

## APPLYING THE PROROTYPICALITY APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH LEXICAL BLENDS WITH AN ABBREVIATED COMPONENT

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The paper identifies two large groups of lexical blends with an abbreviated component, i.e. blends whose first component is orthographically represented by a single letter (an initial) and blends whose first or second component is an initialism (acronym or abbreviation). The aim of the paper is to outline the similarities and differences between splinters and abbreviated word parts emphasizing the problems with defining the term “splinter” and respectively the problems with defining blending as a word-formative process. We suggest a tentative definition of the term “lexical blend with an abbreviated component” and try to explain why it is preferable to adopt the prototypicality approach when analysing English blends of the type.

**Key words:** lexical blend, initialism, abbreviation, clipping, splinter, prototypicality

### **Introduction**

Lexical blending has been analysed from the viewpoint of phonology, morphology, and semantics in order to distinguish this word-formation process from other processes which it resembles, such as composition, abbreviation, and clipping. Unfortunately, the problem with definitions still remains due to the fact that lexical blending encompasses various morphologically different types of derived words.

To some extent, the fuzzy boundaries between some word-formation processes are explainable in terms of their interaction. The formation of a word is sometimes attributable to more than one such process, as is the case with the following example given by Algeo as indicative of the way in which folk etymology operates: the Spanish *cucaracha* was modified to *cockroach* and clipped to *roach*; thus, *roach* was formed with the help of both folk etymology and clipping. Algeo categorizes folk etymology as a minor type of blending (Algeo 2010).

### **The Formation of Initialisms**

Cannon discusses the formation of initialisms, a more general category embracing abbreviations, which are pronounced letter by letter (e.g.: *BBC*), and acronyms (e.g.: *UNESCO*), which are pronounced syllabically (Cannon 1989). We may add that initialisms also have “pronunciation-spellings”, as in *deejay* (*D.J.*) or *okay* (*O.K.*) (Adams 1987). The distinction between abbreviations and acronyms is kept in the present paper which will focus on the ways in which initialism formation interacts with lexical blending.

I. Fandrych discusses acronymy, clipping, and lexical blending as non-morphemic types of word-formation which are similar to one another but which also demonstrate many differences. Fandrych does not agree with Plag’s or Minkova and Stockwell’s statement that acronyms are a subtype of blend (Fandrych 2008: 110). We support Fandrych on that matter although, unlike her, we do not include the category of clipped compounds into that of blends (or vice versa). Some of the author’s examples, e.g.: *WAPathy*, which she calls *graphic blends*, fall into the focus of the present paper although we will call them lexical *blends with an abbreviated component* (henceforth, BAC) in order to be more specific: *Debtroit* (< *debt* + *Detroit*), for instance, is a typical graphic blend because it becomes evident in the written mode of expression, but it is not a BAC.

Abbreviations and acronyms share a gray area since there are hybrid forms, such as *CD-ROM*, consisting of an abbreviated phrase and an acronym. The area of overlap between abbreviations and acronyms also features forms which can be pronounced either way, e.g.: *SAT* (< *scholastic aptitude test*) can be pronounced as [es ei ti:] or [sæt] (see Minkova and Stockwell 2009: 17).

### **Types of Blends with an Abbreviated Component**

According to Fischer, a blend is *an abbreviation blend* when “the syllabic onset of one word is retained, while the onset of another one is lost” (Fischer 1998: 37), as in *geep* (< *goat* + *sheep*). However, we will narrow down her definition to exclude from the category of BAC examples like *smog* and *brunch* whose elements are readily identifiable as splinters (*sm-*, *-og*, *br-*, *-unch*). Thus, by “blends with an abbreviated component” we understand lexical blends where a component is an initial or an initialism. We think that such blends may exhibit greater morphotactic opacity. Splinter-containing blends are usually viewed as more opaque than blends with graphic and/or phonic overlap, e.g.: *guesstimate* (Ronneberger-Sibold 2006). As regards BAC, their morphotactic opacity is

even greater than that of “regular” splinter-containing blends such as *edutainment* (< *education* + *entertainment*) because the source words are less recognizable due to the greater amount of omitted material.

The problem in the case of initial-containing blends will be whether to call the abbreviated component of the blend “splinter” (see *g-* in *geep*). Splinters may vary in size, but usually their size can help the hearer identify the respective source word. Analysing blends and adjacent categories by resorting to the prototypicality approach, P. López Rúa, for instance, posits the criterion “degree of shortening” of the source units pointing out that she regards 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” (López Rúa 2002: 37-38; italics mine). It seems that the more general definition of splinters as “parts of truncated words that do not necessarily coincide with syllables or morphemes” (Cacchiani 2011: 106) does not make a difference between splinters and initials.

