

“BREVITY IS THE SOUL OF CRYPT” REDUCED NOUN PHRASE FORMS IN ENGLISH Uses and underlying processes

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Abstract – In this paper, we will make some observations about the different kinds of reduced or shortened form of noun phrases in English. Departing from earlier treatments such as those by Marchand (1969), or Bauer (1983), we will offer a new analysis, classifying them into two main categories: “reduction to key letters of the full form”, namely written note forms, initialisms and acronyms, and “reduction to key elements of the complete form”, i.e. front-, end-, and mid-remnants, extremity-remnants, complex remnants, compound remnants, blending, and expanded remnants. Our aim is to analyse the various processes that produce these forms of formal reduction in order to show how these apparently disparate phenomena are connected. Furthermore, we hope to show that the various processes and principles which govern formal reduction are systematic. In doing so, we will highlight how they contribute to the creativity of language (see Chomsky 1965, 1975). Our analysis will also lead to a discussion of the stylistic conventions of English, where traditionally longer forms may be replaced by reduced forms for reasons of economy (especially in technical and scientific discourse). Furthermore, we will discuss their use in the context of slang as a means of crypticity, that is to constitute vital elements of anti-languages (Halliday 1976). In this way, the increasing use of reduced forms in English has implications not only for economy but also for comprehensibility, especially in the context of English as an international language or as a lingua franca.

Keywords: formal reduction; deletion; abbreviation; clipping; initialism; acronym.

1. Introduction

The tendency to shorten noun phrases is a feature found in most languages – see for example ‘Dr’ or ‘doc’ for ‘doctor’ in English. This phenomenon can involve a variety of underlying processes, sometimes in combination with each other, which lends a certain unpredictability to the whole process. This in its turn has an undoubted effect on the comprehensibility of such reduced forms, in extreme cases, rendering them cryptic.

Word shortening could be seen principally as a feature of convenience: a way of adhering to the principle of economy (Christiansen 2011), a substitution of longer forms, more difficult to process and produce, with shorter, more practical ones (e.g. ‘DDT’ for ‘Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane’).

Reduction can come about by a variety of methods from using key letters from different parts of the full form as a kind of shorthand (e.g. *d* and *r* in the case of ‘Dr.’) to reducing or deleting different segments of the full form (e.g. *tor* in the case of ‘doc’) leaving a residue or what we choose to call an *remnant* (e.g. *doc*).¹

In this article, we shall make some observations about the different kinds of reduced form of noun phrases in English, classifying them into two main categories: “reduction to key letters of the full form” (§2), and “reduction to key elements of the full form” (§3). In the former category, we include note-forms or written abbreviations (e.g. ‘Dr.’); initialisms (spelling out of initials, e.g. ‘TV’ – /,ti:’vi/ for ‘television’); and acronyms (pronouncing a

¹ We select the term *remnant* over *residue*, to avoid confusion with Halliday’s concept of the same name as in *mood* and *residue* – see Halliday (1985).

phrase as a single word as if the initials of the separate words spelt out a word: ‘NASA’ – /ˈnæsə/ for “National Aeronautics and Space Administration”). Finally, we shall look at deletion of certain parts of a word or phrase to leave only key elements, namely remnants, (e.g. ‘telly’ from ‘television’), classifying the latter according to whether they constitute the front / beginning of the full form (e.g. ‘exam’ for ‘examination’), the end (e.g. ‘phone’ for ‘telephone’), the middle (e.g. ‘flu’ from ‘influenza’), or the extremities (‘Hallowe’en’ from “(All) Hallow Even”). In this section, we shall also discuss complex remnants (those where the process of reduction involves other changes or involves more than one kind of reduction: e.g. ‘bike’ from ‘bicycle’), compound remnants (combinations of different remnants, e.g. ‘hi-fi’ from “high fidelity”), reduction involving blends of two or more words, so-called portmanteaux (e.g. ‘guestimate’ from ‘guess’ and ‘estimate’), and expanded remnants by means of diminutives (‘footy’ from ‘foot’, itself from ‘football’).

2. Reduction to key letters of the full form

In this section, we will look at those forms of reduction that involve the retention of key letters of the reduced full form, namely abbreviations (e.g. ‘Mr.’ for ‘mister’); initialisms (e.g. ‘USA’ /juː-ɛs-ɛɪ/ for “United States of America”), and finally acronyms (e.g. COVID /ˈkəʊvɪd/ from “coronavirus disease”).

2.1. Abbreviations

The first kind of reduction are the conventional short forms or abbreviations used in written language when one wants to avoid spelling out in full certain words, especially those that are frequently used. Such devices then are a kind of shorthand and in fact do not always change the way the word in question is actually pronounced, partly because they are constituted by combinations of letters that would be difficult to pronounce as written. For example, the written form ‘Mr.’, short for ‘Mister’ is pronounced /ˈmɪstə/, identically to the longer form. By contrast, particularly in the case of those deriving from foreign languages, mostly Latin, the abbreviation may be treated as an initialism (see 2.2), for instance: ‘e.g.’ (*exempli gratia*) pronounced /iː.dʒiː/; ‘i.e.’ (*id est*) /aɪ.iː/; but not so in the case of ‘etc.’ where the pronunciation is more or less that of the Latin full form *et cetera* /ɪt ˈsetrə/.

Because abbreviations originate in the written medium, pronounceability is not usually a consideration in the form that one may take. Often the purpose of the combination of letters is merely to identify the word effectively and distinguish it from other similar abbreviations.² Looking at the months of the year for example, which also bear features of reduction to key parts (see §3.0), it can be seen that the system is to give the first three letters of each (excluding May as it already consists of three letters), which proves sufficient to unambiguously identify each one: ‘Jan’, ‘Feb’, ‘Mar’, ‘Apr’, ‘Jun’, ‘Jul’, ‘Aug’, ‘Oct’, ‘Nov’, ‘Dec’. September (‘Sept’) is the exception to this pattern because, for whatever reason (perhaps to retain the link with Latin *septem* – September having been originally the

² An area where the need for written abbreviations or note-forms to differentiate between possible full forms is well illustrated is in the case of IATA airport codes. By convention, these are all combinations of three letters, preferably taken from the full name but not necessarily (cf. JFK – John F. Kennedy Airport, New York; LAX – Los Angeles International Airport). These serve mainly as short standard identifiable codes, designed for the benefit of passengers and may be put on documents, tickets, boarding passes, luggage tags etc. (by contrast, the more complex ICAO codes are used for interoperability between air navigation service providers, air traffic control, pilots, flight planners etc.)

seventh month), an extra letter is used even though ‘Sep’ would have been clear enough in the context, and indeed this more “regular” form does exist but is less frequent. If, by contrast, just the first letter had been used, then there would have been confusion where *J.*, for example, might have stood for ‘January’, ‘June’ or ‘July’. Similarly, using only the first two letters, *Ju*, would still have failed to distinguish between ‘June’ and ‘July’.

With the development of text messaging on digital devices, abbreviations have become more frequent. On these new media, abbreviations may be more unorthodox and more conversational reflecting the informal contexts where they are used. Often they will involve not just shortening by means of selecting key letters, but also the use of other symbols or digits (4 for ‘for’, @ for ‘at’) but also unconventional spellings that may reflect the pronunciation of words, e.g. ‘plz’ for ‘please’, ‘thx’ for ‘thanks’, or even such strings as “C U l8er” for “See you later”.

2.2. Initialisms

Initialisms consist in the reduction of longer words and noun phrases to the initial (or at least “key”: distinctive) letters of their component parts,³ either morphemes, in the case of long scientific compound words, e.g. ‘TNT’ /ti:.ɛn.ti:/ (‘trinitrotoluene’ – i.e. *tri nitro toluene* literally “toluene with three nitro groups”), or words, in the case of noun phrases, e.g. ‘BBC’ /bi:.bi:.si:/ (“British Broadcasting Corporation”); or FAQ (“Frequently Asked Questions”).⁴

The second kind (noun phrases) may contain function words such as *the*, *to*, *for*, *of*, which may often be excluded, for example: ‘USA’ (“United States [of] America”) /ju:.ɛs.ɛi./, or ‘OECD’ /əʊ.i:.si:.di:/ (“Organisation /for/ Economic Co-operation /and/ Development”).⁵ In some cases, certain function words – mainly *of* and *for* – are included, e.g. ‘MOD’ (“Ministry of Defence”, UK), ‘DOD.’ (“Department of Defense”, USA), ‘DfE’ (“Department for Education”, UK). Sometimes, as in ‘DfE’, perhaps for reasons of graphic design, the function word may not be capitalised.

