LEGE ARTIS

Language yesterday, today, tomorrow

Vol. VIII. No 1 2023 (Special issue)

ECONOMIZATION IN INFORMAL ELECTRONICALLY MEDIATED COMMUNICATION: ELLIPSES AND SENTENTIAL ALPHABETISMS

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Received: 12.02.2023 **Reviewed:** 20.02.2023 and 25.02.2023

Similarity Index: 0%

Bibliographic description: Lančarič, D. (2023). Economization in informal electronically mediated communication: ellipses and sentential alphabetisms. In *Lege artis. Language yesterday, today, tomorrow. The journal of University of SS Cyril and Methodius in Trnava*. Trnava: University of SS Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, VIII (1), Special issue, p. 79-91. ISSN 2453-8035 DOI: doi.org/10.34135/lartis.23.8.1.06

Abstract: The paper looks at the phenomenon of sentential alphabetisms and the combination of economization processes applied to their production. The term alphabetism is used as a broad category to cover acronyms and initialisms which both result from acronymization processes. The focus is on sentential alphabetisms and their unacronymized equivalents with the aim to verify the assumption that economization in a significant number of cases involves a combination of processes at the lexical level (acronymization) and the syntactic level (syntactic ellipsis).

Keywords: acronymization, economization, electronically mediated communication, sentential alphabetism, syntactic ellipsis.

1. Introduction

With the emergence of electronically mediated communication, everyday informal language has become an increasingly important subject of linguistic research. The demand for thorough exploration has led to a new branch of linguistic science, computer linguistics. The scope of computer linguistics is dominated by language treatment on the Internet and other new electronic media. Hand in hand with progress in technology and constant linguocultural changes, internet communication is constantly evolving. Much of the print media has been replaced by electronic media, mostly stored online. As a result, many new communicative genres have also emerged in which readers become more communicatively involved, engaging in numerous interactions by leaving comments on social networks or writing their own blogs in response to various communicative situations (Lančarič at al. 2022).

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Many types of new media are characterised by a high degree of spontaneity and communicative interactivity. A typical example of this is the interactive written chat, in which an immediate reaction of the participant is required. This form of communication loses stability, which is characteristic of standard written speech and approaches oral speech in its dynamics. At the same time, written chat moves away from direct face-to-face speech by the reduction of stimuli, since visual and auditory signals drop out, and non-verbal signs, such as gesticulation, mimics and paralinguistic signals are completely or partially absent (e.g., tone, voice, etc.) (cf. Crystal 2001; Hudcovičová 2021; Šušol 2009).

The demand for immediate response on one hand, and the absence of extralinguistic and paralinguistic means on the other has diverted communication from regular to more alternative forms of expressing communicative intention. The absence of extralinguistic and paralinguistic means is mostly compensated for by the use of pictograms, emoji, and the multiplication of keyboard characters (e.g., multiplication of punctuation marks in order to express emotions). The demand for immediate reaction is in turn manifested, for example, by a minimalist application of diacritics, contracted forms, as well as the shortening and use of pictograms.

There is no doubt that, depending on the context, many of these compensatory and economizing tools compensate for full, longer forms. Their application can be motivated by such functional aspects of language, in which language units acquire a certain character of originality. The use of non-standard abbreviations such as alphabetisms enables the communicant to express their unconventional attitudes, playfulness, and joy from the production of nonce expressions. Simplification can have a cryptographic function or it can be used as a tool for euphemization or anonymization. In this paper, however, these language means will be considered instruments of economization and their other functions will not be regarded. More specifically, the paper focuses on sentential alphabetisms (the joint category of acronyms and initialisms) and their structure in informal electronically mediated communication.

The new, alternative forms of communication establish the assumption that any treatment of language units as separate categories is merely illustrative and that language levels are interrelated. The mutual relation among the language levels postulates the fact that the lexical and syntactic levels cannot be treated in isolation and their mutual cooperation needs to be considered thoroughly.

In the present research, the primary focus is laid on the economization of unacronymized equivalents to sentential alphabetisms. Sentential structures often undergo multiple economizations. The presence

 ISSN 2453-8035

of syntactic ellipses is used as a distinctive variable with the aim to verify the assumption that a significant proportion of sentential alphabetisms combine economization at the lexical level (acronymization) and the syntactic level (syntactic ellipsis).