Splinters differ from initials in that between the splinter and the source word there is some “relationship of meaning” (Adams, in Danks 2003: 13), which is not the case with initials when abbreviations and acronyms are formed. We think that such a relationship of meaning may also exist in the case of BAC. This means that the initial preserved may function as a splinter, especially when it recurs in a number of derived forms where it stems from the same source word. We have come across the following splinter-like initials in lexical blends: *V-* (from *video*), as in *vlog* (< *video* + *blog*); *F-* (from *fake*), as in *fushi* (< *fake* + *sushi*); *M-* (from *man/ male*), as in *mimbo* (< *male* + *bimbo*); *S-* (from *supersymmetry*), as in *sparticle* (< *supersymmetry* + *particle*), etc.

These initials may however occur in other blends where they are traceable to other source words, which may hamper the decipherability of the derived word, e.g.: *vog* (< *volcanic* + *smog*), *faby* (< *food* + *baby*), *muppet* (< *marionette* + *puppet*), *sapplet* (< *social* + *applet*), etc.

We have identified two large groups of BAC: 1) blends whose first component is orthographically represented by a single letter (*pkiller* < *player* + *killer*); and 2) blends whose first or second component is an initialism (*UFOfals*). We do not include in the first group blends with graphic and/or phonic overlap, e.g.: *lupper* (< *lunch* + *supper*, the place of overlap underlined) because in this case what is left from the source words are splinters (*lu-*, *-upper*) and we cannot say which source word the

overlapping material belongs to. However, we allow for graphic and/or phonic overlap in the second group of blends because this does not hamper the identification of the initialism as a component of the blend.

**Blends whose first component is orthographically represented by a single letter** are mentioned by Bauer as examples of *word manufacture*. Bauer includes them into the category of mixed formations which are a compromise between two or more word-formation processes or “of the product of one of the processes [...] and an unaltered lexemic base or a normal affix” (Bauer 1983: 239-240). Bauer gives an example derived from three source words: *scramjet* < *supersonic combustion ramjet*. We think that such examples lie at the crossover of the processes of abbreviation, composition, and blending.

In the first group of blends, we have discovered a number of subgroups with recurring source words which are not abbreviated but may be clipped or kept intact. We will form the subgroups on the basis of the source word which is *not* abbreviated in the derived one. We consider the derived forms to be blends of a sort since there is deleted material from all source words and the point of deletion coincides with the juncture of the components. With clipped compounds (e.g.: *wi-fi*), the point of deletion of linguistic material is not superimposed on the place where the lexemes are joined.

The subgroup of “yuppie” is by far the most prominent one. “Yuppie” is itself a product of abbreviation since it combines the initials of three source lexemes (< *young urban professional*) and the diminutive suffix *-ie*. It is pronounced as a regular word and may be considered to be an acronym-like mixed formation. The near-acronymic status of “yuppie” is, however, most probably unclear to many language users. This subgroup includes six derived two-component words and two derived three-component words: *buppie* < *black* + *yuppie*, *guppie* < *gay/ green* + *yuppie*, *suppie* < *southern* + *yuppie*, *huppie* < *Hispanic/ hippie* + *yuppie*, *duppie* < *depressed* + *yuppie*, *luppie* < *lesbian/ Latino* + *yuppie*, *scuppie* < *socially conscious yuppie*, *skippie* < *school kid* + *yuppie*. It is obvious that with some examples the origin of the first component is unclear, which is due to the great amount of material deleted from the first source word. The first two components of *skippie* are more evident orthographically but when pronounced the derived word manifests the presence of some phonic overlap (between [sk] from *school* and [k] from *kid*). If we accept that the first component is represented by the splinter [sk-] and the second one by the splinter [ki-], we may have to exclude *skippie* from the group of BAC.

Orthographically, however, *skippie* is an example of two abbreviated source words and a clipped third component.

In the subgroup of “*selfie*”, we have come across four examples: *belfie* < *butt* + *selfie*, *felfie* < *farm (animal)* + *selfie*, *velfie* < *video* + *selfie*, *welfie* < *workout* + *selfie*. The latter example has two more interpretations (*wealthy* + *selfie*; *welfare* + *selfie*) which fall outside the group of BAC because of the phonic and graphic overlap between the source words.

