Peculiarities of acronyms and shortenings

Dumitru MELENCIUC, Ludmila ZBANT,
Oxana CONSTANTINESCU
State University of Moldova, Chisinau (Republic of Moldova)

Résumé: La deuxième moitié du XX-e siècle et le début du XXI-e siècle sont marqués par la présence de plus en plus visible dans tous les domaines de l'activité humaine des acronymes, des "initialismes" et des abréviations: les problèmes sociaux, politiques, nationaux et internationaux, tout ce qui est lié à l'existence humaine, sont affectés par ce phénomène sociolinguistique. On peut affirmer sans réserves que l'importance des acronymes dans le processus de la communication humaine est incontestable.

Dans le présent article les auteurs présentent les visions de différentes écoles linguistiques sur les particularités des unités terminologiques issues de ce type de formation.

Keywords: acronyms, shortenings, sociolinguistics, communication, metalinguistics.

1. Introduction

The idea of using abbreviations (initials) and blended words goes back to ancient times. Roman soldiers carried standards engraved with the letters *SPOR*, from the Latin for *Senate and people of Rome*. The term *acronym* comes from the Greek (*akros* = tip, and *anyma* = name) and had not been coined until 1943. The influence at the state level of some political, economic, military, business, market economy structures, some linguistic circles, contributed to the creation of a large number of specific metalinguistic units, laconic, easy to use, of pragmatic character, helping to express as much information in as little

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

space and time possible. Abbreviations (including acronyms and initialisms) and all possible compound formations of theirs are used in a way to codify linguistic information in order to optimize communication. The new units have a maximum compact volume of their linguistic sign. The intensive creation of this specific language system started in the XXth century and, especially, after the Second World War. The development of science and technology, economy, business, arms race, etc. brought to the creation of hundreds of thousands of compact linguistic signs in order to cope with the avalanche of information to be communicated. Abbreviations, blendings and various combinations of the mentioned units have become an efficient means of stocking and communicating a considerable volume of information in a very concise way and without any losses. This compression of the expression plane has become extremely economical. Practically all the countries in transition to the market economy have started to actively use compact units created in their countries and quite a number of borrowed ones. If we take the well known example, instead of *"Machine Aided Notification Dissemination and Retrieval of Information"* the mass media names an apparatus with the name of *MANDARIN*, which being decoded expresses its main characteristic features. [12, 43-44]

The internationalization of terms abbreviated and curtailed ones including, started actively in the XVIII with the beginning of the scientific and technical revolution, in order to enhance communication. This process has radically increased due to the acceleration of development of humankind and the formation of abbreviations, shortenings, all possible terms corresponding to the tempo of development of science and technology. At the beginning abbreviations and curtailings were at the periphery of the language, but gradually in the second half of the XXth century quite a number of them began to gradually penetrate into the basic part of the language. Some of them still at the periphery of the language, just because they are part of some metalinguistic systems belonging to certain specific fields of activity and used by limited groups of people in the domain.

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

2. At what extent are acronyms neologisms?

How long newly coined words or sub-meanings of existing lexemes should be considered as neologisms? This is a socio-linguistic factor. It depends on the tempo of development of this or that speaking community. The huge number of new technical terms in most fields of science and technology are assimilated. People get familiar with them much more rapidly in highly developed societies, where people have the knowledge and economic means to learn and use the latest inventions, wonders of the new technologies, scientific discoveries, machine and devices to be used in everyday activity. Thus, in the result of computerization such terms as *e-mail, internet, modem, CD-ROM, world-web, DOS, UNIX, Windows, telnet,* etc. for most people in highly developed countries like the USA, Great Britain, and so on, were considered to be neologisms for a short period of time at the end of the XXth century. The higher the tempo of development of a given country and society the shorter the period of time this or that term or sub-meaning of an existing word is considered to be a neologism. The slower the tempo of development of a speaking community the longer is the period of time a given word or meaning is assimilated and considered as a neologism. Such terms as *television, TV set, radio, radio set, intervision***,** etc. were considered to be neologisms for a longer period of time even in countries with an advanced rhythm of development of science and technology, economy, culture, education, etc., because at that period of time the tempo of development was relatively slower in comparison with that of the end of the XXth century or beginning of the XXIst century. Besides, inside the speaking communities there are people with different possibilities and opportunities. Thus, in Republic of Moldova the terms *e-mail, internet, modem, CD-ROM, world-web, zip, VCD, DVD, CDR, Netscape, CMC***,** etc**.** are considered as neologisms by a considerable number of people. But gradually more and more people get to know them. In some parts of the world you may find people who have never used a computer or even a simple phone, or TV set. It is not so

