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On the Coining of Acronyms by Homonymy

Félix Rodríguez González

I

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 Nacional de Ciegos Españoles*) do not have any logical connection with the meaning of 'sins', 'Sam(uel)', *cima* 'summit', *once* 'eleven'. 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'; and B.C., mostly known as 'Before Christ', also stands for 'Birth Control', 'British Council', 'British Columbia'. 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 Nacional*; by FASA in Valladolid one understands the *Fábrica de Automóviles, S.A.* but in Pamplona it usually refers to the firm *Fundiciones de Alsasua, S.A.* Such homonyms are also found among acronym derivatives with respect to ordinary words, as in Spanish *etólogos* which can refer to specialists in the Basque organization ETA or in animal behaviour, the latter usage being especially frequent in the fields of experimental psychology¹.

There can be cases when the homonymy —or paronymy— in an acronym is rejected for the potential confusion it may create, as happens when the acronym

¹ It is attested with the first meaning in *Cuadernos para el diálogo*, July 1, 1978, p. 14; for an instance of the second, see *El País*, May 15, 1983, p. 11.

with which it conflicts is in common use. Thus in a recent issue of *Time* magazine a journalist mentions the problems the American export agency OPIC has in differentiating itself from OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries)².

Occasionally an acronym may end up altering its form³, but normally a new acronym is recognized 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 the bureaucracy which are usually pronounced alphabetically⁴.

In a similar manner, one may note the deliberate use of initials which result in 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 Therman Oscillator Reactor), HELEN (Hydrogenous Exponential Liquid Experiment), HERMES (Heavy Element and Radioactive Material Electromagnetic Separator), HORACE (H₂O Reactor Aldermaston Critical Experiment), ISIS (Internal 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)⁵, acronyms apparently neu-

² "OPIC, not OPEC", *Time*, Sept. 27, 1982, p. 48. A more general and severe criticism was leveled against homonymy in a letter which a reader sent to *The Times* (Jan. 1, 1964, p. 9): 'Sir, —Will you please start a rigorous campaign to stop our journalists and technical writers, of the English-speaking world, using abbreviations which conflict with those in common parlance. For example, the letters R.P.M., during the past half century and even longer, have meant revolutions per minute whether written R.P.M., RPM, or rpm. Now it would seem that they can mean 'Resale Price Maintenance' as well ...'

³ This is the case of the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile or IBM, as it was termed in the military jargon of the 50's (cf. *Am. Speech*, XXXII, 2, 1957, p. 137), now abbreviated into ICBM, which is probably due to the extensive use of IBM, International Business Machines, meaning computer. Similarly in Spanish the newly founded *Asociación Española de Lingüística Aplicada* has been changed to AESLA and not AELA, as it was first conceived, for its clash with its Ecuadorian counterpart AELA (*Asociación Ecuatoriana...*), thereby avoiding a certain cacophony and the derisive effects which would have resulted from such a form because of its likely association with some paronyms like *hayla* (vulg. for *hay* 'there is'), *aisla* 'cut off'.

⁴ Cf. Félix Rodríguez González, "Variaciones fonotácticas en siglas: condicionamientos lingüísticos y sociolingüísticos", *Revista española de lingüística*, XII, 2 (1982), esp. fn. 12.

⁵ Cf. in French PHEDRE (*Procédé Holographique d'Enregistrement des Données Restituées Electroniquement*), PERICLES (*Prototype Experimental Réalisé Industriellement d'un Commutateur à Logique Electronique Séquentielle*), SOFIA (*Système d'Ordinateurs pour le traitement du Fret International Aérien*), as cited by P. Pamart in "Voyage au pays des acronymes", *Vie et langage*, 237 (1971), pp. 712-3.

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tee to Re-Elect the President), CRAP (Conceptual Reality Alternative Party)¹¹, WITCH (Women International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell)¹².

