Some basic concepts

Although we may not all be as creative as the poets, each of us is a poet in his or her own
right – that is, we are all capable of exploiting the language system creatively, at the level of
phonology, morphology, or syntax. What is of particular interest in this chapter is the way in
which speakers invent, modify, mix, and remix single morphemes, entire words, or whole
expressions by applying or by violating productive and creative word-forming processes. This
is the domain of lexical creativity, and will always involve the phonological and morphological
levels of the language, but may well have repercussions on the syntax and semantics as well.

The English lexicon is a collection of words – or ‘lexemes’, if we are referring to abstract
dictionary entries; we shall use ‘word’ here to mean any actual physical realisation of an
abstract lexeme. Some of the words in our lexicon may be old (or archaic), no longer in
currency; others are (commonly referred to as neologisms), and they contribute to form an
ever-shifting mosaic.

Speakers of a language possess an in-built grammar that allows them to apply the rules
of the system to create previously non-existing words, especially derivatives, such as the
verb ‘nation-al-ise’ (from the noun base ‘nation’) or the adverb ‘un-success-ful-ly’ (from
the noun ‘success’) and compounds, which are composed of two or more lexical elements
(generally a head and modifier), such as ‘big deal’ or ‘big bang’. Whether fused into one
word or remaining as separate units, these constitute a single meaning unit. As in our
examples, these compounds often take on totally new meanings, distinct from those of
their constituent elements, and, as Katamba (1993: 72) affirms, no synchronic rules can be
devised to account for the meaning of such semantically unpredictable formations.

These are some banal examples of two very productive and very frequent word-forming
processes, but there exist many others that are far more erratic and less predictable, such
as blending, back formation, conversion, analogical extension, clipping, initialisation, and
abbreviation. These are often considered to be ‘creative’ processes, because they are less
generalisable than derivation and compounding. But there is also the case of word manu-
facture, or the formation of totally new roots – monomorphemic creations composed of
phonemes having no specific or recognisable associations with previously existing words.
The sum of all of these word-forming techniques is what makes our lexicon so rich, so
flexible, and so varied.

However, it is not as simple as it appears. Problems arise when we discover that a word-
formation process rarely applies consistently ‘across the board’ to all of the bases that would
Lexical creativity

appear to qualify (Katamba, 1993: 73). Paradigms are erratic and not all potential words will ever be realised.

Let us now turn our attention to the finer distinctions between productivity and creativity, before focusing on the more creative aspects of word formation.

The great debate: Distinctions between productivity and creativity

There is a long-standing debate among linguists as to what distinctions are to be made between productivity and creativity, and no consensus has yet been reached on the definition of either. Let us start, nonetheless, with Bauer’s (1983) definition of ‘productivity’ as the formation of new coinages by the application of the rules of the grammar. The outputs of productivity are thus predictable and analysable, meaning that they can be decomposed into their constituent morphemes. Such is the case with many compounds and most derivatives. Being regularly formed, they are grammatically transparent. However, not all compounds are semantically transparent: they present varying degrees of semantic and grammatical opacity, partly depending on the relationship between head and modifier, and on whether the sense is literal or figurative. Bauer (1983: 63) cites the example of ‘headhunter’, which, he says, is initially a productive formation (meaning tribes that keep the heads of their human victims); it is perfectly transparent, whereas in its modern, metaphorical extension as one who searches for intelligent executives, it is an example of creativity. The point here is that regularly formed compounds may be as uninterpretable as certain blends, which are typically considered to be creative (or irregular) formations. As Adams (2001: 17) points out, the distinctions between irregular creative blends and productively formed compounds are not always watertight.

Definitions of creativity are even more elusive than those of productivity, and we enter a veritable labyrinth of contrasting views when trying to sort them out. Bauer (1983: 63) initially viewed creativity as the ‘native speaker’s ability to extend the language system in a motivated, but unpredictable (non-rule-governed or irregular) way’. These unpredictable coinages are formed by processes outside regular word formation. Later, however, Bauer (2001: 64) admitted that these differences are more a question of degree than of kind, and that productivity and creativity should be seen as hyponyms of innovation.

In a more complete discussion of the various positions in this debate, Konieczna (2012) distinguishes between productive morphological processes (predominantly compounding and derivation) and creative morphological processes which she identifies as blending, analogical extension, internal modification, clipping, initialisation, and abbreviation, all less predictable and generalisable than productive word-forming processes. In her study (of a corpus of politically correct terminology), she finds that creative morphological processes are more persistently relied on than productive ones, and she emphasises that there is a high frequency of compounding and suffixation among the creatively formed words (Konieczna, 2012: 15). The prevalence of morphological creativity with respect to productivity, she states, should be attributed to the fact that the creative outputs are ‘more playful’ and ‘tend to be more catchy’, by which she means attention-drawing. This is but another confirmation that productivity and creativity often function in much the same way, although the effects produced may be quite different.

