Neology in English and the hypermodern MICUs: some translation issues

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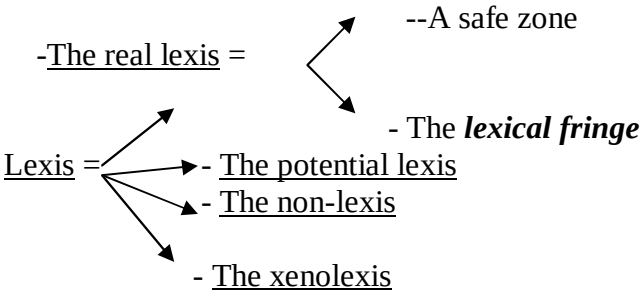
Abstract:
This article discusses the appearance in today's English of complex acronyms AKA hypermodern **MICU**s (Minimal Informational Cooperative Units) and the difficulty to translate them into other languages. In effect, their integrative aspect involves the examination of several units within a single item whose translation into foreign languages may turn problematic.
Peirce's semiotic **triadic theory** may offer a certain room to manoeuvre as it offers a methodology and conceptual tools capable to account for three types of relationships between the sign and its two other counterparts, the sign-Object and the sign-Interpretant.

The question we should like to raise in this discussion concerns the device that ought to be used for the translation of the growing number of hypermodern coinages that flourish within the Internet. In effect, one can daily observe the emergence of a new type of coinages in English whose translation into another language proves problematic to say the least, especially for the ALT specialist. We raise the issue but do not pretend to supply the answers. The difficulty rises from the fact that the structure of these coinages is rather novel

and might in time come to both undermine two important dogmas in linguistics: the principle of the double articulation of language as elaborated by André Martinet[1], and the assumption that words are built from the minimal contrastive units known as phonemes. However, before indulging in the examination of the disruptive elements we have labelled MICUs (Minimal Informational Cooperative Units) and the variety of hybrid coinages to which they give birth and which we have termed Componemes, we should like to start by reminding of the foundation on which the lexis of a language rests. For this purpose, we turn to one of the most interesting lexicologists: Jean Tournier.

Jean Tournier[2] presents the whole lexis of a language as consisting of four sets that make up what he names the lexicogenic processes: the real lexis, the potential lexis, the non-lexis, and the xenolexis. These are synthesized in the following diagram

Tournierôs different types of lexis



[1] Martinet, A. *Eléments de linguistique générale,* Armand Colin, 1998 PP. 13 à 17.

[2] Tournier, J. *Structures Lexicales de lôAnglais*, Nathan, 1991. P 60

1 ï **The real lexis**: it consists of the whole set of realized lexical units, from which the lexicogenic rules in use in a given language can be inferred. It comprises two subsets. The first subset is called a *safe zone*. It is composed of all the realized and listed lexical units, i.e. the lexicalized ones that are admitted and accepted as part of the code or system. All dictionary entries belong to this zone. The second subset is named a *vague zone* (or *lexical fringe*). It consists of realized lexical units, but which are not, or have not yet been listed in the dictionaries, mainly because of their newness. For example, the compound *des res /dɛzrɛz/* (< desirable residence) used to belong to the lexical fringe in the late eighties, but has recently been incorporated in recent academic dictionaries like the COD, or the electronic version of the COED.

2 ï **The potential lexis**: in a given state of language, the potential lexis is composed of all the possible but not yet realized lexical units of a language. A lexical unit is possible as soon as its formation conforms to the lexicogenic rules in use in that given state of language, rules which may be induced from the safe zone of the real lexis. For example, *ódehosêô*, which is a derivate form of *ódhosêô* is used to refer to the action of improving the performance of a channel through which data flows under pressure. This item is still in the potential lexis and will remain there until it becomes eventually accepted by common usage.

3 - **The non-lexis**: it consists of all the lexical units impossible to realize in a given state of language. For example, English would not accept an item such as *tbgdoj* since it does not conform to its phonological rules.

