A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW ON ENGLISH ACRONYMS AND ALPHABETISMS

Nadina VIŞAN
University of Bucharest

Abstract

The present paper offers a systematic account of reduced formations such as acronyms and alphabetisms in English. Oppositions already presented in previous studies are taken into consideration and refined. A comprehensive picture is attempted, with explanatory power, meant to provide 'quirky' examples, so far left unexplained in the literature. New aspects are revealed with respect to lexicalization phenomena, productivity, conversion, syntactic behaviour.

Keywords: *acronym, shortening, lexicalization, word-formation, convertion*

Résumé

Le présent travail se propose d'offrir une vue d'ensemble systématique sur les formations lexicales réduites de l'anglais, telles les acronymes et les sigles. Des oppositions présentées par nombre d'études de spécialité antérieures sont rediscutées et réévaluées. On essaie de réaliser un tableau general qui puisse fournir des explications pertinentes pour les exemples problématiques restés jusqu'à present sans solution dans literature de spécialité. Sont soumis à l'analyse de nouveaux aspects concernant des phénomènes tells que la lexicalization, la productivité ou la conversion, ainsi que le comportement syntaxique des structures lexicales examinées.

Mots-clés: *acronyme, abrègement, lexicalisation, formation des mots, conversion*

Introduction

The present paper endeavours to offer a comprehensive survey of some important issues that arise when a description of two related classes of English abbreviations is attempted. We refer to the related classes of lexical items known as acronyms and alphabetisms. The latter class is also referred to as 'initialisms' by some linguists (see, for instance Harley, 2004, or Denning *et al.*, 2007). In other studies, the term 'initialisms' is used to cover both acronyms, alphabetisms and abbreviations (López Rúa, 2002, Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Therefore, for reasons of clarity, we have chosen to dispense with the term in this paper.

A tentative perusal of the literature reveals that there are certain problems in the treatment of such formations. These problems are apparent from the very first attempt to categorize or define the structures in question. For instance, while all linguists are in agreement that the two classes are related, and should be defined in opposition with each other, not all of them integrate the two types of formations similarly. Some of them look at formal features that characterize the two classes and therefore choose to place acronyms and alphabetisms in a larger class of 'reduced formations' or 'shortenings' (Denning *et alia*, 2007, Jackson & Amvela, 2007, Katamba, 2005, López Rúa, 2002, to

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

name but a few)[1], while others focus on word-formation processes lying at the basis of these types of structures and group them under such labels as *oddities* (Aronoff, 1976), *unpredictable formations* (Bauer, 1983), *minor word formation processes* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). More issues arise when a description of the structures is attempted, pertaining to fuzzy boundaries of categories, register and stylistic markedness, lexicalization phenomena and, for certain subclasses, even syntactic matters.

In what follows, we will try to offer a systematic discussion of these issues, which will permit us to develop a more comprehensive view of these structures. We will also try to discuss some problems related to distinct syntactic behaviour of certain subclasses of acronyms and alphabetisms, first observed by Huddleston & Pullum (2002) and then refined by Harley (2004). Our predictions are that the set of parameters used to define and categorize the formations needs to be expanded for a better grasp of their descriptive features and behaviour.

1. Definitions of Acronyms and Alphabetisms

One of the defining features of both acronyms and alphabetisms is that they are reduced formations, coined by speakers with a view to 'economizing', to referring in a more efficient manner to a concept otherwise expressed by a long full phrase. Emphasis is thus laid on the pragmatic effectiveness of these formations, on their 'brevity' (Pyles & Algeo, 1993). Secondly, a substitutive function is brought to attention, the fact that a need for economy produces a shortened form that substitutes and might ultimately come to actually supplant the original base form, the source phrase. This is the case of an acronym such as *radar* (< Radio Detecting And Ranging) or an alphabetism such as *OK* (< All Korrect), which substituted their base forms and ultimately supplanted them. Such cases are quite numerous, as shown in the literature.

A definition of acronyms and alphabetisms is generally provided by placing the two formations in opposition with each other. Pronounciation is normally the criterion used to differentiate between them: while acronyms are reduced formations where the initials of the constituents in the source phrase are pronounced in concatenation, as a well-formed autonomous lexical item (*AIDS* /ejdz/ < Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), alphabetisms are reduced formations where each letter is pronounced separately (*BBC* /bi bi si/ < British Broadcasting Corporation, *DOA* /di jow ej/ < Dead On Arrival). This distinction is phonologically grounded, it appears. As noticed by Plag (2003), Huddleston & Pullum (2002) *inter alia*, not all such reduced formations are equally pronounceable as fully-fledged words in English, according to phonological rules. For instance, a reading out of an item such as *BBC* would produce what Plag (2003) calls "an illegal phonological word", since both /bbk/ and /bbs/ feature "an illegal word-internal combination of sounds in English" (Plag, 2003: 128). It therefore follows that *BBC* is indeed a poor candidate for an acronym, but an excellent one for an alphabetism.

