

THE LUDIC ASPECT OF LEXICAL INVENTIVENESS

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I shall also call the whole [of language], consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’.

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we discuss the following question: Is there anything else but context and the immediate communicative goal that determines the degree of ludicity of the products of lexical inventiveness? To formulate a plausible answer we need first to delineate the notational terms we operate with in order to avoid adding to the existing confusion in discussions of lexical inventiveness, creativity, word-formation, and play. The claims we make require that we define lexical inventiveness, nonce-formation, ludicity, and the clines of institutionalization and of lexicalization.

Lexical inventiveness covers all patterns and instances of the employment of form and meaning¹ modifications that result in the appearance of a new lexical item. The term is adopted in order to avoid at least two caveats: (i) the implications of the notorious term *creativity* in its opposition to *productivity*² and (ii) the adverse effects of the distinction between grammatical and

¹ The use of the term is restricted to instances in which both form and meaning are simultaneously modified to the exclusion of mechanisms of sense extension and semantic change. This definition could only be problematic in cases of conversion but the inevitable change of category in this word-formation process is taken as sufficient modification in form. Lexical inventiveness is also coterminous with dynamic word-formation, which is a subset of Lipka’s (2007) dynamic lexicology.

² Any discussion of the essence or justification of the opposition between the concepts of word-formation as productive when it is characterized as rule-governed and as creative when it involves changing the rules is beyond the scope of the current paper and will not be focused on. Yet, the view which seems most congruent with our understanding is Bauer’s (2001) idea that creativity and productivity should be taken as hyponyms of innovation, which we prefer to call inventiveness.

extragrammatical word-formation as this distinction is irrelevant in relation to ludicity.

We have organized the paper as follows: in Part One we clarify our position vis a vis the terminological abundance in the literature on word-formation and lexical inventiveness; in Part Two we elaborate on our notion of ludicity; in Part Three we discuss possible correlations between ludicity and creativity; and in Part Four we draw some tentative conclusions as an answer to the initial question.

The data used here have been gathered by the method of Participant observation (Lipka, 2003) and no claims of representativeness (typically accompanying the rigorous methods of corpus linguistics) are made, nor any comments or predictions concerning the general acceptance of the nonce formations analyzed or mentioned here.

2. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Under nonce formation we do not understand a qualitatively different type of word, rather we conceptualise the term as a temporal and spatial notion which captures the spatio-temporal difference between an individual's invention of a word and the socio-pragmatically diffused use of a word. It is the zero point of the two clines of institutionalization and lexicalization, along which any word can potentially develop, no matter whether it results in a onetime usage event or in a lemma-to-be.

We postulate ludicity as a theoretical construct to be a property of all new formations that designates the inherent interplay between whole and parts and the necessity for negotiating undetermined meaning on the basis of linguistic prompts. It emphasizes the fact that instead of relying on intentionality on the part of the speaker for detecting ludicity (and/or creativity), it would be better for analysts to consider "the diversity and unexpectedness of the connections made among related stored items" (Bybee, 1995: 452) on the basis of either meaning or form, or both.

The cline of institutionalization, in our view, defines the socio-pragmatic diffusion of a lexical item and is associated with its entrenchment. It covers both a spatial and a temporal dimension. The spatial dimension traverses the spread of a lexical item among the members of a speech community and encompasses at least the following regions: nonce formation (launching of a novel formation in a communicative exchange), neologism (a fairly widely spread but still perceived as not fully entrenched lexical item) and an entrenched/established word (a lexical item recorded in authoritative lexicographic sources and widely spread). The temporal dimension covers the age of a word, its survival period

before drifting off to obsolescence and covers at least the periods: novel, established and obsolete.

The cline of lexicalization combines the theoretical concepts of analyzability³ (both morphotactic and morphosemantic) and motivation⁴ and traces the pattern and nature of recycling familiar material. It allocates the following regions: spontaneously created, motivated and analyzable, and lexicalized.

3. LUDICITY AND NONCE FORMATIONS

Verbal ludicity belongs to the set of unique human traits. After all, as Hans (1981: 5) claims:

it is only through play that the structures we live by grow and change. The role of play is not to work comfortably within its own structures but rather constantly to develop its structures through play. It is through play that man adapts to his changing world, that he constantly challenges and changes the rules and structures by which he lives.

