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Semantic Features of Neologisms in Contemporary English: Word Formation, Meaning Change, and Digital Communication

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Abstract

Neologisms provide evidence of the ways in which language responds to technological innovation, social change, and emerging communicative needs. This article examines selected examples of contemporary English neologisms, focusing on their word-formation patterns, semantic development, and contextual functions in digital communication. Drawing on a qualitative descriptive approach, it considers compounds and blends, affixation, conversion, abbreviations, and semantic innovation. Examples such as doomscrolling, ghosting, brunch, cloud, viral, and unfriend illustrate the relationship between linguistic form, newly emerging concepts, and context-dependent meaning. The analysis distinguishes newly created forms from established words that have acquired new meanings, and it emphasizes that a word's status as a neologism cannot be established solely from its current popularity or technological association. The article proposes a contextual analytical sequence that considers (1) the form and formation process of a lexical item, (2) its semantic contribution, and (3) the communicative context in which it is used. The discussion highlights the role of digital platforms in circulating lexical innovations while acknowledging that wider claims about frequency, permanence, or social acceptance require corpus-based and diachronic evidence. The study contributes a practical framework for examining English neologisms in lexical-semantic research and language education.

Keywords: *neologisms; English lexicon; word formation; semantic change; digital communication; lexical innovation*

1. Introduction

Language is a dynamic system that changes in response to developments in society, technology, culture, and communication. These changes are particularly visible in the lexicon, where speakers create new forms, assign new meanings to existing words, and adapt established expressions to emerging contexts. Contemporary English provides many examples of this process, especially in digital communication, social media, technology, and changing social practices. The study of neologisms is therefore important not simply because it records new vocabulary, but because it reveals how speakers conceptualize new experiences and make them communicable.

A neologism may be a newly formed lexical item, a new meaning attached to an existing form, or an established expression that has acquired a new function in a particular domain. These categories should not be treated as identical. For example, brunch is a blend formed from breakfast and lunch, whereas cloud has an established everyday meaning and a specialized technological meaning. Similarly, viral retains a connection with the spread of infection while also describing online content that circulates rapidly. The examples show that lexical innovation can involve changes in form, meaning, or both.

Research on word formation provides tools for identifying the structural processes involved in lexical innovation. Bauer (1983), Booij (2012), Lieber (2016), and Plag (2018) discuss morphological processes through which lexical items are formed and interpreted. Semantic change, by contrast, requires attention to the relationship between earlier meanings and later uses. Traugott and Dasher (2002) and Blank (1999) demonstrate the importance of examining semantic developments in historical and cognitive contexts. Digital communication adds another dimension because online environments can accelerate the circulation of expressions and create new communicative practices (Crystal, 2006; Zappavigna, 2012). Nuri's work on productive word formation in English offers a directly relevant local research reference (Nuri, 2023a).

The present article addresses the relationship between the formation of neologisms and their semantic behaviour. It does not assume that every recently popular word is newly created, nor that every established word used in a technological context is a neologism. Instead, it examines selected examples to demonstrate how form, meaning, and context interact.

Three research questions guide the discussion: *RQ1:* Which word-formation processes are illustrated by selected contemporary English neologisms? *RQ2:* How do these lexical items express semantic innovation, including extension and context-specific meaning? *RQ3:* How does digital communication contribute to the circulation and interpretation of neologisms?

Research published in the local academic context also underlines the importance of examining English lexical features in relation to language variation. Babayev's study of American English dialects discusses differences in pronunciation, lexis, grammar, and spelling, providing a relevant contextual reference for the study of lexical variation, although it does not directly investigate neologisms (Babayev, 2025). In a related discourse-oriented study, Alisoy (2026a) demonstrates the value of interpreting lexical choices in their textual and pragmatic contexts, while Alisoy (2026b), analysing neologism and intertextuality in a 2025 political address, offers a directly relevant perspective on how newly salient expressions acquire meaning in discourse. These works are used here within their actual scope and are not treated as direct evidence about the formation or frequency of neologisms.

The article's contribution is an integrated reading procedure that links word formation, semantic interpretation, and contextual use. It is intended as an exploratory analytical framework rather than a quantitative account of the English lexicon.

2. Conceptual and Linguistic Framework

2.1. Defining neologism

The term neologism is commonly associated with lexical novelty. However, novelty is relative to a period, community, and communicative domain. A form may be new to a general audience but familiar to specialists; alternatively, a long-established form may develop a new sense in a changing context. For this reason, the analysis of neologisms should distinguish formal novelty from semantic novelty and from increased visibility.

