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SYSTEMIC IRREGULARITY PATTERNS IN GRAPHEMIC REPRESENTATION OF E-CHAT SENTENTIAL INITIALISMS*Daniel Lančarič* * , *Peter Bojo* *Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia***Corresponding author*

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Abstract: This article stems from Zipf's Principle of Least Effort and Martinet's theory of language economy. We examine sentential initialisms in the sub-standard language of electronic media, verifying the occurrence of 1:1 correspondence between the initialism's lexemic constituents and their graphemic representations. The sentential initialisms in which each constituent lexeme is represented by its initial letter are called canonical. As a part of the research, some regularities are established in forming non-canonical sentential initialisms.

Keywords: sentential initialism, canonical sentential initialism, non-canonical sentential initialism, regularity pattern, hierarchy of language units.

1. Introduction

This article draws on the theory of the linguistic sign by Ferdinand de Saussure, stating that the signifier (the sign form) of any language unit is determined in time and is measurable only linearly. In communication, the units enter chained relations, which precludes any realisation of more than one expression at once. The units, however, do not function in isolation. They largely depend on their linguistic surroundings (1996). The realisation of lexemes in linguistic surroundings is reflected in language reality as a phrase, a clause, or a sentence. In electronically mediated online discourse, these groupings are often initialised, and sentential initialisms emerge where initial letters represent the constituent lexemes of their expansions.



The present research provides an in-depth analysis of grapheme-to-lexeme correspondences in e-chat sentential initialisms. It aims to a) identify the ratio of canonical and non-canonical grapheme-to-lexeme correspondences, b) determine whether the non-canonical representations occur frequently enough to challenge the regularity patterns in initialism formation, and c) find out what irregularities enter the non-canonical initialism formation.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Previous research

Despite the constant flow of ideas, the communicator is not able to simultaneously use more than one unit. This fact drives the communicator to manifest their cognitive efforts in language as simply as possible. The communicator abbreviates sentences and lexemes and tends to omit any language units that may seem obvious to the recipient. These efforts massively contribute to the overall economisation of language (Lančarič et al. 2022).

Zipf (2014) assigned the economisation of language to a psycho-biological mechanism of the least effort, i.e. to an inborn tendency of humans to achieve maximal communicative impact with minimal cognitive effort. This approach, later known as the Principle of Least Effort, inspired Martinet (1969), who defined language economy as a permanent tension between satisfying the communicators' needs, on the one hand, and reducing the effort put into the articulation and remembering of words, on the other.

Recently, human communication has changed its form significantly. Alongside traditional oral communication, ideas are often transmitted via electronic media such as TV, smartphones, computers, and, above all, the Internet with its social media, where written, predominantly sub-standard, communication is characterised by numerous tendencies towards economisation (cf. Lančarič 2023).

The research presented in this paper focuses on the sub-standard written language used in various online applications. This type of language is marked by specific features which can mainly be observed in electronically mediated discourse. The latter tends to be unstable, and due to its dynamics, it resembles spoken discourse. On the other hand, electronically mediated written communication differs from spoken discourse because of the absence of many aspects of paralinguistic and extralinguistic communicative means. In fact, this recent form of communication represents a certain kind of new medium which copies verbal communication (Crystal 2001).

Various theoretical aspects of economisation processes related to the informal style of electronically mediated communication were addressed by Baron (2010), Hroteková (2021), Lančarič and Bojo (2020), Lančarič and Pavlík (2016), and Maierová (2019; 2021). Probably the most well-known disseminator of knowledge about informal electronically mediated language is Crystal (2001; 2004; 2008; 2011; inter al.).

Electronically mediated communication is marked by numerous elliptical structures, condensations, and abbreviations. Abbreviation of various types is considered a highly productive process of forming new language units. And, notably among other types of abbreviations, initialisms appear to be the most widely used.

