

Abbreviations as a modern phenomenon in business jargon

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Abstract: The English language employed in business contexts has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, driven by the integration of new communication technologies and a broader trend toward linguistic economization. To establish a robust foundation for Business English courses, it is imperative to conduct research into the lexical, syntactic, and discourse characteristics of contemporary business English. The present analysis seeks to identify abbreviation processes prevalent in contemporary business communication, with the aim of providing authentic language learning materials for Business English students. Using qualitative corpus analysis, we put abbreviation processes in a context, i.e. contextualising the features of the abbreviation processes based on fundamental notions of extra-grammatical processes rather than presenting statistical quantitative analyses. The outcome of our research is general features, which determine abbreviatory processes occurring in business correspondence. Finally, we demonstrate specific class activities of Business English course taking into account the real characteristics of abbreviations used in business jargon.

Key words: abbreviation, authenticity, business correspondence, business English, business jargon, corpus analysis

Introduction

The English language employed in the business world has undergone substantial transformation in recent decades, influenced by a confluence of factors including multiculturalism, technological advancements, and the broader trend toward linguistic economization. In an effort to enhance productivity, both formal and informal business communication has increasingly adopted abbreviated language as a means of time-saving and reduced effort. While efficiency is a primary motivator, the use of abbreviations within teams and organizations also serves to foster a sense of camaraderie and less formal interaction. However, the deliberate use of abbreviations in business jargon can inadvertently lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and confusion among those unfamiliar with the specific terminology. Given the prevalence of abbreviations in contemporary business discourse, their inclusion in linguistic analysis is essential to understanding the evolving nature of professional communication.

Crystal (2018) defines abbreviations in “The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language” as shortened forms of words or phrases created to make communication more efficient. He discusses various types of abbreviations, including acronyms, initialisms, and contractions, highlighting their roles in both formal and

informal contexts. In our research, we adopted the umbrella term “abbreviation” for particular types of shortenings used in business communication.

Brevity, compactness of presentation and economical use of language has been pointed out as one of the most common features of business discourse by numerous authors (e.g. Zinukova, 2021; Luján-García, 2020; Mahyaddinova, 2022; Imre, 2022). Abbreviations, especially those created in professional environment, are not only artificially created units for language economy, but they also eliminate contradiction between modern thinking and limited lexical resources of the language used.

The analysis of business jargon and how this linguistic phenomena have become successful is demonstrated in the work of Pop and Sims (2014: 111–119) proving that the use of abbreviations might be confusing, especially in business communication, where the message should get across succinctly. Similar results were demonstrated by Kačol (2017), who analysed to what extent acronyms and abbreviations have affected business communication claiming that, in business English, jargon can be annoying because it overcomplicates, it is frequently unnecessary and it can transform a simple idea or instruction into something very confusing. Coancă (2017) also investigated the use of English abbreviations in business communication. The study examined the formation mechanisms of identified acronyms and their contexts of use. The findings indicate that business abbreviations in English vary in length and are becoming increasingly prevalent. They are commonly found in business newspapers, often accompanied by marginal explanations or equivalent phrases. Some abbreviations have even migrated to the general language and are now widely used in the press.

We agree with Veloso (2017) stating that abbreviations are functionally equivalent to the longer expressions they replace and the fact that they absorb the essential grammatical properties of morphosyntactic words, he assumes them as true entries of the speakers' mental lexicon. *“In fact, most of them are largely shared by the speakers' community and acquire a stable meaning (very often, they are even admitted by lexicographers as entries of current dictionaries).”* (Veloso, 2017). Thus, the results of linguistic analyses of abbreviations in written business correspondence penetrate further into spoken communication in this specific environment.

