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Linguistic Contamination: Word-building Peculiarities and Stylistic Functions

Lavrova N.A., Moscow State Pedagogical University, Russia

Abstract: The article investigates the linguistic and extralinguistic nature of contamination – a word-building pattern that seems to be on the rise in modern English. The relative productivity of contamination is traced down to several factors: first, the speaker's intention to assert his individuality through punning and word-juggling; second, saving up time and physical and mental effort; third, camouflaging some notion deemed indecent, rude, impolite and, therefore, unworthy of mentioning; fourth, in political and advertising discourse - exerting an influence on the recipient. The corresponding functions of contamination are: self-expressive, compressive, euphemistic, pragmatic. The article also touches upon some borderline cases – word-building patterns considered by some linguists as contamination (or blending), which in reality present contiguous models, in some of their aspects resembling contamination, but not identical to it. The author, henceforth, strives to pinpoint some criteria that help to set contamination apart from other patterns.

1. Introduction

The word-building pattern of contamination was popularized at the end of the 19th century by mathematician Ch. Dodgeson, who started his literary career under the pseudonym L. Carroll. He suggested calling them "portmanteau words", apparently, because their structure resembles a portmanteau case – two compartments "packed" in a single unit. Ever since that time such words have popped up sporadically, primarily, in children's literature, in the works by E. Lear, A. Milne and at the turn of the 21st century – in Victoria and Elizabeth Kahn's books and in a series of novels about Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling. The words seemed to strike a cord with children and soon the pattern was taken over by mass media – newspapers, journals and advertisements. The fact that contaminated words were born on the pages of books meant for children suggests that their main function is punning and word-play. This can hardly be denied if one considers such words as "bromidioms", "crocogator", "foolosopher", "toycoon", "millionerror", etc. However, a number of "most serious" words were made through contamination, terms like "electrocution", "bionics", "electronics", "avionics", etc. Apart from that, a number of nomenclature words appeared, such as "allerest" and "brevail" (see below). All this is to say that contamination should not be taken lightly as a facetious device meant to entertain by dint of disregarding the norm. Contamination is a multi-faceted phenomenon, which performs several functions and is complex in nature.

2. Contamination and Contiguous Word-building Patterns

The inventory of word-building models can be expanded through contamination, providing that one of the components, due to some reasons, gets prominence and productivity, and as a result becomes a recurrent and partially independent structural element. The word "Breathalyzer" (breath + analyzer), which appeared in the 80s of the previous century and initially served as a trade-mark name, gave rise to the combining form "-lyzer". As a result the word "eyelyzer" was constructed, which means "an instrument for detecting the

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amount of alcohol one has consumed by measuring the alcohol by the vapors emitted form the eyes" [Algeo, 1991:41]. The international words "secretariat" and "proletariat", in active use at the turn of the 20th century in Russia, have become the source for the form "-ariat" in the words "infantariat" and "salariat". The latter is nowadays applied to some clerks in Japan. Another combining element – "-flation" was abstracted from the contaminated word "stagflation" and is used as a structural element in compound words, such as "gradeflation" (the embellishments of grades and as a result – dumping educational standards), "oilflation" (rising oil prices), "taxflation" (rising taxes). One of the most productive combining forms in the English language at present is "-aholic". It got abstracted from the word "workaholic" in the 60s of the 20th century and gave rise to such words as "shopaholic", "wordaholic", "spendaholic", "coffeholic", etc. The word-forming element "-gate" was subtracted not directly from its prototype "Watergate" (a symbol of political scandal), but a little later when the following contaminated lexemes appeared: "winegate", "Irangate", "Iraqgate", "skategate", "dancegate". At present the element is used in a more abstract, generalized meaning of any scandal, political or not, as a rule involving celebrities. The word "foodlegger" is formed by merging "bootlegger" and "food". The combing form "-legger" has the generalized meaning of illicit import or export. "Cheesewich" (cheese + sandwich) is the source of such words as "duckwich", "spamwich", "turkeywich". The fact that the English "cosmonaut" is formed by contamination might be a novelty to some native speakers, as well as foreign learners. It was formed by curtailing and subtracting from two words – "astronaut", which appeared in 1880, and "cosmic". Later the element "-naut" was abstracted from "cosmonaut" with the generalized meaning of "an explorer of certain matter or space". As a result such words as "aquanaut", "bathynaut", "hydronaut", "plastinaut", "chimponut", "Reaganaut" appeared. The latter example reveals the maximally abstract meaning – "the one who supports R. Reagan".

