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SPEAKING OF 'NUNAVUT': A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL CREATIVITY IN CANADIAN NEWS DISCOURSE

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to investigate lexical creativity around the word 'Nunavut' in Canadian news discourse through a qualitative and quantitative analysis conducted on a subcorpus of the *News On the Web Corpus* (*CaNOW*). When on April 1, 1999 a new territory was officially created by the Canadian government out of the Northwest Territories, the term 'Nunavut' entered the Canadian English vocabulary. It was not a neologism, though, but a borrowing from Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit, meaning 'our homeland', capitalised to become a brand new place-name. In recent years the term has undergone a series of morphological and syntactic processes of adaptation, integration and naturalization, forming derivations and compounds. The existing item has, therefore, been manipulated, combined and recombined to form creative lexical inventions (Pope 2005), being that compounding is one of the most used word-forming processes in English (Munat 2015). The analysis shows that news discourse is a fertile ground for new vocabulary, since productive word-formation processes are used to popularize new items. By adopting a discourse analytical approach, the intent is also to state what is the political meaning of creativity, i.e. how linguistic innovation can be used to reshape social relationships and create new social identities.

Keywords: lexical creativity; Canadian English; news discourse.

1. *Introduction*

In *Language and Creativity, the Art of Common Talk*, Ronald Carter (2004) maintains that creative language is not to be looked at as something separate from the social conditions of its production. On the contrary, "it is seen as something that is co-constructed in interaction and dialogue […] in a wide variety of different forms of communication" (p. xviii). It is, then, a product of the people who use language to accomplish the most diverse social functions. The implications of such a

statement are numerous. Firstly, it confirms that in the past twenty years the academic interest towards creativity has shifted from considering creativity in language as an exclusive feature of the artistic/literary realm to seeing it as a condition of everyday communication and interaction, operating in groups of peoples and individuals (Swann 2012; Holmes 2007). Seen in this light, creativity can be understood broadly "as a property of all language use in that language users do not simply reproduce but recreate, refashion, re-contextualise linguistic and cultural resources in the act of communicating" (Swann and Maybin 2007: 493). The second implication of Carter's perspective, strictly related to the first, is that it places language creativity within a network of social and cultural interactions that are inevitably affected and changed by the ultimate products of linguistic creativity. The considerations that follow move from these assumptions and draw on Rodney Jones's (2010) approach that sees a strong relationship between discourse and creativity, which will be used here as a starting point to explore a case of lexical creativity in Canada in light of "the broader social, cultural and critical dimensions of discourse" (Jones 2010: 467). Our initial hypothesis is that lexical creativity occurring in the form of borrowing, compounding and unique collocates can be used strategically to create changes that have a socio-political impact. The creative formations that we will analyse herein are nonce formations (Bauer 2001), or spontaneous creations, used in few occasions, not yet part of the norm of the language, but still coined to cover some immediate communication needs. By looking at recent cases of linguistic coinage in Canada involving the word 'Nunavut' since it entered the Canadian dictionary after the formation of the homonymous territory in 1999, we are going to discuss some creative acts of language in the news domain as strategies used to build a new territorial identity.

According to Jones, "[…] creative products, whether they be durable artefacts such as written texts, or more ephemeral verbal phenomena, or phenomena that may not seem on the surface to have much to do with language at all (such as paintings, machines, music, social identities and social practices), all depend on the interaction of cognitive processes, social processes and semiotic resources" (2010: 2). By arranging and rearranging the finite number of semiotic resources that we can use as speakers, language allows us to articulate the world and create new social relationships through the inventive production of infinite creative linguistic solutions. The discourse-analytical approach to language creativity that Jones adopts is one that concentrates on the social impact of inventiveness in language rather than on the formal aspects of the creative product. In other words, it highlights how the

creative potential of language used in situated social contexts can lead to the creation of new kinds of social practices, power relationships and even social identities. And it, consequently, requires paying attention to what stands within and beyond the text, in order to catch the network of relationships surrounding it. Ultimately, in light of this, by means of creativity in language use, hegemonic discourses (Fairclough 1992) can be transformed and undermined by shifting power relations to create "possibilities for social action that did not exist at the outset of the interaction" (Jones 2010: 473).

