

CAN PERIPHERALITY SUPPORT CENTRALITY? SOME EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM MORPHOLOGICAL MARGINS

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This article puts forward the results of a survey on the process of creation and realization of initialisms (acronyms and alphabetisms) and abbreviations. This survey was devised to acquire a better understanding of a field of word formation which is usually neglected due to its unpredictable and language-specific quality. The survey shows that customary use and background knowledge (i.e. social and individual factors) are determinant for the realization of these items, whereas other criteria, such as phonotactic possibilities, time saving principles, or the orthographic or semantic influence of already existing words, seem to be much less significant. Besides verifying that prototypes or central cases do play a role as points of reference for categorization judgements, the results of the survey evince a central principle of languages: they are dynamic instruments ultimately conditioned by their users and their communicative contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION: ACRONYMS AND RELATED ITEMS AS A MARGINAL AREA OF LEXICAL MORPHOLOGY

In her review of the historical treatment of “Acronyms & Co.,” López-Rúa (2004:128) remarks that this area of lexical morphology is characterized by a great deal of “confusion, overlap and inconsistency.” In fact, initialisms (i.e., acronyms and alphabetisms: respectively, items built out of initials and read out either as words – *laser* – or letter by letter – *BBC*) have been defined and classified as a type of abbreviation, shortening, clipping or blend. Specialized dictionaries such as Crowley and Thomas (1973) or Mossman (1993), and even authoritative monographs like Marchand (1969) provide vague, all-inclusive

characterizations. Scholars like Bauer (1983) or Spencer (1991) disregard the device and describe it as minor or marginal within word-formation, and thus unworthy of a detailed treatment. Discrete typologies result in a confusing proliferation of items (Casado 1979; Alvar and Miró 1983; Martínez de Sousa 1984) and eventually coexist with anarchic lists of exceptions (Rodríguez González & Cannon 1996). Lastly, parameter-based definitions lack hierarchical arrangements and do not succeed in providing an internal structure for the categories (Cannon 1989). The most promising approaches seem to come from non-discreteness and resort to continua and prototypes vs peripheral cases (López-Rúa 2002).

This article intends to face this controversial area of word-formation on empirical grounds, that is, by supplying authentic data which can be contrasted with theoretical accounts. It is believed that the results will contribute to a better understanding of how these “marginal” items are conceived and realized, besides providing valuable information as regards the functioning of “centres,” i.e. prototypical items and truly lexical categories.

2. THE SURVEY

2.1. AIMS, FEATURES AND HYPOTHESES

In view of the above considerations, the questionnaire enclosed in the Appendix was administered to several groups of native speakers of English in the years 2000, 2003 and 2006 with the following aims:

1. Verify the categorization of a set of items by observing the speakers' realization habits. The items were selected by considering the examples and definitions provided by both the references quoted and other authoritative sources (dictionaries, grammars, articles and specialized books: see section 4.1 in the References).
2. Delve into the relationship between the language and its users by confirming the influence of extralinguistic factors (such as the speakers' background knowledge) on categorization judgements.
3. If possible, gather evidence in support of the centre-periphery structure of the categories involved, which could be reflected in the use of prototypes as points of reference for the categorization of other items.

The paragraphs that follow provide a detailed account of the characteristics of the subjects and the questionnaire. It must be remarked that the results should not be

interpreted as rigid rules, but as general tendencies or useful guidelines for further research, not only because of the limited number of informants, but also because the data gathered from average speakers of a language must always be handled with care.

An anonymous questionnaire was filled in by forty native speakers of English, who were identified by means of an alphanumeric code. In order to check whether the speakers might have any difficulty following the instructions or answering the questions, a pilot study was previously conducted on five informants. As a result, a few slight modifications and corrections were introduced in the final version.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. Questions 1 and 2 preceded the reading of the items and were intended to obtain personal information about the informants which could be relevant for the study. In the first place, the speakers were asked to locate themselves within one age group, so that a correlation might be drawn between the expanded or unexpanded realization of some abbreviations and the speakers' age: therefore, it was hypothesized that younger speakers would be more familiar with abbreviations standing for certain pop groups and singers (*NKOTB*, *TAFKAP*), or clothing firms especially targeted at that public (*DKNY*); consequently, they would tend to read these items in their expanded forms, in contrast with speakers from the fourth age group, who would probably read them unexpanded. The speakers' nationality was asked with a view to verifying the existence of geographical differences in the realization of the items, fundamentally between BrE and AmE, since the informants came from different English-speaking countries: Canada (Vancouver), Great Britain (London, Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield), New Zealand (Auckland), and the United States (Kansas). The speakers' occupations and studies were used to determine their background knowledge. Therefore, some subjects stated that they had a specialized knowledge of languages, science (Physics, Chemistry and Biology), computing, finances and accounting, which was used to establish significative correlations with their answers. Lastly, the question concerning other languages spoken by the informants was formulated with a double aim: on the one hand, it was intended to detect possible interferences in the pronunciation of English items (in particular *VIP* and *UVA*) due to the influence of other languages with different realization rules (for example, Spanish); on the other hand, it was also aimed at verifying how the (un)expanded realization of borrowings may be influenced by the speakers' background knowledge of the source language (for instance, French).

