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David A. Hatch

Think Small: Acronyms in English

Our times have received many fancy monickers from both press and public leaders: The Space Age, The Atomic Age, The Cold War Era, and even The End Times. This writer would like to suggest, not entirely in a facetious manner, that we are living in the Age of Acronyms. These mangled words may be avoided only by complete withdrawal from one's society. So prevalent have they become that a second supplement to a popular dictionary of acronyms boasts that it "contains about 26,500 such newly coined or newly found terms, which is more than double the total number of entries in the first edition. . . ."¹ This composition had been done in less than five years!

The word itself is coined from two Greek terms: *akros* = tip and *onyma* = name.² One definition reads: "A word made up of the first letters of a series of words, or of the beginnings and ends of a series of words."³ Examples of acronyms may be found at all quarters, but consider "radar," "WAC," "Loran," or "TESL,"⁴ which are encountered almost daily.

In fact, some language scholars make distinctions between types of shortened words. Acronyms which are composed only of the first letters of the full name

have sometimes been called "initialisms," or in one quaint case, "abecedisms."⁵ Examples of this category would be "AID," or "SCLC." There is some debate about whether an initialism requires periods after each letter, but the argument seems to run that periods would make the subject nothing but a common abbreviation, rather than an honored acronym, the mainstay of our language.

Another category within the generic term "acronym" is titled "telescope words"; into its depths are placed such as "COMSAT" and "AGITPROP." It is reported that when President Eisenhower used the telescope word "CHICOM" in a speech, one of its first public uses, the public and media pondered its meaning for days, until its expansion was produced.⁶

Like some viruses, acronyms or potential acronyms defy easy classification as living or dead. Certain words clearly constitute acronyms, for they have no life of their own without an expansion; in other cases the borderline is hazy. Would such modern coinages as "skyjacking," "sexploitation," "picturephone," or "multiversity" be considered "telescope words"? The weary world awaits the linguist who will instruct us.

How do acronyms arise and why are they employed so extensively? One authority assures us that "It is safe to say that the newer a field of endeavor is, the greater is the number of acronyms and initialisms emanating from it."⁷ However, one of the co-authors apparently

¹ Robert C. Thomas & Ellen T. Crowley, *New Acronyms and Initialisms* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1969), p. viii.

² *ibid.*, p. x.

³ Mary Reifer, *Dictionary of New Words* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 3.

⁴ "Would you believe 'Teaching English as Second Language'?"

⁵ Thomas & Crowley, *op. cit.*, p. xv.

⁶ Clarence L. Barnhart, Sol Steinmetz, Robert K. Barnhart, *The Barnhart Dictionary of New English Since 1963* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 88.

⁷ Thomas & Crowley, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

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disagreed with this, and in a revision of the work, wrote, somewhat more plausibly, "It is safe to say that the more dynamic a field of endeavor is, the greater is the number of acronyms and initialisms emanating from it."⁸

It is true, nonetheless, that activities of recent vintage seem to carry with them enormous numbers of acronyms. The aero-space industry must account for a majority of them, with the military and electronic industries not far behind. Complex terminology requires methods of handling which are at once time-saving and easy. Acronyms provide both these services.

In addition to providing ease in handling cumbersome vocabulary, acronyms save considerable space, a valuable asset in journalism or in scientific publishing, among other enterprises. One can only shudder at thoughts of the length of lab reports or police blotters if DNA and LSD had to be written in full. The space problem may be one reason why acronyms are foisted on both technicians and the public with such intensity, for with increasing computerization of business and industry, heroic searches are continually launched to discover terminology more easily assimilated by electronic data processing (EDP) equipment.

Some acronyms, particularly telescope words, may be formed simply because they sound better. Thus, "motel" rolls more smoothly into speech than "motor hotel," a term that now seems pretentious, and, unless it is used in advertising extensively, may drop from English vocabulary lists.

Certain acronyms are carefully chosen for their onomatopoeic effect, or for their suggestiveness. Here we discover: "WAVES," "CARE," "HOPE,"

and "ZIP"⁹ codes." Each is calculated to evoke a reaction in keeping with its function. Occasionally some tailoring becomes necessary, when function changes but continued exploitation of acronym reaction is desired; for example, CARE, the Cooperative for American Relief in Europe, substituted "Everywhere" for its final word when the public began to realize that European refugees were getting hard to find and donations slackened.

Finally, acronyms, like jargon, remove an occupation or enterprise one step further from the uninitiated or untutored, and, conversely, represent verbal evidence of acceptance for those who use them. Like Latin for doctors and lawyers, or statistics for sociologists, acronyms may prove that the user has completed his rite of passage.

Living languages change; this is a hackneyed truism. It might be expected that in a modern world which emphasizes speed, values conciseness, and worships efficiency, language would evolve toward truncations and half-words reflecting these virtues.

But even the space age falls short of the ideal. According to *Time* magazine, controllers discovered a malfunction in the Apollo 12 mission caused by the Digital Uplink Assembly. Radioed Mission Control: "We think we've figured it out—your DUA was off." Replied Apollo: "What is a DUA?"¹⁰

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⁸ Ellen T. Crowley, *New Acronyms and Initialisms* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1971), p. vii.

⁹ Be honest—did you remember this stands for Zone Improvement Plan?

¹⁰ *Time*, 20 July 1970, p. 61.