French communications industry.

3. People can, however, use short forms whether or not they are familiar with their full versions. For example, literate people are familiar with 'e.g.' and 'q.v.'; they understand them, whether or not they know the Latin phrases they represent. In the same way, anybody can talk about ICI or Texaco without reflecting on what the names stand for. The more familiar the short form, the less need there may be to invoke the full form, and indeed the full form may be forgotten. The words 'radar' and 'mob' are potent illustrations of how this happens.

4. Those who know and use certain abbreviations may or may not feel the need to explain them to others. In addition, members

of groups may feel that it is a token of non-membership or of less than proper competence not to know both the short and full forms used in their group. They may also feel a certain pride in their easy acquaintance with such expressions, and risk using them in the wrong company. This can result in accusations of jargon-mongering. There are few things as opaque (or irritating) as an abbreviation one has never met before.

5. Abbreviations can be polysemic. Thus, the letters AA stand for both 'Alcoholics Anonymous' and (in Britain) 'Automobile Association'. The contraction *con* can mean 'convict', 'confidence trick', 'concentration', 'concerning', 'consol', 'consul' – and 'contradiction' itself.

These points cover the generalities of present-day abbreviations. To appreciate them better, however, we need some history and classification.

A typology of abbreviations

Abbreviation may be as old as language, especially in baby talk and the creation of pet names. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs functioned in both their full forms and 'acro-

The variable reference of everyday abbreviations: IRA to most Britons is only the Irish Republican Army, but to most Americans is primarily an individual retirement account.



phonically'; in the latter case, signs were interpreted in terms only of the opening sounds of the words they stood for, and were used in cartouches to represent people's names. In doing this, they functioned as proto-letters, before alphabets became common. Among the ancient Romans, the letters 'S.P.Q.R.' stood for *Senatus Populusque Romanus* ('the Senate and the Roman people'), and clipped words like 'IMP CAES' for *Imperator Caesar* ('Emperor Caesar') were common on inscriptions and coins.

Present-day conventions of abbreviation, however, have their origins in medieval European scribal and scholastic practices. In the Middle Ages, contractions were valued both for mnemonic purposes and because parchment was expensive and copying laborious. As writing extended from Latin into the vernacular languages, abbreviation extended with it, first of all as Latinisms (such as 'e.g.' for *exempli gratia*), then as native contractions. From the 15th century onward, printers turned many scribal usages into typographic conventions, leaving others for use in note-taking and record-keeping.

The core purpose of all abbreviated usage, ancient or modern, alphabetic or otherwise, is to combine economy of effort with repetition of the familiar. The results, however, are far from straightforward in a language like English and lexicologists have come to use at least the following four categories to describe the kinds of items listed in the *IAIAD* and *EDOB*.

1 The initialism

This fundamental category is script-based and unpronounceable as a word. It is therefore spoken as letters. Initialisms have an indeterminate linguistic status; there is something unword-like in items that always have to be spelled out, yet they have the same textual autonomy as words and, like words, can take affixes (as in 'pro- and anti-BBC'). Although there is a public consensus about pronouncing initialisms (except for such items as 'an MP' or 'a MP', depending on whether the initialism is pronounced in full or not), there is confusion about writing or printing them, people dividing into those who use points, those who do not, and a probable majority caught in the middle.

This is a relatively recent state of affairs;

formerly, using points was the norm. In the preface to the second *EDOB*, Paxton notes that 'the modern practice of omitting from abbreviations the full point (period) continues to grow, and it is particularly true in military and data processing terms. The unpointed style, too, may be used for advertising or for bold headings while the pointed is kept for more formal use although increasingly officials are extremely doubtful about what is the exact style of abbreviations to be used by their organizations'.

