

Analysis Of Theoretical Approaches To The Concept Of Occasional Lexical Units

Primqulova Oybahor

Basical doctoral student at Andijan state pedagogical institute, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article explores the phenomenon of occasional units (nonce words) within different linguistic traditions. Starting from Hermann Paul's notion of individual creative acts, the study highlights James Murray's introduction of the term nonce-word, N. I. Feldman's foundational work on occasionalisms in Russian linguistics, and subsequent classifications by Babenko and Bauer. David Crystal's psycholinguistic perspective and the role of nonce formations in language acquisition experiments are also examined. The paper further analyzes contemporary research on internet-based occasionalisms during the COVID-19 pandemic and the productive word-formation processes in Australian English. Overall, the article demonstrates how occasional units reflect linguistic creativity, language change, and cultural values.

Keywords: Occasional unit, nonce-word, neologism, Feldman, language change, creativity, lexicalization.

Introduction: Today, the concept of occasionalism is one of the topical issues being studied by linguists. There are a number of linguists who have examined the problem of occasional units in depth, each approaching this phenomenon from different theoretical perspectives.

METHOD

One of the representatives of the "Young Grammarians" school in nineteenth-century linguistics, the German scholar Hermann Paul, mentioned the phenomenon of individually coining new words within the broader process of language change. In his view, every language is enriched in the course of its development as a result of individual creative acts, but most of these acts disappear without a trace [11]. Although Paul himself did not use the term occasional words, he wrote in the sense that "in the history of a language many words are created once and then forgotten", in fact pointing to the very phenomenon that we now refer to as occasional units [11]. This idea was later developed by other researchers.

The chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the British linguist James A. H. Murray, is remembered as the scholar who introduced the term nonce-word into the field. In the OED he defined a nonce-word as

"a word coined for use on one occasion only" [4]. Murray and his followers were extremely cautious about including such words in the dictionary, that is, only those single uses which occurred in the works of major writers and were recognised by literary criticism were recorded [3]. For example, in the 1993 Burchfield edition of the Oxford Dictionary, unique usages such as M. Hopkins's unleave (used in an unusual sense meaning "to cause leaves to fall") or Milton's unchildhood are listed as nonce words, because these authors are ranked among the "great writers" and even their rare word usages are considered important for the history of the language [3].

In Russian linguistics, the scholar who laid the foundations of the theory of occasionalism was N. I. Feldman, who in 1957 gave the first definition of occasional words and described them as units formed according to productive types of word-formation and interpreted in the text through context [6]. Feldman compared the phenomenon of occasional units with neologisms and stressed that they are a phenomenon that supplements the vocabulary and reflects the dynamic side of the language. In his view, ordinary (usual) words are contrasted with occasional (unusual) words: usual words are units established in language

usage and familiar to the majority, whereas occasional words are unique formations that appear as an “event” in the speech of a particular author [6]. Inspired by Feldman, later Russian linguists (for example, Babenko, Kiseleva and others) developed various classifications of occasional units. N. G. Babenko, for instance, divided occasional units in literary texts into such types as phonetic, lexical, grammatical, semantic and phraseological; she also showed that they can be differentiated as first-degree, second-degree and third-degree occasional units according to the extent to which they deviate from the norms of the literary language [1]. This approach provided a theoretical classification demonstrating that even within occasional words themselves there is a diversity of scope and character.

The well-known British specialist in word-formation Laurie Bauer has analysed occasional formations from the perspective of productivity and lexicalization in language. He defines the term “nonce formation” as “a newly coined complex word thought up on the spur of the moment, under inspiration” [2]. According to Bauer’s observations, in journalism and everyday written discourse newly created words are often given in quotation marks or introduced with a special comment – a phenomenon related to the fact that speakers are aware that the new word is not (yet) part of the norm [2]. However, if over time this word begins to be used and becomes familiar, it is then used in texts without quotation marks as an ordinary item. In other words, the process of “legitimization” of the occasional unit begins [2]. This view shows how newly introduced words are received at the initial stage. Discussing the notion of lexicalization (entering the vocabulary), Bauer also notes that every new word first goes through a stage of occasional (single) use, and may then move to the stage of institutionalization (recognition by the community) [2]. Thus, occasional words in many cases are a transitory stage, some of which have the potential to pass on to the next stage and become active new words.

