

English -o Clipping as Social Morphology

Mark Aronoff, Stony Brook University
Anna M. Thornton, Università dell'Aquila

Abstract

We discuss a word formation rule that goes beyond 'logical content' or truth-conditional semantics in its meaning. This rule is a rare instance of social morphology. Most linguistic analysis is rooted in the view that language is for conveying the truth. Other functions of language include the expressive and social functions, but these have been seen as lying outside grammar. While expressive syntax has recently been subject to formal analysis, the only expressive morphological phenomena that have received much attention are evaluatives (diminutives and augmentatives), which also lend themselves to expressive use. Purely social morphology has long been thought to lie outside the realm of language. The most extensive social morphology in English involves clipping, including the use of clipping to form hypocoristics (e.g., Will from William). Here we present a detailed analysis of a related phenomenon, a trochaic template ending in /o/ <o> that has two distinct uses. In one, longer nouns are mapped onto this template to convey an attitude of casual familiarity. The earlier cases of this mapping use a base, often a neoclassical compound, whose second syllable already ends in /o/ (e.g., photo from photograph). More recently, the rule has been extended to other bases (e.g., ammo from ammunition and convo from conversation). A possibly related rule adds -o to a monosyllable (either a noun or an adjective) to produce words like boyo and weirdo and carries a similar familiar or casual tone.

Keywords: *clipping, expressiveness, prosodic template, shortening, social morphology.*

1 Introduction

In this article, we will discuss a recently evolved lexeme formation rule (or pattern, or construction) of English that maps onto a trochaic template ending in /o/ <o>.¹ This rule goes beyond 'logical content' or truth-conditional semantics in its meaning. The rule is a rare instance of social morphology. As such, it provides a window into the nature of language. It shows what language is for.

What is language for? One answer is that language is for telling the truth. Language is for communicating truth, describing truth, information, thought, at-issue meaning, and truth-conditional semantics. What is missing in this view is the human element, whatever lies outside Frege's *Gedanke* 'thought', the truth-conditional content of an utterance (Frege 1892, 1918–1919). Frege himself understood that language conveys other things besides what he called 'thought':

It makes no difference to the thought whether I use the word 'horse' or 'steed' or 'nag' or 'prad'. The assertoric force does not cover the ways in which these words differ. What is called mood, atmosphere, illumination in a poem, what is portrayed by intonation and rhythm, does not belong to the thought. (Frege 1918–1919: 63, translation by Peter Geach and R. H. Stoothoff in Beaney, ed. 1997)

¹ We analyze the phoneme as /o/, with different realizations in different varieties of English.

Aristotle famously observed that language was for people:

διότι δὲ πολιτικὸν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ζῶν πάσης μελίττης καὶ παντὸς ἀγελαίου ζῴου μᾶλλον, δῆλον. οὐθὲν γάρ, ὡς φαμέν, μάτην ἢ φύσις ποιεῖ· λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζῴων. ‘And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech.’ (Aristotle *Politics* 10.10, translation by Harris Rackham, 1932)

For Aristotle, language went beyond matters of truth and thought. For Aristotle, as for Frege, analyzing thought is the job of logic, which he called λογική τέχνη *logikḗ tékhnē* ‘speech craft’. Aristotle distinguishes between λόγος σηματικός *lógos semantikós* ‘meaningful speech’ and λόγος ἀποφαντικός *lógos apophantikós* ‘declarative speech’ in *De Interpretatione* 4.17a — only the latter can be true or false and hence subject to logical analysis. Unfortunately, at least in the century and a half since the ascendance of formal logic and the use of formal logic as a tool for analyzing natural language, the fact that language contains more than truth has been conveniently forgotten. Our goal here is to demonstrate that at least one small piece of the system of Present-Day English grammar contains a non-truth-functional purely social expression, showing that language does indeed go beyond truth, as Aristotle first observed. Language is for people, for whom logical truth is only one small part of life.

