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Neological Competition in Multimodal Contexts: Toward an Ecosystemic and Phraseological Theory of Neology

This special issue investigates lexical and phraseological creativity, both in synchrony and diachrony, across multimodal contexts. It seeks to reconceptualize neological **competition** – between words, affixes, expressions, and iconic signs – as an ecosystemic mechanism of lexical adaptation to social, technological, and discursive change. Contributors are invited to address word-formation, discourse diffusion, and phraseological patterning from historical and contemporary perspectives, within *usage-based*, constructional, or variationist frameworks. The ultimate aim is to develop an ecosystemic theory of lexical change, connecting neology, phraseology, and multimodality across time.

1. A dynamic conception of neology

Neology is not a marginal phenomenon but a principle of lexical vitality (Rey 1976; Guilbert 1975; Cabré 1993). It reflects the adaptive capacity of languages to name the new, rename the old, and reorganize their morphological and semantic resources in response to discursive needs. Neology belongs to a continuum of variation and renewal, linking lexical creation, discourse diffusion, and progressive institutionalization (Tournier 1991; Sablayrolles 2000; Humbley 2018).

Contemporary approaches underline the need to move beyond typologies of word-formation mechanisms, and to treat neology as a relational dynamic balancing innovation and stabilization (Kerremans 2015; Renouf 2013; Maniez 2020). As Sablayrolles (2021) observes, lexical dynamics do not follow a simple life cycle but rather a continuous process of coexistence, obsolescence, and reactivation, in which neologisms, archaisms, and paleologisms index an adaptive equilibrium between innovation and lexical memory.

Neology should therefore be viewed not as a series of isolated lexical events, but as a permanent process of adjustment between the lexicon and its discursive, media, and technological environments.

2. Neological competition as a structuring principle

Contemporary neology unfolds in an environment where multiple competing forms may designate the same concept. Lexical competition thus becomes the driving force behind selection and obsolescence, organizing the tension between redundancy and economy, between formal innovation and cognitive stability (Bauer 2001; Štekauer 2005; Renner 2020; Fradin 2003, 2019; Rainer, Gardani, Dressler & Luschützky 2019).

This competitive logic can be observed at several levels:

- Morphological, when suffixes or formation patterns rival one another (*-able* / *-some* / *-ish*; *-age* / *-ing*) (Fradin 2019; Aronoff 2019);
- Lexical, when synonyms and near-synonyms coexist across registers, domains, or speaker identities (*selfie* / *selca*; *influencer* / *content creator*) (Geeraerts et al. 1994; Bauer 2001; Blank 2001; Grzega & Schöner 2008);
- Discursive, when frequency, dispersion, and expressive value determine which forms prevail (Renouf 2013; Fischer 1998; Munat 2007).

As Renner (2020) notes in his ecosystemic view of English word-formation, competition rarely operates at a large systemic scale between entire morphological processes; rather, it tends to generate functionally complementary configurations. Each subsystem (trans-categorical, trans-conceptual, evaluative, compounding) exhibits tendencies toward complementarity or even combinatory behavior rather than direct rivalry.

This adaptive cooperation reveals that word-formation functions as a differentiated ecosystem, where competition and coexistence are regulated by principles of functional specialization and semantic *coverage*. Neological competition can thus be understood as an internal economy of the lexicon, in which lexical units are selected and distributed according to usage, visibility, and formal motivation – echoing usage-based and constructionist models (Bybee 2010; Goldberg 2019; Schmid 2020).

3. Multimodality and neosemiosis

The rise of digital and multimodal environments profoundly transforms the mechanisms of neology. Words now coexist with visual, gestural, and sonic units – emojis, gifs, hashtags, memes – creating hybrid forms that are simultaneously lexical and iconic (Crystal 2008; Zappavigna 2018; Evans 2020).

Such media multiply channels of innovation and diffusion: meaning is distributed across semiotic modes, generating processes of neosemiosis (Eco 1976; Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Forceville 2009). The evolution *laughing out loud* → *LOL* → 🤔 exemplifies the successive textual, abbreviated, and iconic materializations of a single concept.

Neology today is therefore not only formal, but also modal and interactional, mobilizing multimodal resources that reinforce the expressive, social, and community-oriented dimensions of lexical creativity. In digital spaces, this results in plurisemiotic neolanguage phenomena such as memes and gifs (Wagener 2022).

A multimodal approach to neology requires a semiotic perspective, attentive to the specific modes of information circulation in digital environments (Stockinger 2001). Neological creativity encompasses all signs contributing to the dissemination of words, symbols, and social movements – such as *#MeToo* – in an affiliative logic (Thiault 2015) that turns multimodal neology into a genuinely sociolinguistic and sociosemiotic phenomenon, connected to hypertextuality (Rose 2012) and the circulation of linguistic innovations across digital and non-digital spaces (Wagener 2020).

Multimodality has long been central in linguistics, illuminating the discursive dimension of neologizing acts, notably through the text–discourse–interaction model proposed by Paveau (2017). It also plays a major role in language disorders (Bellifemine 2024), conversation analysis (Mondada 2005), language teaching (Guichon & Tellier 2017), and human–AI interaction (Bajohr & Marand 2024).