Some linguists further distinguish between such structures and abbreviations (*Dr.*, *Mr.*, *e.g.*, *ME*), which are only orthographic shortenings and mere symbols for their source phrases. Abbreviations are meant to be pronounced in full when read out loud: *doctor*, *mister*, *for example*, *Middle English*.

[1] Harley, 2006, treats these formations as a case of 'extreme economizing'. In her view, both acronyms and alphabetisms are to be subsumed to the larger class of clippings. They are "a kind of extreme clipping: using the initial letters of the content word in a phrase to stand in for the whole phrase." (Harley, 2006, p. 96) This view is supported by Brinton (2010).

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

As with all types of classifications, no matter which criterion or parameter is applied, categories are not completely clear-cut, boundaries are more often than not blurred by counterexamples. This is why there are studies in the literature that favour approaches which focus on the word-formation processes lying at the basis of these structures in an attempt to account for the existence of such exceptions. Bauer (1983), for instance, taking over from Aronoff (1976), discusses the unpredictable character of acronyms and alphabetisms. In her opinion, these structures are to be grouped together with clippings, blends, manufactured words and back-formations not necessarily because most of these classes seem to be formed by shortening, but because of the unpredictability of their form: "it is by no means clear that the forms of these words can be predicted by rules without appealing to such ill-understood notions as euphony." (Bauer, 1983: 232) There are at least two sources wherefrom the lack of predictability for acronyms springs, she says.

In the first place, the source phrase provides initials for acronyms with a certain freedom. Consider, for instance, the acronym *BASIC* (< Beginners'All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code), where only the first part of a compound adjective such as *all-purpose* is the basis for one letter in the acronym. This situation is to be compared with *WASP* (< White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), where both initials in the compound adjective are bases. By the same token, *GRAS* (< Generally Recognized As Safe) takes as basis the adverb *as*, whereas *FIST* (< Federation of Inter-State Truckers) does not take the preposition *of* into consideration.

In the second place, phonological rules do not predict why some formations such as *OD* (< Over-Dose), or *BO* (< Body Odour) cannot be acronyms (since they can be easily pronounced as one word). An interesting example is provided by the pair *JAL* /ʤei ei el/ (< Japanese Airlines) and *IJAL* /ai ʤæl/ (< International Journal of American Linguistics), where the same syllable is treated differently. See also a hybrid formation such as *JPEG* /ʤeɪ pɛg/ (< Joint Photographic Experts Group), where pronounciation is of no help in labeling the item.

An interesting angle is also put forth by Katamba (2005) who defines acronyms as shortenings that are interesting types of a role-reversal in the sense that they are initially spoken word-forms derived from words in the written language. In a first phase of existence, such items are spelt with capital letters, indicative of the fact that the people are still aware of the phrase that constituted their source. In time, some acronyms start being spelt like any other 'ordinary' word. See for instance, the situation of *NATO* (< North-Atlantic Treaty Organization) or *AIDS* (< Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), which are often spelt as *Nato* or *Aids.* A further stage in the evolution of acronyms is complete loss of motivation, that is loss of awareness of the source phrase, as is the case of *Aids*, *scuba*, *radar*, *laser*. Nobody remembers, for instance, that *scuba* is an abbreviation for 'self-contained underwater breathing apparatus'. This actually stands proof for the fact that the respective acronym has become lexicalized[2], it has become a fully-formed lexeme, a view supported also by

[2] We look upon lexicalization as a process by means of which words previously analyzable morphologically are rendered opaque, 'petrified'. The implications of this process are that the meaning of the items becomes specialized and that "their properties have to be specified individually in the dictionary rather than being consistent with the grammatical rules of word-formation." (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 1629).

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

Brinton & Traugott, 2005. Another good example is *pin* (< Personal Identification Number) whose source phrase is no longer known by many speakers, which led to the formation of a new phrase that in fact contains redundant lexical information, *pin number*.