The idea that language goes beyond truth has had some currency in the last century. Karl Bühler (1934) identified three functions of language in his organon model, only one of which involved truth:

- i. Expressive (*Ausdrucksfunktion*): emphasizing the speaker’s internal state
- ii. Representational (*Darstellungsfunktion*): focuses on objects, events, and facts
- iii. Conative (*Appellfunktion*): the use of language to persuade and appeal to an interlocutor

John Lyons (1977) observed that language has three functions, descriptive, social, and expressive:

Let us simply assume that there are three more or less distinguishable functions: the descriptive, the social and the expressive. Correlated with these three different functions we can recognize *three different kinds of semantic information encodable* in language-utterances. (Lyons 1977: 50) [emphasis ours]

Lyons followed Bühler and did not mention the metalingual, phatic and poetic functions of language that Jakobson (1960) had in the meantime included among his six functions of language. Lyons’s inclusive use of the term *semantic* to encompass all meaning is reminiscent of Aristotle’s equally inclusive term *lógos semantikós*. Two of Lyons’s three functions lie outside Frege’s truth-conditional semantics: *Expressive* (Bühler 1934; Lyons 1977; Kaplan 1999; Potts 2005, 2007), also called *Emotive* (Jakobson 1960) and *Social*. The *expressive* function focuses on the speaker/signer: I am telling you how I feel. The *social* function focuses on the relation between interlocutors and is deeply intertwined with *theory of mind* (Premack & Woodruff 1978). Lyons differs from Bühler in substituting the social for the conative function. The difference between the two is more than terminological, but the conative function

presupposes the social: we would not try to persuade someone unless we had a social relation with them. We will consider the latter function only.

The purely social function of language was first brought to the fore in modern times by Bronisław Malinowski (1923). He coined the term *phatic communion* to refer to this function: “There can be no doubt that we have here a new type of linguistic use — phatic communion, I am tempted to call it, [...] a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words.” The term *phatic* is taken from Hellenistic Greek φατικός *phatikós*, itself derived from Classical Greek φάτος *phatós* ‘spoken’. Phatic communion is social communion by means of speech. For Malinowski, language promotes social bonding among people. This is the social function that both Bühler and Lyons included among the three basic functions of language.

Phatic communion has little if anything to do with communication, though it is often erroneously and confusingly termed *phatic communication*, as an internet search for the latter term instantly demonstrates. In Malinowski’s original work, phatic communion does not communicate information but rather promotes social bonding. The standard example of phatic communion is the ritual greeting.

Phatic communion can be thought of as a form of social grooming. The term *social grooming* was coined to describe the mutual cleaning and grooming of one animal by another and is most widely discussed by primatologists. Robin Dunbar (1996) famously posited that social grooming was the driving evolutionary force behind human language. John Laver presaged this claim: “phatic communion [...] serves to establish and consolidate the interpersonal relationship between two participants [...]. Phatic communion is a complex part of a ritual, highly skilled mosaic of communicative behaviour whose function is to facilitate the management of interpersonal relationships” (Laver 1975).

An excellent example of phatic communion is the expression *bonjour hi!*, which has become ubiquitous over the last quarter century among store clerks in Montreal, who greet visitors with this bilingual coordinate expression. In the words of Wikipedia, “This is a bilingual greeting, meant to inform the recipient that the speaker can respond to them in either French or English”. Not everyone is pleased with this cultural inclusiveness. Montreal mayor Valérie Plante had the following to say in 2024: “People come to Montreal knowing that it is a francophone city, so, though we want to be welcoming to everybody, of course — we want to do good business and everything of course — we should be proud and we should encourage people to only say ‘bonjour’”.²

2 Expressive semantics

If, as Lyons claims, language has three encodable functions, then we should be able to find cases of systematic encoding of each of these within the grammar of a language, either in syntax, semantics, or morphology. We will begin with the expressive function, whereby the speaker encodes their feelings.

Expressives of all sorts were excluded from the purview of formal semantics until Christopher Potts sparked a resurgence of interest in non-truth-conditional aspects of language by showing that the expressive function could be analyzed by formal semantic means. Potts (2007) is devoted specifically to the formal semantics of expressive lexemes. Among the most

² <https://globalnews.ca/news/10446438/bonjour-hi-montreal-rise/>

influential of Potts's contributions is the claim that what he called expressive content is best thought of as comprising a distinct dimension of meaning separate from descriptive content, allowing it to be formalized as such using well-established formal tools. He proposes two distinct dimensions, expressive/emotive and descriptive: "No lexical item contributes both an at-issue [descriptive] and a CI [conventional implicature, expressive] meaning" (Potts 2005: 7). This move allowed for the inclusion of the expressive aspect of semantics under the purview of formal semantics, albeit as a separate dimension.

