

Acronyms & Co.: A typology of typologies

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ABSTRACT

This article puts forward a critical review of the treatment of acronyms and related items (clippings, blends and abbreviations) as regards denominations, definitions and taxonomic arrangement. The analysis includes occasional references to works in Spanish, although English in the language chosen to illustrate the final proposal. The results obtained evince that detailed taxonomies with classically bounded and profusely labelled categories and subcategories coexist with general or vague definitions, unsystematic enumerations of irregular cases, and scalar or multidimensional treatments. However, none of the alternatives seem able to provide a truly satisfactory account of the object. The article concludes with a proposal to label and classify the categories mentioned by combining multidimensional descriptions with the notions of typicality and continuity. This combination results in a characterization of central, peripheral and borderline cases of simple and complex shortenings which is exemplified by English, thus providing a unified and comprehensive picture of this controversial area of word-formation.

Key words: abbreviation, acronym, continuity, taxonomy, typicality

Acrónimos y Cía: una tipología de tipologías

RESUMEN

El presente artículo ofrece una revisión crítica del tratamiento de acrónimos y formaciones afines (*clippings*, *blends* y abreviaturas) en cuanto a definiciones y clasificación. El análisis incluye referencias ocasionales a trabajos en español, aunque el inglés es la lengua elegida para ilustrar la propuesta final. Los resultados obtenidos ponen de manifiesto que taxonomías de estilo clásico, con límites precisos y multiplicidad de términos, coexisten con definiciones generales, enumeraciones de casos irregulares y tratamientos escalares o multidimensionales. No obstante, ninguna de las alternativas parece dar una respuesta realmente satisfactoria, por lo que el artículo concluye con una propuesta para denominar y clasificar las categorías mencionadas mediante la combinación de una descripción multidimensional con las nociones de tipicidad y continuidad. Dicha combinación da como resultado la caracterización de casos centrales, periféricos y fronterizos de truncamientos simples y complejos que, ilustrada mediante el caso del inglés, proporciona una visión unificada y global de un campo problemático dentro de la formación de palabras.

Palabras clave: abreviatura, acrónimo, continuidad, taxonomía, tipicidad.

SUMARIO: 1. The definition of acronym. 2. Facing diversity: alternatives and problems. 3. A typology of written and spoken shortenings. 4. Conclusion. 5. References.

1. THE DEFINITION OF ACRONYM

There is a lack of consistency and a good deal of vagueness and overlap with respect to what is to count as an acronym in general (that is, what I will refer to as an initialism)¹ in contrast with what should be regarded, for instance, as a ‘proper’ abbreviation, a clipping, a blend, or a hybrid including features of two or more of the above. As Cannon (1989) suggests, the weight of tradition is partly to blame. Dictionary practice, for instance, has been nurturing a general confusion of terms “since the fifteenth century” by listing as abbreviations “legitimate abbreviations, clippings, contractions and visual devices” (1989: 106). In the case of acronyms, the lack of agreement and explicitness on the part of scholars concerning terminology and characterization has been a constant before and even after the specific term *acronym* was coined.² The 1950 definition of acronym provided by the Funk & Wagnalls Company in the supplement *New Words and Words in the News* would contribute to the assimilation of these items to blends, since an acronym was described as a word formed from the initial letters of other words (*Unesco*: ‘United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’), but also from the initial syllables and letters (*radar*: ‘radio detecting and ranging’) or the initial and final syllables (*motel*: ‘motor + hotel’).

The existence of fuzzy limits among all the categories considered has always been admitted, and such a problematic circumstance is often mentioned as a reason for the lack of a systematic description, or as an excuse for the faults and deficiencies of discrete typologies. The impression given is that it is an area of metalinguistic categorization which cannot be bounded or clearly divided, so that this intrinsic continuity becomes a resignedly accepted state of affairs.

2. FACING DIVERSITY: ALTERNATIVES AND PROBLEMS

This section is devoted to a review of representative literature concerning the object of study (*initialisms* and related items) in English and Spanish. In this respect, it should be noted that, although the review basically concentrates on English, the references made to works in Spanish are justified by their representative quality as examples of certain types of classifications. The sources consulted – dictionaries, grammars, articles and specialized books – tend to agree on some general issues, for example, they usually group initialisms together with clippings and blends, and regard them all as instances of a word-formation device in which old bases³ are shortened or abbreviated. However, as already mentioned, there are also strong discrepancies and a great deal of

¹ In this article the term *initialism* is used as a superordinate comprising both *acronyms* (f. ex. *laser*: ‘light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation’) and *alphabetisms* (f. ex. *BBC*: ‘British Broadcasting Corporation’).

² The technical term *acronym*, from Greek *akros*: ‘tip’ and *onyma*: ‘name’, was coined by a Bell Laboratories researcher in 1943.

³ The term ‘base’ comprises roots alone (simple stems) or in combination with one or more derivational affixes (complex stems).

variation concerning terminology, definitions and taxonomic arrangement. The contributions were grouped into five subsections on the grounds of the common approach chosen, which led to the detection of similar basic problems. The concluding subsection summarizes the main shortcomings of the proposals as regards terminology and classification. In that respect, it is important to notice that the proposals reviewed have sometimes been oversimplified so as to highlight flaws and similarities. Besides, the vagueness and lack of coherence of some typologies have been criticized when they seemed to be due to conceptual confusion, inadequate methods or deliberate carelessness, although it must be acknowledged that on some occasions it is the aim at a global understanding of the phenomenon that leads scholars to provide simple but efficient definitions, which work for the majority of examples of the categories they handle. Unfortunately, that reasonable aim can only minimize the main problem with those definitions, namely that they do not account for all cases. As will be seen, how to deal with diversity is a question for which the sources consulted suggest different answers.

2.1. GENERAL DEFINITIONS: LACK OF DISCRIMINATORY POWER

Some classifications limit themselves to general or ‘permissive’ definitions devised to apply to most cases: in these typologies it was observed that the definitions were either too vague (and therefore not really useful to distinguish one category from another) or were progressively broadened so as to account for obvious irregularities. Vague definitions lose discriminatory power as categories blur.

Marchand’s (1969) influential book on English morphology actually illustrates the ‘vague’ approach. Within word manufacture, the author distinguishes between letter-words (*Care*: ‘Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe’), syllable words (*sial*: ‘silicon + aluminium’) and combinations (*radar*). Alphabetisms are described by means of pronunciation and examples (*YMCA*: ‘Young Men’s Christian Association’), but they are not labelled or categorized. Finally, blending and word manufacturing (two instances of word coining) actually blur, since blending is “merging parts of words into one new word” (p. 451) and in word manufacturing “more or less arbitrary parts of words are welded into an artificial new word” (p. 452). Similarly, the *AID (Acronyms and Initialisms Dictionary, 1973)* describes acronyms as words made from “tips” of other words, mainly syllables (*arbor*: ‘arthropod borne’) or parts of syllables (*Bart*: ‘Brooklyn Army Terminal’), whereas forms which take only initials are called “initialisms”. Even so, in the prefatory comments the term acronym is used to denote any of the entries, which comprise written abbreviations (*Mr*), proper acronyms (*Unicef*: ‘United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund’), alphabetisms (*UNSC*: ‘United Nations Security Council’), blends (*motel*) and clippings (*lab*).