Some linguists call the process in which the initial letters of multiword sentential unit components are grouped into a lexeme by the term "alphabetism" (e.g., Mattiello 2013). Yet, it traditionally refers to the process when each letter is spelt out but has no reference to preserving the initial letters of the constituent words. Many linguists prefer the term "acronym" when addressing related issues. It is often used either as an umbrella term that includes both acronyms and initialisms, or, conversely, as a term specifically denoting a type of initialism where the sequence of initial letters forms a syllabic structure and is pronounced as a single word (cf. Adams 2016; Litkovych et al. 2020).

2.2 *Initialisms in online communication*

A discrepancy in naming the word-formative process in which new lexemes are created by grouping initial letters of constituent lexemes encourages us to find the most explicit term that would cover all the related phenomena. We adopt the term "initialism", which will include abbreviations, alphabetisms, and acronyms.

Initialisms are a common manifestation of language economy. They are used in various contexts, such as scientific disciplines, names of institutions, and everyday language, including informal chat communication. Some initialisms have the formal attributes of standard lexemes, and their spelling follows language conventions.

Initialisms are coined from the initial graphemes of complex and compound lexemes, various phrases, or even sentences (e.g. *DOD* ← *Department of Defense*; *CMB* ← *Call me back!*). However, alongside the initial graphemes of the base words, initialisms can also include additional letters in the sequence (e.g. *BSc.* ← *Bachelor of Science*). On the other hand, it is common practice to omit function words (e.g. *FBI* ← *Federal Bureau of Investigation*) (cf. Jackson & Amvela 2007).

In some cases, initialisms are closer to clippings, many of them with a skeletal structure, where the process of economisation occurs at the word level. Examples of such units come mainly from the Internet communication, e.g. *CLK* ← *click*; *FRM* ← *from*; *FWD* ← *forward*; *IDL* ← *ideal*; *LNDN* ← *London*; *NVR* ← *never*; *SRSLY* ← *seriously*; *WKND* ← *weekend*, etc. (cf. Lančarič & Pavlík 2016).

The problem of initialisms may well be perceived through the hierarchy of language units, which organises language units from higher levels to lower ones.

A. Multiple sentence initialisms constitute the 1st, highest, level of the hierarchy of language units. These are commonly referred to as deproposemic (Borys 2022). Deproposemic initialisms may represent multiple sentences, i.e. a) multiple compound sentences, e.g., *FIIOOH* ← Forget it, I'm out of here; *SUAKM* ← Shut up and kiss me!; *LOLAROTG* ← Laughing out loud and rolling on the ground; and b) multiple complex sentences, e.g., *DAMHIKT* ← Don't ask me how I know that (main clause + nominal wh-interrogative clause); *CYPUWIPD* ← Can you pick up what I'm putting down? (main clause + nominal wh-interrogative clause); *DBEYR* ← Don't believe everything you read (main clause + relative clause).

B. Simple sentence initialisms, e.g. *IMR* ← I mean really; *PEST* ← Please excuse slow typing; *URSKTM* ← You are so kind to me!

C. Independent clause initialisms are initialisms which, in the direction from the top to the bottom level, hierarchically occur at a clause level. They are independent units and function primarily as a) participial clauses, e.g., *ROTFL* ← rolling on the floor laughing, *SICS* ← sitting in chair snickering, and, less frequently, as b) to-infinitive clauses, e.g., *TBD* ← to be decided, c) independent adverbial clauses, e.g. *AIIC* ← as if I care; *IYDM* ← if you don't mind; *WAEF* ← when all else fails, and d) comparative clauses, e.g., *ALAP* ← as late as possible; *AIW* ← as it was.

D. Dephrasal initialisms are reduced groups of words of the non-sentential character, e.g., *AAMOF* ← as a matter of fact; *BH* ← better half; *CFD* ← call for discussion; *EG* ← evil grin; *FLK* ← funny looking kid.

E. Delexical initialisms are compounds and derivatives whose components (morphemes and syllables) are reduced to initialisms, e.g., *EZ* ← eazy; *GB* ← goodbye; *OD* ← overdosed; *PW* ← password. Within this category, a group of pseudo-initialisms which do not respect syllabic or morphological boundaries may be found, e.g., *MT* ← empty; *MBRSD* ← embarrassed; *HMWK* ← homework; *FWD* ← forward; *PCT* ← podcasting.

