

## ABBREVIATION AND ITS PLACE IN THE WORD-FORMATION SYSTEM OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** *The primary aim of this research is to study abbreviation as a word-formation process and identify its specificity. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were formulated and addressed: identification of the main methods of word formation in contemporary English; determination of the place of abbreviation in the word-formation system of modern English; identification of the main types of abbreviations; description of the characteristics of each kind; analysis of the structural and semantic organization of initialisms in contemporary English. The research was based on a complete Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2023) sampling method and involved the analysis of 635 initial abbreviations that were categorized according to their structural and semantic characteristics.*

**Key words:** *abbreviation, word-formation, initialisms, English language, applied linguistics*

### 1. Introduction

This study explores the phenomenon of word formation in modern English, explicitly focusing on conversion, reversion, contamination, and abbreviation methods. By examining these word-formation processes, the study aims to elucidate their role in enriching the English vocabulary and shaping linguistic expressions. The chosen topic is significant as it provides insights into the dynamic nature of language development and evolution.

Drawing from linguistic theories and concepts, the study delves into the intricate mechanisms underlying word formation in English. It considers the distinctions between morphemes and words, the significance of base elements, and the productivity of various word-formation methods. Additionally, the study explores differing scholarly perspectives on the nature and classification of abbreviations, highlighting debates surrounding their status within the word-formation framework.

The study addresses the need for a comprehensive understanding of word formation in modern English, particularly concerning conversion, reversion, contamination, and abbreviation. The rationale for focusing on these aspects is their fundamental roles in word formation and language evolution. While they operate differently, they are interconnected in their ability to create new words and expand the vocabulary of a language. These aspects represent distinct processes through which new words are created, showcasing language's creative and adaptive nature. Providing definitions of the concepts discussed in advance benefits readers unfamiliar with linguistic terminology.

By conducting a thorough literature review, the research aims to elucidate the structural and semantic characteristics of these word-formation processes. Furthermore, the study seeks to analyze the implications of these processes for language development and communication.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in linguistics by offering insights into the dynamic nature of word formation in contemporary English. The research sheds light on how new lexical units emerge and evolve by examining conversion, reversion, contamination, and abbreviation. Moreover, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the role of abbreviations in linguistic innovation and communication practices. Overall, this research enhances our comprehension of the complex interplay between language structure, creativity, and societal change.

## 2. Materials and Methods

When discussing the linguistic composition of a language, its open nature is usually emphasized, i.e., the ability to replenish it with new units, linking this possibility primarily with active word-formation processes or word formation (Kharitonchik 1992).

The term "word formation" has two meanings that should be clearly distinguished: the ongoing process of creating new words in a language and, as a scientific field, studying how lexical units are formed. First, it is about language's continuous development, generating new words. In the second sense, it examines the formal, semantic, and genetic patterns of forming new lexical units, reflecting societal changes. New lexical units are produced according to specific word-formation patterns historically developed in each language. At the same time, one of the critical problems of word formation is the problem of the productivity of the model or method of word formation (Plotkin 1989).

A word consists of morphemes, the most minor language units with form and content. Morphemes lack syntactic and semantic independence and serve as components within words. Root morphemes convey central lexical meanings, while affixational morphemes add additional meanings as prefixes or suffixes. Morphemes within a word are closely interconnected structurally and semantically, influencing each other's meaning.

The base is essential in word formation, representing an unchanging part of a word that maintains its form across different grammatical forms. Bases can comprise one or multiple morphemes with lexical and grammatical meanings. They play a selective role in determining affixes and interacting with other bases. In English, many linguists view the base functionally as a structural and word-formational unit (Eliseeva 2003).