4 ï **The xenolexis**: it consists of all the real lexis belonging to all the other languages, and from which English may borrow some elements. The loan words present in English used to belong to this category of lexis.

These four sets make up the lexical boundaries of a language, since all the lexical units of a language at a given time, belong to one of these sets which are the source from which it draws language vitality.

Let us now examine the category of coinages to which a neology may belong, once invented. Indeed, the construction of a coinage presupposes its conformity to one of three types of mechanisms which J. Tournier presents as follows:

The first macro-mechanism is called **morpho-semantic**. It forms lexical units whose novelty concerns both the signifier and the signified. The lexicogenic processes it involves are: prefixation, suffixation, back derivation, compounding, blending and onomatopoeia.

The second macro-mechanism called **semantic neology** groups lexical units whose novelty involves only the signified. It includes conversion, metaphor and metonymy.

The last macro mechanism relates to **morphological neology** and permits the formation of lexical units whose novelty concerns only the signifier.

Therefore, the formation of any complex word in English (here complex means any word other than a simple lexical unit) should be the result of one of the lexicogenic processes mentioned in the following table borrowed from J. Tournier.

The lexicogenic processes

LEXICOGENIC PROCESSES OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH AND THE TYPES OF NEOLOGY				
INTERNAL PROCESSES	**Morpho-Semantic Neology**	Affixation	1-prefixation: antinuclear 2-suffixation: graceful 3- back derivation: burgle<burglar	
		Compound	4- juxtaposition: sheep-dog 5- blending: smoke + fog > smog	
		Phonic imitation	6 - onomatopoeia: splash	
		Change in function	7- conversion : tunnel, N > tunnel, V	
		Change in meaning	8 ï metaphor: (she is) a cat 9 ï metonymy: the Crown	
	Semantic Neology	**Morphological Neology**	Form reduction	10 ï clipping : phone 11 ï acronymy: VIP
		external processes	loan words	12 ï borrowing : tutu

The last important point that needs to be mentioned concerning the formation of a coinage in English, relates

to the constraints it has to conform to in order to be accepted by usage. In English, like in any other language, some constraints are imposed on the formation of lexical units as they determine what is possible from what is not. These constraints, inform the user of the language that all signs, whether already existing in the real lexis, or simply bearing a chance to be coined someday as part of the potential lexis should, in Tournierôs terms, conform to three types of constraints: the morpho-phonological constraint, the constraint of order, and the semantic constraint.

1- The morpho-phonological constraint

The first of these constraints is the morpho-phonological constraint, and it is exerted at two levels.

- At the first level, it is exerted on the pattern of the phonological realization of the sign defined in terms of consonant (C) and vowels (V). For example English phonotactics constrain a coinage to conform to the rule characterizing the English syllable (no onset but a termination, having an onset but no termination or having both onset and a termination)
- At the second level, the constraint is exerted on the choice of consonants and vowels in a given pattern. For example, in a CCCVC pattern, only the following initial consonant clusters are not possible: / spr / as in *spread* / spred /, / str / as in *strike* / straik / or / spl / as in *split* / split /, or /skr/ as in *scream* / skri:m /. No other three consonant initial cluster is allowed.

2 -The constraint of order

The second constraint that English lexical units have to conform to is the constraint of order. It applies to memorized lexical units larger than primary lexical units to which it imposes a certain order of construction. For example at the level of affixation, it forces the prefixes to be placed on the left and the suffixes on the right, thus modelling the construction of coinages.

3 - The semantic constraint

The semantic constraint either permits or prevents the formation of lexical units in the English language from the standpoint of their cognitive acceptability. It is closely linked to what the culture admits as possible or refutes as impossible. For example, the association of the prefix *un* + *verb* + *able* is permitted as in *unforgettable*, but the association of *un* + *verb* + *ful* or *less*, is not.

Now that we have detailed the conditions of acceptability linked to the formation of a coinage in English, we shall proceed to the exposition of the items which we have labelled MICUs.