Vorobyova et al. (2015) conducted the research on peculiarities of linguistic manipulation in the texts of electronic business correspondence. From a pragma-linguistic perspective, the main point of such research is to reveal and describe the linguistic means of realization of manipulative intension; to define functional and pragmatic potential of the split-level language means used by the producers of electronic business letters. Thus, we agree that with the help of certain linguistic means (in our case-abbreviations), it helps the addresser to regulate the

behaviour of the recipient. Overall, the use of abbreviations in business correspondence is appropriate to save space and time, however can go far beyond that.

Concerning abbreviatory processes, Mattiello (2013) presents fundamental notions, which she considers necessary in the study of these extra-grammatical processes. We have adopted her systematic division, which has helped us to organize our findings in the corpus, by contextualizing them, within the categories for better transparency.

Rules vs analogy

What differentiates rules from analogies is answered by Mattiello (2013) claiming that in an analogical approach to word-formation there is no concept of “potential word” because all words are potentially created, or possible, as long as there is an actual or existing word formed analogously, and the new word obeys the principles of pronounceability and euphony. Thus, in an analogy-based approach, formations are not inherently ungrammatical. Rather, they are considered more or less likely, as Becker (1990) suggests. This likelihood is determined by the extent to which they are supported by a network of parallel structures. Conversely, in a rule-governed approach, formations that violate established rules are typically deemed ungrammatical. We are aware of the fact that although analogy may fail to make appropriate predictions, it certainly plays a considerable role in language change. Bauer (2001) concludes that the two notions of rule and analogy coexist within word-formation and that neither one nor the other can underlie morphological innovation itself. We agree with Mattiello (2013) that abbreviations, as well, are based on analogical patterns and reanalysis. For example, many clipped words ending with the vowel *o* (e.g. *demo*, *disco*, *hippo*, *intro*, *limo*) have been reanalysed as complex words exhibiting a familiarising *-o* suffix.

Productivity vs creativity

To summarize the definitions of productivity in word-formation processes by numerous linguists (Kastovsky 1986, Lieber, 2021; Jovanovic, 2003, Spencer, 2019), they all commonly view the productivity as that property language which allows a native speaker to create new words in a rule-governed way. It coins new words by exploiting word-formation rules. Creativity, on the other hand, is often negatively defined as a lack of rule-governedness as well as lack of predictability and generality. As Mattiello (2013) opposes, as well as Beliaeva (2019), the line between productive and creative processes is blurred and often difficult to draw, when a rule is applied to an irregular base. This statement is considered crucial from our perspective as numerous irregular abbreviatory processes occur in our analysis applying a rule in subsequent word formation process. The examples are shown in research findings. Although both, productivity and creativity give rise to

large number of new words, we consider abbreviatory processes analyzed in our corpus from the point of view of creativity.

Profitability vs availability

These two notions are originally part of Corbin's (1987:177) trichotomy, which also include "regularity". In her distinction, all three aspects are connected with the notion of productivity of words. Mattiello (2013) based on the works of Bauer (2001) and Plag (1999), summarizes that availability is a qualitative notion which has to do with the existence of a morphological process as a motive to be reused in new coinages, whereas profitability is a quantitative notion and is strictly linked with the frequency of a word-formation processes.

We consider abbreviatory process as creative coining, which is irregular and only partially predictable, and yet admissible, depending on the availability of parallel structures which are already in use and ready to be reused. Availability will be dependent on which patterns have been used in particular register, and most importantly, whether they are necessary to satisfy the particular users' communicative needs.

Corpus research has yielded relevant findings for course and materials design in ESP. Several studies have demonstrated that investigating corpus data representing the language of the specific subject field in use provides a sound basis for course and materials design for the ESP classroom (e.g. Jablonkai, 2022; Hou, 2014; Skorczynska-Sznajder, 2010;). Some of these studies have also shown how findings of corpus research can be integrated into the ESP teaching practice (e.g., Cortes, 2004, 2006; Trebits, 2009) in the form of new approaches and tasks.

