THE MEANING OF "e-":
Neologisms as Markers of Culture and Technology

By Lucinda McDonald

> A community is known by the language it keeps, and its words chronicle the times. Every aspect of the life of a people is reflected in the words they use to talk about themselves and the world around them. As their world changes – through invention, discovery, revolution, evolution or personal transformation – so does their language. Like the growth rings of a tree, our vocabulary bears witness to our past.
>
> - John Algeo (*Fifty Years Among the New Words 1*)

Algeo reveals two interesting concepts in this simple passage. First, he acknowledges the intricate relationship between language and culture. Although it is no secret that both language and culture change over time, he explains how language acts as a marker of history, reflecting back culture as it changes. Secondly, he points to vocabulary as the primary indicator for tracking this change and recognizes that new words or neologisms can be useful tools for understanding how culture is evolving. Algeo shows us that through monitoring vocabulary change, we can track cultural change.

New words are constantly entering the lexicon to describe new concepts and technologies and what they mean to us. Conversely, older words continually fall out of use as they decrease in cultural significance. Considering the influence digital technology has had on society, it is not surprising then that lexicographers have found that science and technology are by far the most prolific sources of neologisms in recent times (Crystal 2002; Knowles & Elliot 1997; Van Dyke 1992; Gozzi 1990).

The Internet and computers in particular have spawned a large and specialized jargon. For example, the prefix "e-" is particularly productive in generating new terms such as *e-mail, e-commerce, e-solution, e-vite, e-newsletter, e-book, e-publishing, e-politics* and *e-government,* to name just a very few. e- can be added to almost any term to create a reference to the online computer world. The prefix e- is also unique in that it is only a single letter. Although there are other instances of neologisms being formed in English from other single letter prefixes (eg. Algeo 1998: he points to A-bomb, F-word, S-curve, U-boat, V-neck and G-string), none of these are productive in that they can attach themselves to numerous other words in the same way that e- can. Despite the unique nature of the e- prefix surprisingly little work has been done on it beyond Schaffer (2001) and Freckmann (2000).

"e-" is obviously a clipping of "electronic" but what does it mean specifically? How does adding e- to a word change its meaning? Why are these terms so ubiquitous? What does the coining and great currency of these e-terms signal about our society and out attitudes towards technology? What can our language reflect and reveal about our culture and how it may be changing? I answered these questions using a slightly unorthodoxed research method and found some interesting results. Firstly, that e- has more than one meaning. It refers generally to anything connected to the online, computer and electronic world as well as connoting a connection to the dot. com boom and bust. Secondly, the results revealed that our attitude towards e- and the trend it signifies started out positive and became increasingly negative over time.

Methodology

My first task was to develop a list of e-words. I created this list by looking in new word dictionaries, academic articles, scholarly books, *Lexis-Nexis* newspaper articles and online sources. All e-words encountered in my ongoing reading and research were incorporated into my list of e-words. My list includes a total of 152 e-words. Next

I calculated the frequency of use for each of these e-words using *Lexis-Nexis Academic,* a database of the text of all the major English newspapers in the world. This represented a departure from traditional corpus linguistic methods of calculating frequency, because I evaluated words over time rather than in comparison to other words in the corpus. The e-words with the largest frequencies were graphed according to time with the number of occurrences along the y-axis and the year along the x-axis. Thirdly, each e-word was evaluated to determine what level of institutionalization it had reached (see Fischer 1998 for an explanation of the institutionalization process). This was achieved by checking to see which words had been codified in one of three dictionaries. These dictionaries were the *OED Online, Dictionary.com* and *Netlingo* which represent Standard English in the UK, the US and a specialized online language resource respectively. Next, the list of e-words was then organized into the following categories: stunt or legitimate and pun or non-pun formations. Stunt and pun formations, with the largest frequencies, were determined to be of particular interest and were further studied. Finally, selected stunt words were examined in further detail using a concordance listing technique called KWIC, or "key word in context," which displays both the selected word and its surrounding context. This helps specifically pinpoint the meaning of the e- prefix each time it occurs.

As this research area is so new and cross-disciplinary, no standard research technique has yet been established. As such I have had to MacGyver (note the neologism!) an unorthodox but essentially workable and effective research methodology by bringing together ideas from a variety of disciplines including English, linguistics, cultural studies and communication studies.