(cf. Borys 2018; 2022; Borys & Materynska 2020; Cannon 1989; Lančarič et al. 2022).

Combinations of several categories within A. – E. are also allowed, like in the sentential initialism containing a dephrasal initialism (e.g., *RTF* ← *Read the FAQ*), the sentential initialism containing a delexical initialism (e.g., *PANB* ← *Parents are nearby*), or the dephrasal initialism containing a delexical initialism (e.g., *FBC* ← *Facebook chat*).

As mentioned above, categories A. – C. can be initialised as much as categories D. and E., which means that the process of initialisation may equally affect words as well as sentences. In the most canonical representations of the non-abbreviated sentential structure by initialisms, there is a 1:1 correspondence between the graphemes and the lexical constituents the graphemes represent; each grapheme in the initialism is the initial letter of the word it represents, e.g., *HDYWTDT* ← *How do you work this dratted thing?* Alongside these canonical forms, e-chat sentential initialisms may avoid this regular pattern and the graphemes may represent a morpheme, a phrase, a phonemic realisation, or else a constituting word may not be represented at all.

3. Results and discussion

The research is based on a quantitative corpus analysis. The *Dictionary of English abbreviations and codes in informal on-line communication* (2013) by Lančarič and Pavlík, which contains nearly 5,000 entries, was examined for sentential initialisms. The distinguishing criterion for determining an initialism as sentential is the presence of a subject and a predicate in its full form, e.g., *CPF* ← *Can pigs fly?* Alternatively, due to their informal character, the structures in which the subject is elided are also allowed, e.g., *LYLAB* ← *Love you like a brother*. The dataset of 200 sentential initialisms was further examined for the canonical/non-canonical patterns and their types as follows:

**St Is* = sentential initialisms

**C St Is* = canonical sentential initialisms

**NC St Is* = non-canonical initialisms

<i>St Is total</i>	<i>C St Is</i>	<i>NC St Is</i>
200	138	62

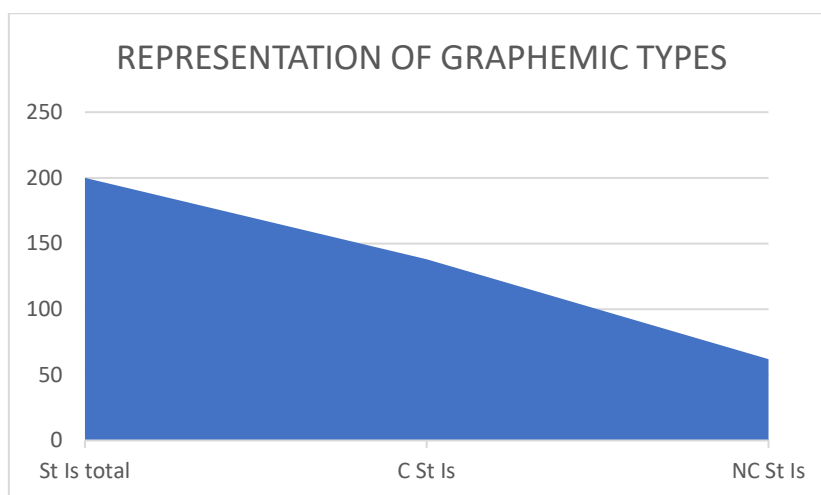


Figure 1. Representation of graphemic types. Source: Own processing

Chi-square goodness of fit test. The Chi 2 value is 28.88. The p -value is < 0000.1 . The result is significant at $p < .05$.

As introduced in Figure 1, the category of canonical 1:1 graphemic representations of the lexical component in sentential initialisms was identified in 138 cases, against the category of non-canonical graphemic representations in 62 cases. The goodness of fit test demonstrates a significant prevalence of the canonical representations in the e-chat sentential initialisms.

