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BARBENHEIMER OR OPPENBARBIE: A CASE STUDY IN LEXICAL CREATIVITY AND LUDICITY IN ENGLISH

Language creativity is a complex topic involving many different and mutually intertwined aspects. In this paper we deal with lexical creativity in English and discuss several key issues relevant to it: the relationship between productivity and creativity, the concepts of ludicity and wordplay, the attention-seeking function of lexical creativity, and the importance of extralinguistic factors in lexical creativity. To illustrate how these issues pertaining to lexical creativity are reflected in the actual process of forming creative coinages, we focus specifically on the attention-grabbing and the naming functions of lexical blending as one of the most creative and most playful word formation processes in English, using as an example the blend *Barbenheimer*, recently coined for a particular purpose of a double feature of the two different films premiering on the same date. We discuss the formal structure of this blend, its semantic features, as well as its iconicity and the degree of predictability exhibited in the way the names of two blockbusters were amalgamated to form a blend.

Key words: language creativity, productivity, ludicity, lexical blending, *Barbenheimer*

1. Introduction

Despite different and sometimes even conflicting views on what language creativity actually is and how it manifests itself, this concept has long attracted the attention of researchers. What exactly does linguistic creativity involve, how is it manifested, by whom and in what situations? Are we all creative when and whenever we use language? Does every use of language involve creativity simply because we are saying something new, something that has never been said before (also sometimes referred to as *mundane* or “*small c*” *creativity*) or is it reserved for linguistic achievements of great literary masters like Shakespeare or Lewis Carroll (also referred to as *exceptional creativity* or “*big C*” *creativity*)?

Language creativity can be seen as the ability of speakers of a language to combine a finite number of units, based on a limited set of grammatical rules, to produce an

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infinite number of sentences that have never been produced before and that can be understood by other speakers of the language. This conception of linguistic creativity was put forward by Hockett (1960) and was soon taken up and popularized by Chomsky (1965) in his widely read *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Although this capacity to create original outputs from a finite set of inputs is truly extraordinary, creativity is often thought of not so much as combinatorial or computational but rather as striking, original or eye-catching — in other words, as creativity that does not consist in applying the rules, but rather in bending or reinventing them and thus extending the language system. However, it is now universally accepted in linguistics that one of the essential properties of language is its inherent creativity. It is also recognized that all humans have the capacity for linguistic experimentation and innovation — creativity is thought to be very much an inseparable part of our everyday language and social practices.

In this paper we deal with lexical creativity in English and discuss several key issues relevant to it: the relationship between productivity and creativity, the related concepts of ludicity and wordplay, the attention-seeking function of lexical creativity, and the importance of extralinguistic factors in lexical creativity. To illustrate how these issues pertaining to lexical creativity reflect on the actual process of forming creative coinages, we specifically focus on the attention-grabbing and naming functions of lexical blending as one of the most creative and most playful word formation processes in English, using as an example the blend *Barbenheimer*, recently coined for a particular purpose of a double feature of the two different films premiering on the same date. We discuss the formal structure of this blend, its semantic features, as well as its iconicity and the level of predictability exhibited in the way the names of two blockbusters are concatenated to form a blend.

2. The great debate: creativity vs. productivity¹

A much debated issue – what is creative and what is just productive – has been going on for a long time now and is still in the linguistic and other disciplines' spotlight as there are no strict boundaries between the two. Thus a number of authors (e.g., LYONS 1977; FERNÁNDEZ-DOMÍNGUEZ 2010; RONNEBERGER-SIBOLD 2015) believe that productivity and creativity are two distinct concepts and that a new formation is either productive or creative. Other authors prefer to speak of a 'continuum' or a 'cline' rather than an opposition as they believe that productivity and creativity cannot be entirely separated (e.g., HOHENHAUS 2007; MUNAT 2007, 2016; BERGS 2019), among other reasons because many novel formations that may be considered creative turn out to be analyzable on the basis of some productive, rule-governed behaviour.