Findings and analysis

Frequency
An analysis of the frequencies of e-words shows that except for a few mega e-words like *e-mail, e-business* and *e-commerce,* most e-words are

not frequently used. Just under 60 percent of the e-words researched were used in Lexis-Nexis 10 times or less. Graphing the number of occurrences over time for some of the most frequently used e-words revealed an interesting pattern (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1 Frequencies over time for   e-

Figure 2 Frequencies over time for   e-
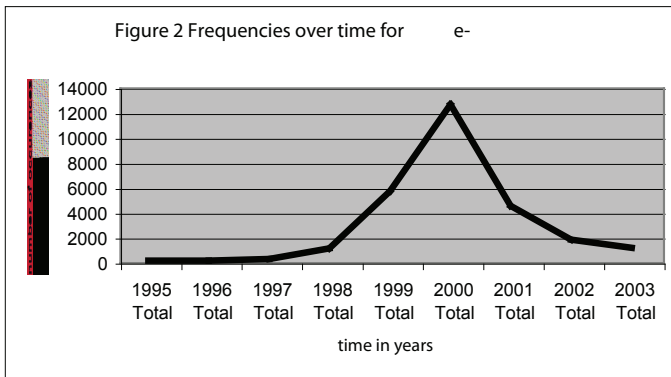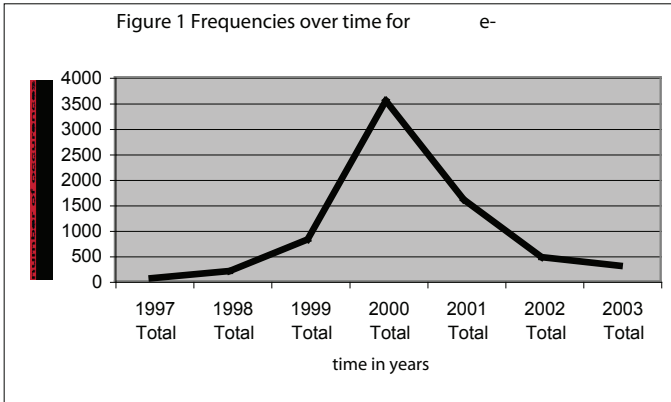
What are these graphs telling us? Comparing the dates of the dot.com boom and bust to the usages of e-words we see a strong correlation. All the above-mentioned e-words see an increase in frequencies through the late 1990s mirroring the growth of the high tech sector in financial markets. After the crash of the NASDAQ in

2000, we see a corresponding drop in e-word frequencies. It appears that everything e- was the buzz on the way up and nobody wanted e-anything on the way down. However, a few tried and true words survived the crash such as e-mail, which was already well established before the dot.com boom and bust.

Institutionalization

I checked each of my 152 e-words to see if they had been included in one of three dictionaries: the online edition of the OED, *Dictionary. com*, and *Netlingo*. Only 29, or 19%, of the words in my list have been institutionalized in some form. The majority of words, 123 or 81%, were not institutionalized in any dictionary. This demonstrates that, although the e- prefix is very productive in creating new terms, slightly less than one-fifth of the neologisms coined make it through the institutionalization process and end up "sticking" in our vocabulary.

Categorization: Stunt Words and Puns

I classified all 152 e-words based on two different axes. The first axis categorized each word as either a "stunt" or "legitimate" formation. Terms were classified as stunt if they contained some humorous or clever element, expressed frustration with technology and the Internet or made reference to other cultural factors. Words classified in the stunt category include examples such as *e-bandwagon, e-free* and *e-everything*. Legitimate e-words turn regular items or ideas into online, Internet or computer versions. Examples include terms such as *e-business, e-learning* and *e-crime.* The results show that stunt words appear to be coined and used in very specific situations and are not picked up in general vocabulary. Words classified as legitimate in contrast have higher frequencies and levels of institutionalization.

The second axis considered whether e-words were formed as a pun or not. There are several ways puns could be formed with e-words. The first way includes modifying a word that already starts with e- and simply adding a hyphen. Examples include terms such as *e-asy, e-pistle* and *e-conomy*. The second way involves altering the

sound of another vowel so that it can sound like "e" in examples such as *e-llowance* (for allowance) or *e-diot* (for idiot). The third way involves substituting "e" for longer morphemes, for example *e-vite* (for invite), *e-cruiter* (for recruiter) and *e-tailing* (for retailing).