As noticed in Huddleston & Pullum (2002), upper-case acronyms can be often doubled by alternants (i.e. their unreduced source phrase) in the context where they appear, whereas lower-case acronyms no longer do so[3]. It is important to notice here that when it comes down to lexicalization, very little is mentioned with respect to alphabetisms. Brinton & Traugott (2005:42) mention that, although alphabetisms might not be viewed as fully-formed lexemes, there are certain cases where they start being treated as unified lexemes: *emcee (MC)* (< Master of Ceremonies), *Veep* (*VP*) (< Vice-President). Consequently it might not be amiss to consider that alphabetisms appear more 'motivated', more 'transparent' than acronyms, i.e. the source phrase is more easily retrievable for speakers of English[4].

So far it appears that the main feature distinguishing between acronyms and alphabetisms is still that of pronunciation. There is a degree of unpredictability in their formation, since, as proved by Bauer (1983), sometimes only usage accounts for choosing one alternative (consider also *VAT* (< Value Added Tax) which is pronounced both as an acronym and as an alphabetism). Acronyms appear as a class of reduced formations highly receptive to lexicalization, while alphabetisms appear more resistant to the process. This is probably because of claim of acronyms to lexical autonomy, due to their one-word pronunciation.

2. Models of Differentiation between Acronyms and Alphabetisms

This subsection deals with three models of differentiation between acronyms and alphabetisms. We have chosen to discuss each of these models in chronological order. Each of them comes up with relevant information in an attempt to differentiate between the two types of reduced formations under discussion.

2.1. Fisher's (1998) Model

Fisher's (1998) analysis of shortenings offers an insightful systematized picture. She methodically builds a clear-cut model of analysis by fully integrating acronyms and alphabetisms into a larger picture, which we reproduce in a slightly adapted form below, under Figure 1:

[3] The fact that lower-case acronyms are considered to be heavily lexicalized items is also seen in a phenomenon remarked upon by Denning *et al.* (2007): there are cases when credible acronymic etymologies have been concocted for unaccounted-for words. This is the situation of *posh* which is falsely believed to have originated from the syntagm *port out, starboard home*, purportedly a remark about how posh people used to book their reservations from England to India.

[4] There are, of course, counterexamples: an interesting one is *lol* which is an alphabetism created for internet chat use, meaning 'laughing out loud'. It appears that in time, the alphabetism started to be pronounced as an acronym and then it started spawning derived forms and underwent conversion: *John lolled at what Mary said.* Some people even think that *lol* means 'a laugh' and use it as a regular noun with a singular form (*lol*) and a plural one (*lols*). We should notice however that lexicalization takes place *after* the item starts being pronounced as an acronym: Stage 1: *lol* (alphabetism). Stage 2: *lol* (acronym) Stage 3: derivations of *lol* + loss of source phrase awareness. (http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=1634516)

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

Figure 1

TYPE	BASE FORM	PRONUNCIATION	EXAMPLES
abbreviation	one word	alphabetical or going back to the base form	Dr.
clipping	one or more	orthoepical	enviro
alphabetism	two or more	alphabetical	SOS
blend	two words	orthoepical	brunch
acronym	three words or more	orthoepical	AIDS

As one can see, in Fisher's model there are slight variations to the defining features discussed in Section 2 of this paper. For instance, abbreviations (which she actually calls 'shortenings') are not just read out loud as base forms but also alphabetically. However, they are supposed to be reductions of one word only (it follows that items such as *e.g.* or *p.m.* are to be grouped with alphabetisms in her model).

An important image of the differences between acronyms and alphabetisms is drawn by Fisher in Figure 2, where she delves into the data provided by Cannon (1989) and sums them up in a very palatable form:

Figure 2

CRITERION	ALPHABETISM	ACRONYM
pronunciation	alphabetical; stress on last syllable; favoured vowels /i/, /e/ and /ei/	orthoepical; stress mainly on the first syllable
spelling	one to five letters	three to nine letters
base form	at least two words	at least three words
productivity (new word-formations)	rare	restricted
subject area	mainly science	mainly science, business and politics
semantics	–	often homonymy

This model is relevant for a better definition of acronyms and alphabetisms in that pronunciation is no longer the main differentiating feature between the two classes. Special emphasis is laid on spelling, on the length of the source phrase (two vs. three words at least) and on extended semantics. Let us briefly comment upon some aspects related to the oppositions proposed in Figure 2.