A useful working distinction includes three categories. First, formal neologisms are newly created forms, including blends and newly formed derivatives. Second, semantic neologisms arise when an existing form acquires a new sense. Third, domain-specific innovations are expressions that become prominent in a particular professional or social setting. These categories can overlap, and the status of a particular item may change as it spreads and becomes conventional.

Lexicographic evidence is relevant to determining whether a form or sense is recorded, but dictionary inclusion alone does not establish the exact date of creation or the degree of acceptance in everyday language. The Oxford English Dictionary and other lexical resources can support historical verification (Durkin, 2016); contextual evidence is still necessary to explain how an item functions in use.

2.2. Word formation and lexical innovation

English uses several productive word-formation processes, including compounding, affixation, blending, clipping, abbreviation, and conversion. Compounding combines complete lexical elements, while blending combines parts of words. Affixation adds prefixes or suffixes to a base. Conversion involves a change in grammatical category without an overt change in form. These processes provide speakers with economical ways to name new objects, practices, identities, and social experiences (Bauer, 1983; Booij, 2012; Plag, 2018). This discussion is also consistent with Nuri's analysis of productive word formation in English (Nuri, 2023a).

Borrowing from other languages is a further source of lexical innovation, in which items from a donor language are adopted and then phonologically, syntactically, and semantically adapted in the recipient language. Studies of English–French lexical contact illustrate these processes in detail, examining borrowed vocabulary, its integration, and its impact across varieties and media (Ashrafova, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). Informal and slang formations follow partly distinct morphological and sociolinguistic patterns and often feed into mainstream usage over time (Mattiello, 2008).

The semantic interpretation of a new form is not always predictable from its components. Some compounds are relatively transparent, whereas others acquire conventional meanings that depend on shared knowledge. Blends can compress two conceptual domains into a single form, as brunch combines the ideas of breakfast and lunch. In digital contexts, new verbs and derivatives can emerge from existing nouns or platform-related practices. Babayev's discussion of stylistic devices and language components provides a broader interpretive context for considering how lexical meaning is shaped in use (Babayev, 2022).

2.3. Semantic change and context

Semantic change may involve extension, narrowing, metaphorical transfer, specialization, or the development of a domain-specific sense. In semantic extension, a word becomes applicable to a wider range of referents; in narrowing, its use becomes more restricted. Metaphorical transfer links a new domain to an earlier meaning through perceived similarity. These processes are often shaped by recurrent contexts and shared cultural knowledge (Blank, 1999; Traugott & Dasher, 2002).

Context is essential because an isolated word form may support several interpretations. The technological meaning of cloud, for example, differs from its meteorological meaning, but the newer sense remains connected to the idea of remote or distributed storage and access. Similarly, viral may describe a biological process or, figuratively, the rapid circulation of online content. A sound analysis identifies the relevant sense from the surrounding discourse rather than treating the form itself as sufficient evidence. For a comparative Romance-language

perspective, Ibrahim (2020) examines neologism formation in contemporary French periodicals, including the role of English borrowings; the language focus differs from the present English-language study.

2.4. Digital communication as a site of circulation

Online platforms provide spaces in which lexical items can be coined, repeated, adapted, and disseminated. Hashtags, short posts, memes, video platforms, and online communities can make expressions visible beyond the groups in which they first circulated. Crystal (2006) describes the linguistic consequences of internet communication, while Zappavigna (2012) examines how social media language helps users construct affiliation and shared identities. Online registers also mix informal and formal features, and moving between them is itself part of digital communicative competence; local research on social media in English teaching and on register in the digital era addresses these practices (Nuri, 2022, 2023b).

Digital communication is, moreover, multimodal, combining text with images, video, and paralinguistic cues. Research on the communicative role of gesture and facial expression points to meaning-making resources beyond the lexicon (Ismayilli, 2021); such resources fall outside the lexical focus of the present study but indicate that online meaning is rarely carried by words alone. Nevertheless, visibility should not be confused with permanence. A term may become widespread during a specific event and then decline, while another may become established across multiple contexts. Claims about the long-term status of a neologism require evidence from dated texts, corpora, dictionaries, or other traceable sources.

3. Materials and Method

3.1. Scope and illustrative material

This article uses a qualitative, descriptive analysis of selected English lexical items discussed in the source research work (Ashrafova, 2026). The examples represent several types of innovation: brunch as a blend; unfriend as an affixal formation; message as a source for the verb to message through conversion; doomscrolling and ghosting as expressions associated with digital or social practices; and cloud and viral as examples of established forms used with additional meanings. These examples are illustrative rather than a statistically representative sample of all contemporary English neologisms.