If this understanding of ludicity requires a specific philosophical commitment, the comparison of the morphosemantic properties of words produced by the set of standard word-formation processes and of extragrammatical patterns of word creation for the purposes of communication and words characterised by conscious ludicity (in contexts recognized as word play / playing with language) reveals that these do not differ in terms of the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms involved in the creation of a word. It is in this narrow sense that we employ ludicity. As a theoretical construct the concept of ludicity as developed here tries to bridge cognitive structures and interactive communicative practices. It is not identified as a specific pragmatic motivation or a separate function of word-formation, rather it is construed as an imminent property of any novel⁵ word at the moment of its origination in a particular communicative

³ The concept is understood here as defined by Langacker (2008: 61) in terms of salience of component structures in relation to a composite conception.

⁴ The concept of motivation relates to “the influence of cognition and, via cognition, of peripheral systems on language” (Panther & Radden, 2011: 9).

⁵ In using this term we try to avoid the nonce formation vs. neologism quandary and capture in a theory-neutral manner all formations which are new in relation to the mental lexicons and linguistic repertoires of the interactants in a communicative exchange. The inherent ludicity of lexical items is first and foremost measured within the confines of a communicative exchange. The degree of ludicity of a word, once it has moved along the cline of institutionalization, is associated with the nature of the hypostasized concept, not with its history of origin.

act. It is a central property of the ontology of nonce formations. The appearance of a new word in communicative exchanges is redolent of Heidegger's (1962) description of the hermeneutic circle. Hans's (1981) description of this notion summarises the cognitive processes of solving the riddle in the exchange of a new word.

[I]nterpretation involves the paradoxical relationship between the part and the whole of that which is to be interpreted: one can only understand the whole through the parts, but one cannot begin to understand the parts without some understanding of the whole. Thus, one begins with certain prejudgments about what the whole is, confronts the parts with this set of prejudgments, and allows the sense of the whole to be continuously altered through an interaction with the parts (Hans, 1981: 5).

Weak compositionality and the general underdeterminacy of constructed linguistic elements pre-empt this element of ludicity in the classical form of the riddle in any process of word creation. The specific mechanisms and patterns in rule-governed word-formation and the so-called extragrammatical word creation might be different (for example Dressler's, 2000 distinction between conscious or sophisticated coinages and unconscious productive new formations; or the distinction between affixation and compounding and minor word-formation patterns such as backformation, blending, abbreviation, etc.), but for the recipient in a communicative act the results are the same insofar as meaning is negotiated, highly context-sensitive, underdetermined and a matter of interpretation. Ludicity arises from the inherent trade-off between explicitness and economy of expression.

The degree of ludicity is directly dependent on the type of interaction and cannot be read off the word-formation pattern or any purely linguistic property of lexical items. We should not distinguish between ludic and non-ludic words and word creation, rather we should conceptualise lexical inventiveness as occurring in different contexts and driven by different communicative needs which underpin the detection of heightened ludicity. The distinction between ludic and teleological words lies exclusively in the unexpectedness in the pattern of recycling all available linguistic instrumentality and the degree of (un)predictability of the output.

Novel lexical items are ludic components that, besides satisfying a naming need, perform the playful function of innocuous riddles (contrasted with the life-threatening riddles of the Sphinx).

A coiner always has a particular meaning in mind, but the interpretation the listener brings into the communicative act is unrestricted and depends

on numerous factors. Negotiating the intended and the interpreted is at the center of the socio-cultural engendering of meaning (the solving of the riddle). As is acknowledged, the “individual speaker is the central factor with regard to all linguistic phenomena” (Koefoed & van Marle, 2000: 311) and lexical inventiveness does not make an exception. Speaker (coiner) and listener are the players recreating the ancient ritual of the riddle. In this line of reasoning, it would not be unjustified to add the ludic aspect of word creation to the set of “specific *metacommunicative* functions of word-formation”, which Hohenhaus (2007: 15; emphasis added) identifies besides the more general lexical, textual, etc. functions. Ludicity is not only a metacommunicative function, characterising all nonce formations, it is rather a component inherent in the act of creating a nonce formation (i.e. any lexical item as implied by our spatio-temporal understanding of nonce-formation). Depending on the subsequent development of a lexical item, it would either retain its ludicity, and in some cases even be marked by secondary intentional ludicity, or become purely teleological⁶.