It is apparent that Cannon's (1989) findings have undergone certain changes. For instance, with respect to productivity, which we understand to be the ability of the class of items to produce derived forms, the last two decades or so have proved that these classes have started to become more productive, acronyms more than alphabetisms. Let us consider, for example, *YUP* (< Young Urban Professional) which has produced an entire plethora of derived forms: *yuppie*, *to yuppify*, *yuppification*, *yuppiedom*, *de-yuppify*, *yup-speak*, etc. One should also include here what Katamba (2005) calls 'copy-cat formations', items built by analogy with *yuppie*:

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

(1) *Woppies* Wealthy Older Professional Persons
Yummies Young Upwardly-Mobile Marxists
Dinkies Double-Income-No-Kids
Nilkies No-Income-Lots-of-Kids

Also, let us not forget the example offered by *lol* (< Laughing Out Loud), which has lexicalized and has started producing verbal and nominal paradigms, or *OD* (< Over-Dose) which is regularly used as a verb (*She OD-ed in my backyard*). In a similar vein, consider such formations as *dinkdom*, *WASPish*, *AIDS baby*, *AIDS virus*, etc.

The subject area has also extended, with the rise of a whole variety of alphabetisms and acronyms in the domain of Internet communication; see, for instance, *imho* (< In My Humble/ Honest Opinion), *motos* (< Member Of The *Where Do Words Come From*? Opposite Sex), *rotfl* (< Rolling On The Floor Laughing), *rtfm* (< Read The Fucking Manual), *ykwim* (< You Know What I Mean), etc.

In the area of semantics, some further comment is in order. Cannon (1989) acknowledges the fact that acronyms might occasionally be created as homonymous to already existing lexical items in English. The phenomenon is also recorded by Denning *et al.* (2007) as reverse acronyms, those acronyms created by reversing the process of word-formation, where the base is invented to justify the acronym, not the other way round. Consider, for instance an example such as *WASP* (< White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) which obviously has a derogatory tinge, or *MADD* (< Mothers Against Drunk Driving) which is meant to have a humorous dimensions, or even *SAD* (< Singles' Awareness Day) which is a counter-coinage for 'Valentine's Day' and which is meant to form a pun that echoes a celebratory formulaic phrase: *Happy SAD Day*! (Nancy Gibbs, *A Day to Forget*, TIME, February 18, 2008). In fact, Fisher herself (1998) remarks upon the metaphoric transfer that takes place in the coining of such items: the meaning of the existing word is transferred to the acronym. She provides examples such as *BASIC* (< Beginners'All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code) or *WIMP* (< Weakly Interactive Massive Particle), or even *WIN* (< Whip Inflation Now), the latter being interpreted as an implicit speech act. In the same line, consider NOW (< National Organization of Women), which can similarly be interpreted as having pragmatic weight.

Cannon (1989) and Fischer (1998) omit to mention that alphabetisms do manifest interesting behaviour in point of their semantics. Pyles & Algeo (1993) remark upon their propensity towards functioning as euphemisms and illustrate their thought with such examples as *BO* (< Body Odor) or *VD* (< Venereal Disease). To these we could easily add a whole number of such items. Consider, for instance, *STD*s (< Sexually Transmitted Diseases), *SOB* (< Son Of a Bitch), *RTFM* (< Read The Fucking Manual), *OD* (< Over-Dose), *BS* (< Bull Shit), etc. An illuminating example is offered by Allan (2012), where the word *tits* has double meaning (among other things, it also means a British variety of bird), hence the pun:

(2) "Twenty WRNS walked into the cold store and forty blue tits came out" (WRNS, homophonous with *wrens [a kind of bird]*, is the acronym for Women's Royal Naval Service)." (Allan, 2012: 9)

It appears therefore that both acronyms and alphabetisms can be used with stylistically marked value, either by metaphoric transfer (reverse acronyms) or euphemistically (certain alphabetisms). In fact such connotative uses also support the lexicalization hypothesis already discussed in Section 2. It thus appears that these

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

semantically charged reduced formations are new lexemes instead of just new surface forms (i.e. allomorphs) of the same source phrase (Plag, 2003)[5]. As shown also in Huddleston and Pullum (2002), in a recent coinage such as *dinky* (< "married couple with [double income but no kids yet]") the meaning of the acronym incorporates the meaning of a larger phrase than the source one, which might stand as proof that we are in fact dealing with a new lexeme instead of an allomorph of the source phrase.

2.2. López Rúa's (2002) Model

López Rúa's model is one of the most comprehensive we have encountered in the literature. Her aim is to provide a systematic account of the metalinguistic categories involved in the description of shortenings, often neglected in lexical morphology. In order to accomplish this, she uses the framework of the revised version of prototype theory, which, she explains, appears to offer special insight and has better explanatory power than the classical theory. It is due to the lack of flexibility in the classical theory that a series of 'quirky' examples are left unaccounted for. Consider, for instance, *Carisform* (< Carribean Institute of Social Formation), a peripheral formation that previous researchers had trouble labeling. We notice here that the approach proposed by López Rúa does in fact manage to eliminate a feature that used to be used as a defining criterion in older studies (Bauer, 1983): the feature of 'unpredictability' that helped Bauer integrate acronyms and alphabetisms under the class of 'unpredictable formations.'