Many scholars make desperate attempts to draw a productivity–creativity divide. Schröder and Mühleisen (2010), in their investigation of new ways in which to measure productivity, conclude with a series of considerations on creativity in word formation, which they call...
‘expressivity’. They cite, among others, Lieber (1992, in Schröder & Mühleisen, 2010) who affirms that those words that ‘draw attention to themselves . . . are formed according to an unproductive pattern’ and are therefore excluded from a theory of word formation. The authors immediately rebut this statement by citing Lehrer (1996: 64, in Schröder & Mühleisen, 2010), who says that ‘creative neologisms’ can tell us a great deal about word formation, because they are ‘extremely productive’. Granted, Lehrer may be using ‘productive’ here to mean frequent or prolific, and perhaps Lieber’s reference to ‘words that draw attention to themselves’ is not very precise descriptive terminology, but we can nonetheless glimpse a possible divergence. Schröder and Mühleisen also report Zwicky and Pullum’s (1987: 335) claim that rules of expressive morphology (referring to a ‘playful, poetic or ostentatious effect’) are not subject to the same rules as plain morphology. These playful words are presumably the ‘imaginative ingenious neologisms’ represented by individual creativity in Bolozky’s (1999: 4, cited in Schröder & Mühleisen, 2010) terms. What emerges from these various contrasting viewpoints is that creative words belong to expressive morphology and have a playful or poetic intention. Given that they are imaginative or ingenious ‘neologisms’, they are not subject to the word-forming rules of ‘plain’ or productive morphology. A central distinction made by Schröder and Mühleisen between these two types of word is that productively derived forms are, by definition, transparent, whereas this does not apply to creative neologisms. As we shall see later in the chapter, this is not always the case.

In his chapter on novel word crafting, Miller (2014: 83) also distinguishes between word formation and word creation (by which he means the creation of new roots, which is a rather reductive view of lexical creativity). But he then states that the creation of novel words by various means (including compounding, borrowing, and blending) and ‘the use of everyday language in unusual ways’ are both significant aspects of verbal art (Miller, 2014: 100). Although he is here referring specifically to poetic language, for our purposes the statement can be extended to lexical creativity in general. Creative word formation does, in fact, go well beyond the creation of new roots and is not always distinguishable from productive word formation. There is, as we have seen, almost no agreement among scholars as to precisely which processes should be considered productive and which creative. Our position here is that they are to be located at two different points on a cline and can best be defined by their prototypical features.

Word-forming processes such as shortening or blending are considered by Ronneberger-Sibold (2008) to be creative techniques, distinct from ‘regular’ word formation that exploits grammatical rules. She justifies her position by stating that even though clipping and blending techniques are becoming ever more frequent in morphological change, the nature of such creations has not yet been thoroughly understood nor convincingly described. She therefore places them in the domain of speaker performance rather than speaker competence. They are intentional choices no less than other types of lexical creativity, but she considers them to be a subtype of extragrammatical morphology (see Dressler, 2000). The justification for this analysis is that, in many shortenings and blends, the application of word-formation rules to linguistic input does not enable a predictable output – that is, the identification of the constituent elements is not always possible. Consequently, these words display reduced transparency with respect to products of regular word formation and present difficulties in interpretation. As has been pointed out earlier, even canonical productive processes such as compounding can present difficulties of analysability and interpretation.
Although productively formed words are often placed in opposition to creative lexical inventions, Bagasheva and Stamenov (2013: 71) object that lexical inventiveness covers all patterns, and all instances of form and meaning modification, that result in the appearance of a new lexical item. This view broadens the outlook on the various types of word-formation patterns, but still leaves us in the dark as to exactly where lexical creativity is to be sought. As Zawada (2006) states, there is no consensus as to the precise nature of this creativity.

In the absence of a generally accepted definition, we shall, for the present, take the position that creative lexical inventions are those new words produced intentionally by speakers, generally formed analogically on the models of other words in the lexicon. These may be productively formed, serving an impelling communicative need of the moment and never intended to fill any real or permanent naming need in the wider community of speakers. This automatically excludes all slips of the tongue, malapropisms, spoonerisms, and speaker errors. However, this creative output may also be intentionally deviant with respect to the rules, thus grammatically opaque (or un analysable into component elements). Finally, like regularly formed words, the semantic content of creative lexical items may not be recoverable without the support of context to aid in decoding.

Creation or re-creation?

According to Pope (2005: xv), linguistic creativity means creation from something; it is an ongoing process in which the writer or speaker draws from a finite number of existing items in order to create an infinite number of fresh or imaginative solutions. These previously existing items, whether phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, or phrasal units, are manipulated, combined, or recombined, to form new creations. In the process, new conceptual structures may emerge as unexpected associations are formed between previously distinct concepts (Lamb, 1998: 205). The term ‘interlexicality’ (Munat, 2010: 147) has been used to indicate that the connotations and habitual contexts of use associated with a given morpheme or lexical element incorporated in a new word or expression will become part of the meaning of that word or expression.