Tables 1 to 4 below summarize the characteristics of the subjects who co-operated in the survey. Table 1 displays the percentages of informants belonging to each age group; Table 2 shows the geographical varieties of English used by the speakers (in the present case, a general distinction is made between "BrE," "AmE" and "Others"); Table 3 classifies the informants according to the specialized knowledge which was inferred from their occupation or studies; finally, Table 4 summarizes the languages spoken by the

informants apart from English. As can be observed, in Tables 3 and 4 the sum of individual percentages exceeds 100% because they are not mutually exclusive; in other words, they allow for the possibility that the same speaker may belong to several groups simultaneously. For example, if an informant knows both Spanish and French, he or she will join the group of Spanish-speaking subjects (80% of the total amount) and also the group of French-speaking subjects (40% of the total amount).

Age Group	%
up to 20	25%
21-30	45%
31-45	10%
46 +	20%
	100%

Table 1. Percentages of informants and age groups

Varieties of English	%
BrE	50%
AmE	35%
Others	15%
	100%

Table 2. Percentages of informants and varieties of English

Background Knowledge	%
Languages/ Literature/ Education	80%
Science (Biology, Chemistry, Physics)	25%
Accounting /Finances	20%
Computing	10%
Others	10%

Table 3. Percentages of informants and background knowledge

Languages Spoken	%
Spanish	80%
French	40%
Galician	15%
German	10%
Others (Catalan, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Portuguese and Russian)	10%

Table 4. Percentages of informants and languages spoken

As can be inferred from the tables, the profile of the average informant who answered the questionnaire is the following: a male/female up to 30 years old (most likely between 18 and 30, since the survey was mainly carried out among university students), who is a student of modern languages and has some knowledge of Spanish and/or French.

Question 3 was a list of forty items with several alternative readings. The items were grouped into three categories of increasing complexity on the grounds of their possibilities of realization, which determine their categorization: alphabetism/abbreviation (from *PC* to *YSL*); alphabetism/acronym/abbreviation (from *FIFA* to *SCSI*); and alphabetism/(acronym)/translated abbreviation/foreign abbreviation (from *eg* to *RIP*). In order to prevent interference due to proximity, items with different theoretical pronunciations were inserted among others which could be read out in the same way: for example, *LA* was placed between *NY* and *NYC*, *PM* between *NYC* and *NZ*, and *VIP* between the word-like sequences *APT* and *AID*². Similarly, alphabetic listing was avoided whenever possible so as to preclude the influence of similar shapes on realization. Concerning orthographic conventions, periods between initials were kept only in those lower-case items which written sources categorized as abbreviations. Besides, alternative forms in capitals or small letters (for example, *VAT/Vat* or *Nato/NATO*) were provided when, according to the written sources, both had the same currency.

The items listed in Questions 3 and 4 were selected in accordance with the following criteria: some widespread forms with predictable realizations (*NY*, *LA*, *VIP*, *FIFA*, *pm* and most items in Question 4) were included as prototypical examples which could easily be identified by the informants. Major trends of realization were sought for in a series of widespread items with two or more possible readings (*PC*, *SWF*, *cc*, *o/a*, *PM*, *mph* and *WWF*). Other items less commonly used but often mentioned by written sources (*NW*, *NYC*, *NZ* and

UVA) were selected in order to ratify the typical realizations provided by written data, which were confirmed in all cases. The possible correlation between acronymic realization and actual or potential word-like sequences was explored in *AID*¹, *WOW*, *APT*, *AID*², *IRIS* and *UNEDA*. All the items with borrowed expanded expressions as alternative readings were chosen to analyse the importance of background knowledge, particularly that of foreign languages. The variable of specialized background knowledge was investigated in a set of items: scientific (*bp*, *cps*, *nm*), linguistic (*OE*) and computational (*SCSI*). The variables of age and background knowledge were studied in four generation-bound items: *DKNY*, *NKOTB*, *YSL* and *TAFKAP*. The geographical variable was particularly considered in *Btu*, *LA* and *PM*. Finally, a few popular items which due to coexisting realizations can be categorized as potential hybrids (namely *REM*, *VAT/Vat*, *aka/AKA*, *asap/ASAP* and *eg*) were included to verify whether those items actually displayed all the alternative readings provided by the written sources, as well as to find out general tendencies of realization. As regards the first objective, written data were confirmed in all cases, although the word-like realizations of *REM*, *aka* and *asap* were only exceptionally chosen by the informants.

