

Linguistic Features of Business Acronyms and Abbreviations in English

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Abstract:

This paper gives an insight into the development of abbreviations and acronyms and analyzes the use of English abbreviations and acronyms in business communication, the formation mechanisms of identified acronyms and abbreviations and their contexts of use. The study concludes that business abbreviations in English have various lengths and represent an increasing part of the language as they are common in business newspapers (accompanied by marginal explanations or equivalent phrases) while some of them are frequent in the general press due to their migration to the common language which assimilated them completely.

Key words: business acronym, business abbreviation, linguistic feature.

JEL classification: A12, F00.

1. Introduction

The 21st century is considered the century of the educational entrepreneur and of the learners as protagonists, self-motivated and self-organized learning, at scale, wherever and whenever it is needed [Leadbeater & Wong (2010)]. Also, in this century we often share and exchange information with friends or colleagues in a lapidary way, therefore we use abbreviations in our daily communication.

Comprehensive studies show that English abbreviations and acronyms are assimilated by other languages highlighting the capacity of these languages to assimilate and use an international composition process [Stoichițoiu-Ichim (2006); Kostina *et al.* (2015)]. This international trend of using abbreviations and acronyms is justified not only by extra-linguistic factors. In this age of technical-scientific revolution, the abundance of abbreviations is also related to the interaction between the internal and external norms for the development of language [Cotelnic (2013: 123)].

In what follows we compare the definitions of acronyms and abbreviations as provided by dictionary and the definitions formulated by other authors. The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus defines an *abbreviation*

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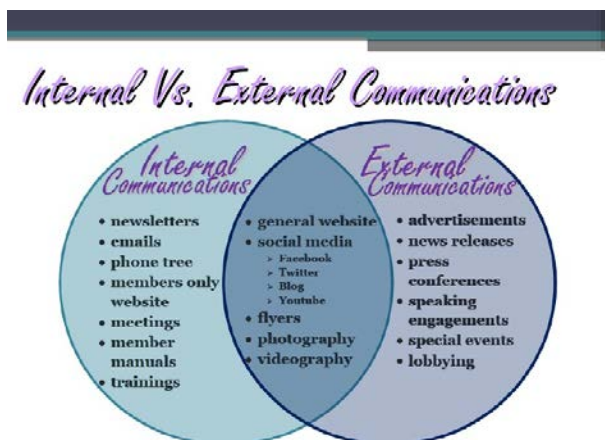
as “a short form of a word or phrase. When we abbreviate a word or phrase, we shorten it. Abbreviations can be formed from the first letters of the word or phrase. In such cases, we normally say them by spelling out each letter”, whereas an *acronym* is defined as “an abbreviation consisting of the first letters of each word in the name of something, pronounced as a word”, according to the same dictionary. Acronyms are words which are formed from the first letters of other words, and which are pronounced as full words. On the other hand, researchers use the term *initialism* for the popular means of forming new words by taking the initial letters of multiword sequences, which are traditionally divided into two types: acronyms and alphabetisms [Rúa, (2002) apud Altakhaineh (2017)]. While far from a novel invention, abbreviations are similar in their lexical nature to the current vocabulary. However, the abbreviations formed by initials are still specific units as their sign character is to a certain extent different from that of a common lexical unit. It should be noted that any incorrectness of business abbreviations complicates the relationship between writing and reading, between writing and decoding, hindering the real understanding of communication [Cotelnic (2013: 124, 128)]. The next section of our paper focuses on the importance of business communication, its relationship with the business discourse as investigated by recent research and highlights the characteristics of the multidisciplinary field of research referred to as *Business Linguistics*. The 3rd section makes an overview of the use of acronyms and abbreviations, describes business abbreviations in English and identifies their main features. The last section of the paper summarizes the points discussed and key findings.

2. Business Communication – Business Discourse

While speaking out the origin of the term “economics”, Bliss points out that ancient Greeks who gave to us the name of this subject lacked the concept of what we now call *Economics* since “Oeconomicus” would be ‘Household Management’ in modern English (Bliss, 2005: 14).