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

simple of lexical units to cease to be neologisms, just as soon as they appear in "good dictionaries". The social linguistic factor is always there and should be taken into consideration. [15, 236-239]

3. Formation and semantics

The areas where abbreviations and shortenings are created and used in large numbers are in the fields of politics, economics, local administration, organizations, research activities, etc. Initially they were created and used in note-taking, file-making, cataloguing, in inventories, having a symbolic or lexical function. Borrowings from Latin get English names of the corresponding lexemes may be pronounced with Latin words, English words or both English and Latin depending on the functional style of the given register: e.g. (exempli gratia) – for example, a.m. – in formal register *ante meridiem* is used corresponding to the colloquial variant *in the morning***,** the same in the case of *p.m. – post meridiem / in the afternoon.* Initial abbreviations are read like separate words usually named **acronyms** (radar, laser, NATO), some of them may be read both way (VAT (Value added tax) – [vΘt] or [vi ei ti]).

Another variation of shortening is *blending or fusion*, which blends two or more clipped words or mixed forms of clipped and unclipped words. Other terms used are *portmanteau word and telescoping*. In modern English the number of fusions has radically increased. For example: *smog (smoke + fog), brunch (breakfast + lunch), positron (positive + electron), motel (motor-car + hotel).*

Clipping is a widely spread means of word building. In most cases the shortened variants of the words coexist with the original unclipped ones: *lab* – laboratory, *doc* (Dr) – doctor, *phone* – telephone. All the types of clippings (initial, mid and final) are regularly used to create shortened lexical units: *sub(marine), phys(ical) ed(ucation); (tele)phone, (cara)van, (ham)burger; (re)fridge(rator), (in)flu(enza).* Investigating the topic we can conclude that abbreviations, shortening and blending are extremely productive means of word-building in Modern English. There exist dictionaries containing up to 400.000 abridged and clipped lexemes. This produc-

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

tivity is enhanced by the fact that all varieties of abbreviation and shortening contribute to saving time, space and money. Like in the case of terminology acronyms are formed in mass by various individuals or groups of people and they have to make their way to be accepted in the language. Many potential acronyms with time get out of usage and only those which are regularly used and indispensable to the process of communication become part of the language. Acronyms are usually limited to reduced specific metalinguistic units, and lots of homonyms are created. The same form of an acronym can exist in a number of languages. The abbreviation CDC [sidisi] has 19 homonyms and EMIS – 12 homonyms.

Acronyms are often homonymous to ordinary words; they may be intentionally chosen in order to form certain associations. Thus, for example, *the National Organization for Women* is called *NOW*. Homonymy may be sometimes used to provoke positive or negative, or some other connotations. Acronyms like ***radar*** *– radio detecting and ranging;* ***laser*** *– light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation* – are used now as integrated lexemes in many languages of the world. Among acronyms there are quite a number of homonyms of **proper names** and **common nouns**. The names may function as personified metaphors, sometimes producing a humorous effect. Thus, for example: ***IRMA –*** *Information and Referral Manual,* ***ICARUS*** *– Industrial Computer Applications, Retrieval and Utility Systems,* ***HERMES –*** *Higher Education Resource Materials: Evaluation and Services,* ***EDGAR*** *– Electronic Gathering, Analysis and Retrieval System (US).* We have observed that the intentional use of this or that name is found in many cases, i.e. while abbreviating a certain combination of words, some of the elements are left aside in order to have an acronym identical to a given name. See, for instance, *EDGAR, IRMA, ADAM, EMIE, GOLD, INPLAY, FACTS, FACT*, etc.

The decoding of many proper noun homonymous abbreviations demonstrates the fact that they, in their turn, possess two or more homonymous meanings: ***DAISY –*** *1. Dairy Information System (Reading University-GB), 2. Decision-Aiding Information System*

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

(University of Pennsylvania, Wharton School of Finance and Commerce – US). DAISY(Daisy) – Druckindustrie – Abrechnungs – und Informations – System; ***ADAM –*** *Advanced Data Management System (MITRE Corp. – US), Aid in Design and Evaluation of Data Management (IBM-US), Automatic Data Management System (MITRECorp. – US), Automatic Document Abstracting Method (Ohio State University – US),* ***EMIE –*** *Education Management Information Exchange (GB), Educational Media Institute Evaluation Project.*