2. Corpus and methodology

This quantitative corpus-based research examines a sample of 4500 alphabetism entries previously introduced in *Dictionary of English abbreviations* and codes in informal online communication compiled by Lančarič & Pavlík (2013). The raw data comprise one-lexeme alphabetisms, e.g., *NRG* (energy), lexical, non-sentential acronymized clusters, e.g., *NQT* (newly qualified teacher) and sentential acronymized clusters, e.g., *NTDW* (nothing to do with). The sentential acronyms are extracted and analysed further. The criteria for distinguishing the sentential from the lexical and other non-sentential clusters are the following:

(1) The full non-acronymized form contains a subject and a predicate (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990: 13), e.g., *AASHTA* (As always, Sheldon has the answer).

(2) The full form does not contain a subject and / or a predicate where it would normally be anticipated, e.g., *AUDI* (<…> accelerates under demonic influence). (Further discussed in the section on ellipsis).

(3) The full non-acronymized form is a non-finite verbless clause: two questions may arise over this category, namely supposing the verb is traditionally introduced as central to a regular sentence structure, why are the structures which do not contain verbs referred to as clauses? According to Biber at al. (2003), the logic behind this is their syntactic functioning, in that they have their syntactic roles. The second question concerns defining verbless clauses, i.e., what exactly can be considered a verbless clause? Biber et al. provide several examples: *Although not a classic, this 90-minute video is worth watching*., *Every day, if possible, allot time at your desk to sorting and filing*. These verbless structures can be treated as adverbials with the ellipsis of the verb *be* and the subject (ibid., 260-262). In this research though, I diverge from this regular perception of verbless clauses and establish a category in which verbless clauses will be considered any clusters which may be treated as clauses but which operate without a verb, e.g., *DMNO* (Dude man no offence).

(4) The subject is naturally unexpressed: unexpressed subjects can be found in directives which typically operate as subjectless imperatives (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990: 241), e.g., *ALTG* (Act locally, think globally). Here, the unexpressed subject results from the imperative structure and function of the clause.

(5) The cluster is an exclamation. As Greenbaum and Quirk put it, exclamatives are largely restricted to the "*wh*" types of clauses (e.g., *What a beautiful day!*) (1990: 244-245). In this category, though, I also divert from the regular perception and consider an exclamation to be any clause or sentence

 ISSN 2453-8035

which, in its character, is exclamative, e.g., *X-(* (Just died!) This category may overlap (4) since, in a broad sense, exclamations and directives share some features.
(6) The cluster is an interrogative clause, e.g., *ATAB* (Ain't that a bitch?).
(7) The head noun is post-modified by a dependent clause, e.g., *FAWC* (For anyone who cares).
(8) The cluster contains a subordinate clause, e.g., *WYGISWYPF ← What you get is what you pay for* with the subordinate clause "*What you get*".
(9) The cluster is a Latin, potentially-sentential acronymized structure, e.g., *NB* (Nota bene).

Based on the above-mentioned criteria, a dataset of 2460 sentential alphabetisms was compiled. Pilot research of 100 entries (n=100) was conducted and the preliminary excerpt was tested for the presence of elliptical structures. The examined data demonstrated the presence of elliptical structures in 30 sentential alphabetisms, which is considered a significant proportion. Based on these preliminary findings, it is safe to assume that similar values will be detected in the dataset of 3306 entries. As a result, the following hypothesis was formulated: The ratio of elliptical sentential alphabetisms against the non-elliptical sentential alphabetisms is 1 to 3. The goodness-of-fit statistics will be used to test the hypothesis.

3. A review of theories

3.1 Economization in informal, electronically mediated communication

Economization and its impact on the production of abbreviated expressions in electronically mediated language has recently gained popularity in linguistic research. It is addressed directly or indirectly in Mattiello's *Extra-grammatical morphology in English: abbreviations, blends, reduplicatives, and related phenomena* (2013), and Maierová's *Alphanumeronyms in digitally mediated communication* (2019). Maierová also deals with the processes of the lexicalisation and institutionalisation of abbreviations in digitally-mediated communication in her work *Lexikalizácia a inštitucionalizácia abreviatúr v digitálne sprostredkovanej komunikácii* (2021). The following works also represent important contributions to this issue: *The influence of economizing factors of speech on the lexical and phonological structure of linguistic units* (Lančarič & Pavlík 2016) and *Structural lexical reduction in informal online communication* (Lančarič & Bojo 2020). The latest monograph of this type is *Jazyk elektronických médií v lingvokultúrnom kontexte angličtiny* (Lančarič et al. 2022), whose authors have made a linguistic analysis of electronically mediated language in terms of the economization of specific linguistic units, while also examining a number of interesting occasionalisms and their communicative functions. Stylistic issues in social media posts are discussed in the paper *A new future for English stylistics?* by Hroteková (2021); Kabát (2022) describes ways to translate acronyms in software texts. The issue of electronically mediated communication has also