Although there is no overall consensus or terminological consistency, a general distinction between the two may nevertheless be drawn: productivity is considered to be a rule-governed innovation, whereas creativity is said to be rule-changing (BAUER 1983: 63). In productivity, at least in word formation, we witness processes which result in predictable outputs as they are based on the existing rules, whereas creative outputs are not, or not fully, predictable (BAUER 2001; MATTIELLO 2013). Thus, the produc-

¹ The title of this section is inspired by Munat's (2015) chapter on lexical creativity.

tive word-formation processes, since they are rule-based, are part of morphology. For example, words like *modernize*, *socialize* or *visualize* are outputs of a productive process (adding the suffix *-ize* to an adjective X in order to make a verb with the meaning ‘to make something X’ or ‘to become X’) and their phonological and morphological form is fully predictable. In contrast, creativity is regarded as a “non-regular and intentional activity” (FISCHER 2007: 265). Thus for instance, in the process of lexical blending, where parts of two source words are combined without regard for morpheme boundaries, there are no strict rules governing the process and we are unable to predict what the output will precisely be. For instance, the word *Brexit*, referring to the UK’s June 2016 decision to withdraw from the European Union, can be interpreted as having been coined from either *Britain* + *exit* or from *British* + *exit*, the latter interpretation being more prevalent. In either case there was no strict rule which could have predicted how the word *Brexit* would have been formed² — it might as well have been *Brixit*, which did in fact co-exist with *Brexit* for some time. Along these lines, then, *Brexit* would be an example of creativity as the output is not fully predictable.

3. Lexical creativity and ludicity

While ludicity has been extensively explored in the context of literary studies, its role in the process of lexical creation has not been thoroughly investigated although it is even thought to be an inherent component and, as some authors claim, “an imminent property of any novel word at the moment of its origination in a particular communicative act” (BAGASHEVA and STAMENOV 2013: 73-74). Ludicity is frequently treated as synonymous with creativity and, if taken in their broadest, non-technical sense, they are sometimes considered to be almost coextensive (BAGASHEVA and STAMENOV 2013). Ludic forms can be defined as those linguistic items which are used playfully to express verbal humour or wordplay, performing, *inter alia*, “the playful function of innocuous riddles” (BAGASHEVA and STAMENOV 2013: 74). Their formation presumes both the knowledge of a language’s potential and the ability to creatively “shuffle around” the elements of the linguistic system, either by strictly observing the rules or by challenging or defying them (BAGASHEVA and STAMENOV 2013).

Ludicity is viewed as a property of lexical items generated through different processes, since humorous wordplay can be achieved in various ways, for example by exploiting phonological similarity to a model, morphological re-use of affixes, by substitutions based on similarity or contrast, by analogy or through creative mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy, loan processes or reduction operations like clipping, blending or acronymy, or any combination of these (see e.g., WINTER-FROEMEL 2018; BAGASHEVA and STAMENOV 2013). Ludic forms may display a number of different motivations and patterns, all of which can be narrowed down to a (1) certain kind of markedness (structural, semantic and pragmatic), and/or (2) deviation from communicative rules and established principles of “ordinary” communication (WINTER-FROEMEL 2018: 249). Structurally, ludic formations are marked for example by their rhyming ability, deviation from the established spelling, pronunciation or morphological rules, all of which are based on some

² For a more detailed account of *Brexit* as a blend and the blends inspired by or modelled on it, see LALIĆ-KRSTIN and SILAŠKI, 2018, 2019).

kind of incongruity, identified as one of the basic sources of humour and playfulness. They may also deviate from grammar rules and usage as well as “the internal harmony of the linguistic items by combining structurally and/or semantically heterogeneous elements, producing a sort of clash for the hearer” (WINTER-FROEMEL 2018: 249), which the hearer needs to somehow resolve.

Playful formations are usually short-lived or nonce, one-off creations coined to defy the established linguistic and communicative rules, although many of them enter dictionaries and are labelled as “jocular” or “humorous”. If spoken, they are usually uttered “in a more careful or prominent manner” (CRYSTAL 2001: 4) or are accompanied by special facial expressions to indicate that they are meant as language play, expecting an appropriate response on the part of the hearer, usually an acknowledgement that the playfulness is understood and appreciated. This is why ludicity is classified as one of the processes in which the role of the speaker/writer, their communicative goal and the context in which ludic forms are constructed are particularly important (e.g., ARNDT-LAPPE, BRAUN et al. 2018; BAGASHEVA and STAMENOV 2013; MUNAT 2016).