Lastly, in the preface to the *Dictionary of Acronyms, Initialisms and Abbreviations* (1993), Mossman seems to place the three types mentioned in the title at the same level, although no superordinate term is provided. Acronyms and initialisms (i.e. my alphabetisms) are composed of initial letters or parts of a compound term, and they are distinguished by means of labels and pronunciation. Finally, an abbreviation is

vaguely defined as “a shortened form of a word or words that does not follow the formation of either of the above” (p. ix).

2.2. GENERAL RULE AND EXCEPTIONS: LACK OF HOMOGENEITY

Perhaps foreseeing the problems of providing detailed definitions for such overlapping and slippery concepts, many scholars resort to simplified descriptions which apply to the clearest cases. However, the multifarious nature of the categories forces them to complete those descriptions with long enumerations of particular cases which do not follow the general rule. These descriptions eventually become heterogeneous lists of exceptions; consequently, the categories lose cohesion as wholes.

Kreidler (1979), for example, regards acronyms and clippings as “shortenings”, blends being “multiple clippings”. An acronym is a word “formed from the first letter or letters of each major word” in a construction (p. 25). Two unlabelled types are distinguished by means of pronunciation: the “letter-recitation” type (*FBI*) and the “letter-sounding” type (*UNESCO*). Unfortunately, things are not that simple for all items, so the author is forced to provide examples and explanations of irregular cases, for instance, those including “imported” vowels (*SNCC*: ‘Student Non-violent coordinating committee’) or “little words” like *of* or *in* (*CORE*: ‘Congress of Racial Equality’). The initial definition of acronyms is eventually stretched with the remark that “various portions of the source term may be included in the acronym” (p. 26), as in *AMESLAN* (‘American Sign Language’). Finally, the borderline with blends is definitely blurred when the author increases his list of acronyms with forms such as *AdComSubLant* (‘Administrative Command, Submarine Forces, Atlantic Fleet’) and *Texaco* (‘Texas Company’).

In McArthur’s *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992), the category of “hybrids” within “lexical abbreviations” is openly described as a “fourth less clear-cut type” (p. 3) which is intended to find a place for all the irregularities and mixtures which cannot be included in any of the main types. Within the general process of abbreviation – “the process of shortening words and phrases and the result of that shortening” (p. 2) –, *The Oxford Companion* describes “lexical abbreviations”, which serve as “words” and fall into five types: “initialisms” (“letter groups pronounced as letters”: *BBC*), “acronyms” (“letter groups pronounced as words”: *NATO*), “clippings” (“a part of a word standing for the whole”: *phone*), “blends or portmanteau words” (“made from two or more other words” by fusion or syllabic clustering, like *brunch*: ‘breakfast + lunch’ or *Oxbridge*: ‘Oxford + Cambridge’), and finally “hybrids” of those basic types: the all-inclusive category of hybrids is actually a collection of various items, some of them being, for example, “part-initialism, part-acronym” (*VTOL*: ‘Vertical Take-Off and Landing’), initialisms adapted as acronyms (*GLCMS*: *Glickems*, ‘ground-launched cruise missiles’), forms that belong to two types at the same time (*VAT*: ‘Value Added Tax’) or “forms that look like one type and behave like another” (p. 3), such as *WHO* (‘World Health Organization’).

Finally, Rodríguez González and Cannon’s (1996) work is a meticulous study which, however, cannot prevent the existence of loose ends under the shape of a chaotic

enumeration of items. In the authors' opinion, the "explosive increase in the number of items" leads to the impossibility "to determine the major patterns today" (pp. 267-268). Quantity and variety seem legitimate reasons to avoid the trouble of devising an undoubtedly complex classification. Therefore, no attempt is made to organize the miscellaneous collection of items displayed on pages 268 to 270. They are not even labelled in a consistent way: the authors start using "abbreviations" as a superordinate for both initialisms (my alphabetisms) and acronyms (p. 265). However, on page 268, after remarking that initialisms "exhibit almost any kind of linguistic structure", they use that term to replace "abbreviation" as a superordinate covering "initialisms" such as *ACP* ('African, Caribbean, Pacific'), *bpi* ('bits per inch'), or *R&D* ('Research and Development'), abbreviations like *secy* ('secretary'), and acronyms like *GASP* ('Gals Against Smoke and Pollution'). In the following paragraph on the same page, "abbreviation" is rescued as a superordinate for all of the above. On page 269 the authors discuss "acronyms", and state that "their variety is even greater than that of abbreviations": the reader is free to infer what they now understand by acronyms and abbreviations. Moreover, the statement is illustrated by a set of multifarious examples of "acronyms", such as *SALT* ('Strategic Arms Limitation Talks'), *KREEP* ('Potassium - K —, rare-earth elements, Phosphate'), *EBCDIC* ('Extended Binary Coded Decimal Interchange Code'), *Intelsat* ('International Telecommunications Satellite') and *Bosnywash* ('Boston, New York, Washington').

2.3. DISCRETENESS AND DETAIL: LACK OF DESCRIPTIVE ECONOMY

Discrete classifications are based on strict rules whose application often results in a proliferation of sometimes useless terms. The lack of economy and simplicity leads to confusion, the categories again look more dissimilar than they really are, and omnipresent exceptions are remnants forced into one heterogeneous category, vaguely defined, such as *sigloide* (whose approximate translation could be 'near-' or 'pseudo-acronym').

Seco (1977) is an example of a detailed study of Spanish initialisms and related items in the discrete fashion. It begins by differentiating *siglas* (initialisms read out as words) from *abreviaturas* (i.e. abbreviations, read out expanded). Although *sigla* becomes an implicit superordinate for what I call acronyms and alphabetisms, the main criticism of this classification concerns the heterogeneous category of *sigloides*, which is conveniently devised to account for irregular cases, that is, for those items which are not strictly composed of each initial phoneme from the previous expression; therefore *RENFE* ('*Red Nacional de Ferrocarriles de España*': 'Spanish National Railway') would be a *sigloide* whereas *RNFE* is regarded as the true *sigla*. However, the definition of *sigloide* is so vague that it allows him to categorize as *sigloides* forms such as *Interpol* ('International Police') and *Benelux* ('Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg'), which are quite different from *RENFE*. Furthermore, a rigorous application of his definitions leads to undesirable conclusions, since it forces him to ascribe similar items, such as *RENFE* and *CAMPSA* ('*Compañía Arrendataria del Monopolio de Petróleo, Sociedad Anónima*': 'Spanish Petrochemical Company'), to different categories; similarly, some

items described by the author as “siglas lexicalizadas”, like *radar* or *jeep* (from GP: ‘general purpose vehicle’), would have to be called *sigloides* instead of *siglas*. In the same way as Seco, Casado Velarde (1979) insists on a strict definition of the term *sigla* in Spanish: it can only be formed out of the first letter of each of the syntagmatic components. Therefore, he is also forced to categorize all the exceptions to the rule (f. ex. *RENFE*) under the term *sigloide*.