Finally, Question 4 was devised to gather some evidence concerning the process of lexicalization of initialisms. Leaving aside orthographic issues, it is here suggested that, from the point of view of semantics, acronyms and alphabetisms get closer to proper words when they lose their connections with the source expressions they replace and develop alternative expressions which define them. Accordingly, the informants were asked to supply definitions for the items listed (*NATO*, *UFO*, *BASIC*, *CIA*, *yuppie* and *LSD*). It was specified that they could define the items by providing the original expressions and /or by using their own words.

2.2. RESULTS

As was expected, in some well-established cases the data provided by the written sources were confirmed (for example, the realization of *NZ* as “New Zealand,”⁹¹ or *FIFA* as a word); however, in some others the results turned out to be different from what was predicted, and even displayed a considerable

⁹¹ The original expanded expressions of all the items of the questionnaire are written between single inverted commas (‘...’); by contrast, double inverted commas (‘.’) are used for alternative expressions provided by the subjects.

degree of inter-subject disagreement. Two sources of discrepancies were identified in the answers: first, the speakers' background knowledge; second, the fact that initials are ambiguous by nature, as they may stand for more than one word: for example, *WWF* – which stands for “Worldwide Fund” – was alternatively interpreted by some speakers as replacing “World Wrestling Federation”. Concerning ambiguity, it must be added that the spelling of the items (capitals vs lower-case) did not seem to be an important factor for the identification of the expanded sources. Therefore, a few speakers (both British and American) interpreted the abbreviation *bp* as an alphabetism for “British Petroleum” (*BP*); similarly, *APT* was occasionally realized as an abbreviation standing for “apartment,” and *p.c.*, one of the items provided as examples, was alternatively expanded as “politically correct” (which written sources provide as one of the possible realizations of *PC*).

Regarding the hypothesis of the possible influence of age on the realization of the items, the results obtained were not conclusive, mainly because the majority of informants were found to belong to the first and second age groups. These speakers tended to choose expanded realization for *NKOTB* and *TAFKAP*, and letter-by-letter reading for *DKNY*. On their part, the majority of speakers from the fourth age group did choose unexpanded realizations for all the items (one of them even read out *TAFKAP* as a word), but they tended to mark both options as possible alternatives. Some informants from that age group left those particular questions unanswered, and remarked that they were not familiar with the items. Further research should therefore be conducted to verify this hypothesis.

As regards geographical differences, the most remarkable tendency observed in the study was that speakers of BrE recognized some specific items like *Btu* (“British thermal unit”) or *PM* (“Prime Minister”) and included the expanded realizations in their answers, whereas speakers of AmE systematically read them unexpanded, and some of them explicitly commented that those items were not in use in the States. In some cases, American speakers replaced the expanded readings of these items with familiar alternatives: for example, *PM* was occasionally identified as standing for “post meridian” (sic), although it was read out letter by letter.

Concerning the informants' occupations, it was confirmed that specialized knowledge plays an fundamental role in the reading of the items as their corresponding expanded expressions or as alternative expressions. Some examples of this influence are listed below:

1. The form *bp* (“boiling point”) was alternatively or exclusively read out as “blood pressure” by around 25% of the speakers, most of them having a specialized knowledge of Physics and Biology.

2. The form *cc* (“cubic centimetres”) was interpreted as “(carbon) copies” and read out accordingly by some informants whose job involved a knowledge of accounting and finances, and also by a few specialized in humanities.
3. When asked how to read the form *OE* (“Old English”), those subjects with a specialized knowledge of languages and literature tended to choose the expanded expression. The rest of informants, who were probably not familiar with the abbreviation, read it letter by letter, and two of them (probably due to their knowledge of accounting) interpreted *OE* as “omissions excepted,” which is part of the commercial abbreviation *E & OE* (“errors and omissions excepted”) used in invoice forms.
4. Abbreviations borrowed from Latin, such as *pm*, *eg* or *NB* were mostly read out either letter by letter or as their translated expanded expressions. By contrast, the abbreviation *RSVP* was read out, among other alternatives, as the original French expression by the majority of informants with some knowledge of French.

No significant interference from other languages was spotted in the realization of the items, in spite of the fact that the majority of informants could speak Spanish and some of them also spoke French (see, however, *RIP* below). In this respect, it was found out that only about 15% of the speakers systematically chose the options of Latin expanded expressions for the abbreviations provided, although they also marked letter-by-letter and/or translated alternatives. The results confirm that average background knowledge does not generally include source expressions from Latin. Thus the reading of the items is restricted to letter-by-letter realizations or translated expressions.

