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Acronyms in general are skilfully composed without taking into account possible conflicts which could arise due to the existence of words with a similar or identical morphological make-up. For example, in English SINS (Ship’s Internal Navigation System), SAM (surface-to-air missile), or in Spanish CIMA (Comisión Interministerial del Medio Ambiente), ONCE (Organización Naciones de Ciegos Españoles) do not have any logical connection with the meaning of their homophones sins, Sam (uel), cima, once. New acronyms can, on the other hand, form homonyms with other acronyms of the same form: in English C.O.D. means cash on delivery but also Concise Oxford Dictionary. In peninsular Spanish MIR designates the community of Médicos Internos y Residentes whereas in Venezuela and Chile el MIR is the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria and in Argentina el MIR is the Movimiento de Intransigencia Radical. The homophonic or homographic character of all these words is no obstacle to the continuous use of the acronymic lexeme since the homonymic conflict is solved by reference to a specific context and/or by its use within a different linguistic community. Moreover, one makes use of acronyms like SAM, CIMA, whose coincidence, presumably fortuitous, with a pre-existing lexeme makes them easier to pronounce or recall, thus getting away from the scrawny appearance of the majority of acronyms that emerge in bureaucracy which are usually pronounced alphabetically.

With the same purpose in mind one arrives at a deliberate use of initials so that one obtains a pre-existing word in acronym form; to do this one may proceed in various ways: manipulating the syntax of the acronym’s underlying phrase; eliminating an initial; or else representing a word of the original phrase with a letter, syllable or segment of a word, whichever is most convenient. English examples are found among the numerous classical names which appear in the various domains of technology and electronics, such as HECTOR (Heated Experimental Carbon Thermal Oscillator Reactor), HELEN (Hidrogenous Exponential Liquid Experiment), HERMES (Heavy Element and Radioactive Material Electromagnetic Separator), HORACE (H₂O Reactor Aldermaston Critical Experiment), ISIS (International Satellites for Ionospheric Studies), MERLIN (Medium Energy Reactor Light Water Industrial Neutron Source), MIDAS (Missile Defense Alarm System), NERO (Sodium [Na] Experiment Reactor of Zero Power), acronyms apparently neutral in connotations and which Wittlin (1981:160) has called acróñimos lexemas. But in practice it is difficult to maintain the neutral character of the acronym since in general homonymy it entails positive, negative or awkward connotations, or else it is a source of humour. This paper is mainly an
attempt to exemplify and examine these connotative values in order to determine their relative weight in the coining and use of acronyms.

The practice of coining acronyms by homonymy is not new; although they have experienced a tremendous push in recent years, the *acronym lexemes* experienced their initial splendour in the World Wars, especially the Second. This is well attested by one of the minor genres of American folklore which consisted of the interchange of scribbled messages on the back of envelopes ("envelope sealers"). This practice was particularly popular during the two World Wars among soldiers and adolescent girls who often coded their sentimental messages by means of acronyms giving these, at times, an *acrostic* character: MAYATA (My Anxious Lips Await Your Arrival), POLAND (Please Open Lovingly And Never Destroy), HOLLAND (Hope Our Love Lives And Never Dies), ITALY (I Trust And Love You), NELLY (No one Ever Loved Like You), etc. (cf. Dundes 1967:26; Pendennis 1974). Such "acronym lexemes" acted then as a mnemonic instrument, thus accomplishing a purely metalinguistic function.

Occasionally some acronyms have survived because of the inappropriate or ironic form with which they were originally coined, such as the following which I have collected from American English: IDIOT (Instrumentation Digital On-Line Transcriber), MANIAC (Mathematical Analyzer Numerical Integrater and Calculator), MISHAP (Missiles High-Speed Assembly Program), WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), CREEP (Committee to Re-elect the President), CRAP (Conceptual Reality Alternative Party).

