The innovation and adoption of English lexical blends

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Abstract

This article focuses on how innovation and adoption, two commonly-cited processes of language change, can be discerned in the emergence and spread of lexical blends. Lexical blending is a productive process in English by which parts of two lexemes are combined in order to create a new lexeme. Brunch*, which is formed through the combination of parts of* breakfast *and* lunch*, is a typical example. This article describes an experiment which investigated the ways in which speakers assign meaning to unfamiliar blends. Participants were presented with a number of unfamiliar blends, some attested and some invented, and asked to cite their source lexemes and meanings. A number of hypotheses were tested: (1) where a majority of speakers agree on the source lexemes of an unfamiliar blend, they will also agree on its meaning (2) the higher the number of syllables in an unfamiliar blend, the more likely it is a consensus will be achieved with regard to its source lexemes; (3) where the unfamiliar blend rhymes with one of its source lexemes, the more likely it is a consensus will be achieved with regard to its source lexemes. I conclude with an attempt to relate these findings to the speaker's involvement in broader processes of language change.*

1   Introduction: Innovation and adoption within the lexicon

Innovation and adoption are often cited as important processes in language change (cf. Milroy 1992, Croft 2000). Innovation refers to the creation of new linguistic material, and adoption refers to its proliferation among wider groups of speakers. It might be considered then that adoption is the more important process of language change; an innovative form must be adopted by a significant number of speakers in order for observable change to take place (cf. Milroy 1992: 79). This article describes an experiment which was carried out in order to investigate the factors which might motivate speakers to adopt (or reject) an innovative lexical form.

   The focus on speaker involvement with lexical developments appears justified for a number of reasons. It seems that speakers more readily engage with lexical innovation than with innovation in other linguistic domains. The discussion of lexical neologisms is a common mainstay of popular science literature, and often features in a wealth of websites, newspaper columns and discussion forums, (cf. Fischer 1998, Metcalf 2002, Kemmer 2004, Lehrer 2005, 2007, Crystal 2007). Innovations which occur within functional domains such as the sound system, for example, do not appear to attract similar levels of popular interest.

   Furthermore, there is considerable scope for metalinguistic discussion among speakers about the diverse meanings of certain lexical items. For example, in English, a 'bank' can denote a financial institution, or the slopes at the edge of a river, to name just two of its meanings (Croft and Cruse 2004: 109). Although it is highly unlikely that these two meanings could ever become confused in conversation, discussions could

conceivably arise about the relationship between the two meanings, On the other hand, metalinguistic discussions within less meaning-driven domains of language appear to be comparatively rare. For example, within the sound system, phonemes frequently exhibit a number of different allophones. In the variety of English spoken in (London)Derry, Northern Ireland, lateral [l] is a common allophone of intervocalic /ð/, which gives rise to [mʌlər] and [brʌlər] pronunciations for *mother* and *brother*, (cf. McCafferty 2001: 184-195, Hickey 2007: 343). While it is certainly possible for speakers to associate one or more of these allophones with a particular social meaning, explicit metalinguistic discussion about these meanings appears to be less common. In terms of its social meaning, the [l] variant might be considered as a Labovian 'marker', in the sense that its patterns of usage indicate that it encodes some degree of meaning, although the speakers who make use of the feature may not be aware of it (cf. Labov 1972: 179). [1] In this sense, it might be argued that the speaker's *engagement* with meaning in language is more pronounced in the lexicon than in other linguistic domains.

Moreover, change takes place very readily within lexical domains. The lexicon constitutes an 'open' category of language to which one can freely add new members, whereas more 'closed' grammatical categories can only have twenty or thirty members at most (cf. Emonds 1985). Lexical innovation is often indicative of what Labov (1994) has termed 'change from above'. Changes from above are characterised by developments which emerge and quickly proliferate among privileged classes of people (those at the forefront of technological developments, for example), before potentially spreading to others (1994: 78). Changes from above arise as a result of the conscious action of speakers. In contrast, 'change from below' arises at the level of the vernacular as a result of internal, linguistic factors and occur below the level of speaker awareness (Labov 1994: 78). This suggests further that the speaker's engagement in innovation is more heightened within lexical domains than within grammatical domains.