Potts observed that expressive content has a number of distinct characteristics (Potts 2007: 166):

1. *Independence*: Expressive content contributes a dimension of meaning that is separate from the regular descriptive content.
2. *Nondisplaceability*: Expressives predicate something of the utterance situation.
3. *Perspective dependence*: Expressive content is evaluated from a particular perspective. In general, the perspective is the speaker's, but there can be deviations if the conditions are right.
4. *Descriptive ineffability*: Speakers are never fully satisfied when they paraphrase expressive content using descriptive, i.e., nonexpressive, terms.

Daniel Gutzmann has questioned whether it is possible to draw a clear line between lexemes with expressive content and those with truth-conditional content. Gutzmann (2011) and Gutzmann & Turgay (2026) show that there is a set of what they call "mixed expressives" whose members are quite common. These are lexemes that have both expressive and descriptive content. According to Gutzmann, "Potts's claim that there are no such expressions as mixed expressives is not valid" (Gutzmann 2011: 134).

Gutzmann examines a variety of types of mixed expressives. The first involves what Frege (1892) called *Färbung* 'coloring'. Frege noted that the German word *Köter* 'cur' carries the same descriptive content as *Hund* 'dog', but with additional negative coloring or attitude. Other examples from Gutzmann are *Bülle* 'cop', 'policeman + negative attitude', and *Tussi* 'bimbo', 'girl + negative attitude'. English terms like *bastard*, *bitch*, and *motherfucker* all refer to a person, but in addition carry negative expressive content. Ethnic slurs, too numerous to count (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_slurs), are of particular interest because their descriptive content can be denied directly without regard for the negative attitude, as in: "A: Lessing was a Boche; B: No, he was not a German" (Gutzmann 2011: 133), which shows quite directly that they have both descriptive and expressive content. Thus, while description and (emotive) expression may constitute distinct dimensions, as Potts claims, a single lexical item may have content on both of these dimensions.

In the literature on English syntax, the most widely studied expressives are expletive modifiers. Many colloquial varieties of English have one or more expletive adjectives/adverbs. The exact expletive varies among varieties, and all expletive expressions have euphemistic variants: *bloody* (*bleeding/blooming*), *damn* (*darn*), *fuckin(g)* (*effing/freaking*). Expletive modifiers are usually inserted before the head of a phrase: *No damn way*, *Big darn deal*, *So blooming what*, *How damn big*, *So damn many times*. As we will see shortly, these expletive modifiers play an outsized role in English expressive morphology.

2.1 Expressive morphology

The study of non-truth-conditional expressive morphology has thrived for the last several decades. Most of this research has been concentrated on a subset of expressives, evaluative expressions (diminutives and augmentatives), beginning with Scalise's (1984) discussion of Italian diminutive and augmentative suffixes. Merlini Barbaresi & Dressler (2020) sums up more than two decades of research by this team, beginning with Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994). Grandi & Körtvélyessy (2015) is a 750-page handbook devoted entirely to evaluative morphology. Evaluative affixes can also often morph into purely expressive uses (Jurafsky 1996). Diminutive affixes often have affectionate uses, while augmentative suffixes can be pejorative.

English is quite impoverished when it comes to evaluative morphology. There are a few diminutive suffixes (e.g., *-ette* as in *kitchenette*, *diskette* and *-ling* as in *duckling*, *princeling*), but none of them is at all productive. What is productive is the use of expletives. Most curious about these expletives is that they occur as infixes in English. Even more curiously, they are the only infixes that are found in English. McCarthy (1982) is the locus classicus for the study of expletive infixation. The basic observation is that the expletive is inserted before a stressed syllable: *Massa-fuckin-pequa* is perfectly fine, but **Mas-fuckin-sapequa* and **Massape-fuckin-qua* are not.

2.2 A mixed expressive suffix in English

If, as Gutzmann claims, there are mixed expressive lexemes, then, just as we find expressive affixes alongside expressive lexemes, we should also expect to find mixed expressive affixes alongside mixed expressive lexemes. And like mixed expressive lexemes, these affixes should have semantic content on two dimensions, truth-conditional and expressive/emotive.