The issue of what linguistic status the analyzed above words enjoy is debatable. The solution to the problem is linked, on the one hand, to the duality of synchronic and diachronic word-forming analysis, and, on the other, to the differentiation between word-building analysis proper and the morphemic one. Viewed synchronically, such formations are regarded as words including one of more combining forms with the rider that one of the elements is not necessarily of Latin or Greek origin and can be formed on the basis of English. Diachronically, however, the first few words were not formed by directly linking the stem to the combining form – they were a fusion of two independent words that were curtailed in the process. The confusion of word-forming and morphemic analyses may cause ambiguity in treating the resultant lexeme. From the standpoint of morphology, the word "moneymoon" is a compound two-stem unit. Despite this undeniable fact, the word does not refer to a kind of moon which is composed of or is related to money. One would be hard put to find the word in a dictionary, because it is not there. It is an occasional haplological contaminated word traced back to the words "honeymoon" and "money". Given that, its first element is not constituted by the word "money" alone – there is an application of "money" onto "honey", the graphemes "oney" being common.

A review of modern linguistic papers on word-building, in particular – on contamination (or blending) (J. Algeo, J. Kremer, R. Fischer) shows that there is a highly flexible approach to what should be called "contamination": a lot of contiguous patterns are subsumed under the heading "blending" or "contamination" (in the sense that we regard it here, the two terma are synonymous). J. Algeo (1991) regards some complex clippings,

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compound, derived, and words with combining forms as contaminated or blended. Thus, the neological word "build-down", according to J. Algeo, is made by blending the lexemes "build-up" and "down". I think, however, that this a compound word built analogically on the word "built-up". The main objection to regarding this one as a blend runs as follows: the process of blending consists in merging the structures and semantics of two (rarely – more) words, so that some semes of both words are inevitably present in the resultant blend. The meaning of the word "built-down" in diametrically opposed to its prototype "built-up", so it is illogical to treat it as a blend or a contaminated word. The same reasoning can be applied to the synonymous words "hit lady" and "hit woman", which mean "a contract female murderer". It seems obvious that they are both formed analogically on the word "hit man", whose second component retains its more specific sense of a "male", but not a generic one – a human being. This is partially explained by the fact that (at least up to now) most contract murderers have exclusively been male. The word "femspeak" is also regarded by J. Algeo as a blend, which is doubtful, though.

Apparently, this is a case of a complex clipping, because, firstly, the second component is wholly retained in the word and, secondly, because the first word is shortened up to a fully closed syllable, which is typical of modern English; therefore the graphemes "fem" should be regarded as a regular clipping of a morpheme. The combination "ice house" is not a blend, either, although J. Algeo indicates that it is formed by blending the words "green house" and "ice age". The definition of "ice house" runs as follows: "a cooling of the earth's surface and lower atmosphere, triggering an ice age" [Algeo, 1991:50]. Comparing the words "moneymoon" and "ice house" one may get the faulty impression that structurally they are the same - in fact, this is not so, and the ultimate criterion is not the separate spelling of "ice house". The word "moneymoon" is facetious and is not used for denoting a new notion. In contrast, "ice house" is not facetious and is used to designate a new terminological notion, which does not, however, include the semes of "green house", unlike the blend "moneymoon", which includes the semes of both "honeymoon" and "money". All the facts considered, "moneymoon" is definitely a blend, whereas "ice house" is a compound word based on analogy.

R. Fischer (1998) regards as contaminated the structure "des res", which corresponds to the full form "desirable residence". This "word" (I will presently explain why it is in inverted commas) does not meet a single requirement worked out for contaminated words – monolithic spelling, irregular curtail of morphemes, structural and semantic merging. The expression "des res" is a stylistic variant of "desirable residence" and is notionally equal to it. A contaminated word is characterized by some novelty of notion and meaning, that is, its semantics is not a mere sum total of the semes of the constituents. The clippings "des" and "res" are structurally fully closed, which is typical of present English, in short, they present regular patterns of clipping in English. The very treatment of "des res" as a word is open to doubt. Despite a certain degree of idiomaticity, both constituents retain semantic and structural independence. Finally, no structural blending is observed here, that is why it is not a blend (or contamination), but a stylistic variant of a not fully idiomatic word combination.