In commercial names, the function word ‘and’ can also be abbreviated, but, in this case, the abbreviation is the special ampersand symbol & (derived from the ligature of the letters *e* and *t*, which correspond to the Latin word ‘et’: “and”): M&S (“Marks and Spencer’s” the department stores) or Ben & Jerry’s (the ice cream brand).⁶ In more informal contexts, ‘and’ can be reduced to ‘n’ as in “Rock ‘n’ Roll” or “Fish ‘n’ chips”, which when spoken becomes an example of a mid-remnant of a conjunction (see also §3.3).

³ Sometimes, in predominately humorous contexts, what looks like an initialism, or at least something that is presented as an initialism (for example, the letters are capitalised) may include letters that do not appear in the full form, but are representative, in a loose way, of the sound: e.g. BBQ for barbecue [ˈbɑːbɪkjʊː], the letter Q standing for the homophonic *cue*, [kjʊː]. Such forms however are not pronounced as initialisms, but like the original form and are just written abbreviations, very much like examples such as ‘Mr’ – discussed in §2.1.

⁴ One problematic case is ID, which can stand for various full forms: ‘identifier’; ‘identification’; “identity document”. Only in the last case is it actually an initialism. Rather it would seem to be a front-remnant (§3.1) where the first vowel /aɪ/ is pronounced like an initial (*I*) and by allusion, the following *d* is not pronounced as /d/ but as if it too were an initial /di/. Revealingly, both letters are capitalized, something associated with initialisms. The existence of the bona fide initialism ‘ID’ for “identity document” no doubt adds to the confusion here. To be pedantic, ‘ID’ from ‘identifier’; ‘identification’, should be in the lower case, as it is a front-remnant ‘id’ /aɪd/ (§3.1). The pronunciation /aɪ.di/ may have come about through phonemic transformation to echo the initialism ID, in which case it would constitute a complex remnant (see §3.5).

⁵ In the case of ‘USA’, people might, possibly for humorous effect or out of sarcasm, say “U.S. *of* A” as in “good ol’ U.S. of A”, which conjures up a stereotypical unswerving patriot. In whatever way this form is actually intended, it confirms that function words do not always form parts of initialisms.

⁶ Similarly, in the past, *etc.* (see §2.1) was sometimes written &c.

Over time, initialisms have come to be widely used also in science, technical fields, and in bureaucracy of all kinds: anywhere in fact where terminology may be typically too long and cumbersome for most everyday uses e.g. ‘DVD’ for “Digital Versatile Disk”), ‘HMMWV’ (“High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle”), or ‘RSPCA’ (“Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals”).⁷ The origins of one of the most common expressions in English, the ubiquitous ‘OK’, would seem to lie in a Bostonian (USA) slang initialism “orl korrekt” (“all correct”) or possibly “Old Kinderhook” (see Christiansen 2021, pp. 63-64), although there is no lack of rival theories.⁸

There are also initialisms that are hybrids of the two kinds, those formed out of component morphemes, and those formed out of component words. For example, ‘DNA’ (“Deoxyribonucleic Acid”) represents an initialism made out of both component morphemes (*deoxy ribo nucleic*) and words from a phrase (‘acid’), i.e. *deoxy, ribo, nucleic, acid* – meaning “acid made of sugar from ribose without oxygen, found in nuclei.”

Furthermore as seen with “DNA”, which might have been better dubbed DRNA (the R standing for *ribo*), not all of the component morphemes are always represented in the initialism: for example, ‘DDT’ from ‘Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane’ (whose components are: *di, chloro, diphenyl, tri, chloroethane*) meaning a compound that contains two chlorine atoms, two phenyl groups, and three chlorine and ethane groups. There might be an analogy with function words in phrase initialisms. However, which components are omitted for the initial in such cases seems to be more arbitrary and less predictable: the first *D* in ‘DDT’ stands merely for *di* (two) and all reference to chlorine, an important element one would think, is left out. Perhaps, as in the case of airport codes mentioned in a footnote above, the initials serve principally to disambiguate between the intended full form and other ones with which it may be confused, and thus are chosen on the basis of their referential efficacy (i.e. how far the referring question used succeeds in designating the referent in question and distinguishing it from other possibilities; Christiansen 2009).

2.3. Acronyms

Acronyms derive from initialisms, but differ in that, instead of each letter being pronounced separately (as in ‘BBC’ /bi:bi:si:/), the initials are pronounced as if they were all components of a single word: ‘COVID’ /'kəʊvɪd/. Acronyms, like normal words, have word stress, e.g. /'kəʊvɪd/, whereas initialisms do not: /bi:bi:si:/.

The fact that acronyms and initialisms are closely linked is shown by the fact that sometimes they can be mixed. For example, ‘JPEG’ /'dʒeɪ.pɛɡ/ (“Joint Photographic Experts Group”), where the first letter (*J*) is initialised and the other three letters pronounced as if they formed a word (which of course they do, ‘peg’, with an entirely different meaning, being an existing lexeme).

As with *peg* in ‘JPEG’, acronyms may naturally arise where initialisms, by pure chance, spell out what look like words, and thus may be pronounced as such. e.g. ‘NATO’ (“North Atlantic Treaty Organization”), ‘UNICEF’ (“United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund”), ‘PIN’ (“personal identification number”) or ‘laser’ (“light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation”). In theory, in at least some cases, people may be unaware that the forms are initialisms and mistake them for actual words, although

⁷ However, sometimes initialisms take longer to pronounce than the word that they stand for, cf. VW /vi:.dʌb'ljʊ:./; Volkswagen /'vɒlks.vɑ:g'ɪn/ (English) // 'fɒlks.vɑ:g'n/ (German), but, in this case, the fact that the full form is an expression from another language may justify the use of the initialism.

⁸ See, for example, the Oxford Online Dictionaries. “What is the origin of the word ‘OK’?” en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/whatis-the-origin-of-the-word-ok/

the fact that initialisms are conventionally capitalised, and sometimes have a full stop after each letter (e.g. ‘N.A.T.O.’) — something increasingly less common — should be a clear enough signal that they are not to be treated as normal words.

‘Laser’ is an interesting example because, by dint of the fact that it is not capitalised, it has obviously been coined to resemble a normal word (cf. ‘laser’, *‘LASER’), and thus to be pronounced as such. Indeed, that acronyms may frequently, even usually, not simply be the products of misinterpretation of initialisms, but actually designed to be treated as new words is shown by the fact that very often they derive from initialisms made up of letters which are “key” insofar as they facilitate pronunciation. Take ‘Covid’ for example, a reduced form of “coronavirus disease”. Like some of the examples such as ‘DDT’ that we discuss in §2.2, this could have been initialised in many different ways, and the selection of *c, o, v, i,* and *d*, might seem arbitrary if it were not taken into account that together they do produce an easily pronounceable word (not just in English, but in most languages one would presume). Even more importantly, it produces a simple, easy-to-remember word that is referentially efficacious in most languages, and thus cannot be confused with any other existing term.⁹

One reason for the desire to use acronyms instead of initialisms, and to fabricate them as in the case of ‘Covid’ where they do not, is that acronyms may actually be shorter and thus more economical to use than initialisms. For example, the acronym ‘Covid’ /'kəʊvɪd/, is much quicker to pronounce than ‘C.O.V.I.D.’ /si:.əʊ.vi:.aɪ.di:/.