Neither the former nor the latter have any logical relation with their homonyms, which explains a great part of the humour produced. Thus, in Spanish the name *Falange Española (Auténtica)* which was frequently scribbled on walls as FE(Auténtica) by its own militants, was transformed ingeniously by the pen of a humorist into the form FEA 'ugly' with a clear satirical purpose in mind¹³. With regard to English other cases can be cited, especially when the acronym is assigned as an epithet to a given individual. In spite of the privileged position occupied by the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant in the North-American world, nobody feels flattered when called by its own short form WASP, for its homonymy with the word 'wasp'; at any rate, it continues to be used given its semi-jocular character. But at other times the result is so disagreeable and insulting that the homonym leads to the disuse or alteration of the acronym form, as when the American Secretary of Defense refused to be called SOD in 1952 therefore prompting the use of SECDEF, an acronym based on syllables instead of initial letters¹⁴. Because of these inappropriate connotations one also understands why the acronym BRUTO was objected to in 1954 as a tentative title for the Brussels Treaty Organization; to counter such an effect a reader suggested that they use the spelled out form BTO¹⁵. In like manner the humorous CREEP, mentioned above, has its formal counterpart in the variant C.R.P.¹⁶. Similarly, Baum argues, the acronym U.N. (United Nations) should be given a letter-by-letter instead of a syllabic pronunciation¹⁷.

Furthermore, one may resort to changing one element in the underlying phrase leading to a simultaneous change in the initial as well. Such could be the case in Spanish of the recently abolished *Mando Unico para la Lucha Contraterrorista* (MULC), originally coined as *Mando Unico para la Lucha Antiterrorista* (MULA); in this way a mere change of a word altered the graphemic make-up of the acronym MULA 'mule', thus eliminating the negative associations which could have arisen¹⁸.

¹¹ Name for a participant slate in the students elections of the University of Alberta, Canada, in 1977 (*The Gateway*, Feb. 2, 1977, p. 2).

¹² Cf. Fr. SATAN (*Société Anonyme des Transportes Automobiles Nationaux*).

¹³ *Interviú*, Feb.. 22, 1979, p. 3.

¹⁴ "The Acronymous Society", *Time*, July 28, 1961, p. 39.

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¹⁶ *Time*, August 2, 1982, p. 27.

¹⁷ Nonetheless, in my view, the spelled out pronunciation is not determined by the negative associations that the *un-* prefix could raise but rather by the monosyllabic condition of the term, since the election of the pronunciation pattern is in some way connected with the canonic form of the language. For a more detailed study of this correlation, see Félix Rodríguez González, *Estudio lingüístico de las siglas en español actual* (pp. 20-1) and *Taxonomía de la siglación* (forthcoming).

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ca), URGE (*Unión Revolucionaria de Guinea Ecuatorial*), URJE (*Unión Revolucionaria de la Juventud Ecuatoriana*), PACEM (*Profesores Asociados Católicos de Enseñanzas Medias*)²³. These acronyms have been formed to meet the need for incisiveness 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 purposes²⁴. If the iconic character inherent in the representation of meaning through initials is, in general, in some way reduced by the form of the 'acronym'²⁵, in these cases it 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 ASTHMA (A Society To Help the Morale of Asthmatics), GAS (Gas Appliance Society), JOBS (Jobs Opportunities in the Business Sector), LATINO (Latin American Television International Organization), MEDICO (Medical International Cooperation), PAYE (Pay As You Earn), PEEK (People for the Enjoyment of Eyeballing Knees), SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge), TACT (Tactical Apprehension Containment Team), or in Spanish FIDEL (*Frente de Izquierda de Liberación*, Uruguay), MAO (*Movimiento de Auto-defensa Obrera*, Bolivia), ORDEN (*Organización Democrática Nacionalista*, El Salvador), MANO (*Movimiento Anticomunista Nacional Organizado*, Guatemala), APOYAR (*Asociación Pedagógica de Orientación y Apoyo al Retorno*), VERDE (*Vértice Español de Reivindicación y Desarrollo Ecológico*)²⁶, ANIDA (*Area Natural para' la Investigación Didáctica Ambiental*)²⁷.

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²⁵ Here reference is made to the acronym *stricto sensu*, that is, pronounced as a word (*acronym*) as opposed to the one pronounced alphabetically (*initialism* or *literation*).

²⁶ An ecologist party that participated in the last general elections of October 1982, its emblem being a tree over a green V and its motto, 'A more green, clean and humane Spain' (*El País*, Oct. 25, 1982, p. 18).