Further, the research maps the non-canonical representations and attempts to inspect potential regularities. The following categories are established (one initialism may fall into more than one category):

A. A grapheme represents a morpheme rather than the whole lexeme, as in AMRMTYFTS ← All my roommates, thank you for the show. The graphemic representation of the compound lexeme "roommates" consisting of two root morphemes (room and mate) is RM, with each grapheme standing for one root morpheme. All the members of this category are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Grapheme-to-morpheme correspondence. Source: Own processing

NC St I	Full form	Legend
AMRMTYFTS	All my roommates , thank you for the show.	RM = roommates; initialisation of two root morphemes
SMEM	Send me an e-mail .	EM = e-mail; initialisation of the root morpheme "mail"
SDIHTT	Someday I'll have the time.	SD = someday; initialisation of two root morphemes

B. A grapheme represents a contraction, a grammatical or lexico-grammatical word combination, e.g. AYTMTB ← And you're telling me this because? The grapheme "Y" represents the subject-auxiliary contraction "you're". All the members of this category are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Grapheme-to-contraction correspondence. Source: Own processing

NC St I	Full form	Legend
AYTMTB	And you're telling me this because?	Y = you're; a grapheme represents a contraction
EGBOG	Everything's going to be ok.	E = everything's; a grapheme represents a contraction
IBIWISI	I'll believe it when I see it.	I = I'll; a grapheme represents a contraction
II	I'm impressed.	I = I'm; a grapheme represents a contraction
IMP	I might be pregnant.	M = might be; an initialisation of a grammatical word combination
INGST	I'm not gonna say that.	I = I'm; a grapheme represents a contraction
IPN	I'm posting naked.	I = I'm; a grapheme represents a contraction
IROOC	I've run out of cigarettes.	I = I've; a grapheme represents a contraction
LAB	Life's a bitch.	L = life's; an initialisation of a lexico-grammatical word combination
SDIHTT	Someday I'll have the time.	I = I'll; a grapheme represents a contraction
TAFN	That is all for now.	T = that is; an initialisation of a grammatical word combination
TAFT	That's a frightening thought.	T = that's; a grapheme represents a contraction
TCD	That cat's dead.	C = cat's; an initialisation of a lexico-grammatical word combination
TDD	The dog's dead.	D = dog's; an initialisation of a lexico-grammatical word combination
TGTF	Thank God, tomorrow's Friday.	T = tomorrow's; an initialisation of a lexico-grammatical word combination
SOK	It's OK.	S = it's; a grapheme represents a contraction
TILII	Tell it like it is!	I = it is; an initialisation of a grammatical word combination
TJM	That's just me.	T = that's; a grapheme represents a contraction
TLITBC	That's life in the big city.	T = that's; a grapheme represents a contraction
TMIY	Take me, I'm yours!	I = I'm; a grapheme represents a contraction
TMTOWTDI	There's more than one way to do it.	T = there's; a grapheme represents a contraction
TTBE	That's to be expected!	T = that's; a grapheme represents a contraction
TTT	That's the truth.	T = that's; a grapheme represents a contraction
TTWIG	That's the way it goes.	T = that's; a grapheme represents a contraction
UAPITA	You're a pain in the ass.	U = you're; a grapheme represents a contraction
UKTR	You know that's right.	T = that's; a grapheme represents a contraction
UOK	Are you ok?	U = are you; a grapheme represents a contraction
ATAB	Ain't that a bitch?	A = ain't; a grapheme represents a contraction
DUNA	Don't use no acronyms.	D = don't; a grapheme represents a contraction
ICBI	I can't believe it.	C = can't; a grapheme represents a contraction
ICW	I can't wait.	C = can't; a grapheme represents a contraction
IDM	It doesn't matter.	D = doesn't; a grapheme represents a contraction
IDST	I don't say that.	D = don't; a grapheme represents a contraction
IONO	I don't know.	O = don't; a grapheme represents a contraction

C. A lexeme is represented by the grapheme's phonemic realisation. Hence the full-form lexemes in the sentence *How are you?* are represented by the initialism *HRU*, with the "R" and "U" being used in their phonemic realisations /ɑ:(r)/ and /ju:/. The full representation of this category is outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Grapheme-to-phonemic realisation. Source: Own processing

