From *Kisstory* to *Megxile*

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Tabloids as lexical trendsetters

1. Introduction

While the year 2020 will undoubtedly be remembered for the sudden and unexpected worldwide expansion of COVID–19, which has threatened humans globally, the year 2021 is being marked by news related to the fight, vaccination and immunization against the coronavirus. However, in both years some, comparatively secondary, developments took place which were also relevant at other areas of interest. This is the case with the events surrounding the British Royal Family, especially after the interview with Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan Markle, by the renowned US journalist and TV presenter, Oprah Winfrey, on 7 March 2021. The interview took place following the couple's decision in 2020 to step down from their duties as senior members of the Royal Family. Both this decision and the interview, which contained uncomfortable allegations against the Royal Family, have had a clear and widespread impact on the media at different levels. Thus, the British tabloids have played a very important role in Harry and Meghan's story.

In general, tabloids have a strong impact on British public opinion, and are particularly salient in their tendency to convert serious news stories into sensational ones, using emotive language, playing with words and choosing topics that appeal to mass readership, such as celebrities, gossip or royal news, for the sake of entertainment. Linguistic mechanisms are fundamental in the construction of tabloid news and in readership engagement, as shown below. Journalists use a colloquial style, usually accompanied by innovative and creative linguistic devices such as metaphors, alliteration, rhyme, puns, neologisms and nonce formations that, on many occasions, are adopted by language users and hence become part of the language word stock.

2. Lexical creativity in tabloids

Neologisms are new words created by language users in general but also by journalists, scholars or advertisers, in order to name something new, be it an idea, a discovery, a product or a political or social phenomenon. A *renaming process* can also take place, whereby the new word does not designate something that was not there before, but attempts to change the perception of an existing entity. For example, the term *pro-lifers* was created to give a positive connotation to those who object to abortion, and may now replace *anti-abortionist*, an inherently negative term. In tabloids, neologisms are used to catch readers' attention. These and other equally colourful, innovative and easily understandable linguistic resources employed in serious and sensational news stories and their headlines make tabloids popular. As Conboy (2006: 16) argues, the style and tone of language contribute to the popularity of these newspapers. From a purely linguistic or lexical point of view, tabloids expand the English language word stock either by making

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already existing words well known, creating new ones, giving them new uses or even recovering old ones.

This study aims to briefly analyse and explain some examples of word creativity and trendsetting in news related to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's decision to resign as senior members of the British Royal Family and to the aforementioned interview on CBS. For the purposes of this paper, news stories and headlines were collected within the 15–day period following the interview broadcast on 7 March 2021 from the printed version of the best-selling British tabloid, *The Sun*. Headlines were primarily selected to explore neologisms or lexical creativity as they are the most important resources used to attract readers' attention to the content of an article (Schneider, 2000; Richardson, 2007). Headlines are not only the first element that readers view or scan to get an idea of the message, but are the most striking, attractive and read part of newspapers (Van Dijk, 1988; Isani, 2011). It is here that journalists are especially playful with language, making innovative, concise and effective lexical choices or simply creating new lexical items to grab readers' attention and influence their interpretation of a particular event, as claimed by Fairclough (1995) and Reah (2002). Leigh (1994) notes that headlines include short words, widespread use of puns, word play and alliteration. Such lexical creativity and playful lexical devices in headlines tend to make them short, catchy and effective.

3. *Megxit* and beyond

Productive word-formation mechanisms have provided a good number of neologisms related to Harry and Meghan's story. Amongst other word-formation processes, blending is particularly used in news stories and headlines not only for its conciseness and transparency in most cases but also for its impact and effectiveness. Blending consists of joining together parts of two or more words. These parts, or at least one part, are not morphemes or morphs but splinters, that is, a priori meaningless word chunks which become meaningful in the new combination (Cannon, 1986).