²⁷ ANIDA 'makes its nest' is an ecologist project developed by a government institution of Cantabria to alter the course of the waters of the region. Other apposite acronyms equally interesting are: ALAS (*Alianza libertadora de América del Sur*), ANDEMOS (*Asociación Nacional de Importadores de Automóviles*, Colombia), ARPA (*Asociación para la Radiodifusión Privada Argentina*), CRAC (*Cruzada Revolucionaria Anticomunista Cubana*, Estados Unidos), CHE (*Comités de Huelga Estudiantiles*), FARO (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*, Uruguay; *Frente de Acción Revolucionario de Obremos*, Bolivia), FIEL (*Fundación de Investigaciones Económicas Latinoamericanas*), FRENO (*Frente Nacional de Oposición*, Panamá), GAS (*Grupos de Acción Sindicalista*), IDEA (*Instituto de Estudios Asturianos; Asociación para la Investigación, Divulgación y Educación Ambientales; Instituto para el Desarrollo de Ejecutivos en la Argentina*), MAS (*Movimiento Aragonés Social; Movimiento Al Socialismo*, Venezuela; *Movimiento de Acción Social*, Perú; *Muerte A los Secuestradores*, Colombia), OLAS (*Organización Latinoamericana de Solidaridad*), OPINA (*Opinión Nacional*, Venezuela), PAN (*Partido de Acción Nacional*, México; *Comité Privado de Asistencia a la Niñez*, Colombia), PURA (*Partido de Unión Republicana*, Valencia), RENACE (*Regencia Nacional Carlista de Estella*), UNIOS (*Unidad Obrera Social*, Colombia), UNE (*Unión Nacional Española; Unión Nacional de Estudiantes*, Venezuela), UNO (*Unión Nacional de Oposición*, El Salvador). With no wish to be exhaustive, these examples show the roots they are forming in Spanish which again contradicts the assessment made by Wittlin (p. 171).

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reinterpretations are not directly related, they are deeply-rooted in a platonic mentality which tried to see in each word the acrostic of a phrase³³.

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 /o:l kə'rekt/ but this does not seem to have any relation with its original meaning, according to most authoritative opinions. There have been attempts to find various etymological sources for this term not only in English but also in very different languages³⁴. 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 organization, programs, etc., as, for example, 'Save Our Schools', 'Sanity On Sex'. Even something so concrete and relatively recent as the German brand name DKW has received varying lexicographic treatment. Thus, while many dictionaries, among them the Martínez de Sousa, give the initials the meaning *Deutscher Klein Wagen* 'small German car'³⁵, others echo the enthusiastic imagination of some German who would like to see in the initials the abbreviation *Deutscher Klein Wunder* 'small German miracle', or simply *Das Kleine Wunder* 'the small miracle'. Despite the interpretation given by Wittlin (p. 173) as *Deutsche Kraftfahrt-Werke* 'German motor vehicle workshop', it is probable that the original name applies to *Dampfkraftwagen* 'steam-powered wagon', as quoted in a German dictionary³⁶. Algeo also refers to the confusion around the meaning of CARE, where the initials have been taken to express various words: C = Committee, Cooperative; A = Agency, American; R = Relief, Remittances; 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 connotations³⁷. Neither is it relevant to know if the D of the mixed abbreviation D-Day is 'Decision'³⁸ or 'Debarcation'³⁹, since in both glosses the meaning remains the same, that of 'day agreed for the accomplishment of an objective'. A clear example of erroneous

³³ Cf. Wittlin, p. 172.

³⁴ Cf. H. van Hoof, "Une abréviation universelle: O.K.", *Lebende Sprachen*, IX, 3 (1964), pp. 65-6.

³⁵ J. Martínez de Sousa, *Diccionario internacional de SIGLAS* (Madrid: Pirámide, 1978).

³⁶ According to *Bertelsmann Volkslexicon* (Berlin and Stuttgart, 1956; rpt. 1960), DKW was used as a trademark in the steam engine factory of Zschopau where they first made steam engines, and later motorcycles and small cars.

³⁷ Cf. Algeo, p. 229.

³⁸ Cf. M. Pei, *The Story of the English Language* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1952; rpt. 1967), p. 262.

³⁹ Cf. A. Ehrentreich "Abkürzungen im Amerikanischen", *Die Lebenden Fremdsprachen*, 1 (1949), p. 220.