Labov states that innovations which emerge through change from above are frequently borrowings from languages which the dominant classes deem to be prestigious (1994: 78). These borrowings are often incongruous to the native vernacular and are not immediately adopted by speakers from other social classes as a result. For example, the widespread borrowing of Latin vocabulary into English during the Renaissance period came about because many considered English to be too impoverished to describe the various new developments which were emerging at the time (cf. Blank 2006, Baugh and Cable 2002: 195-248). Latin had been the language of scholarship for centuries and enjoyed great prestige as a result. However, these Latin borrowings and neologisms which utilised Latin processes of word formation were not widely adopted by lower-class speakers, whose speech was often derided as 'cant' by the elite (Blank 2006: 226-230).

Labov's discussion of change from above focuses on the influence of the elites in society. It appears that he considered the elite solely in terms of those who asserted socioeconomic dominance, but it can also be argued, in terms of lexical change, that any group of speakers which enjoys some degree of privilege can also have an influence. A group of computer developers could be considered as elite, for example, given their privileged position at the forefront of technological innovation. It can be assumed that the wide range of technical lexicon which has become common currency among wider

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[1] McCafferty's work shows that the [l] allophone is most commonly found among Catholic teenagers in the city, but it appears that there is no clear association of the feature with a 'teenage' and/or 'Catholic' variety of speech (cf. McCafferty 2001: 189).

groups of speakers first originated among those who had a hand in the development of the technology. For example, technical terms such as *LAN, wi-fi* and *captcha* are understood by growing numbers of lay speakers, as a result of the increasing computerisation of everyday life. These terms all had their origins among the elite professionals who were involved in the development of these technologies.

This article seeks to investigate the ways in which speakers respond to such innovative lexical items. It is argued that speakers most readily engage in processes of adoption where the meaning of the item to be adopted is accessible. Since it is the lexicon which most readily encodes meaning, it was decided to focus on innovation and adoption within this domain. The article focuses on blends in particular and draws inferences about the apparent 'adoptability' of innovative blends, based on the apparent consensus among participants with regard to the sources of the blend and its meaning. The following section discusses how blends are typically formed and Section 3 describes the experiment and its aims and outcomes in detail.

2   Blends and other lexical formation processes

In English, there are various processes of word formation. Processes of conversion, or 'zero-derivation', by which a lexical item comes to be used in a different syntactic context without any change of form, are very common in lexical development (cf. Bauer and Huddlestone 2002: 1644-1641, Bauer and Valera 2005). The use of verbs, such as *arrest, attempt* and *go,* as nouns is typical of this process (Bauer and Huddlestone 2002: 1641). However, this process only entails the accumulation of an innovative function rather than the accumulation of an innovative form. Innovative forms are most commonly coined through various processes of compounding, by which two base lexemes are combined in order to encode another meaning (cf. Bauer and Huddlestone 2002: 1644-1666, Bauer 2006: 484-485). Bauer and Huddlestone state that compounds which combine two nouns are 'by far the most productive kind of compounding in English' (2002: 1647). Compounds are often subordinative, in that one of the constituent base words can usually be considered as the head and the other as dependent (Bauer and Huddlestone 2002: 1646). The head is usually the final element of the compound (Bauer 2006: 484). For example, *birdcage* has *cage* as its head and *bird* as its dependent; *birdcage* denotes a kind of cage rather than a kind of bird (Bauer and Huddlestone 2002: 1646).

Blending is also a major process by which innovative lexical material can be created and it is this process which is the focus of this investigation. Blending can be compared to compounding in the way in which it combines two (or more) base lexemes in order to form a new one (Bauer and Huddlestone 2002: 1636, Gries 2004: 639). However, where compounding is often a regular, productive process, as noted in the previous paragraph, blending tends to be irregular and unpredictable. Examples such as *brunch* (<*breakfast+lunch*), *motel* (<*motor+hotel*) and *breathalyser* (<*breath+analyser*) are well-established in the English lexicon.