To summarise, the major word-forming processes in English exploited by speakers for the construction of new words are compounding, derivation, clipping, blending, back formation, calqueing, borrowing, and conversion. We have seen that there is great divergence among linguists as to which of these are productive and which creative patterns, because they all serve to modify and expand our lexicon. In his book English Lexicogenesis, Miller (2014: 100) offers a taxonomy of the various types of rule-governed formation, and then attributes to analogy a central role in lexical diffusion, stating that this is the means by which ‘all word creation originates and spreads’. Veale (2007: 194) also affirms that analogy is a powerful force, especially in the creation of compound terms, concluding that ‘analogy has a central role in the mechanism of linguistic creativity’ (Veale, 2007: 209). Hickey (2006: 156) seems to have a more restrictive view of analogy when he states that all analogical formations are transparent (we will see that this is not the case) and that they are ‘synchronically derived by a productive process of compounding’, but some of his examples belie this statement. Are ‘buppie’, ‘chapess’, and ‘outro’ really transparent even though they may have been formed analogically on the basis of ‘yuppie’, ‘chap’ and ‘intro’?

The role of analogy in word formation is a ‘vexed question’, according to Hohenhaus (2007: 27). It remains to be established whether analogy is a useful umbrella term for
all types of word creation (as Miller claims) or simply a principal force in compounding (Veale’s position), or, more restrictively, one type of word creation (as Hickey seems to maintain), albeit of central importance.

Much of our linguistic output is marked by original, non-canonical, even ungrammatical or deviant expressions, which may be single lexemes or longer phrasal units, idioms, metaphors, etc. But all of these are not ‘creative’ in the same way or to the same degree. The locus of lexical creativity can be identified as residing in the words or lexicalised expressions that a speaker intentionally invents, often by combining or recombining existing elements of the language, when seeking to express his or her thoughts in a manner that will have a striking or lasting effect on the listener. This may occur when no existing word is found in the speaker’s mental lexicon to satisfy his or her immediate communicative needs, or, quite simply, when the intention is that of humorous wordplay. Creativity is thus unpredictable, and triggered by a specific communicative need in a given context and in a particular moment in time. The products of such creativity may be formed by various word-forming processes, including compounding and derivation, although they may present anomalies with respect to other productively generated words. Perhaps Moon (2008: 133) makes a useful terminological distinction when she speaks of ‘systematic creativity’, which she defines as those ‘cases where individual words, phrases, and affixes are regularly used in creative ways to produce variations of meaning, including connotation and pragmatic effect’. If this means that creative word formation exploits the same morphological and lexical resources as other word-forming processes, and then shuffles them around in a playful fashion to invent new lexical solutions, this is in total accord with the view expressed in this chapter.

In the following sections, we shall be looking at a variety of examples that are intended to illustrate some of the many possible creative solutions found by speakers to meet their particular communicative needs. We must bear in mind, however, that a creative lexical item and the creative invention of lexis are distinct concepts. In the first case, the focus is on the word as output, or product, of the creative process, while the process is illuminated by the speaker’s performance strategies in coining a newly created word or expression.

**Lexical creativity in written texts**

Most frequently, lexical creativity has been studied in the domain of the written word, given the accessibility of printed texts, including literature, advertising or news articles, scripted dialogues or electronic communication, to mention only a few that are readily available and offer abundant examples of creative wordplay, and other clever or catchy solutions serving the author’s specific communicative goal.

The majority of newly formed complex (multi-morphemic) words are based on productive word-forming rules and charged with meanings incorporated in or associated with the component morphemes. In a study conducted on lexical creations in science fiction and in children’s literature (Munat, 2007a), it was found that the majority of novel creations are analysable on the basis of productive rules, even when grammatically or semantically opaque. Blending, compounding, neoclassical compounds (especially in science fiction), or polyword complex nominals and derivations are the principal processes documented in the corpus, along with (far fewer) examples of clippings, neosemes, borrowings, or meaning extension by metaphor and metonymy. Many of the derivatives are deviant, in that they contain a non-existent root or present an invented pseudo affix, but even when opaque in meaning, their component elements can generally be analysed grammatically.
These words are thus formed by productive processes even though deviant in some way and uninterpretable without the aid of definitions or contextual clues. In science fiction texts, the principal function of invented words is that of naming things that are part of the futuristic text world, thus creating the illusion of their actual existence – a case of hypostatisation (see Hohenhaus, 2007: 22) – or serving to name new concepts. A great many of these are compounds (or complex nominals), such as ‘hypno-ligation’, ‘projecto stylus’, ‘thermal resist boron’, or ‘fuseddollars’, although some clearly bear derivational affixes, such as ‘liga–tion’ or ‘therm–al’. The word-forming process is regular, but the outputs are anomalous, because not all of the component elements are identifiable and many are newly created.

It is often claimed that the only truly creative words are simplexes: monomorphemic roots that are cases of word manufacture. As single morphemes, they cannot be further decomposed. Such invented simplexes, at least in theory, carry no previous semantic content in that they have never appeared as components of other (complex) words, although some may bear phonological resemblance to existing words.