One such affix has emerged recently in Present-Day English, the suffix *-free* (Aronoff 2020). English has two suffixes that form adjectives from nouns with the meaning 'lacking N': *-less* and *-free*. They differ in that *-free* carries an additional expressive meaning. While both X_{less_A} and X_{free_A} predicate of the head N that they modify that 'the referent of N does not have X', X_{free_A} predicates in addition that 'it is good that the referent of N does not have X'. Contrast *saltless* vs. *saltfree*; *ambitionless* vs. *ambitionfree*; *eyeless* vs. *?eyefree*. In the last case, it is hard to imagine that being eyefree is a good thing, and hence the oddity of the expression. The suffix *-free* is a mixed expressive in the sense of Gutzmann, with semantic content on two dimensions. It is a rare example of a mixed expressive affix. It is also a rare example of a positive expressive affix in English, where, as we have seen, most expressive affixes are expletives that convey a negative attitude.

3 The social dimension

What about the social function of language? Many languages have pronominal systems that encode the social relations between interlocutors, usually studied as instances of politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987). Most commonly, these are sets of second-person pronouns: French *tu* vs. *vous*; German *du* vs. *Sie*; Italian *tu* vs. *lei*; Spanish *tu* vs. *usted/ustedes/vosotros, vos* vs. *vosotros/vosotras* (Helmbrecht 2013). These sets of pronouns are not expressive: they do not

convey the speaker's attitude or frame of mind. Rather, they serve a social function in the sense of Lyons. They encode the relative social positions of the interlocutors. Among the most common linguistic signals of relative social status are honorifics, meant to convey respect for an interlocutor or another person. In European languages, honorifics are frequently terms of address, such as *sir*, *madam*, *monsieur*, *madame*, *your holiness*, *your majesty*, etc. An excellent introduction to the topic is McCready (2019), whose very title, *The Semantics and Pragmatics of Honorification: Register and Social Meaning*, points directly to the social nature of honorifics. While honorific terms of address are close to ubiquitous, honorific morphology has been described in only a handful of languages, notably Japanese and Javanese.

Other sorts of social morphology have received less attention, in part because such phenomena have been seen as lying entirely within the realm of pragmatics, outside the confines of Frege's 'thought'. Hans Marchand expressed this point of view very clearly in his monumental work on English word formation, in his discussion of clipping in English:

Clipping consists in the reduction of a word to one of its parts. [...] The difference between the short and the long form is obviously not one of logical content. [...] What makes the difference between *mag* and *magazine* [...] is the way the long word and the short word are used in speech. They are not interchangeable in the same type of speech. [...] The substitution [...] involves a change of emotional background [...]. The process of clipping, therefore, has not the grammatical status that compounding, prefixing, suffixing, and zero-derivation have, and is not relevant to the linguistic system (la langue) itself but to speech (la parole). Marchand (1969: 441)

Lappe, however, in her comprehensive treatment of English clipping and related phenomena, asserts otherwise:

recent investigations have brought to light convincing evidence for an approach which incorporates the manipulation of non-referential aspects of meaning into the realm of word formation. [...] English truncatory patterns [...] are a case in point. (Lappe 2007: 28)

In the rest of this article, we will show that one form of English clipping is a productive lexeme formation rule that expresses a social function, phatic communion.

3.1 *Encoding familiarity in English trochaic -o truncation*

Most discussion of phatic communion in the literature involves ritual greetings, individual lexemes. While the literature on politeness contains some analysis of morphology, there are no morphological examples of phatic communion, as far as we know. In what follows, we will discuss an English word formation template, trochaic *Xo*, that began to emerge centuries ago but solidified only in the 20th century. This template expresses a familiar/casual attitude towards the entity described and familiarity between the interlocutors. The result is a mixed expression: descriptive + social.

We used as our main data source the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (OEDO). We searched for all nouns ending in the letter <o>, using an advanced search for *o. Among these, we selected those that were labeled as either 'shortening' or 'derivative'.³ Our search of OEDO

³ The exact query we generated is the following:

(14/2/2026) yielded 949 nouns, 699 of them classified as derivatives and 250 of them classified as shortenings. This list formed the initial basis of our investigation, which would not have been possible if it were not for the use of these labels on OEDO entries. We then eliminated false positives, among which nouns that contained the prefixes *co-* and *pro-* (such as *co-workman*, *pro-choicer*) or other first members ending in <o> followed by a hyphen (such as *go-carting*, *Indo-Europeanist*, *Oto-Manguean*, *retro-ignition*, *two-handedness*...) and other irrelevant results (such as *sermonettino*, *supercasino*...). The final list amounted to a little less than 300 words.