Corpus research in ESP has also been used to evaluate existing teaching materials. Nelson (2000) compared a corpus of published course books of BE to a corpus of English in "real-life" business in order to test his hypothesis that "the lexis found in Business English published materials is significantly different from that found in real-life business" (Nelson, 2000, p. 1). When teaching ESP, *the "university classes have to treat a foreign language not simply as a set of rules, but as a means of communicating for achieving specific goals in everyday life activity"*. (Berezenko, Cherkhava, Musiienko, 2022).

Linguistic researchers (Safont and Esteve 2004: 261–274, Mishan 2005:40, Benavent and Peñamaría 2011: 89–94, Gilmore 2007: 97–118) seem to agree that authentic language has to be brought to the students' attention and that the teachers need to take time to study how the language has to be brought to the situations in a given ESP context. The effort should be put on creating a genuinely useful course.

Aim

The primary objective of our research is to identify and analyze the processes involved in abbreviation formation within contemporary business communication. By employing a qualitative corpus analysis approach, we aim to contextualize these processes within the broader framework of extra-grammatical phenomena. This research seeks to uncover the underlying patterns and characteristics of abbreviations used in business correspondence and to provide practical insights for the teaching of Business English.

Methodology

A qualitative corpus analysis method was adopted to achieve the research objectives. The analysis focused on actual patterns of abbreviation usage as observed in various online sources. These sources provided contextualized examples of abbreviations along with explanations from business commentators and experts. The research primarily concentrated on written business communication. The vast amount of information available online pertaining to business operations provided a rich source of data for analysis. This eliminated the need to rely on limited, pre-existing lists of business abbreviations. To ensure a representative and diverse corpus, a random sampling technique was employed. Various websites were selected using Google Search, focusing on those that provided explanations and examples of abbreviations. While access to in-house company communication was not feasible, the analysis of 50 reference websites was deemed sufficient to extract the necessary information.

Results and discussion

In our corpus, we observed particular abbreviation categories, which have been used in business correspondence regularly, such as acronyms, hybrids, numeronyms and clipped units. Generally, we can claim that it is evident that they do not always comply with basic word-formation rules. Regularities we have found are just tendencies, the only obvious regularity of abbreviations is that they shorten the words or phrases from which they originate. Many exceptions do not strictly conform to the theoretical definitions. Thus, we observed impermanent creations (*WTF- what's the flavour in the advert by Pringles*), ambiguity in meaning (*CAO- Chief Administrative Officer, Chief Accounting Officer, Chief Analytics Officer*) or irregular subtractions (*CAPEX- capital expenditures, Pd-paid*).

The sources we have chosen for contextualized examples are excerpts from our corpus and they are meant to represent some of the typical business communication contexts in which abbreviations are preferred to their corresponding standard forms.

Creativity

Creative usage of abbreviations in business correspondence, and generally in business communication has led to various lexical innovations.

Majority of the forms are being abbreviated in order to avoid multiple repetition of the whole source phrase or words in internal communication such as memos, reports, e-mails, graphs/charts, minutes, manuals, guidelines, or even in business contracts or personnel letters. External communication e.g. in advertising and marketing materials, brochures and leaflets or even social letters is not an exception to the abbreviatory processes. However, the reason of coinage could be also different- for example phenomena which, when used in everyday language, would not have a tendency to be abbreviated. In our opinion, those are the abbreviations which could be causing ambiguity if not properly defined as it is impossible to deduce their meaning from their abbreviated forms, especially if the recipient is unfamiliar with the in-house jargon.

The following examples indicate how a simple message might be confusing if abbreviations have been used excessively, as they can be interchanged for other words:

IMO, your OS lacks QC and is enough to make me SMH and LOL. Until then, TTYL.
(In my opinion, your operating system lacks quality control and is enough to make me shake my head and laugh out loud. Until then, talk to you later).

Did you read the new PSPB article comparing the accuracy of IATs with the AMP procedure? It is a nice follow up to the JPSP article that came out before SPSP.