Idiosyncratic usage abounds. For example, people may or may not place points after each of the initials of their names. The *International Herald Tribune*, for example, prints 'U.S.' for the United States alongside 'EC' for the European Community. There are even exceptions to the implicit convention that upper case is for language realia (such as 'BBC') and lower case for stylistic and other devices (as with 'e.g.'). The Initial Teaching Alphabet (or initial teaching alphabet), for example, reduces to 'i.t.a.', and the common short form of 'son of a bitch' is 's.o.b'.

It is also curious that a letter sequence which is not an initialism can be interpreted as one. Thus, the letters SOS were adopted as an international distress signal solely because they were an easily transmitted sequence in Morse code. Nonetheless, they are often taken to stand for 'save our souls'.

2 The acronym

By accident or design, some initialisms can be pronounced. If this is so, they usually are pronounced, as with *NATO* ('Nay-toe') and *radar* ('ray-dar'). Such forms are generally known nowadays as acronyms, although they have also been called protograms. Their pronounceability makes them more like words than other initialisms and parallels two tendencies in writing:

○ Absence of points ('NATO' rather than 'N.A.T.O.'), a practice that further strengthens an item's word status as well as reinforcing the general inclination to remove points from all initialisms.

○ A shift to lower-case letters ('radar', not 'RADAR'), because of increasing familiarity and use, with the result that on occasion an acronym becomes so thoroughly a word that its letter-based origin ceases to signify.

Again, there are variations and idiosyn-

cratic practices. For example, in the list of abbreviations used for defining purposes in *EDOB*, a pointed 'U.N.O.' lies close to an unpointed 'UNESCO'. The British newspaper *The Guardian* treats acronyms like proper nouns; it therefore prints the agency's name as 'Unesco'. Paxton does not, however, acknowledge in the body of his dictionary either 'UNESCO' or 'Unesco'; there the agency is 'U.N.E.S.C.O.'. The editor of *EDOB* is by no means alone in such inconsistency.

3 The clipping

A clipping is part of a word that serves for the whole, either the first syllable (as with *pro* for 'professional') or the last (as with *phone* for 'telephone'). The German lexicologist Hans Marchand (*English Word-Formation*, 1969) has divided clippings logically but confusingly into *back-clippings* (in which the front survives: *pro*) and *fore-clippings* (in which the back survives; *phone*). To avoid further confusion, I will stay with Marchand's terms.

Back-clipping is commoner and has a long pedigree, especially for shortening people's names. Such shortened names are subject to adaptation and extension, so that 'William' can be either the straightforward 'Will' or the adapted 'Bill'. These in turn can have diminutive suffixes added, to produce 'Willie' and 'Billy', which can extend further to such usages as 'willie' (a euphemism for 'penis') and 'billy' (a club or a male goat). Occasionally and mock-formally, the process can work in reverse: someone in a British restaurant might, for example, offer to pay the william.

The clipping of everyday words is attested as early as the 16th century: the obsolete *coz* from 'cousin' in 1559 and the long-serving *gent* for 'gentleman' in 1564. In the early 18th century, Jonathan Swift objected to the Latin phrase *mobile vulgus* ('the fickle throng') being reduced to 'mob' – one among many such novel contractions.

In contemporary English, the practice is firmly established, though often both selective and polysemic. It is selective where *rev* is short for only one kind of 'revolution' (extending to 'revving' and 'revved up'); it is polysemic where *rev* may be 'revolutions per minute', 'revenue', and 'revision', or (capitalized) either 'Reverend' or 'Book of Revel-

ation'. In addition, clippings need not be uniform throughout the English-using world. 'Mathematics', for example, is typically shortened in Britain to 'maths' and in North America to 'math'.

Clippings are also capable of becoming distinct words well removed from the meanings and applications of their original longer forms. Such is the case with the *fan* in fan clubs (from 'fanatic') and the British *navvy* or general labourer (from a 19th-century use of 'navigator' to mean a digger of a Midland 'navigation' or canal).

Fore-clipping is a minor activity. It also occurs in names, as when 'Andrew' becomes 'Drew'. Around the turn of the century, a fore-clipped word was often given a somewhat self-conscious apostrophe, as with '*phone*'. This usage is nowadays rare (perhaps '*gator*' rather than *gator* for 'alligator').