Blends are distinguished from compounds in that they combine *parts* of lexemes, rather than whole lexemes (Kemmer 2003: 75). Despite the fact that blends are a very productive source of lexical innovation (Gries 2004: 639), they have often been considered as a peripheral morphological process (Kemmer 2003: 76, Lehrer 2007: 115). Blends are commonly divided into two general types: substitution blends and overlap blends (cf. Bauer 1983, 1988, Bauer and Huddlestone 2002, Kemmer 2003,

Gries 2004). In substitution blends, a part of one of the source lexemes (also called a *splinter*) can be replaced with another lexeme (Lehrer 1996). To cite an example, *carjacking* is a blend of *car + hijacking*. In order to form this blend, the first part of *hijacking* is replaced with another lexeme, *car*. Another type of substitution blend is illustrated by the blending of the first part of one source lexeme and the final part of another. *Heliport* (*<helicopter + airport*) and *stagflation* (*<stagnation + inflation*) are two established examples of this type of blending. Overlap and substitution blends are not entirely distinct from each other, but it has been considered useful to keep them apart (cf. Kemmer 2003). Overlap blending occurs where the two lexemes which are combined share a common morphological or phonological unit. The combination of *glitter* and *literati* to make *glitterati*, for example, which denotes the celebrities who populate fashionable society, is facilitated by the /lɪtər/ phonological segment which they share, as well as by the semantic connotations of *literati* (cf. Kemmer 2003: 76).

While there are key differences between compounds and blends, the foundations which underpin their formation are essentially the same: the combination of established source lexemes in order to encode an innovative meaning. However, the fact that blends combine parts of words can potentially lead to problems of interpretation. While a speaker can easily identify the source lexemes of a true compound because they are present in their entirety, this is not always the case for blends. This article focuses on the various ways in which speakers identify the source lexemes of an innovative blend and how they come to assign a meaning to it. The following section describes a pilot experiment which aims to explore the factors which can influence the ways in which speakers interpret innovative blends and examines how this might have consequences for a theory of lexical change.

3 The innovation and adoption of blends: an experiment

An experiment was carried out in order to investigate the ways in which speakers assign meaning to blends which they are encountering for the first time. The methodology chosen is comparable to that of Lehrer (1996), with a number of key differences. Similarly to Lehrer's experiment, participants were presented with a number of blends and were asked to identify their source lexemes and their meaning with no time constraints. In Lehrer's experiment, all blends were attested, although some of them were not widely known. In the experiment described in this article, 16 participants were each presented with a list of ten blends, six of which were attested and four invented. Furthermore, Lehrer presented the blends to her subjects in context, whereas my experiment presented the blends without context, in an attempt to access the ways in which the participants assessed their meanings based solely on their structure. The following subsections outline key aspects of the experiment.

3.1 The participants

The 16 participants in this study were all native speakers of English from various parts of Northern Ireland and all were between 18-30 years old. Of these participants, 9 were male and 7 were female. All participants were attending university or had recently completed their university education.

3.2   Procedure and hypotheses

Both the experiment described in this paper and that of Lehrer aimed to investigate the interpretative strategies of participants. However, Lehrer's experiment is psycholinguistic in its focus and my experiment is an attempt to examine how diverse interpretations can have implications for the study of lexical change. This article explores whether or not the accessibility of the source lexemes of a blend might be a factor in its potential proliferation.

The experiment also aimed to investigate a number of hypotheses. They are outlined as follows:

(i) where a majority of speakers agree on the source lexemes of a blend, they will also agree on its meaning;
(ii) the higher the number of syllables in a blend, the more likely it is a consensus will be achieved with regard to its source lexemes;
(iii) where the blend rhymes with one of its source lexemes, the more likely it is that a consensus will be achieved with regard to its source lexemes.

Each participant was given a questionnaire. The questionnaire gave a definition of a blend and cited an example of the phenomenon. Participants were presented with one of two lists, each with ten blends. They were asked to state if they were familiar with the blend and to cite its source lexemes and meanings. Participants were encouraged to guess the source lexemes and meanings where the blend was unfamiliar.