Neither the former nor the latter have any logical relation with their homonyms, which explains a great part of the humour produced. On other occasions the special morphology, accidental or deliberate, can produce certain humoristic and offensive effects, such as in English WASP (White Anglosaxon Protestant) or in Spanish FEA (Falange Española Auténtica). Sometimes the result is so disagreeable and insulting that the homonym leads to the disuse or alteration of the acronym form. This was the case with, for example, SOD (Secretary of Defense), BRUTO (Brussels Treaty Organization) and Sp. MULA (Mando Unico para la Lucha Antiterrorista). On the other hand, there are often cases of acronyms, especially in American English, where a normal word with a certain semantic relation is intentionally sought. This type of acronym, without doubt the most interesting and popular, is known by the name of *apposite acronyms* (Baum 1956:224), *punning acronyms* (Makkai 1974:1), *prefabricated acronyms* and *reverse acronyms* (q. by Algeo 1975:229), and in Spanish *acrónimos lexemas contextuales* (Wittlin 1981:160). They appear with particular frequency in names of organizacions or slogans of various types among which we could mention: ASH (Association on Smoking and Health), COPE (Committee on Political Education), SHARE (Share Happily and Reap Endlessly), NOW (National Organization for Women), GUTS (Georgians Unwilling To Surrender). Also in Spanish, although the same development has not been reached, we may notice the use of: ACUDE (Asociación de Consumidores y Usuarios de España), ACUSO (Asociación Cultural de Somontano), ARDE (Acción Republicana Democrática Española), FATIMA (Familias Agrupadas para Tutelar a la Infancia Menos Apta), FIRME (Fondo de
Inversiones Regional para el Mejoramiento Educativo, Costa Rica), URJE (Unión Revolucionaria de la Juventud Ecuatoriana). These acronyms have been formed to meet the need for inciseveness and efficacy in advertising. The creator of these acronyms has conveniently chosen a word whose grapho-morphonic composition on the one hand, and semantic description on the other, offer an intelligent and suggestive mnemonic device for the name of the organization and its implicit purposes (Makkai 1974:356). If the iconic character inherent in the representation of meaning through initials is, in general, in some way reduced by the acronym is accentuated because of its connotative features. With some acronyms the semantic relation even conveys more substantial or denotative meaning, as for example in English TRAIN (Tele-Rail Automatic Information Network), GAS (Gas Appliance Society), JOBS (Jobs Opportunities in the Business Sector), ASTHMA (A Society To Help the Morale of Asthmatics), MEDICO (Medical International Cooperation), SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge), or in Spanish ADELPHA (Asociación para la Defensa Ecológica y del Patrimonio Histórico-Artístico). A.P.O.Y.A.R. (Asociación Pedagógica de Orientación y Apoyo al Retorno), MAO (Movimiento de Autodefensa Obrera, Bolivia), FIDEL (Frente de Izquierda de Liberación, Uruguay), ORDEN (Organización Democrática Nacionalista, El Salvador), MANO (Movimiento Anticomunista Nacional Organizado, Guatemala).

The iconicity observed up to the moment is based principally on the composition of the letters of the acronyms ("grapho-morphonic" composition in the terminology of Makkai). But we can also observe others whose iconic character is based mainly on its phonic value; these are acronyms whose coinage, comprehension and circulation have been helped by onomatopoeic or phonoesthetic effects derived from their make-up, in taking as a model, not a word but a special sound with which they have a certain association. Thus for example the American acronym WAC, originally WAAC (Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps) was helped by its similarity to whack, which denotes the sound of a blow (Wölcken 1957:330). With regard to this it is also worth mentioning the onomatopoeic character of the German acronym flak (FLugzeugAbwehr-Kanone ‘anti-aircraft artillery’), which evokes the explosion of a shell; the same characteristic can be attributed to the “k” sound in ack-ack, a word of British derivation based on AA (Anti-Aircraft).

We can also note the onomatopoeic value of the American neologism riffing, first employed in Washington political jargon in 1953 to refer to the process of staff reduction, and derived from the official name of the government operation ‘reduction in force’ (cf. Baum 1955:109). This word attracts my attention for its phonic and semantic analogy with rift, which evokes the action of breaking or splitting, thus maintaining a logical connection with the idea of staff reduction or dismissal. A phonic and semantic association can also be seen in the acronym ZIP (Zone Improvement Plan); the term zip, of onomatopoeic origin already incorporated into the lexicon with the meaning of ‘zip fastener’ or ‘move rapidly’, evokes quickness and facility.

The reverse process of the coining of acronyms by homonymy consists of reinterpreting as acronyms, seriously or humourously, ordinary words of the language. This false etymology can be seen in the English term pig, a name given satirically to
the police and interpreted as an acronym meaning *Pride, Integrity, Guts; tip*, which has been taken to represent *to insure promptness; news*, which has been imaginatively derived from *north-east-west-south* (q. by Algeo 1975: 230). These reinterpretations do not express continuity but are connected in their roots with a platonic mentality which tried to see in each word the acrostic of a phrase (cf. Wittlin 1981:172).