Definition of a MICU

A **MICU** could be defined as a linguistic unit functioning as the initial of a ówordô and which, in association with other MICUs compose a complex acronym labelled componeme. A **componeme** is therefore the linguistic unit which results from an appropriate combination of MICUs. The relations between the MICUs which make up a componeme involve both ña syntagmatic and a paradigmaticò dimension to use a Saussurien terminology. A componeme built from MICUs is

therefore structurally distinct from an ordinary ówordô in that it is formed not from phonemes, but from a number of initials of words which are amalgamated to build a single complex lexical unit. This feature of the MICUs provides a third dimension to the classical double articulation of language as elaborated by André Martinet

As an illustration of componemes, let us consider the following items: *bit, laser, grep, radar, sonar, grep*, ASCII Art, *ASCIIbetical order*, ASCII chart, or even LOL@tags. The novelty is that these acronyms have been naturalized in the English language and are sometimes written with lower-case characters as if they were ordinary lexical units. Then, as it often happens with simple lexical units, the new coinages become subject to the same grammatical processes as with any ordinary other lexical unit.

In effect, a phonological analysis of the structure of an ordinary English lexical unit, like for instance the word óhouseô, will display some of the following features:

- If the word is pronounced, that is, if it is articulated through a personôs vocal tract, by dint of a certain amount of air travelling from the lungs through the vocal organs towards the mouth, and then out into the open air, the initial amount of air coming from the lungs undergoes a series of obstructions along its way which will model its final shape. For instance, to produce the word óhouseô, only one syllable is necessary. However, three phonemes are needed: two consonants, one standing in initial position /h/ makes up the onset of the syllable, and a final consonant /s/ standing for its termination. In between the two consonants, lays the back closing diphthong /au/. Phonologically then, the word óhouseô consists of three

speech sounds belonging to the English phonemic system, and uttered in the following order: /h/ + /au/ + /s/. The first phoneme /h/ can be featured as a glottal voiceless fricative. The second /au/ is described as a back closing diphthong, and the last phoneme, /s/ as an alveolar fricative voiceless sound.

- If the word is written, or carved, or engraved, or even if it is coded in machine language in order to be displayed on a computer screen, the word ‘house’ appears as consisting of five graphs that have to be typed in a linear way from left to right, starting from the graph ‘h', up to ‘o’, then to ‘u’, next, to ‘s’, and finally to the graph ‘e’. The morphology of the word ‘house’ can be altered by the addition of affixes or inflexions. Accordingly, it is possible to build the following derivations: *housing*, *houses*, *houseful*, *household*, *housework*, *housewife*, etc.

In spite of their structural likeness with ‘house’, items like ‘bit’, ‘laser’, ‘grep’ or ‘radar’, are not articulated in accordance with the principle of the double articulation of language, because neither ‘bit’ ‘laser’ nor ‘grep’ nor ‘radar’ are simple lexical units. The truth is that these items are acronyms so well internalized by a process of familiarization that they appear as simple lexical units. In effect, the acronym bit is built from ‘**B**’ which stands for binary, and from ‘**it**’ for ‘dig**it**’. In ‘laser’, ‘l’ stands for ‘light’ and thus appears not as a phoneme but as a lexeme. ‘a’ stands for the lexeme ‘amplification’, ‘s’ for ‘stimulated’, ‘e’ for ‘emulsion’, and ‘r’ for ‘radiation’. ‘Grep’ is the acronym for **G**lobally search for the **R**egular **E**xpression and **P**rint the lines containing matches to it. ‘Radar’ is the acronym for **Ra**dio **D**etection

And **R**anging, and ósonarô is the acronym for **So**und **Na**vigation and **R**anging.

However, all these words, óbitô, ólaserô, ógrepô, ósonarô and óradarô are simulacra of simple lexical units. This can be easily proved by a simple transcription. As a matter of fact, when transcribed into phonetic alphabet, a word like ólaserô which consists of five initials is transcribed into four supposed equivalent phonemes /leizɒ/. In other words, what can be observed here, is that *laser* is transcribed as if it were composed, on the one hand of two syllables, with primary stress falling on the first syllable, and as if the lexical unit is formed out of real phonemes transcribed into graphs, on the other hand.