 ISSN 2453-8035

been explored at length in a number of works by Crystal, such as *Language and the Internet* (2001), *A glossary of netspeak and texspeak* (2004), *The language revolution* (2004), and *Internet linguistics: A student guide* (2011). The title of Crystal's publication, *Txtng the gr8 db8* (2008), also points to the creative nature of the neologisms with which the author is concerned.

The economization of Internet language can be attributed to what Zipf (1999) describes as the psychobiological mechanism of least effort, i.e., the innate human tendency to perform the most comprehensive communicative act with the least possible physical and cognitive effort. Thus, during normal and conscious communication we tend to express our ideas as efficiently as possible, which means that once the object of the communication is selected from the thought continuum, it is encoded into the most structurally appropriate and length-appropriate units.

Economization occurs at all levels of the language, including simple words, complex lexemes, and sentences. On the level of simple words, economization is most frequently manifested by clipping (Bojo 2016: 25). This is a process in which part of the original word is omitted. Although the formation is generally unpredictable (Lappe 2010), we can distinguish several basic types of clipping: final (e.g., *digi* ← *digital*), initial (e.g., *nywhere* ← *anywhere*), central (e.g., *itslf* ← *itself*), and combined (e.g., *tec* ← *detective*). There are, of course, other types of clipping that are difficult to classify in any of the above categories. An innovative three-level taxonomy of clippings is outlined by Borys in his work *Clipping in English slang neologisms* (2018).

3.2 Alphabetisms

3.2.1 Lexical alphabetisms

Alphabetisms are abbreviations created as a string of consecutive graphemes. Such elements are pendants of the original and simultaneously existing lexemes. In this paper, the term "alphabetism" is used as an umbrella term for both initialism and acronym.

On the phonetic level, initialisms have only a spelling form while on the orthographic level most of them typically represent all of the words of the motivating unabbreviated lexeme (e.g., *MMOG* ← *massively multiplayer online game*; *NPC* ← *non player character*). In contrast, initialisms such as *SCPI* (Standard commands for programmable instruments) omit some words of the motivating lexeme, especially grammatical ones. Sometimes, such alphabetic clusters refer to another pre-existing lexeme from which they differ in meaning (e.g., *World Wide Web* → *WWW* ← *World Wide Wait*) or they may refer to themselves, within the boundaries of the expression they form (e.g., *PHP* ← *PHP Hypertext Preprocessor*).

 ISSN 2453-8035

As for acronyms, they usually consist of the initial letters of the individual constituents of the motivating lexeme. These letters form syllables and behave orthoepically as unabbreviated words (e.g., *PIN* ← *personal identification number*). Some, however, include other graphemes of the motivating complex lexeme in addition to the initial letters to achieve syllabic pronunciation, or alternatively, some initial letters are omitted (e.g., *BASIC* ← *Beginner's All-Purpose Symbolic Instruction Code*; *AID* ← *Agency for International Development*). In addition, recursive acronyms refer to themselves within their morphological boundaries (e.g., *CAVE* ← *Cave Automatic Virtual Environment*; *VISA* ← *Visa International Service Association*). In some cases, the association between an acronym and another formally corresponding word is based on metaphor or metonymy (e.g., *GIRL* ← *guy in real life*; *SITCOM* ← *single income, two children, oppressive mortgage*) (cf. Borys & Materynska 2020; Lančarič & Pavlík 2016: 29-40).