The answers provided for each of the items in Question 3 are summarized below. The analysis considers the main trends as regards the pronunciation of each item, although it includes some noteworthy exceptional readings. Unless otherwise specified, when two or more readings are mentioned as alternatives for each item (as in *PC* below), this implies that they are the choice of roughly equal percentages of speakers.

1. *PC* was mainly read out letter by letter, or both letter by letter and as “Personal Computer”. 30% of the informants (both British and American) also read it as “politically correct” and one speaker of BrE also interpreted the item as a possible abbreviation of “police constable.”
2. *bp* was mainly read out either as “boiling point” (40% of the answers) or letter by letter (40%). A few speakers with scientific knowledge –

- 20% of the informants – considered that the item could be an abbreviation of “boiling point” and/or “blood pressure.” Finally, 10% of the speakers also observed that the item could stand for “British Petroleum” (although they read it out letter by letter).
3. *Btu* was read out letter by letter by most informants irrespective of their background knowledge. Most speakers of AmE tended to choose only the unexpanded realization, while the expanded reading was only simultaneously chosen by a few speakers of BrE.
 4. *SWF* was read out only as “single white female” by 47.5% of the speakers, and especially by speakers of AmE.
 5. *cc* was mainly read out both letter by letter and as “cubic centimetres”. Some informants – the majority having a specialized knowledge of accounting and finances – alternatively read the item as “copies.”
 6. *cps* was most commonly read out letter by letter. The item was also exceptionally interpreted as standing for “Child Protective Services.”
 7. *DKNY* was mainly read out letter by letter.
 8. *o/a* was most commonly read out as “on account of,” the second alternative being letter-by-letter reading. One of the informants remarked that it could also be interpreted as “or /and.”
 9. *nm* was mostly read out letter by letter., although this realization was closely followed by either the expanded reading or both the expanded and the unexpanded readings.
 10. *NKOTB* was read out only as “New Kids on the Block” by approximately 80% of the informants. The rest chose either the alphabetic reading or both options.
 11. *NW* was read out only as “north-west” by 90% of the informants.
 12. *NY* was read out only as “New York” by 90% of the informants; the remaining 10% chose both letter-by-letter and expanded readings.
 13. *LA* was read out both letter by letter and as “Los Angeles” by 70% of the informants. On the whole, speakers of BrE tended to choose both options simultaneously, and none of them chose only the expanded reading; among speakers of AmE it was detected a slight tendency towards the expanded realization, which was also the alternative systematically selected by the informants from New Zealand .
 14. *NYC* was read out only as “New York City” by 75% of the subjects.

15. *PM* was mainly read out both letter by letter and as “Prime Minister”. Speakers of BrE tended to choose both readings simultaneously, which was not done by any speakers of AmE. 10% of the informants considered that the item could also be an abbreviation of “post meridian,” although they read it out alphabetically.
16. *NZ* was read out only as “New Zealand” by 90% of the informants.
17. *mph* was read out as “miles per hour” by around 50% of the informants. The rest chose either letter-by-letter reading or both alternatives.
18. *OE* was read out letter by letter by 30% of the informants. The rest of the speakers tended to choose either the expanded reading (55%) or both options (10%), probably under the influence of their specialized knowledge of languages and their subsequent familiarity with the abbreviation.
19. *WWF* was read out both letter by letter and as “Worldwide Fund” by 45% of the subjects. Another 35% chose only letter-by-letter reading, and 20% preferred only the expanded realization. Around 25% of the total amount of informants considered that the item could also be read out as “World Wrestling Federation/Foundation”
20. *YSL* was read out as “Yves Saint-Laurent” by 70% of the informants. 25% of the speakers did not mark any of the alternatives.
21. *FIFA* was read out like a word by 95% of the informants. Exceptionally, one of them also read it out as “football association.”
22. *AID*¹ (“Artificial Insemination by Donor”) is analysed below, together with item No 26 (*AID*²).
23. *WOW* was read out like a word by about 75% of the informants, probably due to the coincidence in shape with the interjection *wow*.
24. In spite of its phonotactic possibilities, *APT* was read out only letter by letter by 30% of the informants, whereas 35% of the subjects chose only the expanded reading (“advanced passenger train”), and another 35% chose both options simultaneously. 10% of the speakers also identified the item as an abbreviation for “apartment.”
25. *VIP* was read out letter by letter by 60% of the informants. 30% of the subjects chose both readings (expanded and unexpanded).
26. *AID*² stands for “Acute Infectious Disease,” and both *AID*¹ and *AID*² are categorized as alphabetisms by the written sources consulted.