The tendency to fabricate acronyms out of initialisms is so strong that sometimes complex transformations and extra letters will be added in order to create a pronounceable word. For example, the light, four-wheel drive US military truck, officially known by the initialism ‘HMMWV’ (‘High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle’) came to be affectionately referred to with the acronym ‘Humvee’ /'hʌm.vi:/ by military personnel. This informal term is obviously a lot easier to pronounce (cf. /eɪf-ɛm-ɛm-'dʌbʰlju:-vi:/). As is obvious, to get to ‘Humvee’ from ‘HMMWV’ involves some alteration: an /ʌ/ sound has been inserted between the /h/ and /m/; and the /w/ has been omitted. The resulting word is thus more of a sketch of the original initialism than a faithful transformation, and is reminiscent of the way that words imported from one language to another can undergo significant changes (e.g. ‘jungle’, which is an Anglicised approximation of the Sanskrit ‘jāṅgala’). Such a process can contain an element of disparagement as in the case of another Anglicism ‘Hobson-Jobson’, a corruption by British soldiers during the Raj of “Yā Ḥasan! Yā Ḥosain!” chanted by Shia Muslims during the procession of the mourning of Muharram.¹⁰ Similarly, the distortion of ‘HMMWV’ into ‘Humvee’ might, in a sense, be deliberate and reflect a disdain on the part of servicemen and women for clumsy jargon (and see §3.6 for some more examples), and represent the appropriation of an unnecessarily complicated term, and of its subsequent being stripped down and modified into something more user-friendly.

A similar process may account for the name of the other famous US utility vehicle known as the “Jeep”. The exact origin of this name is unclear, but it is reported¹¹ that Joe

⁹ For example, initially before the WHO designed it as ‘COVID-19’, many people referred to the virus in question as the “Corona virus” or simply ‘Corona’ (nominal ellipsis – see §3.0 and AUTHOR 2011). ‘Corona’ is an existing term in Spanish, meaning *inter alia* “crown”. It is also a popular brand name for many products, not least beer, and thus, had it been adopted, it may have caused confusion, and financial loss to some.

¹⁰ See Nagle (2010) – Note also that this archaic expression features in the title of the first dictionary of Anglo-English (Yule, Burnell 1903) and also gives it name to a linguistic law regarding the way that loanwords may be distorted in strange, humorous, or derogatory ways: “The Law of Hobson-Jobson”.

¹¹ Brown (2001, p. 42)

“Jeeps” Frazer, president of the manufacturer Willys-Overland at the time of the car’s development, claimed to have coined the word *jeep* by “slurring” the initials G.P. (presumably from “general purpose”, a term from WWI that had applied to many items of equipment, and jokingly to new recruits) to create the new word *Jeep*. Following this version, the initialism ‘GP’ morphed into ‘Jeep’ /dʒi:p/, essentially by liaison of the two sounds /dʒi:/ and /pi:/ and by reducing the final /pi:/ to /p/. The resulting word /dʒi:p/ was then rewritten as ‘Jeep’, thus effectively disguising the initialism from where it had originated.¹² In US politics, ‘veep’ for ‘VP’ (“Vice President”) is formed in a directly analogous way to ‘jeep’ from ‘GP’.

A final kind of acronym are so-called *backronyms* which occur frequently in popular culture, for example in spy novels or the names of products. Here, instead of the acronym coming about naturally because an existing initialism happens to form something which may be pronounced like a word (as in ‘NATO’, ‘UNICEF’, or ‘laser’ above), an initialism is back-formed from a memorable word to create a phrase that gives it a more appropriate meaning, e.g. the menacing sounding ‘SPECTRE’ from the James Bond novels (“special executive for counterintelligence, terrorism, revenge and extortion”) or the famous example of the Morse code distress call “S.O.S”. The combination of two *S*s separated by an *O* was originally chosen purely because it is simple to remember, to transmit, and to recognise (the Morse code signal being: ... --- ...). However, in popular culture, the expression ‘SOS’ acquired a fictitious backstory, namely that it was derived from the initialism for the phrase “save our souls”.

Even in politics, backronyms may be employed to give projects and proposals catchy names derived from fabricated initialisms which in some way describe or advertise their intended purpose: “GIVE MILK Act” (Giving Increased Variety to Ensure Milk Into the Lives of Kids); or “CROOK Act” (Countering Russian and Other Overseas Kleptocracy).¹³ Curiously, one of the many purported origins of the name “Jeep” is that it derives from the initialism “just enough essential parts” (which concisely captures the ethos of the original vehicle). However, given the fact that few experts take this theory seriously, this could be seen rather as a backronym, like “save our souls”, a fanciful invention to explain its meaning: perhaps a rumour started by a dealer or someone working in marketing.

3. Reduction to key elements of the full form

Marchand (1969) coined the term *clipping* to refer to reduction to key elements of the full form, that is, the deletion of some portions of a word to create a synonym of it (e.g. ‘doc’ from ‘doctor’): in essence, a shorter version that may stand for it in less formal contexts, or where considerations of economy take precedence, namely, in situations analogous to those in writing where abbreviations might be justified (see §2.1). In fact, reduced forms are not always synonymous with the full forms; they may evolve separately and take on new or different meanings. One example, is ‘suss’ as in “to suss something out” (i.e. “to figure something out”) which is a clipping of the full form ‘suspect’, which could not be used in the same way *“to suspect something out”.

¹² Other theories for the origin of *Jeep* also exist, mostly notably allusion to the character in E.C. Segar's comic strip "Thimble Theater" (best known for Popeye the Sailor), Eugene the Jeep, see: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/jeep>.

¹³ See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/backronym>.

Clipping involves one part of the full form standing for the whole full form in the absence of the other parts, e.g. ‘doc’ for ‘doctor’, where ‘doc’ constitutes the *clipped form*¹⁴ a term that we here shall, for reasons of clarity,¹⁵ replace with *remnant*.¹⁶ In the case of ‘doc’ the clipping has adhered to morphological structure of the word ‘doctor’, which can be divided into two morphemes, *doc* and *tor*. However, the remnant does not always have to actually constitute a morpheme in the full form. For example, the morphemes in ‘microphone’ are *micro* and *phone*, but the reduced form is ‘mike’ / ‘mic’, that is, merely a set of contiguous letters, which is why Marchand speaks about *segments*.¹⁷

According to Marchand (1969), remnants emerge in the form of slang or jargon from within individual speech communities, such as students at specific schools or universities, military units, or various groups of professionals or academics. In some cases, such forms may gradually gain currency among the wider speech community, and even become part of the standard language (e.g. ‘flu’, ‘math/maths’, ‘exam’, ‘phone’, and ‘fridge’).

Reduction to key elements of the full form, also occurs at a purely phonetic level, and as such is a phenomenon that is common in many languages, especially Germanic ones, where numerous words are pronounced in a diminished fashion compared to how they are written. Weak syllables are often eliminated altogether, something in phonology which can be described by the terms: *aphaeresis* if they are deleted from the beginning (e.g. ‘bout’ from ‘about’, ‘em’ from ‘them’); *apocope* if they are deleted from the end (e.g. ‘o’ for ‘of’ as in ‘o’clock’); or finally *syncope*¹⁸ if the sounds are deleted from within the word (e.g. ‘Wednesday’ / ‘wenzdei’ or many British place names, such as Worcestershire / ‘wostəʃə/).

What is called *contraction* of auxiliary / modal verbs (‘do’, ‘can’, ‘will’), and negative particles (‘not’), is also a kind of phonetic reduction which is also rendered in writing, conventionally by means of the apostrophe (cf. “do not” and “don’t”, “will not” and “won’t”). Typically, in relaxed speech, catenative verbs like “want to” /wɒnt tu:/, and “going to” /ˈgəʊɪŋ tu:/ as well as the expression “don’t know” /dɒnt nəʊ/ can also be reduced phonetically: /wɒnə/, /gɒnə/, /dʌnə/ – something which may be represented by such unorthodox spellings as “wanna”, “gonna” and “dunno”. A similar thing is also found with other function words such as the conjunction /ə/ (‘and’ – see §2.2) and the preposition /ə/ (‘of’), mentioned above, especially in quantifying structures such as ‘cuppa’ /kʌpə/, ‘lotta’ /lɒtə/ for “cup of”, “lot of”. The latter forms are similar in some respects to blends or portmanteaux as discussed in §3.7.

Reduction of sorts can also be found in ellipsis, mainly nominal but also verbal and clausal, which is an aspect of *cohesion* (Halliday, Hasan 1976; Christiansen 2011), e.g. “Would you like a coffee?” – “Yes, black Ø /coffee/ please”. However, examples like this involve the reduction of a complete form (‘coffee’), and not the clipping of some part from its interior as in ‘Coke’ /kəʊk/ from “Coca Cola” /ˈkəʊkə ˈkəʊlə/. Furthermore, this type of reduction is dependent on the discursal context and the cohesive ties between what is

¹⁴ Stageberg (1974, p. 121).