NC St A	Full form	Legend
HRU	How are you?	R /ɑ:(r)/ = are
HRU	How are you ?	U /ju:/ = you
RUMF	Are you male or female?	U /ju:/ = you
U up?	You up?	U /ju:/ = you
UAPITA	You are a pain in the ass.	U /ju:/ = you
UCCOM	You can count on me.	U /ju:/ = you
UDM	You 're the man.	U /ju:/ = you
UGTBK	You 've got to be kidding.	U /ju:/ = you
UKTR	You know that's right.	U /ju:/ = you
UNOIT	You know it.	U /ju:/ = you
UNTCO	You need to chill out.	U /ju:/ = you
UOK	You OK?	U /ju:/ = you
UOM	You owe me!	U /ju:/ = you
URAPITA	You are a pain in the ass.	U /ju:/ = you
URAQT	You are a cutie.	U /ju:/ = you
URH	You are hot.	U /ju:/ = you
URLCM	You are welcome.	U /ju:/ = you

D. A lexeme is represented by a grapheme other than the initial. In the initialism *LEMENO* ← *Let me know!* the verb "*let*" is graphemically expressed by "*LE*". Table 4 depicts all the members of this category.

Table 4. Non-initial grapheme-to-lexeme correspondence. Source: Own processing

NC St I	Full form	Legend
LEMENO	Let me know.	LE = let
PXT	Please explain that.	X = explain
SEC	Wait a second .	SEC = second
SP	Sorry for the bad spelling !	P = spelling
STPPYNOZGTW	Stop picking your nose, get to work!	STP = stop
STPPYNOZGTW	Stop picking your nose, get to work!	P = picking
STPPYNOZGTW	Stop picking your nose , get to work!	NOZ = nose
SOK	It's OK.	S = It's
RTFQ	Read the FAQ .	FQ = FAQ
IONO	I don't know.	O = don't

E. The graphemic representation within the initialism equals a lexeme in its full form. In the alphabetism *LEMENO* ← *Let me know!* the pronoun "*me*" equals its graphemic representation "*ME*". Table 5 indicates the full representation of the category.

Table 5. Grapheme-to-full lexeme correspondence. Source: Own processing

NC St A	Full form	Legend
LEMENO	Let me know.	ME = me
UUP?	You up ?	UP = up

A summary of occurrences of the non-canonical cases is provided in Table 6.

Table 6. Representation of non-canonical initialisms. Source: Own processing

Category	Occurrences
A grapheme represents a morpheme	3
A grapheme represents a contraction, a grammatical or lexico-grammatical word combination	34
A grapheme's phonemic realisation represents a lexeme	17
A grapheme other than the initial represents a lexeme	11
A grapheme represents a full lexeme	2