Are you a PCBU ("person conducting a business or undertaking"), or an FTE ("full-time employee")?

Does your organisation employ a MBO (management by objectives) or MBWA (management by wandering around) approach? Do you use OSKAR (outcome, scale, know-how, affirm + action and review) as a coaching technique to boost employees' performance?

Could you BID it for me? (Could you break it down for me?)

In many cases, it alienates and excludes prospective or new members, but it might make regular members feel special and superior to those not belonging in their group.

As various inputs correspond to the same output (Chief Administrative Officer, Chief Analytics Officer, Chief Accounting Officer-CAO), abbreviations are not al-

ways unambiguous as expected in specialized terminology. This can cause obstruction in recovering the source.

Contractors, repairpersons, or information technology services department staff may be permitted to bring in a cell phone and portable wireless router (Wi-Fi, MiFi, etc.) if approved by the CAO (Chief Administrative Officer) when the phone is necessary to complete job duties relating to repairs on a case by case basis.

The company's CAO (Chief Analytics Officer) said that their mission was to provide the information to help health care organizations make the right hiring decisions.

The company fired its CAO (Chief Accounting Officer) in 2019 for attempting to destroy documents.

On the contrary, the same input can be spelled differently in the output. In this particular case, we would not claim that it causes ambiguity in meaning as in the context, it is always complemented by additional information.

OOO – Out of the office

OoO – Out of the office

OOTO – Out of the office

OOF – Out of the office

OOTF – Out of the office

Out of the office email subject line examples:

OOO: I am on annual leave until 25.04.

OOF: Sipping cocktails on a beach!

OoO – Returning from holiday 10.03.

Elliptical constructions for Chief Executive Officer are used variably and in most cases replaced by the acronym CEO. These constructions can be applied in other cases stemming from the same acronymy family and are used also in spoken form.

CDO Chief Data Officer

CEO Chief Executive Officer

CIO Chief Information Officer

COO Chief Operating Officer

CSO Chief Security Officer

CTO Chief Technology Officer

The CEO decided to reshuffle the company's top management.

It was just us, some finance people, four engineers, our Chief, a coordinator, a lawyer, and a marketing guy.

All the executives were sitting at one table, ready to negotiate.

Semantically, synonyms, occurring especially in in-house jargon, name the same phenomena, and paradoxically, they don't contribute to the economization of language.

COB (Close of Business) is a sales acronym that refers to the end of the business day, usually 5 PM. Also known as end of day (EOD) and close of play (COP).

You have until COB today to show us why you should not be disconnected!

I need your final report on my desk by EOD Wednesday.

At COP next Monday, Allied Zurich will wave goodbye to the FTSE 100 as it is absorbed by its Swiss parent, Zurich Financial Services.

Spelling of acronyms without periods can lead to lexicalization of abbreviations. This phenomenon was also observed in business correspondence.

This time around, Jane plans to leverage SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-bound) goals for setting an action plan and staying the course.

Analogy

As explained in more detail in the theoretical part, abbreviations are often based on analogical patterns and reanalysis. In our corpus, the most evident analogical pattern is the common initial pattern. In case of acronyms, they have been formed by taking the initial letters of the words in a title or phrase.

This job is soooo tedious. – Yeah mine too. SSDD (same stuff, different day).

TFW (that feeling when) you finally finish a big project.

That restaurant does not advertise, but relies on WOM (word of mouth) for custom.

Certain promotional activities have drawn fire, including greenwashing, bait and switch, shilling, viral marketing, spam (electronic), pyramid schemes and MLM (multi-level marketing).

The most common base of abbreviations has been a noun (noun phrase) which, generally, is the case of many professional jargons as they provide contexts in

which a word or phrase is so frequent that a shorter and more efficient form is needed and often required to save space.

You can cut down on CPU (cost per unit) by continuing with the old machinery.