What the transcription reveals is that the initials of words are confused with alphabetic letters. This explains why L.A.S.E.R is transcribed / leizɒ/. The initials are arranged in this particular order, where /l/ stands for óL.ô, /ei/, stands for óA.ô, /z/, stands for óS.ô, and finally the closing schwa /ɒ /, which stands for both óE.ô, and óR.ô, as in, say óbrotherô or ólaborô, where the two last graphs are transcribed with the symbol /ɒ/, thus increasing the confusion between the two different categories.

In fact, the primary function of the initials forming an acronym is to behave like circumstanced metonyms pointing contextually towards their immediate objects. The initials in bold type for example reflect this órdinaryô way of using common acronyms.

Light
Amplification by
Stimulated
Emulsion of
Radiation

However, in the examples above, the initials of acronyms do not impose their individual presence as representatives of the lexical units they stand for. Rather, they lend themselves to the habitual way of transcoding speech into writing as if the acronyms were initially spoken before being written, while we suspect that these words became acronyms to facilitate their transcoding into speech. This real inversion in the verbalization process deserves full attention as it illuminates a rather obscure side of lexicalization.

Thus, L.A.S.E.R., becomes laser, and it is transcribed /leizɒ/

L A S ER
/l ei z ɒ /

Four sounds and five graphs! Besides, once it is coined, a word like «laser» can evolve grammatically into the verb to «lase», «laserize» or to compounds such as «laser disc, laser chicken». The two types, simple lexical units and acronyms, although different, behave «structurally» as belonging to the same class, while «grammatically» they belong to two different classes.

Therefore, the novelty with the examples mentioned above, is that when written with lower-case characters, the form of a componeme undergoes a mutation which makes it behave as an ordinary lexical unit. Indeed, the components of *laser, bit, or grep,* etc. are not phonemes operating within a clearly-bounded phonological system but constitute a new linguistic phenomenon labelled MICUs. These units are termed MICUs in analogy with the definition of phonemes as Minimal Contrastive Units. Indeed, the MICUs are built on the model of phonemes, sharing with them their minimal contrastive features,

except that while phonemes combine to build simple lexical units, MICUs combine to form complex structures which sometimes appear as simple units. The elucidation of the existence of the MICUs will also serve to explain the presence in English of already naturalized complex units such as Apex, MEcon, (Advance Purchase Excursion, Master of Economics) etc.

Similarly to phonemes, MICUs combine with other MICUs to form larger units of meaning. A single change in the informational units making up the overall structure entails a total change in the meaning of the acronym. However, no isomorphism can be claimed between the phonological constituents of a lexical unit such as *lamer* and a complex acronym like *laser*. Despite the similarity of their graphic constituents and even of their pronunciation, the simple character of phonemes and the complex character of MICUs are profoundly different. In effect, to distinguish between two simple lexical units, an ordinary minimal pair can be used to illustrate a semantic difference entailed by a phonemic difference. For example, /m/ and /s/ serve to distinguish /mi:t/ meat, from /si:t/ seat. However, to distinguish between a simple lexical unit such as *lamer* /leimɒ/ and a componeme like *laser* /leizɒ/ involves a second order analysis since despite its similarity to an ordinary simple lexical unit, *laser* is a complex unit built on a structure which involves not phonemes but a combination of MICUs.

It should be reminded that in the Saussurean framework, the reality of a phoneme lies only in its capacity to distinguish a morpheme from another as can be shown by contrasting minimal pairs such as *fair* and *hair*, or *cat* and *bat*, etc. The reality of a MICU lies mainly in its

ability to combine with other MICUs to form larger units of meaning which we won't fear, in relation to Martinet's classical double articulation, to label the **Triple Articulation of Language** (TAL) because, contrary to phonemes, MICUs comprise individual meanings conferred by the context in which they are used. This feature turns Martinet's double articulation into a triple articulation, where the first articulation remains the same, but between Martinet's first and third articulation a second articulation imposes itself. This second articulation is the one where only the initials of the successive monemes (the MICUs) are selected into coherent wholes. It is the pronunciation of these MICUs as if they were phonemes, which makes up the third articulation of language.