Within the 'royal' frame, the most well known blend is probably *Megxit*, though Harry and Meghan's tale had already begun with their *Kisstory* (kiss+history) in May 2018 (*The Sun*, 20 May 2018, front page). *Kisstory* appeared one day after their wedding with a brief explanatory gloss of 'KISSTORY. Harry & Meg's historic change for monarchy', which anticipated a historic

development, albeit not the one that ended up taking place, and unexpected at that time. That is to say, the marriage between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, an African-American divorced actress, was initially perceived as a major change. It implied progress towards modernization in the British monarchy, especially due to the implications that Prince Harry marrying an African-American divorcee and actress had for the traditional British monarchy. However, no one could have anticipated what was to come next which was their withdrawal as working royals and their impactful world-renowned interview. This even has been interpreted as a severe threat to the Royal Family, its members and the British monarchy itself.

Megxit (*Meghan+exit*), a transparent blend with phonological and orthographical overlapping, was created in analogy with the well-known blend *Brexit* (*Britain+exit*), a term coined with reference to the 2016 United Kingdom referendum on European Union membership, meaning 'the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union' (see LEXICO). It may be argued that *-exit* has become a productive combining form in English (see Lalić–Krstin & Silaški, 2018) with the meaning of 'unilateral withdrawal from an institution'. Its now almost forgotten origin seems to be traceable to *Grexit*, a word created in 2012 to refer to the potential departure of Greece from the European Union during its economic crisis (see Macmillan Dictionary). While most of the examples (*Brexit* and *Grexit*, but also *Frexit*, *Germexit*, *Calexit*, *Spexit*, *Swexit*, etc.) seem to follow the pattern 'country withdrawal from an institution', in *Megxit* (and others like *Trumpexit* or *Mexit* [*Messi + exit*]), the pattern changes from a country or toponym to a person or eponym. That is, the word *exit* is blended or combined with a proper noun to mean 'person who unexpectedly, unilaterally and drastically leaves an institution' or 'the withdrawal of the name bearer from an institution'.

The word *Megxit* is an example of how a proper name rather than a title, in this case of a former celebrity and a member of a royal family, is used to create a neologism, probably to give the latter a touch of familiarity and to connect with readers. As Fowler (1991: 15) maintains, first names in the media help to promote 'feelings of identification, empathy or disapproval' or to produce 'a metonymic simplification of a complex historical or institutional narrative'. The use of the name *Meg (han)* may be due to several reasons. For example, the name may potentially create a feeling of identification and make the person feel closer to the

reader. However, in the British tabloids, Meghan came to be depicted as the person causing damage to the royal institution. Hence, the use of her first name may only be for purposes of conciseness and effectiveness. In addition, it is not rare for first names without a corresponding title to refer to royalty in tabloids, but in Meghan's case it is even more common since she is a former celebrity. In fact, blending is currently often used for naming, as in commercial brands (e.g. *MiracOILous* or *Frogurt*) or to refer to celebrity couples (e.g. *Brangelina* [*Brad (Pitt)+Angelina (Jolie)*], *Bennifer* [*Ben (Affleck)+Jennifer (Lopez)*], or more recently, *Kimye* [*Kim (Kardashian)+Kanye (West)*]).

Chronologically, the neologism *Megxit* had already been used in 2019. For example, a documentary called *60 Minutes Australia* broadcast on Channel 9 on 8 September 2019 featured *Megxit* in the following way:

> Megxit! How Meghan Markle lost her sparkle. From adored to insufferable in less than a year. What went wrong for Meghan, and how it affects hubby Harry. Can the ghost of Princess Diana save a fairytale?[1]

Nevertheless, the word was actually popularised when the Megxit event itself took place on 8 January 2020, with the withdrawal of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle from the British Royal Family. The decision was announced on Instagram as a 'step back as "senior" members of the Royal Family', where the couple would split their time between the United Kingdom and North America, and become financially independent, as reported in *The Times*.[2] Within a few hours, Megxit became a hashtag on Twitter (#megxit) and now it may no longer be considered a neologism since it is included in dictionaries, such as the *Collins Dictionary* and *Macmillan Dictionary*.[3] The latter defines *Megxit* as 'a humorous term for the decision of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex to step back from their royal duties'.[4] However, far from it being humorous, it is our belief that the term has negative connotations and implies a high degree of criticism. Its derogatory meaning may be inferred, for instance, from the existence of 'petitions to reclaim the word' like that found at https://captainsupersteph.tumblr.com/, where the following is stated:

> Petition to reclaim the word '**Megxit**' like we reclaimed the word 'bitch.'
> **Megxit's new definition**: to leave a toxic environment that was threatening or physical and/or mental health.