The subjects' general tendency was reading both items (*AID*¹ and *AID*²) in the same way, that is, both as words, as abbreviations, or alphabetically. The first alternative was slightly more common, followed by expanded readings. The choice seems to support the influence of phonotactic possibilities on the realization of the items. Concerning *AID*², a few informants stated that the choice of word-like reading was motivated by its similarity to *AIDS*. This could be taken as evidence that prototypes may play a part in the categorization of less typical items, since *AID* may have been ascribed to the group of word-like initialisms due to its resemblance to a typical member (*AIDS*) in both external shape and expanded expression (as both items refer to illnesses). As regards the possible influence of semantic connections with existing words on the realization of the items, both *AID*¹ ("Artificial Insemination by Donor") and *AID*² ("Acute Infectious Disease") were purposely included in the questionnaire with a view to verifying whether the connotations conveyed by the word *aid* were transferred to *AID*¹, thus contributing to the acronymic pronunciation of the item. It was expected that the connotations of "help" or "assistance" conveyed by *aid* would favour the realization of *AID*¹ as an acronym; by contrast, the impossibility of establishing such links in the case of *AID*² could prevent its pronunciation as a word. Nevertheless, the results obtained indicate that semantic links are not as relevant as other parameters. In general terms, the choice of pronunciation did not seem to be guided by contrastive semantic connotations, since most speakers selected the same option (expanded, letter-by-letter or word-like pronunciation) for both items, irrespective of the positive or negative connotations of their expanded sources and already existing words.

27. *REM* was mainly read out either letter by letter, or both letter by letter and as "Rapid Eye Movement".
28. *IRIS* was read out only as a word by 75% of the speakers.
29. *UNEDA* was read out only unexpanded or both expanded and unexpanded by 80% of the informants. Another 15% read it out letter by letter: this reading could be due to the fact that the item contains a widely known alphabetism (*UN*), which starts the sequence of letters. Once again, prototypes might be influencing categorization.
30. *VAT/Vat* was mainly read out like a word, either exclusively (25% of the informants) or in combination with other alternatives: word-like reading and letter-by-letter reading (10%), word-like reading and expanded reading (10%), or the three alternatives simultaneously

(25%). Minority answers include all possible combinations except both letter-by-letter reading and expanded reading. One of the informants pointed out that the word-like realization of the item occurs in informal situations.

31. *aka/AKA* was mainly read out either letter by letter or both letter by letter and as “also known as”. One informant alternatively read the item as “alias.”
32. *TAFKAP* was read out only expanded by 90% the informants in spite of its length and its theoretical possibilities of word-like realization. Letter-by-letter or word-like readings were chosen by a minority of speakers, but always in combination with the expanded pronunciation.
33. *asap/ASAP* was read out both letter by letter and as “as soon as possible” by 65% of the informants. None of the speakers of BrE marked the option of word-like reading for this item.
34. *UVA* was read letter by letter by around 40% of the subjects, and another 40% read it out both letter by letter and as “ultraviolet”. The rest tended to read the item only expanded.
35. *SCSI* (a computing term which written sources identify as an acronym, since specialists read it as /'sku:zi/) was read out letter by letter by 90% of the informants. The remaining 10% read it like a word.
36. *eg* was read out letter by letter and as “for example” by 70% of the subjects. The rest tended to choose only one of those readings.
37. *NB/nb* was read out letter by letter by 75% of the informants. The second alternative was both letter-by-letter and expanded reading (“note well”). Some informants added alternative expanded readings such as “take note” or simply “note,” and 20% of them also considered the foreign expanded expression among the possible alternatives.
38. *RSVP* was most commonly read out letter by letter. The second alternative was both letter-by-letter reading and the expanded expression in French (“répondez s’il vous plaît”). 70% of the speakers with some knowledge of French included the foreign expanded expression in their answers. 40% of the total amount of informants chose the expanded alternative in French, either alone or in combination with letter-by-letter reading, and nearly half of them did not speak French; therefore, it could be hypothesized that this French sentence belongs to a set of words and common expressions which

have crossed linguistic boundaries so as to become part of the background knowledge of speakers of other languages.

39. *pm* was read out letter by letter by 60% of the informants. The second option (chosen by 35% of the subjects) was both letter-by-letter reading and the expanded expression in English (“in the afternoon”).
40. *RIP* was read out both letter by letter and as “rest in peace” by approximately 65% of the informants. In this case, around 20% of the speakers considered the word-like reading as a possible alternative to letter-by-letter pronunciation and/or expanded reading (perhaps due to the influence of the Spanish realization), although they rarely selected it as the only option.

