

Abbreviations and their Ambiguity in Euro-Texts

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Abstract

EU English is becoming an especially important field within various types of research mostly on English for Specific Purposes with overwhelming quantity of reference materials published in English, which will require proper comprehension and precise translation. Our paper focuses on the outcomes of our own conducted research on shortening processes occurring in the euro-texts. Tendencies and irregularities as the most remarkable characteristics of shortening processes in the EU corpus are presented, pointing out the fact that many of those linguistic features could cause ambiguity in comprehension of the texts.

Keywords: euro-texts, abbreviations, ambiguity, EU Publications, corpus.

Introduction

The euro-texts are considered non-literary texts. That said, “such texts are marked by an officially prescribed style, which is manifested in a very high degree of language similarity (from text to text) so that it is possible to speak about their ‘matrix form’“(Gibová 2010: 103) or ‘homogenous discourse’ (Schäffner 2001: 172).

“Generally, over the years, the European institutions have developed a vocabulary that differs from that of any recognized form of English“(A Brief List of Misused English Terms in EU Publications 2013: 3). According to the authors of the List, it includes words that do not exist or are relatively unknown to native English speakers outside the EU institutions and often even to standard spellcheckers/grammar checkers (planification, to precise or telematics for example) and words that are used with a meaning, often derived from other languages, that is not usually found in English dictionaries (coherent being a case in point). Some words are used with more or less the correct meaning, but in contexts where they would not be used by native speakers (homogenise, actor for example). Finally, there is a group of words, many relating to modern technology, where users (including many native speakers) “prefer” a local term (often an English word

or acronym) to the one normally used in English-speaking countries, which they may not actually know, even passively (GPS or navigator for satnav, SMS for text, “to send an SMS to” for “to text”, GSM or even Handy for mobile or cell phone, etc.). Internally, it may often be easier to communicate with these terms than with the correct ones. However, the European institutions also need to communicate with the outside world and the EU documents need to be translated - both tasks that are not facilitated by the use of terminology that is unknown to native speakers and either does not appear in dictionaries or is shown in them with a different meaning. Finally, it is worth remembering that, whereas EU staff should be able to understand “real” English, one cannot expect the general public to be “ready” with the EU variety.

A further objection that is often put forward is that one EU institution must use the same terminology as other EU institutions (the European Commission in particular) (*ibid*: 4). That is to say, if the Commission uses the verb “transpose”, for example, the others within must all use the same term, even if they know it to be incorrect. This is a dangerous path to take, especially as the Commission itself recognizes the need to improve the quality of its English and is often hampered in this by constraints that smaller institutions may not face.

Although some institutions ignore the fact that it is hard to understand their documents, some of them are trying to explain it if they want to be sure that readers will understand. In the example of “transpose”, they might add a note saying something like “term used at the Commission/in EU legislation to indicate ...” (in this case, the enactment of a Directive in national law).

Reviewing and collecting the appropriate data and evidence for the interest in research of abbreviatory processes, we came across the above mentioned EU English. Our own experience of working with the euro-texts in the European Parliament for 5 years (2005-2010) has suggested a hypothetical conclusion that the euro-texts are useful source for both quantitative and qualitative linguistic research on specific linguistic units. Identifying niche in linguistic analysis of the euro-texts, where most studies deal with lexis, terminology or translatory issues we decided to examine particularly the usage of abbreviations as they are regularly present within the whole range of EU corpora. The EU institutions publish a large number of on-line documents, which contain information of great potential value. In order to utilize the knowledge these data contain, many linguists, terminologists or researchers have been attempting to create common glossaries of the EU domain-specific names and terms. It is also notable that the euro-texts con-

tain a lot of abbreviated terms, which carry important knowledge about various significant issues.

Summary of regularities and irregularities of the abbreviatory processes in the EU corpus

In our research we intended to go beyond simple counts of abbreviations in different EU texts, thus, the qualitative, functional interpretation of quantitative patterns were identified. For this purpose, we have carried out the corpus based research analysing these processes from our own specific EU corpus - selected English language EU documents. We focus only on written registers analysing the documents which have been published recently but also those ones published over the last 50 years.