There are also a few disyllabic words of the form *Xo* that we came across in our daily lives that were not among the results yielded by our query: *camo*, *convo*, *inspo*, *nepo*, *orgo*, *pano*, *rando*, respectively from *camouflage*, *conversation*, *inspiration*, *nepotism*, *orgasm*, *panoramic*, *random* are not listed in the OEDO at all, while *doggo*, *preggo*, *mammo* and *lingo* are listed by the OEDO but were not among the results of our query.

The data sorts itself into three sets, which appear to have emerged roughly in historical order, based on the first citations in the OEDO.

Already in the 18th century we have the first cases of clipping of nouns whose second syllable ends in <o>/o/ that conform to a trochaic template: *hypo1* (1701), *memo* (1705), *demo1* (1794), respectively from *hypochondria*, *memorandum*, *democrat*. These show that the output of the clipping can coincide with the first member of a compound (*hypochondria*, *democrat*), but it can also coincide with a substring of the input noun that does not correspond to a morphological or lexical entity, as in the case of *memo*, as long as it conforms to the template constituted by a disyllabic trochee ending in /o/.

From the early 19th century on, the number of such clippings increases. These are the lexical items that bear the label ‘shortening’ in the OEDO, since they are literally orthographically shortened forms of their bases. In the cases of the ones coinciding with a combining form used as first member of a neoclassical compound, it is impossible to decide whether the process that creates the shortened form is morphological or prosodic: mapping to a trochaic prosodic template and clipping after the first member would yield the same result in countless cases, such as *typo1* (1816), *hippo* (1850), *panto* (1852), *photo* (1860) respectively from *typographer*, *hippopotamus*, *pantomime*, *photograph*.⁴ But in cases such as *compol* (1823), *curio* (1851), *appro* (1874), *repro* (1903), *demo2* (1904), respectively from *composition*, *curiosity*, *approval* or *approbation*, *reproduction*, *demonstration*, it is clear that the clipped form is obtained through mapping of the base to a prosodic template – a disyllabic trochee ending in /o/. *Demo1* ‘democrat’ and *demo2* ‘demonstration’ constitute a nice minimal pair showing that the two processes, clipping after the first member of a neoclassical compound and mapping the base to the prosodic template, can yield phonologically identical results.

On the other hand, clipping after the first member of a compound does not always yield a disyllabic output: we have a few trisyllabic shortenings, like *electro1* (1862, from *electrotype*), *amnio* (1974, from *amniocentesis*) and even the quadrisyllabic *photolitho* (1890,

https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Entries?partOfSpeech=noun&typeOfFormation=derivative%2Cshortening&textTermText0=*o&textTermOpt0=WordPhrase&dateOfUseFirstUse=false&page=12&sortOption=AZ&tl=tr
ue. Readers should be aware that the number of results yielded by the query will vary in time, because the OEDO is constantly updated.

⁴ Montermini (2002: 315), commenting on similar Italian data, observes that it is “oggettivamente impossibile – e probabilmente privo di senso – stabilire se siano state formate attraverso un procedimento o l’altro” [objectively impossible – and probably meaningless – to establish whether they were formed in one or the other way].

from *photolithography*), which encompasses two combining forms from a tri-membered neoclassical compound.

Beginning in the mid-19th century, we find the suffix <o> added to monosyllables: e.g., *boy* (1835), *smoko* (1857), *brasso* (1905), *milko* (1905), *cheapo* (1911), *wino* (1915).⁵ Later, a new variant emerges, in which /o/ is appended to a clipping consisting of the first syllable of the base, sometimes followed by the onset of the second syllable: e.g., *brillo* (1916), *obbo* (1925), *lezzo* (1941), *journ* (1965), *sando* (2003), respectively from *brilliant*, *observation*, *lesbian*, *journalist*, *sandwich*. In *fatso* (1944) and *nutso* (1975) a monosyllabic base is expanded by adding /s/ before /o/. This pattern produces many nouns denoting humans (44 out of 75, i.e. 58.7%), and about one third of these are from adjectives; the pattern appears to be distinct from the shortening pattern in both its formation and its meaning (only 28/169, i.e. 16.6% of the clippings ending in an /o/ that was already present in their base denote humans).

