

Blending and compounding: Strategies and preferences in creative language use

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In everyday communication, speakers benefit from frequently used routines: They rely on well-established patterns, allowing them to access, combine, and interpret linguistic material efficiently and with little cognitive effort. At the same time, speakers can use language in creative ways, e.g., by inventing novel words. Lexical creativity provides a window into the interplay of routine and innovation: when speakers coin novel words, they draw on established linguistic resources, while simultaneously extending or reshaping them in new ways.

We developed a new task for the elicitation of novel words—the Prompted Word Creation Task (PWCT)—which is designed to measure (i) which word-formation strategies speakers spontaneously recruit when naming novel hybrid entities, (ii) which strategy they prefer and (iii) how consistently they apply a given strategy. In the PWCT, participants are introduced to a dream scenario in which they encounter entities that are not found in the real world and which they wish to describe to a friend. These entities are composed of two existing entities, e.g. a hybrid of two animals. In experimental trials (Figure 1, left side), participants are shown two words and are asked to name an entity composed of the corresponding objects. Filler trials (Figure 1, right side) maintain engagement and reinforce the intended “hybrid” interpretation. To this end, participants see a picture after their response and indicate whether the picture matches the hybrid they imagined based on the input words.

Method: The experiment tested the PWCT with 16 input words (8 feminine and 8 masculine nouns, all bi-syllabic and commonly used) from four categories (mammals, birds, food, tools) combined to 240 pairs and distributed over lists. Each participant (N = 61) provided written responses to 40 experimental item pairs and 8 distractor pairs.

Results: Participants produced mainly compounds and various types of blends, other word formation types were rare. Overall, the numbers of compounds and blends were comparable (1149 vs. 1197). However, most participants showed a strong preference for one strategy (either compounding or blending): 80 % of the participants adhered to one strategy in 80–100 % of their responses (see Figure 2).

Discussion: The PWCT is a promising tool for investigating lexical creativity and its underlying processing mechanisms. Participants enjoyed the task (as reported in the post-questionnaire), and they complied with the instructions. They did not simply concatenate the two input words but also came up with creative solutions, despite not being explicitly instructed to do so. Some creative solutions involved replacing one or both of the input words by semantically related alternatives, e.g., *Teichassi* (lit. ‘pond assi’) in response to *Ente* ‘duck’ and *Taube* ‘pigeon’ or *Gurrhase* (lit. ‘coo-rabbit’) for *Taube* ‘pigeon’ and *Hase* ‘rabbit’. Others involve blending such as *Adlente* for *Adler* ‘eagle’ and *Ente* ‘duck’ or *Zwaten* for *Zwiebel* ‘onion’ and *Spaten* ‘spade’. In some cases, more complex patterns emerged, e.g., *Spapfen* for *Spaten* ‘spade’ and *Apfel* ‘apple’ (sandwich pattern).

German is known for its propensity for nominal compounding ([1, 2]). By contrast, blending is a relatively marginal word-formation process in German (see overview in [3]) although it currently appears to be increasing in productivity. Against this background, the finding that participants produced blends at roughly the same rate as compounds is unexpected. While the hybrid nature of the imagined entities may encourage blending, it does not account for the strong clustering by participant, with some speakers producing almost exclusively blends and others almost exclusively compounds. This bimodal pattern points to stable between-speaker differences and motivates testing individual-difference predictors. We therefore conducted a follow-up study using the same task and stimuli but eliciting spoken responses, and complemented the PWCT with a battery of cognitive (e.g., executive functions, working memory, fluency, creativity) and personality measures to assess individual-difference predictors

and the robustness of the pattern across modalities.

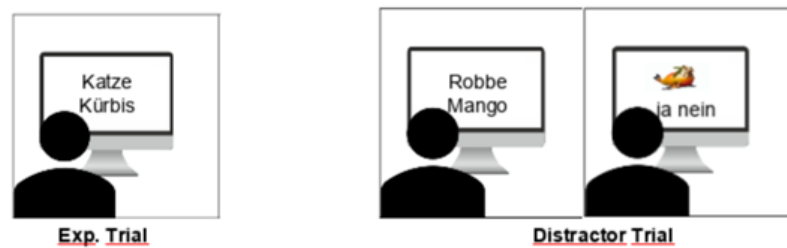


Figure 1: Illustration of trials in the Prompted Word Creation Task (PWCT).

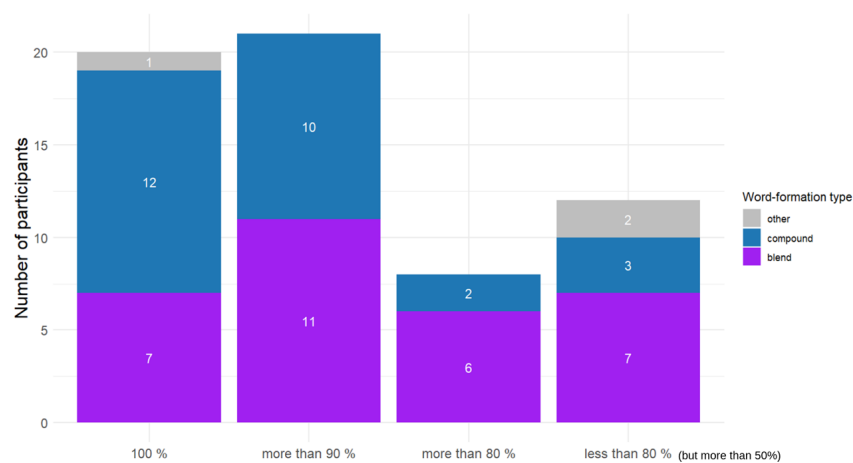


Figure 2: Strength of individual preferences: Number of participants by word-formation-type consistency

References

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