Ludic language is based on the creative manipulation of rules in order to generate a playful outcome which will suit the communicative intention of its creator. Some playful forms are characterized by intentional ludicity and creativity, coined for a particular extralinguistic context and with a clearly predefined communicative goal in mind, meant to produce an unexpected effect, to shock or entertain (e.g., *Corbyngeddon*, *Blursday*) while others are a result of entropic ludicity and creativity, performing the naming function (e.g., *ego-surfing*, *doomscrolling*). Some combine a number of communicative goals, as will be seen from our example of a creative lexical blend *Barbenheimer*. These pragmatic functions of ludicity encompass a whole array of goals, such as demonstrating linguistic mastery or wittiness, achieving complicity between the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader, strengthening in-group ties and social bonds, lampooning, ridiculing or satirizing and parodying (e.g., in political discourse). However, a function that playful forms, especially lexical blends, perform which is particularly pertinent to our discussion here is serving as attention-seeking devices. This will be discussed in the next section.

4. Lexical blending as an attention-seeking device

Depending on the genre, the target audience, the context or the communicative goal, lexical creativity can serve a variety of functions. One of them is especially important in the discourses and genres where there is a high level of competition for the readers’ attention, such as in advertising, journalistic texts (particularly news headlines) or, more recently, internet memes and other existing and still emerging digital genres and forms – creative coinages, especially if they involve ludicity, can function as attention-seeking devices (LIPKA 1992; HOHENHAUS 2007; MUNAT 2007, 2016).³ The attention of the hearer/reader is captured by the fact that creativity and wordplay are foregrounded, but

³ For example, the British tabloid *The Sun* changed its name to *The Son* to mark the birth of the royal baby in 2013; an internet meme says “What do vice presidents listen to while doing math problems? Al Gore Rhythms; the Mercedes-Benz advertising campaign describes its new car models as *fabuttractive* and *superfect* as they “deserve a whole new language”, while screensavers featuring cats are described in an advertisement as *purrfect*.

also because more effort is required for their processing (LEHRER 2003), which eventually increases memorability. As Stockwell points out, the use of wordplay and other creative linguistic devices produces “deviations from the expected or ordinary use of language that draw attention to an element, foregrounding it against the relief of the rest of the features of the text” (STOCKWELL 2002: 14).

It seems that lexical blending,⁴ ranked very high on the ludicity and creativity continuum (see LEHRER 2007; RENNER 2015, among others), is especially convenient for attracting the attention of readers/hearers since “[a]ny process of lexical blending [...] can be considered as involving some form of wordplay as it is an operation which plays with a variety of potential output forms to name a new conceptual combination” (RENNER 2015: 124). By not complying to the rule-governed principles of morphological processes, blends are “associated with an expressive, playful, poetic, or simply ostentatious effect of some kind” (ZWICKY and PULLUM 1987: 335). Wordplay in the form of the blend presumes an irreplaceable role of the hearer/reader – they must be aware of and appropriately assess the language play, at the same time trying to find their way through the creativity of its author in order to disentangle the meaning of blends as well as the author’s pragmatic intentions. For this reason, creative blends need to possess a certain level of morphotactic and semantic transparency if the hearer is to successfully decode them (WINTER-FROEMEL 2018: 247). This act of “solving” their meaning often yields a sense of amusement and accomplishment, attracts the attention of the reader and increases memorability (LEHRER 2003). It is for this reason that blends have been called ‘lexical puzzles’ (BUGARSKI 2001, 2013) or ‘lexical teases’ (KELLY 1998: 586) as their reduced morphotactic transparency correlates with an increase in ludicity (CACCHIANI 2016: 307) and an increase in the processing effort, thereby in audience engagement and attention. Therefore, using and creating a novel word “is likely to catch our attention and get us to read or listen to what is being presented” (LEHRER 2007: 116). This is particularly important in today’s attention economy and fast-paced digital world, where capturing the attention of consumers of goods and services is becoming increasingly challenging. Therefore, blends seem to be “highly desirable candidates for names of new products, services as well as companies, especially because those who create brand names intend to draw the attention of the target audience to the company, product or service and persuade potential consumers to try and, eventually, buy it, or at least remember its name” (TOMIĆ 2022: 19-20).