Like in the case of proper names the common lexeme homonymous equivalent acronyms my possess internal homonymy, connected with the use of the similar initialism in various fields of activity: **CAR** – Center for Abortion Research, **INTIME** –Interactive Textual Information Management Experiment, **INFORMAL** – Information for Avionics Laboratory, **INFER** – Information for Every Resident, **INCLUDE** - Implementing New Concepts of the Library for Urban Disadvantaged Ethnics, **IMPRESS** – Interdisciplinary Machine Processing for Research and Education in Social Science, **IMPACT** – Implementation of Micropublishing, Army Concept and Technology, **HOST** – Institut International d'Organisation Scientifique du Travail (fr.), **HEN** – International Environmental Education Network, **IDEA –** Interactive Data Entry Access, **GOLD –** Glasgow On-Line Desk Project.

Many acronyms and initialisms have come to the point of not just representing a combination of words they gradually developed features of independent lexical units with new global meanings. Thus, for example, LASER – well known as Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation (there also such homonymous combinations as: Learning Achievement through Saturated Educational Resources; London and South Eastern Library Region; Learning Achievement through Saturated Educational Resources; London and South) may be used as a noun, adjective, verb: to lase – print some materials by using a laser printer; a laser aircraft – an aircraft with a laser engine, laser – in the meaning of quantum/laser amplifier, etc.

Double compression or compression of the compressed abbreviations is a very good example of discourse economy / sa-

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

ving of time, space and money. Thus, in *"Acronyms and Initialisms Dictionary"*, Michigan, 1998 we find: LIF – Laser Interference Filter; LFL – Laser Flash Lamp; LID – Laser Intrusion Detection; LIED – Laser Initiating Explosion Devise**.** In other dictionaries we can find some more (11): LMI – Laser Microfilming, Inc., LVIS – Laser View data Information Service. Thus, the acronym laser here is further compressed as a component part of new abbreviated lexical units. [12] More than 500 word combinations in the English technical terminology can appear in their abbreviated variants with the initial letter of LASER in them.

4. Metalinguistic problems

The analysis of various language aspects plays an important role in learning/teaching of foreign languages, using both traditional and intensive methods. Confronting various opinions in the field usually we discover discrepancies in the metalanguage, interpretations and classifications of certain lexical, grammatical or lexical-grammatical phenomena. Analyzing various kinds of abridged lexical units and the system of terms used in this field we shall confront different terminological systems put forward by scholars and try to explain the difference in meanings of the terms to make it easier for students to better understand the material on the subject. It is well known that one of the main stumbling blocks in rational categorization is the lack of a firmly established relationship between the actual phenomena and their names. The specific language of lexical categories cannot be taken for granted and metalinguistic work cannot be regarded as merely taking an inventory of terms. It is mainly a question of discovering whether there is any real difference in the various approaches and theories, or whether it is purely a terminological difference, mere conventions on this level. Often the very approach to categorization may be untenable in the sense that the researcher fails to keep clearly apart the object of analysis (the facts of the language in question) and the metalanguage – the words and expressions used when people talk about the object language. But even if this is not the case, we very often find a large number of different termino-

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

logical expressions and we are faced with a peculiar situation: we must compare those different systems and try to understand why the different metalinguistic expressions were introduced, the discrepancy not only in the expressions used to denote certain more specific or particular categories, but also in the naming or description of the most general concepts themselves. [14, 104] If we compare the multitude of terms used in the lexicology to name all possible abbreviated lexical units we discover to our amazement that only in English there exist different approaches and interpretations in defining a variety of lexemes used in the field, like for example, *shortenings, curtailings, abridgment, abridgement, contractions, telescoping, shortenings, to telescope, abbreviate, curtail, shorten, contract, blend, blendings, fusion, adhesion abbreviations, acronyms, initialisms, abridged words. Brachionymy* and *brachiology* are occasionally used (*brachi-* means *short*), *cutting-down, shorten*. Compare the terms in: **French** – *abrègement, abrégé abreuvement, signe abréviatif, abréviation, retranchement, contractions, syncope, syncoper, sigle; siglaison, brachyonyme (brachy = short, etc.)*; **German** – *Aphäresis*; *Apokope, Apokopieren,* Abkürzung*; Zusammenwachsen (telescoping), Verwachsen*; lingv. *Zusammenbildung; Kürzung, Verminderung, Herabsetzung, Verringerung; Reduzierung;) Reduktion, Kürzung; Zusammenziehung, Kontraktion; Abkürzung, Abbreviatur; Kurzbezeichnung*; *Kürzel*; **Spanish** – ***abreviatura, sigla***; *acortamiento, abreviación, reducción*; *contracción, simplificación, reducción; aféresis; apocopa* [16]. Some of the terms can be used to denote exactly the same thing and some others express different meanings. Thus, it is not merely a question of choosing between this or that particular term, but the question of approach or attitude to categorization. Various approaches bring to different meanings of some of the terms and serve as a source of confusion for the students of the English language. It also should be taken into consideration the fact that no categorization is attainable and no consistent metalanguage can be worked out, unless a very clear distinction is made form the very start, between the emic and etic levels. Quite a number of the discussed terms are part of