The word-formational structure of a word is described using models, i.e., formulas reflecting the principle of combining the base with other components. The remaining unchanged formula can be filled with different lexical materials. Models can be productive and non-productive (Eliseeva 2003). Productivity is a quantitative characteristic of a word-formation series: a model is productive when dozens or even hundreds of derivatives are created in the language according to its pattern. On the other hand, the activity of a model is more of a qualitative characteristic, as it means the ability of a word-formation series to be supplemented with new units. Finally, the usability of a model is related to its implementation in the text, i.e., the static regularities of its use (Kubryakova 1981). Many word-formational models differ precisely in the quantitative aspect: compare the quite limited and closed list of derivatives with the suffix *-dom* (*kingdom*, *princedom*, etc.) and the vast, open range of derivatives with the suffix *-er* in modern English; compare also in the Russian language sets of derivatives with the suffix *-иш(a)*, the suffix *-ение*, and others (Kharitonchik 1992). Non-productive models describe existing words in the language, but no new words are created based on them. The *N+-OUS* model belongs to this type; in particular, David Barnhart's dictionary of new words does not contain a single formation with the suffix *-ous* (Eliseeva 2003). The word-formational model shows how a word is formed in each case and helps create similar meanings with similar means. The concept of word formation includes generalizations and grouping different models by methods of word formation (Eliseeva 2003).

In English, several word-formation methods are recognized, although opinions on their number vary due to changes in their productivity over time. Generally, six methods are considered the most productive: affixation, compounding, conversion, reversal, contamination, and abbreviation. Other methods like alternation, doubling, onomatopoeia, and rhyming repetition are deemed secondary and unproductive. Lexical-semantic word formation involves changing the meaning of existing words. Traditionally, three primary methods are distinguished: word production (including affixation, reversal, and conversion), compounding, and abbreviation (Smirnitsky 1998).

Perhaps no word-formation method in different languages, including English, has been studied as often and in as much detail as affixation. This is natural: in affixational word formation, the semantic changes undergone by the base are explicitly expressed and are associated with the addition of formal indicators – *affixes* (Kharitonchik 1992). The general word-formation model of affixation can be represented by the formula "*base + affix*" and belongs to linear models. The result of the word-formation process in affixation is a derived word (Eliseeva 2003).

Affixational word formation in English has evolved over centuries, leading to changes in the system of affixes. Some affixes have become unproductive or extinct, while others remain in use. Words formed with obsolete affixes (like "*steward*") coexist with those formed using ancient but still meaningful affixes (like "*governess*"). Additionally, contemporary vocabulary includes words created with currently active affixes, some with ancient origins (like "*driver*"). In modern linguistics, there is a challenge in classifying verbal structures that lie between compounding and affixation. Morphemes such as *-man*, *-boy*, *-maid*, *-woman*, *-girl*, *-lad*, and *-person* exhibit characteristics of semi-affixes due to their clear word-formational function, generalized meaning, and detachment from corresponding words when used independently.

Compounding is one of the oldest and most universal methods of word formation. This method of forming new words can be conveyed by the formula "*base + base*," resulting in a compound word. A compound word is usually fully formed; its grammatical characteristic depends on the second component. For example, with the structural similarity of the phrases *whitewashes* and *blackboard*, they belong to different parts of speech because their second components are, respectively, a verb and a noun.

Compounding often serves as a means of creating a producing base for further word-formation processes. The base obtained in this way undergoes conversion, reversal, or affixation, resulting in a new derived word (*blocklist* – *to block*; *daydream* – *to daydream*; *stage manager* – *to stage-manage*; *babysitter* – *to babysit*; *honeymoon* – *to honeymoon* – *honeymooner*; etc.) (Eliseeva 2003).

Conversion is the only method in the English word formation system where a new word is produced without quantitative changes to the original word's basic form or applying any linear word-formational means. For example, English verbs like *arm*, *bank*, and *book* are derived through conversion from corresponding nouns. At the same time, nouns such as *catch*, *fall*, *help*, and *spy* are formed from verbs. This word-formational method is also called the root or suffixless method of creating new words. Conversion represents one of the main productive methods of enriching the vocabulary of modern English. The following changes occur when converting a new word with the original root base. Firstly, the latest word acquires all the endings serving to form grammatical forms in the new part of speech; secondly, the new word acquires a different syntactic function and collocation; thirdly, the latest word acquires a new lexical-grammatical meaning. The latter change is because, during the process of forming a new word through conversion, there is a change in the definite meaning of the original base. In other words, the latest word is included in a new paradigm and is characterized by new grammatical categories.