This trait grants the MICUs an unlimited freedom to modify their meanings in accordance to the ever changing environment in which they are used. One could say that the MICUs, similarly to ordinary phonemes combine on the syntagmatic linear level to permit paradigmatic associations, but phonemes, the MICUs use both sound and graphic registers to duplicate themselves on demand over a second level layer. This characteristic explains why the MICU ***A***, is not the same in **A**BEND, as it is in **A**FAIK, as it is in **A**IDS. The same observations can be made for FISH, acronym of **F**irst **I**n, **S**till **H**ere, which can turn into FISHing, GREP into grepped, etc. similarly, we observe the appearance of newly coined "verb acronyms" such as *to R&D* (Research and Development), to QC (Quality Control), or to X (to indicate an incorrect answer). Actually, the effects of this

mutation from one lexical category to another are much more critical than generally acknowledged.

This double naturalization poses a problem never accounted for, and thus requires a meticulous attention in view of their translation.

Indeed, the specific conditions of the construction of componemes, which seek to meet the needs of its authors, resemble those that compelled human to invent economic storage devices (multi-level car-parks for busy towns, skyscrapers in place of individual houses, liquid food for astronauts, etc.). In this respect, one can affirm that componemes which are in fact, *word-statements* which unroll whole cognitive programmes, are the linguistic counterparts of hypermodern life.

One of the major problems to which the translator is confronted is the fact that in addition to the multiplicity of translations for a lexical unit, for example, Daniel, L. Newman[3] has identified eleven different translations in Arabic for the term ñphonemeò, the translator has to inquire on the most appropriate way to translate the hypermodern coinages, because the translation processes of the neologies need to be accounted for. In effect, the integrative aspect of the hypermodern coinages involves the examination of several units within a single item whose translation into foreign languages may turn problematic. The difficulty arises from the fact that the structure of the target language may sometimes be extremely different from that of English and the treatment of the MICUs may require innovative devices.

[3] Daniel, L. Newman, *Modern Phonetic Terminology in Arabic : Translation and Equivalence,* in Revue Campus, UMMTO, Tizi-ouzou, 9 Mars 2008

How to translate them? As calques (el-alat al-kahro-manzilia?), as loans (lazir, campjuter), as periphrases (, or as componemes?

In agreement with Catford who points out that ñIt is clearly necessary for translation-theory to draw upon a theory of meaning", and considering that among two major theories available for us (the semiological and the semiotic theories), we deliberately opt for the triadic theory as elaborated by C.S. Peirce, because it provides a methodology and conceptual tools capable to account for three types of relationships between the sign and its two other counterparts, the sign-Object and the sign-Interpretant. Depending on whether the focus is on the sign as Representamen, on the Object or on the Interpretant, a sign will be examined: a) - in relation to itself, b) ï in relation to its object, c) ï in relation to its Interpretant.

Peirce deals with both meaning and reference. Reference pertains to the dimension of the object of the sign and requires the distinction between denotation (Io) and extension (Do).

Taking into account the tendency to coin neologies whose characteristic is to be increasingly motivated, as in (figure skating = patinage artistique = atazahlouq al fini; or a wireless instrument = un appareil sans fil = djihaz alla silki, etc.), and considering with Peirce that meaning is "the translation of a sign into another system of signs" (CP 4.127), or, in other words: "The meaning of a sign is the sign it has to be translated into" (CP 4.132), then, from a semiotic standpoint, calques are an advantage since they incite a direct relationship between a sign and its immediate object. Conversely, if we consider that the

extra-linguistic conditions like the economy of time, hybridity, compactness, etc. which compel the componeme to be articulated in MICUs are also valid in the target language, then maybe the a loan would be more convenient with the risk however that the original meaning of the loan can be lost in the course of the translation process.

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