Table 5 summarizes the itemized analysis of the forty initialisms and abbreviations. Crosses represent the most common readings of the items, and asterisks stand for second answers. Symbols joined by lines – ‘x—x’ – indicate that the informants chose two or three readings simultaneously for the same item.

ITEM	READING	
	letter by letter	expanded (expand.)
1. <i>PC</i>	x x—————x	
2. <i>bp</i>	x ————— x	
3. <i>Btu</i>	x	
4. <i>SWF</i>		x
5. <i>cc</i>	x—————x	
6. <i>cps</i>	x	*
7. <i>DKNY</i>	x	
8. <i>o/a</i>	*	x
9. <i>nm</i>	x *—————*	*
10. <i>NKOTB</i>		x
11. <i>NW</i>		x
12. <i>NY</i>		x

	READING		
13. <i>LA</i>	x—————x		*
14. <i>NYC</i>			x
15. <i>PM</i>	x—————x		*
	*	*	
16. <i>NZ</i>			x
17. <i>mph</i>			x
18. <i>OE</i>	*	x	
19. <i>WWF</i>	x—————x		*
	*	*	
	letter by letter	word	expand.
20. <i>YSL</i>		x	
21. <i>FIFA</i>		x	
^{22.} <i>AID¹</i>		x	*
23. <i>WOW</i>		x	
24. <i>APT</i>	x		*
	—————		*
25. <i>VIP</i>	x		*
	—————		*
^{26.} <i>AID²</i>		x	*
27. <i>REM</i>	x		
	x—————x		
28. <i>IRIS</i>		x	
29. <i>UNEDA</i>	*	x—————x	
		x	
30. <i>VAT/Vat</i>		x	
	—————		*
31. <i>a.k.a./AKA</i>	x—————x		
	x		

	READING		
32. <i>TAFKAP</i>			x
33. <i>asap/ASAP</i>	x	—————	x
34. <i>UVA</i>	x	—————	x
	x		
35. <i>SCSI</i>	x		
	letter by letter	expand. (English)	expand. (foreign)
36. <i>eg</i>	x	—————	x
			*
37. <i>NB/nb</i>	x		
	*	—————	*
38. <i>RSVP</i>	x		
	*	—————	*
39. <i>pm</i>	x		
	*	—————	*
40. <i>RIP</i>	x	—————	x

Table 5. The reading of *initialisms* and *abbreviations* in the survey: general tendencies

The informants' answers to Question 4 were analysed by considering their proximity to the original expanded sources: it was found out that they ranged from exact reproductions of the original expression to personal adaptations of the initials to assumed original words, and more or less free definitions of the referents. The answers were used to establish a relative measure of the degree of lexicalization of those initialisms and therefore their proximity to proper words. Thus higher percentages of personal expanded expressions and free definitions were assumed to increase the overall level of lexicalization of the item. In view of the results, the items can be arranged in the following way: the most lexicalized initialism in the list (and therefore the one which is closer to the morphosyntactic category of "word") is *Basic /BASIC*, followed by *yuppie*, *LSD*, *CIA*, *Nato /NATO*, and *Ufo /UFO*, in this order.

UFO can be regarded as the least developed item of the list in terms of lexicalization, since 90% of the informants defined it by providing the original expression it replaces ("unidentified flying object"). The remaining 10%

reproduced the expanded expression with minimal variations (for example, “unidentified foreign object,” or simply “flying object”).

NATO was defined as “North Atlantic Treaty Organization/Organisation” by 80% of the informants. In a scale of lexicalization, the item could be located slightly above *UFO* because 12.5% of the remaining informants provided assumed expanded expressions (“North American Trade Organization”) or approximate definitions (such as “international military organisation of defense”), whereas a small percentage (7.5%) gave no answer.

CIA could be located above *NATO* in the scale of lexicalization: in this case, none of the informants left the question unanswered, and the percentage of speakers who defined the item by supplying the exact expanded expression (“Central Intelligence Agency”) amounts to 75%. Another 10% chose assumed expanded expressions (for instance, “Central Investigation Association” or “Criminal Investigation Authority”), and most of the remaining 15% chose free definitions (for example, “US crime investigators”).

For *LSD* (“lysergic acid diethylamide”) only 10% of the speakers (among them, those with a knowledge of chemistry) provided the exact expanded expression – with or without some minor modifications in spelling. 70% of the informants recovered part of that original expression in their answers, since they defined the item as “acid”; this could be taken as an indication that the connection with the original expression is not lost yet. About one third of those subjects enlarged their definitions by adding that the item referred to “a drug” or “a hallucinogenic drug.” This free definition occurred on its own in 15% of the answers. Besides, 15% of the informants reinterpreted the expanded expression by providing the euphemistic alternative popularized by the Beatles: “Lucy in the sky with diamonds.”