Thus, conversion is a morpho-syntactic method of word formation in which new words arise without changing the primary form of the original word. In addition, the result of conversion is homonymy of the primary forms of the derived word and the derivative (source) word, meaning linguistic units that are identical in form, pronunciation, and spelling but have different meanings and belong to other parts of speech. It should be noted that words are created with one meaning during conversion, but many of them become polysemous later (Ilyina and Kibasova 2012).

Reversion, or back-formation, forms new words by removing a word-formational (or assumed to be so) element from the original word. In this case, the original word is believed to

include a suffix or, less commonly, a prefix by which the given original word was formed. For example, the verbs *beg*, *edit*, and *perk* were derived from the corresponding nouns *beggar*, *editor*, and *percolator* (Ilyina and Kibasova 2012). As a result of reversion, like in affixation, a derived word appears since, in this process of word formation, one base is used, and the standard model of this method can be represented as "*base - quasi-affix*" (Eliseeva 2003).

Contamination combines two (and sometimes more) words without considering their morphological structure, primarily based on the sound similarity or euphony of the combined parts. Contamination (portmanteau word, contraction, telescoping, blending - the terminology is not standardized) is considered by many linguists as a rare type of word formation, combining compounding and abbreviation (Lashkevich 2007). Words like *motel* < *motor* + *hotel*, *brunch* < *breakfast* + *lunch*, *transistor* < *transfer* + *resistor*, *stagflation* < *stagnation* + *inflation*, and many others are formed by combining morpheme parts into a complex, although sometimes assimilated to monomorphemic, lexical unit. Indeed, compounding is similar, as elements of two words are combined, and to abbreviation, as both combining words or instead bases, are shortened to a few letters. The resulting neologism meets two language requirements for nomination: integrity (i.e., what the problem of a compound word is related to) and compactness of linguistic means (the main characteristic of a shortened word). However, it should be noted that this type of word formation is not so rare in modern English, although it retains some unusualness and unpredictability, which contributes to the use of blended words for attracting attention and creating expressiveness in speech works (Akhmanova 2017).

Abbreviation, or truncation, is one of the "*youngest*" methods of word formation, which became widespread mainly in European languages in the 1920s-1930s. The term "abbreviation" (from Latin *abbrevio* "*I shorten*") means the formation of new words by shortening. As a result, words with an incomplete, truncated base (or bases) are created, called abbreviations. Abbreviations have all the properties of full-fledged lexical units, and the system of abbreviation words is developing and improving. This applies to European languages in general and to the English language in particular, which widely uses abbreviations to expand its vocabulary.

Abbreviated units are most often used in scientific journals and in books on regional studies, where they convey local color and usually denote concepts familiar to the reader. At the same time, abbreviations are used relatively rarely in fiction literature. Currently, the number of abbreviations in modern English is increasing. More and more abbreviation dictionaries are appearing. Abbreviations are used in all areas of activity: in science, literature, document drafting, in the names of educational institutions, car brands, etc. The emergence of an increasing number of abbreviated lexical units in modern English provides ample space for research activity.

The terms "abbreviation" and "acronym" are frequently encountered in recent decades. The term "abbreviation" refers to "a method of word formation, the essence of which lies in the condensation of means of expression and a generalized perception of the substantive side of new linguistic units" (Yarmashev 2017). At the same time, an "acronym" is the result of this process.

Many scholars (for instance, E.S. Kubryakova, M.A. Yarmashev, A.S. Murycheva, L.M. Mitrofanenko, L.M. Ilchenko, E.A. Dyuzhikova) consider abbreviation in a broad sense, meaning any process in a language where a specific initial unit loses some of its elements and becomes a shortened unit (Ilchenko 2020). Abbreviation is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon rooted in ancient history. Above all, it creates nominations for concepts and realities that were initially denoted descriptively using attributive phrases (Alekseev 1966).

In modern lexicological research, several contradictory views exist on the place of abbreviation in the word-formation system of contemporary English. A.I. Smirnitsky believes that in the case of abbreviation, we are dealing not with different nominative units but with

structural varieties of the same nominative unit, which are capable of almost always replacing each other in context due to the identity of their semantics (Smirnitsky 1998).

