Witnessing lexicalization: An analysis of the recent development of the collocational range of the term *Brexit*

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The word *Brexit* has become ubiquitous, but in fact it is a neologism only six years old. This coinage was invented for a concept that required a new term to facilitate communication, as is often the case in lexicalization. The present paper deals with the developmental trajectory of a recently born blending that exhibited astonishing lexical change in such a short period of time. *Brexit* was officially recognized in December 2016 by the Oxford English Dictionary, defining its meaning as "the (proposed) withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, and the political process associated with it". For example, shortly after the referendum, *hard Brexit* and *soft Brexit* have become conventionalized collocations. They were not so transparent at first for many speakers of English, which is why some politicians think the collocations "clean Brexit" or "full Brexit" should replace "hard Brexit". However, when something becomes conventionalized in language it is difficult to change it. *'Hard' Brexit* is favoured by ardent Brexiteers and would see the UK refusing to compromise on the free movement of people even if it meant leaving the single market or having to give up hopes of free trade arrangements. '*Soft' Brexit* could involve keeping close ties with the EU, possibly through some kind of membership form of the EU single market, in return for a degree of free movement. Using the methodology of corpus linguistics of existing corpora such as the *NOW* (News on the Web) *corpus* and the theoretical framework of discourse analysis, this paper aims to shed some new light on the interplay between ideology, politics and language. A chronological organization of different Brexit corpora will give us an insight into how a newly coined word quickly gained ground, tracing its fast-track history of collocational range.

Key words: Brexit, collocation, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, diachronic lexicology