Examples of novel simplex words in the science fiction data are rare compared to poly-morphemic words. We find, for example, ‘simps’, ‘biots’, ‘kroclion’, and ‘bitek’, all of which respect the phonological constraints of English, but two of which carry the plural inflectional morpheme. It is not immediately clear whether bitek is a newly manufactured root or whether it can be analysed as bi + tek. And is kroclion a simplex or a derivative composed of krocl + ion? In other words, they are grammatically unanalysable. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the context in which these words appear, but this would give little insight as to their morphological structure. This simply serves to illustrate that the structure of creatively formed words may respect the grammar just as productively formed words do, but they are ultimately unanalysable because their constituent elements are not familiar.

The creative words examined in children’s literature are another matter entirely: there are numerous simplexes – products of word manufacture – some of which break the phonological constraints of English, such as ‘thneed’, ‘thwerll’, or ‘zitzkis’, being almost unpronounceable. These are instances of strong creativity in Zawada’s (2006) terms in that they represent totally new, albeit ungrammatical, words. The majority of nonce words in the children’s corpus, however, appear to be phonologically motivated, exploiting rhyme, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, or sound symbolism, presumably with the juvenile audience in mind. These are quite different from the high-sounding, pseudo-scientific, or neoclassical compounds in science fiction. We have compounds and derivatives such as ‘zooglobble’, ‘memmily’, ‘winksquiffler’, ‘smogulous’, ‘gruvvulous’, ‘gorble snop’, and ‘fizzwiggler’, which are analysable, but semantically opaque. Again, at least one of the morphemes in each of these complex words is invented, so the resulting word is uninterpretable. Many of the nonsense words sound vaguely similar to existing lexemes (‘frumpkin pie’, ‘cannybull’, ‘scrotty’, ‘strawbunkles and cream’), allowing the young reader to guess their meaning on the basis of sound associations. This preference in children’s literature for novel words based on phonological play has also been noted by Elsen (2010: 139). In analysing her corpus of 500 neologisms from children’s books, she noted that ‘there is a continuum from sound shape to recurring groups of sounds to morphemes’. She draws the conclusion that the traditionally grammatical view of morphology is obviously inadequate to capture these phenomena, and that there is no clear-cut borderline between categories and between linguistic levels.

Even transparent or analysable novel words are rarely destined for repetition in other communicative contexts because they have been created with a specific audience in mind.
and for a specific context of use. Thus they are unlikely candidates for a permanent place in the lexicon, bearing little referential validity in the world at large. Such words are variously referred to as ‘ad hoc’, ‘once-off’ (or ‘one-off’), ‘occasional’, or ‘nonce’ words. In strictly linguistic terminology, they are termed *hapax logomena*, defined by Plag (2003: 54) as words that occur only once in a given corpus. These may be newly coined neologisms appearing for the first time, or a rarely used word of the lexicon, or even ‘a weird ad-hoc invention by an imaginative speaker’. Even when productively formed, as we have seen, they often violate the system, exploiting the rules in original ways. Only rarely does it happen that words coined for such restricted contexts later reappear as entries in the lexicon, although this has happened with several coinages in science fiction, such as ‘android’ or ‘psychohistory’. These occasional words, according to Smirnova, Sadykova, and Davletbaeva (2014), represent a divergence from the language norms. They differ from normal productively formed words in that they are monosemantic in structure and are created in intentional violation of the language norms. She also specifies that they are irreproducible, because they ‘belong’ to their author and to the communicative context for which they were originally coined.

In looking at these examples of lexical creativity in written texts, we have seen that the types of novel words differ considerably, depending on the textual genre and the intended audience. A closer look at different textual varieties such as advertising, newspaper articles, electronic communication, or scripted dialogue (see Hohenhaus, 2007; Kuiper, 2007; Lehrer, 2007; Lopez-Rúa, 2007; Renouf, 2007) confirms that each of these discourse varieties spawns different types of lexical creation, thus allowing a reasoned guess as to the motivations underlying different typologies of invented words.

**Lexical creativity in speech**

Presumably, spontaneous spoken interaction will provide yet different types of nonce words. It is, however, more difficult to ‘capture’ such fleeting occurrences of invented words. Carter (2004: 6) affirms that ‘creativity is a pervasive feature of spoken language exchanges . . . and a property actively possessed by all speakers and listeners’. This is confirmation, if any were needed, that linguistic creativity is not the exclusive domain of a few gifted individuals and is by no means limited to written texts.

While existing computer corpora offer samples of spoken interaction for analysis, these are not ideal sources for research on novel word formation, given that they provide little in the way of contextual background; moreover, the recorded dialogue will necessarily have been interpreted to some degree in the course of transcription, and the ‘presence’ of recording equipment, whether audio or video, will invade the intimacy of the interaction and condition the speakers’ language.

The corpus that I have examined is, instead, a published volume of ‘private’ words created by speakers in Britain – words that were invented for restricted use in intimate family circles. These were published in a collection entitled *Kitchen Table Lingo* (Lucas, Fennell, & Brooks, 2008), a non-academic volume compiled on the basis of voluntary contributions. These words would normally have remained hidden in the family closet but for the enterprising decision on the part of the authors to publish the results of their survey (see http://www.englishproject.org). In the preface to the volume, the authors state that these words were ‘invented to meet a new need’ or ‘coined just for fun’ (Lucas, Fennell, & Brooks, 2008: xiii). The conditions for inclusion in the corpus were that: they do not appear in any dictionary; they are guaranteed to be in use by three or more speakers; and they have been
around for no less than a month. All brand names were excluded. In some cases, the story
of how the word came to be is provided; others have only a brief definition, or an utterance
in which the word is typically used. Descriptions of context are therefore limited.