López Rúa emphasizes the explanatory value of her approach, an approach that seems especially appropriate in the description of acronyms and alphabetisms, structures that are characterized by variety and complexity and that normally defy all attempts at comprehensive description in a classical fashion.

In order to provide such a comprehensive description, a set of defining parameters are necessary. Below we present the six parameters selected by López Rúa:

López Rúa's (2002: 35) Set of Defining Parameters:

1. Number and Type of source form (i.e. the morphosyntactic unit which is shortened): one or more; a word or a phrase. Examples: *Mon* (< Monday), motel (< 'motor' + 'hotel'), *Inbucon* (< International Business Consultants).

2. Pronunciation of the resulting form: unexpanded (ordinary word or letter names), or expanded (source form). Examples: *Zip/ZIP* (< Zone Improvement Plan), *KDP* (< Potassium ± from Latin Kalium ± Dihydrogen, Phosphate), *NY* (< New York).

3. Orthography or spelling: small letters, capitals, or a combination of both. Examples: *laser, SALT* (< Strategic Arms Limitation Talks/Treaty), *GEnie* (< General Electric Network for Information Exchange).

[5] Plag comments upon the pair of acronyms *START* (< Strategic Arms Reduction Talks) and *SALT* (< Strategic Arms Limitation Talks), the first of which was a reverse acronym purposefully coined not only in order to refer to a possible disarmament treaty between the US and the Soviet Union but also to somehow hint at the fact that the Americans intended to make a new, serious effort in disarmament talks with the Soviet Union at a moment when people no longer believed in such honest intentions. *SALT* was another reverse acronym for the name of the programme that replaced the by then unsuccessful programme *START*. Plag (2003, p. 128) makes the following comment: "Such data show that in political discourse, the participants consider it important to name a phenomenon in a particular way in order to win a political argument. The assumption underlying such a strategy is that the name used for a given phenomenon will influence the language users' concept of and attitude towards that phenomenon." The plus of meaning offered by these reverse acronyms pleads in favour of their being newly-formed lexemes instead of mere allomorphs for their source phrases.

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

4. Degree of shortening: from maximum (one or two initials replacing one source word, as in laser), to medium or minimum, in which the resulting form retains splinters[6] or even complete words of the source, as in *TriBeCa* (< Triangle Below Canal Street) or *Eximbank* (< Export Import Bank).

5. Degree of phonic integration of the constituents: high (sound intersection or overlap), medium (sound union), or low (sound clustering). In 'high' integration there is an assimilation of identical or similar sounds occurring in the constituents which are to be shortened and combined (for example, the phonemes /b/ and /d/ in *bomdron* < bombardment squadron). In 'medium' integration there is no intersection of common sounds; the remaining parts of the sources are simply joined, but they form either a syllable or at least a pronounceable sequence in the resulting item (for instance, *br-* and *-unch* in *brunch* < breakfast + lunch; or the initials of an acronym such as radar). Finally, in 'low' integration each original constituent provides a splinter which becomes an independent syllable in the resulting form; these syllables are then simply clustered in order to build the new item, as in *Nabisco* (< National Biscuit Company). Another example of low integration would be the clustering of initials in typical alphabetisms such as *BBC* (< British Broadcasting Corporation).

6. Mode of expression: speaking and writing, or only writing.

A closer look at the set of parameters proposed by López Rúa is in order. If we were to compare this picture with Fisher's (1998), it appears the last three parameters in the set (i.e. 'degree of shortening', 'degree of phonic integration' and 'mode of expression') have replaced those of 'productivity', 'subject area'[7] and 'semantics'. In a comprehensive formal description of shortenings, López Rúa's parameters do indeed seem to bring a modicum of extra-relevance. For instance, the last parameter (mode of expression), is used to differentiate between simple shortenings (only written ones, represented by abbreviations) and complex shortenings (both written and oral, represented by all other classes of shortenings). It would be interesting to see in what manner Katamba's (2005) observation on role-reversal formations (written mode being source to spoken mode formations, as is the case of acronyms) can be integrated in this model or if this integration could further illuminate the picture.

