# Competition between word-formation strategies in view of meaning predictability

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# Keywords


- Competition
- Semantic transparency
- Economy of expression
- Onomasiological approach

# Competition

“Nothing in language makes sense except in the light of competition… because we use language as the basic glue for our social lives, these competing motivations are as diverse as the many facets of human life and thought” (MacWhinney 2014: 386).

# Competition

- The biological competition between species captured in the well-known Darwinian assumption (1859) that in the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment translates in word-formation, inter alia, as a competition between synonymous affixes and synonymous words.
- *Competitive Exclusion principle* proposed by Gause (1934) stating that no two species with similar ecological niches can coexist in a stable equilibrium.

# Competition

- A special type of linguistic competition is the competition between the preferences of speakers/writers and the preferences of listeners/readers. While the former aim to communicate as much as possible within a given period of time, the latter aim to receive a comprehensible message that can be easily decoded.

- In an onomasiological theory of word-formation, this kind of competition is reflected in the competition between various onomasiological types
- Word-formation strategy
- Semantic transparency
- Economy of expression

# Onomasiological types

| Determining constituent of the mark | Determined constituent of the mark | Onomasiological base |
|---|---|---|

- Formation of a name for ’a person who writes novels’:

| Result | Action | Agent |
|---|---|---|
| *novel* | *write* | *er* |
| *0* | *write* | *er* |
| *novel* | *0* | *ist* |
| 0 | write | (0) |

# Onomasiological types

Preference of a coiner for a specific onomasiological type manifests their **preferred word-formation strategy**, .i.e., preference for economy of expression or the preference for semantic transparency.

# Experiment

The experiment sought answers to the following questions:

*Q1 Are the naming strategies influenced by one's mother tongue?*

*Q2 Are the naming strategies of native speakers identical to or different from those of non-native speakers?*

*Q3 Is there any relation between the morphological (word-formation) type of a language and the preferred onomasiological type?*

*Q4 In general, what is the dominant strategy in coining complex words – economy or transparency?*

# Experiment

- 4 languages: Slovak, Bulgarian, Hungarian, English
- 40 respondents per language – university undergradates studying English - homogeneity in terms of age, education, knowledge of English
- 3 tasks each including 5 subtasks aimed at giving names of Agents for which there is no (complex) word in the lexicon. Avoiding descriptive phrases as well as existing words in shifted meaning.
- .completion of the tests twice – first in English and after one month in the mother tongue

# Experiment

**Task 1 – Naming an Agent based on a choice from options**

Example:

- Give a name to a person who frequently interrupts other people when they are talking:

- a. interrupter
- b. interruptist
- c. interruptant
- d. butt-in
- e. butter-in
- f. butter-inner
- g. butt-innnist
- h. butt-insky
- i. cut-in
- j. cutter-in
- k. cutter-inner
- l. cutt-innist
- m. cutman
- n. interposer
- o. interposist
- p. other:

# Experiment

**Task 2 – Naming an Agent based on a description**

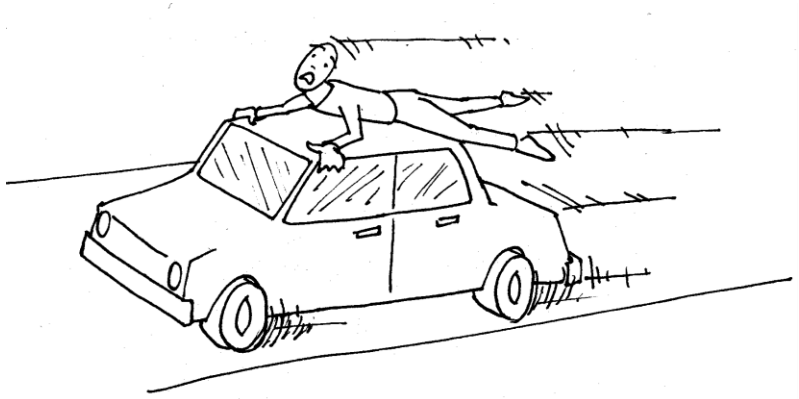
Example

- Suppose that space aliens were about to land on Earth for the first time. What would you call a person who is supposed to meet them as a representative of the human race?

# Experiment

**Task 3 Naming an Agent based on a drawing**

Example



# Findings

Q1 ***Are the naming strategies influenced by one's mother tongue?***

- To answer this question, we asked English-speaking respondents with different mother languages to produce Agent names in English.
- The data clearly demonstrate the universal preference of all four groups of respondents to coin semantically transparent words even if they are not formally economical.
- The results suggest that **the word-formation system of the target language** (English, in our case) **determines the formation of new complex words without any significant influence of the word-formation system of one's mother tongue**

# Findings

Q2 ***Are the naming strategies of native speakers identical to or different from those of non-native speakers?***

- A comparison of the results of native and non-native speakers confirms the findings for Q1. The native speakers of English do not differ in their naming strategies from the non-native respondents: the difference between the average use of the individual onomasiological types by the native and non-native speakers is statistically insignificant.

# Findings

Q3 ***Is there any relation between the morphological (word-formation) type of a language and the preferred onomasiological type?***

- The differences are significant for the individual languages, suggesting that the word-formation system of the complex-word-forming language plays a crucial role in the naming process.
- The biggest difference is between Slovak and Hungarian. The use of the *novel writer* OT in Hungarian is almost twice as high as its use in Slovak. It does not come as a surprise because this OT is, in principle, represented by synthetic compounds, a type of complex words which is not very common in Slovak.
- On the other hand, the use of *writer* OT is almost three times higher in Slovak.
- OT3 (*novelist* type) is twice higher in Slovak.

# Findings

- What comes a little as a surprise, when comparing the *writer* and the *novelist* types,  the respondents, with the exception of the Bulgarian cohort, prefer semantically less transparent *novelist* OT to a more transparent *writer* OT despite the usually high number of potential readings bound to the *novelist type*.

# Findings

- Q4 ***In general, what is the dominant principle in coining complex words – economy or transparency?***

The factor of semantic transparency in the formation of Agent names seems to be much stronger than the economy factor in each of the  examined languages.

# **Determining** factors

1. **Coiner** of a new word

- His/her knowledge of and experiences with the use of a language
- Psycholinguistic factors, especially creative potential
- Sociolinguisitc factors, such as age, education, profession

2. **Structural richness** of the word-formation system, i.e., the availability of individual word-formation techniques

3. **Productivity**

# Available resources – structural richness

- Word-Formation in 73 Standard Average European languages
- Word-formation processes, including prefixation, suffixation, prefixal-suffixal derivation, circumfixation, infixation, postfixation, compounding, conversion, reduplication, blending, and internal modification
- 100 comparable features

# Available resources – structural richness

**Structural richness:**

- English 51%
- Slovak  50%
- Bulgarian 44%
- Hungarian 24%

# Restrictions of the research

- Restricted to Agent noun formation
- Definition of semantic transparency:
- Experimental conditions vs. real-life tendencies – social networks, short messages

# References

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