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WHY DO WORD BLENDS WITH NEAR-SYNONYMOUS COMPOSITES EXIST AND PERSIST? THE CASE OF GUESSTIMATE, CHILLAX, GINORMOUS AND CONFUZZLED

Despite their increasing use, little is known about the purpose of word blends, e.g. chillax, which have near-synonymous composite words (relax and chill). Potential explanations for their existence and persistence include: use in different sentence constructions, to provide unique meaning, and to create interest/identity. The current study used a vignette methodology with two-hundred and forty-one students to explore the relevance of such hypotheses for 'guesstimate', 'chillax', 'ginormous', and 'confuzzled'. Our inconsistent results suggest that the semantics of the word blends may differ from their composites in very subtle ways. However further work is needed to acknowledge and determine the impact of context upon the use and consequences of these word blends.

Key words: word blends, synonyms, portmanteau, blends, words, language

> *Language itself is merely a tool, a tool of the trade in meaning*
> (*Altmann, 1997, p. 117*)

Language is a creative process (Algeo, 1977) and new words and meanings, i.e. neologisms, are always being developed (Algeo, 1980; Lehrer, 2003). Words such as 'chillax' and 'twerk' have recently received significant media attention. These word blends are combinations of words where at least one word has been shortened, are easy to produce and comprehend (Algeo, 1977), and account for roughly 5% of all new words (Algeo, 1993). Many blend 'types' or structures

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have been noted (e.g. Fandrych, 2008; Gries, 2004; Kelly, 1998; Piñeros, 2004), with much importance placed upon the need for recognisable composite words (Cook & Stevenson, 2010). The current study focus lies solely with word blends created from words with near-synonymous semantics (i.e. with similar or identical meanings), e.g.:

> **Confuzzled = confused + puzzled:** Online sources note the first recording of 'confuzzle' in 1993 (Wiktionary, 2013), however a similar sounding word is noted in Disney's Winnie the Pooh song 'Heffalumps and Woozles' (Lounsbery & Reitherman, 1977). Pooh also used other word blends including smackerel -snack and mackerel (Withington, 1932).
>
> **Ginormous = gigantic + enormous:** Thought to be first used in WW2, ginormous was first recorded by a British dictionary of military slang (Partridge, Ganville, & Roberts, 1948).
>
> **Chillax = chill + relax:** Thought to be first created in the early 2000s (Crystal, 2012), and popularised by the 2003 film 'Final Destination 2'. Claims for an earlier (1996) origin have been made, but are currently unsubstantiated (BehindTheGrammar, 2010).
>
> **Guesstimate = guess + estimate:** First coined in mid 1930s by American statisticians (Algeo, 1993).

Synonyms increase the number of words available to communicate a topic with (Johnson, Meinke, Van Mondfrans, & Finn, 1965) and can be of value in diverse ways, e.g. for newspaper editors' snappy headlines (Hicklin, 1930). However, due to the therapeutic, comical, and/or colloquial nature of blends, they infrequently earn a respected place in a language (Nayak, 2011; Withington, 1932). Blends with limited or passing unique relevance to society either fall out of use (Bryant, 1974; Pound, 1933) or take on a new meaning (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002). The question thus remains: How have the blends mentioned above persisted despite appearing to provide little or no differentiated meaning? The current paper will consider three perspectives which could account for the blends' popularity.

Perspective One – Providing Unique Meaning

It is possible that blends with near-synonymous composite words persist because they hold a *slightly* differentiated meaning. Language is a tool for meaning (Altmann, 1997) and developed from an evolutionary need to communicate complex information (Scott-Phillips, 2007). It can be difficult to define a concept with a single word (e.g. 'cravings'), especially across languages (Hormes & Rozin, 2010), and we have therefore developed many words with similar meanings to provide semantic differentiation (Divjak, 2006; Divjak & Gries, 2006; Xiao & McEnery, 2006). For example, Prenner (1928) found many synonyms for 'drunk' but they typically varied in severity of drunkenness e.g., 'boiled' and 'tipsy'.

Subtle differences in semantics can be useful for providing the detail required for effective communication (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002; Fleck, 2006) and lead to use of different words in different contexts despite their underlying similarities (Gutierrez, Giner-Sorolla, & Vasiljevic, 2012). On these grounds, it is possible that blends with similar composite words persist by holding subtle differences in meaning, e.g. ginormous denotes something of bigger size than gigantic or enormous. Often semantic similarity and interchangeableness co-occur (Church, Gale, Hanks, Hindle, & Moon, 1994; Miller & Charles, 1991) and thus the assumption that all neologisms or synonyms with no unique semantic contribution fall out of use or 'die' may be incorrect (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002). Explanations for their existence and persistence beyond semantic difference therefore demand consideration.