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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 /o:l kə'rekt/ but this does not seem to have any relation with its original meaning, according to most authoritative opinions. There have been attempts to find various etymological sources for this term not only in English but also in very different languages³⁴. 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 organization, programs, etc., as, for example, 'Save Our Schools', 'Sanity On Sex'. Even something so concrete and relatively recent as the German brand name DKW has received varying lexicographic treatment. Thus, while many dictionaries, among them the Martínez de Sousa, give the initials the meaning *Deutscher Klein Wagen* 'small German car'³⁵, others echo the enthusiastic imagination of some German who would like to see in the initials the abbreviation *Deutscher Klein Wunder* 'small German miracle', or simply *Das Kleine Wunder* 'the small miracle'. Despite the interpretation given by Wittlin (p. 173) as *Deutsche Kraftfahrt-Werke* 'German motor vehicle workshop', it is probable that the original name applies to *Dampfkraftwagen* 'steam-powered wagon', as quoted in a German dictionary³⁶. Algeo also refers to the confusion around the meaning of CARE, where the initials have been taken to express various words: C = Committee, Cooperative; A = Agency, American; R = Relief, Remittances; 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 connotations³⁷. Neither is it relevant to know if the D of the mixed abbreviation D-Day is 'Decision'³⁸ or 'Debarcation'³⁹, since in both glosses the meaning remains the same, that of 'day agreed for the accomplishment of an objective'. A clear example of erroneous

³³ Cf. Wittlin, p. 172.

³⁴ Cf. H. van Hoof, "Une abréviation universelle: O.K.", *Lebende Sprachen*, IX, 3 (1964), pp. 65-6.

³⁵ J. Martínez de Sousa, *Diccionario internacional de SIGLAS* (Madrid: Pirámide, 1978).

³⁶ According to *Bertelsmann Volklexicon* (Berlin and Stuttgart, 1956; rpt. 1960), DKW was used as a trademark in the steam engine factory of Zschopau where they first made steam engines, and later motorcycles and small cars.

³⁷ Cf. Algeo, p. 229.

³⁸ Cf. M. Pei, *The Story of the English Language* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1952; rpt. 1967), p. 262.

³⁹ Cf. A. Ehrentreich "Abkürzungen im Amerikanischen", *Die Lebenden Fremdsprachen*, I (1949), p. 220.

23, 1981, some people read into TALBOT, a newly made car model, *Todos Andan Locos Buscando Otro Tejero* 'everybody is going around like mad searching for another Tejero'. A similar comic vein had been already detected in the past with other political organizations: CNT(*Carcas No Temáis* 'don't be afraid, you square'), FAI(*Franco Avanza Invencible* 'Franco Advances Invincible'). With a different objective in mind the acronym S.O.B., which was the title of a film exhibited in Madrid during 1982, was euphemistically reinterpreted, not without a spark of genius, into *Somos (h)Onrados Bandidos* 'we are honourable bandits', thus avoiding the jarring expression 'son-of-a-bitch'.

III

Closely related to the phenomenon of reinterpretation is the ingenious coining of imaginary acronyms as a symbolic representation of ordinary phrases whose syllables or words are made to coincide with the phonetic value of the initials. As this coincidence is not always exact, the reading or interpretation of the acronym forms has a lot to do with guessing or rebus-like puzzles constituting an amusing pastime. The English language particularly lends itself to this type of hieroglyphic writing due to the great number of monosyllabic words it contains⁴⁴. Suffice to mention the well-known IOU(I owe you), M.T.(empty), B4(before). Particularly amusing is the decoding of YYUR/YYUB/ICUR/YY4ME(too wise you are, too wise you be, I see you are, too wise for me) and IXQSU(I excuse you). With regard to advertising there exist forms like U-haul(you haul), a trademark, U-Save(you save), a supermarket, etc.⁴⁵.

Although they are not so popular in Spanish, similar examples can also be found like the funny inscriptions once shown in some Colombian buses: *Dicen que T.B.C. y T.D.G./No niegues que T.B.C.* (they say that I kissed you and left you/don't deny that I kissed you); and the well known form TBO, originally a witty transcription of *te veo* 'I see you', which has become an accepted part of the language because of its nominal character meaning 'a children's magazine'⁴⁶. From

sides, the slogan *Vota CDS, Centro Democrático y Social, el Centro de Suárez*, repeatedly emitted on radio spots, ended with another mnemonic reinterpretation, no less ingenious: *Vota Como Debe Ser* 'vote as you should', reproduced likewise with such capital letters in the propaganda leaflets of the party.

