Language Log

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December 30, 2005

FROM NABISCO TO NANOWRIMO

In my post yesterday critiquing Kevin Roberts' coinage of *sisomo* (an acronymic blend of "*si*ght, *so*und, and *mo*tion"), I stated that "extracting the first two letters from each word in a series is not a productive source of English neologizing." This was a bit too glib a dismissal, since there is some precedent for such orthographic blends, especially if we consider not just two-letter "Consonant-Vowel" components but the combination of initial syllables or syllable-parts more broadly.

The birth of modern English acronymy can be traced to the early years of the 20th century (though there is some evidence for acronymic thinking — mainly in the form of backronyms — from the 19th century and earlier). In 1901, the *Na*tional *Bis*cuit *Co*mpany filed a trademark for a shortened form of the company name: *Nabisco*. The following year (as noted by David Wilton on the American Dialect Society mailing list and in his book *Word Myths*), *Se*ars, *Ro*ebuck & *Co*mpany began advertising under the trade name *Seroco*. Similar corporate acronyms quickly followed, particularly in the petroleum business. In 1905, the *Texa*s *Co*mpany sought a trademark for *Texaco*, and other oil companies such as *Sunoco* (*Sun O*il *C*ompany), *Amoco* (*Am*erican *O*il *Co*mpany), and *Conoco* (*Con*tinental *O*il *Co*mpany) followed suit by the 1920s. The shared component in these blends is the final *-co*, short for *company* in all cases. (It could even appear medially, as in *Socony*, for *S*tandard *O*il *Co*mpany of *N*ew *Y*ork). This is clearly derived from the abbreviation *Co.*, which developed a spelling pronunciation of /koʊ/ (independent of the pronunciation of the first syllable of /'kʌmpəni/) that was then available for acronymic combination. We can see a similar process with other abbreviation-derived components, such as *So.* and *No.* in acronyms like *SoCal* (*So*uthern *Cal*ifornia) and *NoCal* (*No*rthern *Cal*ifornia).

Seroco and all of those oil companies ending in *-oco* must have exerted an influence on English speakers' acronymic patterning, since we find a marked propensity towards orthographic blends involving rhyming *-o* syllables throughout the late 20th century. In the mid-1960s, the Howard Johnson restaurant chain came to be known as *HoJo* or *HoJo's* (evidently popularized by the introduction of "HoJo Cola" in 1964). It would then be the fate of anyone named Howard Johnson, be he a New York Met or president of MIT, to be assigned the nickname *HoJo*. On the *HoJo* model, track star Florence Griffith-Joyner was popularly known as *FloJo* when she won three gold medals at the 1988 Olympics. Similar rhyming nicknames continue to develop, such as *ProJo* for the *Providence (R.I.) Journal* and more recently *MoDo* for New York Times columnist Maureen ("Mo") Dowd (used as early as Sep. 2002 by Andrew Sullivan).

Since the 1970s, blends à la *HoJo* have extended beyond personal nicknames. The region of lower Manhattan below Houston Street was originally known as "South Houston Industrial Area," but this was shortened by city planners to the snappier *SoHo* around 1970. The new name was interpreted as a blend of "*so*uth of *Ho*uston" and was soon joined by *NoHo* ("*no*rth of *Ho*uston"), not to mention various other non-rhyming blend-names for Manhattan neighborhoods (*TriBeCa*, *NoLiTa*, etc.). Other acronymic legacies of the 1970s include *slomo* for "*slo*w-*mo*tion" and *froyo* for "*fro*zen *yo*gurt" (though these at least match up phonemically with the source material, unlike the other strictly graphemic blends discussed here). The 1980s of course brought us *pomo* for "*po*st-*mo*dern(ist)" approaches to art and literature. And in 2000, David Brooks introduced his own contribution to the field in the title of his book *Bobos in Paradise*, where *bobo* stands for "*bo*urgeois *bo*hemian" (in turn apparently modeled on the old shortening of *bohemian* to *boho*).

No other vowel comes close to *o* in the production of rhyming orthographic blends. The only serious competitor is *i*, largely on the strength of two popular coinages from the mid-20th century: *hi-fi* for "*hi*gh *fi*delity" (appearing as early as 1947 in an issue of *Popular Science Monthly* uncovered by Barry Popik) and *sci-fi* for "*sci*ence *fi*ction" (dated to 1949 in a letter by Robert Heinlein tracked down by Jeff Prucher of the Science Fiction Citations project). More recently we have *Wi-Fi*, which many assume stands for "*wi*reless *fi*delity" on the analogy of *hi-fi*. But Phil Belanger, a founding member of the Wi-Fi Alliance, recently revealed that *Wi-Fi* wasn't originally intended to stand acronymically for anything (though obviously there must have been an implicit modeling on *hi-fi*).