Generally speaking, communication takes place everywhere - in all social spheres: in organizations, in management, and in the business world. Business communication encompasses all formal and informal communication within business settings. Nowadays, it is essential to achieving significant economic outcomes. Internal communication includes the communication aimed at employees to explain procedures and policies, whereas external communication comprises email and compulsory forms of marketing (posters, brochures, advertisements, etc.) to attract customers, business partners and key suppliers to conduct successful business transactions (see also Fig. 1)

Fig. 1: Internal versus External Communication



Source: Ashley Davis (2012 Summer Leadership Conference¹)

Many scholars have formulated various definitions of *business communication* in which they refer to business communication as a form of communication that overlaps with professional communication and communication within the organization (enterprise). A similar view is expressed by Dragoș Vasile who defines business communication as “the process of transmitting a message about something to a receiver, in direct or indirect connection with the fulfillment of professional tasks performed by people in formal organizations” [Vasile (2000: 11)]

To shed some light on the purpose of business communication, we can add that business communication is different from other types of human communication through:

- Participants. In business communication they participate as businessmen, traders, partners, clients, negotiators, etc.;
- Content. The aim of business communication is the achievement of the economic transaction, the sale/purchase of a product or a service;
- Finality. Business communication is omnipresent in commercial (business) documents (sales contracts, conventions, orders, protocols, etc.).

The features of Business Communication [Vasile (2000: 15-17)] reveal the fact that it has become of paramount importance in the business arena and as noticed by us it is an attractive discipline in the faculty curriculum due to its pragmatic feature, concern for efficiency, adjustment of the message to meet the needs of a wider audience, and creation of a trustworthy image among business actors.

¹ <https://www.slideshare.net/LAEducators/communications-101-13777029>

The relationship between the concepts of communication and discourse has been investigated by many researchers who are active in teaching, too. In this regard, a well-crafted statement caught our attention as it highlights that the concepts of communication and discourse “focus on text and talk in the context of business”, but that business discourse “focuses more directly on text and uses context to explain linguistic phenomena” [Louhiala-Salminen (2009: 305) apud Mautner & Rainer (2017:8)].

Consequently, both are investigated within the field of Business Linguistics, which covers the following key areas [Daniushina (2010: 241-242)]:

- Business discourse, organizational, corporate and managerial communication;
- Oral, written and technically mediated communication in business, its typology and genre classification;
- Professional sublanguages of business sectors (e.g. banking, accounting, manufacturing, administration, etc.);
- Language of advertising and marketing, public relations (PR), the special language techniques for sales and marketing;
- Lingua-pragmatics in a business context and Business Rhetoric (e.g. leader’s speech, communicative strategies for conducting meetings, and negotiations, etc.);
- Documentation linguistics: business correspondence and drafting contracts;
- Instructional (teaching) and academic language of business, economics and management, used in textbooks and research, academic publications, lectures, case studies and training, consulting and coaching on business topics;
- Business lexicography (systematizing business terminology and composing thesauri of business vocabulary);
- Language of the business media;
- Intercultural business communication (including teaching/learning foreign languages for business purposes, as well as language in the workplace in multinationals, and language assessment).

3. The Use of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Acronyms and abbreviations have been used since ancient times. Generally speaking, they are not a novel invention and are employed to attenuate the complexity of wordiness. Relevant studies [Altakhaineh (2017); Khodorkowsky (2014)] mention the Roman origin of several abbreviations which are still in use today, such as AM and PM (*ante meridiem* and *post meridiem*, meaning “before noon” and “after noon”), AD, which indicates the time period after the birth of Christ and originates from the Latin *anno domini*, meaning “in the year of our Lord”, SPQR (Senatus populusque Romanus) “the Senate and People of Rome.” Another well-known and old acronym, cited in the Christian Bible, is INRI (Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum) “Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews.” [Altakhaineh (2017); Khodorkowsky (2014)]

In the 19th century, due to the Industrial Revolution, researchers exemplified the proliferation of acronyms for corporations, railroads, stock exchanges, telecommunications, oil and gas, and numerous other enterprises, whereas in the 20th century, they reveal that acronyms were used frequently as they related to tanks, planes, and weaponry for condensing and shortening information that was sent as quickly and efficiently as possible during World Wars [Khodorkowsky (2014)].