J. Kremer in his dictionary "Squeasel Words in Real Life" (2008) cites the example: "All Stressed Up and Nowhere to Go!" (all dressed up and nowhere to go + stressed: Book by Bill Crawford) and regards it as a syntactic blend, because the words "dressed" and "stressed" sound alike. The criterion of paronymy indeed plays a role in the formation of a

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contaminated word, but it is not ultimate. What happens here is a decomposition of a set phrase, which is not based on contamination, but on a substitution of one element for another. The word “stressed” does not contain any semes of the word “dressed” and so their paronymy and sharing some graphemes are conducive to punning, but not contamination. The expression "Golf of Mexico” (golf + Gulf of Mexico: a miniature golf course) semantically has nothing to do with the “Gulf of Mexico”, although it conjures the latter up. Here a phenomenon of precedence or intertextuality can be observed, that is to say, the structure “Golf of Mexico” is an intertext.

As can be seen from the above reasoning, there is still little unanimity in the treatment of what can be referred to as contamination, therefore it is a compelling and fruitful subject to study.

3. Contamination as a Means of Euphemistic Circumlocution

Since Ancient Greece euphemistic words and expressions have actively been used as a stylistic device with a view to avoiding communication breaches by means of substituting downright and straightforward expressions for indirect and milder ones. A number of euphemisms emerged as a result of self-consciousness and bashfulness, as well the desire to be polite and show reverence. The rationale behind using euphemistic expressions started to be minutely studied at the end of the 19th century when the focus of research was the place and function thereof in language, their impact on a people’s culture and their reflection of some typological cultural characteristics (L.V. Scherba, V.V. Vinogradov, B.V. Golovin, A.N. Vasilieva). In the encyclopaedic dictionary by prof. O.S. Akhmanova euphemisms are defined as “emotionally neutral words and expressions, used instead of synonymic structures that are deemed by the speaker as impolite, rude or indecent” [Akhmanova, 1966:521]. L.P. Krisin (1996) defines euphemisms as an indirect, paraphrased expression that performs the following functions:

- The subjective or objective evaluation of the denotatum as rude or vulgar.
- The search for a word or an expression that both neutralizes and shrouds the true nature of the object or phenomenon.
- The bearing of psychological, intellectual, moral and cultural peculiarities of the speaker, as well as social standards, on the occurrence rate of euphemisms.

U.V. Gorshunov justly claims that euphemisms do not only camouflage some notion, but also perform the pragmatic function and are aimed at regulating and forming the recipient’s consciousness in political discourse; cryptic function, caused by the intention to conceal the activities of some group or organization; compressive function and ludic, or word-playing one. In the latter case they may convey irony, sarcasm, or the particular attitude of an interlocutor towards the subject of communication.

An influx of euphemistic expressions could be observed in the Victorian epoch when a great many paraphrased words appeared that described the parts of body deemed not worthy of mentioning. Nowadays a certain shift in the objects of euphemisation can be observed: while politically correct speech is still valued, ludic euphemistic expressions are foregrounded, among which one of the most popular models is contamination or blending. Contamination consists in curtailing morphemes and merging them together either with a

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haplological centre or without it. This pattern seems to be optimal for conveying two or (rarely) more structural and semantic wholes by dint of one word. Some examples of contaminated words that are a variant of euphemisation can be drawn from the dictionary by J. Kremer "Squeasel words in real life" (2008). The word "Bossip" (blog + gossip) is used by Internet users as a jargonism in the meaning of a journal written on-line that contains, however, not verified information about celebrities. The emergence of this euphemistic blend is probably explained by the fact that some blog-users are not willing to acknowledge the fact that what it contains in reality is simply gossip. Here the cryptic function is realized – not every one of native speakers is familiar with the term "bossip", and that was actually the aim of the wordsmith – to conceal from the uninitiated the notion that stands behind it. The word "grog" from the same conceptual field (group + blog: a group blog) is an homophonic euphemism which phono-graphically coincides with the usual word "grog" used in the meaning of "diluted alcoholic beverage". The cryptic function is intertwined here with the ludic one, so much so that an occasional bystander might have some difficulty in deciphering the expressions "let's go grogging" or "let's do some grogging. The word "hasbian" (hasbeen + lesbian) is a euphemistic blend created by circumlocution with the aim of avoiding mentioning the fact which is embarrassing for a person it refers to.