In the 20th and 21st century, we find an extension of the first pattern: a trochaic template producing nouns ending in <o>, but from nouns whose second syllable's nucleus is not /o/: e.g., *ammo* (1911), *boho* (1920), *combo* (1929), *inspo* (not in OEDO, attested at least from 2019⁶) from *ammunition*, *bohemian*, *combination*, *inspiration*.⁷

3.2 Italian *accorciamenti* and English *shortenings*

Thornton (1996) analyzes several shortening phenomena in Italian as examples of mapping onto a prosodic word consisting of a syllabic trochee ending in a vowel. Thornton first shows that the minimal nominal prosodic word in Italian is disyllabic and ends in a vowel. The most prominent type is that of *accorciamenti* or shortenings. In these, the base is mapped onto a template, which is a disyllabic trochee ending in a vowel, not always /o/, as it is in English. The truth-functional meaning is unchanged, and the output may or may not coincide with a morpheme in the base. Some examples are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Italian *accorciamenti*

accorciamento	base	gloss
<i>bici</i>	<i>bicicletta</i>	‘bicycle’
<i>Juve</i>	<i>Juventus</i>	proper name of a soccer team
<i>auto</i>	<i>automobile, autobus</i>	‘car’, ‘bus’

⁵ There are two early forms, *stingo* (1651, ‘strong ale or beer’) and *guardo* (1832, from *guardship*) which the OEDO assesses as formed by adding the suffix <o> “perhaps simulating a Spanish or Italian ending” or “simulating Spanish words”. *Boyo* (1835) is the first entry of the kind with an added <o> for which no influence of Spanish or Italian models is invoked.

⁶ *Inspo* is the example that inspired us to conduct the present study. A search through Google Books Ngram Viewer allowed us to identify several examples of the noun *inspo* ‘inspiration’ in books published in 2019 and onwards, and an example from 2017 in which it is possible that *inspo* is an adjective (‘inspirational’): “inspo photos from the Spring / Summer 2017 Monique Lhuillier collection”

(https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=inspo&year_start=1500&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3&case_insensitive=false).

⁷ There are two early examples from the 19th century: *tambo* (1848), from *tambourine*, where the base does not have /o/ in the second syllable's nucleus phonologically, but there is an orthographic <o> in the base at the point of clipping, and *salvo* (1887) ‘member of the Salvation army’, the first unquestionable example of this new pattern.

<i>tele</i>	<i>televisione</i>	‘television’
<i>bilo</i>	<i>bilocale</i>	‘two-room apartment’
<i>Anto</i>	<i>Antonella</i>	woman’s proper name

Despite its name, *accorciamento* is templatic mapping, not shortening, as Thornton shows. It might appear to be subtractive, as its traditional name suggests. But *accorciamento* maps the word onto a disyllabic trochee ending in a vowel, which might or might not be identical to the word’s first foot. Subtraction is simply a side effect of the mapping onto a disyllable. The domain of the mapping function is the whole word. The range of the function is a trochee ending in a vowel: “These shortened forms of Italian are better described as the result of mapping a base to a template, in our case coincident with the language’s minimal prosodic word, than as truncation of part of the base.” (Thornton 1996: 86)

As, we have seen, English has a template similar to Italian *accorciamento*. The two might be historically related, a question we will not address here. In English, the word is reduced to a disyllable consisting of the first syllable, the onset of the second syllable, and the vowel /o/ <o>. The pattern has early examples, but larger numbers are attested from around 1850.

Lappe (2007) is an exhaustive description of shortening in contemporary English. In this monograph, Lappe covers three phenomena: truncated names, -y hypocoristics, and -o clipping (our trochaic -o template). Lappe remarks on the semantics of clippings:

Obviously, however, clipped words do have a meaning and a function that is different from their bases. [...] [C]lipping can be seen as a means of creating new words for very specific concepts that have been part of the meaning of their base words before. [...] [T]hese words are likely to be used – pragmatically – as familiarity, or in-group markers. (Lappe 2007: 27)

We will pursue the implications of her analysis in what follows.

Table 2 contains a sample of 19th century -o clippings. Like all early cases, these contain an /o/ in their original form. Table 3 contains a sample of nouns conforming to the -o template from monosyllabic bases; Table 4 provides a sample of later entries in which the base does not contain /o/.