The blends were of a number of different types. Out of each list of ten, three had one syllable, three had two syllables and four had more than two syllables. In the list which was presented to the participants, there were four invented and six attested blends. Among the invented blends, there was one with one syllable, one with two syllables and two with more than two syllables. The blends used were largely formed through substitution, but there were also some which were formed through overlap. 8 out of the 20 were overlap blends and 12 were formed through substitution. Furthermore, 12 out of the 20 blends rhymed with one of their source lexemes. Table 1 shows the blends which were used in the experiment and the various categories they represent.

	Substitution	Overlap
1 syllable		*Brunch**
		Jorts*
		Pleave*
		Smirt*
		Spork*
		Neast*
2 syllables	*Zeedonk*	*Bromance**
	Blingket	
	Carjack	
	Greenwash	
	Napsule*	

3+ syllables	*Affluenza* *Frankenfood* **Phlegmonstrate** * *Phonesia*	**Shoperate***
	Fezurrection* **Slickophant***	

Table 1: The blends included in the experiment. Those in bold type are invented and those marked with * rhyme with one of their source words

Table 2 shows the participants' responses to the question about the source lexemes of the blends. Each participant was asked if they were familiar with the blends. The experiment seeks to investigate how speakers interpret *innovative* blends; therefore in instances where a blend was familiar to a majority of participants, the responses for that blend were discounted from the study.

	Heard it before?	Source words? (only from respondents who hadn't heard it before)
Jorts	0/9 respondents	*jogging + shorts* x 3 *jeans + shorts* x 2 (4 incomplete)
Pleave	0/9	*please + leave* x 8 (1 incomplete)
Smirt	2/7	No conclusive response (4 different responses and 1 incomplete)
Neast	0/7	*near + east x 2* *north + east x 2* *neat + yeast x 1* *(2 incomplete)*
Zeedonk	0/9	No conclusive response (6 different responses, 3 incomplete)
Blingket	0/9	*bling + blanket* x 5 *bling + trinket* x 2 (2 incomplete)
Greenwash	0/7	*green + wash x 5* *green + whitewash x 1* *(1 incomplete)*
Napsule	1/7	*nap + capsule x 6* *net + time capsule x 1*
Affluenza	3/9	*affluence/affluency + influenza* x 3 *afford + influenza* x1 *affect + influenza* x 1 (1 incomplete)
Frankenfood	4/9	*Frankenstein + food* x 4 *Franken + food* x 1
Shoperate	0/9	*shop + operate* x 7 *shop + moderate* x 1

		shop + rate x 1
Phlegmonstrate	0/9	*phlegm + demonstrate* x 7
		phlegm + remonstrate x 2
Phonesia	1/7	*phone + amnesia x 3*
		phone + Asia x 1
		phone + disease x 1
		(1 incomplete)
Fezurrection	0/7	*fez + resurrection x 5*
		fizz + resurrection x 1
		(1 incomplete)
Slickophant	1/7	*slick + sycophant x 4*
		slick + elephant x 1(1 incomplete)

Table 2: Identification of the source lexemes. (Note that *brunch, bromance, carjack, spork* and *egosurf* were excluded from the analysis)

The most common responses to the question about source lexemes were singled out for further analysis. This was carried out in order to examine Hypothesis 1: if a majority of participants agree on the source lexemes of an unfamiliar blend, a majority will also agree on its meaning. Table 3 shows the most common meaning responses that were cited by those participants who had given the most popular source lexemes responses.

3.2.1 Hypothesis 1: Consensus about the source lexemes entails consensus about the meaning

In order to examine all hypotheses, it is necessary to draw inferences about the degree of consensus that is apparent in the responses to both the source lexemes question, and the meaning question. In order to do this, firstly, the most commonly cited responses to the source lexemes question was expressed as a percentage. For example, for jorts, the most commonly cited response to the source lexemes question was 'jogging' and 'shorts'; three out of the nine respondents cited this response, which amounts to 33%. Thereafter, the most commonly cited meaning responses by the respondents who had cited the most common response to the source lexemes question was also expressed as a percentage. For example, for *jorts,* of the three respondents who had cited 'jogging' and 'shorts' as its source lexemes, all three stated that 'jogging shorts' was its meaning, equating to 100%. These percentages were compared using a Pearson correlation test in order to ascertain whether or not consensus about the source lexemes of an unfamiliar blend coincided with consensus about its meaning. Table 3 highlights the most popular responses to the 'source lexemes' and 'meaning' questions which were investigated in this section. Figures 1, 2 and 3 highlight the results of the Pearson correlation tests for one-, two- and three-plus-syllable blends.