As regards *yuppie* (“young urban/upwardly-mobile professional”), 60% of the informants defined it by providing the expanded expression, either complete or with minor modifications (for instance, “young professional” or “young upwardly mobile individual”). However, there is a high percentage of personal definitions (30%) which, in contrast with those of *CIA*, increase their “free” quality by including subjective judgements (some of those definitions are, for example, “rich brat,” “snob,” “materialistic city worker,” or “highly-paid person with a fashionable lifestyle”). As a result, *yuppie* can be located above the other items as regards the degree of lexicalization.

Lastly, *BASIC* was not defined by any of the informants by resorting to the expanded expression (“beginners’ all-purpose symbolic instruction code”). In fact, 40% of the subjects did not answer the question, and the rest provided definitions using their own words, the most common being “computer/programming language,” followed by “computer code.” As can be

observed, *BASIC* has entirely lost its connection with the expanded expression it replaces. In spite of the relative expansion of the item, the fact that it belongs to the specialized field of computing could account for the high percentage of informants who were not familiar with it and did not provide a definition. Taking into account the type of definitions supplied by the speakers who were acquainted with the term, it can be suggested that *BASIC* has reached a high level of lexicalization in comparison with other items of the list, such as *UFO* or *NATO*.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The survey evinces that widespread abbreviations (which include prototypes, such as *NW*, *NY*, or *NZ*) tend to be read out expanded, whereas less common abbreviations (*cps*, *nm*) tend to be read out unexpanded. Likewise, popular (and prototypical) acronyms and alphabetisms like *FIFA* and *VIP* tend to be read out accordingly (i.e. like a word and letter by letter respectively), and may influence the realization of less common items (*UNEDA*, *AID*, *APT*), which display more variety. Acronymic pronunciation is always a possibility, as illustrated by *APT*, *AID*¹, *AID*² or *UNEDA*, which were identified as acronyms by some speakers although written sources classify them all as alphabetisms. Finally, abbreviations borrowed from other languages (*eg*) tend to be read out either unexpanded or as their expanded expressions in English.

The survey also verified the existence of idiosyncratic habits of pronunciation, particularly as regards the realization of those items which are not widely spread or commonly used. Thus some subjects were found to show a systematic preference for tied answers or for one realization over the rest (for example, word-like pronunciation, or expanded reading). Moreover, it was verified that on some occasions those personal preferences could account for exceptional choices of pronunciation in more common items: for instance, a few informants who clearly tended to read all the sequences as words whenever possible also chose that reading for other items which are less frequently or even rarely read out like that, for example *aka*, *APT*, *REM*, *RIP* or *TAFKAP*.

The general conclusion that can be drawn is that, in practice, the most relevant principles for the realization of initialisms and abbreviations are customary use followed by the speaker's familiarity with the expanded expressions (the latter particularly applies to the reading of abbreviations). By contrast, the phonotactic possibilities of the sequence and the practical motivation of saving time when reading the item seem to be much less

important for the speakers. Finally, the coincidence in shape with already existing words and the semantic influence of these words on the realization of the items are parameters of relative importance, although they are easily superseded by custom and background knowledge. As regards the categorization of initialisms with respect to truly lexical items, it was verified that only a few initialisms are equipped to acquire the status of “quasi-words,” being marginal elements within that category; the rest are, to a greater or lesser extent, word-shaped phrases, that is, phrases that have been subject to a process of maximum graphic and phonic shortening (initialization), among other reasons, because their length was a hindrance to fluent communication. This process of shortening allows them to assimilate some convenient features of words which phrases lack, for example, brevity, mobility or cohesion. However, in most cases these reduced phrases are still dependent on their original expressions, to such an extent that they must coexist with them so as to ensure communication; in Bauer’s words, an initialism usually needs “the title which it purports to abbreviate” (1988:39). A high percentage of initialisms never come to be completely independent of their sources; consequently, they cannot make any progress in the process of lexicalization. As a matter of fact, the features and behaviour exhibited by the majority of these items seem to suggest that, as already mentioned, they are simply tools devised by the language to ease communication and, sometimes, to make it more creative or less unpleasant.