López Rúa uses these parameters to draw an interesting set of prototypical features for each of the classes of shortenings. We shall limit our discussion to acronyms and alphabetisms and only briefly refer to other classes when discussing borderline cases and their integration in a more permissive model that has a higher explanatory force. Consider the prototypical features for acronyms and alphabetisms offered below in Figure 3 and Figure 4, respectively:

---

[6] The term is borrowed from Lehrer (1996) and refined: "I therefore regard as splinters those graphic and phonemic sequences (not only in blends but also in peripheral initialisms) which are neither inflectional nor derivational morphemes, nor combining forms (*electro-*, *-scope*), and whose length generally allows their identification as belonging to a previous word. Consequently, splinters tend to be syllables or units larger than syllables in their sources, as *Ox* and *-bridge* in Oxbridge ('OXford and CamBRIDGE'), or *Digi-* and *-alt* in *Digiralt* ('DIGItal radar ALTimeter')." (López Rúa, 2002, p. 37-38)

[7] 'Subject area' has actually lost relevance as a differentiating parameter since the classes of acronyms and alphabetisms have lately expanded massively and extended in all subdomains (López Rúa, 2002, Brinton & Brinton, 2010, *inter alia*).

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

Figure 3: Hierarchy of prototypical values of acronyms**:** *laser*, *radar*

PARAMETERS	PROTOTYPICAL VALUES
Pronunciation	their unexpanded form is orthoepic
Degree of shortening	their degree of shortening is maximal (1 or 2 initials per word)
Degree of phonic integration	their degree of phonic integration is medium
Source form(s)	their source form is prototypically one phrase
Orthography	they are prototypically written in small letters
Mode of expression	they are used both in speaking and in writing

Figure 4: Hierarchy of prototypical values of alphabetisms: *BBC*

PARAMETERS	PROTOTYPICAL VALUES
Pronunciation	their unexpanded form is letter by letter
Degree of shortening	their degree of shortening is maximal (1 initial per word)
Degree of phonic integration	their degree of phonic integration is low
Source form(s)	their source form is prototypically one phrase
Orthography	they are prototypically written in capitals
Mode of expression	they are used both in speaking and in writing

The picture drawn by Figures 3 and 4 acknowledge examples such as *laser* or *BBC* as prototypical for their class and traces important differences between the two prototypes. As in previous models, clear-cut differences arise in point of pronunciation, spelling and source phrase. Special emphasis is laid on the degree of shortening and degree of phonic integration, which come to further refine the differences between the two classes. It thus appears that the model offered by López Rúa does indeed provide a plus of explanatory force. This is to be checked when taking into account various classes of hybrid formations: a) acronym/alphabetism – such as *VAT* (< Value Added Tax), pronounced as an alphabetism when spelt with capital letters or exhibiting features of acronymy when spelt and pronounced alternatively (*Vat*); b) acronym/alphabetism/blend – such as *IBMulation* (< IBM + eMULATION, i.e. 'emulation of International Business Machines'); see also *echovirus* (< ECHO + virus; ECHO: 'Enteric Cytopathogenic Human Orphan'); c) acronym/alphabetism/clipping – such as *CLAB* (< Custom LABoratories Inc.), *coth* (< Hyperbolic COTangent), *BOPS* (< Bomber OPerationS), *DSAT* (< Defensive SATellite), or *E-Spec* (< Equipment SPECification).

Not much is said about productivity or about extended semantics, which had a place in Fisher's (1998) and Cannon's (1989) models, although, as we have seen, there is some relevance to using the latter at least for differentiating purposes. Lexicalization phenomena are not mentioned either, even if an opposition could be traced between acronyms and alphabetisms with respect to this parameter.

On the whole, the model proposed by López Rúa has the merit of systematically describing the classes of structures under study. It does offer a far more comprehensive picture and it accounts for hybrid cases left unexplained properly by previous analyses.

Harley's (2004) Model

In an attempt to address issues related to the lexical domains that favour the appearance of alphabetisms, Katamba (2005) draws the following picture:

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

Figure 5

DOMAIN	EXAMPLE
Organizations	UN (< The United Nations), NFL (< the National Football League)
Places	LA (< Los Angeles)
Science	DNA (< Deoxyribonucleic Acid)
Media Companies	BBC (< The British Broadcasting Corporation)
Academic Institutions	UCLA (< The University of California, Los Angeles)
Miscellaneous	TLC (< Tender Loving Care) DJ (< Disc Jockey)

If we analyse this picture we notice that some of these alphabetisms have as source phrase a definite description, such as organizations, media companies and academic institutions. It is interesting to further notice that in most cases the determiner of these definite descriptions is retained even after the source phrase has been abbreviated into an alphabetism: we say *the UN*, *the NFL*, *the BBC*, *the CIA* (< the Central Intelligence Agency), *the FBI* (< The Federal Bureau of Investigation). A significant exception is to be noticed in the behaviour of a restricted class, that of alphabetisms created from source phrases that designate academic institutions: *UCLA*, but not **the UCLA*; *MIT* (< Massachusetts Institute of Technology), but not * *the MIT*; *NYU* (< New York University), but not **the NYU*.