	Most commonly cited source lexemes	Most commonly-cited meaning, based on these source lexemes
Jorts	*jogging + shorts* (3/9 respondents who hadn't heard it before)	'jogging shorts' (2/3)

Pleave	*please + leave* (8/9)	'to ask politely for someone to leave' (4/8)
Neast	*near + east* *north + east* *(2/7 each)*	No majority response (1/2)
Blingket	*bling + blanket* (5/9)	'an expensive/fancy blanket' (5/5)
Greenwash	*green + wash* *(5/7)*	'to wash something in an environmentally friendly way' (3/5)
Napsule	*nap + capsule* *(5/6)*	'small sleeping compartment' (3/5)
Affluenza	*affluence/affluency + influenza* *(3/6)*	'problems affecting wealthy people' (2/3)
Frankenfood	*Frankenstein + food* (4/5)	'combination of snacks or food (in order to create one new food)' (3/4)
Shoperate	*shop + operate* (7/9)	'to run a shop' (2/7)
Phlegmonstrate	*phlegm + demonstrate* (7/9)	'to spit while arguing, in disgust/disapproval' (4/7)
Phonesia	*phone + amnesia* *(3/6)*	No majority response (1/3)
Fezurrection	*fez + resurrection* *(5/7)*	'phenomenon of fezzes or other unfashionable items of clothing coming back into style (3/5)
Slickophant	*slick + sycophant* *(4/6)*	'an expert sycophant' (3/4)

Table 3: The most commonly-cited meaning responses (note that *smirt* and *zeedonk* were not included in this part of the analysis, because of their lack of conclusive meaning response)
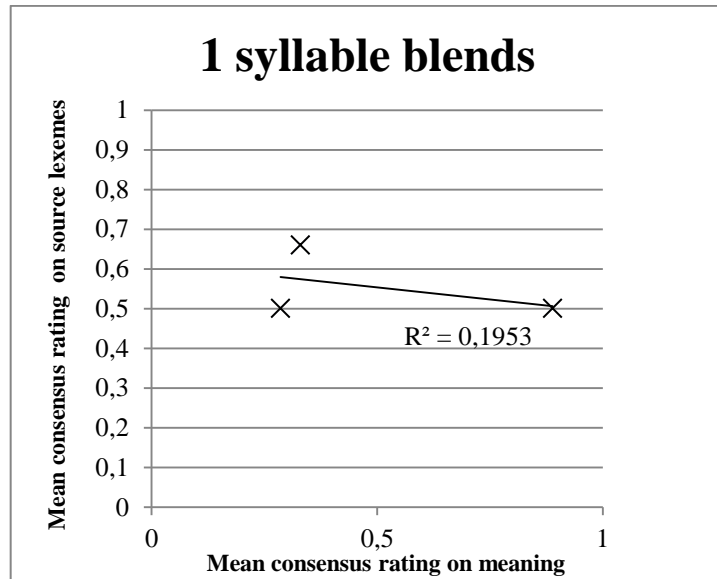
Figure 1: Results of a Pearson correlation test investigating whether consensus on the identification of source lexemes for one-syllable blends correlates with consensus on meaning responses
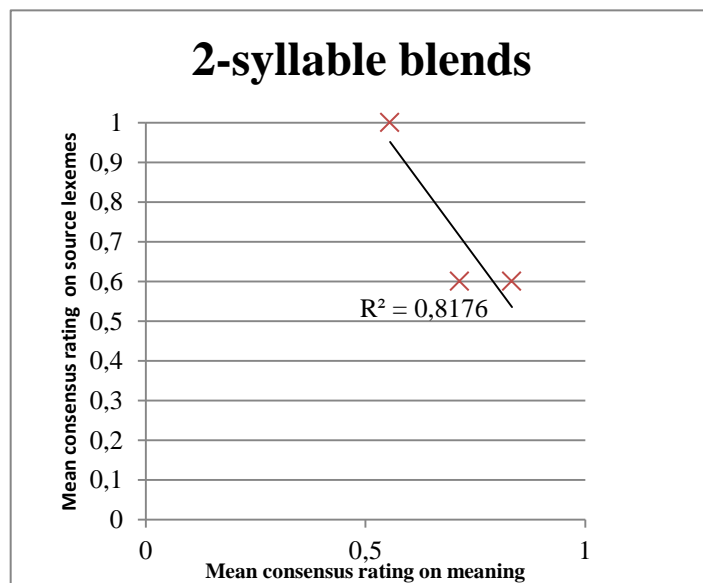