Note that *hi-fi* and *sci-fi* both use the /aɪ/ pronunciation for the letter *i*, which phonemically matches each blend's first component (*high* and *science*, respectively). The second syllable (*fi* in both cases) follows with /aɪ/, despite the fact that the *i* in the first syllables of *fidelity* and *fiction* are actually pronounced as /ɪ/. This is for the sake of the rhyme, but also because the rules of English phonotactics disallow words ending in /-Cɪ/. (The schwa sound /ə/ is available word-finally, so presumably *hi-fi* could have ended up sounding like *Haifa*. But the rhyme was clearly too appealing to early hi-fi enthusiasts.)

So how does Roberts' creation of *sisomo* stack up to these neologistic forebears? The final two syllables with their matching *o*'s don't seem so bad, especially since there are precedents for using *so* to stand for *sound* (as in *sonar*) and *mo* to stand for *motion* (as in *slomo*). But that first syllable — *si* for *sight* — is still rather odd, since Roberts wants us to pronounce it as /sɪ/ (based on the synthesized voices that keep obtruding on his website). Why not /saɪ/, which would not only match up phonemically with *sight* but would also resonate with earlier blends like *hi-fi* and *sci-fi* ? Odder still, when we hear the creator himself pronounce the word by clicking on "Kevin Roberts' message" on the site, he's pronouncing it with initial-syllable stress as /'sɪsəmoʊ/, which both draws attention to the clumsy first component and destroys the euphony one would expect from rhyming *o*'s. (Roberts, by the way, is a New Zealander working in New York for a London-based firm, so his speech pattern has a certain "International English" flair to it.)

Finally, I should note that what I sense as artificial and awkward in *sisomo* might actually work for other pairs of ears. On Erin O'Connor's LiveJournal blog there has been a lively debate on the coinage, with most commenters objecting on semantic grounds or a general impression of "yuckiness." But one contributor mentioned a recent acronymic blend that strikes me as structurally quite similar to *sisomo*: NaNoWriMo, which stands for "*Na*tional *No*vel *Wri*ting *Mo*nth." Since the launch of NaNoWriMo in 1999, companion blends have appeared like NaNoEdMo (National Novel Editing Month), NaNoWriYe (National Novel Writing Year), and NaNoPubYe (National Novel Publishing Year). So perhaps this type of acronymic pile-up really is the wave of the future and I'm just being a stick in the mud. I probably would have griped about *Nabisco* in 1901.

[Update #1: Jeff Russell emails with some examples of "Stanford-speak":

> Your Language Log post on initial-syllable acronymy struck a chord with me, since it's particularly prevalent at my recent alma mater Stanford University, where this pattern is referred to as "Stanford-speak". Some words are rolled out mostly during admit weekend (usually referred to as "ProFro weekend", from "prospective freshman") and feel artificial even to us undergraduates, but most of these words are used without any self-consciousness by mid-freshman year. In fact, it would garner strange looks or confusion to refer to the CoHo as "the coffee house", to the dorm FloMo as "Florence Moore", or to FroSoCo as "Freshman-Sophomore College". "Memorial Church" is MemChu, "Memorial Auditorium" is MemAud, "Tresidder Express" is TresEx, and "Residential Education" is ResEd. In writing, these appear with our without spaces, and with or without the capital letters.
>
> As you observed, rhyming -o syllables, are particularly common, even to the point of co-opting other vowels (though the "fro" in "freshman" may arise from "frosh"). One interesting thing is that attempts to coin new Stanford-speak--and they are often made--usually fail. "MuFuUnSun" (for Music and Fun Under the Sun, an annual event) and "HooTow" (for Hoover Tower), while in use, never sound

> anything but contrived, and most (like "FoHo" for fountain-hop, or "StanSpe" for Stanford-speak) are non-starters.]

[Update #2: Jonathan Epp writes in with another NaNoWriMo spinoff and a question about the pronounceability of such acroblends:

> I had seen NaNoWriMo used in blogs before your "From Nabisco to NaNoWriMo" post, but had never imagined that anyone would actually say it verbally. (Although, that may say more about the circle of people I speak with than anything else.) I've also seen NaDruWriNi (National Drunk Writing Night) used in blogs, which would seem even more awkward to use in conversation. Given the context though, that may be half the fun.]

Posted by Benjamin Zimmer at December 30, 2005 01:01 AM