This collection provides some interesting insights into the lexical inventions that unso-
phisticated speakers (that is, not linguists or teachers of English) create in private contexts:
words never intended to go beyond the family walls, or the circle of friends, by whom and
for whom they were originally created. These would be largely incomprehensible to the
outsider without backup information, as a result of the lack of shared context, but these
words provide evidence that: (a) the average native speaker possesses an inherent know-
ledge of the language system and the ability to manipulate the rules in order to produce
never-before-heard words and expressions; and (b) the interlocutor is able to interpret the
words simply on the basis of shared contextual knowledge.

Clearly, the functions of these private words – essentially that of bonding among group
members – are markedly different from those of the more literate words invented for written
texts and destined for an unknown audience. The most curious feature of the entire corpus is
the surprisingly large number of words serving to name a remote control, including:

bimmer, blapper, blitter, blooper-dooper, boggler, bomper, bumper, buttonbox, butts,
cajunka, channel changer, channel-panel, clicker, clicky, commander, conch, coofer,
dibber, dibbler, digotrontid, dobar, dobbery, doflicka, donker, dooty, flicker, flipper-
dopper, flugel, funning-dong, gum gum, hoofer-doofer, kadumper, mando, melly,
mutilator, norm, oofahdoofa, phaser, pilot, plinger, plinker, plinky, podger, pokery,
potiate, presser, pringer, rees-mogg, remy, splunker, spurger squirter, telly box,
tinky-toot, turner-upper, twanger, twidger, wanger, widger, wiz-wiz, woojit, zapper

And this, the authors state, is only a small selection of those that were sent in! As we can
see, some of these are formed of a nonsense morpheme of purely phonological effect, but
the majority are productively formed derivatives – for example base + -er affix, serving
to create agentive nouns (that is, formed from verbal bases such as ‘command’, ‘zap’,
‘press’, ‘turn up’, ‘flick’, ‘click’) – thus perfectly law-abiding, even when the base is an
invented word. Others are existing lexemes that have been assigned new meanings, such as
‘mutilator’ or ‘pilot’, neosemes similar to those appearing in science fiction texts, such
as ‘wheel’ or ‘jalopy’ in Philip K. Dick’s fiction, which do not mean what we might think,
while still others are fully transparent compounds such as ‘telly box’, ‘buttonbox’ (play-
ing on alliteration), ‘channel changer’ (again exploiting alliteration), or ‘channel-panel’
(presumably motivated by rhyme). A great many of these creative spoken words have
obscure morphological origins, but we must also bear in mind that they were probably
never written down until they were sent in for the survey, so the spellings are to be consid-
ered as approximations of the phonological structure. They do, nonetheless, bear witness
to the infinite variety of linguistic invention – and to the centrality of television within
domestic walls: the new family hearth.

The second observation regards the large number of words in the overall corpus that are
phonologically motivated, confirming what was noted earlier in relation to children’s litera-
ture. This might suggest that many of these playful words originate from children’s early
speech – words that were then adopted by family members and passed along to the next
generation – but as Hickey (2006: 162) has noted in his exhaustive taxonomy of productive
word-forming patterns in present-day English, ‘alliteration [as in ‘gas guzzler’, ‘mattress
money’, ‘road rage’] and rhyme [as in ‘pooper-scooper’, ‘dream team’, ‘pub grub’] are
common... and indeed extend to nonce formations’. As with all nonce creations, Hickey (2006: 162) reminds us, ‘the essential requirement is that they be readily interpretable to hearers’. Naturally, the ‘hearers’ in this case are members of a restricted circle sharing the same context. What we see here, once again, is that productive processes and creatively formed words are bedfellows. These creations are largely based on canonical patterns, all of them intentional coinages that rely on contextual clues for disambiguation.

In so far as kitchen table lingo, the most significant observation is that made by David Crystal in closing the volume, ‘The words in this book may be new, but the processes of word formation that they use are not’ (Lucas, Fennell, & Brooks, 2008: 208) – that is, creative and productively formed words have a close family resemblance: that of siblings, if not of identical twins.

**Functions of lexical creativity**

Why expend the energy to invent a word rather than draw on the available lexicon? After our look at some of the patterns and products of lexical creativity in speech and writing, let us briefly consider the benefit of a nonce word employed in lieu of an available lexeme. We have mentioned in passing that a speaker may wish to have a striking effect on a listener by using an unusual ad hoc word, or the intention may be simply to evoke humour. But the functions of novel words in discourse go far beyond these.