Figure 2: Results of a Pearson correlation test investigating whether consensus on the identification of source lexemes for two-syllable blends correlates with consensus on meaning responses
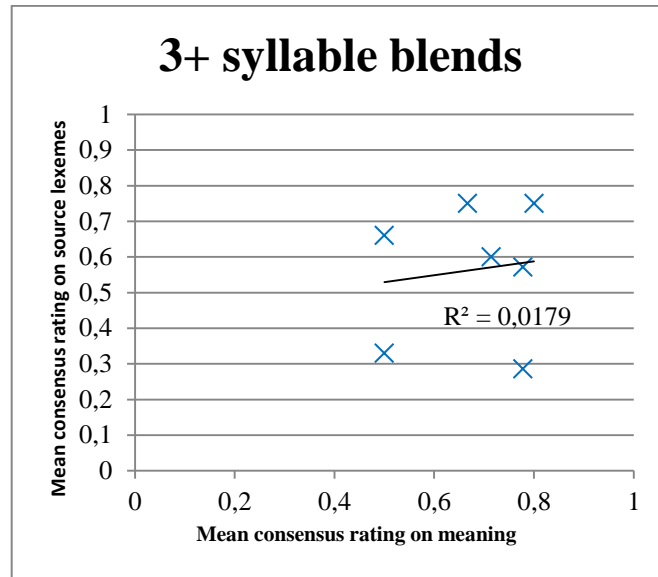
3+ syllable blends

Mean consensus rating on source lexemes

Mean consensus rating on meaning

$R^2 = 0,0179$

Figure 3: Results of a Pearson correlation test investigating whether consensus on the identification of source lexemes for three and more-syllable blends correlates with consensus on meaning responses

The results of the Pearson correlation tests shows that consensus on the source lexemes of a blend appears not to correlate with consensus on meaning for one-syllable and two-syllable blends. The R^2 rating for one-syllable blends in 0.1953, which indicates a weakly negative relationship between the responses. The rating for two-syllable blends is 0.8176 which denotes a more strongly negative relationship. Conversely, there appears to be a weakly positive relationship between the mean scores for three and more-syllable blends, with an R^2 rating of 0.0179.

It appears that we cannot draw any clear inferences about the effect that consensus on the source lexemes of a blend have on consensus about its meaning. There appears, based on these data, that consensus is most readily reached meanings where the blend is of three or more syllables, but further investigation with larger datasets would be necessary before drawing firmer conclusions.

3.2.2 Hypothesis 2: The higher the number of syllables, the higher the consensus about the source lexemes

In order to examine Hypothesis 2, which states that the higher the number of syllables in a blend, the more likely it is that a consensus will be reached with regard to its source lexemes, it is necessary first to express the most common response to the source lexemes question as a mean percentage. Two-tailed t-tests were then performed in order to ascertain if the differences between these means were statistically significant. The results of these comparisons are shown in Table 4.

Number of Syllables	Range of means (% of most popular source lexeme responses)	P (two-tailed t-test)
1 v 2	0.5015 v 0.7011	0.440
1 and 2 v 3+	0.6013 v 0.6766	0.443

Table 4: Comparison of mean source-lexeme consensus for blends with one v two syllables and one and two v three-plus syllables

It cannot be said with certainty, based on these results, that Hypothesis 2 has been confirmed. While it appears that participants have most difficulty in coming to a consensus about the source lexemes of single-syllable blends, it also appears that the degree of consensus does not increase as the number of syllables in the blend increases. The degree of consensus with regard to one v two-syllable blends on the one hand, and with regard to one and two v three-plus-syllable blends on the other, does not reach statistical significance at the $p < 0.5$ level.