Lastly, this study on morphological marginality also provides evidence that languages, users and contexts make up an indivisible whole. The results evince the existence of a central principle which lies at the very heart of languages, namely that they are codes which are not independent of the remaining components of a communicative situation. On the contrary, languages are dynamic instruments embedded in socio-cultural environments, and messages are influenced by the rules and possibilities of the code, but also by the features of the context and the participants, as well as by the type of channel. As has been shown, the periphery cannot and should not be ignored, since it helps to enhance our knowledge of centrality besides confirming basic realities about language.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE ABBREVIATIONS IN ENGLISH

ID CODE

This questionnaire is about abbreviations (for example, *Mr.* or *kg.*), and words made up of initials from other words (for example, *AIDS* or *BBC*). Please read the

following instructions and answer the questions. Thank you very much for your help.

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Question 3 consists of a list of items with several possibilities of pronunciation. Tick (✓) the option you would choose, and if you think they could be read in more than one way, please tick all the alternatives. The possible answers for the first few items have been provided as examples.
- Choose the option in inverted commas (".") if, when finding the abbreviation, you read the expression it replaces: for example, **Mr** is read out "Mister."
- Choose the option "Others" when available if, for example, you think that the reading can be an expression other than the one in inverted commas.
- In Question 4 you should provide a brief definition for the items listed. That definition may be the expression that the item replaces (if known), a description using your own words, or both.
- Finally, when answering Questions 3 and 4, try to think about what you would normally say, rather than what you would regard as "correct".

QUESTIONS:

1.- Tick your age group and state your nationality and occupation. If you are a university student, please specify your degree (for example, Maths, Spanish Philology, etc.):

Age Group: up to 20 31 – 45
21 – 30 46 or over

Nationality: _____

Occupation /Studies: _____

2.- Do you speak any other languages besides English? If so, please specify:

3.- How would you read the following items if you found them written, for example, in a book, a letter, a magazine or a newspaper?

ITEM	READINGS		
<i>p.c.</i>	letter by letter ✓	"per cent" ✓	Others (please specify): <i>postcard</i>
<i>GCSE</i>	letter by letter ✓	"General Certificate Education)" ✓	(of Secondary Others (please specify):

<i>RAM</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word V		“Random Access Memory” <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>i.e.</i>	letter letter V	by	“that is” V	“ <i>id est</i> ” <input type="checkbox"/>	Others (please specify):
<i>PC</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“Personal Computer” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>b.p.</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“boiling point” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>B.t.u.</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“British thermal unit” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>SWF</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“Single White Female” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>c.c.</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“cubic centimetres” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>c.p.s.</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“cycles per second” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>DKNY</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“Donna Karan, New York” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>o/a</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“on account of” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>n.m.</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“nautical mile(s)” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>NKOTB</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“New Kids On The Block” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>NW</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“North-West” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>NY</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“New York” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>LA</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“Los Angeles” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>NYC</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“New York City” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>PM</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“Prime Minister” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>NZ</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“New Zealand” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>m.p.h.</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“miles per hour” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>OE</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“Old English” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>WWF</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“Worldwide Fund (for Nature)” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>YSL</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	“Yves Saint- Laurent” <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>FIFA</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>		Others (please specify):
<i>AID</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>		“Artificial Insemination by Donor” <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>WOW</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>		“Women against the Ordination of Women” <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>APT</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>		“advanced passenger train” <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>VIP</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>		“Very Important Person” <input type="checkbox"/>

<i>AID</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	"Acute Infectious Disease" <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>REM</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	"Rapid Eye Movement" <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>IRIS</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	"International Research & Information Service" <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>UNEDA</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	"United Nations Economic Development Administration" <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>VAT (or Vat)</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	"Value Added Tax" <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>a.k.a. (or AKA)</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	"also known as" <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>TAFKA P</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	"The Artist Formerly Known As Prince" <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>a.s.a.p. (or ASAP)</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	"as soon as posible" <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>UVA</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	" <i>ULTRAVIOLET</i> " <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>SCSI</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	"Small Computer Systems Interface" <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>e.g.</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	"for example" <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>"exempli gratia"</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	Others (please specify):
<i>NB (or n.b.)</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	"note well" <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>"nota bene"</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	Others (please specify):
<i>RSVP</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	"please answer," "please reply" <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>"répondez s'il vous plaît"</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	Others (please specify):
<i>p.m.</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	"in the afternoon" <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>"post meridiem"</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	Others (please specify):
<i>PSOE</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>"Partido Socialista Obrero Español"</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	"Spanish (Workers) Socialist Party" <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>RIP</i>	letter letter <input type="checkbox"/>	by	like a word <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>"Requiescat in Pace"</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	"(May he/she) rest in peace" <input type="checkbox"/>

4.- Do you know what the following items refer to?

Nato (or NATO): _____

Ufo (or UFO): _____

Basic (or BASIC): _____

CIA: _____

yuppie: _____

LSD: _____

Thank you for your cooperation. If there is anything you would like to add as regards the items or the questions, you can do it below:

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