COMMON ACRONYM WORDS

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As computerized word lists become readily available to the logologist, many of the previously difficult problems that have filled the pages of Word Ways become trivial. It is therefore interesting to begin researching problems that cannot be solved with word lists. A dictionary provides four pieces of information about a word: spelling, pronunciation, etymology and meaning. This suggests three types of problems for systematic logological research, in ascending order of difficulty: pronunciation (homophones, refractory rhymes, syllables, etc.), etymology (this article) and meaning (homographs, autographs, contronyms, etc.). Although these topics have appeared in Word Ways, they have not received the kind of systematic treatment accorded spelling.

As a step in the right direction, I now attempt to answer the following question: "What acronyms have become common English words?" I define a common English word to be a word that appears uncapitalized in Merriam-Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary. The Ninth defines an acronym as "a word formed from the initial letter or letters of each of the successive parts or major parts of a compound term." Note that a blend is "a word produced by combining other words or parts of words." Therefore, every acronym is a blend but no vice versa. However, blends usually are constructed from phonemes, while quality acronyms are constructed from initials.

Since I do not yet have access to a computerized dictionary complete with etymologies, and I am too lazy to scan all 160,000 entries in the Ninth, I needed a method. After much experimentation, I noticed that the word "acronym" was coined in 1943. In fact, in the Second Edition of the New International, such words are called "acrostics." This implies that most acronyms were formed since the turn of the century, and can be located by scanning the addenda to the various Merriam-Webster dictionaries. My other method was to ask members of the National Puzzlers League; I received help notably from Eric Albert, Philip Cohen and Murray Pearce.

Entries in the following table include the year in which they first entered the language (according to the Ninth), and the Merriam-Webster dictionary that first contains them. The following symbols are used:

- N11 New International (1909)
- N11+ New Words section of the New International (1931)
- N12+ Addendum section of the Second (1959, same as 1954)
Quality Acronyms

asdic Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee (1940, NI2+)
dew Distant Early Warning (1953, 9C)
dopa DihydroxyPhenylalanine (1917, N13)
fido Freaks + Irregulars + Defects + Oddities (1966, 12W)
laser Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation (1957, N13)
lidar Light Detection And Ranging (1963, 12W)
maser Microwave Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation (1955, N13)
nitinol Nickel + Tin + Naval Ordnance Laboratory (1968, 12W)
radar Radio Detection And Ranging (ca.1941, N12+)
rem Roentgen Equivalent Man (1947, N13)
scuba Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus (1952, N13)
snafu Situation Normal — All Fucked (Fouled) Up (ca.1940, N12+)
sofar Sound Fixing And Ranging (1946, N12+)
soran Sound Navigation And Ranging (1945, N12+)
tepa Tri-Ethylene Phosphor-Amide (1953, 12W)
zip Zone Improvement Plan (1963, 12W)

Blends That Technically Are Also Acronyms

alnico Aluminum + Nickel + Cobalt (1935, N12+)
boff Box Office (1946, N13)
ceralal CERamic Alloy (ca.1948, N12+)
cernot CERamic METal (1948, N12+)
comsymp COMMunist SYMPathizer (ca.1961, 12W)
cyborg CYBernetic ORGanism (ca.1962, 12W)
elhi Elementary school + High school (1948, 12W)
goxy Gaseous OXYgen (1959, 9C)
hela HElen Lane (1953, 12W)
linac LIinear ACcelerator (1950, 12W)
loran LONg-RANGE Navigation (ca.1932, N12+)
lox Liquid OXYgen (1923, 9C)
mascen MASS Concentration (1968, 12W)
maximin MAXIMUM + MINIMUM (1951, 12W)
minimax MINIMUM + MAXIMUM (1918, 12W)
modem MODulator + DEModulator (ca.1952, 12W)
motocross MOTOR + CROSS-country (1951, 12W)
napalm NAPthenic and PALMitic acids (1942, N12+)
parssec PARallax SECond (ca.1913, N12+)
selsyn SELF-SYNchronizing (1936, N12+)
shoran SMOrt-RANGE Navigation (ca.1932, N12+)
silvex SILVers + EXterminator (1961, 12W)
sitcom SITuation COMedy (1963, 12W)
teleran TELEvision-RADar Navigation (1946, N12+)
teleex TELEprinter EXchange (ca.1943, 12W)

Acronyms

agitate
biopsy
boff
box
cafe
cease
chic
climb
comet
congress
consider
contact
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deed
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Acronyms From Other Languages

agitprop AGITatsiya + PROPaganda (Russian, ca.1926, NI2+)
flak FLiegerAbwehrKanonen (German, 1938, NI2+)
gestapo GEheime STAatsPOLizei (German, 1934, NI2+)
gulag Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel'notrudyovkhh LAGERei (Russian, 1974, 12W)

moped MOTO + PEDal (Swedish, ca.1955, 12W)
sambo SAMozashchita Bez Oruzhiya (Russian, 1972, 12W)

Near Misses

athodyd Aero–THERmODYnamic Duct (1945, NI2+) – blend
awol Absent WithOut Leave (1919, NI2+) – usually capitalized
benday BENjamin DAY (1903, NI1+) – blend
deet Di-Ethyl Tolumide (1962, 12W) – pronunciation of D.E.T.
hi-fi High Fidelity (1948, NI2+) – hyphenated
ibuprofen Iso-BUTyl PROPionic PHENyl (12W) – PH pronounced f
jeep General Purpose (1940, NI2+) – pronunciation of G.P.
op-ed OPPOSITE EDITORial (1970, 12W) – hyphenated
nazi NAZionalsoZIalist(German, 1930) – shorten & alter
sci-fi SCIence FIction (1955, 12W) – hyphenated
siloxane SILicon + OXygen + methANE (1922, NI3) – blend
veep Vice President (1940, NI2+) – pronunciation of V.P.

Acronyms That Should Be In Webster's Ninth

biopic BIographical PICture (12W)
fifo First In, First Out (NI2+)
lifo Last In, First Out (NI2+)
quangoQUasi-Non Governmental Organization (12W)
shazam Solomon Hercules Atlas Zeus Achilles Mercury (12W)
tacan TACtical Air Navigation (12W)

Supposed Acronyms

posh Port Out Starboard Home
tip To Insure (should be Ensure) Politeness (or Promptness)