4. Constraints, genres, and the circulation of innovations

Neological selection occurs within an ecosystem of constraints – technical, cognitive, and social. In digital environments, constraints arise from platform architectures and algorithms: character limits (Boot, Kim Sang, Dijkstra & Zwaan 2019), user practices (Ghliss & Jahjah 2019), and algorithmic filtering or “enclosure” mechanisms (Ertzscheid 2015).

But constraints are not only digital: they also include psychological, neurological, cognitive, economic, and socio-demographic factors (Bose & Buchanan 2007; Altmanova 2013; Wadea 2024), as well as registers and discourse genres in broader sociolinguistic terms.

These constraints shape the evolutionary trajectories of forms, favoring those best adapted to genres and channels of diffusion. We thus observe selection through use (Renouf 2013; Kerremans 2015): the most widely circulating forms prevail through pragmatic and intersemiotic efficiency, not prescriptivism.

5. Neology and phraseology: from combination to pattern

Neology often manifests through phraseological units, where innovation arises from the reconfiguration of existing patterns (Tutin 2007; Mejri 2011; Kühn 2014; Burger 2015; Legallois & Tutin 2013; Ladreyt & Tutin 2023).

Expressions such as *have the nerve to*, *get woke*, *go viral*, or *clap back* show that lexical creativity frequently operates through phraseological construction:

- Stable combinations in which lexical variability signals semantic innovation;
- Productive templates that accommodate analogical variation (Mattiello 2017, 2024; Smith 2023; Renner 2020).

Phraseological neology provides a privileged observatory of lexical change, revealing the continuum linking lexicalization, fixation, and innovation (Gréciano 1997; Gledhill 2000; González Rey 2021). In a usage-based perspective, phraseological productivity reflects a pattern’s ability to generate functional variants adapted to new contexts (Dostie & Tutin 2025).

Masini (2019) proposes a constructional and gradient model of competition, in which the boundary between words and expressions becomes porous. Competition thus extends to constructional patterns themselves: e.g. *X-shaped* ↔ *in the shape of X*, *Y-free* ↔ *without Y*, *X-phobia* ↔ *fear of X*. Such pairs illustrate the coexistence and gradual specialization of morphological and syntactic schemas within the same semantic domain.

Series like *get + Adj + with + N* (*get fresh with, get cheeky with, get lippy with*) or *have the N to + V* (*have the guts to, have the nerve to*) show how micro-constructions compete in specific pragmatic niches. They contribute to a broader *coverage*-based dynamic (Goldberg 2019; Smith 2023), in which phraseological diversity reflects the plasticity of the lexicon in use.

6. Toward a linguistics of competition

Viewed through the lens of multimodal competition, neology offers a framework for rethinking lexical and phraseological evolution. Far from being a mere play of occasional creativity, it reveals a systemic principle of adjustment whereby competing units coexist, differentiate, and redistribute according to usage.

In line with recent competition-based approaches (Nagano, Bagasheva & Renner 2024), competition is conceived as a multi-level organizing mechanism of the lexicon:

- Micro-structural, when rival affixes or constructions (*-able / -some; -age / -ing*) share the same semantic space;
- Macro-structural, when derivation, conversion, and compounding compete to produce new units.

Competition can be triggered by usage-based factors (frequency, analogy, iconicity) and resolved through semantic differentiation, pragmatic redistribution, or obsolescence. This dynamic framework portrays lexical variability not as disorder but as an adaptive engine ensuring linguistic resilience.

In this light, neology and phraseology jointly participate in a constructional ecosystem (Diessel 2019, 2023): forms emerge, spread, and conventionalize through networking and usage reinforcement. Competition plays a key role in structuring the *constructicon*, regulating the balance between innovation and stabilization (Hilpert & Hotta 2025).

Three guiding principles emerge:

1. Lexical variation as motor – the coexistence of competing forms (morphological, lexical, phraseological, or iconic) is a principle of adaptation and plasticity;
2. Innovation as recycling – every creation reconfigures existing schemas, showing the continuity between lexical memory and creativity;
3. Multimodality as interface – the circulation of words, images, and gestures redefines “form” and calls for a trans-semiotic model of the lexical unit.

In sum, a linguistics of competition articulates models of neology, phraseology, and multimodality within a unified eco-constructivist framework. It connects the cycles of emergence, diffusion, and stabilization of forms to formal, cognitive, and iconic motivations, uniting diachronic morphology, constructionalization, and neosemiosis within a usage-based continuum.

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GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Authors are invited to submit an extended abstract of 1-2 pages outlining the corpus, the methodology used and presenting some results of their research. The abstract should include a title, references and 5 keywords. The author's affiliation should also be noted. Abstracts are to be submitted to studiidelingvistica@gmail.com, chris.smith@unicaen.fr and albin.wagener@gmail.com.

Papers should be written in French or English. The selected articles will undergo double-blind peer-review.

DEADLINES

Abstract submission: **January 15, 2026**

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