Table 1. Illustrative lexical items and analytical focus

Analytical group	Illustrative item(s)	Main focus
Blending	brunch; smog	Combination of word forms and concepts
Affixation	unfriend; influencer	Morphological structure and meaning
Conversion	to message	Change in grammatical function
Digital/social expressions	doomscrolling; ghosting	Naming emerging practices
Semantic innovation	cloud; viral	New or specialized contextual senses

3.2. Analytical procedure

The analysis follows four steps. First, each item is assigned a provisional formation type, where applicable. Second, its conventional or component meanings are described. Third, the meaning activated in the relevant contemporary context is identified. Fourth, the analysis considers whether the example represents formal word creation, semantic innovation, or simply an established lexical item used in a specialized domain.

The procedure avoids classifying every digital term as a newly coined word. For example, cloud is not a newly created English form; its relevance lies in the technological sense associated with computing. Likewise, the presence of a productive suffix does not by itself establish that a word is recent. Where the available material does not provide dated corpus evidence, the article makes no claim about first attestation, frequency, or rate of adoption.

3.3. Methodological limitations

The study is exploratory and qualitative. It does not present a newly collected corpus, frequency counts, statistical tests, or independent inter-coder reliability measures. The examples demonstrate analytical distinctions but cannot establish how common each item is across English varieties or how rapidly each has been adopted. Further work should use dated corpora and lexicographic sources to verify chronology, distribution, and persistence.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Blending and semantic compression

Brunch combines elements of breakfast and lunch to name a meal associated with the time and functions of both. Its form is shortened, but the semantic result is not merely an arbitrary abbreviation: it identifies a socially recognizable meal category. The word illustrates how blending can compress related concepts and create a lexical item that is relatively easy to interpret from its components.

Smog, formed from smoke and fog, similarly combines two source concepts. Its meaning refers to polluted air associated with smoke and atmospheric conditions. The example also demonstrates that a once innovative form can become conventional. It is therefore useful as a model of the blending process, but it should not automatically be described as a newly emerging word in present-day English.

These examples indicate that structural novelty and current novelty are different questions. A word can illustrate a productive formation mechanism without being a recent neologism. In analysing contemporary items, researchers should therefore establish both how the form was created and whether it remains new relative to the period under investigation.

4.2. Affixation and digital practices

Unfriend combines the prefix un- with friend. In social-network contexts, the verb means to remove a person from a digital friends list. The formation uses a familiar morphological pattern, but its contemporary sense is associated with a platform-mediated social action. The example shows how established word-formation resources can be recruited to name practices made salient by technological change.

Influencer contains the base influence and the agentive suffix -er. The suffix typically supports an interpretation involving a person who performs or is associated with an activity. In social-media contexts, influencer has developed a more specific association with people who build audiences and affect followers' preferences or behaviour. This specialization illustrates the interaction of morphology and social context: the structure helps make the word interpretable, while usage establishes its domain-specific meaning.

Neither example should be classified solely by appearance. The presence of un- or -er does not prove that a form is recent. A careful account distinguishes the morphological process from the historical question of when the word or sense emerged.

4.3. Conversion and grammatical flexibility

The verb to message illustrates conversion, in which a noun is used as a verb without an overt change in form. In digital communication, the verb refers to sending a message to someone. This use responds to a communicative environment in which messaging is a routine activity and a concise verb is useful. The semantic relation between the noun and the verb remains transparent, although the grammatical role changes.

Conversion demonstrates that lexical innovation does not always require a new sequence of letters. A familiar form can acquire a new syntactic function and become conventional in a particular domain. To establish whether a converted use qualifies as a neologism in a specific period, however, the researcher needs historical or corpus evidence rather than relying only on its present-day familiarity.

4.4. Semantic extension and specialization

Cloud provides a clear illustration of semantic extension from a physical phenomenon to a technological concept. In computing, the word refers to remote resources and services accessed through a network. The connection between the senses is not literal identity; rather, the newer sense is conventionalized within a technical domain. This example is best treated as semantic innovation in an established form, not as the creation of a completely new word.

Viral has also developed a prominent figurative use in digital communication, where it describes content that spreads rapidly from user to user. The newer sense draws on the idea of transmission associated with viruses. The metaphor makes the process of online circulation intelligible through a familiar source domain. Its evaluative force can vary: viral content may be presented positively, neutrally, or critically depending on context.

These examples demonstrate that semantic change is often gradual and context-sensitive. The new sense may initially be restricted to a specialist community before spreading to broader usage. An adequate analysis therefore records the domain, the local context, and the relation between earlier and later meanings.

4.5. Naming new social and communicative practices

Doomscrolling refers to the repeated or prolonged consumption of negative or distressing online news. Its structure combines doom with scrolling, linking an evaluative concept to a familiar digital action. The term does more than name a technical operation: it frames the behaviour as repetitive and potentially harmful. Its meaning therefore includes an evaluative component that is relevant to pragmatic and stylistic analysis.