The abbreviations found in the EU texts exhibit some regularities but also numerous irregularities, generally we can claim that it is evident that they do not conform to canonical word-formation rules. Below mentioned regularities are mostly tendencies, because, as most linguists have claimed, the only obvious regularity of abbreviations is that they shorten the words or phrases from which they originate. Many exceptions have remained that do not strictly comply with common definitions as numerous examples with their unique constructions have considerably complicated any overall theory of English word-formation.

Analyzing the EU corpus, we have noticed that, mainly in acronymic formations, it contains patterns for new coinages, which provide the language user with a potential to exploit an already existing morphological structures.

Prototypical initial pattern (Mattiello 2013: 102)

In case of genuine acronyms, they have been formed by taking the initial letters of the words in a title or phrase rather than the end of words as in blends: National Funding Body (NFB); Middle East Peace Process (MEPP); European Fiscal Board (EFB); Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). In case of many hybrids often taking even more than one letter from the beginning of the words of their source occurred.

Multi-word input was noticeable where in almost all categories abbreviations had at least two basic components (genuine acronyms: Pilot projects (PP); Preparatory Actions (PA)), in other categories abbreviations accepted potentially infinite number of basic components. (the European Hospital and Healthcare Employers' association (HOSPEEM); European Federation

of Public Service Unions (EPSU); Commission staff working document (CSWD); the Action Plan on Visa Liberalisation (VLAP); Director-General of the Structural Reform Support Service (DG SRSS); Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH); the European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI)

The prototypical base of almost all abbreviatory processes has been a noun (noun phrase) which, generally, is the case of many professional jargons as they provide contexts in which a word or phrase is so frequent that a shorter and more efficient form is needed and often required to save space and time. This characteristics applies to EU documents as well. Only in very few cases an adjective has been abbreviated.

Distinctive spelling shall be mentioned in order to point out the fact that concerning acronyms, spelling without periods is more common. It is often an open question whether or not periods should be used with particular abbreviation. The trend in the EU texts is apparent i.e. strongly away from the use of periods with all kinds of abbreviations (Kaprálíková 2015). We have to admit that anything that reduces the fussiness of typography makes for easier comprehension. It is worth to mention that this phenomena is the initial step to lexicalization of abbreviations. Although many of those abbreviations created in the EU texts soon fall into disuse so they rather belong to innovations with short period of usage, especially in written communication, some of the lexicalized forms of the abbreviations created within the EU context have become stable and “institutionalized” as part of the accepted vocabulary of EU community. This is the case not only in written communication but also in spoken one. Thus, shortened versions of the names of the representatives and authorities (MEPs), bodies (the Parliament, EP, the Council, AFET, AGRI, REGI, DG) and activities (Plenary, COREPER, the Group) of the EU, used by eurocrats¹, have emerged into their everyday communication not only within their work but within the communication with outside world (Member States, journalists, external authorities). Moreover, acronyms normally use capitals in the EU texts, however, they are rarely written in lower-case letters when they are lexicalized as generally spelled in other registers. Very often the content words are represented by capitals while function words are lower- case letters in the hybrids.

¹ Exemplification of how the abbreviation of Departments of European Commission (DGs) is used in the EU context without explanation of the abbreviation in the whole text :

„The Commission should see to it that not only the DGs creating and managing expert groups have sufficient staff attributed to the well-functioning of these groups, but also the SG which is responsible for the general oversight in respect of the implementation of the horizontal rules;“

As regards the salient form, acronyms tend to omit the function words in their output since they are semantically less salient. (The value of preventing a casualty (VPC); the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), however the exceptions can be found as well :Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS).

This is often the case when acronyms even those included in hybrids intentionally coincide with an English word and usually the meaning of the acronym is appropriate to the referent (TRIPS, REACH, REFIT, LIFE, NUTS, Eureka, RABIT, NATURA 2000). Clippings tend to avoid ambiguity with existing full words which is often easily deduced depending on the specific content of the text. So if the reader is concerned with the context on financial issues clipped word cap is defined as capital or capitalization straight away.

Abbreviations as acronyms or clippings regularly acquire word status, in that “they can function as input to word formation rules” (Bat-El 2000: 67). So status as words (Mattiello 2013: 104) would be considered as other regularity of abbreviation processes in the EU texts.

Lastly, inflected forms are crucial to mention as almost all categories (except in the case of elliptical constructions) of abbreviations behaved as regular bases in inflection. Both genuine acronyms and hybrids as well as clippings inflect for plural in a regular way (SMEs; local border traffic agreements (LBTAs); multiple entry visas (MEVs); internally displaced persons (IDPs), as well as they take the possessive form (’s): MEP’s; Union’s.