However, in addition to serving as an attention-seeking device, one of the principal functions of lexical creativity is that of naming, or labelling. We create new lexical items in order to name new entities in real or fictional worlds. This is closely linked to the principle of hypostatization, which refers to the fact that the existence of a word implies that there must be a corresponding entity in extralinguistic reality (HOHENHAUS 2007: 22). Linguistic creativity and wordplay manifested through blending “expediently and

4 There is disagreement concerning the exact delimitation of the concept of lexical blending and “because the unusual formal properties of blend words made it difficult to provide an exhaustive description of blends as a word formation category or even define what a blend is” (BELIAEVA 2019: 2), see e.g. RENNER, MANIEZ and ARNAUD 2012, BALTEIRO and BAUER 2019, BELIAEVA 2019, LALIĆ-KRSTIN 2022, RENNER 2023 for an overview of lexical blending and the terminological and definitional dissonance among authors.

cleverly compress multiple meanings into one, providing labels for previously unnamed social phenomena” (BRIDGES 2021: 65), which was exactly the case with the blend *Barbenheimer*, which soon after its creation became much more than a purely linguistic phenomenon.

5. The case of *Barbenheimer*

As Fontaine (2017: 1) believes, “[a]ny newly-formed word is formed for a purpose and therefore it is reasonable to assume that the word will bear some meaning that is related to its context of use.” The immediate context, whether communicative, textual, cultural, social, or political, plays a crucial role in stimulating linguistic creativity – it is not simply an individual act aimed at demonstrating linguistic mastery, but a truly social and contextual act (CARTER 2007). In order to demonstrate the creativity and ludicity with which people coin blends in English in response to extralinguistic contexts, we will use a recent illustrative example of a lexical blend which was created when in July 2023 two high-budget movies, *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*, premiered simultaneously in world cinemas and a name for this was promptly coined: *Barbenheimer*. From a marketing point of view, this event was an example of counterprogramming, a marketing strategy commonly used in the television and film industries when two distinctly different films are released at the same time in order to simultaneously target diverse audiences with different tastes and disparate demographics, thus reducing competition and increasing profits.⁵ The two films stand in stark contrast with each other: while *Barbie* is a fantasy comedy based on the famous eponymous dolls Barbie and Ken and their journey of self-discovery happening in Barbieland and the real world, *Oppenheimer* is a bibliographical thriller film about J. Robert Oppenheimer who, together with a team of scientists, took part in developing and designing the atomic bomb during World War II.

Initially, the blend appeared only in jocular use in internet memes and on Twitter, but it soon spread to other registers and in a very short time its use skyrocketed.⁶ The blend was coined because there was a need to attract the attention of cinema-goers and to label an event in extralinguistic reality as the simultaneous release of the two films soon led to *Barbenheimer* as a cultural phenomenon. Despite, or perhaps because of, the differences between the two films in terms of genre, mood and target audiences, cinema-goers were encouraged to see them as a double feature, one after the other, with special significance being given to the order in which the movies were to be seen. This was further fuelled by the earlier disagreement between Christopher Nolan, the director of *Oppenheimer* and Warner Bros. Pictures, the distributor of his movies, and also the distributor of *Barbie*, which resulted in the production of *Oppenheimer* being transferred to Universal Pictures. Both movies turned out to be very profitable for the two companies. Not only did they ex-

⁵ In the aftermath of the *Barbenheimer* boom, a new double feature was announced: *Saw X*, a horror movie, and *Paw Patrol*, a children’s animation were to premier on the same date in the US and the name suggested in a tongue-in-cheek article in *The Guardian* was *Saw Patrol* (“Saw Patrol: will this horrifying double bill be as big as *Barbenheimer*? *The Guardian*, 2 August 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/aug/02/saw-patrol-will-this-horrifying-double-bill-be-as-big-as-barbenheimer> (Accessed 4 August 2023)).

