



A MORPHONOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CLIPPING IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. This paper investigates clipping—a word-formation process also referred to as truncation or shortening—from a morphonological perspective. It aims to define the phenomenon, clarify its terminology, explore its semantic and stylistic implications, and determine whether it qualifies as a legitimate word-formation device. Emphasis is placed on the phonological patterns of clipping in English, revealing that phonological regularities support its classification within generative morphology. Various types of clipping—back-clipping, fore-clipping, syncope, and median clipping—are examined, and the productivity, lexicalization, and morphosyntactic behavior of clipped forms are analyzed. Results suggest that clipping is a structured, rule-governed process that interacts closely with phonology and morphology.

Keywords: clipping, shortening, truncation, morphonology, word-formation, phonology, morphology, lexicalization

In this article, I will endeavor to define clipping, and see if there are any semantic differences between the multiplicity of terms: “shortening”, “clipping”, “truncations”, etc. I will examine the semantic role of clipping, and try to answer the following question: is clipping a word-formation device? I will mainly focus on the consequences and phonological realizations of clipping in English to show that the phonological regularities in the formation of clipping make it a potential word-formation device, by shedding new light on the tendencies formalizing the study of clipping.

I would like to study one of the word-formation processes known as “shortening”, “clipping” or “truncation”, adopting a morphophonological approach. The present paper will be divided as follows: in the first part entitled “theoretical background: what is clipping?” I will endeavor to define clipping¹, and see if there are any semantic differences between the multiplicity of terms: “shortening”, “clipping”, “truncations”, etc. The second part will examine the semantic role of clipping, and in the third part I will try to answer the following question: is clipping a word-formation device? The fourth and final part will focus on the consequences and phonological realizations of clipping in English to show that the phonological regularities in the formation of clipping make it a potential word-formation device.

In other words, the key-questions addressed in this paper are to decide whether or not the study of clipping can be formalized, i.e. given word-formation generative rules;



whether clipping is part of morphology or phonology; and finally whether phonological constraints are more important than morphological constraints in order to formalize the study of clipping.

Quite paradoxically, clipping has more than one name. Depending on the reference books consulted, the same phenomenon is often referred to as “shortening”, “clipping” or “truncation”. The first task I would like to carry out is to see whether the three terms are really synonymous, or if they do not refer to different linguistic realities. Clipping and truncation seem to be quasi synonymous terms, clipping being the Anglo-Saxon term, whereas truncation is borrowed from French. The semantic difference lies in the use of the term “shortening”, which seems to act as a hyperonym for clipping and truncation, but also for blends, backformations, acronyms, etc. I will further show that there are good reasons to differentiate these various word-formation devices, as they do not partake of the same phenomena. From now on, I will consider the two terms “clipping” and “truncation” as synonyms, and “shortening” as a hyperonym comprising not only clipping/truncation as one of its possible linguistic realizations, but also blends, acronyms, etc., word-formation devices which will not be studied in this paper. Let me now examine the definitions given by linguists for “clipping” or “truncation”. Clipping is generally considered a linguistic phenomenon consisting in cutting up, trimming, or “mincing” a word, so as to produce a shorter version of this word by loss of material. The first two definitions are borrowed from Bauer and adopt a semantic and stylistic approach, clipping being negatively defined as a process without any semantic consequences, but with a change in the stylistic value:

Clipping refers to the process whereby a lexeme (simplex or complex) is shortened, while retaining the same meaning and still being a member of the same form class. Frequently clipping results in a change of stylistic level.

Another type of shortening is clipping. Clipping is the process of shortening a word without changing its meaning or part of speech. As will be clear from the examples given below, clipping frequently does change the stylistic value of the word.

Katamba provides a somewhat related definition, but adds a phonological dimension to his definition:

Clipping is the term for the formation of a new word-form, with the same meaning as the original lexical term, by lopping off a portion and reducing it to a monosyllabic or disyllabic rump. [Katamba 2005: 180]

As for Stockwell & Minkova [2003: 10], they add a syntactic element by noting that clipping is not restricted to a single existing word, but can also apply to a whole phrase: mob (<< mobile vulgus); zoo (<< zoological garden).

The grammatical or syntactic dimension is also tackled by Tournier [1985: 299] who



notes that clipped forms are essentially nouns, but also adjectives, verbs, but more rarely adverbs and prepositions, and even more rarely interjections and conjunctions ('cos). A short statistical survey I have carried out on a list of 290 clippings provided by Wikipedia² confirms Tournier's analysis and gives the following results:

- nominal clipped forms: 265 (91.38%)
- adjectival clipped forms: 20 (6.90%)
- verbal clipped forms: 3 (1.03%)
- adverbial clipped forms: 2 (0.69%)

What is interesting to note is that adjectival clipped forms are often converted into nouns, which confirms the supremacy of nouns as clipped forms (bisexual >> bi; traditional >> trad, etc.). This nominal nature can be the first noticeable tendency in the study of clipping.