3.2.2 Sentential alphabetisms

In the domain of virtual communication, most initialisms have a sentence structure. They are called sentential alphabetisms and have many different communicative functions. They can be used to express notification (e.g., *GFN* ← *Gone for now*), they can have the function of a recommendation (e.g., *RBTL* ← *read between the lines)* or to ask for something (e.g., *TMB* ← *Tweet me back*; *PTB* ← *Please text back*). Sometimes they are used to express greeting (e.g., *BBBG* ← *Bye bye be good*; *CYT* ← *See you tomorrow*) or gratitude (e.g., *TIA – Thanks in advance*), etc. Some sentential alphabetisms include numerals (e.g., *B4N* ← *Bye for now*). Like ordinary sentences, sentential alphabetisms can have the status of a declarative, interrogative, exclamative or imperative sentence.

Based on our corpus we have determined full sentential alphabetisms (e.g., *IDC* ← *I don't care*; *URSKTM* ← *You are so kind to me!*; *YTTM* ← *You talk too much*), elliptical sentential alphabetisms (e.g., *BRB* ← *Be right back*; *DR* ← *Didn't read*; *WTT* ← *Want to trade*), sentential alphabetisms with indefinite construction (e.g., *TBC* ← *To be continued*; *TBDL* ← *To be discussed later*), sentential alphabetisms with participial construction (e.g., *LFM* ← *Looking for member*; *EAK* ← *Eating at keyboard*), sentential alphabetisms with adverbial subordinate clause function (e.g., *AIR* ← *as I remember*; *ICYDK* ← *in case you didn't know*; *IYDM* ← *if you don't mind*), and sentential alphabetisms of fixed phrases (e.g., *GNA* ← *Good night all!*; *HRU* ← *How are you?*; *SUL* ← *See you later*; *E123* ← *Easy as one, two, three*) (cf. Lančarič & Pavlík 2013).

The above examples suggest that the structure of such units is the result of the interaction of the lexical and grammatical levels of language. Despite the fact that an interactive written chat loses its stability as it approaches oral speech, the tendency towards the fixedness of the sentence and its

 ISSN 2453-8035

potential reproducibility, similar to that of phraseologisms, is evident. Most of the examples thus indicate the tendency of graphemes to reflect the grammaticalized structure of the English sentence.

3.3 Ellipses

The traditional mismatch in definitions of ellipsis allows for speculation on how to define this linguistic phenomenon. A comprehensive definition of ellipsis and the history of the term's origins are provided in the article *The elusive ellipsis – the complex history of a vague grammatical concept in need of empirical grounding* (Menzel 2016). Some consider ellipses as structures in which an element is omitted (ellipted). Yet, the problem of ellipsis requires further considerations. In terms of omissions and replacements in their full equivalent, a parallel may be observed between lexical abbreviations and syntactic ellipses. In both cases, a full unabbreviated form needs to exist (Šipošová & Bojo 2016: 22-24). As a result, an ellipsis is what Halliday and Hasan (1976: 362) define as "a substitution for zero". To explain the "zero", such structures are considered elliptical which a speaker still finds natural and non-defective. Aelbrecht (2010) studied the meaning of elliptical structures and introduced the feature of recoverability. He defines ellipses as instances which can be inferred from the context. Interestingly, he sees the ellipsis as a mismatch between the form, the phonemic structure, and interpretation, and claims that the interpretation is much richer than other two. Interpretation requires a larger context of the situation to make the ellipsis fully recoverable (ibid., 2). Contextual recoverability is also emphasized by Allerton (2016), Bojo (2013) and Carter and McCarthy (2006), who elaborated on the spoken and the written discourse, yet emphasized the fact that the two should not be strictly separated (Allerton 2016: 265-267). Allerton's approach to recoverability and the inference of meaning from context was in agreement with Biber et al. (2003) who distinguish between the textual and the situational ellipsis. To him, textual ellipses are linguistic structures whose meaning is recoverable from the surrounding text, whereas the recoverability of situational ellipses requires a larger situational context. In general, recoverability is conditioned by grammatical, textual, and semantic links which enable the speakers to understand and interpret the elliptical utterances. If there are no existing semantic links, speakers tend to create their own links. The situational type of ellipsis is also considered by Barton and Progovac (2005) who explore ellipses in non-sentential structures. The non-sentential character underlines the importance of the situation. The recoverability of ellipses and the inference of meaning in non-sentential structures largely depend on the whole of a communicative situation (ibid., 73-75). On the other hand, Biber et al. (2003) focused their exploration on sentential ellipses. They introduced a detailed classification of elliptical structures and distinguished ellipses according to various factors, such as situations and clause-element roles. Their classification is adopted to the research criteria and used in this paper as follows:

(1) Ellipses of a subject: The subject of a declarative clause is omitted, e.g.,

 ISSN 2453-8035

A: *What's concubine?*

B: *(I) Don't know, get a dictionary*.