The company has replaced share options for directors with long-term bonuses based on TSR (total shareholder return).

He plans to cope with the fall in sales by drastically reducing CAPEX (capital expenditure) and cutting staff.

This kind of logging is very useful for site owners who can determine the popularity of a web page based on how many UV (unique visitors) it has, and how many come back.

Inflection of abbreviated forms, where abbreviations behaved as regular bases in inflection. Thus, it is common in business correspondence that abbreviated forms inflect for plural in a regular way as well as they can take the possessive form ('s):

Notwithstanding the recent rise in bank borrowing by SMEs, the net bank indebtedness of the SME sector has continued to fall.

Our clients are CEOs and CFOs of Fortune 500 companies.

How many small firms with less than five advisers have formal reviews of an adviser's KPIs (key performance indicators)?

CMO's salary was recently increased as his department is delivering very good results.

Availability

In our research the notion of availability is applicable not only to productive rules, but also to above mentioned analogical patterns, because it opens up the possibility of creating new formations supported by pre-existing constructions.

We can claim that the abbreviation processes in business jargon are not only about their frequency and quantity but also about re-usage of the patterns. All the above mentioned phenomena are more tolerant, admitting in the presence of irregularities alongside regular tendencies. Properties, which characterize those abbreviation processes have just proven that they are not only productive (as their number is relatively high) but more "available" as well as there is high potential for repetitive coining.

Naming is another characteristic feature of the formation of the abbreviation processes in business communication. Many abbreviations tend to name new specific

phenomena, newly formed institutions, activities and procedures in the business world. They are very often but not always mono-referential in a sense that they acquire specificity and semantic uniqueness and their association to the context immediately suggests the referent.

Quantitative research in the form of frequency of occurrence of the abbreviations, used in business communication of the various departments in companies, could be also useful source for creation of frequency-sorted word lists, which provide valuable information about those units that appear (and do not appear) in a text. These lists can be arranged in order of first occurrence, alphabetically or in frequency order and used as authentic material in the classroom. What we might find challenging in this type of research would be the problem of identifying various abbreviation categories in the texts and subsequently counting them manually as the majority of computer tools for various corpus analysis do not offer such possibility due to creative nature of abbreviatory processes.

Research and its pedagogical perspectives

Based on our research findings, a comprehensive approach to teaching Business English should incorporate several key pedagogical strategies.

To solidify students' understanding of abbreviation trends and their practical application, a variety of pedagogical activities can be employed. These activities range from textual analysis to creative expression and collaborative learning.

For instance, a textual analysis exercise can involve dividing students into groups to examine diverse business texts, such as emails, reports, and articles. By *identifying and categorizing various types of abbreviations* within these texts, students can develop a nuanced understanding of their usage and context. Furthermore, *creative writing exercises* can encourage students to coin their own abbreviations for specific business phrases or concepts, fostering both creativity and a deeper understanding of abbreviation principles. To assess students' comprehension, *quizzes* can be administered to test their knowledge of abbreviation definitions, meanings, and appropriate usage.

Additionally, *role-playing scenarios* provide students with opportunities to practice using abbreviations in simulated professional settings, receiving valuable feedback on their language use and the appropriateness of their abbreviations.

Finally, *social media analysis* can expose students to the informal use of abbreviations in contemporary business communication, enabling them to discuss the impact of these trends on professional language. Comprehensive summary of the above-mentioned activities is presented in Table 1 below.

Promoting effective communication in Business English classes is paramount. Students should be taught to use abbreviations judiciously, avoiding ambiguity and ensuring clear and concise communication. Integrating technology into the classroom can enhance the learning experience. By using online tools and resources, students explore real-world examples of abbreviations and practice using them in authentic contexts. By implementing these pedagogical strategies, teachers can empower students to navigate the complexities of business communication and succeed in the globalized workplace.

