OBSERVATIONS ON THE CURRENT BREXPLOSION: 
BOOM OF BREXIT-RELATED BLENDINGS 

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Abstract: This paper aims to outline the dynamic appearance of numerous blendings (or portmanteau words), connected with Brexit. Based on a study of coverage of the Brexit debate, the UK referendum and the post-Brexit process in the British and world press, as well as articles and responses in the social media (blogs, Twitter, Facebook etc.), some conclusions are drawn about the blending word formation patterns in the Brexit lexicon, their frequency of appearance and their value orientation and function. These portmanteau words have predominantly strong connotative meanings, expressing clearcut political and citizen positions. 

While the frequency of some terms are examined in the framework of News on the Web Corpus, the approach to the Brexit lexicon boom is interdisciplinary rather than strictly linguistic, the phenomenon being regarded in its wide socio-cultural context. The language creativity and word play demonstrated seems to be a coping strategy for some of the British people, a reaction to a process that has dramatically divided the society. Posts, blogs and twitters have served as bonding platforms, as a forum of sharing a whole range of emotions and expressing subtle nuances while resorting to irony and language creativity.

This phenomenon seems to go far beyond Brexit, Britain and the EU. It seems to have triggered a whole trend in the use and abuse of the language of departure worldwide, indicating social turmoil and profound social and cultural changes in the political and economic climate.

Key words: Brexit, blending, coinage, language of departure

I. Introduction: Brexit and the Brexplosion phenomenon

Before providing some insights into the newly coined political blendings related to Brexit, the paper needs to address briefly a series of preliminary questions: What is Brexit? What is blending? What accounts for the exponential growth of Brexit lexicon over the last couple of years? How come we experience such an acute brysteria, a regular bravalanche?

1.1. Brexit.

Investopedia [3], defining “Brexit” as an abbreviation for "British exit" (referring to the UK’s decision in a June 23, 2016 referendum to leave the European Union), briefly summarizes the referendum results: “The vote's result surprised pollsters and roiled global markets, causing the British pound to fall to its lowest level against the dollar in 30 years. "Leave" won the referendum with 51.9% of the ballot, or 17.4 million votes; "Remain" received 48.1%, or 16.1 million. Turnout was 72.2%. The results were tallied across the UK, but the overall result
conceals stark regional differences: 53.4% of English voters supported Brexit, compared to just 38.0% of Scottish voters.”

Based on coverage in the world press, we can claim that the term “Brexit” has equally great significance in the post-referendum Brexit negotiation period.

I.2. Etymology. The origin of the term “Brexit” is tracked down by some researchers such as Ludowig [5] and Maxwell [6] as to be appearing soon after the coinage of the term “Grexit”. According to Ludowig [5] the latter was presumably used for the first time in an article in Febr 2012 by Willem Buiter and Ebrahim Rahbari, two economists from the Citigroup, discussing a possible Greek departure from the euro zone. “Grexit” is largely considered to have become a model of a number of new coinages. Yet, a brief check in the NOW Corpus/News on the Web Corpus 2017 [7] indicates that the term “Grexit” was actually used at least a year earlier. On 10 Jan 2011 Investment week highlighted that: “as European investors have been buoyed by the news, a Grexit has been avoided for now.” Similarly, the corpus search [7] indicates that “Brexit” was used as early as 10 Aug 2011 by Cityware.co.uk in the following context: “From investors, discussing everything from the threat of Brexit to weighing up value versus growth.” We can safely claim that the term “Brexit” was used as early as 2011 and it soon gathered an unprecedented momentum. Kerry Maxwell concisely summarizes its current importance: “Brexit reflects a growing trend in recent years of coining a catchy new expression to appealingly characterize a topical scenario.” [6]

I.3. Blending. Blending or portmanteau word is the combination of two or more words or their parts, making a new word. Blendings usually demonstrate the principle of language economy, compressing the initial words or morphemes, conceptually integrating them into a new whole.

I.4. Popularity of the blending “Brexit”.

The popularity of the term is unique. In 2015 “Brexit” was considered among the top buzz words [8]. In 2016 the Oxford dictionary launched a project of the most hated words and not surprisingly in August 2016- a couple of months after the EU referendum in Britain, “Brexit” and “British” were among the top five most hated words in the UK [14]. This ambivalence seems to be all pervasive both in the Remain and Brexiter camps.