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

the international vocabulary in the result of the process of borrowing. A difference has been observed between the manifestation forms and the phenomenon of reduction of words. A great number of terms are being constantly created and entering the usage: Cf. the **French** *apocope, aphérèse, truncation, siglaison, acronymie, mot-valise, port-manteau, initialisme*, – all of them in scientific sources are united in the generic term *abbreviation* (to mean the process of reduction of lexemes). Lately linguists have often used the term *brachionyme.* In French the terms *brachiology, brachiographie, brachionymie, brachionyme* have been actively used, while in English the term *abbreviation* is regularly used as a generic term to express the meaning of any variety of shortening or reduction of a lexeme, and it is also used in the meaning of *initialism* (words usually reduced to their initial letters). The common element the mentioned terms *brachy- in* English (*brachi-* in French) is practically an international affix of Greek origin. It is used to form quite a number of lexical units, especially in the field of medicine. Thus, in the Multilingual Dictionary 10 we can come across the following examples. **English:** *brachyfacial, brachyoures brachysyndactylie*; *brachydactylie*. **French:** *brachygraphie* (shortening of words); *brachysyndactylie*; *brachydactylie*. **German:** *Brachydaktylie*; *Brachyphalangie*; *Brachylogie*. **Italian:** *brachilogia* (Syn: brevità); *brachilogico*; *brachimorfia*; *brachimetacarpia*.[16] In the absolute majority of cases *brachy-* means *short*. There are some rare exceptions like *brachyfacial* which means *broad-faced*. From the above given examples we can clearly see that the Dictionary contains lexemes with the clear-cut meaning of *short, compressed, shortening of words, shortness of speech* in French, German and Italian correspondingly. That is why there is no wonder that the term *brachyonymy* is sometimes occasionally used in some other languages. Thus, in the Romanian Explanatory Dictionary (1996) we find the term *brahiologie* "Tip de elipsa care consta în evitarea repetarii unui element al frazei exprimat anterior (fr. brachyologie)". [7, 109]. The meaning of *brahiologie* in Romanian has a narrower meaning than in French, the language it was borrowed from. In

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

Romanian *brahi-* is also mainly used in the field of medicine, for example: *brahial, brahicefal, brahicefalie, brahipod.* Most of these terms have been borrowed from French. [7, 109]. The fact that the new terms *brachiology, brachiographie, brachionymie, brachionyme* become more popular in French can be proved by the fact that they are found in more and more linguistic publications (but not yet used in prestigious encyclopedia). Let us give some examples. A. Ceas in his work *"Brachiographie et oralité"* (1990) quoting from Marie T. Cabre *"Terminologie et traduction"* [5, 145-156] gave an exhaustive explanation of the given term. On the other hand the Canadian linguist Marie T. Cabre remarks the notional area of reduction of lexemes, giving a formula: *sigles – initialism – acronyms – abbreviations*. The scholar considers the abbreviation as a particular case of reducing the volume of a lexeme. The author states the need to renovate the exiting terminology.[4] Lexicographic sources express an ambiguous attitude towards the introduction of terms in the linguistic usage. On the other hand, the linguists have started to use the new term not only in French but even in some other languages. "Le Dictionnaire de la langue français" de Pierre Robert (1994) mentions the term *brachiologie* [16,1842). Then in Grand Robert – *"Dictionnaire de la langue français"*: we find *brachiologie* – manner of expressing with extreme conciseness [8, 1643]. Jean Dubois, *"Dictionnaire de linguistique et de sciences de langage"*: *Brachilogie* is a form of consistent conciseness of reduction of lexemes. In the field of neology linguists should always keep in mind the fact that there is a connection between the social-political conditions of the given speaking community and that of the entire population of the globe in a permanent process of optimization of the linguistic means of communication. A generalizing term like brachiologie in French should help avoid the phenomenon of homonymy, polysemy we come across so often. In the field of lexicography we should pay special attention to the constantly changing terminology to avoid the confusion of scientific terminology in the publication of lexicographic dictionaries, regularly making a revision in order to actualize the neologisms,

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

modifying the definitions, to respect exigency towards the proposed neologisms. We can sum up that the creation of abbreviated units and their metalanguage, the compiling of numerous dictionaries in the domain are part of continuous social and linguistic phenomenon. Their creation and existence are due to the important function they have in communication. The increased productivity of all possible abbreviations and shortenings is caused by the accelerating tempo of development of the human society and the need to express the constantly growing volume of information.