Lastly, I will consider Alvar and Miró’s extensive preface of their Spanish *Diccionario de siglas y abreviaturas* (1983), which is entitled “El acortamiento de palabras” (‘word shortening’). Within this general device, the authors differentiate between phonic shortening (*abreviación* or *abreviamiento*) and graphic shortening (*abreviatura*). There are also two types of *abreviamiento*: *abreviamientos simples* (shortening involving one word, i.e. what I call clipping) and *acrónimos*, also called *palabras-percha* or *palabras-maleta* (i.e. shortening involving more than one word). The latter roughly corresponds to what I call blends, but the term is restricted to those forms composed of opposite parts of words, as in *motel*; therefore, forms clustering the beginnings of words (like *ASTANO*: ‘*Astilleros y Talleres del Noroeste*’: ‘Northwestern Shipyards and Workshops’) are called *compuestos fruto de la abreviatura* (‘compounds resulting from graphic shortening’), although they are not exclusively graphic, whereas mixtures such as *CASRAMA* (‘*Consortio de Abastecimiento de Agua y Saneamiento de la Sierra de Guadarrama*’: ‘consortium for water supply and cleaning up of the Guadarrama mountain range’) either receive the vague label of ‘complex formations’ (*formaciones complejas*), or become confusingly assimilated to the group of *siglas* (which is described below). Graphic shortenings (*abreviaturas*) are divided into three groups: *simples*, involving one word (what I call simple abbreviations: *tel.*); *compuestas*, involving more than one word (what I call compound abbreviations: *d.e.p.*, ‘*descanse en paz*’: ‘rest in peace’); and *complejas* (‘complex’) or *siglas*, which are actually read out unexpanded although they are placed on a level with with simple and compound abbreviations, which are exclusively graphic. Moreover, there are two types of *siglas*: those in capital initials which may be read out as true abbreviations are called *transparentes* (‘transparent’), and those always read out unexpanded are called *opacas* (‘opaque’). The latter are further divided into two unlabelled subtypes depending on their pronunciation (that is, what I call alphabetisms vs. acronyms).

One positive feature of Alvar and Miró’s typology is the reference made to usual and unusual (but feasible) creations and realizations, which provides the classification with a flexible quality which is missing in other discrete typologies. Categorical heterogeneity is therefore acknowledged, although no attempts are made to organize it, since, for example, the exhaustively labelled category of *siglas* is arbitrarily expanded to comprise such different items as *POLMETASA* (‘*Polvos Metálicos, Sociedad Anónima*’: ‘Spanish metal powder company’) or *BANESTO* (‘*Banco Español de Crédito*’: ‘Spanish Credit Bank’). As far as initialisms are concerned, the main problem with this typology is that it lacks a subtle but essential balance between flexibility and systematicity. It is not too rigid, so that it admits the possibility of alternative realizations, licences of formation, exceptions and irregularities; however, the acknowledgement of this intrinsic variety does not go much further than a list of cases of doubtful ascription. Therefore, diversity seems to be noticed, but it is not really accounted for.

Finally, Martínez de Sousa's elaborate preface in the *Diccionario internacional de siglas y abreviaturas* (1984) may be highlighted as an example of a discrete typology in the classical fashion, having all the advantages and disadvantages of such classifications: all the possible methods of abbreviation and their results are labelled and thoroughly described; however, since the intrinsic variety of the categories involved defies an exhaustive account, the result is a sometimes unnecessary proliferation of terms, together with the usual list of exceptions escaping even such detailed rules, and a lack of organization in the application of categorial criteria.

Within the general process of abbreviation in Spanish (*abreviación*), the author discusses different types of formulae: *abreviaturas* (they roughly correspond to my abbreviations), *abreviamientos* (clippings like *lab*), *siglas* (my initialisms) and *acrónimos* (my blends). Written abbreviations are adequately defined as graphic representations. *Siglas* are further divided into two groups, according to pronunciation: *silábicas* (my acronyms) and *consonánticas* (my alphabetisms), although I agree with Rodríguez González (1986: 124) on the lack of suitability of the term *consonánticas*, since alphabetisms do not exclude the presence of vowels as constituents (as in *UCD*: '*Unión de Centro Democrático*': 'Democratic Centre Union', a Spanish political party).

My first objection concerns the graphic summary on page 18, where abbreviations are classified according to criteria that are sometimes complementary and not mutually exclusive. For example, regular abbreviations (*col.*: '*columna*': 'column') and conventional abbreviations (*Dr.*: '*Doctor*': 'Doctor'; *J.C.*: '*Jesucristo*': 'Jesus Christ') are apparently classified on the grounds of the degree of shortening. However, they appear on a level with simple (*Sr.*: '*Señor*': 'Mister') and compound abbreviations (*S.M.*: '*Su Majestad*': 'His/Her Majesty'), which result from applying the criterion of the number of items abbreviated. All of them look like co-ordinate and independent types, although in practice we may come across combinations of different types, which is not adequately reflected in the chart. This problem could be solved by resorting to a type of graphic which could account for simultaneous categorizations of single items, for example a matrix diagram or a grid.

The process of initialization (*siglación*) is defined as the abbreviation of phrases or utterances by selecting only their initials: "no se considera sigla . . . si intervienen otras letras que no sean iniciales" (p. 27).⁴ Again the rigid definition of *sigla* is a serious weakness of the proposed typology, because it forces the author to the awkward conclusion that forms such as *laser* or *Unesco* belong to the group of *siglas* or *siglónimos*, whereas forms such as *radar* or *sonar* ('sound navigation and ranging') cannot be called *siglas* simply because they must take two initials from one word to ease the pronunciation of the sequence. Therefore, they will join the group of *acrónimos*, which becomes an all-inclusive and chaotic category, with such different members as *modem* ('modulator-demodulator'), *radac* ('radio digital automatic navigation') or *Pryca* ('*Precio y Calidad*': 'price and quality'). Furthermore, the group of *siglas* is divided into two subtypes: *siglas propias o estrictas* (proper initialisms) vs. *siglas improprias*

⁴ The item 'is not regarded as a *sigla* . . . if other letters apart from initials are used.'

or *sigloides* (p. 32), the difference being that the latter include initials from grammatical words (*KWIC*: ‘key word in context’). In my judgement, what should really matter when forming an initialism is the fact that we can take initials or not just initials: the category of the word initialized does not seem relevant enough to justify another division in a typology which is already quite complex.