Euphemistic contamination is also made use of in political discourse as part of politically correct speech. The word "Obombies" contains in its structure and semantics the compressed expression "Barack Obama + zombies". It is used for designating those who blindly and subserviently support the political course of the current US president B. Obama. The word through its constituent elements means to convey that those people are hardly aware of what exactly the politics embrace. The form of the word is convenient for camouflaging both words: in fact, it is more likely that the recipient will wrongly read the lexeme "bomb" into the blend, the result is that the wordsmith, at least formally, can hardly be accused of a disparaging or downgrading attitude towards the president, although it enables the wordsmith to let the steam off and simultaneously assert their individuality. Euphemistic contamination is also favoured by some medical terms and nomenclature and is aimed at creating a more appealing image of the medication, simultaneously obscuring the essence of the ailment one suffers from. Thus, the name of an antiallergic medication "Allerest" (allergy + arrest) is a case of euphemistic contamination which defies correct interpretation, the more plausible components being "all", "rest" or even the German "alle(r)". Here punning word-building can be observed: the medication is easily associated with rest. The name of the cancer treatment course is "brevail": breast + prevail. The components of the word are curtailed in such a way that it's hardly possible to correctly interpret its first element, because the two graphemes "br" can be the initials of a great many words. Given this, the designation is appropriate for being cryptic and euphemistic: it camouflages the disease, its treatment and enables the patients to freely communicate with each other without feeling the curious or condescending gazes of others.

It is not at all easy to connote any euphemistic function in the word "smurds", which is the name of a patented ornament by H. Herschfield. This is partly because it is a trademark aimed at attracting attention and holding it for as long as can be. The word also defies deciphering, sounds and looks fanciful, weird, or at least unusual. Apparently, instead of using the expression "smiling words", H. Herschfield together with advertising people, preferred the more original, though obscure, "smurds", which only vaguely conjures up some associations that are hard to pinpoint. But this very fact makes the word all the more

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poignant, compelling and fairy-like. The blend "chuppie" (child + yuppie: the child of a yuppie who acts like a younger version of its parents) is homophonous with the name of food for dogs "chuppie". The blend emerged much later than the food, so it is very unlikely that people perceive it as contamination which represents a complex, albeit facetious, notion. It is worthy of note that this blend is polysemantic: it also stands for "Chinese yuppies". The word "doga" in all probability was created with the aim to hide the fact that a dog attends fitness classes. Here a metaphorical usage can be traced, as the first component realizes its figurative, indirect meaning: it is not, in fact, a yoga course that a dog attends: it is viewed by some people as funny and downgrading and this is reflected in the word they created for it.

The word "dreaditor" in a compressed form negatively characterizes a 'ruthless' editor who will stop at nothing to create a few stumbling blocks on one's way to a publication. The second component is hidden here: it might very well be the word "creditor", for usually it is they who are dreaded.

It follows from the above-mentioned that euphemistic contamination is resorted to whenever a person is willing to conceal from too many something that is meant to be conveyed to a single person only or to a circumscribed group. Presumably, the secrecy that is associated with euphemisms is ephemeral, for in a relatively short period f time due to the spread of mass media, the so-called "outsiders" are bound to grasp the meaning and the notion that is represented by a contaminated euphemism. Medical terms and nomenclature often represent the notion that might cause anguish to people afflicted with some particular disease, for this reason more elaborate ways are sought after. The structural model of contamination seems to be an adequate way of camouflaging some painful notions and meanings and lending the product (medication) simultaneously less harsh and more appealing.

4. Contamination as Word-play

Recent decades have seen a change in the linguistic research paradigm – from a descriptive to a more explanatory pattern. This has partly been caused by an interest in the speaker's intention while producing an utterance. The focus of research is primarily derived words, inasmuch as they account for approximately 70 % of all the new words in English (S.Z. Nuchov, 1997). New words are mostly formed on the basis of English resources, borrowing from other languages as well as the usage of neo-Latin and neo-Greek elements amounts to no more than 8%. Apart from a systemic description of productive and occasional formations, within the framework of the new paradigm, the task of the researcher also embraces the study of provenance, usage, and interpretation of new words. The creation thereof, if it is not about neologisms proper, is an emanation of human creativity and indicative of punning. Prof. S.Z. Nuchov points out that more often than not, the speaker does not in fact aim to exert any influence on his interlocutor while playing with words: "I believe that the speaker does not think along the lines of the dogmatic norm meaning to violate it and somehow to affect his interlocutor, he's got a more egotistical intention: by rearranging words and morphemes to express whatever thoughts, feelings and preoccupations he has in his mind, in other words, he depicts his inner world through the medium of words" [Нухов, 1997: 18].