The subgroup of “*blog*” is interesting as well because the source word “*blog*” is a product of clipping. P. López Rúa treats “*blog*” as a clipped compound produced by fore clipping and a whole word (in Munat, ed. 2007: 153): *blog* < *web* + *log*. Again, we do not think that language users are aware of the clipping process that has brought about “*blog*” which functions as a full-fledged word. “*Blog*” is blended with other words to form: *vblog/ vlog* < *video* + *blog*, *flog* < *fake* + *blog*, *plog* < *personalized* + *blog*, *glog* < *graphic* + *blog*, *crog* < *carefully researched* *blog*. With the exception of *vblog*, “*blog*” has been clipped in all derived words. *Vblog* may be treated as a mixed formation touching upon clipped compounds, blends and initialisms, produced by hind clipping and an entire word. With the other examples in the subgroup, however, the point of deletion of linguistic material coincides with the point of fusion of the source words, which makes us include them into the category of blends.

The subgroup of “*ugly*” also comprises a few representatives such as *dugly* < *dog* + *ugly*, *hugly* < *hog* + *ugly*, *fugly* < *fat* + *ugly*, *rugly* < *really* + *ugly*. The first source word in *fugly* may have an alternative interpretation as an f-word, in which case there will be phonic and graphic overlap and we will deal with the *fu-* splinter. The example of *bugly* < *butt* + *ugly* has been left out for the same reasons.

One of the smallest subgroups is that of *leisure-words* and we have found only two members: *bleisure (travel)* < *business* + *leisure*, *weisure* < *work* + *leisure*. From the viewpoint of pronunciation, *weisure* may also be regarded as an ironic corruption of *leisure* due to the replacement of the clear [l] consonant with the [w] semi-vowel.

There are two members of the *shorts-group* as well: *jorts* < *jeans* + *shorts*, *norts* < *Nike* + *shorts*. The example of *corts* < *corduroy* + *shorts* has been omitted here because of the phonic and graphic overlap at the juncture of the two source words (see the splinters *cor-* and *-orts*).

**Blends whose first or second component is an initialism** can be subdivided into two subgroups depending on whether there is some phonic

or graphic overlap between their components. We think that the unpredictability and indecipherability of these blends are doubly intensified because of the coupling of the processes of abbreviation and blending.

Initialism-containing blends with graphic and/or phonic overlap are, for instance: *WAPathy* < *Wireless Application Protocol* + *apathy*, *FOBbit* < *Forward Operating Base* + *hobbit*, *troLOL* < *troll* + *Laughs Out Loud*, etc. Most initialism-containing blends in our corpus of examples exhibit overlap of some sort, which seems to be the rule rather than the exception.

Initialism-containing blends without graphic or phonic overlap are, for instance: *LOLtard* < *Laughs Out Loud* + *retard*, *FOBlish* < *Fresh Off Boat* + *English*. The second example shows that initialisms can be ambiguous because the same initialism may be derived from a number of different phrases (see *FOB* < *Forward Operating Base*).

As far as the pronunciation of such blends is concerned, the components of the blend are often selected in such a way so as to resemble the pronunciation of the source unit which is clipped (*not* abbreviated), e.g.: *LOLocaust* and *holocaust*, *NODgeball* and *dodgeball*, etc. This may be one of the reasons why phonic overlap is preferred with initialism-containing blends. One of our examples draws the attention because it contains not the acronym itself but its “pronunciation-spelling”, namely *veepstakes* < *veep* (*VP* < *vice-president*) + *sweepstakes*.