It is usually only personal names that can be subject to both back- and fore-clipping, as well as considerable adaptation. An outstanding example of this is 'Elizabeth', which may become 'Eliza', 'Liz', and 'Lizzie', or 'Beth', 'Bess', and 'Betty'.

4 The blend or portmanteau word

With this category, we move into a difficult area, because blends are not always abbreviations as such, although they have abbreviation-like features. Their purpose is more to form new words than to shorten existing ones. Consequently, they are usually seen as the fusion of one word with another to produce a third, as in Lewis Carroll's *slithy* (from 'slime' and 'lithe'), and *chortle* (from 'chuckle' and 'snort'). Carroll called such coinages 'portmanteau words', because you could pack two ideas into one container.

However, although blending is a word-forming procedure, it is not the same as derivation and compounding, in which the creation of new material from pre-existing material follows relatively clearcut patterns. We can see a rational process at work in the creation of *slithy* and *chortle*, but it is far from clearcut.

In recent decades, however, blends have covered the whole gamut from the Carrollian portmanteau (*brunch* from 'breakfast' and 'lunch') to forms that shade into and create derivational patterns. Thus, *electrocute* (coined around 1889) combines 'electro-' and

'execute' so effectively that it suggests a suffix *-cute*, meaning 'to kill by means of'. More strikingly, *motorcade* (c. 1913) combines 'motor' in full with 'cavalcade', leading on to the nonce-like forms 'aerocade', 'aquacade', 'autocade', and 'camelcade'. In the *OED Supplement* (Vol. 1, 1972), Robert Burchfield labels *-cade* a suffix, but notes that it is 'Taken by false division of CAVAL)CADE'. However, yesterday's false division may become tomorrow's conventional analogy.

Above, I mentioned the case of 'Elizabeth' as a word that can be clipped at either end. Something similar can happen to lexical material used in blending. Thus, the word 'economics' now provides us with both the *econo-* in 'econometrics' and the *-nomics* in 'Reaganonomics'. Comparable new formatives recently active in the language include: *-gate* as in 'Irangate', *-matic* as in 'selectomatic', *maxi-* as in 'maxiskirt', *mini-* as in 'miniboom', *-thon* as in 'telethon', and *-tron* as in 'Robotron'.

On occasion, blend elements are printed as separate words, as contractions of the phrase 'high technology' graphically demonstrate. More commonly, these are hyphenated, as in 'Hi-Tech', 'high-tec', and even 'Highest-Tech', but open variants range from 'Low Tech' and 'No Tech' to such facetious coinages as 'Lie Tech' and 'high tack'. 'Hi-Tech' is close to a new convention that dispenses altogether with hyphens and uses capitals for visual impact, as with 'VisiTel' and 'CompuSex'. All such practices – hyphenation, separation, and internal capitalization – serve to highlight visually the side of blending which is more a matter of abbreviation than word formation proper.

The proliferation of blends and blend elements can be traced to several contemporary factors that affect many languages. Three of these are the scientific need for compact labels, the practical advantages of port-manteau telex names, and a liking for trendy usages in advertising, publicity, and the creation of brand names. Thus, science provides us with 'aldehyde' from *alcohol dehydrogenatum* and 'amatol' by contracting and combining *ammonium nitrate* and *trinitrotoluene*. Pharmaceutical companies have followed science in the creation of innumerable new blends and quasi-blends, such as 'Mentadent', a toothpaste flavoured with menthol, and 'Trexan', the name

under which Dupont will market the drug *naltrexone*. There is a wholly unknown but enormous number of such creations in English today, with no super-*IAIAD* to catalogue them.