Ghosting describes the abrupt ending of communication, typically without explanation. The metaphorical connection with a ghost suggests disappearance or absence, while the contemporary social sense identifies a recognizable interpersonal practice. The term can appear in informal conversation, advice content, journalism, or discussions of relationships. Its pragmatic effect depends on the context and may communicate criticism, disappointment, humour, or neutral description.

Both items show how lexical innovation can make socially salient behaviours easier to name and discuss. They also illustrate why semantic analysis should consider more than dictionary-style definitions: the choice of a term can frame an action, suggest an evaluation, and establish a shared understanding among speakers.

4.6. Summary of the lexical-semantic relationships

Table 2. Summary of selected lexical-semantic relationships

Item	Formation or process	Semantic contribution	Caution in classification
brunch	Blending	Breakfast/lunch meal category	Established form; useful as a formation example
unfriend	Affixation	Removing a digital connection	Date of emergence requires verification
to message	Conversion	Sending a message	Grammatical change is not proof of recent origin
cloud	Semantic extension	Computing resources/services	Established form with a specialized sense
viral	Metaphorical extension	Rapid circulation of online content	Meaning depends on context
doomscrolling	Compound/derivational pattern	Repeated consumption of distressing content	Chronology and frequency need corpus evidence
ghosting	Derivational form with specialized social sense	Abruptly ending communication	Pragmatic force varies by context

5. Discussion

The examples support a view of neologism as a multidimensional phenomenon. Formal structure, semantic development, and contextual use are related but distinct analytical levels. Brunch illustrates a blend; unfriend illustrates the adaptation of a productive morphological pattern to a digital practice; to message demonstrates conversion; and cloud and viral show that lexical innovation can occur without a new form. A single category cannot fully account for all of these cases.

The analysis also highlights the need to distinguish word formation from lexical status. A process such as blending or affixation explains how a word is structured, but it does not establish when the word entered the language or whether it is still perceived as new. Similarly, the fact that a term is associated with social media does not automatically make it a neologism. This distinction is consistent with morphological approaches that treat word formation as a system of patterns while recognizing that the lexical status of individual items must be examined separately (Bauer, 1983; Booij, 2012; Plag, 2018).

Semantic interpretation requires context. The technological meaning of cloud and the online meaning of viral depend on domain-specific conventions. Doomscrolling and ghosting also encode social evaluations that cannot be derived solely from their component forms. These findings reinforce the importance of combining morphological description with contextual and semantic analysis, as well as with broader accounts of semantic change (Blank, 1999; Traugott & Dasher, 2002).

Digital platforms may increase the visibility and speed of lexical circulation, but visibility alone cannot establish permanence. A term can be highly salient for a limited period without becoming part of the stable general lexicon. Claims about adoption should therefore be supported by dated evidence from corpora, dictionaries, or multiple genres. The present article proposes an analytical framework for such work rather than making quantitative claims about the English lexicon.

For language education, these distinctions can help learners explore the relationship between word structure, meaning, and context. Students can identify a word's components, compare its conventional and domain-specific senses, and discuss how the term frames a new practice. Such tasks support lexical awareness and critical reading of digital communication. Local pedagogical scholarship offers a complementary perspective: Nağıyeva (2024) discusses

methods for developing speaking skills, Mammadova (2024) examines motivational and practical frameworks for teaching English to less proficient learners, and Mammadova (2025) considers cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of translation. These works are cited within their pedagogical scope and are not treated as evidence about the formation or frequency of neologisms.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined selected English lexical items to show how neologisms and semantic innovations emerge through different relationships between form, meaning, and context. Blending, affixation, and conversion provide structural mechanisms for creating or adapting lexical items, while semantic extension and metaphorical transfer allow established forms to express new concepts. Examples such as brunch, unfriend, to message, cloud, viral, doomscrolling, and ghosting illustrate different points along this continuum.

The central conclusion is that a neologism cannot be identified reliably by its appearance or association with technology alone. Researchers should distinguish a newly formed word from a new sense, a specialized use, and an established word that has become newly visible. The contextual analytical sequence proposed here — formation, semantic contribution, and communicative use — offers a transparent starting point for this task.

The study is limited by its illustrative qualitative design and the absence of a systematically sampled corpus. Future research could examine dated corpora, compare dictionary records with real-world usage, measure the distribution of selected items across genres, and investigate how their meanings change over time. Such work would provide stronger evidence about the emergence, circulation, and stabilization of neologisms in contemporary English.

Declarations

Data Availability: The article analyses illustrative lexical examples drawn from the author's research work. No new corpus or participant-level dataset was collected.

Ethics: The study uses linguistic examples and does not involve human participants or private personal data.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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