3.2.3 Hypothesis 3: The source lexemes are most easily ascertained when one of them rhymes with the blend.

Hypothesis 3 was examined by comparing the most common source lexemes responses for blends which rhyme with one of their sources with those which do not. The mean percentages for the most commonly-cited source lexemes for rhyming and non-rhyming blends were compared through means of a two-tailed t-test. The results are shown in Table 5.

Rhyming?	Comparison of means (% of most popular source lexeme responses)	P (two-tailed t-test)
Yes v No	0.6597 v 0.6140	0.496

Table 5: Mean source-lexeme consensus for blends which rhymed with one of their sources, and those which did not

These results show that consensus is slightly more readily reached when the blend rhymes with one of its source lexemes (0.6597 of participants cited the most common responses for blends which rhymed with one of their source lexemes, compared to 0.6140 for blends which did not rhyme). However, the results of the t-test show that the difference between the consensus rate for rhyming and non-rhyming blends is very slight and does not reach significance at the $p < 0.05$ level. As a result, it cannot be said that this hypothesis has been proven.

4. Conclusions

The hypotheses which were proposed before the experiments appear generally not to have been borne out by the results. While the results show a slight correlation between consensus on the identification of source lexemes and on the identification of the meaning for blends with three or more syllables, there is no evidence to support the assertion that consensus on the source lexemes is most easily reached with blends of multiple syllables or to support the assertion that consensus on source lexemes is most easily reached with blends which rhyme with one of their putative source words.

It must be noted that this is a pilot experiment with a small number of participants and a small number of blends and larger numbers of participants and/or blends might have led to different results. The aim of these experiments was to explore the nature of consensus in the assignation of meaning to innovative lexemes and its ramifications in discussions of the nature of the degree of speaker involvement in lexical innovation. The experiments were based on the premise that speakers appear to most readily engage with linguistic items which convey an accessible meaning. Since the lexicon is the major meaning-bearing unit of language, it was decided to focus on this domain. The experiment aimed to investigate the factors which might influence the spread of an innovative lexical item. It was argued that, where a majority of speakers could agree on the source lexemes and meaning of an innovative blend, then this indicates that the meaning of the form is readily accessible. Where the meaning of the form is accessible, then it can potentially be adopted. Ultimately, the experiments do not allow us to draw any meaningful conclusions about the role of consensus in the proliferation of lexical innovation.

It must also be noted that there are likely to be other factors which influence a speaker in his/her decision to adopt or reject the innovative form. One the one hand, if a speaker deems an innovative form to be indicative of a prestigious norm of speech, then it can also be adopted or rejected on this basis (cf. Milroy 1992: 172-175). This experiment does not permit the examination of the participants' concepts of 'prestige'. Furthermore the perceived utility of an innovation can also play a role in whether or not it is adopted. While blends such as *frankenfood* and *greenwash* might be considered interesting and their meanings appear to be accessible, they are also rather esoteric and perhaps only attractive to speakers who deal with environmental issues on a frequent basis.[3] The participants' perception of the utility of many of these blends is not evident.

The accessibility of the meaning of an innovative blend appears to play some role in whether or not it is adopted, but the perceived prestige and utility of the form must also be taken into account. It must also be noted that the meaning of an unknown form can often be reconstructed in the context of a broader discussion. In such instances, it is unclear the extent to which a speaker would engage in the specific meaning content of the various elements of the blend in order to decide whether or not to adopt it. Further experiments can take these variables into account, but it appears that the inherent unpredictability of language change will prevent the development of any authoritative conclusions about the 'adoptability' of lexical innovations.

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[3] It must be noted, however, that the most popular meanings which were cited for these forms were different from their attested meanings. The attested meaning of *greenwash* (<*green+whitewash*) is 'to give the false impression of environmental credentials' (OED *greenwash*) which differs significantly from the most popular meaning in the experiment of 'to wash something in an environmentally friendly way'. *Frankenfood* is discussed in Section 3.2.

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