Alphabetism example: *H2CUS*

Example of its unacronymized equivalent: *(I) hope to see you soon*.

(2) Ellipses of initial operators in questions, e.g., *Oh, (are) you serious?*

Alphabetism example: *nm, u?*

Example of its unacronymized equivalent: *not much (do) you?*

(3) Ellipses of a subject and operator (in interrogative clauses), e.g., *(Do you) know what I mean?*

Alphabetism example: *KWIM*

Example of its unacronymized equivalent: *(Do you) know what I mean?*

(4) Medial Ellipses: an operator is omitted in the middle of a sentence, e.g., *How (are) ya doin'?*

Alphabetism example: *PIR*

Example of its unacronymized equivalent: *Parent(s) (is / are) in room* (Biber at al. 2003: 441-443).

(5) Instances of textual and situational ellipsis where the meaning can be inferred from the surrounding of the omitted structure in the unacronymized equivalent, e.g., *ITTT* and its unacronymized equivalent *You telling the truth?* The surrounding context of the sentence suggests that the omitted element will be the verb to be in the auxiliary function: *(Are) you telling the truth?* Similarly, in the elliptical sentential alphabetism *TTYT – Talk to you tomorrow* the alphabetism operates with a parallel, non-acronymized structure. The non-acronymized structure is elliptical because it requires a subject (a noun or pronoun) recoverable from the surrounding text or situation.

5. Research and results

As introduced in Chapter 2, the dataset of sentential alphabetisms and their unacronymized equivalents will be tested for the presence of elliptical structures according to the criteria listed in Chapter 3.3. A sample of the dataset is provided below (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample of the dataset (non-elliptical and elliptical sentential alphabetisms and their equivalents – acronymized and unacronymized). Source: Own processing

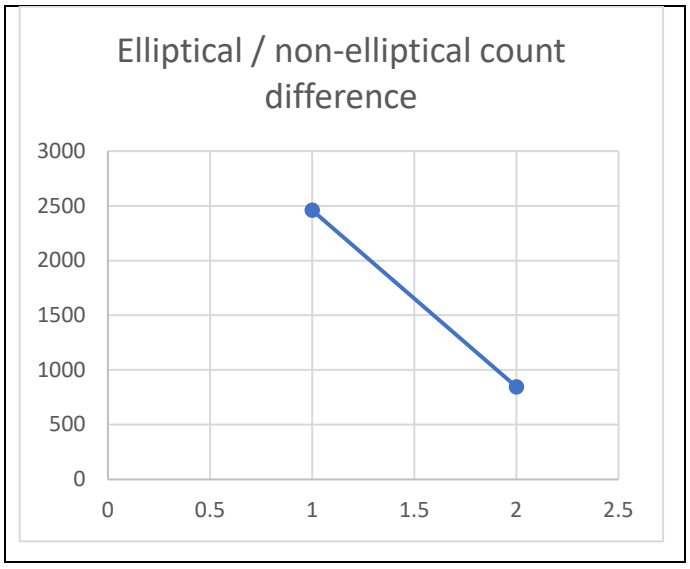
Non-elliptical sentential alphabetisms	Elliptical sentential alphabetisms
FMTEYEWTK – Far more than everything you've ever wanted to know.	YTTT – You telling the truth?
GIGATT – God is good all the time.	YGTI – You get the idea?
XLNT – Excellent!	X-(– Just died.
HAWTLW – Hello and welcome to last week!	WIWH – Wish you were here!
WWYC – Write when you can!	WYD – What you doing?
RU-OK – Are you ok?	UR – U are.
UNOIT – You know it.	U8 – You ate?
TYG – There you go!	TYLE – Took you long enough!
TTWIG – That's the way it goes.	TTYT – Talk to you tomorrow.