If clipping is inevitably linked to morphology, as it consists in cutting up, mincing, trimming or deleting a portion of its constituent part, the word "morphology" is nevertheless rarely mentioned. Yet, it seems that clipping is originally defined according to morphological criteria. What are the recurrent morphological patterns found in English?

Three main patterns can be found, with another border-line pattern which can be added:

- Clipping of the final part, of the end of the word, back-clipping (apocope or apocope): bi (<< bisexual); binos (<< binoculars); mike (<< microphone). It is by far the most frequent case, accounting for 3 cases out of 4 (Tournier). Even discontinuous pieces can be clipped, as with sci-fi (<< science fiction); sitcom (<< situation comedy); biopic (<< biographical picture); modem (<< modulator demodulator), etc. Clipping is also very often linked to backformation: some authors such as Stockwell & Minkova [2003] or Bauer [1993: 176] consider backformations as cases of shortening: edit (<< editor); burgle (<< burglar); peddler (<< peddle). There are pros and cons to considering backformations as examples of clippings; I personally consider backformations to be different from clippings, because backformations are always opaque, no longer transparent, whereas the origins of most clipped forms can still be traced back; and backformations change the word-class, whereas it is not the case for clipping.

- Clipping of the initial part, of the beginning of the word, fore-clipping (apheresis): fro (<< Afro); loid (<< celluloid); Yard (<< montagnard), accounting for 1 case out of 5.

- Clipping of both the initial and the final parts of the word (syncope): jam (<<



pajamas); shrink (<< head-shrinker); van (<< advantage); flu (<< influenza); fridge (<< refrigerator).

• Another related though different pattern can be added: it could be called median clipping (6% according to Tournier [1985]), in which the middle of the word is dropped: paratrooper (<< parachute trooper); breathalyser (<< breath analyser); smog (<< smoke fog). I think it is better to treat this phenomenon as a “contraction” rather than as a real case of “median clipping”, as this last phenomenon could be considered as a case of blending (“mot valise” in French, or “mixonym” for Pottier [1987: 47]). It is indeed sometimes hard to decide if we are confronted with clipping or blending: edbiz. According to Bauer [1993: 233], if there is compound stress, it is a clipping; if there is simple word stress, it is a blend.

The tendency we can note here is the supremacy of back-clipping over the other three types of clipping. Proof of this is that the list of “apocopations” provided by Wikipedia has no counterpart for “apheresis” or “syncope”.

Another characteristic feature of clipping is that once a word has been clipped, it can become completely autonomous and be combined with other word-formation processes. An example borrowed from Bauer [1993: 176] is commitology, “the study of committees”. Let me give purely discursive creations, showing the infinite morpho-lexical creativity of English. The following two examples have been borrowed from the American situation comedy – I mean “sitcom” – How I Met Your Mother:

These swords represent our brohood (S.1, Ep.8)

- We’re bros [...] we’re going to have one last awesome night as bros. It’s a broing away party. A special broccasion. A bro-choice rally. A brotime of the Apollo.

- No, don’t bro me!

Once a clipped form has become lexicalized as such, it can adopt all the properties of the full form, such as tense for the verb, plural marker for the noun, etc. For instance, gym, fridge and phone can be pluralized: gyms, fridges and phones. The noun disrespect has been clipped into diss, but cannot really be pluralized because of its use as an uncountable noun. It has nonetheless given way to the clipped verb diss following a conversion / functional shift process, and it is possible to say: Stop dissing me!

Some clipped forms happen to get so autonomous that they are finally perceived and considered as the unmarked, standard forms (the same phenomenon is observed with euphemism): fridge (<< refrigerator). Sometimes, the motivation between the full form and the clipped form is sometimes lost – a phenomenon known as “opacification”; the following clipped forms are classified from the most transparent to the most opaque: flu (<< influenza); van (<< caravan); miss (<< mistress); fence



(<< defence); gipsy (<< Egyptian); gin (<< Geneva); gym (<< gymnasium); piano (<< pianoforte); cello (<< violoncello); bus (<< omnibus); pants (<< pantaloons); pram (<< perambulator), etc. This leads me to consider the semantic function of clipping in English.

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