Diverse and hybrid forms

The four above categories conventionally describe lexical abbreviation, and each is a powerful and valuable tool for doing so. There is, however, even greater typological, formational, and semantic diversity among abbreviations than so far shown, as the following points demonstrate:

○ Some short forms are in limbo between initialism and acronym, as for example *WHO* ('World Health Organization'), which for the sake of clarity is usually pronounced 'Double-You-Aitch-Oh' rather than 'Hoo'. Paxton cites it as both 'WHO' and 'W.H.O.'

○ Some are part-initialism, part-acronym, as for example *VTOL*, a short form referring to the characteristics of a certain kind of aircraft. It is pronounced 'vee-tall', and stands for 'vertical take-off and landing'.

○ Some initialisms are most ingeniously adapted into acronyms, as in: 'GLCMs (ground-launched cruise missiles) and SLCMs (sea-launched cruise-missiles) are called Glickems and Slickems by those in the know' (*Time*, 18 Feb 85).

○ Most abbreviations can combine with affixes to produce a diversity of additional constructions. These are: prefixal adaptations like *ex-PoC* (Amnesty International: someone who is no longer a prisoner of conscience) and *pro-FLP* (in favour of the Jamaican Labour Party); and suffixal adaptations like *Rabisms* (the double-edged remarks for which the British politician R.A. Butler was famous) and *WASPier* (more like a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant than someone else).

○ Compounds containing abbreviations abound, often becoming highly complex, as: 'N.Y. kiddie porn', 'the TM-Sidhi programme', 'an AIDS-Africa link', and 'Metro-Montreal QPF contingent patrols' (where *QPF* stands for 'Quebec Police Force').

○ Multiple or compound abbreviations are possible and common, like *Mr. TV Exec* (addressing a man who is a television executive), *IBM PC* ('a personal computer made by International Business Machines') and *NYS ESOL BEA* ('New York State,

English to Speakers of Other Languages, Bilingual Educators Association’).

○ Some traditional learned compounds do not retain all the material from their source words, as with *fathometer*, which compacts ‘fathom’ and ‘meter’, and *symbology*, which runs ‘symbol’ and ‘-ology’ together to save a syllable.

○ In addition to institutional and stylistic abbreviations, there are many usages serving nonce or facetious purposes, such as: *BMOC* for ‘Big Man on Campus’; *BOGSAT* for ‘A bunch of guys sitting at a table’; *GOMER* for ‘Get Out of My Emergency Room’; *MMBA* for ‘Miles and Miles of Bloody Africa’; and *TGIF*, meaning ‘Thank God it’s Friday’.

○ Similarly, standard usages with official interpretations can be assigned facetious and ironic additional interpretations: *KKK*, ‘Koestler’s Kultur Kongress’; *ARIBA* (‘Association of the Royal Institute of Architects’), ‘Always remember I’m a bloody architect’; and such British honours as *CMG* (‘Commander of St Michael and St George’), *KCMG* (‘Knight Commander of St Michael and St George’) and *GCMG* (Grand Commander of St Michael and St George’) which are also glossed as ‘Call Me God’, ‘Kindly Call Me God’, and ‘God Calls Me God’.

This list by no means exhausts the actual or potential in the language. The coinages of every passing day include UFOports in space, OD-ing on drugs, being mirved by a superpower, engaging in flexercise and sexercise, danceroitics and docudramas, talking to Australaskan gastronauts about Easter eggonomics, eating Tuna-roni at Snaxpo while reading about Speedimpex in Enginews, before moving on to a beautique for faddicts of insta-fash.

A continuum model of abbreviation

The existence of such formations indicates that, however valuable the listing of traditional categories has been to date, we need a more flexible and accommodating model, both for its own sake and because (as the Gale publicists pointed out) abbrevomania is in the air. Such a model comes in either of two forms: the traditional categories plus an indefinite range of hybrids among and around them, or a continuum, in which the traditional categories are focal areas rather

than distinct containers. My preference is the latter, because it accounts realistically for the clearcut and fuzzy aspects of the data.

A model of this kind is particularly useful for handling a subspecies that I would like to call the *syllabic acronym*. It lies between acronym and blend, and is currently productive worldwide, and in other languages besides English.