An interesting picture emerges if we take into consideration the behaviour of acronyms derived from definite descriptions, which can be patterned with that of alphabetisms of academic institutions. In her study, Harley (2004) notices that acronyms derived from definite descriptions always behave like proper names in that they lose the determiner from the source phrase. Consider a few such examples provided by Harley (2004: 388-389):

(3) *RADA* (< The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art)

I'm still at school but I would like to apply to RADA. [Gordon Ashbee, "Royal Academy of Dramatic Art Frequently Asked Questions," RADA, 2002, http:/www.rada.org/facq.html] (Cf. *I'm still at school but I would like to apply to the RADA.)

(4) *UNESCO* (< The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization)

To fulfill its mandate, UNESCO performs five principal functions. [UNESCO, „What Is UNESCO?" 2000, http:/www.unesco.org/general/eng/about/what.shtml] (Cf. *… the UNESCO performs five…)

(5) *UNICEF* (< the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)

UNICEF helps children get the care and stimulation they need in the early years of life and encourages families to educate girls as well as boys. [UNICEF, "Changing the World with Children," 2003, http:/www.unicef.org/uwwide] (Cf. * The UNICEF helps children…)

The behaviour of acronyms contrasts with that of alphabetisms (save for the restricted class[8] of alphabetisms derived from source phrases designating academic institutions). While acronyms behave like proper names, dropping the determiner

[8] In her study, Harley (2004) points to the fact that the number of members in this set is far lower than the numbers for the other two sets (i.e. Places and Organizations). She also emphasizes on the 'exceptional' behaviour of this class.

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

present in their source phrase, alphabetisms tend to retain this determiner. This happens even with cases of lexicalized alphabetisms, such as *the GOP* (< The Grand Old Party), where the source phrase is no longer transparent for young speakers of American English.

Harley (2004) looks at this contrast in the syntactic behaviour of acronyms and alphabetisms derived from definite descriptions and demonstrates that it is a generalized pattern. She explains that alphabetisms derived from source phrases designating academic institutions behave in an exceptional manner. The explanation offered is that this particular class of alphabetisms behave like bare location nominals through analogy. It is well-known that English possesses a class of bare location nominals (Stvan, 1998), which behave syntactically like proper names, in that they also occur without determiners or plural marking (as is apparent in the examples under (6)):

(6) a. *School* was fun today; b. I want to go to *camp*; c. I'm going on *break*.

A new opposition can be thus traced if we agree with Harley's (2004) findings. Her study is a convincing demonstration, offering a whole series of sound arguments in favour of interpreting this contrast as a generalized pattern in the syntactic behaviour of acronyms and alphabetisms. In fact this opposition is mentioned in Huddleston & Pullum (2002) as well: "Like the intialism MIT, proper name acronyms stand as full NPs without the definite article: *She works for NATO/ UNESCO*, not *the *NATO/ *the *UNESCO*". (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 1634)

Let us conclude this section by summarizing it as follows:

Figure 6: The Syntactic Behaviour of Acronyms and Alphabetisms of Definite Descriptions

ACRONYMS	ALPHABETISMS
Behave like PNs: *NATO/John Smith*	Behave like definite NPs: *the BBC/ the boy*

It appears therefore that the set of oppositions described in sections 3.1. and 3.2. can be enriched with one more element, as presented in Figure 6.