5. Conclusion

We can conclude that acronyms have been used since times immemorial, but only now we have an impressing development of the given lexical units in all the fields of activity and gradually they come into usage in all the languages of the world. The higher the level of development, more sophisticated compressed units are created and used. The evolution of acronyms in various functional styles very often is accompanied by a metasemiotic usage of the codified combination of initialisms. In various sophisticated contexts the abridged units gradually start to acquire a certain stylistic connotation. Names of institutions, organizations, etc. may be chosen in order to sound more attractive and produce a strong emotional effect on people. The name of an organization, institution, or social-political movement can bring success and prosperity or, if the acronym is not attractive enough, it may be the cause of failure. That is why the subjective character in creating new abbreviations is increasing in the fields of politics, economy and in various social life activities. That is why more and more “elegant”, “fashionable” and ”super” compressed units come into being. It is for the information of consumers that it is important to have something jovial, euphonic, recognizable in form, related to some well-known names, that would make the new appellation more superior, attractive, interesting and people would get eager to know more of the object or phenomenon in question.

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)

Bibliography

ABBYY Lingvo, 10, 2004, *ABBYY Software Ltd.*
Acronyms and Initialisms Dictionary, 1998, Michigan.
Bauer, Laurie, 1984, *English Word-Formation*, Cambridge University Press.
Bauer, Laurie, 1983, *English Word Formation*, Cambridge University Press.
Cabre, Maria Teresa, 1998, *Terminologie. Théorie, méthode et applications*, Armand Colin et Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa.
Ceas, Patrick A., 1990, *Brachiographie et oralité*, Paris.
Crystal, David, 1992, *An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages*, London.
Dictionarul explicativ al limbii române, 1996, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucuresti.
Grand Robert. Dictionnaire de la langue française, 8 volumes, 2004, Editions Robert, Paris.
Melenciuc, Dumitru, 2003, *Comparativistics*, CEP USM, Chisinau.
Melenciuc, Dumitru; Macarov, Oxana, 2006, *A Lexicographic and Social-Linguistic Study of Acronyms*, Conferinta stiintifica internationala consacrata aniversarii a 60-a a USM, CEP USM, Chisinau.
Melenciuc, Dumitru; Macarov, Oxana; Calchei, Marcela, 2006, *The Metalinguistic and Social Aspect of Abbreviated Lexical Units*, Analele Stiintifice ale Universitatii de Stat din Moldova, Seria „Stiinte filologice", CEP USM, Chisinau.
Melenciuc, Dumitru; Macarov, Oxana, 2005, *The Process of Acronymisation in Modern English*, Analele Stiintifice ale Universitatii de Stat din Moldova, Seria „Stiinte filologice", CEP USM, Chisinau.
Melenciuc, Dumitru; Macarov, Alexandra; Axenti, Stela; Macarov, Oxana, 2003, *Acronyms in Modern English*, Analele Stiintifice ale Universitatii de Stat din Moldova, Seria „Stiinte filologice", CEP USM, Chisinau.
Melenciuc, Dumitru; Macarov, Alexandra; Macarov, Oxana; Gil, Vladimir, 2003, *Abbreviations, Clippings and Blendings in Modern English*, Analele Stiintifice ale Universitatii de Stat din Moldova, Seria „Stiinte filologice", CEP USM, Chisinau.
Melenciuc, Dumitru; Macarov, Alexandra; Axenti, Stela; Trohin, Elena, 2003, *The Metalanguage of New Technologies as a Sociolinguistic Phenomenon*, Analele Stiintifice ale Universitatii de Stat din Moldova, Seria „Stiinte filologice", CEP USM, Chisinau.
Le Dictionnaire de la langue française, 1994, Larousse, Paris.
Sawoniac, Henryk, 1976, *New International Dictionary of Acronyms in Library and Information Science and Related Fields*, Second Edition, Saur, München – London – New York – Paris.
Sawoniac, Henryk; Witt Maria, 1988, *New International Dictionary of Acronyms in Library and Information science and related fields*, Second Edition, Saur, München – London – New York – Paris.

BDD-A17843 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:14 UTC)