2. *Methodology and research questions*

This study relies on Corpus Linguistics as a method to investigate linguistic creativity in a discourse-analytical perspective. Electronic corpora have been an asset to the study of creativity, pushing forward the field of Creativity Studies (Carter 2004), especially since findings from Corpus Creativity Studies have shown that creativity is not literature-exclusive (Vo and Carter 2010). Although corpora, intended as collections of texts (Biber *et al.* 1998), normally testify to recurrent patterns of language and are analysed as "a sample of the language" (Sinclair 1996: 4), nonetheless they can be used to detect uniqueness and creativity in that they provide "a background of what is normal and expected in general language use" (Stubbs 2005: 5). According to Vo and Carter, "corpora, if carefully compiled (or properly chosen), will be far more representative of the norms of contemporary English than any existing set of prescriptive rules, providing much more accurate backgrounds for analyses of creativity/uniqueness" (2010: 304). However, to spot novelty across corpora is not an easy task, given the current state of software tools that do not allow the automatic retrieving of creative choices, and the still needed additions to corpus annotation systems. Yet, searches for variants may be conducted by adopting qualitative methods, repeated searches of key words or on the basis of existing hypotheses.

The methodology adopted in this study cannot but take into account the numerous studies conducted in the field of Corpus Linguistics, especially the models of analysis provided by Baker and Gabrielatos (2008), McEnery and Hardie (2012) and Tognini-Bonelli (2001). Our study involves a set of software filters used to detect novel uses of the word 'Nunavut' and their collocational environments in the *News on the Web* (*NOW*) *Corpus*. The *NOW* corpus[1], created by Mark Davies, is

[1] Online at *https://corpus.byu.edu/now/*, last accessed April 10, 2018.

web-based and contains over 4.9 billion words from online magazines and newspapers in twenty English-speaking countries, collected from 2010 to the present day. Being a web-based corpus it offers a customizable interface that allows its users to create their own virtual corpora, selecting specific time-frames and/or countries. Our search was limited to a specifically created subcorpus of the *NOW* corpus that we named *CaNOW* Corpus, of 4 million words, collected between 2010 and 2016. The *CaNOW* corpus includes 5541 news articles from online news providers physically based in Canada. Some of the newspapers included in the corpus, such as the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, have a national focus. Others, like the *Windsor Star*, the *Edmonton Journal* and *Nunatsiaq News*, have a more local or provincial coverage. Of these, *Nunatsiaq News* is a web-based newspaper offering the most interesting findings, as we will discuss shortly. This is Nunavut's bilingual newspaper, founded in 1973, issued weekly in English and Inuktitut and based in Iqaluit, the capital of the northern territory.

Our initial hypothesis is that since the name 'Nunavut' has entered the Canadian dictionary in 1999, the term has been used to generate a number of linguistic inventions, using existing rules in English to create unique lexical manipulations. The aim of the analysis is to detect such unique lexical features generated from 'Nunavut' and to observe them in light of how they "integrate ideas in our conceptual system that have not been previously connected" (Lamb 1998: 205). In Munat's words, "creative lexical inventions are new words produced intentionally by the speakers, generally formed analogically on the models of other words in the lexicon" (2015: 95). While according to Antoinette Renouf lexical creativity in journalism as in literary prose or poetry "is employed for the purposes of achieving certain stylistic effects, such as humour or irony" (2007: 71), our initial steps move from the assumption that some of the linguistic creativity involving 'Nunavut' in our corpus serve an impellent communicative need. Therefore, our intent is to address the following research questions:

1. Can an inventive linguistic product be used to fill a linguistic gap that produces a set of new social, cultural and political relationships? And, consequently, a new way of seeing given realities?
2. How can loanwords be manipulated and circulated in order to be shared?