In this way the contemporary metamorphosis of play in human life surfaces as a voluntary but socially and communicatively necessitated riddle-solving in composing meaning in communicative exchanges. As words are central in human communication and according to Joubert (2005) “are like eyeglasses, they blur everything that they do not make clear”, dynamic word creation constitutes a ludic activity par excellence. Of course, besides voluntary involvement, play is assumed to be constituted by a number of other characteristics, among which constitutive and regulative rules, fun, awards, intentional engagement, and goal-orientedness, figure prominently (Huizinga, 1950: 3-5). All of these apply to communicative exchanges, where reward⁷ always appears in the form of mutual understanding and successfully negotiated meaning.

4. THE INTERACTION BETWEEN LUDICITY AND CREATIVITY

Each novel lexical item results from recombining or exploiting to their fullest all kinds of rules intermixing linguistic subsystems and producing specific effects with different degrees of impact. All novel words result from intentional engagement in a communicative exchange and the award comes in

⁶ This process is intricately interwoven with the development of the lexical item along the clines of lexicalization and institutionalization.

⁷ No claims are made here that every communicative exchange culminates in sharing the reward. Miscommunication frequently occurs but the conditioning factors are so numerous that their discussion is impossible here for lack of space.

the form of achieving mutual understanding. Some novel words are consciously created as demonstratively ludic. Studying such words according to Crystal (1998: 8) is the only way in which we “can reach satisfactory understanding of what is involved in linguistic creativity”. We find linguistic creativity a misnomer since this term ascribes properties to the system and this meaning is for us best dubbed *productivity* – the potential of the system. On the other hand, lexical inventiveness as a notational term reveals the output of human ingenuity, which involves knowledge of the system and an ability to shuffle the elements around, either by strictly observing the rules or challenging them. Our hypothesis of the ludicity of nonce formations (as both a spatial and a temporal notion) is harmonious with de Beaugrande’s understanding of creativity, according to whom “[c]reativity is a shared activity of speaker and hearer” (de Beaugrande, 1978: i). In his view

[c]reativity is the process whereby we become aware of the present and possible conditions for the organization of cognition, and whereby we enable others to reenact that awareness (*ibidem*).

This understanding makes it patently clear that the basic source of new words is human cognition and the human ability to find proper expression of that. We side with de Beaugrande in recognizing recombination and playing on motivation as the basic mechanisms exploited for meaning encoding.

The basic mechanisms of creativity are means of recombination; new elements added to the repertory must appear in motivating combinations within or among systems (de Beaugrande, 1978: i).

If we recall the definition of ludicity from the Introduction, it will become obvious that creativity and ludicity are almost coextensive.

Patterns of recombination seem to underlie the typology of lexical inventiveness.

As Lipka (2007: 3) contends, we can recognize four

macro-mechanisms of lexical innovation 1. morpho-semantic neologism⁸, i.e. basically WF, 2. semantic neologism, or semantic transfer, viz. metaphor and metonymy, 3. morphological neologism, i.e. reduction processes like clipping, blending and acronymy and 4. external, i.e. loan processes.

⁸ We take the liberty of understanding by neologism in this specification of the mechanisms of lexical innovation any novel (new) lexical formation without any commitment to distinguishing between nonce formations (in the traditional understanding as one-off events) and neologisms.

Agreeing with the majority of the specified mechanisms, we slightly modify what is to be understood by semantic neologism. In addition to the established definition, we subsume under this label new words which create novel concepts which might not be related to any existing ones by semantic transfer but rather by unexpected combinability – e.g. *toastaphobia*⁹ or *pre-autoistic McConsumption*¹⁰.

In such an understanding semantic nonce-formations, besides relying on the same set of expressive mechanisms (blending, (de)affixation, etc.), involve mundane propositional creativity¹¹ and bring to the fore their ludicity by exploiting the phenomenon of hypostatization.

Hypostatization is a side-effect of the naming function of word-formation, whereby the existence of a word seems to imply for speakers the existence in the real world of a single corresponding ‘thing’ or clearly delimited concept (Hohenhaus, 2005: 356).