Riordan argues that World War 1 witnessed a systematic increase in the number of abbreviations, as Americans had been using them for a long time to talk about governmental, business and daily activities [Riordan (1974) apud Altakhaineh (2017)]. Additionally, Merriam collected 72 initialisms and included them in the 1945 supplement to Webster's second edition (1934), thus becoming part of the American lexicon [Russell (1946) apud Altakhaineh (2017)].

Other researchers contend that when acronyms have a meaning that corresponds to one denoted by an established word and they are mentioned in a relevant context which both speakers are familiar with, their processing effort is minimized to a great extent. In other words, to reach a maximal relevance, positive cognitive effects (e.g., understand a certain concept, find a solution to a problem, confirm a doubt, etc.) are achieved by processing an input with a minimum processing effort [Wilson & Spreber (2004:252) apud Altakhaineh (2017)].

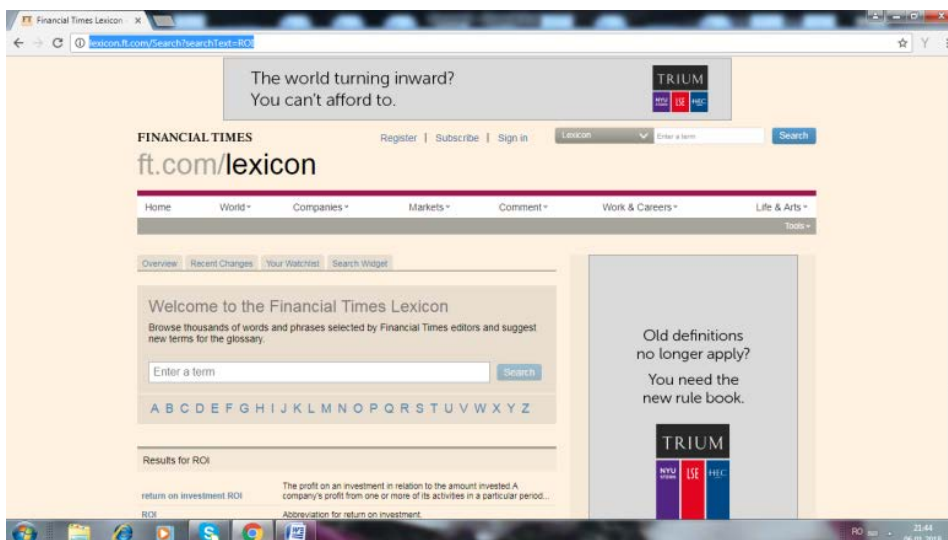
The use of English acronyms in other languages could be attributed to different reasons: (a) English is regarded as the language of science; (b) there are few acronyms in other languages in comparison with English; and (c) the significant increase in the use of abbreviated forms in writing on the Internet [Altakhaineh (2017); Crystal (2006)]. Likewise, the advent of text-speak and internet lingo has determined many of us to look for the most efficient routes of communication [Khodorkowsky (2014)].

We strongly believe that the most known and used business abbreviation worldwide is CV (Curriculum Vitae, which originates from Latin for "course of (one's) life") and is defined as "a short account of one's career and qualifications prepared typically by an applicant for a position" – in other words, a résumé [Merriam Webster Dictionary]. As we face changing conditions of social life and technological progress, the need for efficient communication plays an important role in the formation of new units of communication - a process for which there are prerequisites in the language system and which have manifested until recently only sporadically [Cotelnic (2013: 123)].