¹⁵ The term *clipped form* can cause confusion because an expression like *front clipped form* could be interpreted either as the clipping of the front element (e.g. ‘phone’ from ‘telephone’) or of the opposite: the retention of the front element (that which is clipped from the front) e.g. ‘telly’ from ‘television’. Scholars have tended to use a terminology like *back-clipping*, *fore-clipping*, *middle-clipping* oriented to what is reduced or deleted. Hence, *back-clipping* means in effect the deletion of everything but the *beginning* (e.g. ‘doc’). We adopt a different terminology that unambiguously concentrates on what is retained (e.g. *front-remnant*), a terminology which we hope is clearer.

¹⁶ Fischer (1998) coins the term *stump word* but this has not gained wide currency.

¹⁷ As Marchand says, “.../ the clipped part is not a morpheme in the linguistic system (nor is the clipped result, for that matter), but an arbitrary part of the word form” (1969, p. 441).

¹⁸ In more relaxed uses, *syncope* can refer to the deletion, (or *elision*), of any phoneme within a word, whatever its position. In this article, we will adhere to its more precise definition.

reduced and what is presupposed. That is to say, how the addressee, in order to comprehend the message, can access or retrieve the information that has been left out, i.e. how he or she can understand that “black Ø” means “black coffee” and not, say “black pepper”. Clippings like ‘doc’ for example, always stand for ‘doctor’, whatever the context (although which precise type of doctor – medical, academic etc. – may be open to question).

Finally, clipping of the kind we discuss in the following sections is well-established also in the area of names where traditionally longer forms, particularly of given names,¹⁹ may be *truncated*²⁰ and replaced by so-called *diminutives*, used either as affectionate or familiar forms of address, or to provide referentially efficacious alternatives to distinguish between people who have the same name (Christiansen 2009, p. 131). In this way, Thomas may become Tom, Jonathan - John, Elizabeth – Liz, or Mel from various names (female or male) such as Melvyn, Melinda, Melissa, and Melony.²¹

As we shall see in the next four sections, reduction to key elements of the full form can be classified according to which part of the form the clipped form or remnant comes from: the front (§3.1); the end (§3.2); the middle (§3.3),²² or the extremities (§3.4). In § 3.5, we will look at reduction that involves less systematic forms of clipping, or a combination of clipping and other processes, producing what we will call *complex remnants*. In §3.6, we will examine *compound remnants*, which are combinations of two or more remnants. In §3.7, we will examine at reduction which involves combining and blending two separate forms, resulting in what are traditionally known as *portmanteaux*. Finally, in §3.8, we will look at the ways, mainly in the context of slang, in which remnants may be expanded by the addition of affixes.

3.1. Front-remnants

In Table 1, we present some common examples of front-remnants from different varieties of English, giving the full form and also the variety of English with which the remnant is associated (marking it as “general” if it is now widespread).

¹⁹ Less commonly, surnames may also have diminutive e.g. WW2 British field marshal, Bernard Montgomery, was popularly known as ‘Monty’.

²⁰ Booij (2005, p. 20).

²¹ Of course, diminutives of names and nicknames can be very complex, with such diverse forms of reduction as: Chuck from Charles; Dick from Richard; Bill or Wills from William; Nancy from Ann; or Polly from Mary. In short, it is an area that merits detailed study in its own right.

²² In view of our comments above about the term *clipping*, and whether one orientates one’s terminology to that which is reduced (or deleted) or to that which is retained, Bauer (1983, p. 234), like most scholars does the former, and uses the terms *back-clipping*, *fore-clipping*, *middle-clipping* to describe these.

Remnant	Full form	Variety
auto	automobile	USE*
doc	doctor	General
exam	examination	General
gas	gasoline	USE*
gov	government	General
gym	gymnasium	General
Fed	Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent	USE*
lab	laboratory	General
lav	lavatory (toilet)	BrE**
math	mathematics	USE*
maths	mathematics	BrE**
mike / mic	microphone	General
perm	permanent wave (hairstyle)	General
petrol	petroleum	BrE**
specs	spectacles	General
telly	television	BrE**
the Fed	the Federal Reserve	USE*

* USE (US English)

** BrE (British English)

Table 1
Some common front-remnants in English.

On Table 1, we have some example of some common front-remnants which involve the retention of the left-most element in the word or phrase and the elimination of the rest (as in ‘auto’ from ‘automobile’).²³

The two items ‘maths’ and ‘specs’, are difficult to categorise because of the presence of the final *s*. They could be analysed as a separate category, a kind of “extremity-remnant”, i.e. a product of syncope (see §3.4). However, both consist of a front-remnant, with the addition of the plural suffix. ‘Specs’ is an invariant plural and so it is natural that its number is marked, as it would be for any of the items on Tables 1 (or on those that follow below) if they were to be used in the plural: *mikes*, *perms*, *tellies*.²⁴ For this reason, we do not analyse either of them as a syncope because the final *s* has not been retained as such from the full form, but is a functional affix that is added as required regardless of whether the noun phrase in question is a full form or remnant.

‘Fed’ and ‘perm’ are remnants of noun phrases, containing multiple nouns and adjectives in the case of the former, and a noun and adjective in the case of the latter. The remnant is taken from the first element alone, in both cases the adjective (*federal*, *permanent*). As such, they can be contrasted with compound remnants (see §3.6), where remnants come from two or more elements of the noun phrase (e.g. ‘hifi’ from “high fidelity”).

‘Mathematics’ is slightly problematic because although it was originally the plural of ‘mathematic’ (attested from the 1400s, from Greek *mathēmatikē*),²⁵ it is now often viewed as an uncountable noun (see USE ‘math’) and thus takes a singular verb: “Mathematics is important”. The US remnant reflects a modern interpretation of its number

²³ Some scholars (e.g. Arnold 1986, p. 138) have borrowed the term *apocope* (see §3.0) from phonology to describe this process.

²⁴ As regards irregular invariant plural nouns, ‘peeps’, a front-remnant (see §3.1) of ‘people’, provides an interesting example. ‘People’ is invariant plural in the sense of “persons”, it has no corresponding singular form (cf. ‘people’ in the sense of ethnic group: “the English people”; “the English-speaking peoples”). The remnant ‘peeps’ is a similarly invariant plural and this has to be marked by the regular plural affix *s*.

²⁵ See, for example, the Oxford English Dictionary Online (www.oed.com)

while the British is more archaic, even though use of the full form ‘mathematics’ is similar in both varieties.

3.2. End-remnants

End-remnants are less common than front-remnants and finding examples is more difficult. In Table 2, we give common basic examples:

Remnant	Full form	Variety
bot	web / internet robot	General
net	internet	General
phone	telephone	General
tater	potato	General

Table 2
Some common end-remnants in English.

It may be tempting to say that end-remnants occur when the stress is not on the front element, as in the case of ‘tater’ /teɪtə/ from ‘potato’ /pə'teɪtəʊ/ – which also shows an additional element of phonetic reduction, and is thus, in a sense, an example of a complex remnant (see §3.5).²⁶ However, this is not true of ‘robot’, where the stress falls on the first syllable /'rəʊbɒt/, or of ‘telephone’, where, like ‘television’ /'telɪvɪʒən/, on Table 1, the first syllable is stressed /'telɪfəʊn/.

Indeed, looking back at Table 1, while most items (10 out of 15 or 75%) have stress on the first syllable, as many as 5 out of 15 (25%) do not: ‘examination’ /ɪg,zæmɪ'neɪʃən/; ‘gymnasium’ /dʒɪm'neɪziəm/; ‘laboratory’ /lə'bɒrətəri/; ‘mathematics’ /,mæθə'mætɪks/; and ‘petroleum’ /pə'trəʊliəm/. There is therefore only a weak link between where stress falls and what kind of remnant may be formed: front, end, mid or extremity.

3.3. Mid-remnants

As with affixes, where we can have prefixes (before), suffixes (after), and a more marked option, namely *infixes* (within a phrase),²⁷ similarly, with remnants, in addition to front- and end-remnant, we can also find cases of what we will term mid-remnant.