Word creation, in fact, serves a wide variety of functions, the most obvious being that of naming. As seen in our earlier examples from science fiction, strange names are invented for things that do not exist in the real world to create the illusion of reality (that is, hypostatisation), but another important function of nonce formations is that of attention-seeking devices (ASDs) (see Lipka, 2000). This is especially true in the media and in advertising, but also in literary texts, in which stylistic form is foregrounded or highlighted, drawing the reader’s attention to the way in which language is used. This effect may be achieved by an invented word, as in science fiction and children’s literature, but it may also result from a semantically quirky compound or the clever manipulation of a frozen multiword expression.

As Hohenhaus (2007) has illustrated, nonce words serve a variety of different metacommunicative and textual functions. Deviant derivations such as ‘factoid’ or ‘sizeness’, for example – the first analogically formed on the model of humanoid (but of uncertain meaning), the second an anomalous derivation (the –ness affix normally attaches to adjectives, not nouns) – may contribute to creating the idiolect of a fictional character. The invention of bizarre or nonsensical complex nominals such as ‘suitcase sauce’ or ‘starling inspector’ produces a purely ludicrous effect; ‘coolometer’, an analogically formed nonce word suggesting that the metaphorical ‘coolness’ of a parent can be objectively measured, stands out for its semantic oddity, but contributes to characterisation. Other irregular products of regular word-forming rules, as Hohenhaus (2007) argues, may serve as deictics, cohesive devices, episodic compounds, or ASDs.

The function of any novel lexical creation is determined in large part by the speaker’s communicative goal and the discourse that is being constructed. The context in which the discourse takes place is also a conditioning factor. In synthesis, the creation of novel words serves both private and societal functions, textual and discourse functions, and, cutting across all of these categories, it may quite simply be a means of engaging in ludic wordplay.
The ludic effects of novel word creation

Humour, or what we shall call ‘ludicity’, is often coterminous with lexical creativity. Bagasheva and Stamenov (2013: 80) even claim that a lexical item is, by default, ludic on its initial launching in a communicative exchange. In their view, ludicity is a property of all new word formations. It is an important meta-communicative strategy and the degree of ludicity is directly dependent on the communicative goal and context, not on the type of word formation or on the playful modification of the rules. The examples of ludic nonce words presented in their study are modelled on different word-forming processes, such as compounding, blending, derivation, and back formation; thus we have ‘vacation elbow’, ‘waxident’, ‘rubbage’, and ‘shevelled’ as proof that ludicity is not limited to any one particular type of word-forming pattern.

Ludic wordplay, as seen in some of our earlier examples, may depend on incongruous phonological shape or on cryptic semantic content, but the abundance of novel blends presented in Lehrer’s (2007) study that display evident humorous intent would seem to suggest that blending is particularly rich in the inherent ludicity of which Bagasheva and Stamenov (2013) speak. Lehrer’s data, drawn largely from brand names and advertising, offers examples of creative naming units such as ‘Successories’ (self-improvement products), ‘Avant-Card’ (a card shop), ‘Frutopia’, ‘Count Chocula’, and ‘Nutrageous’ (all product names). These are quite easily decomposable into their component constituents: success + (access)ories; Fruit + (cornuc)opia; ‘Avant card’ formed by analogy with ‘avant-garde’; (Count) choc(olate) + (Drac)ula; and Nut + (out)rageous. Despite the reservations expressed by many linguists regarding the dubious morphological status of blending as a ‘regular’ word-forming process, it evidently produces a considerable number of transparent coinages.

Renouf’s (2007) corpus study of the British broadsheets offers further examples of humorous wordplay, largely based on multilexemic phrasal units, such as the plethora of expressions formed by analogy with ‘weapons of mass destruction’ immediately after its first appearance in the press on 20 February 2003, among which ‘weapons of mass distraction’, ‘– of mass deception’, and ‘– of mass entertainment’ were soon followed by ‘weapons of mass consumption’, ‘– of mass hysteria’, ‘– of mass media’, ‘– of moose destruction’ (!), and even ‘– of math instruction’. And this is but a small sampling.

Chovanec (2011: 88) considers these to be ‘instances of echoic allusion’, in which the newly created phrase acts as a cue to the recognition of the (absent) original. In this way, allusion serves as an intentional strategy to encourage the listener or reader to seek additional meanings from the juxtaposition of the newly created and the original texts. In Chovanec’s (2011: 89) view, the use of these creative variants allows the speaker to express an evaluative stance or personal attitude in addition to irony or mockery – what he refers to as ‘subversive wordplay’ – in expressing ‘disagreement or opposition to the official policies and establishment’.

Many of these novel phrasal expressions are formed on phonological principles of alliteration, rhyme, consonance, or morphological repetition of an affix, as well as semantic substitutions of similarity or contrast. There can be little doubt as to the underlying humorous intention. Renouf (2007: 70), in fact, affirms that their purpose is that ‘of achieving humour and irony’.