> **Example**: I'm so proud of Lex, she **megxited** from her stressful corporate job and the glow up is real!
> #meghan markle #megxit #prince harry #oprah winfrey #oprah with meghan and harry #british royalty

It is important to underline that although the Duke and Duchess of Sussex decided to 'step back', it is only Meghan who is selected to create a concise and effective label for the process. Why not *Sussexit* or *Harxit*? Apart from morphological reasons such as the overlap in *Megxit*, which is key for a well-rounded blend compared to lack of conciseness in the case of *Sussexit*, it is highly probable that this lexical choice responds to the existence of some kind of sympathy for Harry or at least a desire to make him less responsible, coupled with dislike for his wife. Criticism is clearly behind the use of *Megxit*, as reinforced by headlines like 'Civil war as Harry & Meg quit the Royals' and 'Queen sad . . . Charles and Wills furious' in the front page of *The Sun* (9 January 2020). The decision is associated with wrongdoing, allegedly initiated by Meghan Markle ' . . . Harry said racism was a major factor in their decision to spark Megxit. Prince has to share Megxit blame' or also as a conflict or quarrel as in '*Megxit row explodes*'. Still, as stated above, British tabloids seem to show some kind of empathy towards Prince Harry, but not towards Meghan. Statements like the following provide some justification when Harry's name is mentioned:

> Harry and Meghan also suggested the decision not to make Archie a prince with full HRH status was racist – and Harry said racism was a major factor in their decision *to spark Megxit* and quit the UK for America (emphasis added; *The Sun*, 9 March 2021, front cover).

After all, Harry is the member of the Royal Family, and a Briton, while Meghan, an American, is negatively depicted as unsupportive of her husband. This is evident in the example from Channel 9 (8 September 2019). Megan is also the agent of a crisis and the person who chose to escape the situation. As argued in Weidhase (2021):

> Markle is seen as rejuvenating the British monarchy by injecting some much-needed diversity and progressive politics . . . However, her articulations of progressive racialised and feminised politics are equally considered a threat to the cohesion of the Royal Family, and by extension the nation. As such, Markle's mediated royal femininity is overburdened with meaning from both ends of the political

spectrum, and highlights the gendered dimensions of dominant Brexit discourses.

Meghan Markle is not only the subject, but also the agent and the person who caused this unexpected situation. Furthermore, within a gender-biased approach, Meghan as a woman is the temptation, the origin of evil and wrongdoing, the one who leads Harry astray.

Apart from the meaning restriction of *-exit*, there has also been an extension of meaning with the general sense of 'move abroad', either for other royals, such as Princess Sofia of Sweden or Prince Joachim of Denmark[5], or even for non-royals as in 'What if your client wants to do a 'Megxit'?'[6] Also, the meaning of 'leaving the Royal Family' may metonymically lead to 'becoming a republic', as has been said about Australia.[7] Moreover, the rapid integration of 'Megxit' in language use, on the one hand, and journalists' creativity, on the other, has led to the pluralization of the noun (e.g. 'The megxits are probably moving to cleveland'[8]) but also to its conversion to a verb, as in '. . . who dramatically quit – or 'Megxited' – Britain's royal family a year and six pandemic lifetimes ago'[9]; 'More than 20 years later, her younger son has Megxited, following what seems a similar script: Appeal for public sympathy, release a tell-all book, emerge even more popular and beloved'[10]; or 'They're fully Megxiting. Meghan Markle and Prince Harry will give up their royal titles, Buckingham Palace announced'.[11] It may even function as a modifier with an adjectival function, as in '"She's more than a pretty face, she actually is an amazing person – she's strong, committed and really inspirational," he told the TV station of the Megxiting royal.'[12]

