A corpus study of phonological factors in novel English blends

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Blending, as in *br(eakfast) + (l)unch > brunch*, is a fairly productive process in English (e.g., Kemmer 2000), though few studies systematically analyze the potential forces driving intentional blends, and fewer still from large databases (Gries 2004). The morphophonological regularity of this process is debated (see, e.g., Connolly 2013 for an irregular view), though tendencies can be identified; for instance, shorter source words often contribute more material to their blends (Gries 2004). In this paper, I propose an expanded corpus study of factors regulating blends in the popular "one thicc bih" meme, as identified in a preliminary study (submitted).

This meme, most frequently found in the text-to-song app Ditty (Zya), showcases novel blends of a famous personality or some associated referent (hereafter "base") and the word "pussy," e.g., *Trump + pussy > trussy*. In a preliminary study of 95 distinct *-(u)ssy* forms manually gathered from YouTube compilations, I found that relative word length plays a diminished role (e.g. *nut > nussy* but *Waluigi > wussy*), while other phonological factors such as prosodic deficiency (i.e., inclusion of sub-syllabic constituents) and V-initial bases favour greater retention of base material (e.g., *England > englussy*). In anticipation of a large-scale database from the app-makers (March 2018), I propose a study of variation in and the relative strengths of factors in this blending process. In particular, I will focus on areas of constraint competition. For instance, *Babadook* yields both *babussy* and *babadussy*, though in Google Trends, the latter is only 7% as popular as the former at the meme's zenith. Results will finally be compared with known factors in English blending (e.g., Kemmer 2000, DiGirolamo 2012) as well as in other operations on the phonological periphery (e.g., McCarthy 1982, Elfner & Kimper 2008, Tessier & Becker 2017).

In the preliminary corpus, *-(u)ssy* forms were gathered along with the full referent and the inferred base (e.g., *Mr. Krabs* and *Krabs*, respectively). The base was then compared with the material preserved in the blend with respect to stress pattern of the base, number of syllables in the base, and prosodic template of the truncatum (= material contributed by the base) in isolation. V-initial and "novel" bases (e.g. *Mario > mushrussy* via *mushroom*) bases were tagged as such.

A clear preference for disyllabic blends (63/95, 67%) emerges, though novel and vowel-initial bases lead to greater preservation of information in the base and often supersede other factors. Finally, presence of a voiceless fricative (especially [s]) and a rhotic vowel in the base tends to lead to loss of the vowel, though criteria on how to quantify these need to be established. It is not conclusive if stress plays a role, as no iambic, disyllabic bases were present in the data.

Monosyllabic bases lead overwhelmingly to onset-only truncata (17/21, 81%). Disyllabic bases exhibit more variation, yielding a disyllabic blend in 35/51 cases (69%), 10 of which eliminate greater material of the second word (e.g., *Twintelle > twissy*). Potential syllabification of the material leading up to the final rhyme of the base may play a role. Namely, prosodically deficient strings are preserved in truncata (e.g., *Manray > manrussy,* ?*mussy*), while legitimate ones tend to lead to onset-only ones (e.g., *starfish > stussy,* ?*starfussy*). All in all, only 35/95 truncata (37%) constitute a legitimate syllable of English pre-blending.

Though its blends are relatively apparent from context, a large corpus of the "one thicc bih" meme may prove highly informative, as the second word is a controlled constant. A large number of variables governing the selection of material from both words (but especially the first) can thus be tested. The memetic context in addition encourages the same referents to appear multiple times in the data, allowing for greater chance to observe variation in their blended forms. In sum, through this meme, we may be able to observe not only about speakers' knowledge of blending in general but also their greater linguistic competence, as factors may stem from more putative, universal sources, rather than established constraints in English word-building.

Works cited

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