In every scientific communication the use of symbols, abbreviations, and acronyms for various business concepts has been of paramount importance for ensuring understanding; therefore, it is necessary that they be accompanied by marginal explanations when addressed to a specialist audience and by explicit definitions when addressed to a non-specialist audience. Unlike teaching books focused on business vocabulary [Rawdon (2007)], it is worth mentioning the

Financial Times newspaper, which offers a useful resource - a lexicon (see Fig. 2) that facilitates the understanding of business abbreviations in English through comprehensive definitions, as shown in the examples below:

Fig. 2: Interface of the Financial Times Lexicon



Source: <http://lexicon.ft.com/>

USP (Unique selling point) = “is a feature of a product that no other similar products have, used in advertising etc. to try to persuade people to buy it.” [Financial Times Lexicon]

AOB (Any other business) = “the time during a meeting when people can discuss things that were not on the agenda (list of subjects to be discussed)...” [Financial Times Lexicon]

ROI (Return on investment) = “the profit on an investment in relation to the amount invested or a company’s profit from one or more of its activities in a particular period.” [Financial Times Lexicon]

NI (National Insurance) = “In addition to income tax, the self-employed may be liable to pay and employees may suffer deduction of national insurance contributions.” [Financial Times Lexicon]

MBO (Management buyout) = “A management buy-out is an acquisition in which the acquiring group is led by the company's own management and executives. The key difference between an MBO and a regular acquisition (takeover) is that the company is bought by its own management rather than by another company or by a group of outside investors.” [Financial Times Lexicon]

3.1. Linguistic features of Business Abbreviations and Acronyms in English

Although most of the abbreviations relate to the terminological lexicon and the nomenclature, which limits their sphere of operation, business abbreviations and acronyms have spread like any professional terminology in the journalistic style (see examples below):

“The study looked at **M&A** deals done by listed companies in America’s Russell 3000 index” (The Economist, article *Mergers and acquisitions often disappoint*).

“The trouble with **GDP**. Gross domestic product (**GDP**) is increasingly a poor measure of prosperity.” (The Economist, article *The trouble with GDP – Measuring economies*)

“**SWOT** is a handy mnemonic to help corporate planners think about strategy.” (The Economist, article *SWOT analysis*)

“It has been apparent for some time that there is something badly wrong with the way the **RPI** is calculated. This matters because although the newer Consumer Prices Index (**CPI**) has supplanted the **RPI** for macroeconomic purposes - the **CPI** is used for the inflation target - and for uprating public-sector pensions, the **RPI** is used for uprating pensions in most private defined-benefit schemes and is the basis for Britain’s index-linked bonds.” (The Economist, article *No RIP for RPI*)

“A basic government responsibility is to secure maximum value for money from the **O & M** of a country’s existing infrastructure assets. Governments can adopt various strategies to optimize the socio-economic returns.” (World Economic Forum, report *A Framework for O&M practices*)

“Meanwhile, AstraZeneca, a British-Swedish multinational pharmaceutical and bio-pharmaceutical company, pumped 21.5% of its annual revenue into **R&D** in 2015 - the highest proportion of ring-fenced investment of any of the top 20.” (World Economic Forum, article *These companies invest the most in research*)

“Why this **CEO** does not care about your **CV**?” (World Economic Forum, article *Why this CEO does not care about your CV*)

In a recent study it is pointed out that the abbreviation concept is represented by four sememes in the English language. The author argues that the concept abbreviation is represented by lexemes *abbreviate* (*abbreviates*), *abbreviating*, *abbreviated*, *abbreviation* in the English language, therefore different lexemes and various lexical semantic variants of lexemes verbalize different conceptual features of the abbreviation concept [Kostina (2015)].

Acronyms are the result of a morphological process, in which initial letters of a word are combined and written in upper case or lower case, and are pronounced as a word [e.g. ISO (International Organization for Standardization), ICC (International Chamber of Commerce), IATIS (International Association of

Translation and Intercultural Studies), ESSE (European Society for the Study of English), EaSI (European Association for Social Innovation)]. Unlike business acronyms, business alphabetisms are a combination of the first letters of the words, spelled in upper case and pronounced as a series of letters. However, other authors point out that alphabetisms might not be considered as fully-formed lexemes, as there are certain cases where they are treated as unified lexemes: emcee (MC) (< Master of Ceremonies), Veep (VP) (< Vice- President) [Brinton & Traugott (2005:42) apud Vişan (2013:241)].