The category of *siglónimos* (i.e. lexicalized acronyms such as *ovni*: ‘objeto volador no identificado’: ‘unidentified flying object’) is another example of the unnecessary proliferation of terms. *Siglónimos* are simply *siglas* which have reached the highest degree of lexicalization. For simplicity’s sake, the term *sigloide* should be dispensed with or, at least, kept as a label for the last stages of the lexicalization of *siglas*, instead of using it to name a new category on a level with *siglas* (as Sousa’s graphic suggests).

The other type of abbreviation of units higher than the word is called abbreviation by contamination, and roughly corresponds to the device of blending understood in a broad sense, since it covers contractions, clusterings, and proper blends such as *motel*, which are called acronyms. The category of acronyms presents two important flaws, both derived from the strict definition of *sigla* which the author insists on applying: fuzziness and heterogeneity. In order to find a place for all the exceptions to the rule of *siglas*, he is forced to provide a vague definition for acronyms which is broad enough to comprise such different items as *motel*, *Benelux* or *algor* (‘algorhythmic language’), all of them categorized as acronyms: an acronym is “la palabra resultante de la fusión en una sola de truncamientos iniciales o finales (cualquiera que sea la sucesión) . . . Tales truncamientos están constituidos normalmente por sílabas, pero puede darse también por mezcla de sílabas y letras, generalmente iniciales” (p. 45).⁵ A certain uniformity of members would be acquired, for example, if the author reserved the term “acronym” as a label for a subtype (more imperfect) of *siglas*, namely those that mix syllables and initials, instead of jumbling up within the same category combinations of syllables and initials, fusions and clusterings.

2.4. PARAMETER-BASED DESCRIPTIONS: LACK OF METHOD TO CHOOSE AND RANK PARAMETERS, LACK OF CATEGORY STRUCTURES

Parameter-based definitions look for accuracy in multidimensional descriptions. However, their problems derive from the choice and status of the defining parameters: if all of them are equally important, the categories will consist of items which comply with all or most of the requirements. However, they will lack internal structure, and non-members will again form an heterogeneous periphery.

In his review of acronyms and “acronym-like” words, Algeo (1974) uses “abbreviation” as a superordinate term to refer to acronyms – “pronounced as the

⁵ An acronym is ‘the item resulting from the fusion of initial or final shortenings (whatever the order). . . Such shortenings usually consist of syllables, but they can also be combinations of syllables and letters, usually initials.’

abbreviated spelling suggests” (p. 218) –, and purely written abbreviations; acronyms belong to the more general category of blends, which are also defined as “a class of abbreviations”, and as “words that combine two or more lexical items, at least one of which has been shortened” (p. 230). Therefore, acronyms and blends share the original constituents (two or more lexical items) and the device of shortening, although “acronyms are . . . shortened to the initial part” (p. 230), that is, to the highest degree.

Algeo provides some arguable reasons for considering what I call alphabetisms as a type of acronyms. The first one is pronunciation: “like the orthoepically pronounced acronym . . . they have a pronunciation different from that of the corresponding full form” (p. 222). Thus stated, however, the argument of pronunciation does not seem valid to subordinate alphabetisms to acronyms. The “different pronunciation” they share probably refers to their unexpanded realization, in contrast with written abbreviations, but this common feature turns acronyms and alphabetisms into co-ordinates, so that it cannot be used to make the former a subordinate of the latter. The second and third reasons for including alphabetisms within acronyms are the following: “secondly, the alphabetic pronunciation is sometimes spelled out, as in *emcee*, *okay*, . . . the word loses much of its character as an abbreviation. Third, some forms have a pronunciation that combines alphabetic pronunciation with orthoepic rules . . . [for example] *ROTC*” (p. 222). Again, both may be reasons for excluding alphabetisms from the category of written abbreviations but they do not justify their subordination to acronyms. In fact, they merely prove that there are items which cannot be clearly grouped either with typical acronyms (*Nato*) or with typical alphabetisms (*BBC*) due to their special features of spelling and pronunciation; moreover, they also evince that a unified category of acronyms and alphabetisms (the former being either above or on a level with the latter) is too heterogeneous to be accounted for with a simple discrete definition. The fourth reason for regarding alphabetisms as a type of acronyms is that “although most definitions of the acronym do not explicitly consider its pronunciation, they often include among their examples forms like *MP* [‘Member of Parliament’]” (p. 222). In other words, the author seems to subsume alphabetisms under acronyms simply because everybody else implicitly does so.⁶

Algeo’s effort to draw a dividing line on what should and should not be considered as an acronym is certainly praiseworthy. He provides an exhaustive description of acronyms with respect to different criteria: spelling, pronunciation, number of original items shortened and the kind and extent of that shortening. However, despite this thorough analysis (or perhaps because of it) the final impression of the category is still that of vagueness and heterogeneity. For example, the list of “pronunciation features” of acronyms (pp. 223-224) is actually an unsystematic enumeration of “worth noting” cases (*SNCC*, *TripleA*: ‘Automobile Association of America’, *ack emma*: *AA*, ‘anti-

⁶ In that respect, it is interesting to notice that in the preface of Algeo’s *Fifty Years Among the New Words* (1991) the author regards “shortening” as a unifying device which results in three subgroups of items: “clippings”, “alphabetisms or initialisms” and “acronyms”. This time acronyms and alphabetisms appear as independent categories subordinated to the general device of shortening and on a level with clippings.

aircraft’); similarly, some oddities such as *IOU* (‘I Owe You’) or *PX* (‘Post Exchange’) are described as “pseudo acronyms” and mentioned “in passing” (p. 230). The problem is that the author does not try to relate all these irregularities to the typical cases, nor does he suggest how they could be arranged or accommodated within the category as a whole.

In another article on word-formation in English, Algeo points out that the main problem with traditional typologies is that they are “messy” and “ill-defined”, since they lack coherent definitions based on a “consistent set of criteria” (1978: 123). His proposal of a taxonomy of word-formation devices is based on “nine criteria that can be applied to a new item in the lexicon” (p. 124). The six “major classes of new words” obtained are “root creations”, “conversions”, “clippings”, “composites”, “blendings” and “borrowings”. Sixty-three lexical items are categorized in a grid, each of them receiving a plus (+), minus (–) or zero (0) mark according to the response to the nine parameters.

To start with, the parameters provide some guidelines to ascribe the items to the categories, but the classification within each major group is rather confusing because the parameters are not ranked and some of them are more important than others. For example, the fact that the new item comes from a shortened etymon (parameter 4) seems more relevant than its being phonologically motivated (parameter 6). With ranked parameters, each of the major classes could be organized as a group of central or regular vs. peripheral or irregular examples by virtue of the number and relevance of the conditions fulfilled. The author tries to account for this shortcoming by stating that criteria 1 to 4 define “major classes”, whereas criteria 5 to 9 “define subclasses” (p. 125). However, this distinction is not sufficient, as not all the parameters within each group are equally important (for instance, adding a new morph to the language – parameter 9 – seems more important than being derived from a written or a spoken form – parameter 8). Without a detailed ranking, all the items of a class are perceived to be on a level, and this does not always correspond with their real status (even though they are numbered, the author does not explicitly state that numbers may indicate different status). One example is the classification of items 20 to 28: such varied forms as *radar*, *Nabisco* (‘National Biscuit Company’), *bit* (‘binary digit’), *Amerindian* and *sit com* (‘situation comedy’) are labelled as “acronyms” and categorized as instances of clipping. Besides, they have the same marks, their only difference being their number in the list and the traditional (undefined) label they receive. Moreover, some criteria do not seem to be consistently applied. For example, *CO* (‘Commanding Officer’, “initialism”) and *scuba* (‘self-contained underwater breathing apparatus’, “acronym, 1st order”) are both marked ‘minus’ for written origin, whereas the rest of “acronyms” (*radar*, *Nabisco*, etc.) are marked ‘plus’.