In Table 3, we list a few representative examples of mid-remnants:

Remnant	Full form	Variety
flu	influenza	General
fridge	refrigerator	General
scrip	prescription (e.g. prescription drug, short legal document)	General

Table 3
An example of a basic mid-remnant in English.

Examples of mid-remnants are much rarer than either front- or end-remnants, just as infixes are less common than pre- or suffixes. The most notable examples are ‘flu’, ‘fridge’ and

²⁶ Arnold (1986, p. 138) and others have used the phonological term *aphaeresis* (see §3.0) for these.

²⁷ “In English these comprise the non-standard intensifiers like *bloody*, e.g. *fanbloodytastic*” (Börjars, Burridge 2001, p. 18).

‘scrip’ as evidenced on Table 3. With all these, the mid part of the word or phrase is retained, and the beginning (respectively *in*, *re*, *pre*) and end sections (*enza*, *erator*, *tion*) are eliminated.

3.4. Extremity-remnants

Extremity-remnants are rare in contemporary English except at the phonological level, and the examples that can be found are typically far from straightforward. However, for completeness, they deserve a place in our discussion.

They are the products of syncope, which is primarily a phonological phenomenon. They contrast with mid-remnants, which involve the deletion of both the front and the end of a noun phrase, because they come about when the front and end are retained and some internal part of the noun phrase is deleted.

As a phenomenon, syncope involves all forms of words, even function words such as ‘o’er’ (“over”) or ‘ne’er’ (“never”) and can also be seen at play in verb phrase reduction such as /dʌnə/, “don’t know” (see §3.0). Singular genitives in English take an apostrophe and an *s* (e.g. “John’s school”, “the boys’ school”). This was originally also a form of syncope because, in Old and Middle English, *es* was used to mark the genitive (*cyninges*), and this was gradually shortened to ‘s (*king’s*) with the apostrophe marking the deleted *e*.²⁸ By contrast, the use of the *s* then apostrophe for plural genitives (e.g. *kings’*) is merely a typographical convention.²⁹

Being predominately the result of phonological deletion, extremity remnants are not consistently reflected in spelling in contemporary English although in older varieties of English they were.³⁰ Given time, such deletions may have become reflected in the spelling of a word, e.g. ‘fortnight’ /'fɔːtnaɪt/ from “fourteen nights” (Old English “feowertyne niht”). In this way, as Marchand (1969) predicts, the reduced form may take its place in the standard language, and its origins as a reduced non-standard form may be forgotten especially if, as in the case of ‘fortnight’, any apostrophes marking the missing letters are removed.

Conversely, with the growth of literacy, some forms, which in the past were pronounced as syncopes, but spelt like their full forms, have in speech recovered their lost phonemes under the influence of the spelling. For example, ‘forehead’, in older varieties of English pronounced as /'fɔːrɪd/, is now usually pronounced as it is spelt /'fɔːhɛd/.³¹

In Table 4, we give some examples extremity-remnants including both some of those where the syncope is reflected in the spelling and one where it is not.

²⁸ See the Merriam Webster online dictionary: www.merriam-webster.com/grammar/history-and-use-of-the-apostrophe.

²⁹ In Old English, the plural genitive was in most cases marked by an *a* affix.

³⁰ And often apostrophes were liberally used, often for things unconnected with syncope. For example, in the early days of moveable type printing, when typesetting was an intricate and time-consuming process, they were often used almost arbitrarily to facilitate the laying out of a page for reasons of space, and also to make up for the shortage for certain frequently used letters (e.g. *e* or *t*) (Christiansen 2018, p. 101).

³¹ The same phenomenon is seen with place names in Britain in particular. In some cases, a locality may be known by a different name to locals than to outsiders, who may replicate the spelling. For example, the small town of Daventry in Northamptonshire is traditionally called /'dɛntri/ (“Dayntree”) by locals, but /'dævəntri/ by the rest of the world. Over time, with the influx of outsiders, the traditional name may be replaced by something more representative of the spelling.

Remnant	Full form	Variety
/ˈkɜːnəl/	colonel /ˈkɜːnəl/	General
fəˈcʰsle / fəˈcʰsle / ˈfoʊksəl/	forecastle	Nautical
fɔːtnaɪt / ˈfɔːtnaɪt/	fourteen nights	BrE
Halloweɪn / Halloweˈen	(All) Hallow Even (i.e. Eve)	General

Table 4
Examples of extremity remnants in English.

Of the examples on Table 4, only ‘colonel’ is close to being a straightforward example of extremity-remnant, but of course it is a syncope only at the phonological level.

‘Fortnight’ drops the final plural affix *s*. The fact that this is an affix means that it is not an integral part of the full form (see also our discussion of regular plurals in §3.1) and so, with nouns at least, we can count as the end of the full form any elements directly to the left of a plural *s*. That said, the fact that the separate elements ‘fourteen’ and ‘nights’ have been fused together, with the loss of *een*, could also be described in terms of blending (see §3.7).

The other two, ‘foˈcʰsle’ / ‘foˈcʰsle’ and ‘Halloweˈen’ / ‘Halloweɪn’ could be classed as complex remnants (see §3.5), involving as they do different reduction processes. ‘Foˈcʰsle’ / ‘foˈcʰsle’ involves, in addition to the loss of the /ɑː/ in ‘castle’ /ˈkɑːsl/, the transformation of the vowel sound in ‘fore’ /ɔː/ to the diphthong *foʊ*.

By contrast, ‘Halloweˈen’ is not an example of a pure extremity-remnant because although the interior of ‘even’ has been reduced, so has the beginning of the full form, the quantifier, *all*. Therefore, it also consists of an end-remnant. However, unlike ‘fortnight’, the fact that ‘Hallow’ and ‘even’ are combined into a single word does not result in a blend (§3.7) because this process does not involve any deletion of either of their parts.

3.5. Complex remnants

Another set of remnants, which occur in a less systematic fashion, and which may involve some phonetic changes as well, are shown in Table 5:

Remnant	Full form	Variety
bike	bicycle	General
info	information	General
pram	perambulator	BrE
the Beeb	the BBC (initialism for the British Broadcasting Corporation)	BrE

Table 5
Examples of complex remnants in English.

On Table 5, we have examples of remnants which are complex in the sense that we can perceive that different processes (not simply clipping) have taken place. ‘Bike’ is not so simple as it appears at first glance. If it were a simple remnant like the examples on Table 1, it would be pronounced /baɪs/ not /baɪk/. The reduction of ‘bicycle’ /ˈbaɪsɪkəl/ to ‘bike’ has involved a further stage. One possibility is that it is influenced by the word’s spelling, in particular by the fact that the letter *c* in English is in some words pronounced as /k/ e.g.

as in the second *c* in ‘cycle’ /'saɪkəl/. This morphing of /s/ into /k/ is not in itself unusual; words like ‘Celtic’ can be pronounced either with an initial /s/ or /k/: /'seltɪk/ or /'keltɪk/.³²

Alternatively, the reduction that has resulted in the remnant ‘bike’ would have to be described as something much more complex, involving the extraction of separate unconnected parts of the full form: the *bi* /baɪ/ from the beginning and the *k* /k/ from close to the end (but not at the end) so it cannot constitute an extremity-remnant as such (see §3.4). On balance however, the principle of Occam’s razor³³ leads us to opt instead for the simpler explanation that it is a complex remnant, and not the only member of separate category of remnant, at least until further evidence to the contrary presents itself.

‘Info’, like “bike”, has undergone not only clipping but also a change in pronunciation, in this case relatively slight, with the final “o” (an unstressed schwa in the full form /,ɪnfə'meɪʃn/) being replaced by a diphthong: /'ɪnfəʊ/, which constitutes an expansion of that sound (something also seen with ‘fo’c’sle’: §3.4). The reverse is seen with ‘tater’ in Table 2, where in the remnant, the final diphthong of the full form ‘potato’ (/əʊ/) is phonetically reduced to a schwa (/ə/) in ‘tater’. In fact, both these forms could also be analysed as expanded remnants, and will be discussed briefly in §3.8.