3. *The linguistic coinage of 'Nunavut'*

Before 1999, the northernmost region of Canada was simply known as 'The Northwest Territories'. In years of exploration and colonization of North America, Europeans and then Canadians had not showed much creativity in naming the area, probably because of the lack of strong economic interests and the fierce living conditions. However, the land was not a lifeless, frozen desolation, as discourses of 'nordism' claimed in travel journals of the early explorers (Rudiger 2009). On the contrary, it has been inhabited since time immemorial by the Inuit, previously misnamed as 'Eskimos'. Between the Inuit and the land there is no relationship of ownership but of land use and this is very well symbolized at the level of lexicon by the Inuktitut word *nunavut*. Inuktitut belongs to the Eskimo-Aleut family (Allen 1996) and is the language spoken by the Inuit. As other languages belonging to the same family, Inuktitut is well-known for being extremely polysynthetic since one word made of several morphemes may express what would normally take a sentence of several words in other more analytic languages (Allen 1996: 14). 'Nunavut' offers an example of this feature. The suffix *-vut* broadly translates into English as 'our', not much in the sense of possession, but more in terms of a place where one lives, or which is used without implying a relationship of ownership, while the root *nuna* refers to the land as home where dwelling in without owning, and includes everything existing therein. The term is culturally loaded with meanings that lead back to the Artic demography and traditions, as it states that the Inuit have been the Aboriginal people of Nunavut and they are part of the Artic landscape and seascape.

In 1993, after continued demands for more independence had come from the Inuit living in the Northwest Territories, the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act* and the *Nunavut Act* were signed and started the formation process of a new territory on the federal ground. It was the biggest land rights agreement to be signed in the history of Canada, as it covered one-fifth of Canada's land mass and a very large marine area. It was also the first time that the term *nunavut*, reclaimed by the Inuit as the place-name for their land, entered the language of the Canadian government as a borrowing taken from Inuktitut and used officially in mainstream Canadian English to indicate a land rights settlement with the Crown. In 1999 the territory of Nunavut was officially created, so the term gained another meaning, its official one, that of a territory carved out of the existing Northwest Territories and equipped with its own government, celebration day (July 9) and official languages (Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, English and French). Consequently, *nunavut* ceased to be a mere Inuktitut word and became a Canadian proper noun, cap-

italised to designate a geographic area of 350,000 square kilometres, 23% of Canada's land mass.

At the level of discourse, the term has made semantic space for Inuit sovereignty over their land in contemporary Canadian English and has consistently undermined the colonial discourses of exploitation and otherness brought by the previously imposed place-name 'Northwest Territories'. In fact, the previous name was not simply descriptive, but had been strategically used to erase the history of Inuit presence on their land, revealing a flaw in the ideological construction of 'the North'. Linguistically, as a borrowing from Inuktitut, *nunavut* has gone through the three stages of borrowing described by Picoche and Marchello-Nizia (1989). At the first stage, the term was taken from Inuktitut and started to be used as a foreign word. At the second stage, *nunavut* was adapted phonologically, morphosyntactically and semantically to Canadian English, resulting, for instance, from the transcription of the Inuktitut word ᓄᓇᕗᑦ[2] into the Latin alphabet, then capitalised to adapt semantically and morphologically to the hosting language. At the third stage of borrowing, the term was 'naturalized' and brought about more considerable transformations that will be discussed in the next section. At this stage the word has been used to form derivatives that do not exist in the donor language and is treated like a lexical item of the borrower language. This last stage involves a certain amount of creativity, as the major word-forming processes of derivation, compounding and inflection give rise to creative lexical inventions. This is also the stage we are mostly interested in.

4. *Results and discussion*

'Nunavut' has firstly been used alone as an entry term to check the overall frequency of the word in the *CaNOW Corpus*. The word occurs 21,313 times, most of them in news items from *Nunatsiaq News*. The frequency rate suggests that, broadly speaking, there is not much talking of Nunavut outside the territory, on a national scale. What is of interest, though, is the way in which the term is manipulated in order to form new creations following what normally happens with other territory and province names in Canada, for example Ontario. The corpus

[2] Syllabics are the most common writing system in Nunavut. The writing system was developed by James Evans for Cree, since Indigenous languages used to be spoken-only languages. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Cree syllabics were adapted to fit Inuktitut. In 1976 the writing system was standardized with the creation of a double orthographical system both in syllabic and Roman characters (Hot 2009).

was further investigated to search for occurrences of 'Nunavut-*', in order to include word formations having 'Nunavut' in the position of modifier. The results showed 36 compounds of two kinds, *name+adjective* and *name+noun*, part of which are showed in Table 1, occurring 147 times throughout the corpus. In some way, the findings come as no surprise given that compounding itself is one of the most creative processes in English (Benczes 2006).