Thus most semantic nonce formations are recognized as funny because of the nature of the concepts they hypostatize – *to blurfle* – ‘to be caught talking at the top of one’s lungs when the music at the bar or disco suddenly stops’ (Hall, 1985), *bowlikinetics* – ‘the act of trying to control a released bowling ball by twisting one’s body in the direction one wants it to go’ (*ibidem*) or *bugpedal* – ‘to accelerate or decelerate rapidly in an attempt to remove a clinging insect from a car’s windshield’ (*ibidem*) (see Fig. 1).

Admittedly, all three examples are characterized by intentional ludicity and creativity, while the majority of novel formations likely to get institutionalized are characterized by entropic ludicity and creativity. According to this criterion we can classify all new lexical items along the cline of ludicity, where the criterion of marked ludicity is associated with intentionality and goal-orientedness. At one extreme (immediately after point zero or the inherent ludicity of any new formation) we can position intentionally ludic lexical formations. Such formations are recognized by the invariable goal of their coiners to produce special effects, to entertain, shock, etc. At the other

⁹ The fear of sticking a fork in a toaster even when it’s unplugged (Hall, 1985).

¹⁰ The tendency to start eating your French fries in the car on your way home (Hall, 1985).

¹¹ For a detailed and revealing discussion of the notion of mundane propositional creativity and its role in concept formation see Barsalou & Prinz (1997).

extreme are entropic creations or teleological¹² formations, whose main goal is to satisfy a genuine communicative need or fill in a lexical gap. Intentionally ludic lexical items (marked with secondary ludicity) are usually invented to create novel (often humorous) unexpected concepts, while entropic creations are recognized as standard word-formation products (*-er* agent nominals, *-able* adjectives from transitive verbs, etc.) naming necessary concepts. The latter are predetermined to perform the basic naming function recognized for lexical items, while the former are associated with other microstructural metacommunicative functions.

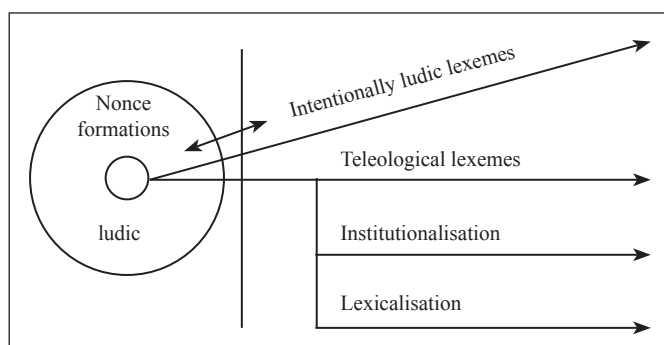


FIGURE 1.

Parsimony requires that we do not excessively multiply the dimensions that jointly and exhaustively describe the development of a lexical item from the moment of its creation and its stage of neological item to a onetime occurrence or to an entrenched word, recognized and used by a sufficient number of speakers. Yet it seems that the introduction of ludicity as an inherent property of nonce formation needs to be clearly delineated in the analytical space.

The diagram illustrates our conceptualization of the interaction of the dimensions. The circle covers the early stages of neology at which it is still not clear whether a new formation will stay on and turn out fully teleological or die out. The teleological status of a lexical formation can only be adequately measured *post hoc*, but at the moment of its creation it can only be classified as potentially teleological or intentionally ludic.

¹² For lack of a better term we use as a working label *teleological lexical items* to name the fully productive, necessary lexical items which can be dubbed “regular” in any conceivable sense.

Thus sniglets such as *checkuary*¹³ would be recognized as ludic and likely to move along the path of intentionally ludic formations, while novel formations such as *green tape*¹⁴ or *advertorial* would be characterised as having greater teleological potential and *bit* would be recognized as the most teleological of all. Of undecided teleological potential will be the types of lexical items people record on *Urban dictionary* for all goals and purposes – e.g. *labradorable*¹⁵, etc. This helps us trace the cline of human ingenuity and playfulness from the purely amusing to the teleologically driven. It is often difficult to decide with a novel lexical item which end of the cline it would tend towards, despite the marked unexpectedness of the conceptual hypostatization of intentionally ludic formations, even though there is no uniformity in the nature of the hypostatized concepts in intentionally ludic formations¹⁶.