⁶ A Google search for “*Barbenheimer*” returned over 82 million results on 29 July 2023 (only a week after the premieres) and some 91 million only three days later. Although Google search results cannot be completely reliable, they seem to indicate a very strong increasing trend.

ceed expectations at the box office, but they also featured prominently in the nominations for the 96th Academy Awards.⁷

The word *Barbenheimer* is an example of an onomastic blend, which is not uncommon in English and is most often encountered in the case of informal names of celebrity couples, such as *Brangelina* (Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie), *TomKat* (Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes), *Billary* (Bill and Hillary Clinton) or *Kimye* (Kim Kardashian and Kanye West), to mention just a few. These are mostly coined by entertainment media in a humorous and light-hearted manner, especially for those couples that for some reason attract a lot of attention or that somehow capture the public's imagination. The practice of blending names of two individuals to denote a single, united entity draws on the well-established use of lexical blends to express coordinate semantic relations. Looking at the semantic structure of blends, both Beliaeva (2014) and Renner (2019, 2023) find "a sizeable minority" of coordinate structures, which is highly significant when compared to compounds (RENNER 2019: 38). Blending is similar to compounding in that both processes involve the combination of two bases and one would expect to find similar semantic relations between two bases in both compounds and blends. However, research shows that blends exhibit a much higher tendency toward the formation of coordinate structures. Around 20-30% of English blends are said to be coordinate (RENNER 2019), which is a marked difference from compounds, where only about 2% of all compounds are estimated to be coordinate (BERG 2009). Renner (2019: 38) believes that this discrepancy is a reflection of the onomasiological preference of hybrid concepts to be expressed by blends, "which itself is a manifestation of linguistic iconicity, a hybrid form mimicking a hybrid concept".

Although there are marked tendencies in the formal shaping of blends (see RENNER 2023 for a detailed account), there is no strict rule that could have predicted how this word would have been formed, what the order of the two source words would have been or how much of each would have been used to form the blend. It could just as well have been *Barbieheimer* or *Oppenbarbie*. In fact, both *Barbieheimer* and *Oppenbarbie* have been recorded, together with *Boppenheimer*. The order of source words in blends can be affected by various factors. Kelly (1998: 584) points out that "the temporal order of events tends to be preserved in conjunct word order" and goes on to postulate the observance of the same principle in blends. Indeed, the different ordering of the two movie titles has been used to signify the viewing order: *Barbenheimer/Barbieheimer* implying that the person first saw *Barbie* and *Oppenbarbie* that the person first saw *Oppenheimer*, the temporal order of constituents thus iconically reflecting the order of events in the extralinguistic reality.⁸ However, this ordering effect is not always brought to the fore and the blends under scrutiny are more frequently than not used to denote the phenomenon as such, irrespective of the viewing order. Of all the four recorded words (*Barbenheimer*,

⁷ Their intertwined connectedness continued in the Academy Award nominations, where they were nominated together in as many as 21 categories. In a further twist, it has been announced that a spoof movie *Barbenheimer* is in the works, which will supposedly combine the themes of the two originals in a quirky fashion, as foreshadowed by its tagline: "D-Cup, A-Bomb".

⁸ Kelly (1998: 584) provides a classic example of *brunch* where this effect of the temporal ordering of the constituents is carried over to the blend because "speakers say 'breakfast and lunch' more often than 'lunch and breakfast'".

Barbieheimer, *Oppenbarbie* and *Boppenheimer*), *Barbenheimer* is by far the most frequent, as evidenced not only by Google search results but also by corpus data. Querying the *NOW Corpus* (DAVIES 2013-), which is the most robust publicly available monitor corpus of English, suggests that *Barbenheimer* is the most frequently used one and, unless something unpredictable happens, the one that will most probably stay.⁹ The reasons for this may lie in its structural features which make it a more felicitous blend than the other three in several respects.

