Telegraphese and Telegraphese

An English Corpus of Telegraphese was developed in the early 1990s by linguists, for research in areas like ellipsis and aphasia. Five "situations" were prepared, and research subjects were asked to compose English "telegraphic" phrasal units for each of the scenarios. Their collected English "T-phrases" formed the English corpus. The exercise was part of a larger European Telegram Project involving seven European languages; the corpus of T-phrases it generated was used for various cross-language comparisons., e.g., Tesak (1992). Subjects in the project did not employ telegraphic code dictionaries, but wrote in what they assumed to be "telegraphic" prose.

How might these situations have been handled, if expressed via telegraphic code dictionaries that were actually used during the period 1870-1930?

Examples of pronounceable word and five-letter code cipher solutions to the ECT "situations" are presented below.

1       *You would like to participate in a conference where you would like to present a paper. You have influenza and cannot go. This happens suddenly (on the eve of your departure).*

| *A.B.C.* | icosander departable |
|---|---|
| icosander | I am too ill to attend to business |
| departable | sincerely apologize for having disappointed |

| *Adams* | duration actuation |
|---|---|
| duration | regret to say |
| actuation | detained here by illness. cannot say when shall be able to leave |

| *Acme* | elfteognym |
|---|---|
| elfte | impossible to go |
| ognym | very sorry |

| *Simplex* | PLEODJAWAM |
|---|---|
| PLEOD | I regret that |
| JAWAM | too ill to attend to business |

2       *You have been traveling in the countryside to visit your aunt; suddenly your car breaks down. Presently you are in the lounge of the Summerside Motel, Newbury; you have to be picked up there.*

| *A.B.C.* | slumbered Summerside Motel Newbury chalicore |
|---|---|
| slumbered | is stranded at |
| chalicore | come as quickly as possible |

| *Adams* | drain edifying Summerside Motel Newbury clubbed |
|---|---|
| drain | owing to circumstances, about which I cannot explain by wire, |
| edifying | shall remain at [Summerside Motel, Newbury] until |
| clubbed | come here as soon as possible |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Acme* | olauabalok Summerside Motel Newbury |
| olaua | stranded at |
| balok | can you come |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Simplex* | SWAMTCRUVE Summerside Motel Newbury |
| SWAMT | stranded |
| CRUVE | come as quickly as possible |

3    *You are arrested because of presumed drug smuggling at the Newport, Vermont, border. You have the opportunity to send a telegram to your partner to request help.*

| | |
|---|---|
| *A.B.C.* | seteleran Newport Vermont impunidad |
| seteleran | caught smuggling and arrested |
| impunidad | waiting instruction |

| | |
|---|---|
| *A.B.C.* | denshired admetos Newport Vermont |
| denshired | the following difficulty has arisen, please wire instructions |
| admetos | arrested for smuggling |

| | |
|---|---|
| *A.B.C.* | admetos Newport Vermont adiposas |
| admetos | arrested for smuggling |
| adiposas | no time must be lost in making arrangements |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Adams* | sinnspiel camelion Newport Vermont |
| sinnspiel | discovered at railway station |
| camelion | act cautiously but quickly |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Acme* | Newport Vermont akbmeewegd |
| akbme | arrested |
| ewegd | awaiting your instructions |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Simplex* | Newport Vermont ATFUJKABUK |
| ATFUJ | arrested |
| KABUK | will wait for instructions from you |

4    *You have booked a flight from New York to Paris that was canceled because of a bomb threat. You are stuck at JFK Airport and do not know when you will have a flight to Paris.*

| | |
|---|---|
| *A.B.C.* | deicrates talkoel |
| deicrates | departure postponed until |
| talkoel | I will telegraph you immediately anything offers (happens) |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Adams* | actually |
| actually | departure postponed. will wire on what date I leave |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Acme* | rhyfgotsaw |
| rhyfg | vessel delayed, will not sail until |
| otsaw | will telegraph fully later |

| *Simplex* | GADYP |
|---|---|
| GADYP | departure postponed. will wire on what date I (we) leave |