On the other hand, these reinterpretations are not limited to normal words only but are also applied to other acronyms, especially those which have achieved acceptance in the language. It is well known that the folk etymology of the American acronym O.K. is ‘oll korresct’ but this does not seem to have any relation with its original meaning, according to most authoritative opinions. It has been attempted to find various etymological sources for this term not only in English but also in very different languages (cf. H. van Hoof 1964). The interpretation of S.O.S. as an abbreviation of the phrase *Save Our Souls* is also widely known but in fact these initials constitute a radiotelegraphic formula established as an international signal of danger. The present meaning of ‘urgent request for help’ is nevertheless, so well known that S.O.S. has been taken as a model in the formation of various acronyms of organizations, programmes, etc., as for example, *Save our Schools, Sanity on Sex*. Even something as concrete and relatively recent as the German brand name DKW has received various etymological treatment. Thus, while many dictionaries, among them the *Martucci* & Sousa, give the initials the meaning *Deutscher Klein Wagen* ‘small German car’, others echo the enthusiastic imagination of some Germans who would like to see in the initials the abbreviation *Deutscher Klein Wunder* ‘small German miracle’, or even *Das Kleine Wunder* ‘the small miracle’; however, it is probable that the original name was *Deutsche Kraftfahrt-Werke* ‘German motor vehicle workshop’, as it has been pointed out by Wittlin (1981:173). Algeo (1975:229) also refers to the confusion around the real meaning of CARE, where the initials have been taken to express various words: *C* = *Committee, Cooperative; Agency, American; R = Relief, Recessions; E = Europe, Everywhere*. But the exactness of these terms, in general very close semantically, is of secondary interest. The real interest lies in remembering the arrangement of the initials in the form of CARE, which in this way helps to evoke the overall meaning of the acronym and gives it favourable connotations. Neither is it relevant to know if the D of the mixed abbreviation *D-day is Decision or Debarment*, since in both glosses the meaning remains the same, that of ‘day agreed for the accomplishment of an objective’. This diversity of explanations is owed, then in many cases, to the action of time which leads to the gradual loss of the real significance of the initials.

On the other hand, other acronym reinterpretations have been given deliberate false meanings with a merely humorous objective. For example, very amusing explanations are given for YMCA (*You must come across/Your money cheerfully accepted*) and some air companies: ALITALIA (*Always Late In Take-Off, Always Late In Running*), BEA (*Britain’s Excuse for an Airline*), BOAC (*Better On A Camel*), D.A. (Try Walking Across).

This type of comic interpretation has wide scope in the field of politics for potential sarcasm, especially in our country given the political efervescence of
in which we live. Thus, for example, during the last elections for the Andalucía parliament the socialist politician Alfonso Guerra defined the UCD as ‘un cadáver en descomposición’, to which the president of the centre party in power Íñigo López replied, with equal wit that PSOE meant ‘podéis seguir oponiéndos amamente’. And at the hands of a well known cartoonist the recently formed CDS was portrayed as ‘Centro del Duque de Suárez’. With a different objective in mind the acronym S.O.B., which was the title of a film exhibited in Madrid during 1982, was metonymically reinterpreted, not without a spark of genius, into ‘somos (h)onrados’. Thus avoiding the jarring expression son-of-a-bitch.

‘Apposite acronyms’, which are deliberately composed through homonymy, are gradually growing in importance. Within this field we can underline for their linguistic and psycholinguistic interest the so-called “ácronimos lexemas contextuales”, given the semantic association which are applied to their coinage and use as a result of their formal set-up. Such associations presuppose a mnemonic and, as such, a utilitarian instrument in driving home the meaning of the acronym. That is why the fields of publicity and politics (whatever the ideology may be) stand out among the most receptive to this type of formation, given their urgent need to publicize their products as messages and having here at their service a comfortable and constantly available method for doing so.

If on the one hand this deliberate search for a normal lexical form for the acronym lexemes leads frequently to the manipulation of the syntax of the underlying phrase, however arbitrary that may be, on the other, the acronyms so formed entail denotative, denotative, or mnemonic values and, hence, they represent a much more elaborated linguistic sign, which separates them from that ‘cold framework’ with which they are habitually constructed, according to Dámaso Alonso’s (1962) happy metaphor. Finally, the reinterpretation of initials and their playful function in the service of irony and jest constitute a more conspicuous and skilful attempt to give motivation to this sort of abbreviation.

FOOTNOTES

1 I have used the term “acrostic” to apply to acronyms and lexical formations in another place (Álvarez González 1980:25, 164) when referring to those coinages, acronymic or otherwise, which are intentionally given a morphological shape similar to that of other words of the language.

2 Interviu, 22-2-79 (“Sal y Pimienta”, pág. 3).

3 WUA is what originally appeared in the press, but it has now been replaced by MULC.