

The Etymological History Of The Concept Of Occasional Language Units

Primqulova Oybahor

Basical doctoral student at Andijan state pedagogical institute, Uzbekistan

Received: 30 September 2025; **Accepted:** 23 October 2025; **Published:** 28 November 2025

Abstract: This article explores the etymology, theoretical foundations, and linguistic features of occasional units. The study first examines the origins of the term occasional and the English word nonce, then provides definitions and interpretations from European, American, Australian, and Russian linguistics. It further discusses the reasons for creating occasional words, their structural patterns, and functional aspects, highlighting their difference from neologisms. Through examples, it is shown that occasionalisms are temporary linguistic phenomena created within productive word-formation models, which may sometimes develop into established neologisms. The findings emphasize that such words reflect the creativity and flexibility of language.

Keywords: Occasional unit, nonce word, neologism, linguistics, word-formation, linguistic features, creativity.

Introduction: Occasionalisms are studied by different linguists from different approaches. The etymological aspect of the theory of occasional units is also of interest. The term “occasional” derives from the Latin occasion (“chance event”), and expresses the “accidental, one-time” nature of such units [13]. The English word nonce in turn comes from the Old English phrase *for þe nanas*, which originally meant “for this occasion” [10]. Thus, the term itself also shows the temporary and individual character of this linguistic phenomenon.

In this section, approaches to the theory of occasional units and their origins will be discussed in detail on the basis of European, American and Australian sources. First, the definition and linguistic features of occasional words are analysed. Then, various theoretical approaches and the analyses given by scholars (in Western and Russian linguistics) are examined. Likewise, the reasons for creating such units, their structure and functional aspects are considered on the basis of examples. Each scholarly argument and idea is presented with reference to the relevant sources.

METHOD

The concept of the occasional unit has been discussed in linguistics since the late nineteenth century. The German philologist G. Paul was the first, in 1880, to reflect on new words created by an individual author

and to emphasise that they have a place in the history of language [12]. Later, in English linguistics, the term nonce word was introduced into scholarly use by the editor of the Oxford Dictionary, J. Murray, in the 1880s in the sense “for one occasion only” [2]. In Russian linguistics, N. I. Feldman was the first to use the term “occasional words” in 1957, defining such words as “individual units created on the basis of productive word-formation models of the language, but whose meaning is disclosed only within the text” [5]. According to Feldman, occasional units are usually formed on the basis of existing construction models within the general language system and can therefore be interpreted, but they do not have general currency; their meaning is understood only in the context of the author’s text [5].

The definitions given by Western scholars are essentially directed towards the same idea. For example, the American linguist K. G. Wilson calls a nonce word “a word coined only for a particular situation and very unlikely to be used at another time” [16]. The British linguist D. Crystal, drawing on the Oxford Dictionary definition, likewise notes that such words are created “for use at this time only, temporarily” [2]. Similarly, researchers such as P. Štekauer and R. Lieber consider occasional (nonce) units as “possible words” in the word-formation system of the language and sometimes treat them as an

unusual stylistic play [15]. Another linguist, R. Nordquist, points out that occasional words are often invented by authors and humorists to create an amusing effect. For instance, L. Carroll or K. Dodd (a British comedian) created many word plays in their performances and works [10]. Thus, in various sources the main feature of an occasional unit – its individual coinage and one-off use – is emphasised as fundamental.

Scholars who have analysed the characteristics of occasional units have identified several common features. In Uzbek linguistics, for example, A. Mamatov points out seven properties typical of occasional words: dependence on speech (context-boundedness), deviation from the norm, one-time use, creation by an author, expressiveness, subordination to word-formation rules, and the presence of historical and modern adaptation [7]. Although we mainly rely on Western theoretical sources, the conclusions of local research are generally consistent with them: occasional units arise in spoken or written discourse, they involve a certain deviation from the language norm, they usually have an emotional–expressive colouring, and they often serve literary and artistic purposes [7]. Most importantly, such words are usually formed on the basis of productive word-formation patterns – that is, by adding prefixes and suffixes, compounding two words, or mixing parts of words (blends) – but the resulting unit is a novelty that did not previously exist in the language system [6].