Most of the e-words in the sample were not formed from puns (78%) but it is significant that over one-fifth or 22% were. Surprisingly both stunt and legitimate e-words were formed through punning. This demonstrates the creative, lighthearted and flexible nature of language surrounding technology, computers and the Internet as people are willing to let a pun become a common and legitimate part of the lexicon. A good example of this is *e-tail* (and variations) which is a legitimate e-word formed through a pun on the word "retail". The term *e-tail* had over 2,400 occurrences.

Stunt Words and the Meaning of e-: KWIC Analysis

I examined the six stunt words that had the largest frequencies using KWIC analysis. These six words were *e-nough, e-everything, e-normous, e-anything, e-bandwagon* and *e-vil*. I considered the context in which each of these terms appeared and found some interesting results. A key finding is that the prefix e- has more than one meaning. Besides being added to root words to signal a connection with anything to do with computers, the Internet and technology, the prefix e- has also come to be associated specifically with the fate of the technology sector in financial markets. KWIC concordance listings demonstrate that e-words are coined and used to refer directly to the dot.com boom and bust. For example, adding e- in front of *bandwagon* seems to imply specifically jumping on the upcoming, seemingly successful trend of the Internet and high technology companies.

A second key finding is the change in attitude towards both the e-craze and e-terms over time. At first, e-words are used enthusiastically as the benefits of doing business on the Internet are explored. Eventually, as the "new economy" is revealed to be just a massive boom in the traditional boom bust cycle, our infatuation with the e-craze turns to frustration. The KWIC analysis shows how journal-

ists' use of the e- prefix mirrors the fortunes of high tech companies as they rode the dot.com boom and bust. This demonstrates how language and neologisms can act as markers of particular social and cultural change and reflect our attitudes towards technology.

Conclusion

We coin new words to describe new things but also when no word currently in existence can accurately express our sentiments. The words we invent to describe our experiences of the world inherently and concurrently reflect our attitudes about the world in which we live. The study of neologisms or neology is a valuable tool for uncovering cultural changes as they occur.

The purpose of my research is to better understand exactly what our use of technological neologisms, particularly those beginning with the prefix e-, can tell us about how our culture is changing as well as revealing our attitudes towards this change. I determined that the e- prefix had more meaning behind it than simply referring to technology, computers and the Internet, and that the productivity and ubiquity of the morpheme would tell us something about our attitudes towards these things. I also found that other social phenomenon around technology such as the dot.com boom and bust factored into how we use e-words. An example of this comes from an article in *The Age,* a publication in Melbourne, where the journalist quotes from an internet site espousing the benefits of "s-commerce":

> You've heard of e-commerce, this story goes, and possibly also of m-commerce (which is e-commerce on a mobile device such as a digital telephone). But have you heard of s-commerce? "It's a revelation," says the Net posting. It has these shops (which is where you get the s of s-commerce) that seem to be an ideal medium for transactions. Some, for instance, are selling clothing, which you can put on and see in a high-definition 2D viewing device called a mirror. "Some days," the author says, "I don't have time to download a huge flash animation of rotating Nike shoes, then wait five

days for them to be delivered and actually hope they
fit" (6).

This excerpt reveals that journalists were starting to understand that much of the excitement around the possibilities of how the Internet could change society were really just hype, at least in terms of how companies could make money on the Internet. The creative use of the term s-commerce as a pun on e-commerce demonstrates that journalists know a significant amount of meaning has been packed into one small morpheme and that it can be used to express a variety of ideas including frustration with the e-trend. My research has revealed specifically how the Internet boom left its mark on our language and forces us to consider the power of language. There was an enormous amount of meaning packed into one letter and a hyphen and this lexical saturation had significant economic value. Having "dot.com" at the end of the name of a company (Amazon. com) or an "e" at the beginning (eBay) could generate massive value for a company. Considering the potential capital that could be secured from investors based solely on the name a company chose to give itself, it is not a stretch to say that words and neologisms can have immense power.

In order to study neologisms I have had to carve out a space from the small but interesting areas of overlap between the disciplines of linguistics, English, communication studies and cultural studies. Further, studying neologisms from a cultural perspective can bring greater understanding to our world, how we interpret it and make meaning from it.

Algeo writes that "We use some new words because we take delight in them... They reflect changes in material and intellectual culture. And they show us something of the way human beings cope with problems and laugh at the absurdities of life" (*Fifty Years* 15). Indeed, for everyone who had been burned by the e-revolution, or is simply frustrated with the massive influence technology has had on our lives, the prefix e- allowed us to shout "e-nough already!"

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