Creativity in neologizing and the survival of the fittest

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By definition producing new linguistic units constitutes a creative act in a wider sense. However, not every neologism shows creativity in the narrower sense of originality and surprisingness. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of creativity in this sense in the fate of neologies. As is well known, the vast majority of neologies are but a flash in the pan, leaving in general at most one of them as survivor. This selection of a winner from a pool of competitors is of course reminiscent of natural selection in biology, as has been noted already by Max Müller (1870) and Charles Darwin (1871) in their exchange about the evolution of language. Both see an ongoing struggle for life at work less between languages than amongst the words and grammatical forms of each language.

Neologisms are a challenge for explanatory linguistic theories because trying to predict neologies seems to lead to a paradox: either creativity with its unpredictability plays no role in neologizing or efforts to explain it amount to predicting the unpredictable and must thus fail. Recently, Ralph Keyes has devoted a whole book to proving the unpredictability of word coinage (2021). Nevertheless, there are attempts at showing that the creation and dispersion of new words is not completely random (Metcalf 2002, Link 2021, Zaefferer 2021). Interestingly, Keyes himself proposes six factors that improve the odds of survival of a new word.

The seeming paradox disappears if predictability is understood as estimating the probability of different outcomes at three stages of a neologie's life. Predicting (a) the emergence of a new entity worth of compact coding is mostly up, e.g., to epidemiology and beyond the scope of linguistics. But predicting (b) the pool of possible labels for the new entity is a genuinely linguistic task, and so is predicting (c) the survivor of a competition based on the factors that contribute to its fitness.

The core of this study consists in comparing the four approaches by Keyes, Metcalf, Link, and Zaefferer regarding the quality of their predictions on a sample of pool - winner pairs from experimental and corpus data. It will be shown that alongside with other factors that contribute to the degree of fitness for survival of a neology a well-balanced degree of creativity seems to be vitally important.

References: • Keyes, R. (2021). *The Hidden History of Coined Words*. Oxford University Press. • Link, S. V. (2021). *What makes a neologism a success story?* PhD diss, LMU. • Metcalf, A. A. (2004). *Predicting new words: The secrets of their success*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. • Zaefferer, D. (2021). Are new words predictable? A pilot study on the origin of neologies by means of natural selection. In C. Mauri et al. (ed.), *Building Categories in Interaction: Linguistic resources at work*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 111-154.