The distinction between occasional units and neologisms deserves special attention. As D. Crystal notes, if a new word is used repeatedly by the speech community so that speakers begin to feel “I’ve heard this word before”, it ceases to be occasional and begins to turn into a neologism [2]. In other words, an occasional word is a “one-off” word, whereas a neologism is a “newcomer” to the vocabulary. For example, when the term selfie first appeared (in Australian English in 2002), it was an occasional innovation, but it quickly became widespread and entered dictionaries, that is, it turned into a neologism [11]. Conversely, some coined words such as freegan (free + vegan) were used once by an author as a joke and did not become widespread; as a result, they remained occasional uses [14]. Thus, an occasional unit can be regarded as a kind of test or experiment for the language system: if it fits communicative needs very well and appeals to the public, it survives (becomes a neologism); otherwise, it is forgotten.

The relationship between the language system and occasional units is also an important theoretical issue. Some scholars regard occasional words as a manifestation of the word-formation potential of a

language. For instance, L. Bauer emphasises that when new formations appear, they are often given in the text in quotation marks or accompanied by comments such as “so to speak”, which shows that the speaker or writer is aware of the novelty of the word [1]. Bauer writes that in newspapers and magazines newly coined words are frequently introduced or explained with expressions like “so-called” or “one might say”; in literary works, however, such innovations are not specially marked, since creative word-formation is accepted as a stylistic device in artistic discourse [1]. This shows that occasional units do not violate the internal rules of the language; on the contrary, they arise from the creative use of those rules. Indeed, research demonstrates that the majority of occasional words are formed morphologically through regular affixation, composition (compounding) or blending [6]. E. Gabriellova and V. Lopatina (2023) studied more than 100 occasional new words that emerged in English and Russian social networks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their observations showed that most of the new coined words were created by compounding and blending, and that many innovations also appeared through the addition of prefixes and suffixes [6]. For example, in English, covidiot (COVID + idiot) was coined to denote a specific social phenomenon during the pandemic; in Russian, words such as obnuliatsiya (“resetting to zero”, a humorous derivative of obnulenie) appeared in texts of that period [6]. These examples show that occasional units are created on the basis of existing elements of the language system, but by combining components that had not previously occurred together in this way.

At this point, it is also necessary to compare occasional units with the notion of potential words. In linguistics, a potential word is understood as a word that could be formed according to the rules of the language but has not yet been observed in actual usage [17]. An occasional word, by contrast, is viewed as the practical realization of this potential – but realized only once. For example, in English the verb to unsad is, from a grammatical point of view, a potential formation based on the pattern un- + sad in the meaning “to make not sad”. If in some text an author uses the word unsad once, it becomes an occasional unit [2]. If this word were to become widespread and be included in a dictionary, the potential word would have turned into a real neologism. Thus, it can be said that occasional coinages are a kind of testing ground for the word-formation capacity of a language, through which the flexibility and creativity of the language are manifested [15].

REFERENCES

1. Bauer, Laurie. English Word-Formation. Cambridge

- University Press, 1983.
2. Crystal, David. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 4th ed., Blackwell, 1997.
 3. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
 4. "Investigating Nonceness." *Journal of Linguistics*, 1998.
 5. Feldman, N. I. "Okkazional'nye slova i leksikografiya." *Voprosy Jazykoznanija*, 1957.
 6. Gabrielova, E., and V. Lopatina. "Occasionalisms in Social Networks During the Pandemic." *Journal of Language and Education*, 2023.
 7. Mamatov, A. *Til birliklari va norma*. Toshkent: Fan, 1985.
 8. Muminov, R. *Neologizmlar va okkazionalizmlar*. Toshkent: Akadernashr, 2010.
 9. Murray, James A. H. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 1880s.
 10. Nordquist, Richard. "What Are Nonce Words?" ThoughtCo, 6 July 2020, www.thoughtco.com/nonce-word-1691342.
 11. Oxford Dictionaries. "Word of the Year 2013." Oxford Languages, 2013, languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2013/.
 12. Paul, Hermann. *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*. Niemeyer, 1880.
 13. Qurbonova, M., and N. Shodiyeva. "Scientific and Theoretical Basis of Occasional Units." *International Journal of Scientific Research*, 2024.
 14. Safire, William. "On Language: Vegan." *The New York Times Magazine*, 2005.
 15. Štekauer, Pavol, and Rochelle Lieber, editors. *Handbook of Word-Formation*. Springer, 2005.
 16. Wilson, Kenneth G. *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English*. Columbia University Press, 1993.
 17. Zhabayeva, G. "Occasional and Potential Words." *Philological Sciences Journal*, 2010.