A Po-Mo Boho in SoHo: 
Emerging Specificity in English 
Templatic Hypocoristics

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English hypocoristic formation

- Non-templatic (Itô and Mester 1997)
- Truncation and suffixation
- Minimal word constrains truncation at the cost of base faithfulness
“CoCo” hypocoristics

• Output form: $C_1+o.C_2+o$
• e.g.
  – South (of) Houston → SoHo
  – Horace Grant → HoGro
• Not just “stump compounding” or “syllabic acronyms”
  – Scarlett Johansson → ScarJo (though Google hits for ScoJo, in reference to the actress)
Emerging specificity

- CoCo forms adhere to a rigid template at the expense of base faithfulness
- Restriction to a certain template is novel for English, but commonplace elsewhere
  - Reduplication (e.g. Austronesian) or templatic morphology (e.g. Semitic)
- Our goal today will be to fill out the lexical entry for the CoCo template
Ancient history of CoCo

- boho (bohemian): OED 1920
- mofo (mother****er): Hunter S. Thompson 1967 (unlikely to be “written” first)
- SoHo (South of Houston): NYT article introduces the word 1970
- slomo (slow motion) and po-mo (post-modern): OED 1978 and OED 1986
Recent history of CoCo

- Spreading rapidly, particularly on American college campuses:
  - HoCo (House Committee): Harvard Crimson 1996
  - CoHo (Coffee House): Stanford Daily 1999
  - FroGro (Fresh Grocer): Daily Pennsylvanian 2001 (built 2000)
- And numerous verbal examples!
  - JoMo (Jonathan Moses, prominent Penn undergrad)
  - RoJo (Ronald Johnson, USC wide receiver)
  - WoPo (Washington Post, competes with stump-esque WaPo)
Constraints on base

• Some bases contain two /o/s:
  – FroYo (frozen yogurt)
• But most just contain one /o/:
  – JoGro (Josh Groban: singer)
  – MoJo (mobile journalist)
• But not all contain an /o/ at all!
  – MoDo (Maureen Dowd)
  – HoJo (Howard Johnson: motel chain)
• But we observe that those that lack /o/ at least have one <o>
Constraints on output

• Complex onsets are retained:
  – Trojan Grounds (USC cafe) → TroGro (*ToGo)
• Coda consonants fall out:
  – Morrison and Foerster (major law firm) → MoFo (*MoFor)
• Looks a bit like a C+V.C+V template sometimes:
  – high fidelity → hifi
  – Sarah Palin → SaPa (google)
• But overwhelmingly, /o/ is the output vowel.
• Zimmer (2005) noted [o] the most popular surface form, and suggested orthography. His suggestion that these are “acronymic” is incompatible with the replication of complex onsets and the /o/ ~ <o> constraint.
[tro.ɡro]
Overview

• Adaptation to Co.Co template
  Fresh Grocer: FroGro
  Trojan Grounds: TroGro
  South of Houston: SoHo
  Maureen Dowd: MoDo

• Presence of orthographic <o> or phonological /o/
Experiments

Mona Boditch: MoBo
Experiments

Mona Boditch: MoBo / Tony Roma: ToRo

1: The first nickname is better
2: No preference
3: The second nickname is better
Experiments

Mona Boditch: MoBo

1: This is a terrible nickname for this person.

5: This is a great nickname for this person.
Experiments

Subjects: Penn students
Comparison task: N=34
Rating 1-5 task: N=27
Results

Hypothesis: Bases with labials are preferred.
Task: Mona Boditch: MoBo / Tony Roma: ToRo
Results

Hypothesis: Bipartite bases are preferred.
Task: Nordstrom: NoStro / North Face: NoFo
Hypothesis: Bases with /u/ are dispreferred.
Task: Harvey Lobel: HoLo / Rudy Newton: RoNo

Results
Results

Hypothesis: Bases with front vowels are dispreferred.
Task: Mona Parker: MoPo / Randy Matthews: RoMo
Results

Hypothesis: Orthographic and phonological /o/ is preferred over just orthographic /o/.

Task: Lola Fairfield: LoFo / Cory Covington: CoCo
Results

Hypothesis: Orthographic and phonological /o/ is preferred over just phonological /o/.
Task: Ron Posey: RoPo / Jimmy Beauregard: JoBo
Results

Hypothesis: Orthographic and phonological /o/ is preferred over just phonological /o/.

Task: Courtney Yoder: CoYo / Beau Johnson: BoJo
Lauren Roper: LoRo / Bo Johnson: BoJo
Conclusions

Preferred: /o/ and <o>
   Bo Johnson: BoJo (3.7/5)
   Cory Covington: CoCo (3.5/5)
Dispreferred: front vowels
   Randy Matthews: RoMo (1.6/5)
   Becky Reeder: BoRo (1.4/5)
Tolerated: <eau> and /u/
   Jimmy Beauregard: JoBo (1.8/5)
   Rudy Newton: RoNo
Highly specific base constraints.
Why /o/?

• French also has a process of nickname formation appending /o/ to truncated forms:
  – dictionnaire → dico
  – apéritif → apéro
• OED: truncation of words after /o/ lead to o-final abbreviations “probably established an association of the ending -o with casual or light-hearted use which it has retained ever since” (e.g. memo, typo) → -o suffix (cheapo, wino, ammo).
• Also connective /-o-/ , as in “syntactico-semantic” to account for medial /o/ in CoCo?
Why /o/?

- “Phoneaesthetic” connections with /o/: “light-hearted”ness (pace OED)
- Associations with “exotic” CVCV phonotactics?
- Associations with infant speech (“place harmony”: work of Paula Fikkert)
Acknowledgments

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References


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<th>Things</th>
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<tr>
<td>SoHo South of Houston</td>
<td>NoHo North Houston</td>
<td>LoHo Lower Houston</td>
<td>boho bohemian bobo bourgeois bohemian mofo mother****er pro-fro prospective freshman HoHo House Host RoHo Room Host coco color computer ho-cho hot chocolate</td>
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<td>SoPo South Portland</td>
<td>SoNo South Norwalk</td>
<td>SoCo South Congress</td>
<td>po-mo post-modern SoCo Southern Comfort fro-yo frozen yogurt slo-mo slow-motion mojo mobile journalist HoCo House Committee</td>
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<td>NoHo North Hollywood</td>
<td>RoPo Rohnert Park</td>
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<td>MoCo Montgomery County</td>
<td>JoCo Johnson County</td>
<td>CoCo Contra Costa</td>
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<td>PoCho Port Chester</td>
<td>SoYo Southwest Yonkers</td>
<td>SoBro South Bronx</td>
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