1 Introduction

➢ The development of inter-computer communication has lead to an increase in the number of abbreviated expressions. E.g.,
  AFAIK ‘as far as I know’  BRB ‘be right back’
  FWIW ‘for what it’s worth’  IANAL ‘I am not a lawyer’
  LOL ‘laughing out loud’  OMG ‘oh my god’
  OTOH ‘on the other hand’  RTFM ‘read the fucking manual’
  STFU ‘shut the fuck up’  etc.

➢ This talk focuses on acronyms that have been lexicalized as verbs.

➢ I show that the verbalization process(es) follow simple, specific patterns.

➢ I also demonstrate that there are two types of verbalized acronyms:
  1. Phrasal acronyms: acronyms that represent basic verb phrases
  2. Quotative acronyms: acronyms that represent complete thoughts

➢ None of the processes and patterns discussed here are new, they are just being applied with greater frequency.

2 Data, Sources, and Citations

➢ Data was collected by reading chat rooms, bulletin boards, and weblogs, as well as using search engines (mostly Google).

➢ All data is cited as found. This means the examples are full of grammatical and typographical mistakes, especially spelling and punctuation.

➢ I have only cited examples below that can be easily accessed. I have listed the URL for the quotes and the date I last view the page.

➢ Pages that have been taken down can usually be recovered via the Way Back Machine (http://www.archive.org/).

➢ Most contexts where these appear are not indexed by search engines, making searching for them difficult.

➢ It is important to remember that these acronyms are at different stages of lexicalization for different speakers. Thus, not all instances of an acronym are consistent.

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1I have benefitted in this work from discussions with and comments from Pam Munro, Nathan Kleindinst, and Ben Keil. All flaws remain my own.
3 Verbalization of Acronyms

- Many acronyms have been converted into verbs in Internet English.
  
  1. When I first tried out iTMS, I didn’t **RTFM** and made some mistakes, including deleting the song I had just purchased. ‘When I first tried out iTMS, I didn’t read the fucking manual and made some mistakes, including deleting the song I had just purchased.’ (http://binarybonsai.com/archives/2004/06/20/drm-gets-the-knife/, accessed 7 September 2004)
  
  
  3. I literally **ROTFLed**, I was laughing uncontrollably for probably 2 full minutes. ‘I literally rolled on the floor laughing – I was laughing uncontrollably for probably two full minutes.’ (http://www.users.bigpond.com/arwon222/writings.htm, accessed 7 September 2004)

- Verbalization of acronyms is an established pattern of English predating mass electronic communication. The following quote was found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, dated 1969.


- There are several reasons for believing these internet acronyms are novel words, not just typographically shortened phrases.

  1. Inflectional morphology comes at the end of the acronym rather than the letter representing the verb.


  2. Acronyms typically take regular inflectional morphology, even if the “source” verb is irregular. The regular past tense suffix *-ed* is added to **RTFS** in (6) and **STFU** in (7), despite the fact that their source verbs (*read* and *shut*, respectively) are irregular.

(7) You talked a lotta shit when the Bucks started hot, then STFUed when they came back to earth.
‘You talked a lot of shit when the Bucks started hot, then shut the fuck up when they came back to earth.’
(http://groups.google.com/groups?selm=shenman-0101982033590001%40port149090.eos.net&rn=1, accessed 8 September 2004)

3. In some cases, valency changing operations affect the acronym but not the source verb. While laugh does not have a lexical causative, the acronym LOL ‘laugh out loud’ does.

(8) a. I’ll tell you what, this interview LOLed me like none other!
‘I’ll tell you what, this interview made me laugh out loud like none other!’

b. * This interview laughed me.

4. In some cases, valency changing operations that can be applied to the source verb cannot be applied to the acronym. Read can optionally take a goal argument, but RTFM ‘read the fucking manual’ cannot. Note, (9a) is only ungrammatical with the reading given – it is acceptable under another reading discussed below.

(9) a. * He RTFMed me
‘He read me the fucking manual’ (intended meaning)

b. He read me the manual.

5. Some acronyms take a direct object even though they appear to include an object already. In the following example, RTFM ‘read the fucking manual’ means simply ‘read’, where the object of the reading is a manual. Note, this verb can also be used intransitively, as above.

(10) i RTFMed the “fstab” man page, which doesn’t really nail it down.
‘I read the “fstab” man page, which doesn’t really nail it down.’

4 Two Verbalization Patterns

- Acronyms can be verbalized according to two different patterns: quotative acronyms and phrasal acronyms.
4.1 Quotative Acronyms

- Quotative acronyms are interpreted as “quoting” a previous utterance. Often, these are not direct quotes, but capture the intent of the original message just as well.

(11) Jasho, read your remark after I brbed, but there’s too much other stuff.
     ‘Jasho, I read your remark after I said I’d be right back, but there’s too much other stuff.’

(12) So I’m glad that nobody RTFM’ed me yet.
     So, I’m glad that nobody told me to read the fucking manual yet.
     (http://groups.google.com/groups?selm=3a9d52f7%240%2470807%24272ea4a1%40news.execpc.com&rnnum=1, accessed 7 September 2004)

- Quotative verbalization is widely attested with phrases in English, so the acronym use appears to be just a special case of the general process. In (13), the verb good-morninged directly quotes an earlier sentence, but seems to address the dismissive intent of the phrase more than the wording. Much the same is true in (14).