G. Marchand also excludes abbreviations from word formation but asserts that there are differences between the abbreviated and full designations, expressed not in meaning but in using acronyms in speech. Marchand excludes interchangeability between abbreviated and full designations (Marchand 1969).

Ginzburg, Khidekel, Knyazeva and Sankin also exclude abbreviations from the word-formation system of modern English. She suggests considering them not as a word-formation process but as a nomination process alongside borrowing because abbreviations do not meet the primary condition of word-formation processes, namely their modifiability (Ginzburg, Khidekel, Knyazeva and Sankin 2022).

Supporters of another point of view believe that abbreviation is a full-fledged method of forming new words. E.S. Kubryakova thinks that a full name gives an exact idea of the details and characteristics of what is denoted; an acronym, on the other hand, is perceived more as a conditional substitute sign for that name. She also notes that the semantic opposition between full and shortened signs can take different forms, for example, marking the difference between formal and colloquial speech: doctor and doc. The conditions of abbreviation usage often have a specific character, and their use marks the speaker's affiliation with a particular professional group or community (Kubryakova 1981).

A.D. Kraev shares E.S. Kubryakova's point of view. The author believes that the semantic shift between the source and derivative, as an attribute of any word-formation process in abbreviation, can vary from lexical shift to complete lexical equality, but with obligatory differences in the explicitness and implicitness of the semantic representation of the same content (Kraev 2014).

E.P. Voloshin, in his works, notes that the interpretation of lexical abbreviation from the standpoint of a strict connection between the abbreviated and full designations is one-sided, hindering the identification of the essence of abbreviation in all its diversity and richness of its word-formation possibilities (Voloshin 1967). Using examples like *OK*, *GI*, *Anzac*, and *radar*, the author attempts to demonstrate that "lexical abbreviations are fully-fledged communication units, meeting the requirements of both written and oral communication types, possessing independent meaning, and realized in speech in their inherent sound form" (Voloshin 1967).

There are also several studies where authors consider it impossible to give a definitive answer to the question of whether an abbreviation belongs or does not belong to the processes of word formation, as they identify "borderline (transitional) cases" located at the intersection of word variation and the creation of new words.

Having analyzed the existing concepts about the nature of abbreviations, we adopt the viewpoint of those authors who consider abbreviation as a method of word formation and, following E.S. Kubryakova, believe that any lexical abbreviation is a unit of secondary nomination with the status of a word (Kubryakova 1981). The different sizes and the associated differences in the degree of semantic representation of the same thing in abbreviated and full designations evidence this.

### 3. Results

Before examining various typologies of abbreviations in the English language, it is essential to note that E.M. Dubenets (2018) identifies two main types: graphical and lexical.

Lexical abbreviations (words) should be distinguished from graphical ones (graphical abbreviations). Graphical abbreviations are symbols used instead of words and phrases in writing.

Graphical abbreviations result from the abbreviation of words and phrases only in written speech, while in spoken language, corresponding complete forms are used. They are used for space economy and emphasis in written form (Eldyshev 1984).

Some authors do not divide abbreviations into graphical and linguistic but consider them whole. For example, L.I. Sapogova identifies the following types of abbreviations:

1) Syntactic:

- a) Semantic-syntactic (public–public house);
- b) Morphological-syntactic (sitters – babysitter);

2) Phonemorphological (doc – doctor);

Phonographic (Sgt – sergeant);

Mixed (a-bomb – atom-bomb) (Sapogova 2021).

As our research focuses on lexical abbreviations, let us delve deeper into the classifications of such abbreviations. For instance, Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (2000) identify three lexical abbreviations: clipping, blends, and acronyms. In the section on "clipping," the following are considered:

a) Truncation of the initial part of a word (*phone* – *telephone*);

b) Truncation of the ending part of a word, which is more common than truncating the beginning (*exam* – *examination*);

c) Truncation of a word's beginning and ending parts, which is rare (*fridge* – *refrigerator*).

The "blends" section includes words like *breathalyzer* – *breath* + *analyzer*.