⁴⁴ This is well illustrated by the following anecdote where the phonic coincidence between acronym and phrase is not precisely intentional: a well known Spanish psychiatrist, Rojas Marcos, told how upon arriving at the United States and while at work in a New York hospital he heard on the loud-speaker his name followed by the phrase I.C.U.(Intensive Care Unit), where he was called to go, and which he wrongly interpreted by answering 'I don't see you'.

⁴⁵ Y. Malkiel, "Secondary Uses of Letters in Language", *Romance Philology*, XIX, 1 (1965), p. 24; H. Müller-Schotte, "Zur Theorie und Praxis der englischen Abkürzungen", *Lebende Sprachen*, XIII, 4/5 (1968), p. 108.

⁴⁶ M. Casado Velarde, "Creación léxica mediante siglas", *Revista española de lingüística*, IX, 1 (1979), p. 84 (fn. 39-40).

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reveal: *Peces con caviar* 'fishes with caviar' is an allusion to leaders of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) in a visit to the Soviet Union⁵⁴; in *A nosotros: ¡PSA!* the acronym PSA which stands for the Socialist Party of Andalucía, clearly evokes the onomatopoeic and derogatory sound *¡psa!*⁵⁵ Sometimes homonym games involve the facetious distortion of the originally acronymic lexemes, as seen in *los PeNes están en paro* 'the penises are unemployed', where *PeNes* is mockingly used instead of *PNNs* or *penenes* (Profesores No Numerarios 'teachers without tenure')⁵⁶; and *PSOEZ* (pron. *soez* 'rude') and *besugos* 'idiots', derogatory epithets found in some graffiti as a wry correction of the acronyms *PSOE* /*soe/* and *PSUC* /*pe'suk/* which designate two well-known political parties in Spain⁵⁷.

Conclusion

Acronyms deliberately composed through homonymy are gradually growing in importance. Within this field we can underline for their linguistic and psycholinguistic interest the so-called 'apposite acronyms' or 'punning acronyms', given the semantic associations which are applied to their coinage and use as a result of their special make-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 or messages and the fact that they have at their disposal a comfortable and constantly available method for doing so.

If on the one hand this deliberate search for a normal form for the acronymic 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 connotative, denotative, or mnemonic values and, hence, they represent a much more motivated linguistic sign, which separates them from that 'cold framework' with which they are habitually constructed, according to Dámaso Alonso's happy metaphor⁵⁸. Finally, the reinterpretation of initials and their playful function in

⁵⁴ *Cambio 16*, Dec. 26, 1976, p. 7.

⁵⁵ *Cambio 16*, August 2, 1976, p. 14. Similar word games made through homophony are found in French, as in these two headings from *Le canard enchaîné* (Dec. 13, 1978): *Des ECUS pour la Seci* (ECU 'European Currency Unit'); and *A l'Assacem*, where the acronym *SACEM* (*Société des Auteurs, Compositeurs et Editeurs de Musique*) has had a hard drubbing—the word *assassin* comes easily to one's mind—in line with the criticism that is levelled in the text against the monopoly and abuses of such an organization.

⁵⁶ *Hermano lobo*, Oct. 11, 1975, p. 4.

⁵⁷ For these and other examples, see F. Rodríguez, "Variaciones fonotácticas...", pp. 364, 365. The use of an acronym re-contextualized within a phrase by means of its corresponding homonym seems to be a humorous device known also in other languages, provided the acronym is well known.

⁵⁸ A. Alonso, "La invasión de las siglas (poemilla muy incompleto)", in *Del siglo de oro a este siglo de siglas* (Madrid: Gredos, 1962), p. 8.

the production of irony and jest constitute a more conspicuous and skilful attempt to give motivation to this sort of abbreviation. At the same time they are evidence of a wide range of humour as a stylistic device at the service of something so exotic in terms of lexicon as the acronym lexeme, which proves once again how deep-rooted and popularized acronyms are currently being adopted as a word-formation method.

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