The compounds emerging from the search (Table 1) are descriptive and range from 'Nunavut-based', being the most common (47 occurrences) to 'Nunavut-centered' (only one occurrence). Interestingly, while the first items in the list occur in news reports taken from the *Toronto Star* and *CBC.ca*, the most unusual compounds (with one or two occurrences) are those created by *Nunatsiaq News* and in some cases they find no correspondence with compounded forms where one constituent is, for instance, 'Ontario'. In order to detect the most creative compounds in this list we decided to compare it with one generated for 'Ontario-*'. As we can see in Table 2, while 'Ontario-based' and 'Ontario-born' show a very high frequency rate being the most common compounds, 'Nunavut-centred', 'Nunavut-tailored' and 'Nunavut-supported' from Table 1 find no correspondence in the Ontario list. This means that these compounds are new, although quite transparent, forms, specific to the reality of Nunavut in that they are coined to fill a semantic gap on the basis of common productive patterns. Nonetheless, the process leading to the results is creative in that these lexemes are coined to refer to brand new concepts. As for the low frequency, it is assumed with Dorothy Kenny (2001) that creative word forms are those that occur with a very low frequency in a given corpus. This seems to be the case if we compare the total occurrences of 'Nunavut-based' (47) and 'Ontario-based' (1100), that are the two most recurrent compounded forms in the two lists, with 'Nunavut-tailored' (1) and 'Nunavut-centered' (1), which are much less frequent and, therefore, more creative.

Compounds	# Occurrences
Nunavut-based	47
Nunavut-wide	31
Nunavut-specific	17
Nunavut-born	16
Nunavut-raised	5
Nunavut-owned	4

Compounds	# Occurrences
Nunavut-bound	3
Nunavut-focused	2
Nunavut-made	2
Nunavut-produced	2
Nunavut-set	2
Nunavut-tailored	1
Nunavut-supported	1
Nunavut-style	1
Nunavut-led	1
Nunavut-inclusive	1
Nunavut-generated	1
Nunavut-derived	1
Nunavut-bred	1
Nunavut-commissioned	1
Nunavut-centered	1

Table 1. Compounded forms of *Nunavut* in the *CaNOW*

Compounds	# Occurrences
Ontario-based	1100
Ontario-born	180
Ontario-wide	132
Ontario-grown	111
Ontario-made	63
Ontario-bred	30
Ontario-raised	22
Ontario-native	16
Ontario-focused	16

Compounds	# Occurrences
Ontario-style	9
Ontario-produced	8
Ontario-specific	8
Ontario-led	5
Ontario-bound	5
Ontario-owned	5
Ontario-inspired	3
Ontario-set	2

Table 2. Compounded forms of 'Ontario' in the *CaNOW*

The least recurrent compounds in the Nunavut list that do not find a correspondent in the Ontario list are not mere inventive linguistic products but seem to have a pragmatic value in that they play a role in building a discourse of Nunavut as a place with its own specific history and needs which make it different from other territories and provinces.

4.1 The case of 'Nunavummiut'

The second case under discussion is that of the loanword 'Nunavummiut'. While Nunavut was officially formed as a territory in 1999, still there was no term to name the people from Nunavut. Although the majority of Nunavut's inhabitants are of Inuit descent (85%), yet there is another 15% of people of other than Inuit identity living on the territory, which explains why the word 'Inuit' is not appropriate and would leave space for semantic inaccuracy. Therefore, in 2003, 'Nunavummiut' became part of the *Canadian English Dictionary* to designate all people from Nunavut. The term, borrowed from Inuktitut, derives from *nuna* by means of suffixation with the collective *-miut*, which identifies families and communities, and the spaces and places they live in and use. While in Inuktitut 'nunavummiut' indicates people who have with the land they live on a relationship of identification, in Canadian English the word has gained the role of ethnonym to designate Nunavut citizens. It was therefore capitalised accordingly. Interestingly, in Canadian English other ethnonyms, like 'Ontarian' or 'Albertan', rely on the suffix '-an/-ian', which is very productive. In our case, 'Nunavummiut' was chosen by the newly formed Government of Nunavut to ensure the formation of a new territorial identity which relied on demographic

presence and cultural tradition, and could incorporate all Inuit as well as the people of non-Inuit descent into a common identity (Légaré 2002).