Looking at different quantitative aspects of blend structure Kelly (1998) and later Gries (2004a, 2004b, 2012) find a strong general preference for the second source word to be longer than the first. As a result, both *Barbieheimer*, *Barbenheimer* and *Boppenheimer* would be more in accordance with this particular tendency of blend structure than *Oppenbarbie* because *Barbie* would be preferred in initial position as it is phonemically, graphemically and syllabically shorter than *Oppenheimer*. Another strong preference is that of the second source word to contribute more of itself to the blend than the first one (as demonstrated by GRIES 2004a). Turning to the three blends with *Barbie* + *Oppenheimer* sequence order, we see that in *Barbenheimer* and *Boppenheimer* the second source word contributes more of itself to the blend – 83% and 100% respectively, if we look at it phonemically, and it is commonly assumed that blending is primarily a phonemic (and a phonological) rather than a graphemic phenomenon. This leaves us with *Barbenheimer* and *Boppenheimer*, where the latter suffers from low information contribution of the first source word as only the initial phoneme of *Barbie* is preserved, which greatly reduces its recognizability and recoverability. Instead, *Barbenheimer* seems to preserve enough of both source words to enable successful interpretation. In addition to this, *Barbenheimer* exhibits another very common and, indeed, desirable quality of blends, which works in its favour: similarity/identity of segmental units at break point (see GRIES 2004b for more details). The similarity is achieved by blending *Barb(ie)* + (*Opp*)*enheimer* into *Barbenheimer*, where the final /b/ of the splinter *Barb-* is in articulatory terms very close to the removed /p/ sound from *Oppenheimer*, and thus virtually replaces it as the onset of the syllable /p@n > b@n/.

Bringing all these aspects together, *Barbenheimer* is a prime example of how linguistic means are exploited to promptly fill a lexical gap created by a new phenomenon in our social reality and how different phonological, morphological and semantic aspects are put to use to do so much more than merely label a concept.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss various aspects of lexical creativity in English, with a particular focus on lexical blending as a naming and attention-grabbing device frequently employed not only in media and advertising but also in other registers in which there is a need to label an emerging concept or where authors may have reason to foreground the form. To demonstrate how linguistic resources are utilized in creative ways to quickly address a lexical gap resulting from a novel event in social reality we used

⁹ This situation can be likened to that of a short coexistence of *Brixit* and *Brexit*, before *Brexit* took over and completely ousted *Brixit*, especially after the former was adopted as the official term by the UK government.

Barbenheimer, a recently coined blend in which the names of two movies are amalgamated to creatively combine the themes of World War II and the glamorous life of the world's most famous doll, thus showcasing not only a linguistic but a conceptual blend as well, while quickly becoming both a linguistic and cultural phenomenon.

Even with a very limited amount of language, such as the two movie titles, human linguistic ingenuity is shown to find ways to manifest itself in creative and playful ways. As Carter (2007: 598) puts it, “[c]reativity is not therefore simply the exclusive preserve of the individual genius or the pathological outsider” and “not simply a property of exceptional people but an exceptional property of all people” (CARTER 2004: 13) who react with a fascinating speed to a change in extralinguistic context, which is once again confirmed to play a crucial role in stimulating and demonstrating linguistic creativity.

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BARBENHEIMER ILI OPPENBARBIE: STUDIJA SLUČAJA LEKSIČKE KREATIVNOSTI I LUDIČNOSTI U ENGLESKOM JEZIKU

Rezime

Cilj ovog rada je da istraži različite aspekte leksičke kreativnosti, uz poseban osvrt na nekoliko ključnih tema: odnos između produktivnosti i kreativnosti u procesu tvorbe reči, ispoljavanje ikoničnosti, pojmove ludičnosti i igranja rečima, leksičku kreativnost kao sredstvo privlačenja pažnje i, naposljetku, značaj vanjezičkih faktora u ispoljavanju leksičke kreativnosti. U cilju ilustrovanja uticaja ovih faktora na konkretan postupak tvorbe reči, usredsredili smo se na dve funkcije leksičkog slivanja (privlačenje pažnje i imenovanje) i kreativnost ispoljenu u stvaranju neologizma *Barbenheimer*, koji označava istovremenu premijeru dva filma (*Barbie* i *Oppenheimer*) ali i novonastali društveni fenomen koji je usledio nakon te premijere. Analiza ove slivenice otkriva koja su to formalna i sadržinska sredstva upotrebljena da se postigne efekat ludičnosti i koji su to društveni faktori uticali na njegovo stvaranje.

Ključne reči: jezička kreativnost, produktivnost, ludičnost, leksičko slivanje, *Barbenheimer*