Perspective Two – Providing Unique Use

It could be argued that blends with near-synonymous semantics offer collocational value. i.e. can be used in different ways. Words that have equivalent semantics at a basic level do not always act similarly when used (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002), as the degree of semantic equivalence and interchangeableness within a selection of synonymous words can vary significantly (Liu, 2010; Xiao & McEnery, 2006). For example, the adjectives big, great, and large or little, small, and tiny appear synonymous. However, semantic differences have been found (Gries & Otani, 2010). Equally, it would be inappropriate to ask for a 'great' slice of cake or tell someone you are a 'tiny' tired (Mackin, 1978). Semantic prosodies, i.e. equivalence in semantic positivity, can also differ (Smith & Nordquist, 2012), e.g. fickle (negative) and flexible (positive) (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001). As the blends being discussed are completely interchangeable in use, there appears to be no compelling evidence to argue that such factors are of importance to their persistence or popularity.

Perspective Three – Creating Interest in the Speaker

The third perspective proposes that blends could provide a semantic message with additional identity implicature. Pagel (2008) argues that language evolved to assist differentiation from others, a claim which is reinforced by the high frequency of socially relevant words like who, what, when, etc. used across multiple languages (Calude & Pagel, 2011). Social regulation, i.e. manipulating how we (and others) are perceived, requires a diverse and nuanced language (Calude & Pagel, 2011) and qualitative analyses have demonstrated how language can be used to construct a unique identity (e.g. Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013). There is growing evidence to suggest that language use and identity are entwined (e.g. Steffens & Haslam, 2013), and it is thus possible that word blends persist due to their ability to communicate something about the user, e.g. users of the word chillax as being more interesting than those using chill or relax.

Aim of the Current Study

The current study adopts an exploratory approach to determine whether confuzzled, ginormous, chillax, and guesstimate have remained within the English language by facilitating communication of greater meaning or greater interest. Many studies (Divjak, 2006; Divjak & Gries, 2006; Gries & Otani, 2010; Liu, 2010; Liu & Espino, 2012) have used corpus-based behavioural profiles, or similar techniques, to determine how semantics can differ between synonymous words. As such methods cannot easily explore other factors, e.g. the interest attributed to speaker, the current study adopts a vignette approach. An experiment was conducted to determine the relevance of the aforementioned perspectives when discussing the purpose and persistence of word blends comprised of near-synonymous composite words.

Method

Participants

241 psychology students were convenience sampled from UK lectures; 133 in their first year, 64 in their second year, and 44 in their third year. 54 participants reported their first language was not English. 193 participants were female and 48 were male, and participants' age ranged from 18 to 40, with a mean age of 20 (*SD* = 2.60).

Materials

Four common student situations were developed into vignettes, e.g. having a burger at a bar, where a blend word was featured and could be interchanged for one of its composite words. Eight questions were then developed for each vignette to assess the degree to which the participant was interested in the speaker, and the semantics of the word (see the example below). All vignettes and questions used can be obtained for research purposes for free by emailing the primary author.

Vignette 3
"How much are those four drinks going to cost Mary?" Fran inquires.
"At a guess/estimate/guesstimate, about £10" Mary responds.

Q3. On a scale of 1-10, how much do you think you would get along with Mary? 1 is not at all and 10 is better than anyone else.

Q7. On a scale of 1-10, how confident are you that Mary's response is accurate? 1 is not confident at all and 10 is completely confident.

Procedure

All data was collected in person using standard vignette materials. The study was approved by the Coventry University Ethics Committee before data collection

began and no identifying information was collected. Participants were given an information sheet and consent form, followed by demographic questions. Each participant was then asked to read each of the short vignettes and answer the subsequent eight questions for each, on a ten-point Likert scale. The presentation of either a composite (e.g. chill or relax) or blend (e.g. chillax) word in the vignette was randomised so that each student rated questions on one 'blend' and three 'composites' as to not arouse suspicions as to the study aim. Participants were then debriefed.

Results

A MANOVA was conducted for each vignette and the eight associated questions to explore the differences in interest and meaning between the blends and their composites. Data was not normally distributed; however, such violations are not particularly problematic for MANOVA (Field, 2009) and a non-parametric test is not more preferential (Finch, 2005). Due to these issues, the current study used a more conservative significance level ($p = 0.01$), as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), when exploring Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc analyses.

For the ginormous vignette, a MANOVA was conducted using Wilks' Lambda and question responses did not significantly differ across the gigantic, enormous, and ginormous conditions: $F (16, 462) = 1.39$, $p = 0.14$, partial $\eta 2 = 0.05$. For the chillax vignette, a MANOVA was conducted using Wilks' Lambda and question responses did not significantly differ across the chill, relax, and chillax conditions: $F (16, 460) = 0.72$, $p = 0.78$, partial $\eta 2 = 0.02$. For the confuzzled vignette, a MANOVA was conducted using Wilks' Lambda and question responses did not significantly differ across the confused, puzzled, and confuzzled conditions: $F (16, 462) = 0.67$, $p = 0.82$, partial $\eta 2 = 0.02$.