5    *You have been detained and thus cannot pick up your nephew from the railway station. Your partner is supposed to help in this situation.*

| *A.B.C.* | demurely [nephew's name, e.g., "Peter"] terstond |
|---|---|
| demurely | unexpectedly detained |
| terstond | is (are) due by train at your end; please have someone in attendance to look after him |

| *Adams* | intrusive diverting |
|---|---|
| intrusive diverting | think you had better go (to ——) meet train due |

| *Acme* | coabwgnycu Peter |
|---|---|
| coabw | unavoidably delayed |
| gnycu | do your utmost to meet |

| *Simplex* | GIBAWMEHNU Peter |
|---|---|
| GIBAW | have been detained |
| MEHNU | can you manage to meet |

Some information is lost in each of these encodings; permissible loss would depend on context and what one party can depend on the other's knowing. Judgment would frequently be called on; one would need it to conclude, in the *A.B.C.* solution to situation 5, that "demurely" (unexpectedly detained) referred to the speaker, not to Peter.

Cost saving is achieved at expense of specificity. Specificity is achieved with reduced data compression.

Alternative solutions are frequently available from a single dictionary, providing some opportunity for nuance. One's familiarity with a particular dictionary will affect how well one can capture the essence of what needs to be expressed. Code books varied in scope and depth. The general-purpose *Adams* and *A.B.C.* codes seem best suited to the non-commercial nature of the Telegraphese "situations." Of the five-letter code cipher books, *Simplex* proved more useful than the *Acme Commodity and Phrase Code*.

Previous usage would form a basis for acceptable ellipses in future and might, as confidence rose, also exert pressure on the sublanguage to perform beyond its normal use. Much would depend on the relationship of sender and receiver, and their respective wits.

In all cases the codes yield large word-count economies over the five examples provided by Barton (1998), which is all of the English Corpus of Telegraphese that I have seen. Note that the five-letter codes were able to be combined into the single ten-letter code words permitted under the the Lisbon Convention (1908).

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*The A.B.C. Telegraphic Code* (Fifth Edition, 1901)

*Acme Commodity and Phrase Code* (1923, 14th printing January 1941)

*The Adams Cable Codex* (Tenth Edition, Boston, 1896)

Barton, Ellen L. The Grammar of Telegraphic Structures: Sentential and Nonsentential Derivation. *Journal of English Linguistics.*  26(1):37-67.  1998 Mar

Fitzpatrick, Eileen, Joan Bachenko and Don Hindle. The Status of Telegraphic Sublanguages. R. Grishman and R. Kittredge, eds., *Analyzing Language in Restricted Domains: Sublanguage Description and Processing.* 39-51. 1986

*The "Simplex" Standard Telegraphic Code* by Edward W. Reiss (New York, 1911)

Tesak, Jürgen,  and Jürgen Dittman. Telegraphic Style in Normals and Aphasics. *Linguistics* 29: 1111-37. 1991

Tesak, Jürgen. Telegraphic Style: A Cross-linguistic Perspective. *Endangered Languages*: proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Linguists, Québec, Université Laval, 9-14 August 1992. vol 2, 381-384. 1993

afterword (21 July 04)

I have examined many code dictionaries, cables (coded and plaintext), and the literature around these since writing the above more than two years ago.

I am most dissatisfied with the paragraph asserting that  "Cost saving is achieved at expense of specificity. Specificity is achieved with reduced data compression." This is not necessarily true, or perhaps is meaningless when it comes to telegraphic message practice involving selection of code words from tables, or construction of "code words" from sequences of tables each providing several facets or "orientations" of qualities. Verbatim encoding of an "original message" — and there were "verbatim" codes that claimed to enable this, as does in its way "facsimile" telegraphy — is not really what telegraphic communication was about. The sender would satisfy his needs from the phrases and message components made available in the dictionary (or dictionaries) he was using. There was no desire (or utility) in transmitting "style;" it was all business, particularly of course by users in trade, commerce and manufacturing.

Yet some of the codes were linguistically ambitious, and their introductions sometimes argued for putting telegraphic code message practice on a scientific (and even philosophical) basis.

In any event, it is the classification side of telegraphic communication, rather than the code languages themselves, that led me to the literature on the indexing, searching and retrieval of technical and scientific literature. The importance of carefully structured telegraphic abstracts, from controlled vocabularies, was one obvious connection with telegraphy, but again, it was not so much the codes themselves, than the classifications that underlie them, that connects with the telegraphic code dictionaries that were beginning to gather dust in the 1950s.