Below we provide the equivalent English phrases of the abbreviations that we collected (from a Business English book, The Economist and World Economic Forum) and then looked them up in the Financial Times Lexicon.

Table 1. Equivalent Phrases of Business Abbreviations (Source: <http://lexicon.ft.com/>)

1. EU = European Union.
2. CV = Curriculum Vitae
3. MBO = management buyout
4. USP = unique selling point
5. AOB = any other business
6. PEST analysis = political, social, economic and technological analysis
7. MD = Managing Director
8. ROI = return on investment
9. M&A = mergers and acquisitions
10. OTE = on-target earnings
11. PAYE = pay as you earn
12. VAT = Value Added Tax
13. SWOT analysis = strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis
14. CEO = Chief Executive Officer
15. RRP = recommended retail price
16. CFO = Chief Financial Officer
17. RPI = retail price index
18. p.a. = per annum
19. PA = personal assistant
20. APR = annual percentage rate
21. ICC = International Chamber of Commerce
22. FYI = for your information
23. NPD = new product development
24. SET = secure electronic transaction
25. GDP = gross domestic product
26. TQM = total quality management
27. PPP = purchasing power parity
28. PLC = public limited company.
29. AGM = annual general meeting

30. PR = public relations
31. L/C = letter of credit
32. MBA = Master of Business Administration
33. O&M = organization and methods (or management)
34. POS = point of sale
35. P&L statement = profit and loss statement
36. CBD = central business district
37. COD = cash on delivery
38. LIFO = last in, first out
39. GNP = gross national product
40. NI = National Insurance
41. CPD = continuing professional development
42. ESOP = employee share ownership plan
43. K (e.g. £20K), where K = thousand
44. EFT = electronic funds transfer
45. R&D = research and development
46. FOB = free on board
47. JIT production = Just-in-time production

Our analysis has revealed the following:

- Pronunciation is the main feature that distinguishes business acronyms from business abbreviations;

- Business abbreviations are derivatives of word, word combinations and phrases e.g. K = thousand; P&L statement = profit and loss statement; NPD = new product development).

- Their main attributes are precision and monosemancy as these render them denominative and distinctive qualities which are quintessential for specialist languages [see also Guilbert (1975: 275), Candel (1992) apud Stoichițoiu-Ichim (2006)];

- Unless they are followed by their equivalent phrases in texts, they tend to become codes understood by receivers that possess a thorough economic knowledge (e.g. ESOP = employee share ownership plan; LIFO = last in, first out; JIT production = Just-in-time production; PPP = purchasing power parity; OTE = on-target earnings). As we mentioned earlier, CV is well-known to employed people and/or students but most often people do not know its equivalent phrase or etymology. Similarly, EU, VAT, SWOT and CEO are decoded by intermediate and advanced students and most of the times they voice its equivalent phrase instantly;

- Another type of business abbreviations is the graphic type (e.g. L/C = letter of credit; p.a. = per annum);

- Some abbreviations are frequently used in the common language (e.g. Approx., Mo = month; No = number, asap = as soon as possible).

- Many of them are used in the titles of articles and are given in the contents of the source or the equivalent phrase which is usually placed in the vicinity of abbreviation or at a short distance from it. (See relevant examples in section 3.1.)

4. Conclusions

People use abbreviations either in humor-based contexts or in daily tasks to deal with various issues quickly. When it comes to business abbreviations and acronyms in English, only specialists and people who have an economic background can decode them. However, the non-specialist reader/speaker can better grasp them in articles or student-oriented materials if the authors use contextual explanatory strategies like equivalent phrases or synonyms to ensure their transparency.

Business abbreviations and acronyms are a distinctive part of the English language and their number is constantly increasing due to technological innovations, political and economic measures. We should not ignore the fact that they are borrowed by other languages and many studies highlight their international proliferation and particular features.

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