Once the defining parameters are applied, “clippings” become a multifarious major class comprising (clipped) compounds together with what I call clippings, alphabetisms (termed “initialisms”), acronyms, different kinds of blends, and also purely written abbreviations (*Dr.*), whose inclusion (at least at the same level) seems to me unjustified. While being true that Algeo’s aim was not an exhaustive description of each class but an integration of all classes within a neat all-embracing taxonomy, intercategory neatness does not seem a legitimate justification for intracategory mess; therefore,

some effort should have been made to organize the items within the major types. I am not suggesting that the author should act in accordance with his own hint that criteria may be added or replaced “to achieve a more delicate classification” (p. 124), since I realize that such work would be outside the scope of the article; still, any comments on the laxity and eclecticism of the categories would be welcome, as would be any suggestions for relevant distinctions.

One of the proposals put forward in Cannon’s (1989) corpus-based analysis of initialisms is the replacement of the term “abbreviation” by “shortening” as a general superordinate covering “blends, acronyms, abbreviations” (i.e. mainly what I call alphabetisms) “and other reduced items” (p. 107). “Abbreviation” is defined as “an item created from one or two first letters of all or most of the 1-5 constituents of an existing item. Medial free forms and bound forms may be constituents, and the resulting shortening is pronounced letter by letter” (p.116). However, the ambiguous label “abbreviation” apparently comprises both alphabetisms (*ELT*: ‘English Language Teaching’) and some written abbreviations (*Jpn, pg, vb*: ‘Japan’, ‘picogram’, ‘verb’) which seem to be regarded as a subtype.

The criteria used to describe the items of the corpus are the following: the structure of the source words (modifying prepositional phrase, compound noun, free form, etc.); punctuation (periods); spelling (capital letters, lower-case letters, mixtures); the number of letters of the resulting item; how many letters are taken from which source word; from which parts they are taken; and, finally, subject area, style and dialect. Apart from the fact that these parameters should be ranked, since some of them (f. ex. length) are obviously less important than others (f. ex. the method of formation), the essential parameter of pronunciation is in principle ignored.

As regards the description of “acronyms”, the author provides a detailed definition based on the number of original constituents (at least three) and their degree of shortening (they “preserve only the initial part”, p. 108), a definition used to refine the borderline with clippings and blends. As regards length, the constituents can retain up to two initial letters or sounds. These conditions allow the author to exclude syllabic or semisyllabic items from the category: *Cogas* (‘Coal, Oil, Gas’), for example, is not an acronym because “gas is not reduced”. From this statement we can infer another condition for acronyms: all constituents must be reduced to some extent. The problem is that allowances must be made even under those conditions; therefore, the author is forced to admit the existence of a few “borderline creations from two-word sources” in his corpus, such as *Algol*, although he remarks that “none of them retains as few as two letters/sounds of each constituent” (p. 108). However, the fact that they are not registered in the corpus does not mean that there are no items coming from a two-word source and retaining “as few as two letters/sounds of each constituent”, for example *hi-fi* (‘high fidelity’). Another licence refers to the number of initials retained: “three or even four . . . if the majority of the reduction typifies acronymy” (p. 108), for example *COMUSMACV* (‘Commander United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam’).

The author insists on an exhaustive account of acronyms according to the number of original words initialized and the origin of the initials (main words, function words or free or bound morphemes). The source of the constituents has already been questioned as a relevant criterion for classification. As regards the various patterns

of representation, they result in a list of apparently unrelated items which makes the category look more heterogeneous than it really is. Orthoepic pronunciation is eventually mentioned in the concluding definition: “an acronym is created from the first letter (and infrequently the second or even the third letters) of all or most of the 3-9 constituents of an existing compound. Initial bound forms and free forms prefixed by a bound form may be part of the representation, and the resulting shortening is pronounced syllabically according to orthoepic practice” (p. 116). If we leave aside the fact that the choice of the second or third letters is not “infrequent” (precisely due to pronunciation), such a comprehensive description should apparently be able to account for most items. Yet, it is the author himself who reduces the range of application by remarking that the definition works except in numerous “pseudocoinages” (a term no further explained or exemplified). Finally, the grouping of both acronyms and “abbreviations” under the term “initialisms” (another superordinate label with a vague definition and no justification) is also worth noticing. Initialisms must fulfil “two conditions”: every constituent “must have a known lexical source” and “no constituent word in the source can be preserved intact” (p. 106). Still, both conditions are also satisfied by some blends, so that the scope of the definition is blurred, and neither of them justifies the choice of the superordinate label “initialism”, since the description does not even mention initials.

2.5. SCALES AND CONTINUA, LACK OF ELABORATION

The last approach is based on continuity: thus the contributions reviewed devise definitions which implicitly or explicitly allow the location of the items described along a continuum. Moreover, some defining features are not absolute but graded, which provides more flexibility in the distribution of the items. Although the approach is undoubtedly appealing, it is unfortunate that the contributions that follow that line are not explicit enough in their suggestions and leave much to be inferred. Their proposals are not fully developed and therefore require more elaboration and detail.

Wells (1956) categorizes forms such as *vet*, *ad* and *Will* (which I call clippings) as acronyms involving a process of shortening. The author distinguishes between simple and complex acronyms, the difference being the number of words shortened (this is not made explicit but inferred from the examples). Simple acronyms may be alphabetic (the highest reduction, f. ex. *B* /bi:/ for ‘Benjamin’), and syllabic (containing one or more syllables, f. ex. *vet* for ‘veteran’). Complex acronyms, also called acronym-sequences, are formed by taking from each word of the previous expression “the first one, two or three letters”, which are “assembled and read out as one word” (p. 665), for example *NATO* or *Texaco*. Finally, he also admits the possibility of coming across borderline cases. Alphabetisms are not explicitly labelled or categorized, although when discussing complex acronyms “one could not fail . . . to think of such expressions as FDR [‘Franklin Delano Roosevelt’]” (p. 665). The sketchy classification proposed by Wells could nevertheless be interpreted as involving an appealing scale of shortening from simple to complex and, inside each type, from the highest to the lowest reduction (i. e. from letters to syllables).

