

Brevity plus

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The innovation and spread of lexical items very often is favored by considerations of **brevity**: items are invented by some people and adopted by others because they are more compact than earlier expressions. (And for some reasons not having to do with formal considerations: they have the virtue of **novelty**, suggesting fashion, ostentatious cleverness, or playfulness; and they usually have the virtue of **contextual or social specificity**, via ties to specific contexts, like sports, journalism, business, radio/television, the tech world, gaming, etc., or to specific social groups, like young people, Australians, women, etc.)

But these innovations also frequently (perhaps almost always) have the virtue of **semantic/pragmatic specificity**. The innovations usually allow for shadings of meaning that are fuzzed over in the older expressions (which, typically, have radiated and generalized in their meanings over the years). This point is scarcely a new one, but it tends to be buried by usage writers and language peevers who are hostile to innovations and treat them as “unnecessary”.

Here I look mostly at category conversions in English, in particular zero conversions and subtractive conversions (back-formations), concentrating on plain nounings (*a disconnect* vs. *a disconnection*), plain verbings (*to extinct* vs. *to make extinct*, *drive to extinction*), simple back-formations of verbs (*to incent* vs. *to provide an incentive*), and two-part back-formations of verbs (*to cheerlead* vs. *to serve as a cheerleader*). The larger point is that people have good (if unconscious) reasons for creating and adopting such innovations,

I look at several case studies, including that of the simple nouning *an ask*, which has been innovated several times in several very different senses over the years.