(13) "Good morning!" he [Bilbo] said at last. "We don’t want any adventures here, thank you! [...] To think that I should have lived to be good-morninged by Belladonna Took’s son, as if I was selling buttons at the door!
     (Tolkien, The Hobbit)

(14) Man: Do you mind? I can’t hear a word he’s saying.
     Woman: Don’t you ‘do you mind’ me. I was talking to my husband.
     (Monty Python’s Life of Brian)

4.2 Phrasal Acronyms

- Phrasal acronyms simply replace an original verb phrase (modulo changes that can occur as part of the lexicalization process).

- The verbalization of phrasal acronyms has strict requirements.

1. They always contain a verb.

(15) * OTOHed
     ‘on the other hand’

(16) * OMGed
     ‘Oh my god’
2. They never contain a letter representing the subject.

(17) *IANALed.
    ‘I was not a lawyer’
(18) *AFAIKed, I was going to Nepal.
    ‘As far as I knew, I was going to Nepal.’

3. The letter representing the verb never disagrees with the morphology of tense or subject agreement. Admittedly, the only verb of English that this can be tested against is be. Given that BRB cannot take any inflectional morphology without being a quotative, it is debatable whether it has been lexicalized at all. It could still be just a typographic convention.

(19) a. *I BRBed.
    ‘I was right back. (intended meaning)’

b. I’ll BRB.

➤ The meaning of phrasal acronyms are derived exclusively from the meaning of the source phrase. In some cases, a bit of semantic simplification has taken place. For example, ROTFLMAO ‘roll on the floor laughing my ass off’ is often used to expressed simply laughter rather than riotous laughter (21).

(20) One also must wonder whether ROTFLers ROTFL about other things elsewhere in life; if so, how come we don’t see them ROTFLing out and about, in the post offices, supermarkets, offices, libraries, etc.
    ‘One also must wonder whether ROTFLers [people who type ROTFL] roll on the floor laughing about other things elsewhere in life; if so, how come we don’t see them rolling on the floor out and about...’

(21) I ROTFLMAOed for *years* over that!
    ‘I rolled on the floor laughing my ass off for years over that!’

(22) Please RTFL before you spout the /. folk wisdom.
    ‘Please read the fucking law before you spout the Slashdot folk wisdom.’

(23) I literally LOLed the first time I read it.
    ‘I literally laughed out loud the first time I read it.’
5 The Path to Verbalization

- Acronyms begin as a valid phrase of the language. If a phrase is used widely enough, it can be reduced to just the bare letters:
  - be right back → BRB
  - I am not a lawyer → IANAL
  - laughing out loud → LOL
  - read the fucking manual → RTFM
  - rolling on the floor laughing my ass off → ROTFLMAO

- At the earliest stages of lexicalization, the acronyms are transparent, so they can only be used in contexts where full phrase could be as well.

- Acronyms that represent verb phrases can be reanalyzed as phrasal acronyms. After reanalysis, their use generalizes to be consistent with other verbs of the language.

  (24)  a. I'm [laughing out loud].
       b. I'm [LOL].
       c. I'm LOLing.

  (25)  a. I did [read the fucking manual]!
       b. I [RTFM]!
       c. I RTFMed!

- Acronyms that encode information that is not found in English verb phrases (such as the subject) cannot be verbalized as a phrasal acronym. This is probably because it encodes a complete thought, not just a verb phrase. It therefore cannot fit into the established syntactic patterns of English. Note, such acronyms do get used in sentences, but because they cannot take inflectional morphology, there is no way to interpret them as a word.

  (26)  a. I am not a lawyer.
       b. IANAL.
       c. *IANALEd.
           'I was not a lawyer.'
       d. Like I said, IANAL.
           'Like I said, I am not a lawyer.'

The semantics of the new phrasal acronym are derived straightforwardly from the source phrase. Because the acronym is lexicalized, the verb can have a different meaning than the full phrase in some contexts. The phrase rolling on the floor laughing requires an argument that acts as both the "roller" and the "laugher" (27a), so ROTFL does too (27c). In the lexical causative of ROTFL, the same argument continues to serve as the roller and laugher (27d), but the lexical causative of roll with a participial phrase can assign these roles to different arguments (28).

27  a. I'm [rolling on the floor, laughing].
   b. I'm [ROTFL].
   c. I'm ROTFLing.
   d. Toby Danger ROTFLeD everyone. ('Toby Danger' cannot be the one laughing.)

   'Toby Danger made everyone roll on the floor laughing.'

28  Toby Danger rolled everyone on the floor laughing. ('Toby Danger' can be the one laughing.)

Once the acronym is established as a verb, the semantics can drift away from the original meaning: associations between letters and the original word can be lost. In (29a), the sentence has a locative on the floor... even though the acronym contains the sequence OTF from 'on the floor'. In (29b), the subject is plural, but the acronym contains an M from 'my'.

29  a. Dianne la Mercenaire [...] passed away this afternoon [...] of oxygen deprivation and multiple contusions apparently sustained when she ROTFLeD herself to death on the floor of her 6th floor office cubicle.


   b. We both ROTFLMAO'ed for about 3 minutes straight.


If the acronym represents a complete expression, then it is interpreted as a quotative acronym. This happens most commonly with fragments with ellided subjects and tenses (30) and imperatives (31).

30  a. (I'll) [Be right back].
   b. BRB.
   c. I BRBed.

   *'I was right back.'
   'I said I'd be right back.'
(31)  a. Read the fucking manual!
    b. RTFM!
    c. You RTFMed me.
        *‘You read me the fucking manual!’
        ‘You told me to read the fucking manual!’

6 Conclusion

➤ Verbalization of acronyms in Internet English follows simple lexicalization patterns:

1. Acronyms representing incomplete phrases are lexicalized as simple verbs
2. Acronyms representing complete phrases are lexicalized as quotative verbs

➤ The processes involved are not new, they are just being accelerated due to a new medium that encourages abbreviations.