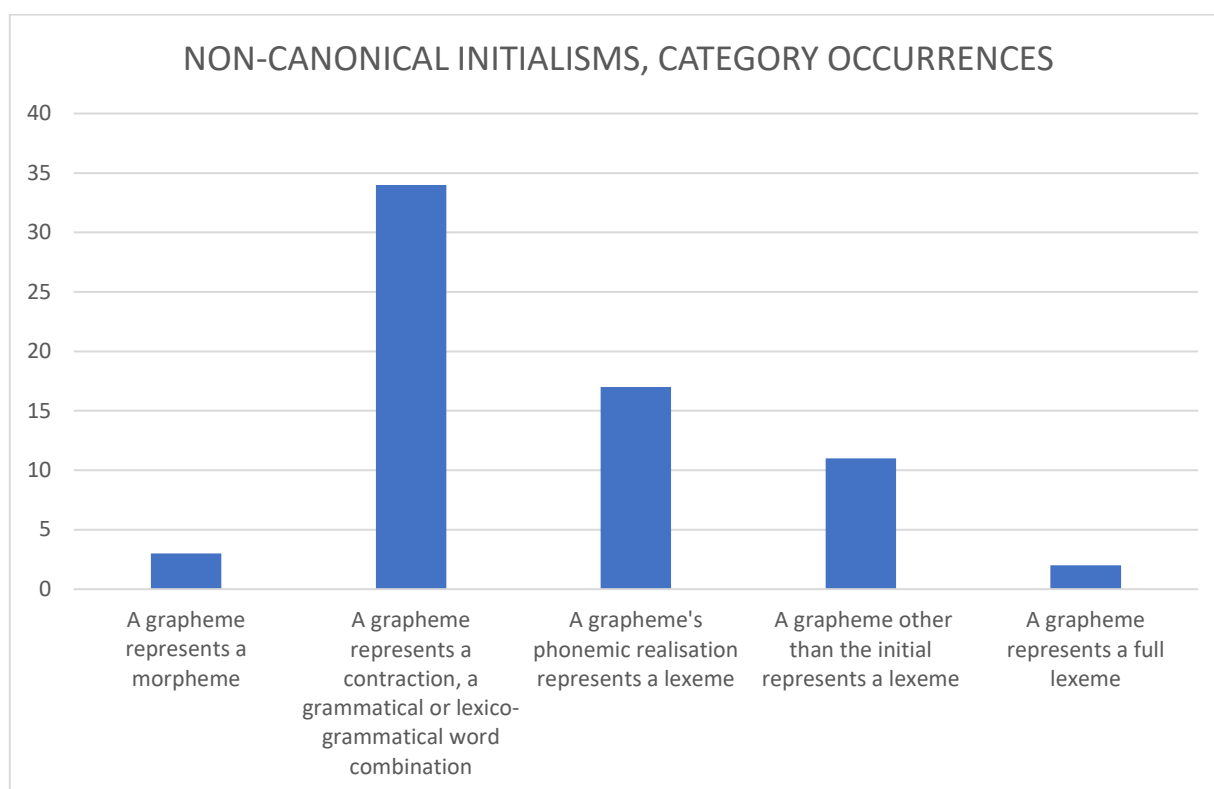


Figure 2. Non-canonical initialisms, category occurrences. Source: Own processing

4. Conclusion

The research presented in this paper reflects overall tendencies towards economy in language behaviour. With a clear reference to the Principle of Least Effort, economy in language behaviour is examined in a specific sub-standard type of communication, electronically mediated e-chatting. Drawing upon the standard hierarchy of language units, in this communication, economisation processes affect lexemes, as well as other (phrasal and sentential) units. The present research focused

on one particular unit type: we examined abbreviated sentential units, jointly called sentential initialisms. A corpus analysis was conducted to examine types of graphemic representations of initialized sentential units. A question posed in the research was whether initialism formation engages purely initial letters of their unabbreviated sentential counterparts or whether exceptions exist to these 1:1 grapheme-to-lexeme correspondences.

A total of 200 sentential initialisms were gathered. The analysis resulted in establishing two categories: the canonical formations, in which each initialism grapheme represents an initial letter of its full lexical counterpart, and the non-canonical formations, which avoid this regularity.

It has been found that the number of canonical formations prevails significantly, with the occurrence of as many as 138 cases against the non-canonical formations represented by 62 cases.

Further, a question was posed whether some regularity patterns may be established in the non-canonical formation. A quantitative analysis of the non-canonical formations shows that they can clearly be grouped into categories following systemic irregularity patterns, with the most significant occurrence of a grapheme representing a contraction, a grammatical or lexico-grammatical word combination. This category was represented by 34 cases and is followed by the category where a lexeme is represented by a grapheme's phonemic realisation; the phonemic interpretation contributes to the formation of a sentential initialism. The category of a grapheme's phonemic realisation was represented by 17 cases. The two categories mentioned above were followed by the categories with fewer occurrences as follows: the category of a lexical unit being represented in an initialism by a letter other than the initial (11 occurrences); the category in which a grapheme represents the root morpheme of a compound lexeme (3 occurrences); and the category in which an initialism includes a full, unabbreviated lexeme (2 occurrences).

Generalisations may be drawn that the significant prevalence of canonical formation confirms the systemic irregularity patterns of initialism formation. In the vast majority of cases, sentential initialisms represent the initial graphemes of the lexical components of their unabbreviated counterparts. Yet, the sub-standard character of electronically mediated e-chat communication quite abundantly provides space for irregular non-canonical formations.


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