SWYP – So, what's your problem?	SYDWBY – See ya, don't wanna be ya.
ST&D – Stop texting and drive!	STBY – Sucks to be you!
RUUP4IT – Are you up for it?	RTTSD – Right thing to say dude!
RTBM – Read the bloody manual!	ROTBA – Reality on the blink again.
PWAS – Prayer wheels are spinning.	PWOMS – Parent watching over my shoulder!
POAHF – Put on a happy face!	YWTLM – You want to love me?
OUSU – Oh, you shut up!	OTTOMHAROOB – Off the top of my head and rolling out of bounds.
ONNA – Oh no, not again!	OTFL – On the floor laughing.
NWCDP – Nothing we could do partner!	NTN – No thanks needed.
NTYMI – Now that you mention it.	NPAA – No problem at all.

The following values were detected (see Table 2, 3 and Graph 1):

Table 2. The total of sentential alphabetisms. Source: Own processing

Sentential Total	3306
Sentential non-elliptical count	2460
Sentential elliptical count	846



Graph 1. The difference in counts between elliptical and the non-elliptical sentential alphabetisms. Source: Own processing

The difference between the expected and observed counts is tested by the Chi-square goodness-of-fit statistics. It was decided that a 1:3 ratio of elliptical sentential structures would be significant enough to demonstrate a strong presence of elliptical tools in sentential alphabetisms.

H0: The elliptical unacronymized equivalents and the non-elliptical unacronymized equivalents of sentential alphabetisms are present in a ratio other than 1:3.

H1: The ratio of elliptical unacronymized equivalents and the non-elliptical unacronymized equivalents of sentential alphabetisms is 1:3.

Table 3. The Chi^2 value is 89.205. The p-value is < .00001. The result is significant at p < .05.
Source: Own processing

	Observed	*Expected*		*Difference*	*Difference Sq.*	*Diff. Sq. / Exp. Fr.*
Sentential non-elliptical	2460	2204		256.00	65536.00	29.74
Sentential elliptical	846	1102		-256.00	65536.00	59.47
						89.205

In 3306 cases, ellipses in the unacronymized equivalents were tagged in 846 unacronymized sentential equivalents. Non-elliptical structures were tagged in 2460 unacronymized equivalents. The occurrence of the elliptical sentential equivalents was lower than presumed after conducting the pilot research. The statistical chi-square test was applied, giving the following results: The Chi^2 value is 89.205. The real counts were significantly disproportional (lower) to the expected counts. The p-value < .00001 indicates the level of significance. Based on the lack of evidence for falsifying H0, the alternative H1 hypothesis cannot be accepted. It is safe to make the generalisation that the unacronymized equivalents of sentential alphabetisms are marked by elliptical structures. However, their occurrence is merely random and statistically insignificant.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the research featured in this paper was to explore two distinct linguistic phenomena, namely alphabetisms and ellipses. The term alphabetism was used as a joint category for acronyms (usually pronounced as one word) and inicialisms (usually spelled out). The research focused on alphabetisms and their unacronymized equivalents with the aim to prove the assumption that a significant proportion of alphabetisms undergo multiple economizations at the lexical and syntactic levels.

The acronymized sentential clusters were tested for the presence of ellipses in their unacronymized equivalents. The level of significance was set at 1:3. If at least 1 out of 3 unacronymized euqivalents of sentential alphabetisms are simultaneously marked by a syntactic elliptical process, the multiple economizations could be considered significant and a generalisation could be made that such instances are frequent or even regular.

The research was conducted as a quantitative corpus-based analysis. The corpus of 4500 entries was examined and a dataset of 3306 sentential alphabetisms was extracted. One of the major limitations of the research was the identification of sentential alphabetisms and distinguishing them from other

non-sentential word clusters. To cope with this limitation a detailed guideline of what is considered sentential alphabetism was introduced.

Further investigation was aimed at identifying the proportion of elliptical sentential alphabetisms. Instances of syntactic ellipsis were detected in 846 cases against the 2460 non-elliptical cases. The chi-square goodness of fit statistics was used to identify the difference between the expected (1/3) values and the observed (846/2460) values. The result demonstrates the Chi^2 value 89.205. The p-value is < .00001. This result does not provide enough evidence for the falsification of H0 and subsequent acceptance of H1. The interpretation of the results may be that the occurrence of the sentential alphabetisms and their unacronymized pairs which undergo the process of syntactic ellipsis is significantly lower than expected. Taking into consideration the stylistic value of some acronymized sentential alphabetisms, a generalisation may be made that the presence of elliptical structures in the unacronymized equivalent may partly be due to the sub-standard nature of these equivalents.

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ISSN 2453-8035