Table 2: Sample 19th century English -o clippings

base	Xo derivative	first citation in OED
<i>typographer</i>	<i>typol</i>	1816
<i>composition</i>	<i>compol</i>	1823
<i>stereotype</i>	<i>stereoI</i>	1823
<i>locomotive</i>	<i>loco</i>	1833
<i>hippopotamus</i>	<i>hippo</i>	1850
<i>curiosity</i>	<i>curio</i>	1851
<i>pantomime</i>	<i>panto</i>	1852

<i>photograph</i>	<i>photo</i>	1860
<i>rhinoceros</i>	<i>rhino</i>	1870
<i>stereoscope</i>	<i>stereo2</i>	1876
<i>dipsomaniac</i>	<i>dipso</i>	1880
<i>heliograph</i>	<i>helio1</i>	1886
<i>rhododendron</i>	<i>rhodo</i>	1886
<i>typographic error</i>	<i>typo2</i>	1892

Table 3: The later English trochaic -o template I: nouns from monosyllabic bases or based clipped to monosyllables + /o/

base	Xo derivative	first citation in OED
<i>gypsy</i>	<i>gyppo1</i>	1868
<i>lad</i>	<i>laddo</i>	1870
<i>fleece</i>	<i>fleeco</i> /'fliˌsoʊ/	1881
<i>kid</i>	<i>kiddo</i>	1896
<i>ox</i>	<i>oxo</i>	1899
<i>raspberry</i>	<i>razzo</i>	1899
<i>cheap</i>	<i>cheapo</i>	1911
<i>pink</i>	<i>pinko1</i> ‘drunk’	1917
<i>go between</i> (?)	<i>gobo</i>	1923
<i>pink</i>	<i>pinko2</i> ‘socialist’	1930
<i>speed</i>	<i>speedo1</i>	1933
<i>beard</i>	<i>beardo</i>	1935
<i>lesbian</i>	<i>lezzo</i>	1941
<i>birdwatcher</i>	<i>birdo</i>	1950
<i>pregnant</i>	<i>preggo</i>	1951

Table 4: The later English trochaic -o template II: shortenings with /o/ replacing a different vowel in the base

base	Xo derivative	first citation in OED
<i>ammunition</i>	<i>ammo</i>	1911
<i>tangerine</i>	<i>tango</i> /'tæŋɡoʊ/	1913
<i>prophylactic</i>	<i>propho</i>	1919
<i>bohemian</i>	<i>boho</i>	1920

<i>compensation</i>	<i>compo2</i>	1921
<i>combination</i>	<i>combo</i>	1929
<i>lesbian</i>	<i>lesbo</i>	1931
<i>jelly</i>	<i>Jell-O</i>	1934
<i>garbage</i>	<i>garbo</i>	1940
<i>communist</i>	<i>commo</i>	1941
<i>refugee</i>	<i>reffo</i>	1941
<i>repurchase</i>	<i>repo1</i>	1956
<i>musician</i>	<i>muso</i>	1967
<i>registration</i>	<i>rego</i> /'redʒəʊ/	1967
<i>aggravation</i>	<i>aggro</i>	1969
<i>pervert</i>	<i>pervo</i>	1970
<i>parmesan</i>	<i>parmo</i>	1999

The data show that the English trochaic *-o* template is social. It conveys a casual, familiar, or informal tone, almost playful. Unlike expressives, it is not negative or positive in tone. It also exemplifies Potts’s criterion of descriptive ineffability: “Speakers are never fully satisfied when they paraphrase expressive content using descriptive, i.e., non-expressive, terms.” In fact, it seems to convey little more than a casual, familiar, even playful attitude. The OEDO expresses this with stylistic annotations such as “colloquial” and “slang”, which appear in over half of the entries in our corpus.

In his classic book, *Homo ludens* (1938/1949: 1), Jan Huizinga argued that play is the basis of human culture: “Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing”. Many authors since Wittgenstein (1953) have observed that language is a form of structured play. Similarly for music, dance, and visual art. Many creatures play. What makes humans different is that the structure of their play is not predetermined. Nor is it strictly self-organized. Rather it is human-organized, like all cultural phenomena. Nonetheless, the clearly ludic aspect of language is often dismissed as ‘extra-grammatical’ (Dressler 2000), simply because it goes beyond description in its meaning. Since morphological patterns are, by definition, grammatical, the English *-o* pattern shows that the ludic and grammatical aspects of language are not mutually exclusive.