One of the leading figures in contemporary English linguistics, David Crystal, has studied occasional units within the domain of language play and creativity, focusing on their psycholinguistic aspects. In his work “Investigating Nonceness”, he distinguishes three categories of occasional words:

1. Hapax legomenon – a word occurring once in a given corpus (it may or may not be a usual dictionary word – this is unknown);
2. Nonce formation – a word intentionally created by an author for one-time use;
3. Neologism – a newly emerged word that has

entered the language [3].

Crystal writes that occasional words are usually created consciously, but in response to a quick creative impulse – that is, the author does not plan them in advance, but “finds” them in the process of speaking [3]. At the same time, the author does not intend to incorporate them into the permanent vocabulary, but uses them in order to express a needed meaning or produce an emotional effect at that moment [3]. In essence, this is consonant with the views of Feldman and Bauer: an occasional unit is a creative solution aimed at resolving a communicative problem immediately. Crystal also gives examples of occasional units sometimes being used as tools in psychological testing. For instance, in the study of child language, the word “wug” (from J. Gilligan’s famous experiment) or the word “blicket” in cognitive science are deliberately invented. The aim was to examine how children or other subjects understand and use such unusual words [8]. Such semantically empty “nonsense” words serve as research instruments in linguistics and psychology [9]. Interestingly, children easily mastered these invented items, producing plural forms such as “wugs” and “blickets” – which demonstrated that the rules of word-formation are present in children’s language as an internal intuitive system [8]. Thus, Crystal’s research sheds light on the role of occasional units in linguistic creativity and in the functioning of linguistic consciousness.

In the modern period, another pair of researchers who have comparatively studied occasional units using the example of internet discourse are the Russian scholars Elena Gabrielova and Vitaliya Lopatina. In their article published in 2023, they analysed more than a hundred new words that appeared in Russian and English on social networks during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gabrielova & Lopatina, *Journal of Language and Education*, 2023). According to their analysis, for both languages the most common methods of occasional word-formation were blending and compounding. In English, for example, words such as “doomscrolling” (doom + scrolling – the habit of endlessly reading bad news online) or “maskne” (mask + acne – facial breakouts caused by wearing a mask) were created in this period (Gabrielova & Lopatina, 2023). In Russian, humorous blendings such as “koronaferien” (from coronavirus and kanikuly ‘vacation’) or “samokatka” (a playful mix of samoizolyatsiya ‘self-isolation’ and diskoteka ‘disco’) emerged (Gabrielova & Lopatina, 2023). The researchers also found that most of the new Russian occasional words carried irony and expressive meaning, whereas the English ones were more often aimed directly at naming new realities (for example, medical-epidemiological concepts) [7]. This shows that

the functional orientation of occasional units may differ somewhat across cultures: in some contexts they fulfil a predominantly emotional–expressive function, while in others they serve a nominative (naming) function.

In Australia and other English-speaking regions, occasional word-formation is also very active. In particular, Australian English has produced many shortened and affectionate new words in informal settings which, at the moment of their emergence, were in fact the creative products of individuals. For example, “barbie” (from barbecue) or “selfie” (taking a photo of oneself) initially appeared as occasional units within a single group as local jargon, and later spread throughout the world. The linguist A. Vierzbicka describes the shortened words of Australian English as expressions of national specificity and an informal style of communication, emphasising that not all of them survive; some remain temporary fashions [14]. Indeed, short forms such as “arvo” (afternoon) are used among Australians but do not enter the formal language – which means they retain their occasional, hobby-like flavour. Thus, the varieties of English in different parts of the world are also rich in new word-formation experiments, but how many of these reach the level of the standard literary language depends on the linguistic culture of each society.

The final analysis shows that although the phenomenon of occasional units has been studied from different approaches by linguists in Europe, America and other regions, all of them confirm the common features of these units: their individual creator, their dependence on context, their one-off nature, and their novelty in relation to the language system. Theoretical interpretations of occasional words and questions of their etymological origin (that is, from which elements they are formed and which semantic gaps they fill) remain an important field for further scholarly research. After all, every new word is yet another experiment in the life of a language, and by understanding these experiments we can gain a deeper insight into the laws governing language development.

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