When discussing the fun component of the ludic aspect of new formations it is worth distinguishing between humour stemming from conceptual manipulation and humour triggered by the expression side. Such a distinction could help us capture the cross-talk between the lexical and the conceptual levels in a lexical item as in the popular example *a bloody Mary* vs. *a virgin Mary*. The expressive and the conceptual side of a new creation might be driving the interpreter in divergent directions. Contextually one or the other interpretation (the conceptually or the morphologically driven one) will prevail but the possibility remains and creates the potential for humour and capitalization on the cross-talk.

But is this the only source of humour? Ascribing name-worthiness to a piece of reality not part of the general conceptual stock seems to be another reliable source (e.g. *idiolocation*¹⁷, etc.). But if contrasted, *alcolean*¹⁸ and

¹³ The thirteenth month of the year; begins on New Year's day and ends when a person stops absent-mindedly writing the old year on his checks (Hall, 1985).

¹⁴ Excessive environmental regulations and guidelines that must be followed before an official action can be taken (word spy).

¹⁵ A dog of the labrador variety which is of a certain cuteness (*Urban dictionary*).

¹⁶ Some sniglets name everyday situations familiar to everyone for which we lack single concepts or, should we say, for which we lack lexical items that would via hypostatization create the single concept; others create absolutely fanciful concepts. Contrast for example *crumbplumb* – attack a serial box in an attempt to retrieve the prize – and *agonosis* – the syndrome of tuning into “Wide World of Sports” every Saturday just to watch the skier rack himself. The former is experientially familiar and might even be construed as a lexical gap, while the latter is surprising as a piece of human experience.

¹⁷ The spot on the map marked *You are here* (Hall, 1985).

¹⁸ The point just before a drunk person starts to stumble (Hall, 1985).

*almetrics*¹⁹ reveal that the novelty of the concept is not exclusively decisive. The humour and ludicity in the first word spring from the mundane nature of the concept. The crucial difference between the two novel formations is their domain specificity. The second word comes from the domain of scientific research and is highly unlikely to be interpreted as humorous or intentionally ludic. The only difference between the two novel formations is their potential for institutionalization, undoubtedly linked with their degree of ludicity, underpinned by their domain specificity.

From the point of view of morphological encoding or expressive means there is no difference (apart from a quantitative²⁰ one, probably) between ludic and teleological nonce formations. As there is only convergence we will not dwell on the various familiar processes and patterns but simply illustrate the uniformity of morphological inventiveness in an illustrative table:

TABLE 1. Morphological patterns and processes

	ludic (Hall, 1985; <i>Urban dictionary</i>)	teleological (Word spy; various sources)
compounding	<i>watt-bobble, tub swizzle, vacation elbow</i>	<i>potty parity, wrap rage, digital native</i>
blending	<i>chortle, waxident, werdle-mass</i>	<i>ignoranus, giraffitti, podcast</i>
affixation	<i>waftic, snuggage, rubbage</i>	<i>McJob, doocracy, Bushism</i>
back-formation	<i>maculate, couth, shevelled</i>	<i>ginger, kempt, to incant</i>
abbreviation	<i>PIYAN, DFW</i>	<i>BANANA, RINO, CAPTCHA</i>
hybrid	<i>zipcuffed, JB point</i>	<i>bouncebackability, b-out</i>

5. CONCLUSIONS

The answer to our initial question seems to be in the affirmative. The degree of ludicity of a lexical item after its initial launching in a communicative exchange, when it is by default ludic, depends on the communicative goal and context, not on the type of word-formation and the operation of established rules or their creative change. To these two determinants it appears we need

¹⁹ Tools to assess the impact of scholarly contributions based on alternative online measures (<<http://altmetrics.org/manifesto/>>).

²⁰ The term *quantitative* is meant here to name the discernible preferences for employing specific word-formation processes and patterns when coining intentionally ludic formations and teleological ones.

to add the domain specificity of the concept which is hypostatized by the novel formation. As Munat (2007: xiv) acknowledges, “allowing us to build new concepts by drawing on and integrating ideas in our conceptual system that have not previously been connected” is the crucial property of lexical inventiveness.

Unlike David Crystal (1998), who assumes that standard language is not the same as ludic language because there is a fundamental difference between the two, we tried to illustrate that all new lexical items start up as ludic elements, at least in the sense of aporia or solving the riddle at the stage of nonce formations. If it is specifically conceptually marked and underscores unexpected hypostatization, a lexical item is most likely an intentionally ludic nonce formation. In any other case a novel lexical item has the chance of staying on as a teleological formation.

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