Marckwardt's (1958) condensed typology illustrates an implicit scale of shortening of constituents and also the continuity blends-initialisms. The author develops a taxonomy of word blending with five categories, adopting the original flexible definition of acronyms – that is, they can be composed of initials and larger parts of words. In his classification, acronyms are defined as forms exclusively made up of parts of other words, regardless of size. Therefore, those items composed of full words plus parts of other words, either initial or final – Types 1 and 2 –, would be instances of word blending with the lowest degree of shortening, since they include full words. The term acronym is restricted to Types 3, 4 and 5: Types 3 (*motel*) and 4 (*minicam*: 'miniature camera') are syllabic and do not include initials. They would exemplify a more advanced stage of shortening, from full words to parts of words. Finally, Type 5 (my initialisms) is exclusively composed of initial letters, so that it represents the highest degree of shortening of the constituents. The heterogeneity of this type is accounted for by distinguishing six subtypes, depending on their pronunciation: initial letters pronounced orthoepically (my acronyms, f. ex. *Unesco*), alphabetically (my alphabetisms, f. ex. *DDT*: 'dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro-ethane'), combinations (*veep*: *VP* 'vice-president'), initials "spelled out" (*Seabees*, or members of the *CB*: 'Construction Battalion'), initials described (*AAA*, read out "triple A") and initials read out with vowel insertion (f. ex. *HFDF*: "huff duff", 'high frequency direction finder').

Baum was one of the first scholars to note how the fuzzy boundaries between acronyms and blends were favoured by vague definitions and confusing terminology. Therefore, in 1962 he tries to impose some limits to the indiscriminate extension of the term acronym towards blends, since he considers that their distinction is useful and should be respected. His classification comprises acronyms of different orders, proper acronyms belonging to Types 1 and 2. First order acronyms (or "pure" acronyms) are formed "only from the first letter of each major unit in a phrase", for example, *Asdic*: 'Anti-submarine Detection Investigation Committee' (p. 49); acronyms of the second order include "two initial letters", like *radar* or *loran* ('long range navigation'). Acronyms of the third order are described as the starting point for the loss of "linguistic identity of the acronym" (p. 49). These "acronyms" (for example, *motel*) can already be regarded as blends or "telescope words". Finally, acronyms of the fourth order are also blends, this time "formed from the initial syllables of two or more words", like *minicam*. The examples of the different types of acronyms seem to suggest that the difference between acronyms (Types 1 and 2) and blends (Types 3 and 4) lies in the degree of shortening of the constituents. Similarly, the distinction between the two types of blends could lie on the degree of fusion of those constituents. As regards alphabetisms, he seems to agree with the view that sequences of initials pronounced letter by letter should be treated as abbreviations, and they are excluded from the classification.

Finally, in his 1998 article on the category of "neoclassical compounds" (such as *geology*), Bauer puts forward a three-dimensional system to account for word-formation devices. The intersections of three clines (native-foreign, simplex-derivative-compound, and abbreviated-full) result in twelve main categories: for example, derivative items (*redness*) are placed in the space where the values 'native', 'derived' and 'full' intersect.

“Initialism” is used as a superordinate term for both acronyms (*laser*) and items like *PC* (‘politically correct’). Initialisms, clippings and blends are located towards the abbreviated end of the scale. The group of acronyms consists only of highly lexicalized items (*laser*; *radar*), separated from alphabetisms and regarded as a three-dimensional category with the values ‘native’, ‘simplex’ and ‘abbreviated’. Their location at the ‘simplex’ end of the scale is due to their similarity to simple words, which are described as “potential stems”, “unanalyzable” and “independent”. However, this location of acronyms is arguable because being a simplex form is not the same as looking like a simplex form; the independence of acronyms may be questioned, as they can always be analysed by expanding the original expression they replace.

The author admits that he is “in two minds as to whether initialisms that are not acronyms should count as abbreviated compounds or as new simplices like acronyms” (pp. 413-414). He eventually decides on the first possibility, probably because alphabetisms do not “look like simplices” (p. 411) as much as acronyms do. He therefore places alphabetisms at the point where the end of the scale of abbreviation intersects with compounds, whereas acronyms represent maximal abbreviation intersected with the ‘simplex’ value. This classification is problematic, firstly because acronyms and alphabetisms appear as more dissimilar than they really are: therefore, acronyms are one of the main categories resulting from dimensional intersections whereas alphabetisms are a compromise type at the ‘compound’ and ‘abbreviated’ ends. The second problem concerns the description of alphabetisms as “abbreviated compounds” (p. 413). There are only a few alphabetisms whose expanded source is a compound (*TV*); besides, the example provided in order to illustrate a maximally abbreviated compound, namely *PC*, has a more than doubtful compound source. Even taking into account that the author admits the existence of “various types of compound” (p. 404) and focuses on the noun + noun type (*houseboat*, *desk office*), the definition of any of the “various types” would have to be considerably stretched so as to include as “compounds” expanded expressions such as ‘Los Angeles’ (*LA*), ‘orl / oll korrekt’ (*OK*), ‘tuberculosis’ (*TB*), ‘do-it-yourself’ (*DIY*), ‘or ‘Young Men’s Christian Association’ (*YMCA*). I would not place alphabetisms either as maximally abbreviated compounds (as they do not usually abbreviate compounds) or as “simplices” on a level with acronyms (as their similarity to simplices is even less than that of acronyms). Even though the second possibility is preferable to the first, it would have to be elaborated by adding that initialisms (acronyms and alphabetisms) are placed near the simplex end. The whole class thus located, part of it (alphabetisms) would have to be regarded as a peripheral type within the entire group.

2.6. CRITICAL SUMMARY

My first objection to the terminology and categorization in the sources reviewed concerns the description of a device without providing a label. This is sometimes done in the case of the general process (initialization) and also in relation to alphabetisms, which are either described but not labelled, or simply jumbled up with acronyms without a different description. As regards abbreviations, the meaning of the term should always be made explicit. The label should be handled with care, so as to avoid ambiguity, that

is, whether the device referred to is the general process of both written and phonic shortening, or the written tool. The distinction between them – accurately pointed out by some sources – should never be taken for granted. Furthermore, there are no grounds for considering written abbreviations on a level with other types of shortening, as some references do. I would also question the indiscriminate mixture of alphabetisms and written abbreviations, as well as the categorization of the former as a subtype of the latter. The features that initial-letter alphabetisms may share with a few initial-letter abbreviations (similar orthography, degree of shortening and type of source unit) are not so relevant as the fact that both alphabetisms and acronyms are complex shortenings, whereas abbreviations are written tools with no linguistic value.