4 Frequency, familiarity, and shortening

Zipf’s law of abbreviation tells us that the more frequent a word is the shorter it is likely to be. “Cognitively, the negative correlation between frequency and length is likely to be a result of a mostly unconscious process of shortening a linguistic form when its meaning is highly accessible” (Levshina 2022). Put another way, we may say that more familiar words are likely

to be shorter: “when a new thing becomes widely discussed, its name can become shorter. An illustration is the COVID-19 pandemic” (Levshina 2022).

Speakers may deliberately shorten words as a demonstration of their familiarity with the reference of the word, as many have observed: “Truncation is born of familiarity” (Pharies 2020, citing Antoine 2006); “esprime soprattutto la familiarità, la vicinanza tra il locutore e la realtà denotata” [it expresses above all familiarity, closeness between the speaker and the denoted entity] (Montermini 2002: 311). Nicknames or hypocoristics are more often than not shortenings born of familiarity. “In standard grammars of English, endearment – ‘emotional attachment’ (Bauer & Huddleston 2002: 1677), ‘close community with (together with familiar, and often affectionate, knowledge of) what is referred to’ (Quirk et al. 1985: 1584) – is assumed to be the driving force behind the use of *y*--hypocoristics” (Lappe 2007: 25).

Like nicknames, the trochaic *-o* template expresses familiarity with the referent. It also expresses a casual attitude toward the referent and the term’s descriptive content. Good examples are *ammo*, *inspo*, *convo*, and *combo*. There is little or no change in descriptive content between the input and the output of these forms. *Ammo* and *ammunition* have the same descriptive content. The common difference is that *ammo* and its congeners add a casual familiarity with the concept and its referent.

Morphology is relational (Aronoff & Sims 2023). Lexeme formation, in particular, deals with the relation between pairs of lexemes. We speak of the relation between the input and the output, the domain and the range. In most instances, the input form is contained in the output. A word like [[de[[[institute]ion]al]iz]ation] is formed by a succession of lexeme formation rules. We start with *institute*_V and form *institution*_N from it. From *institution* we form *institutional*_A, then *institutionalize*_V, *deinstitutionalize*_V, and *deinstitutionalization*_N, in succession. At each step, a phonological signal marks the relation between the input and the output. In cases of zero-derived lexemes, or conversion, such as [[sand]_N]_V, there is no signal. The input and the output are identical in form. In shortened forms, though, the input contains the form of the output! Is this an instance of nonrecoverable deletion?

No, because, as we just noted, shortenings are rooted in familiarity, not just familiarity between interlocutors, but also familiarity with the input. The whole point of saying *promo* is to signal that both the speaker and the hearer know that they are talking about *promotion*. Compare the use of acronyms to show in-group membership.

There are suggestions throughout the literature that shortening is purely pragmatic (cf. Marchand’s quote above) This view is based on a misunderstanding of the relation between the language code and its use. Pragmatics deals with how the code is used, not with the internal workings of the code itself. By definition, whatever is encoded in the arbitrary language code cannot be the domain of pragmatics. Once we have demonstrated that the *-o* template is part of the grammatical code, a linguistic sign, it cannot be thought of solely in terms of pragmatics. Like any other bit of code, it must be used, and hence also subject to pragmatic analysis, but that is secondary to its morphological structure and to its semantics.

5 Conclusion

Humans are the most culture bound of creatures. Every human behavior involves both nature and nurture. Culture and social bonding/exclusion reinforce each other. Language is the best example of this interaction. No human behavior, and hence no human language, is entirely

natural. Morphology is the least natural aspect of the language code, because every morpheme is an arbitrary sign. It therefore has great social power.

Entranced by the glamour of written language, linguists have historically had difficulty dealing with non-truth-functional aspects of language. The great temptation is to claim that the social and emotive functions of language are never grammaticalized and certainly never morphologized. In this short article, we have shown that expressive and social morphology are alive and well in colloquial Present-Day English. These two functions of language are less likely to be encoded than the representational function. But if you look hard enough, you will find them. In the words of Jagger and Richards, “If you try sometimes, well, you just might find you get what you need.”

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Mark Aronoff
Department of Linguistics
Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, New York 11794-4376
USA
e-mail: mark.aronoff@stonybrook.edu

Anna M. Thornton
Dipartimento di Scienze umane
Viale Nizza 14
67100 L'Aquila
Italy
e-mail: annamaria.thornton@univaq.it