For the guesstimate vignette, A MANOVA was conducted using Wilks' Lambda and found a significant difference in question responses between the guess, estimate, and guesstimate conditions: $F (16, 462) = 1.69$, $p = 0.045$, partial $\eta 2 = 0.06$. The group condition had a statistically significant effect upon a single question which explored the level of confidence in the guess/estimate/guesstimate: $F (2, 238) = 3.50$; $p = 0.03$; partial $\eta 2 = 0.03$, see vignette and question 7 in the Materials section. Upon examination of the post-hoc analyses, individuals were more confident with a claim when it was an estimate ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 2.30$) than a guesstimate ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 2.00$); however, this difference was only significant at conventional levels ($p = 0.02$).

Discussion

The current study aimed to provide some insight into the role of word blends with near-synonymous composites by conducting an empirical exploration of

the potential reasons why such words exist and persist. Three explanations were hypothesised; the first postulated that they provide unique semantic meaning, e.g. ginormous to be symbolic of something larger than gigantic or enormous. However, as to be expected from the near-synonymous nature of the composites, the word blends were not rated to be significantly different in semantic content from their composites. Participants were less confident in individuals who used the word guesstimate in comparison to estimate; however, this difference was not pronounced enough to be statistically significant and was the only difference identified. It seems to be of value to have many words with semantically similar synonyms to better articulate oneself when communicating (Hicklin, 1930; Johnson et al., 1965) and the current results are somewhat complimentary to Edmonds and Hirst (2002) and Fleck (2006) who argue that despite similar semantic qualities, very subtle semantic differences are likely to exist, and may be of practical consequence. The current results also reinforce the importance of exploring each word blend individually with respect to its composites, and not making universal assumptions, e.g. that these word blends have minor semantic differentiation and thus that all other blends also have semantic differentiation.

The second explanation proposed for the persistence of word blends with near-synonymous composites suggested they can be used in different ways. There is no empirical or anecdotal evidence to support the claim that, contrary to other words (e.g. little (Mackin, 1978)), these word blends are not completely interchangeable with their near-synonymous composite words within any sentence. Whilst semantic prosodies were not directly captured, the lack of significant differences on any questions which included an affective component, e.g. the Q3 example in the Materials section, suggests this too is not a competent explanation as to why such words exist and persist (Smith & Nordquist, 2012; Xiao & McEnery, 2006).

Creating interest in the speaker was the third potential explanation as to why word blends with near-synonymous composites are popularly adopted. Contrary to Pagel (2008), the current study suggests these word blends do not support the differentiation of individuals as word use had no significant impact on participants' responses to numerous interpersonal interest questions. However, the whole field of discourse analysis supports the claim that subtle differences in the way language is used can change perceptions of identity (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013; Steffens & Haslam, 2013), thus future research should build upon the single facet of identity captured in the current study (interest) to explore the consequences of word blend use on numerous facets of the speakers' identity.

The reason for the existence and persistence of word blends with near-synonymous composite words is undoubtedly complex. As the words discussed are 'near-synonymous' they are unlikely to represent identical semantics, and thus it appears most appropriate to suggest that such words are most likely to facilitate more detailed communications (Scott-Phillips, 2007), whether that be

through subtle semantic differences or identity implicature. Results from the current study are inconclusive, but as indicated through the guesstimate example, some word blends have the potential to communicate subtle differences in semantic meaning (Gries & Otani, 2010; Liu, 2010; Xiao & McEnery, 2006). As the differences between word blends and their composites are small and thus are unlikely to be detected by significance testing, exploring why word blends feature so prominently within our language is likely to be problematic. Future research is encouraged to acquire larger samples and explore effect sizes for an understanding less sensitive to sample size, or to adopt the discursive approach to gain a fine-grained insight into the reasons for, and consequences of, word blend use (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013).

Limitations and Future Research

As the current study takes a timely, exploratory look at the purpose of word blends created from near-synonymous composite words, further work is needed to provide more detailed insights and recommendations for practice. Whilst the current study explored a single environment for each word blend, it would be of significant value to determine whether use of word blends varies between contexts and whether perceptions of semantics or identity also differ between contexts as a consequence, e.g. whether using 'chillax' at work is indicative of more extreme relaxing or reflects more about the identity of the individual, than when using 'chillax' in a home context (Gutierrez et al., 2012). Such works would benefit from developing the vignettes used to incorporate numerous environments, e.g. at a restaurant, at work, at the pub, at home, etc. and develop a more nuanced measurement tool to capture multi-facetted perceptions of the 'speaker'.

The current study has a modest sample with a narrow age range and over-representation of young females. The generalizability of findings to other populations is therefore problematic without replications using a more representative sample. Of greatest importance, the use of word blends fluctuates over time (Bryant, 1974) and thus future work should endeavour to explore the impact of generational differences upon perceptions of word blend use using a sample with a wider age range.

Conclusion

The current study tentatively concludes that very subtle semantic differences or identity implicature are likely to explain the existence and persistence of word blends with near-synonymous composite words. Whilst no clear pattern of significant differences were identified within the current study, there are likely to be numerous small signals communicated through these word blends that are of consequence. As such, it is of importance to be mindful of the way in which we use language to communicate, e.g. when we are more unsure to use

'guesstimate' instead of 'estimate' to elicit less confidence in the audience. More work is needed to gain a contextualised understanding of why word blends with near-synonymous composites exist and persist.

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