Tab. 1: Comprehensive summary of Business English class activities focusing on students' understanding of abbreviation trends and their practical application

Activity	Task	Objective	Feedback
Abbreviation hunt	Dividing students into groups and providing them with a variety of business texts (emails, reports, articles, etc.).	Students should identify and categorize different types of abbreviations used in the texts.	After the hunt, discussing the findings as a class, analyzing the reasons for using abbreviations in each case.
Create your own abbreviations	Asking students to create their own abbreviations for common business phrases or concepts.	Encourage creativity and understanding of abbreviation principles.	Students present their abbreviations to the class, explaining the rationale behind their choices.
Abbreviation quiz	Creating a quiz with questions about abbreviations, their meanings, and usage.	Testing students' knowledge and understanding of abbreviations.	Discussing the correct answers and any common misconceptions.
Role-play scenarios	Creating scenarios where students role-play business professionals using abbreviations in different contexts (e.g. email, meeting, presentation).	Practicing using abbreviations appropriately and effectively.	Providing feedback on students' use of language and the appropriateness of their abbreviations.
Social media analysis	Having students analyze social media posts and comments from business professionals.	Identifying common abbreviations used in informal business communication.	Discussing the impact of social media on the use of abbreviations in business.

Source: author's own

Conclusion

Our research employed a qualitative corpus analysis to investigate the prevalence and characteristics of abbreviations in contemporary business communication. By examining a diverse range of online sources, we identified a variety of abbreviation types, including acronyms, initialisms, clippings, blends, and numeronyms.

Our analysis revealed that abbreviations are frequently used to enhance efficiency, facilitate informal communication, and create a sense of group identity.

However, the creative and often non-standard nature of abbreviation formation can lead to ambiguity and potential misunderstandings. For example, the abbreviation “CAO” can refer to Chief Administrative Officer, Chief Accounting Officer, or Chief Analytics Officer, depending on the context. Moreover, the use of excessive abbreviations can alienate individuals who are unfamiliar with the jargon, hindering effective communication.

To mitigate these challenges, it is crucial to use abbreviations judiciously and to define them clearly, especially when communicating with diverse audiences. Additionally, it is important to stay updated on emerging trends in business communication and to adapt to evolving language practices. By understanding the benefits and limitations of abbreviations, individuals can leverage them effectively to enhance communication efficiency while avoiding potential pitfalls.

When discussing the pedagogical implications of our findings, to effectively teach Business English, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. This involves a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical application. Students should be exposed to various types of abbreviations through textual analysis, creative exercises, and quizzes. Additionally, role-playing scenarios and social media analysis can help students practice using abbreviations in real-world contexts. By integrating technology and promoting effective communication, teachers can empower students to navigate the complexities of business language and excel in global professional settings.

To ensure the continued relevance of Business English education, it is important to adapt to the dynamic nature of business communication. Relying solely on traditional teaching materials can be limiting, as they may not reflect current industry practices. To address this, it is crucial to incorporate contemporary business terminology and writing conventions into the curriculum. While numerous business books offer guidance on various forms of business correspondence, they often provide generic templates without sufficient context or practical application. Therefore, it is essential to supplement these materials with real-world examples and up-to-date insights into business communication practices.

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Appendix

The abbreviations-in-business-correspondence corpus – the list of the websites for analysis

1. <https://www.themuse.com/advice/your-ultimate-cheat-sheet-to-deciphering-the-123-most-common-business-acronyms>
2. <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/business-abbreviations>
3. <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/marketing-key-performance-indicators>
4. <https://preply.com/en/blog/business-abbreviations/>
5. <https://blog.talaera.com/business-acronyms>
6. <https://7esl.com/business-acronyms/>
7. <https://smallbiztrends.com/2021/04/business-abbreviations-acronyms.html>
8. <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/marketing-acronym-glossary>
9. <https://www.mindtools.com/blog/99-business-acronyms/>
10. <https://www.altalang.com/beyond-words/40-business-acronyms-know/>
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