I.5. Brexploration

Core values being at stake, the process of Brexit has led to an explosion of Brexit-related blendings, indicative of dramatic sociocultural changes. While the term “Brexit” was traced back in the corpus used as early as 2011, it is in the last couple of years that together with its related coinages, it has demonstrated unprecedented exponential growth.

Table 1 illustrates the use of the term “Brexit” in the period Jan 2016 up to now, as a period where the term has the highest frequency.

Table 1. Use of the term “Brexit” in the world press (1 Jan 2016-23 April 2017):
The functionality of the tool allows a focus on a chosen specific period with more detailed information. As can be seen from Table 2, around the referendum on 23 June 2016 the term “Brexit” predictably reached a peak in the period 21-30 June 2016.

Table 2. Use of the term “Brexit” in the world press (21-30 June 2016):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Per million</th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21-30 June</td>
<td>440.74</td>
<td>18735</td>
<td>42,508,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I.6. Brexit as a disruptor.

Dr Tim Oliver, an Associate at LSE IDEAS and Director of Research at Brexit Analytics, has collected half-jokingly a dictionary of Brexit words: 101 Brexits. [10] This “Brexplosion” is indicative of Brexit’s unique status as a disruptor in the sociocultural life of Great Britain. It has a wider impact for EU countries as well. To illustrate, in a text about brand revamps Gregory Berleur starts his text with the following topic statement: “In today’s BREXITable Europe, … there’s lots of talk about resilience: the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties.” [1] Needless to say, Brexit as a social, political, economic and cultural factor affects not only the UK and the EU but the larger international community.


The initial stage of the study included identifying a list of common Brexit-related blendings appearing in the British press (The Economist, The Guardian, Financial Times) over the period of the last 2 years. Then some tools were employed to cross-check sample material from the list, using The News on the Web corpus [7], measuring the worldwide frequency of use of the sample material in web-based newspapers and magazines in the period 1 Jan 2016 and 23 April 2017, a period with the highest frequency of use of the term “Brexit”. NOW Corpus, part of The News on the Web corpus, is composed of 4.3 billion words of data, and it is growing by 4-5 million words per day [7].
Table 3. illustrates the frequency of usage of some basic Brexit-related terms in the Wordpress Corpus now in the specified period (using the function “Key words in context”). The top five terms in our sample for that period are: Brexit, post-Brexit, Brexiteer, Brexiter and Remainer. Surprisingly, in our sample, the perjorative blending “Brexiteer” (497) is used 4 time more often than the more neutral “Brexiter” (122).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word (1 Jan 2016 - 23 April 2017)</th>
<th>NOW Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brexit</td>
<td>150,196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Brexit</td>
<td>7,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Brexit</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brexiteer</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brexiter</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remainer</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next most frequently used occasionalisms are: Bregret (37), Bremoaner (29), Brexodus (15), Bremainer (3), Unbrexit (2) and Brenial (2).

Using the function “Key words in context” one can follow what the most common associated collocations are. For example, with ‘post-Brexit’ the top immediate collocations are: Britain (14), world (9), trade (2), recession (2), environment (5), era (6), future (3), recovery (2). Brexit’s top collocations are: Hard Brexit (3,732) and Soft Brexit (544).

III. Main word-formation patterns. (Group ‘Br-‘ and group ‘-exit’) Value orientation. Context and implications.

A week after the referendum in June 2016, John Kelly wrote a bitter humorous blog post “Branger, Debression. Oexit. Zumxit. Why Did Brexit Trigger Brexplosion of Wordplay” with a brilliant paragraph on the current trendy “Portman-texia”: “Many U.K. citizens who voted to Bremain bemoaned the brevastation this brexplosion detonated. Assessing the damage, some Brexiteers now expressed bremorse and bregret, or regrexit, over the results. These Bracksies wondered how the U.K. might stage a bretum. Brecriminations in Parliament began to fly. Some who were wished they hadn’t skipped the polls on voting day. Dismayed and afraid, immigrants, urbanites, and businesses weighed a Brexodus from the U.K. Plenty of Brexpserts weighed in. … exemplifying in tone the classic five stages of grief: branger, brargaining, brepression or debression, bracception or even euukceptance.” [4]

Apart from illustrating the bitterness and frustrations of many Britons, the text serves to illustrate the biggest group of Brexit-related blendings (“Br-“group).
Since the Brexit process seems to be a great divider in British society, many of the coinages have strong connotative elements. Some of them have perjorative meaning (e.g. Bremoaner, Brexiteer). Other blendings indicate ironic or sarcastic overtones (Brexcuse, Bregret, Brequession, Brexodus, Bremaniac). In some cases such neologisms are used for rhetorical purposes, e.g. Nick Clegg’s famous phrase that ‘Brexiteers are in Brenial’, [13].