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Linguists world over unanimously say that the number of such words in English as well as in some other languages seems to be on the rise: at the turn of the 20th century they accounted for no more than 1% of all new words, nowadays this figure has risen up to 7%. The reasons for the active use of this pattern are still unclear and form the fruitful field of investigation for many sciences and areas of study: linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc. The most popular and plausible explanation is that the influx of contaminated words is caused by the tendency to save up physical and mental energy, which is, in its turn, brought about by more or less stable technological progress, particularly in the sphere of computer technology. An important role is also played by globalization and the influx of information that a modern man has to retain in mind.

Notably, this information is not only of pragmatic or sentimental value but is also comprised of various irritants, nuisances and interferences in the form of noise of big cities, ecological imbalance, the rapid transport movement. All this is conducive to psychological and physical pressures and stresses; it has almost become a norm for a big city dweller at the end of a long working day to complain of such exhaustion that “they can hardly move their tongue, let alone speak”. Therefore, it is indeed logical to surmise that one of the reasons for the emergence of contaminated words is a natural tendency to compression, which is caused by the tendency to save up (or, if viewed differently) to accumulate energy, including its verbal variation. We do not support the extreme version of this “economization” theory, which postulates that it is a kind of universal observed world over. If it were really so, with every coming year the number of morphemes and consequently graphemes in a word would be fewer and, at some point in time, the minimal unit of communication might be not a word, morpheme or even a quasi-morpheme (structural element of a contaminated word), but a sound,at best, and at worst – silence and communication through gesticulation. This scenario seems improbable and absurd. What happens in reality is a sporadical, though regular, clipping and merging of words and morphemes in order to convey maximal information by means of one linguistic unit. The fact that the number of such words in on the rise should not instigate fear in language researchers or purists, because language is a self-regulating entity, that is to say, if, on the one hand, an increase in compressed structures is observed, on the other, there exist quite a number of paraphrastic, descriptive expressions and terminoids – lengthy word-combinations which in contrast to classical terms consist of more than two words – 3,4,5,6 and even more. According to prof. S.Z. Nuchov (1997), the most widespread spheres of ludic contamination are: books for children (R. Kipling, curtiosity – curiosity + courtesy), mass media (Aston Villa(in) Aston Villa + villain, wine-oceros – wine + rhinoceros); annotations to films, books, exhibitions (animal + electronics); jokes and anecdotes (Tsardines – tsar + sardines, William-goat – William + billy-goat); limericks (panoe – punt + canoe); facetious definitions (Adolescent: a person in his early nicoteens – nicotine + teens. Autobiography: it's usually an alibiography – alibi + biography); riddles and witty answers to them (What do you get when you pour boiling water down a rabbit hole? Hot cross bunnies – hot cross bun + bunnies); facetious pseudo-terms (“Polygamy is a sort of a vague term. Actually, if you have one wife, it's called monogamy. If you have two wives, it's called bigamy. And if you have more than two wives, it's called pigamy – pig + bigamy” [Nuchov, 1997:177]); imitation (Timethod of wordoggle – Time + method of word + joggle); nicknames (McMillionaire – McNair + millionaire).

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5. Conclusion

The main reasons for making use of contamination can be summarized as follows: punning; expressing satire, irony or imitating somebody's manner; self-expression; word juggling; saving up time and effort. In political and advertising types of discourse contamination serves an efficient means of exerting influence on the audience by way of attracting and holding its attention. Contamination as a word-building device is gathering momentum and is used not only in English, but also in Russian, German, Croatian and some other languages. Such words become sources of combining forms and word-forming affixes, are used as terms in computer- and Internet-communication, as part of pharmaceutical nomenclature. The witty, punning character of contamination makes it particularly popular with wordsmiths.

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