### **Prototypicality of the Blends with an Abbreviated Component**

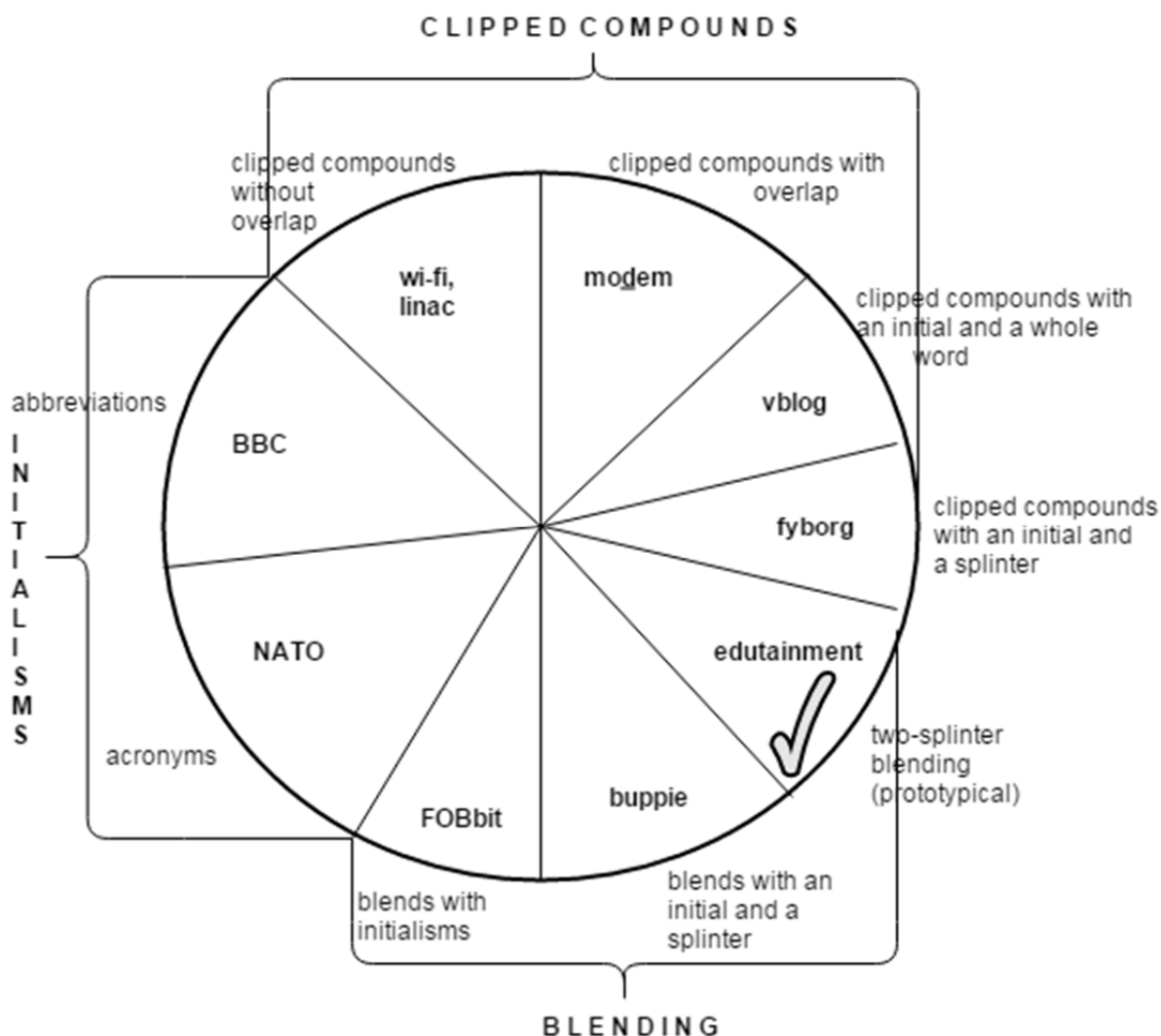
On the basis of the examples given so far, we can now redefine the term “lexical blend with an abbreviated component”. *A lexical blend with an abbreviated component is a derived word stemming from two or more source words where 1) the syllabic onset of the first component(s) replaces that of the second (or last) component and is orthographically represented by a single letter with no phonic or graphic overlap at the point of fusion or 2) one of the source elements is replaced by an initialism which may or may not overlap phonically and/or graphically with the linguistic material preserved from the other source word(s).* In this way, we restrict Fischer’s definition above in order to distinguish blends with *abbreviated* components such as *FOBlish* from blends with *clipped* components of the type of *smog* and *brunch*.

Taking into account all the problems with the linguistic analysis of blending, it seems most appropriate to adopt a prototypicality approach although this does not make us immune to problems of description. Bauer, for instance, makes the following point: “The trouble with prototypical

categories is that as you move away from the prototype you cannot tell whether you are now in another area of description or only in a less prototypical part of the same domain” (Bauer, in Renner et al., eds. 2012: 19). Nevertheless, the prototypicality approach is for the most part the best option we have at present. Some authors opt for the prototypicality approach when the word-formation process they analyse is difficult to delineate. Luizova-Horeva, for instance, discusses composition in terms of the prototypical categories studied by Cognitive Linguistics by positioning the most typical examples of composition at the core and the less typical ones – in the periphery whose boundaries are fuzzy and not clear-cut (Luizova-Horeva 2015).

The prototypicality approach rests on some constraints which are accepted as necessary so that the derived form can be included into the group of blends. The major constraints posited by us are as follows: 1) blending either involves clipping of at least one source word or if no clipping is observable, there will be phonic and/or graphic overlap at the juncture of the source words; 2) clipping produces splinters, whereas abbreviation produces initials/ initialisms (but see Fandrych 2008 on splinters); 3) if all source words are clipped, they are composed of an initial splinter from the first source word and a terminal splinter from the second/ last source word (in support of Bat-El, in Brown, ed. 2006, for whom forms where the right edges of the source units are truncated are clipped compounds); 4) two-splinter derived forms complying with constraint 3 and demonstrating phonic and/or graphic overlap and haplologic forms are more prototypical than two-splinter forms complying with constraint 3 with no overlap; 5) blends in which one of the components is kept intact are regarded as less typical (see, for instance, Thornton, in Tonelli and Dressler, eds. 1993).