Of the many examples cited by Benczes (2010) in her study of metaphorical and metonymic compounds with humorous intentions, the following will suffice to make our point: ‘knee-mail’ (playing on the rhyme with email), to indicate a message sent to God while
kneeling; and the humorous intention behind ‘muffin top’, a creative figurative compound to indicate the roll of flesh bursting out at the waist of low-slung jeans. We might also add the recently heard ‘Pulp Fashion’ as a humorous pun playing on the film title *Pulp Fiction* and calling to mind numerous associations. But the decoding of such creatively formed complex nominals of this sort often requires the aid of contextual backup, as we will see shortly.

Although I agree with Langlotz (2006: 195) that wordplay is a vague term with no clear-cut definition, it is nonetheless descriptive of a great many lexical creations coined by speakers in a variety of communicative situations.

**Semantic shift and creative manipulation of the phrasal lexicon**

Until now we have largely focused on creativity in single words or compounds, but there is a vast area of research on creativity in fixed or frozen multiword strings, such as idioms, metaphors, proverbs, etc., generally referred to as ‘phraseological expressions’. Kuiper (2007) instead uses the term ‘phrasal lexicon’, while van Lancker Sidtis and colleagues (2012: 88) have proposed the term ‘formulemes’, by which they mean formulaic expressions that have stereotyped form, conventionalised meanings, and a close connection with social variables. These properties are part of speaker competence, and the listener, in order to understand creative variations of formulemes, must be familiar with the base form – what Kuiper (2007: 96) calls the ‘accessibility condition’. Without this knowledge, the play on words created by intentional deformation of the original expression would be totally lost. Some formulemes or phrasal expressions allow a certain degree of creative manipulation, but there is an intermediate type that van Lancker Sidtis and colleagues (2012) call the ‘linguistic schema’. These also have a canonical base form, but there is an open slot to be filled by free lexical choice, for example ‘He is a walking (noun)’ or ‘I wouldn’t be caught dead (subordinate clause)’. They carry meaning regardless of how the slots are filled (van Lancker Sidtis et al., 2012: 93), but the speaker has considerable freedom of choice in completing the utterance. For example, we may say ‘He is a walking zombie’ or ‘She is a walking Barbie doll’. Or we can say ‘I wouldn’t be caught dead speaking to that crook’ or ‘I wouldn’t be caught dead taking the bus to the theatre’. Clearly, these schemata call for a fill-in with a negative connotation, which is part of their built-in meaning. Schemata display characteristic or stereotypical language along with the flexibility of a novel phrase, thus allowing the speaker considerable freedom in making creative associations, whereas formulemes are complete (that is, they feature no empty slots) – at least until a creative speaker comes along and invents a playful variant.

Creative manipulations of phrasal expressions may involve recombination of the words in the string, substitution of lexemes, or the addition or deletion of words. Some also permit grammatical transformations, such as passivisation or conversion (see Kuiper, 2007: 98). These manipulations generally introduce a significant semantic change in the original expression, but certain idiomatic (lexicalised) expressions such as ‘That’s the way the cookie crumbles’ do not allow substitution of the main vehicle, because this would literalise the idiom, thus causing the loss of its original connotational or metaphorical content: ‘That’s the way the plaster crumbles’ does not carry the same metaphorical meaning. But if we say ‘That’s the way the cookie splits’, the metaphorical content is not lost, because it evokes the vehicle of the original idiom. Consider, for example, the metaphorical noun phrase ‘rose-coloured glasses’, which expresses the concept that a person views the world in a positive light; a semantic literalisation such as ‘pink-tinted contact lenses’ would no
longer carry the same metaphorical sense, because it would not allow the hearer to access the original expression.

In Kuiper’s (2007) corpus of Cathy Wilcox cartoons, there are many examples of creative phonological deformation (‘A ruminant with a view’) or creative phoneme inversion (as in ‘the ship is slowing’). In other examples cited by Miller (2014), such as ‘hate of arts’ (for ‘eight of hearts’), or The Shaming of the True for The Taming of the Shrew, the phonological inversion results in new rhyming expressions, with totally different semantic content, but the accessibility of the original expression stored in the mental lexicon allows the listener enjoyment as he or she recognises the clever phonological play involved in the pun. These examples take us well beyond the creation of a single lexeme, but the variations of fixed expressions are unquestionably cases of phono/morphological creativity. Once again, it must be emphasised that creative deformations of this type can be appreciated only by a listener who is familiar with the base expression.

Speakers continually invent new figurative expressions, which draw on all semantic areas. Hickey (2006: 165) comments on the present-day figurative use of sports terminology, which he says seems to have substituted former military metaphors. Such well-worn expressions as ‘global player’, ‘a level playing field’, or ‘move the goalposts’ are but a few examples of current sports metaphors in English, but speakers are constantly inventing others based on the conceptual metaphors by which we live (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). (For a full discussion of creativity in metaphor and metonymy, see Hidalgo-Downing, Chapter 6.)

We have already encountered examples of semantic shift in our survey of invented words: so-called neosemes, which actually involve no invention at all, but the attribution of new semantic content to old words. Neosemes occur with a certain frequency in science fiction. Likewise, in the kitchen table lingo, we encountered old words with new meanings, such as ‘mutilator’ and ‘pilot’. Familiar words with new meanings can create a certain disorientation or estrangement on the part of the reader, at least until sufficient contextual clues are provided to allow decoding. Clearly, when a neoseme is employed in direct personal interactions, comprehension is facilitated by gestures and shared context.