Numerous patterns of Brexit-related word-formation are very actively present both in world press coverage and social networks. The social media have been a platform for a rare burst of the full range of semi-humorous word formation patterns and phrases. Just as an illustration a facebook post of Andy Borowitz, comedian and contributor to The New Yorker (The Borowitz Report), triggered an avalanche of Brexit neologisms, ranging from ‘Un/brexitable’, ‘Brexitish’, ‘Brexitability’, ‘prebrexitis’, ‘postbrexitis’ to ‘postbrexit depression’ and ‘brex-astrophe’ to name a few. [2]

It seems that what accounts for the popularity of the coinage of Brexit-related blendings is that they are an “effective way of group bonding”. [9]

Moreover, some Brexit-related occasionalisms are used as marketing tools, e.g. Banana Republic used buzz word such as „Brexcuse“ as a promotional code:

Promo Code BREXCUSE @ bananarepublic.gap.com

Another company used a clever gimmick in advertising products using the slogan “Keep calm and Unbrexit, please”. [16]

Apart from the large group of BR-derivatives another very active model is the ‘–it/-exit’ pattern. In his blog article significantly named Leaving, in tears and portmanteau the linguist Arnold Zwicky enumerates some of the most common ‘–exit’ neologisms across Europe and post-Trump States:

“The names are all portmanteaus: Brexit = Britain/British + exit (exit of Britain from the European Union), Grexit = Greece/Greek + exit (exit of Greece from the Euro zone), Crexit = crisis + exit (rescue from, getting out of, crisis), Trexit above = Trump + exit (exit from the US on account of Donald Trump), Texit = Texas + exit (exit of Texas from the U.S.), Nexit = Netherlands + exit (exit of the Netherlands from the EU), Frexit = France + exit (exit of France from the E.U.).” [15]


What is particularly interesting is that the language of departure, based on the Brexit model, has grown far beyond Great Britain, creating a global interest and developing a trend in terms of language coinages. The examples are not limited to a parallel process in the USA with a focus on “Trumpisms” and “Trump-it”. Just a day after the British referendum, The Times of India published an article “The Curious case of too many exits”, written by Ankita Rajeshwari, contributing to the global trend of neologisms emulating the Br-exit case with a couple of
examples: RBI chief Raghuram Rajan’s exit came to be called ‘Rexi’t while ‘Nexit’ was the term used in Twitter when “India-born Nikesh Arora stunned everyone with his shock announcement that he’s quitting the posts of president and COO at SoftBank.” [12]

Conclusion
For several years “Brexit” has been among the top most popular terms. Yet it has uniquely been ranked among the most hated terms as well as a result of overexposure and certain semantic satiation and emotional saturation. Besides, “Brexit” as a term has been the target of many attacks as being inadequate last but not least because it is the UK that is leaving the EU not Britain only. While presumably after the fact of Brexit some of the Brexit-related coinages will fall into oblivion, being occasionalisms/neologisms, such as “Remainers”, “Brexiters” or “Brexistential angst”, the term Brexit is bound to remain in the English lexicon for quite some time.

Many linguists, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, enthusiastic bloggers and comedians have reacted to the topic of Brexit, making the most of the blending word formation process in the coinage of occasionalisms, expressing and sharing with like-minded audience their mixed feelings of social frustration and linguistic fascination.

The paper has tried to illustrate the exponential growth of blendings in the Brexit lexicon, exemplifying a specific language of departure, by using both world press and social media presence while targeting to outline some of the psychological and sociocultural factors that have contributed to this growth well beyond the boundaries of Britain and the British.

References:

2. https://www.facebook.com/andyborowitz/posts/10154633157340681?comment_id=10154633211970681&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R0%22%7D (5.05.2017)

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