Concerning irregularities, as already mentioned in the interpretations of the frequencies of occurrences, many of the formations of abbreviations, are ephemeral creations, lasting for certain period of time as they are created to abbreviate the EU activities which objectives should be achieved in a given period (INTERREG IIIC, INTERREG IVC). Moreover, there are cases when things, phenomena used in everyday language, would not have a tendency to be abbreviated but in the EU texts the abbreviation occurs (Commission staff working document (CSWD). In our opinion, those are the abbreviations which could be causing ambiguity in the EU texts (one-offs) if not properly defined as it is impossible to deduce their meaning from their abbreviated forms.

Despite this fact, we consider these so called “one offs” (Baayen, Renouf 1996) an important measure for estimating the productivity of abbreviation processes, especially in terms of type frequency. As can be seen in this section and also in contextualising, one offs can help to illustrate the range of patterns which are of significant relevance to our analysis. Mostly in the category of hybrids we can observe such formations where we agree that there is a relatively high amount of freedom in their creation.

As a consequence of multi-word input, in theory, the preferential output length in acronyms is three letters, two are dispreferred, and more than three are less frequent (Mattiello 2013: 102). In the EU corpus, however, multi-letter output prevails over regular formations as the shortened phenomena have their specific meaning which requires more extensive definitions. (European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS); Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR); Persistent Organic Pollutants Review Committee (POP RC).

Since different inputs may correspond to the same output (EEA, EEC), shortenings are not always unambiguous as expected in specialized terminology. This causes obstruction in recovering the source.

Irregular subtraction of parts of the source words or phrase involves various alternatives how the abbreviations will look like in its final form. It is most apparent in hybrid formations (Permanent Structured Cooperation in Defence (PESCO); the Eureka Secretariat ('ESE'); central counterparties (CCPs); the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived ('FEAD'))

Moreover, concerning unchanged meaning, in abbreviation processes there may exist stylistic differences between full forms and their abbreviations (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics-NUTS) but most of acronymic formations in the EU texts do not differ from the longer phrases they stand for. Thus, unless they are lexicalized they can be substituted by their corresponding full forms, with no meaning change, but only what Mattiello (2013) calls "redundancy effect".

The unique processes within shortenings in the EU texts are what we call "acronymy families". As in word formation rules we have word families i.e. extensions of one paradigm where members of the word family share a common base, the same phenomena occurs in creation of abbreviations. As a result we may find coinages of one base in one text such as:

Common safety indicators ('CSIs')

Common safety methods ('CSMs')

Common safety targets ('CSTs')

or

Operator Protection Structures, ('OPS');

roll-over protection structures ('ROPS');

falling objects protection structures ('FOPS');

or

Scientific Committee on Consumer Products ('SCCP')

Scientific Committee on Consumer Safety ('SCCS')

Standing Committee on Cosmetic Products

The latter term was not abbreviated in the text, we suppose, in order to avoid the ambiguity of the previously formed abbreviation (SCCP). In terms of the coinage of the exemplified genuine acronyms, and with regards to our research problem, we will not consider synchronicity or diachronicity of the members of their common acronymy family.

Lastly, calques as rare phenomena in specialized texts have been noticed in the EU corpus. Consider the following example: the phrase the Security Service of Ukraine has been abbreviated to SSU even though originally it is used as abbreviated form of Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy i.e. SBU. Thus, many of the specific foreign institutions are first translated into English language and subsequently abbreviated.

Conclusion

These examples provide the evidence for the fact, that irregular formations are not excluded from written communication in formal situations, and that they are not applied only in informal environment of the EU institutions. Summing up the findings of our research, we consider the following tendencies and irregularities as the most remarkable characteristics of shortening processes in the EU corpus:

- In case of acronyms, *an application of prototypical initial pattern*
- *Alternative inputs*
- *Alternative outputs*
- *Non-predictability of output*- where predictability is possible only to some extent, when the formations are frequently used and well-known (EU, EC, EEA, TFEU). Thus, although preferential patterns can be identified, definite predictions on structure of the abbreviations are unattainable.
- *Irregular subtraction of parts of the source words or phrase*
- *Invariability in meaning*
- *Decreased transparency.*

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