Several contributions regard acronyms and alphabetisms as independent – i. e. not unified – categories, and locate them at the same level or on a level with clippings. However, clippings are syllable-based and shorten one base, and the rest are letter-based and shorten more than one base: their grouping at the same level should be done on the grounds of some explicit common feature. The categorization of acronyms and alphabetisms as coordinates with both clippings and blends is equally objectionable if they are not unified first. In the typology that I suggest, *clippings*, *blends* and *initialisms* are classified on a level because of the features they share: basically, they are all instances of *complex shortening*. In any case, the common features of acronyms and alphabetisms in contrast with the rest of the categories seem to point to the convenience of unifying them in a single category. This leads to another objection concerning terminology: using the same label (acronym) to refer to both proper acronyms and acronyms plus alphabetisms is confusing and inadequate. It is also criticizable to unify acronyms and alphabetisms only by means of a label, with no further justification. Taking into account their common features (both are used in written and spoken language, and both are generally formed out of the initial letters of the words of an expression), it is possible to group them under one denomination and as the result of one process. In fact, this is done in some references, the unifying term being, for example, “acronyms”. However, in the classifications where acronym functions as the superordinate term, alphabetisms appear as discriminated members of the category, sometimes even unlabelled. Besides, the two criteria resorted to when defining these categories are pronunciation and the formation method; however, the former is a differentiating parameter, not a unifying one, so it cannot be used to support a definition of a common denomination for both. What I suggest here is a change in terminology to avoid ambiguity, together with a reasoned definition and label for the common device.

3. A TYPOLOGY OF WRITTEN AND SPOKEN SHORTENINGS

The outline of labels and taxonomic arrangement put forward in this article is partially based on the interpretations of Kreidler (1979), Quirk et al (1985)⁷ and Algeo

⁷ The authors describe three types of abbreviations: “clippings”, “blends” and “acronyms”. Within acronyms, they distinguish between those uttered as “sequences of letters”, i.e. “alphabetisms”,

(1991), although some minor modifications in terminology have been made so as to avoid ambiguities. The changes can be summarized as follows: I adopted Quirk et al's label and definition of *alphabetism*; the term *acronym* corresponds to their proper *acronyms* and the term *abbreviation* is restricted to their *graphic device*. I also suggest the substitution of their superordinate term *acronyms* for that of *initialisms*. The term *shortening* is taken from Algeo to comprise Quirk et al.'s *clippings*, *blends* and *acronyms*, and also as a superordinate term for the process that results in *simple* and *compound abbreviations* (i.e. abbreviations of one word vs. several words or higher units).

As regards terminology, two reasons led me to the choice of the unifying terms *initialisms* and *initialization* to refer to both acronyms and alphabetisms and to the process involved in their creation: first, because they are neutral labels that give no preference to any of the subcategories, and secondly because they are based on the parameter of 'method of formation' or 'degree of shortening', which is a unifying one (according to this parameter, both acronyms and alphabetisms are typically formed by taking the initial letters of the source words). For clarity's sake I disregarded the term *abbreviations*, which I reserve for simple shortenings. Similarly, *acronym* and *acronymy* have also been rejected as accurate superordinates to comprise both acronyms and alphabetisms. By resorting to the superordinate label *initialisms* and the subordinate labels *acronyms* and *alphabetisms* I recognize that acronyms and alphabetisms share some features, which allows them to form a unified category, but I also account for their differences. Lastly, with respect to the particular labels chosen for acronyms and alphabetisms, the term *alphabetism* has been adopted to comprise items such as *BBC* because it recalls some of the typical features of these items: they are letter-based formations with letter-by-letter pronunciation. The choice of the label *acronym* for examples like *Nato* or *radar* is based on etymological interpretation, since it comprises those 'names' created out of 'tips'. I use the term 'name' to refer to any item with 'word' value (and therefore with orthoepic pronunciation) formed by joining 'tips' of other words (typically initials).

On those grounds, I regard *shortening* as a superordinate word-formation device, typically consisting in the reduction of old bases (one or more). According to the medium, shortening can be *simple* or *complex*. *Simple shortening* is exclusively graphic, and it covers simple and compound abbreviations. *Complex shortenings* (clippings, blends and initialisms) are both graphic and phonic reductions, although in different degrees. They are all conceived as overlapping categories with fuzzy boundaries. Together with abbreviations, they are defined by a set of formal parameters: source form – number and type –, pronunciation (expanded or unexpanded), spelling (capitals or lower case), degree of shortening of the source(s), degree of phonic integration of the final constituents,⁸ and mode of expression (speech or writing). Each category has

and those uttered "as a word". "Ordinary abbreviations" are regarded as a "graphic device" and therefore kept aside.

⁸ In 'high' integration the constituents intersect or overlap, as in *motel*. In 'medium' integration the constituents are joined so as to form a syllable or a pronounceable sequence, for example the initials that compose a prototypical acronym. In 'low' integration initials or bigger parts of the source become independent constituents which are

its own ranking of parameters, and its members are distributed in a categorial continuum of central, peripheral and borderline cases⁹ in accordance with the values adopted with respect to the defining parameters. The parameters were chosen and ranked on the grounds of the behaviour exhibited by prototypes and also by considering their discriminatory power to arrange categorial peripheries. For example: the parameter ‘degree of shortening’ helps to locate items composed of initials plus larger parts still within the scope of acronyms. As can be observed in Table 1 below, prototypical acronyms are written in lower case; this implies that items in capitals or with both spellings (which are actually more frequent than those only in lower case) are central but not typical. The explanation for this is that the most ‘perfect’ examples of acronyms (such as *laser*) look like actual words, both in shape and in meaning (that is, speakers use them as words and are no longer aware that they once replaced a whole expression).

Table 1 below summarizes the ranking of defining parameters for each category and the values adopted by prototypical cases.¹⁰ The defining parameters are the following: SU: source unit (number and type); PRON: pronunciation of the resulting item; SPE: spelling; SHORT: degree of shortening; PHON: degree of phonic integration; and EXP: mode of expression.

Considering the parameters and values displayed, the following are examples of items from different categories which are central, but not prototypical:

- a) Acronyms. Central acronyms may be written in capitals (*SALT*: ‘Strategic Arms Limitation Talks’). Other features of less central items include two initials per source word taken from more than one word or the choice of letters which are not initials. A combination of those features makes the item even less central (*BORAX*: ‘BOiling ReActor eXperiment’).
- b) Alphabetisms. In some central but not prototypical alphabetisms not all the original words are initialized. Alternatively, some words may be represented by more than one letter (*CMTT*: ‘CoMmittee for Television Transmission’). There are also alphabetisms whose origin is one word instead of one phrase (*OD*: ‘OverDose’).
- c) Abbreviations. Central abbreviations may combine different degrees of shortening (*F. Inst. L. Ex.*: ‘Fellow of the INSTitute of Legal EXecutives’), or be written in capitals (*NYC*), thus resembling prototypical alphabetisms.
- d) Clippings. Central but not prototypical clippings combine ‘fore’ and ‘hind’ clipping (*flu*) or come from phrases instead of words (*Met*: ‘Metropolitan Opera House’).
- e) Blends. Central blends may exhibit alternative spellings in capitals (*FORTTRAN*) or have all their constituents – two or more – with their last part clipped (*modem*: ‘MODulator DEModulator’), since their prototypical pattern is ‘hind’ + ‘fore’ as in *brunch*.

simply clustered in the new item, for example the initials of alphabetisms or the constituents of clustered blends (*Nabisco*: ‘National Biscuit Company’).

