

Life is too short for long words: Studying English clippings in language use and in the laboratory

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Abstract

This talk addresses the morphological word formation process that is known as clipping. In English, that process yields shortened word forms such as lab (<< laboratory), exam (<< examination), or gator (<< alligator). Existing work (Davy 2000, Durkin 2009, Haspelmath & Sims 2010, Don 2014) characterizes clipping as a highly variable phenomenon, arguing that it is difficult to predict how a given source word will be shortened. Recently however, the view that clipping is unsystematic or unpredictable has been empirically challenged (Lappe 2007, Jamet 2009, Berg 2011, Alber & Arndt-Lappe 2012, Arndt-Lappe 2018). This talk continues that line of research and presents new empirical insights. Specifically, the talk will report on new results that have been obtained on the basis of a newly-compiled large database of English clippings, and through experimental, psycholinguistic methods. The studies take into account variables that include phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic distinctions, along with corpus-based measurements of type and token frequency, as well as distribution.

Earlier research on clippings has emphasized the importance of factors such as the principle of least effort (Zipf 1949), the recoverability of the source word (Tournier 1985), and phonological factors such as stress and syllable structure (Lappe 2007). While the individual influence of these factors on clipping has been recognized, their interaction and their relative importance remains to be fully understood. Addressing this research gap, this talk presents two sets of results. The first of these is based on a multivariate analysis of factors that reveal systematic patterns in the formation of clippings. On the basis of such a multivariate analysis, it is discussed what underlying factors are implicated in the clipping process and how these factors interact. The second set of results is based on experimental studies in which speakers of English are prompted to choose between clipping alternatives, or to propose a clipping of their own on the basis of a source word.

The empirical studies allow a precise assessment of the phonological, semantic, and frequency-related factors that are at work in clipping formation. The overall conclusion is that clipping has been unjustly characterized as an unpredictable word formation process. Not only are clippings formed on the basis of systematic patterns, but these patterns also reflect functional pressures that act on the speaker and the hearer.

References

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