Conclusions

An analysis of the literature reveals various tendencies of classification and organization of reduced formations such as acronyms and alphabetisms. The picture that comes out of this set of diverse approaches is a complex one and reveals a cluster of oppositions traced in terms of features. This picture is drawn below under Figure 7:

Figure 7: A Comprehensive Survey of Acronyms and Alphabetisms

CRITERION	ALPHABETISMS	ACRONYMS
Pronunciation	alphabetical; stress on last syllable	orthoepical; stress on first syllable
Orthography	one to five leters; upper case	three to nine letters; lower case
Degree of shortening	1 initial per word	1 or 2 initials per word
Degree of phonic integration	low	medium
Extended semantics	euphemisms	homonyms of already existing lexemes

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

Productivity due to lexicalization	rare	manifest
Syntax (when the source phrase is a definite description)	behave like NPs	behave like PNs
Conversion from one class to another	possible if phonology permits	impossible

As one can observe, we have eliminated some of the former criteria employed in previous studies: we did away with 'subject area' since, as we were saying, this parameter has become irrelevant because of the fact that both acronyms and alphabetisms are now extensively used in most areas. We also eliminated 'source phrase', since both formations abbreviate phrases and we cannot speak of contrast in this case (as a matter of fact, the only relevant feature to be mentioned here is [+/- definite] with respect to syntactic behaviour, a feature that was captured in the last entry of the table). 'Mode of expression' is another parameter eliminated and which appeared in López Rúa's model. We decided to dispense with it since the only contrast created by this parameter is between simple shortenings and complex ones (abbreviations vs. other shortenings), an opposition which we did not consider relevant for the present discussion. We kept the criterion of productivity, which we associated with the phenomenon of lexicalization, a discussion that is worth pursuing in a separate study. It is however interesting to notice that from what we have seen so far acronyms tend to lexicalize while alphabetisms are prone to do so after conversion (after they have become acronyms themselves). This basically means that productivity and lexicalization are restricted to alphabetisms that have phonological permission to convert. It is an interesting tentative conclusion, which is worth pursuing and testing in some future work we hope to attempt.

Finally, this kind of description such as the one presented under Figure 6 has explanatory power for a lot of examples that so far have been classified under exceptions in previous studies. For instance the propensity towards conversion of a formation such as *VAT/Vat* (< Value Added Tax) is accounted for. In a similar way, the fact that examples such as *SOB* (< Son of a Bitch) or *OD* (< Over-Dose), *BO* (< Body Odor) do not convert even if phonology permits it is explained due to their extended semantics. Since such formations are created for euphemistic reasons (more than just for reasons of economy), their conversion is blocked, as acronyms do not exhibit this kind of semantics.

We believe that this new picture has explanatory power and offers systematic insight into the behaviour and formation of acronyms and alphabetisms.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allan, K., *X-Phemism and Creativity*, in *Lexis*, 7/ 2012, p. 5-42.

Aronoff, M., *Word-Formation in Generative Grammar*, in *Linguistic Inquiry Monograph* 1, Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 1976.

Bauer, L., *English Word-Formation*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Brinton, L., Brinton, J., *The Linguistic Structure of Modern English*, John Benjamins, 2010.

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)

Brinton, L., Closs Traugott, E., *Lexicalization and Language Change*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
Cannon, G., *Abbreviations and Acronyms in English Word-Formation*, in American Speech, vol. 64, 2/1989.
Denning, K., Kessler, B., Leben, W.R., *English Vocabulary Elements*, Oxford University Press, 2007. (http://www.fileshut.com/download/sMuahF5s/denning,-k.;-kessler,-b.;-leben-w.r.-english-vocabulary-elements.pdf.html)
Fisher, R., *Lexical Change in Present-Day English*, Gunter Narr Verlog Tübingen, 1998.
Harley, H., *English Words*, Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
Harley, H., *Why Is It the CIA but not *The NASA*? *Acronyms, Initialisms and Definite Descritptions*, in American Speech, vol. 79, 4/2004, p. 368-399.
Huddleston, R., Pullum, Geoffrey, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Jackson, H., Amvela, E. Z., *Words, Meaning and Vocabulary*, Continuum, London, 2007.
Katamba, F., *English Words. Structure, History, Usage*, Routledge, 2005.
Lehrer, A., *Identifying and Interpreting Blends*: *An Experimental Approach*, in *Cognitive Linguistics*, 7/1996 p. 359-90.
López Rúa, P., *On the Structure of Acronyms and Neighbouring Categories – a Prototype-Based Account*, in *English Language and Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press 6.1/2002, p. 31-60.
Pitiriciu, Silvia, *Abrevierile în limba română*, Craiova, Editura Scrisul Românesc, 2004.
Plag, I., *Word-Formation in English*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
Pyles, T., Algeo, J., *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1993.
Stoichițoiu Ichim, Adriana, *Creativitate lexicală în româna actuală*, Bucureşti, Editura Universității din Bucureşti, 2006.
Stvan, L., *The Semantics and Pragmatics of Bare Singular Noun Phrases*, Ph.D. Diss., Northwestern Univ., 1998.

BDD-A3912 © 2013 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:13 UTC)