The syllabic acronym

Where a classic acronym draws only on the first letters of several words, the syllabic acronym draws on the first syllables. Typical two-syllable and three-syllable patterns are:

<i>Alsama</i>	Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba	Canada
<i>Amoco</i>	American Oil Company	USA
<i>Asda</i>	Associated Dairies	UK
<i>Con Ed</i>	Consolidated Edison	US
<i>Fedeco</i>	Federal Electoral Commission	Nigeria
<i>Hofo</i>	Howard Johnson (Motor Lodges)	US
<i>op-ed</i>	opposite the editorial	journalese

At least two international factors currently encourage the spread of syllabic acronyms. Firstly, the same processes favour these forms as favour abbreviation generally: scientific and commercial labelling, computer usage, revamped telex-style names of businesses, and the creation of snappy brand names. However, all of these tie in with a powerful factor from outside English and the circle of alphabetic languages: the growing influence of Japanese. This language, both phonetically and in its scripts, promotes such syllabic usage; from the Japanese point of view, *Amoco* and *Texaco* are formed in the same comfortable matrix as *Toshiba* and *Tokyo*.

Both traditions come together in such Japanese brand names as *Mavica*, which is formed from the first syllables of the phrase ‘magnetic video camera’. The following extracts from *Time* provide a global context for such abbreviations:

○ ‘The Japanese long ago mastered the process of labeling their consumer goods to appeal to a global market. Walkman may be a piece of fractured English, but the term has become as generic and widely recognized as Xerox or Coke. . . . The Japanese are ‘certainly in the forefront’ of the naming

Across the gamut of acronyms

The unpronounceable initialism flows into the pronounceable acronym, which might in turn be meaningless, accidentally meaningful, or deliberately contrived – as demonstrated by the following real-life specimens:

Unpronounceable

American Automobile Association	AAA
Forest Products Research Laboratory	FPRL
Ku Klux Klan	KKK

Semi-pronounceable

British Broadcasting Corporation	BBC ('Beeb')
Cambridge College of Arts and Technology	CCAT ('See-cat')
National Economic Development Council	NEDC ('Neddy')

Pronounceable but meaningless

Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow	EPCOT, Epcot
National and Local Government Officers' Association	NALGO, Nalgo
Roll-on, roll-off (ferries)	RO-RO, ro-ro

Accidentally or mnemonically mimicking an existing word

Grenada United Labour Party	GULP
Programme for European traffic with highest efficiency and unprecedented safety	PROMETHEUS
Strategic Arms Limitations Talks	SALT
Superconducting quantum interference device	SQUID

'Slogan acronyms', deliberately coined for effect

Disposal of Unused Medicine and Pills	DUMP
Men Allied to Combat Hypocrisy and Oppression	MACHO
National Organization for Women	NOW
People Organized and Working for Economic Rebirth	POWER

game, says Dick Taylor, American Motors' manager of marketing planning. 'I like the name [of Nissan's] Sentra. It's in the middle of their line, like a sentry standing guard. A quality image' ('The Japanese naming game', 13 Jan 86).

○ 'Siegel & Gale, another New York company, persuaded United States Steel to transform itself into USX. San Francisco-based NameLab christened Nissan's Sentra car and Honda's luxury Acura model'. ('The Pros Who Play the Name Game', 3 Nov 86).

These extracts provide further examples of contemporary abbreviation at work. They also indicate that 'corporate-identity consult-

ants' freely depart from the classical orthographies of the West in order to come up with the right 'quality image'. The result is *Sentra* rather than 'Centra' and *Acura* rather than 'Accura'. *Akura* might accord better with Japanese romaji script, but would move too far from the upmarket effect of a Latin 'c'. Among the name-makers' resources is the generation of word forms by computer. Given enough of the bits and pieces of language and rules for infinite re-combination, almost anything is possible. George Orwell might have had doubts about such a future for the language, but James Joyce would probably have approved. **ET**