If *Megxit* has been created by analogy with *Brexit*, the neologism *Megxit* and its increasing popularity have also served as a model for new coinages such as *Megxile* (*Meg*+*exile*) and *Megsplit* (*Meg*+*split*), which are clearly related and associated with the initial word both formally and semantically. Though apparently identical and extremely transparent, the latter is not a blend formation but a compound or a clipped compound, created by linking together two independently existing noun forms, *Meg* and *split*. As Bauer (1983: 42) explained, in order to help readers to realise that there is a neologism in the text, *Megsplit* is followed by an explanation or complete gloss to provide more information and enable audiences to understand the new word. Thus, in this case, the tabloid adds that after the separation of

Harry and Meghan from the rest of the Royal Family, 'She and Harry lost their patronages and military titles after Megxit but remain Duke and Duchess' (*The Sun*, 5 March 2021). Similarly, the blend formation *Megxile* appears on the front page of *The Sun* (8 March 2021) in large capital letters, accompanied by copy explaining and providing further information, as in 'Meghan may never return here'.

Another name-based blended neologism, comparatively minor in terms of usage, is *Moperah*, a three-component blend (**M**eghan+**opera**+**Opr**ah), as in 'Windsor Castle and Palace staff have dubbed the chat "Moperah" after seeing whingey teasers'; 'Staff at Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace have already dubbed the interview "Moperah" after seeing the teasers last week' (*The Sun*, 7 March 2021). The blend is especially interesting given that it incorporates three nouns, i.e. a common one and two proper names. Regarding its origin, *The Sun* attributes it to 'insiders' (a frequent strategy to not name sources, but also used when such sources are non-existent), but all quotes can be traced back to *The Sun*.

In addition to the preceding, other syntactic blends. i.e. phrase-like blends, or blends created above the word level have been identified. These are playful and, to some extent, humorous nonce formations which are also completely transparent through almost full phonemic overlap of the source elements and also various degrees of graphemic overlap. *Annus Harribilis* (Annus Horribilis + Harry) refers to the bad or awful year that the Royal Family has suffered due to Prince Harry and his wife's withdrawal or abandonment of his family duties, though this formation is not new (see, for example, other puns with the name Harry involve 'After The Harry Hill Movie's mixed reception and the early closure of his X Factor musical, it's been what you'd call an "annus Harribilis" for the big-collared loon'[13]; 'The FA CUP e-on FA CUP FINAL: REDKNAPP ON HIS ANNUS HARRIBILIS').[14] Similarly, *Sisters-in-war* (*sisters-in-law*+*war*) is used to describe in a humorous way the misunderstandings and quarrels between the sisters-in-law, Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle. Finally, the proper name Meg replaces 'make' to create the nonce expression *Meg me smile* (*Meg*+*Make me smile*). The phonological near-homophony creates minimal pairs and an element of surprise, which catches the readers' eye and has a humorous purpose. These three are good examples of phrasal blending and wordplay relying on existing lexical items, used by journalists as mechanisms for

lexical expansion, contributing to minimising the seriousness of Harry and Meghan's abandonment and, more importantly, to attract readers' attention.

4. Conclusion

The Sussexes' withdrawal from the British Royal Family has led to an array of neologisms based on word creativity in media sources. British tabloids in particular, as one of the drivers of linguistic creativity and of lexical innovation and change, have become trendsetters of newly created and unusual words such as *Megxit*, as seen above. They have also confirmed the importance and pervasiveness of word play in general and blends in particular, which are used to engage readers. Furthermore, they have contributed to the extension, general knowledge and current widespread use of such lexical elements, and even their capacity to activate other word-formation mechanisms to create newly derived elements (conversion of nouns to verbs, adjectival uses, etc.). This may be yet another case where the impact of large-scale events which affect, impact or change society, mainly at health, economic or political levels, also has a parallel impact on the dynamics of language and language evolution. It is at those moments or periods of change where word inventiveness and lexical or word-formation mechanisms are rapidly activated in order to respond to and follow social developments and meet language users' needs at various linguistic levels. Pure neologisms, but also semantic changes or reactivation of existing words, gain great importance. Tabloids and the media play an essential role in this linguistic scenario, not only as 'creators' but also as expanders and trendsetters.