“The Beeb” is also not so simple as it first appears because instead of being “B. B.” /bi: bi:/ it combines the sound of the first syllable /bi:/ and adds only the first consonant of the second /b/ creating “beeb” /bi:b/ - in a process to analogous to that ‘GP’ purportedly underwent to become ‘Jeep’ (see §2.3). The effect is of someone saying “BBC” and being interrupted before they can complete the second syllable. Indeed it seems to be a particular kind of crypticity (see §4.0) designed to elicit the trick question “What is the Beeb?” – to which the unexpected (and thus humorously intended) reply “the BBC /bi:bi:si:/” can be made.³⁴

Finally, there is ‘pram’ which is relatively simple. It is a close but not direct clipping of ‘perambulator’. If it were, it would be ‘peram’. Instead, it is a syncope representing the reduction of /pə'ræm/ to /præm/ and is similar to an extremity-remnant (§3.4) although in this case, two levels of reduction can be seen at play: one the clipping of ‘perambulator’ to ‘peram’; the other the reduction of /pə'ræm/ to /præm/, with probably the former happening first, given that ‘perambulator’ is pronounced /pə'ræmbjələɪtə/, not /'præmbjələɪtə/.

Complex clipping as illustrated on Table 5, can also occur to given names, giving such diverse forms as Harry or Hal from Henry, Baz from Barry (itself originally from Bartholomew), or Mel from Amelia, which, unlike the examples cited above (i.e. Melvyn, Melissa etc.), involves a change in the vowel sound between the *m* and *l* from /ə'mɪ:liə/ to /mɛl/.

3.6. Compound remnants

The phenomenon of compound remnants occurs when a reduced form consists of two or more remnants. Bauer (1983, p. 234) calls reduction involving compound remnants *complex clipping* and distinguishes it from *blending* (see §3.7) by the fact that with blends, the

³² One further curiosity about ‘bike’ is that in the compound word “motorcycle” is often shortened to ‘motorbike’ which is then reduced to the remnant ‘bike’, making it appear in that this latter form is an end-remnant (see §3.2).

³³ “The principle stated by the philosopher William of Ockham (1285–1347/49) that *pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*, ‘plurality should not be posited without necessity.’ The principle gives precedence to simplicity: of two competing theories, the simpler explanation of an entity is to be preferred.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Occams-razor>

³⁴ In fact, considered like this, it is reminiscent of the famously corny “Knock Knock” format of jokes, e.g. “‘Knock, knock!’ – ‘Who’s there?’ - ‘Abe’ - ‘Abe who?’ – ‘Abe CDEFJH...’”

remnant shows simple word stress as in ‘podcast’ /'pɒd,kæst/, while compound remnants show compound word stress as in ‘hi-fi’ /'haɪ'faɪ/ (Bauer 1983, p. 233). As we said in §3.1, compound remnants also contrast with simple remnants such as ‘Fed’ or ‘perm’ because with these the remnant is taken from only one specific part of the full noun phrase. In Table 6, we give some illustrative examples of compound remnants.

Compound remnants	Full form	Variety
incel	in voluntary cel ibate	General
hifi	hi gh fi delity	General
SIGINT	si gnals in telligence	Military

Table 6
Examples of Compound remnants in English.

In all three examples on Table 6, the compound remnant is made up of front-remnants (see §3.1): *in* and *cel*; *hi* and *fi*; and *SIG* and *INT*. Examples like ‘SIGINT’ are characteristic of military terminology – compare with ‘ELINT’ (“electronic intelligence”) or ‘HUMINT’ (“human intelligence”). Interestingly, the word ‘intelligence’ in this sense is elsewhere often shortened to ‘intel’ (a simple front-remnant), not ‘INT’. Other examples from the military context are ‘KFOR’ (“Kosovo Force”), or more complex structures such as ‘DEFCON’ (“Defense Readiness Condition”). Among lists of such terms, are found items such as ‘COMNAVSURFPAC’ (“Commander, Naval Surface Force, Pacific”), ‘RDCTFP’ (“Regional Defense Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program”), “RED HORSE” (“rapid engineer deployable heavy operational repair squadron engineer”), or ‘VCJCS’ (“Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff”), which show that there are overlaps with abbreviations (§2.1), initialisms (§2.2) and acronyms (§2.3) and perhaps a backronym, depending on whether and how each form is pronounced.³⁵ The origin of these forms is from official terminology, and, as such, they are designed to be systematic (following certain defined patterns) and referentially efficacious (see §3.0). By contrast, ‘incel’ derives from slang, on social media, and was originally the more awkward ‘invcel’.³⁶

Compound remnants, like those found in military contexts are also found across the board in the context of government and administration and constitute one of the defining features of “officialese”: ‘Ofsted’ (an example of a compound remnant made up of more than two words: ‘office’, ‘standards’ and ‘education’ as in England’s “Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills”); and ‘Europol’ (the “European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation”: from ‘Europe’ and ‘police’).³⁷ The last two examples show how compound remnants do not have to involve all the elements of the full form in question; some can be represented, as in the ‘office’, ‘standards’ and ‘education’ of ‘Ofsted’, while others simply ignored (e.g. the rest of the full form: “/.../ Children’s Services and Skills”).

³⁵ See, for example, the “DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms”:

dacipad.whs.mil/images/Public/10-Reading_Room/03_Acronyms_Terms/DoD_Acronyms_Dictionary.pdf

³⁶ See www.britannica.com.

³⁷ The use of compound remnants in political discourse is something the writer George Orwell picked up on in his novel “1984” (1949) where the name of the regime’s doctrine was ‘INGSOC’ in Newspeak (“English Socialism”) and the four government ministries were: ‘Minitrue’ (Ministry of Truth), ‘Minipax’ (“Ministry of Peace / *pax* in Latin”), ‘Miniluv’ (Ministry of Love”), and Miniplenty (Ministry of Plenty”). Cf. Nazi Germany’s ‘Gestapo’ (*Geheime Staatspolizei*), or the Soviet controlled ‘Comintern’ (the “Communist International”).

‘Hi-fi’ involves the retention of the front parts of both elements of the phrase, ‘high’ and ‘fidelity’. In the case of ‘hi-fi’, the phonetic change in the front-remnant on ‘fidelity’ seems to be influenced by the fact that the phoneme is transformed to make it rhyme with the first element ‘high’, therefore changing /fi/ to /faɪ/. In this way, an overlap is formed between the first and second item (‘high’ and ‘fidelity’). Closely related to ‘hi-fi’ is the term ‘sci-fi’ (“Science Fiction”), which seems to date from shortly after ‘hi-fi’, and the one is clearly influenced by the other.³⁸ ‘Wifi’ is also related but is an anomalous case because, although it looks like the remnant of a phrase (“wireless fidelity”), the latter full form never existed. ‘Wifi’ was in fact the invention of a branding consultancy, Interbrand,³⁹ which created it out of analogy with ‘hi-fi’ in the same way that ‘software’, also in the field of ICT, was formed out of analogy with ‘hardware’.

As we have said, compound remnants can be easily confused with blends, which we shall turn to in the next section.

3.7. Reduction by blending

A final kind of reduction occurs when different words (typically two) are combined or fused into one producing what is traditionally known as a *portmanteau*.⁴⁰ In the process, one or more of the words is reduced. Such blending bears some resemblance, involving as it does different elements, to the contraction of verbs (see §3.0). Blends also resemble compound remnants in some respects but can be distinguished by the fact their stress patterns are like those of a single word, while compound remnants, as their name suggests, are stressed like compound words (see §3.6).

One example of a blend that we have already mentioned in this article (see §2.3) is the term *backronym*, which is an amalgam of the two words ‘back’ and ‘acronym’, in which the /æk/ sound of *ack* of ‘back’ and the initial *ac* of ‘acronym’, is not repeated as it would be if the words were treated as separate (/bæk 'ækronɪm/). This results in the reduced form /'bækrənɪm/.

Other examples of such overlapping portmanteaux include: ‘guestimate’ (‘guess’ and ‘estimate’); ‘infomercial’ (‘information’ / ‘info’ – see §3.5 – and ‘commercial’); ‘mockumentary’ (‘mock’ and ‘documentary’); ‘frenemy’ (‘friend’ and ‘enemy’).