Semantic shift of this nature regularly occurs in our lexicon as ‘old’ words are given new life when they are recycled to fulfill new naming needs. Such is the case of ‘cookies’: originally meaning sweet biscuits, but now well known in computerspeak as files that may be added to your computer when you visit a website. And what of ‘hardware’, ‘mouse’, and ‘Windows’, all metaphorical extensions of everyday words that have been recycled in the domain of computer technology? Another example encountered in the kitchen table lingo corpus is ‘kebab’, a foreign loan word widely known as a type of skewered meat, which in a private world has come to signify the speed of an Internet connection. These few examples of semantic creativity in the reutilisation of familiar words are evidence of the vitality of our English lexicon.

**Concluding reflections**

Ultimately, lexical creativity resides in a speaker’s ability (that is, linguistic competence) to exploit the system in novel ways by combining and recombining, substituting and modifying phonological, morphological, lexical and phrasal elements of the language, in the effort to create a novel word or expression to amuse or to communicate thoughts in an original and effective manner (a factor of speaker performance). This often involves the stretching or deformation of grammatical rules and will be an intentional strategy resulting in an unpredictable output. Some of these ‘creations’ may remain in currency for a period of time,
lending greater expressive force to our language. Others will vanish immediately after their first appearance, lost to our lexical patrimony (unless some enterprising linguist happens along to preserve them).

Carter’s (2011: 337) insistence that ‘creativity is not . . . the exclusive preserve of the individual genius or the pathological outsider’, but can be found in ‘ordinary, demotic, common language’ is as true for lexical invention as it is for all types of linguistic creativity. To reiterate what was stated at the beginning of this chapter, creativity is a matter of degree, not of kind. The literary genius employs the same strategies that we can witness in everyday speech and writing. Creativity is a faculty possessed by each and every human being. Nor is it a question of high and low creativity – in Cook’s (2011) words, ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ creativity. As Carter (2004) affirms, on the basis of his research on the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE), creativity is pervasive in all human verbal interaction; the literary genius simply has greater ingenuity in manifesting this creativity. Maybin and Swann (2006: 1, cited in Moon, 2008: 132) also assert that language creativity includes both textual artistry and the construction of identity in managing relationships.

Ricoeur (2000: 340–4) also affirms that human language is inventive despite the objective limits and codes that govern it. He speaks of the mediating role of imagination, which constantly strains and stretches the laws and codes of language. Human ingenuity works within these codes, either subverting them or applying them in original ways. Beyond all of our reflections on language creativity and our many examples of creative lexical inventions, there remains a vast ocean of theoretically possible ad hoc words as yet unexploited, and speakers will never exhaust this wealth of possibilities.

At the outset, it was my intention to draw the limits of speaker creativity. After having attempted to identify the prototypical characteristics of creativity, the word-forming processes that animate it, the contexts in which it is most likely to surface, and the functions that it serves, it has not been possible to trace a distinct line between creatively formed words and productive processes. As we have seen, the same rules may inform productively formed and creative words. Nor is the entry of a word in the official lexicon any indicator of its origins (as creative or productively formed), because rule-breaking renegades may gain officialdom even though they are not formed on the basis of ‘regular’ processes. Whether they stick around or are destined for an early demise will depend solely on their utility as a naming unit for some part of the wider language community and, possibly, also on their ludic or expressive quality, but not on their rule-abiding behaviour. Many of these will have violated the semantics or the grammar (or both) as the output of maverick wordplay. Whether they remain on our tongues for decades or are fly-by-night visitors cannot be the measure of their creativity.

Langlotz (2006: 6) defines creativity as ‘ingenious, artful or playful activities that are unconventional in the very broad sense of not being subject to everyday routine’. This type of creativity, he states, is ‘linked with intelligent human behaviour . . . and involves the ability to develop or invent new and original ideas or products [that is, words] that have not been encountered before’. Although Langlotz is concerned specifically with idioms, typically thought to be fixed or frozen, his words apply equally to other types of lexical invention. In this view, variability and creativity are inextricably bound, and the elastic bounds of the system are the true wealth of the English lexicon.

Drawing our conclusions on the basis of the novel words and word-forming processes that we have examined seems far more fruitful than engaging in interminable theoretical discussions as to the precise nature of lexical creativity, and it allows us to outline the
range and breadth of the word-forming processes involved. In synthesis, lexical creativity is inspired by the communicative context; it is the product of speaker competence and the result of performance strategies; it is triggered by a desire to amuse or draw attention to the message. Even though it represents the intentions of an individual speaker, this creative ability, inherent in all competent speakers, is what permits the continual enrichment of our lexicon.

Related topics

humour and language play; language, creativity, and cognition; metaphor and metonymy; stylistics

Further reading


An in-depth historical overview of English word formation types, combining theoretical perspectives with concrete examples.


Provides a wide panorama of various types of lexical creativity, examined in specific contexts and discourse varieties, with abundant empirical data.

References