⁹ The accuracy of both the approach adopted and the classification proposed in this article has been tested in a corpus-based study, an account of which can be found in López Rúa (2002).

¹⁰ As can be inferred from the examples, English was the language chosen to test the feasibility of this approach. Nevertheless, similar results are likely to be obtained in languages like French or Spanish.

Table 1. Parameters and prototypical values of simple and complex shortenings

Parameters (decreasing order of importance)	Acronyms <i>laser</i>	Alphabetisms <i>BBC</i>	Abbreviations <i>Dr., at. wt.*</i>	Clippings <i>lab</i>	Blends <i>motel</i>
Typical Values					
First	PRON (unexpanded: orthoepic)	PRON (unexpanded: letter names)	PRON (expanded: source form)	PRON (unexpanded: orthoepic)	PRON (unexpanded: orthoepic)
Second	SHORT (maximal: 1 or 2 initials per word)	SHORT (maximal: 1 initial per word)	EXP (writing)	SHORT (medium)	SHORT (medium)
Third	PHON (medium)	SPE (capitals)	SHORT (variable)	SU (1 word)	PHON (high to medium)
Fourth	SU (1 phrase)	SU (1 phrase)	SPE (lower case or combination)	SPE (lower case)	SU (2 words)
Fifth	SPE (lower case)	PHON (low)	SU (1 word or 1 phrase)	EXP (speech, but also writing)	SPE (lower case)
Sixth	EXP (speech and writing)	EXP (speech and writing)	PHON (N.A.**)	PHON (N.A.**)	EXP (speech and writing)

* 'atomic weight'

** The parameter does not apply

Peripheral items from all the categories mentioned are, for example:

- a) Acronyms. Peripheral items combine initialized and clipped constituents (*Algol/ALGOL*: 'ALGORhythmic Language'), initials and full constituents (*LIMEAN*: 'London Interbank MEAN rate'), initials and chemical symbols or formulae (*Nero*: 'sodium – *Na* – Experimental Reactor Of zero power'), or lack an original expression (*qwerty/QWERTY*).
- b) Alphabetisms. Peripheral cases lack a source form (*KLF*, the name of a pop music band) or include numbers, symbols or letters indicating series, phases or types (*UB40*, *UVA*: 'UltraViolet type A')
- c) Abbreviations. Peripheral abbreviations include, for example, apostrophes, hyphens or numbers (*B'ham*: 'Birmingham'; *B-way*: 'Broadway'; *2nd*: 'second').
- d) Clippings. Peripheral cases are, for instance, those which are re-spelled (*broolly*: 'umbrella') or context specific (*op*: 'optic', only in the phrase *op art*)

- e) Blends. Low integration combined with hind clipping increases the peripherality of the item, in the same way as the use of capitals, the phrasal origin and the presence of complete words from the source (*DESIRE*: ‘DEsign by SIMulation and REndering of parallel architectures’; *MINEX*: ‘MINE warfare EXercise’).

Finally, in hybrids or borderline cases a distinction should be kept between actual hybrids, which combine features of different categories (for instance alphabetic shape and acronymic pronunciation, as in *SNCC*, which is read out /snik/), and potential hybrids, which display the features of different categories at the same time (basically pronunciation and spelling, for instance *UFO/Ufo*, which can be read out as an acronym or as an alphabetism), and whose eventual categorization depends on external conditions such as extended use or style. A few representative examples of hybrids are listed below, together with the categories involved.

- a) Acronyms-alphabetisms: *SNCC*
- b) Alphabetisms-abbreviations: *e.g.*
- c) Acronyms-abbreviations: *WAN* (‘Wide Area Network’)
- d) Acronyms-alphabetisms-abbreviations: *asap/ASAP* (‘as soon as possible’)
- e) Acronyms-alphabetisms-clippings (for example, items containing one initial plus one clipping read out orthoepically: *CLAB*, ‘Custom LABORatories inc.’).
- f) Abbreviations-clippings: *Feb* (‘February’)
- g) Acronyms-alphabetisms-blends (for example, items containing one initial plus two shortened elements read out orthoepically: *Imarsat/IMARSAT* (‘International Maritime Satellite’).
- h) Abbreviations-blends (for example, fixed combinations of abbreviated forms which are read out unexpanded and are often, but not always, spaced: *Dip Ed* ‘Diploma in Education’).
- i) Clippings-blends (for example, items in which one of the constituents already exists as a clipping: *arcsec*, ‘arc second’).

As can be observed, this proposal combines parameter-based definitions with the notions of typicality and continuity, trying to overcome the limitations observed in both approaches when developed in isolation. Prototypical values as regards defining features are possessed by nuclear cases, but no values are compulsory for an item to be ascribed to a category. This flexibility brings about an internal arrangement of category members in terms of representativity. Besides, it allows a reasonable location for that persistent group of exceptions and irregularities. Thus conceived, categories which are inherently diverse preserve their internal variety, but also their integrity and their evident connections with neighbouring categories.

4. CONCLUSION

Since the earliest notices of the device initialisms have been defined and classified as a type of abbreviation, shortening, clipping or blend. The root of the problem

often lies in the lack of explicitness, that is, in the fact that what is understood by each of these terms is left unspecified, or must be inferred from a list of heterogeneous examples, or is ambiguously labelled. Confusion, overlap and inconsistency concerning definitional criteria are generally acknowledged and sometimes regretted, but seldom confronted and only exceptionally challenged. This article reviews alternative approaches to the characterization of written and spoken abbreviations, with a view to tracing the sources of discrepancy, vagueness and overlap in the definition and taxonomic arrangement of these items.

The sources reviewed deal with the categories under study from different perspectives. Consequently, there are general characterizations (all-inclusive and therefore vague), oversimplified characterizations refined with chaotic lists of exceptions, discrete typologies based on strict definitions (and often leading to a confusing proliferation of labels), parameter-based descriptions, or approaches based on nondiscrete notions like continuity or gradation. The contributions analysed were found to follow one of these tendencies or a combination of them. In the first two options variety is not really confronted, but tacitly accepted as a state of affairs. The third alternative opts for discrete tools, so that the object is unnaturally forced to become discrete. As developed in the sources consulted, option four ends up being a variant of discrete definitions which still cannot find a place for a handful of troublesome exceptions. Lastly, option five seems the only option which can seriously challenge heterogeneity by resorting to the continuum as a tool, although on the whole the proposals reviewed require less intimation and more elaboration.

The proposal outlined in this article considers the advantages of the nondiscrete perspective for the description and categorization of these items. Therefore, both continuity and typicality are invoked in a multidimensional characterization of central, peripheral and borderline cases of simple and complex shortenings, with a view to providing a unified and comprehensive picture of this controversial area of word-formation.

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