Notes

1 Channel 9. *60 Minutes Australia* broadcast. 8 September 2019. Online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaNS6RD-66M> (Accessed 8 July 2021).
2 *The Times.* Online at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/words-of-the-year-meghan-and-harry-have-left-but-megxit-is-in-dictionary-to-stay-2zvwkkhqf> (Accessed 8 July 2021).
3 *Collins Dictionary.* Online at <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/megxit>.
4 *MacMillan Dictionary*. Online at <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/megxit>.
5 On Princess Sofia of Sweden, see 'Sweden's Princess Sofia asked if she would "do a Megxit" in new doco.' By Kahla Preston. Online at <https://honey.nine.com.au/royals/princess-sofia-sweden-interview-leave-royal-family/

a7c86c00-35e7-4366-a7ef-16a4f8bc6b53>, n/d (Accessed 10 June, 2021); on Prince Joachim of Denmark, see 'Mary's shock family split.' n/a. *Woman's Day Magazine NZ*, 8 June 2020. Online at <https://www.magzter.com/es/stories/Womens-Interest/Womans-Day-Magazine-NZ/MARYS-SHOCK-FAMILY-SPLIT> (Accessed 10 June, 2021).
6 'What if your client wants to do a "Megxit"?' By Laura Kearns. Online at < https://www.ftadviser.com/property/2020/01/28/what-if-your-client-wants-to-do-a-megxit/>, 28 January 2020 (Accessed 24 June, 2021).
7 'Is it time for Australia to do a Megxit?' By Daniel McCulloch. Online at https://www.aap.com.au/is-it-time-for-australia-to-do-a-megxit/, 21 January 2020 (Accessed 1 June, 2021).
8 'the megxits are probably moving to cleveland.' By Mark McKenzie. Online at <https://www.brokaw.com/blog/the-megxits-are-probably-moving-to-cleveland/> 1 October 2020 (Accessed 10 July, 2021).
9 'No Megxit.' By Jon Allsop. *The Media Today*, 4 March 2021. Online at <https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/meghan_harry_oprah_interview.php> (Accessed 2 December. 2021).
10 'Why we're sympathetic to Princess Diana – but not Harry and Meghan.' By Maureen Callahan. *New York Post,* 14 August 2020. Online at <https://nypost.com/2020/08/14/why-were-sympathetic-to-princess-diana-but-not-harry-and-meghan/> (Accessed 2 December, 2021).
11 'Prince Harry and Meghan Markle to give up their titles, Buckingham Palace says.' By Tim Balk, New York Daily News. *Anchorage Daily News*, 18 January 2021. Online at <https://www.adn.com/nation-world/2020/01/18/prince-harry-and-meghan-markle-to-give-up-their-titles-buckingham-palace-says/> (Accessed 2 December, 2021).
12 'UK schoolboy apologizes to Prince Harry for "cuddling" Meghan Markle'. By Lee Brown. *Page Six*, 9 March 2020. Online at <https://pagesix.com/2020/03/09/uk-schoolboy-apologizes-to-prince-harry-for-cuddling-meghan-markle/> (Accessed 2 December, 2021).
13 'COMEDY DVDS'. By Mark Wareham. *The Irish Mail*, 30 November 2014. Online at <https://www.pressreader.com/ireland/the-irish-mail-on-sunday/20141130/284309658181012> (Accessed 2 December, 2021).
14 'Cup glory will lift my dear wife, says Harry Redknapp. The FA CUP e-on FA CUP FINAL: REDKNAPP ON HIS ANNUS HARRIBILIS'. By Paul Smith. *Mirror*, 11 May 2008. Online at <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/cup-glory-will-lift-my-dear-wife-727393> (Accessed 2 December, 2021).

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