

# The role of combining forms in creating neologisms—A data-driven approach

Yongwei GAO (ywgao@fudan.edu.cn)

Affiliation: College of Foreign Languages & Literature, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

Combining forms (CFs), a lexical concept first appeared in the English language as early as 1884 and defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of English* as “a form of a word normally used in compounds in combination with another element to form a word”, has traditionally played an important role in forming new words in the English language. Technical CFs like *immuno-* and *-plasty* have spawned at least one hundred technical terms. Like affixes, CFs can be used to attach to existing words, word elements and even other CFs to form new compounds. Traditionally, the productivity of most CFs is paled by comparison with that of affixes. Unlike affixes, the number of CFs has always been on the rise while there are seldom new affixes emerging in the English language. *Cyber-*, for instance, a relatively new CF, has been very productive in forming new English compounds whose number may have amounted to dozens or even over a hundred, as are recorded by major English dictionaries such as *Collins English Dictionary* and *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Frequently used *cyber-* compounds include *cyberattack*, *cyberbullying*, *cybercafé*, *cybercrime*, *cyber-espionage*, *cybershopping*, *cyberspace*, and *cyberterrorism*, to mention a few. Other newly emerged CFs like *e-* (e.g. *e-book*), *-flation* (e.g. *shrinkflation*), *-fluencer* (e.g. *petfluencer*), *-geddon* (e.g. *snowgeddon*), *-licious* (e.g. *babelicious*), and *-preneur* (e.g. *dadpreneur*) have so far formed scores of new words that have been widely used in the English language. There are also several CFs-to-be that have formed many new compounds, some of which, however, have been wrongly assumed to be blends. *-cation* is a case in point. As a splinter from *vacation*, it has been seen in use in at least ten neologisms such as *bizcation*, *coronacation*, *daycation*, *haycation*, *mancation*, and *nakation*. As a result of their vitality, the current number of CFs has apparently far surpassed that of affixes, as is shown in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in which there are over two thousand CFs and only several hundred affixes (including both prefixes and suffixes).

This paper takes a data-driven approach to the study of new CFs and their productivity in forming new compound words. The new CFs to be studied number at about twenty, including neoclassical elements and clipped forms of existing English words, such as *perma-*, *-pocalypse*, *-razzi*, *robo-*, *-tacular*, *-tastic*, and the above-mentioned CFs. The new compounds formed by these CFs are selected from major English dictionaries like the OED and several neologism dictionaries that the author compiled in the past few years, such as *A 21st Century English-Chinese Dictionary of Neologisms* (2021), *An English-Chinese Dictionary of Neologisms in the New Era* (2023), and *An English-Chinese Dictionary of Neologisms in Present-day English* (2023). The data to be used are taken from corpora like News on the Web and news archives such as Google News. The productivity of all the CFs in question will be examined with the help of corpus data, and the mechanism in forming compounds with CFs will also be investigated. The status of neologisms as compounds or blends will be scrutinized as well.

## References

- Booij, G. 2018. *The Construction of Words: Advances in Construction Morphology*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Gao, Y. W. 2022. *A Study of Contemporary English Word-Formation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Yiwen Publishing House.
- Gao, Y. W. 2023. *A Dictionary of Blends in Contemporary English*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- O'Dell, F. 2016. Creating new words: Affixation in neologisms. *ELT Journal* 70 (1): 94-99.