Once used as an entry term for our search, we noticed that occurrences of 'Nunavummiut' in the *CaNOW Corpus* total 727. Again, 80% of the results come from *Nunatsiaq News*. The word is mainly used as a noun (Table 3), although in a smaller percentage of instances it also occurs as a modifier, in which cases it is normally followed by collective nouns or plurals as in the following example: "Asked to update its plans for spill response equipment and annual training to *Nunavummiut* communities […]" (*Nunatsiaq News*, 06/01/2015).

Phrases	**# Occurrences**
young Nunavummiut	9
other Nunavummiut	9
fellow Nunavummiut	6
homeless Nunavummiut	4
prominent Nunavummiut	3
disabled Nunavummiut	2
deaf Nunavummiut	2
eligible Nunavummiut	2
unemployed Nunavummiut	1
successful Nunavummiut	1

Table 3. Collocates for 'Nunavummiut' (N) in the *CaNOW Corpus*

Retrieved data were compared to the results obtained from a parallel search within the same corpus, using 'Ontarian' as an entry term. The word was chosen as a standard ethnonym deriving from the placename 'Ontario' with the intent of highlighting creative uses of the word 'Nunavummiut' which deviate from the norm or are, in some ways, unexpected or unique. What emerged is that 'Ontarian' is much less used compared to 'Nunavummmiut' (401 times vs. 727); the result already suggests something relevant at the level of discourse: there is more necessity to build Nunavut territorial identities by means of intensive usage of a relatively new word such as 'Nunavummiut', compared

to what happens with regard to other provincial realities. Furthermore, 'Ontarian' mainly occurs in national newspapers such as the *National Post* or *MetroNews Canada*, whereas 'Nunavummiut' is mostly used in news articles in the *Nunatsiaq News*, which suggests that the attention is local rather than national. Another aspect to highlight is the way the terms collocate. While 'Nunavummiut' is almost exclusively followed by plural nouns when it is used as a modifier or by verbs in the plural form, 'Ontarian' tends to collocate with singular nouns or verbs in the third person singular. It may be argued that the ways in which 'Nunavummiut' is used involve the creation of novel texts and inter-texts that aim at building, discursively, the cultural identity of people from Nunavut. In fact, the most common verb collocating with 'Nunavummiut' is 'are' (42 occurrences), followed by verbs of action such as 'challenging', 'facing', 'experiencing', 'doing' and so on, while 'Ontarian' never collocates with the verb 'to be' in the plural form. At a lexical level, the results suggest how 'Nunavummiut' is strategically employed to politically load the discourse on and by Nunavummiut, and to restructure, creatively, norms and practices embedded in how normative ethnonyms such as 'Ontarian' are used.

5. Conclusions

The paper has tried to highlight connections between lexical and discourse creativity by analysing the case of the words 'Nunavut' and 'Nunavummiut' in Canadian news discourse. The idea here is that, starting from lexical creativity, by means of nonce formations (Bauer 2001), discourses can be altered, subverted, invented and changed to restructure positioning practices (Fairclough 1992) and produce new meanings.

It seems possible that inventive linguistic products can be used not only to fill linguistic gaps but also to generate sets of new social, cultural and political relationships. Throughout the *CaNOW Corpus*, uses of the word "Nunavut" with its creative compounds and the derivative 'Nunavummiut' along with its collocates, especially in *Nunatsiaq News* articles, show that cultural identities can be negotiated by means of creative lexical choices which can make some semantic space, new knowledge of and a way to speak about Nunavut, inspired by the communicative context. Before the creation of the territory of Nunavut there was a generic designator to talk about the North, but by adding the loanwords 'Nunavut' and 'Nunavummiut' to the Canadian dictionary, semantic space was made for a new place-name and a new geographic identity

which, nonetheless, bring about an already culturally loaded identity within the broader Canadian national identity.

Therefore, we can conclude that loanwords can be naturalized in ways that create new meanings, in our case circulated through the news. For instance, compounds of the word 'Nunavut' allow discourses on the specificity of Nunavut's history and territorial identity, and collocates of 'Nunavummiut' emerging from *Nunatsiaq News* reports, suggest how, through unique lexical choices, the context of discourse can be altered in ways that draw, for example, 'Nunavummiut' as a collective but still very local identity.

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