It is not always necessary for there to be any overlap between the words combined to form portmanteaux, as is the case with ‘backronym’, but they typically do as in such examples as: ‘motel’ (from ‘motor’ and ‘hotel’); or ‘chillax’ (from ‘chill’ and ‘relax’). By contrast, the portmanteau ‘brunch’ is a combination of two words, ‘breakfast’ and ‘lunch’, which do not have any common phonemes at all, and the blending does not involve any overlapping; it is a case of simply taking the first two letters of the first word and substituting them for the first letter of the second. Such kinds of non-overlapping portmanteaux are simple to invent, e.g. ‘blog’ (‘web’ and ‘log’); ‘cosplay’ (‘costume’ and ‘play’); ‘podcast’ (‘iPod’ and ‘broadcast’); and ‘edutainment’ (‘education’ and ‘entertainment’).

Overlapping portmanteaux can overlap on either of two levels, or both: that of sound, the phonemes (like ‘backronym’); or that of sight, i.e. the letter.⁴¹ Examples like ‘smog’ (from ‘smoke’ and ‘fog’) and ‘spork’ (from ‘spoon’ and ‘fork’), are of the second

³⁸ According to www.etymonline.com, ‘hi-fi’ dates from 1947, and ‘sci-fi’ “by 1955”.

³⁹ See, for example, “Here's Why It's Called 'Wi-Fi'”, *Huffington Post*, Apr 15/04/2019, (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-called-wi-fi_1_5cace3f7e4b01bf960065841)

⁴⁰ This term, which is itself a portmanteau – from French ‘porter’, “to carry” and ‘manteau’ “cloak” – was famously coined by the writer and academic, Charles Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll).

⁴¹ Of course, not every language user is sighted, but in a broad sense we are talking about that which can be read as opposed to heard, which would include non-sight based reading systems, such as Braille.

kind. While in each of the latter two cases the blended words share a letter (coincidentally, the *o* in both cases), they do not actually share a phoneme as, in each, the *o* is pronounced differently: /sməʊk/; /fɒg/; /spu:n/ and /fɔ:k/. In such cases, the blending is at the level of sight alone, while with ‘motel’ it is on both the level of sound (phonemes) and sight /letters/. ‘Backronym’, by contrast is blending mainly at the level of sound, as the /æk/ sound is spelt differently in ‘back’ to how it is in ‘acronym’, and thus the latter word is not as easily identifiable, purely on the level of sight, in the resulting portmanteau. Another example to illustrate overlapping at the level of sound, but not sight, is ‘staycation’ (‘stay’ and ‘vacation’), where the combination of letters *stay* and *va* share only an *a*. Nonetheless, in each case, this is pronounced as /eɪ/ meaning in effect that the two elements rhyme (/steɪ/ and /veɪ/), thus creating the phonemic overlap.

3.8. Expanded remnants

An interesting facet of reduced forms is that, illogical as it may at first seem – given that forms are normally reduced for reasons of economy – remnants will often be expanded by the addition of affixes to form diminutives. In many cases, given that English has no systematic means of doing so (in contrast to languages like Italian where the suffixes *-ino* or *-ina* are often added to create diminutives), suffixes such as *y*, *er*, and *o* can function as informal diminutives.

The term *diminutive* covers a complex array of features relating literally to reduced size, but also, metaphorically,⁴² to speaker’s attitudes towards something: whether he or she considers it as unimportant or is even disparaging towards it. To complicate factors further, especially in informal contexts, diminutives may be used ironically, in effect lowering something’s status to express affection and familiarity. Consequently, depending on context, diminutives may be used to express fondness rather than disdain.

The most common example of a diminutive is perhaps the suffix *y* (often written as *ie*) /i/. This is frequently used also with given names (see §3.0)⁴³ whereby short forms like Tom, John, or Liz, can be further diminished by addition of the same suffix: Tommy, Johnny, or Lizzy. The use of *y* affixed to a noun to function as a diminutive in English is not to be confused with the suffix *y* used to form many adjectives (e.g. ‘lucky’, ‘happy’, ‘merry’, ‘dirty’ etc.).⁴⁴

Some examples of this kind of expanded remnants is shown on Table 7:

⁴² This conforms to the basic conceptual metaphor as identified by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), that: good is up; bad is down, therefore, more is better, less is worse.

⁴³ Katamba (2005, p. 180).

⁴⁴ The affix *y* can also be used as another kind of diminutive with adjectives where it dilutes their meaning so to speak. e.g. *greeny* (something similar to green). The affix *ish* can also be used in this way: *greenish*. The latter can also be with times: “I’ll see you around eightish”.

Expanded remnant	Remnant	Full form	Variety
backy	back (mid-remnant)	tobacco	Archaic
footie / footy	foot (front-remnant)	football	BrE
homie / homey	home (front-remnant)	homeboy/girl (an acquaintance form one’s neighbourhood)	*AAE
leccy	lec (mid-remnant)	electricity	BrE
prezzie / prezzy	prez (front-remnant)	present	BrE
sickie / sicky	sick (front-remnant)	sick (to take a day off work by pretending to be ill / someone who is mentally ill in a dangerous way, cf. <i>sicko</i>)	BrE
tatty	tat (mid-remnant)	potato	Scots

*African American English

Table 7
Examples of expanded remnants by means of the diminutive suffix *y* in English.

Most of the examples on Table 7 derive from simple remnants with the exception of ‘tatty’ which is complex (see §3.5), involving as it does, a change in vowel sound in the reduced form: cf. /pəˈteɪtəʊ/ and /tæt/. At first sight, the same thing appears to be true of ‘prezzy’ but, in fact, despite the difference in spelling, the remnant ‘prez’ is pronounced exactly like the first four letters of ‘present’ /prezənt/.

Two things on Table 7 stand out in particular, the first is that none of the reduced forms *per se* seems to be commonly used, and the expanded form would seem to be the unmarked form. Secondly, it is notable that in our sample, mid-remnants make up almost half of the cases, which is a very high proportion when compared to the incidence of mid-remnants in general (§3.3) compared to front-remnants (§3.1). This observation leads one to speculate whether the relatively low number of mid-remnants is at least partly caused by the fact they seem to be more likely to be expanded by means of the diminutive *y*, than are either front- or end-remnants.

Another common suffix which is used to expand remnants is *er* usually rendered by a schwa /ə/. This is also a diminutive in the sense that it signals affection or familiarity. Again, something analogous can be found with given names especially in British and Australian slang where an *ry* /ri/ is transformed into a *za* /zə/, e.g. *Gazza* for Gary, *Bazza* for Barry, *Jezza* for Jeremy, *Hazza* for Harry, or *Shazza* for Sharon (all spelt with a final *a* pronounced like *er* as a schwa). As we noted in 3.0 (fn), diminutives can also be added to surnames, and this happens in such examples as the ex-Beatle Paul “Macca” McCartney or Alex “Jezza” Jesaulenko, the Australian rules football player.⁴⁵

The suffix *er* can be used generally in English to mark the agent of some action (e.g. ‘play’ vs. ‘player’ – someone who plays) but this is not to be confused with *er* used as a diminutive, which is analogous to the use of *y* in Table 7. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the origins of *er* as a diminutive lie in 19th century English schoolboy slang. Examples of contemporary slang that incorporate it are: ‘copper’ (BrE from ‘cop’: police officer); ‘fiver’ (from “five pound / dollar note”); or ‘geezer’ (Cockney for ‘man’).

⁴⁵ For names, another variant of *er* exists: *ers* /əz/ as in the former British celebrity Keith “Cheggers” Chegwin, or the members of BBC cricket commentary “Test Match Special” team: Brian “Jonners” Johnson; Jonathan “Aggers” Agnew; Henry “Blowers” Blofeld; and Phil “Tuffers” Tuffnell. The tone of this variant seems to be more jocular than plain *er*. It is theoretically possible that this formation is behind a few slang terms, such as ‘laters’ (“see you later”) or ‘afters’ (dessert), but it does not appear to be used to expand reduced forms, at least not in any examples that we could find.

In Table 8, we give some representative examples of its occurrence with reduced forms:

Expanded remnant	Remnant	Full form	Variety
Beemer	Beem (complex remnant)	a BMW	BrE
Hummer	Hum (front-remnant)	a Hum vee (loose acronym for HMMWE)	General
rugger	rug (front-remnant)	rugby (football)	BrE
soccer	soc (complex front-remnant)	association (football)	General

Table 8
Examples of expanded remnants by means of the diminutive suffix *er* in English.