The "acronyms" section covers:

1. Acronyms pronounced as individual letters:

a) Letters representing total words (*C.O.D.* – *cash on delivery*, *EEC* – *European Economic Community*);

b) Letters representing elements of a compound word or simply parts of a word (*TV* – *television*, *GHO* – *General Headquarters*);

2. Acronyms are pronounced as words (e.g., *NATO* = *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, *UNESCO* = *the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization* (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik 2000).

From our perspective, a more detailed classification of lexical abbreviations is provided by Eldyshev (1984). He identifies three main structural types of abbreviations:

Syllabic abbreviations containing part or parts of only one word, not less than a disyllabic syllable.

Compound-syllabic abbreviations contain reduced not only parts of words not shorter than a disyllabic syllable in linear extent but also total words alongside them.

Initial abbreviations contain initial letters/sounds (initials) of a word or words of the abbreviated phrase.

Syllabic abbreviations are formed by truncating a part of a word represented by a syllable or a sequence of syllables (*doc* from *doctor*, *agreg* from *aggregation*). The term "syllabic abbreviation" (abbreviation equal to a syllable or syllables) draws attention to its structural simplicity. It makes it easy to distinguish them from units preserving syllables of different words, i.e., compound-syllabic abbreviations.

Among the general corpus of syllabic abbreviations, four types of units are distinguished, which are formed by final (*crock* from *crocodile*), initial (*phone* from *telephone*), marginal (*tec* from *detective*), and medial truncation of the original word (*specs* from *spectacles*).

Compound-syllabic abbreviations include acronyms formed from several syllables, from one syllable/syllables, and a whole word (*Interpol* from *International Police*).

Within compound-syllabic abbreviations, two subtypes are distinguished: proper compound-syllabic abbreviations, necessarily including initial syllables or syllables, and blendings, characterized by the presence of the final part of the word in their composition.

Initial abbreviations include all complex abbreviations in the composition of which initials or initial letters, preserved during the reduction of several words of the original phrase, are included. Since initials can be combined with other initials and abbreviation syllables and words, initial-syllabic and initial-word (partially truncated), initial abbreviations are also considered under this heading.

The initial abbreviations of the English language are subdivided into letters and sounds according to their pronunciation characteristics.

Letter initial abbreviations are pronounced as sequentially arranged alphabet letters, for example, *M.P.* [*'em 'pi*].

Sound initial abbreviations (acronyms) are pronounced as simple words of the language according to its orthoepic norm (radar). The latter type of abbreviations includes acronyms - initial abbreviations, homonymous to already existing words of the language (*EASY* from *Efficient Assembly System*).

Initial-syllabic abbreviations are considered units that combine the structural features of initial and syllabic abbreviations (*Nylon* from *New York + London*).

Partially truncated initial abbreviations include one to several initials, e.g., *REM sleep*, *V-day*, *U-boat*.

Thus, a structural diversity of abbreviations results from different formal operations, which give rise to acronyms.

#### 4. Structural and Semantic Characteristics of Initial Abbreviations Selected for Analysis

Within the scope of our research, we analyzed initial abbreviations in contemporary English, selected through systematic sampling from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Hornby 2023).

The typology proposed by A.N. Eldyshev was utilized to analyze the structure of the selected abbreviations (see Table 1). The research used a complete Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary sampling method. We analyzed 635 initial abbreviations and categorized them according to their structural characteristics.

Table 1 - Structural Characteristics of Initialisms

| Typology of initialisms                            | Quantity                                          | Percentage ratio                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Proper initialisms                                 | 518 (including alphabetical - 454, phonetic - 64) | 81.6% (including alphabetical 71.5%, phonetic 10.1%) |
| Initial-word (partially abbreviated) abbreviations | 79                                                | 12,4%                                                |
| Initial-syllabic abbreviations                     | 26                                                | 4,1%                                                 |
| Others                                             | 12                                                | 1,9%                                                 |
| Total                                              | 635                                               | 100%                                                 |

As seen in Table 1, most initial abbreviations (81.6%) constitute proper initial acronyms. Specifically, letter abbreviations (71.5%), such as *YMCA*, *VSO*, and *TLC*, and sound

abbreviations (10.1%), for example, *IELTS*, *ACAS*, and *COSATU* are most prevalent. Initial-word abbreviations are less frequently represented, for instance, f-number, D-structure, and B-movie. Initial-syllabic abbreviations such as *BLitt*, *BEd*, and *PhD* exhibit the lowest frequency of usage (4.1%).