Looking at the diagram below, we see the distance of each process from the formation of initialisms or from prototypical two-splinter blending. For instance, words like *FOBbit* are closer to initialisms and further away from prototypical blending than words of the type of *buppie*. Clipped compounds are considered here as a separate category although some linguists include them into the group of blends (see López Rúa 2002; López Rúa, in Munat, ed. 2007). Mixed formations between clipped compounds and blends, such as *fyborg* < *functional* + *cyborg* (< *cybernetic organism*), may be regarded as closer to blending than examples like *vblog* because in the former case both source words undergo reduction coinciding with the point where they are fused (cf. prototypical blending as described by constraint 4) above).



**Diagram 1.** Some non-morphemic word-formation processes involving shortening of the source words/ phrases

Alternatively, taking into account López Rúa's application of the prototypicality approach, which rests on six parameters, we may accept the following: 1) in their unexpanded form blends are orthoepic; 2) their degree of shortening is medium; 3) the degree of phonic integration of blends ranges from high to medium, i.e. there is phonic overlap or the linguistic material preserved from the source words is simply combined, but it forms a syllable or a pronounceable sequence; 4) the source units of blends are usually two words (not phrases); 5) blends are usually written in small letters; and 6) are used in both speaking and writing (López Rúa 2002: 41). With the help of five of the six parameters (because we do not have enough information on the sixth one), we can compare some BAC (Table 1). In each case, the prototypicality parameter which the derived word observes is ticked. Thus, we can conclude that *buppie* is more



prototypical than *vblog* and *vblog* is more prototypical than *FOBbit*. However, determining the degree of shortening of the source units seems to be problematic because it pertains to more than one lexeme: the degree of shortening of one of the source words may be maximal while that of the other source word may be minimal, as is the case of *vblog*. What is more, we still face the problem of distinguishing between word-initial splinters and initials. Therefore, a disadvantage of the prototypicality continuum is that it is constructed somewhat intuitively.

	<i>FOBbit</i>	<i>buppie</i>	<i>vblog</i>
<b>Pronunciation</b>	Orthoepic	Orthoepic	Orthoepic
<b>Degree of shortening</b>	High: an initialism is combined with a splinter	Medium: an initial (or a splinter shorter than a syllable) is combined with a splinter	Lower: an initial (or a splinter shorter than a syllable) is combined with a whole word
<b>Phonic integration</b>	High: phonic overlap	Medium: no phonic overlap but a pronounceable sequence	Medium: no phonic overlap but a pronounceable sequence
<b>Number and character of source units</b>	Four source units: a phrase from three words is combined with a word	Two source words	Two source words
<b>Orthography</b>	Combination of small letters and capitals	Small letters	Small letters

*Table 1. Application of the prototypicality approach as based on five, out of six, parameters*

### Conclusion

The present article has tried to show some of the gray areas between blending and initialism formation in support of the prototypicality approach to the study of lexical blending. The gray areas between blending and other word-formation processes have been touched upon by many linguists (see, for instance, Danks 2003), but the problems with definitions and analysis still remain due to the proliferation of mixed formations. No matter whether we regard such formations as word manufacture or not, the point is that recent years have witnessed a constantly growing number of

such derived words in English. Blends proper, although the status of blending may be questioned as well, and mixed formations are perceived by language users as trendy and topical, which to a great extent is attributable to their odd morphology and, most often than not, odd semantics.

Although at present we cannot resort to hard-and-fast definitions or rules in order to position shortening word-formative devices under a specific rubric, some problems remain to be solved. In view of the focus of the present paper, it seems that most problematic is the notion of “splinter” which should be further clarified or rejected altogether. Like the term “blending”, the term “splinter” is quite fuzzy, which makes us opt for the prototypicality approach when discussing splinters as well. However, it is not clear what the prototypical splinter should look like in terms of its size and presence or absence of relationship of meaning between the splinter and the derived word. That is why it is hard to distinguish between initials and word-initial splinters and this obstructs the analysis of the derived forms containing such elements. It seems that the more we analyse blending and related word-formative devices, the greater the number of the gray areas we discover. Therefore, we think that the “degree of shortening” constraint needs further elaboration because it affects the way we perceive acronyms, abbreviations, blends, and clipped compounds.

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