

## Brevity plus

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[revised and expanded version]

1. the innovation and spread of lexical items very often is favored by considerations of **brevity**: items are invented by some people and adopted by others because they are more compact than earlier expressions

[2. **digression**: other reasons for the innovation and spread of these items, not having to do with formal considerations:

2.1. they often have the virtue of **novelty**, suggesting fashion, ostentatious cleverness, or playfulness;

2.2. they usually have the virtue of **contextual or social specificity**, via ties to specific contexts, like sports, journalism, business, radio/television, the tech world, gaming, etc., or to specific social groups, like young people, Australians, women, etc.]

3. these innovations also frequently (perhaps almost always) have the virtue of **semantic/pragmatic specificity**; they allow for shadings of meaning that are fuzzed over in the older expressions (which, typically, have radiated and generalized in their meanings over the years)

3.1. often the result is that the innovation has a semantics that is the semantics of the older expression **plus** something (as in this Language Log posting – “Y is X plus something”, <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/005487.html> – where the focus is not on recent innovations, or innovations believed to be recent, but instead on long-standing choices like *difficult* vs. *hard*, *nearly n* vs. *almost n*, *however* vs. *but* as contrastive connectives, *lot* vs. *much/many*)

3.2. the extra something in these cases is variously described as a nuance, connotation, suggestion, implicature, or presupposition; here I won’t explore questions about the formal analysis of the extra something in particular cases – in any case, **semantic/pragmatic specificity**

4. here I look mostly at category conversions (that is, conversions from one category to another) in English, in particular zero conversions and subtractive conversions (back-formations) – as opposed to ordinary derivational morphology, with affixes, which you can think of as additive conversion – when such conversions are, or are perceived to be, innovations, and I’ll focus on four types:

4.1. plain nounings (*a disconnect* vs. *a disconnection*)

(inventory of postings on 4.1, as of 2/7/10, here:

<http://arnoldzwicky.wordpress.com/2010/02/07/postings-on-nounings/>);

4.2. plain verbings (*to extinct* vs. *to make extinct*, *to drive to extinction*);

4.3. simple back-formations of verbs (*to incent* vs. *to provide an incentive to*);

4.4. two-part back-formations of verbs (*to cheerlead* vs. *to serve as a cheerleader*)

(inventory of postings on 4.4, as of 6/12/09, here:  
<http://arnoldzwickly.wordpress.com/2009/06/13/postings-on-2-p-b-f-verbs/>)

(the other two inventories are still in preparation)

note that all four types usually provide expressions that are shorter (in number of words or syllables) than the established alternatives: **brevity**

#### 5. on **semantic/pragmatic specificity**:

5.1. sometimes, a conversion is in competition with a (longer) derivational form: *disconnect* the noun vs. *disconnection/disconnexion*; relevant material from the *OED* on these items:

**disconnexion, -nection** in *OED2*:

‘... the fact or condition of being disconnected or unconnected; undoing of connexion; separation, detachment, disunion’ (cites from 1735 on)

**disconnect** n. in the *OED* (draft entry June 2005, labeled as *orig. U.S.*):

1. ‘an act or instance of disconnecting; a break of (esp. electrical or telephone) connection’ (cites from 1951 on)
2. ‘a complete lack of understanding, agreement, or consistency; a discrepancy’ (cites from 1983 on)

5.2. sometimes, a conversion is in competition with a phrase: *curfew* the verb vs. *subject to a curfew, impose a curfew on* (“we’re going to curfew the city”, from ADS-L 3/3/08); as with other choices between one-word and periphrastic expression for some content (morphological vs. syntactic expression for causation – *kill* vs. *cause to die*, and many other sorts of examples – and direct vs. oblique expression for objects (*play the piano* vs. *play on the piano*, etc.), where the one-word alternative famously suggests more direct involvement of the participants in the situation than the periphrastic alternative does

6. these conversions are frequently the object of peevishness, where they are disparaged on several grounds:

6.1. as innovations in competition with established expressions, they are “unnecessary” (but note **semantic/pragmatic specificity**), and are apparently used only for their **novelty** value (but the virtues of novelty are not to be sniffed at);

6.2. they are “ugly” (probably just because they’re unfamiliar);

6.3. their use is associated with deprecated groups (the young, esp. young women, journalists, bureaucrats, business types, etc.) or specific people – **contextual/social specificity**

6.4. general counter: people have good (if conscious) reasons for creating and adopting such innovations

#### Appendix

X. some other shortenings in word formation:

X.1. subcategory conversion (very similar to the category conversions I looked at above):

X.1.1. intransitive > transitive by direct causativization (*progréss* ‘cause to progress’)

X.1.2. intransitive > transitive by “P-drop” (British *agree* ‘agree on/to’): see my Sem Fest 10

paper on P~ Ø alternations in the complements of verbs, handout here:  
<http://www.stanford.edu/~zwicky/P~zero.hand.rev.pdf>

X.2. some other types:

X.2.1. nouning by truncation (*crude* for ‘crude oil’):

<http://arnoldzwicky.wordpress.com/2010/01/06/conversion-by-truncation/>

X.2.2. clipping (*neo* for ‘neophyte [to sci-fi fandom]’, *rents* for ‘parents’): see my inventory of postings on abbreviations (including clippings and alphabetic abbreviations), as of 8/29/09:

<http://arnoldzwicky.wordpress.com/2009/08/29/inventory-of-postings-on-abbreviation/>

X.2.3. alphabetic abbreviations (initialisms like *CBS*, acronyms like *NATO*)

X.2.4. eponyms (*zeppelin* for something like ‘Von Zeppelin’s airship’)

X.2.5. portmanteauing (*clippie* ‘hippie with a clipboard, clipboard hippie’\*) see my inventories of portmanteau postings, as of 12/28/09:

<http://arnoldzwicky.wordpress.com/2009/12/28/inventory-of-portmanteau-postings>

<http://arnoldzwicky.wordpress.com/2009/12/28/portmanteau-inventory-addendum/>

\*One of an enormous number of playful portmanteaus. The context:

Daniel Clowes, “Wilson in Day 16,412”, comic strip in 3/15/10 New Yorker. At a cafe table on the street, Wilson is approached by a young man seeking signatures and donations for a “save the planet” cause. Afterwards, Wilson to guy at next table:

You know what my ex used to call those guys? “Clippies.” Get it? Clipboard plus hippie.