Some of the initial abbreviations I have selected do not fit into any of the types described by A.N. Eldyshev. The reasons for this appear to be as follows:

Specific initial acronyms can be pronounced as sequentially arranged letters of the alphabet and as simple words of the language according to its orthoepic norm. For example, *WRAC* [ræk; dʌblju: a:r ei 'si:]; *CAD* [kæd; si: ei 'di:]; *PIM* [, pi: ai 'em; pim].

Some initial acronyms have two or more meanings, resulting in variations in their pronunciation. For example, *SAT 1* [,'es ei 'ti:] a test taken by high school students who want to go to a college or university (the abbreviation for 'Scholastic Aptitude Test') 2 [sæt] the abbreviation for 'Standard Assessment Task'; *PET 1* [,'pi: i: 'ti:] an artificial substance used to make materials for packaging food, including plastic drinks bottles (the abbreviation for 'polyethylene terephthalate') 2 [pet] a process that produces an image of your brain or of another part inside your body (the abbreviation for 'positron emission tomography') 3 [pet] a British test, set by the University of Cambridge, that measures a person's ability to speak and write English as a foreign language at an intermediate level (the abbreviation for 'Preliminary English Test').

In the context of the same research study, we used a complete Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2023) sampling method with the purpose of analyzing 635 initial abbreviations and categorized them according to their semantic characteristics.

Table 2 – Semantic characteristics of initialisms

| Type                                  | Quantity | Percentage ratio |
|---------------------------------------|----------|------------------|
| Initialisms with a single meaning     | 605      | 95,3%            |
| Initialisms with two or more meanings | 30       | 4,7%             |
| Total                                 | 635      | 100%             |

Based on the results presented in Table 2, most initial abbreviations are monosyllabic, with only a few being disyllabic.

## 5. Conclusions

The study of word formation in English reveals its intricate nature and the dynamic processes involved in creating new lexical units. The distinction between words and morphemes underscores the foundational elements of language construction, with root morphemes carrying central meanings and affixational morphemes adding nuances. Word-formational models elucidate how words are formed, with affixation, compounding, conversion, reversal, contamination, and abbreviation recognized as the primary mechanisms.

Conversion emerges as a productive method of enriching the English vocabulary by forming new words without altering the original word's form. Reversion and contamination contribute to the creative evolution of language, fostering expressive speech patterns. Although often overlooked, abbreviations are crucial in modern English word formation, especially in specialized domains like science, literature, and branding.

The diversity of opinions regarding abbreviation reflects its complex nature. Scholars debate its classification and role in the word-formation process. Despite varying perspectives, many agree that lexical abbreviations serve as units of secondary nomination, contributing to the expansion and versatility of the English lexicon.

The analysis of abbreviations in modern English highlights their structural diversity and prevalence across different domains. Categories such as graphical and lexical abbreviations further illustrate the various forms and functions they encompass. The breakdown of initial



abbreviations underscores their significance, with proper initialisms being the most common type observed. The research used a complete Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2023) sampling method. We analyzed 635 initial abbreviations and categorized them according to their structural and semantic characteristics.

As a result of our research on the selected initial abbreviations for analysis, the following results were obtained: Proper initial acronyms are the most prevalent in modern English, constituting 81.6%. Initial-word abbreviations are less standard, accounting for 12.4%. Initial-syllabic abbreviations exhibit the lowest frequency of usage at 4.1%.

The semantic analysis results of the selected initial abbreviations show that most are unambiguous, with only a few being polysemous.

Overall, this research provides valuable insights into the intricate mechanisms of word formation in English and sheds light on the role of abbreviations in shaping the language's linguistic landscape. Further research in this area can explore additional dimensions of abbreviation usage and its implications for language evolution and communication.

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