Again, as with the reduced forms expanded with *y* listed on Table 7, the reduced forms themselves do not seem to be actually used. Hummer is the brand name for the civilian variant of the military Humvee (see §2.3). ‘Soc’ is a mid-remnant but is classed as complex here because it involves a sound change from /s/ to /k/: /'sɒkə/ vs. /ə,səʊsi'eɪʃn/. ‘Beemer’ is reminiscent of “the Beeb” (see Table 5), in that ‘beem’ seems to be a play on the first two initials *B.M.* of ‘BMW’, just as ‘Beeb’ is of the two *Bs* in BBC. One might argue that ‘tater’ (see Table 2) should be included in this category on the grounds that it is an expansion of ‘tat’ (see Table 7). Once more applying Occam’s razor, we here opt for the simplest solution, namely that it is a simple end-remnant.

One final and relatively rare diminutive affix is *o*, with examples such as ‘psycho’, ‘cheapo’, ‘weirdo’, ‘sicko’, ‘righto’ (or ‘rightio’ an archaic expression of agreement – an example of a double diminutive). It is still fairly popular in BrE, but in USE may seem dated. It is a feature of many uniquely Australian slang terms such as ‘milko’ (milk) or ‘smoko’ (a cigarette break, from ‘smoke’). It can also be used for names (e.g. especially for surnames such as Jackson as in “Wacko Jacko”: an unflattering nickname for the eccentric singer Michael Jackson). In Table 9, we give some examples:

Expanded remnant	Remnant	Full form	Variety
agro / aggro	aggr (front-remnant)	aggression / aggravation	AusE* / BrE
arvo	arv (complex front-remnant)	afternoon	AusE*
defo / deffo	def (front-remnant)	definitely	General
garbo	garb (front-remnant)	garbage collector	AusE*
journo	journ (front-remnant)	journalist	AusE* / BrE
muso	mus (front-remnant)	musician	AusE*

*AusE (Australian English)

Table 9
Examples of expanded remnants by means of the diminutive suffix *o* in English.

As with the other two types of diminutives discussed above, the simple reduced forms as listed on Table 9 do not seem to be used. ‘Arv’ is classed as a complex front-remnant as it involves some phonetic changes, the /f/ in ‘afternoon’ being transformed into a /v/ in the reduced form. The addition of the letter *r* is interesting as it reflects the pronunciation of the initial *after* as /'ɑ:ftə/.

As with ‘tater’, one could argue that ‘info’ (see Table 5) was an expansion with a diminutive affix, in this case *o*, of the remnant ‘inf’ from ‘information’. However here as

well, application of the principle of Occam’s razor would determine that the simpler explanation of it being a complex remnant should be chosen.

4. Discussion

As can be seen, reduction is an important part of noun creation in English, and occurs, if not according to precise rules, then by adhering to broad principles. Such reduced noun forms constitute a large amount of slang and colloquialisms in part because they are more economic than the full forms than they replace. The stylistic conventions of English have come to favour conciseness over verbosity,⁴⁶ and the principle of economy of form, where clarity is not compromised, is in harmony with this, especially in written discourse where the number of characters and words can be reduced, and texts thus shortened. This is the principle reason why formal reduction occurs, in particular those discussed in §2: abbreviations, initialisms, and acronyms.

As regards formal reduction to key elements of the full form, economy may not be the only reason for their popularity. In many forms, such as “the Beeb”, one finds evidence not only of a decision to shorten, but also to some degree to hide or camouflage a reduced form’s meaning. Here then we are talking about crypticity – whereby a form’s meaning can be obscured from all but those familiar with the link between the remnant and its original full form: e.g. ‘scrip’ for “prescription drug”.

While reduction for economy is a common feature of technical and scientific discourse, reduction for crypticity is a feature of slang and so-called *anti-languages*⁴⁷ whereby a self-selecting group of speakers can cut themselves off from the wider community. This runs slightly counter to Marchand’s characterisation of a movement of clipping from slang into general language (see §3.0) which, while often the case, is not always true. That is to say, sometimes reduction is designed for restricted use, and it never makes its way out of an anti-language, if it ever does, until its usefulness there is exhausted.

An illuminating example of an extreme version of this process is the Australian slang term ‘Seppo’, which can be used to refer in a derogatory way to an American. This is a diminutive *o* attached to a front-remnant ‘Sep’ /sɛp/ taken from the full form “septic tank” /'septɪk tæŋk/ itself rhyming slang for ‘Yank’: a slang term for a US citizen (or within the USA itself, more traditionally for a someone from the north eastern Atlantic states – originally those of Dutch origin cf: Janke a diminutive in Dutch for the name Jan). Here, three layers of encryption, so-to-speak have been applied meaning that, if an American in Brisbane, for example, were to hear locals talking about “Seppos”, then they could be expected to have no idea that they were the subject of the discussion.

As we have seen in this article, reduced nouns forms can be formed in a wide variety of ways which provide avenues also for creativity, playfulness, irony, and unconventionality. Remnants often stand out for their originality, and are frequently picked up by the media and used in advertising and headlines (also because these are contexts where, for reasons of space, short forms are favoured over long ones),⁴⁸ and this fact alone will account for their increasing popularity.

The fact that reduced forms and especially clipping have in recent decades become such a common feature of English (see §3.0), constitutes another way that English is continuing to show itself to be highly flexible and adaptive, even while it is coming to be

⁴⁶ For example, Gowers (1954) or Fowler (1926).

⁴⁷ Halliday (1976, p. 570).

⁴⁸ On *Headlines*, see, for example, Garner (2016).

widely spoken all over the world, and an idiom whose L1 speakers are easily outnumbered by the number of L2 speakers (see Christiansen 2015). In this context, that these reduced forms used in colloquial language and slang have the potential to be cryptic and incomprehensible to outsiders is significant.

As English has become international, because of various interconnected factors such as the advent of globalisation and almost universal access to internet, speech communities, and communities of practice (e.g. professions) have become much more fluid, mobile, and more diverse / less homogenous. As a result, in some contexts, in non-territorial dimensions,⁴⁹ language too is becoming more globalised and more homogenous and traditional regional varieties associated with specific physical territorial levels (e.g. London, the Bronx, “Strine”, or Glaswegian), are losing their position as the idioms of more or less fixed communities, who could identify themselves with that same variety. In view of these changes, in non-territorial contexts, perhaps a requirement has arisen for something to replace non-standard varieties and slangs with which specific speech communities can identify themselves. The growth of reduction may be a response to this, because, with its potential for crypticity, reduced forms fill the need for a space reserved for certain groups of speakers where they can still communicate in English, which is rapidly becoming a *universal* language (at least in some contexts), without being *universally* understood.

One may assume that this potential may be limited to those categories of English speakers in the inner circle on Kachru’s 1985 model, which for Graddol (2007) would also include highly proficient speakers. However, given the relative simplicity of some of the rules and principles outlined here, there is nothing in theory to stop other types of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) users from availing themselves of this possibility. Indeed, the desire to use such instruments may not be either for economy or crypticity as we have focused on here, but also to simply create a separate identity for different speech communities using ELF. In such a case, reduction and the creation of short forms as observed here, will be an important step in the creation of non-territorial sub-varieties of international English: something analogous to the traditional “dialects” of standard varieties.

This last observation highlights another important thing about the processes and principles identified here, namely, that they constitute a system that allows such structures to be not only generated with ease, but also to be understood by anyone with access to the same principles. One member of a given speech community can spontaneously reduce a given form in the expectation that, unless they choose a highly cryptic form of reduction, as in ‘Seppo’ or “the Beeb” or very loose form as in ‘Humvee’, then there is a reasonable probability that other members who are familiar with the system will be able to decode or infer its intended meaning. In this way, there is a possibility for creativity in reduction, a constitutive feature of language according to Chomsky (1965, 1975) and the means by which, according to transformational-generative grammar, a language user working within a fixed and limited structure can produce and understand new linguistic items and structures.

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⁴⁹ See Christiansen (2015) on non-territorial dimensions of language use.

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