

## Recognition as a factor in language change

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The aim of this paper is to draw attention to an underexposed, cognitive factor in language change, recognition. So far, mainly structural causes have been identified for language change or incomplete transmission from one generation to the next. The role of the language user and, in particular, her or his cognitive abilities are underemphasized.

In the discussion of folk etymology, a 'misinterpretation' based on alleged element recognition has been raised, but folk etymology has hardly been taken seriously as a systematic form of language change. When it comes to reinterpretation over reanalysis, recognition implicitly plays a role. In this presentation, however, recognition will be central, but this does not mean that recognition is claimed to be the only source of language change.

The role of recognition in the development of a new suffix like *-o* will be discussed. Attention will also be given to suffix reinterpretation, as found in, for example, *-logy* and *-ology*. The importance of recognition for blending will also be briefly discussed. In this abstract only English examples will be presented but in the presentation also examples from Dutch, Swedish, Afrikaans and French will be discussed.

In English, one finds clipped disyllabic forms with final *-o* such as

- (1) psycho from psychopath
- dipso from dipsomaniac
- homo from homosexual

'Naïve' speakers of English noticed that these three disyllabic, trochaic loanwords all end in *-o*. They also share a pejorative meaning and are clipped. These common features were enough for the language users to 'recognize' *-o* as a common factor, which could then be used productively in other, embellished clipped, forms, which in turn also resulted in two-syllabic trochees:

- (2) afro from African (hairstyle)
- lesbo from lesbian
- relo from relative

One step further are pseudo-embellished clippings with final *-o*:

- (3) sicko from sick
- creepo from creep
- kiddo from kid

The reinterpretation from *-logy* to *-ology* follows a similar path:

- (4) biology      (5) Kremlinology
- theology      futurology
- geology      Assyriology

In (4), the 'naïve' language user recognizes a common part *-ology*, although etymologically this segment is not a unity; originally, *o-* belongs to the first part. This common part *-ology* can then be used productively for new formations as in (5).

This same cognitive factor recognition can be used to explain the formation and interpretation of blends, a word-formation process that becomes more and more productive and that not only produces new words but finally also may change the system of word formation, thus of the language.

Reference

Hamans, Camiel (2021). *Borderline Cases in Morphology. A Study in Language Change*.  
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#### Keywords

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