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Morphology and Word Formation

**English word formation processes in the *Cyberpunk*  
tabletop role-playing game franchise: A quantitative  
analysis**

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Linguistics B.A.

Morphology and Word Formation

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## 1. Introduction

Culture and language are closely interwoven and as such one cannot change without in turn impacting the other. Language as a dynamic system is in a state of constant flux. The *Cyberpunk* tabletop role-playing game (or TTRPG for short) franchise conceived by Mike Pondsmith is set in a dystopian future, where modern society is polarized and government systems are in the firm grasp of mega corporations. With massive societal changes comes the phenomenon of what Pondsmith choses to call *streetslang*; essentially a futuristic variety of English featuring neologisms centering around harsh, charged and violent living conditions.

This paper concerns itself with the morphological analysis of Pondsmith's *streetslang* and the word formation processes, or lexeme origins involved in the creation of this fictional jargon. Books and movies are often the subject of linguistic analyses, however tabletop role-playing games present a blind spot in this regard, as they are not as widely consumed and can as such still be considered a niche pastime. When it comes to academic research TTRPGs are often analyzed from a sociological or psychological perspective. such as their impact on racial and gender identities (see Garcia 2017) or their educational value (Bawa 2022), but rarely from a linguistic angle.

This research paper focuses on the English word formation processes involved in the creation of *streetslang* and seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) Which word formation processes were involved in the creation of *streetslang*?
- 2) Can a dominant word formation process be observed?
- 3) Is morphemic or non-morphemic word formation more prevalent among *Cyberpunk*'s neologisms?

## 2. Theoretical Background

Since this paper concerns itself with word formation processes it is important to differentiate between different types in order to classify *streetslang* terminology. Not all words in the *Cyberpunk* TTRPG are created through morphological word formation processes however, making the inclusion of semantic change and borrowing as factors of word origins necessary.

### 2.1 Non-morphemic word formation processes

**2.1.1 Acronyms:** This word formation process is defined by Matthews (2007) as “[a] word formed from the initial letters of two or more successive words”. An example would be the word *IFAR* standing for *improved finned aerial rocket*.

**2.1.2 Back-formation:** This process is defined as “The formation of a simple or simpler word from one understood as derived” by Matthews (2007). This can be observed with the adjective *lacey*, which carries the meaning of *fighting in a berserk rage*. This term was derived from the in-universe designer drug *Black Lace* and its effects upon consumption.

**2.1.3 Blending:** An amalgamation of parts of multiple words, resulting in a lexeme that possesses the combined meaning of all its constituents (see Plag et al. 2007: 225). As such the noun *vidiot* refers to someone addicted to consuming *virtual reality* or *video games* and represents a joining of the first letter of these two electronic mediums with the word *idiot*.

**2.1.4 Clipping:** A word formation process that involves creating new lexemes through elision of parts of a base word (see Plag et al. 2007: 225). This is evident in the case of *corpo* referring to a *corporate employee*.

**2.1.5 Reduplication:** Matthews (2007) defines this word formation process as “[a] morphological process by which all or part of a form is repeated” such as in the word *mishmash*.

## 2.2 Morphemic word formation processes

**2.2.1 Affixation:** Frawley (2003) describes the process of affixation as attaching “morphological (not lexical) elements [...] either directly to roots or stems, or to affixes”. This can be seen in the case of the noun *booster*, which originates from the verb *boost* and was created by attaching the suffix *-er*.

**2.2.2 Compounding:** According to Plag (2015: 100) this word formation process entails joining multiple words to form a new one. An example being *braindance*, which is a combination of the two words *brain* and *dance*.

**2.2.3 Conversion:** “[I]s the process whereby a new word is derived by change in part of speech, without adding a derivational affix” as defined by Frawley (2003). The noun *smelly*, referring to a *corpse* for instance is derived from the adjective *smelly* without any change in its spelling.

## 2.3. Origins of lexemes without involvement of word formation processes

**2.3.1 Semantic change:** Matthews (2014) describes semantic change as an alteration of a lexeme’s meaning. This can either occur via adding to or subtracting from a word’s denotations. An instance of which can be observed with the word *venice* in the *Cyberpunk* franchise. Here it represents not only a city name, but is used to describe any coastal city that has been flooded due the effects of global warming.

**2.3.2 Borrowing:** According to Matthews (2014) borrowing is “the introduction into language *a* of specific words, constructions, or morphological elements of language *b*.” An example being the originally Italian loanword *gato* denoting a particularly *cool person*.

### 3. Methodology

As mentioned, tabletop role-playing games are, in contrast to print and electronic entertainment media, rarely the subject of linguistic research. The *Cyberpunk* franchise's many rulebooks, magazines and compendiums provide an ample amount of data for linguistic analyses. Nowadays even older publications from the late 1980s are readily available in digital form. They can be purchased from several online marketplaces, making these kinds of data more accessible now than they have ever been before.

The research data were collected manually from *Cyberpunk* TTRPG books and every word assumed to be *street slang* was added to a list for further analysis. This brought with it the problem of differentiating between *street slang* and other, already existing varieties. Every term from the initial list was entered into the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) (Davies 2010) to check whether they were already part of a non-*Cyberpunk* variety. This approach essentially utilizes COHA as a linguistic filter. This specific corpus was chosen since the *Cyberpunk* TTRPG is an American product, with another reason being that COHA includes data from the 1980s in which the TTRPG was conceived, which the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* in contrast does not.

An example to illustrate this filtering process can be observed in the case of the lexeme *straphanger*, a term referring to *commuters*. It was assumed to be a part of *street slang* initially. A COHA query has however shown the lexeme to have already been used as early as 1920 in the real world, thus it was ruled not to be part of *street slang*. Another lexeme *flatbacker* could not be found via COHA queries at all, which qualified it as part of *street slang* for this analysis.

All lexemes that could not be found as entries in COHA are assumed to be exclusive to the *Cyberpunk* variety *street slang* for the purpose of this paper. Furthermore, there are also words that have unmistakably changed on a semantic, but not on a morphological level. An example being *heart* referring to a *liquid crystal matrix* in addition to the term's common denotations. For these semantically shifted words samples with a size of 100 were taken from COHA for semantic analysis. Words from these samples that matched with assumed *street slang* terms on a semantic level

were discarded as they were determined to not be part of *Cyberpunk*'s exclusive terminology.

#### 4. Results

Through this approach a total of 175 *street slang* terms across eleven books were identified and then classified according to their word formation processes and lexeme origins, a list of which can be found in the appendix.

Table 1 lists the ten word formation processes and lexeme origins the compiled terms were analyzed for, namely acronyms, affixation, back-formation, blending, borrowing, clipping, compounding, conversion, reduplication and semantic change. The absolute and relative frequency distribution shows compounding to be the most prevalent word formation process with 37.14%, followed by the non-morphological process of semantic change with 27.42%. Conversion (1.14%) and back-formation (1.71%) represent some of the rarest processes, with the only exception being reduplication, instances of which could not be observed at all.

<b>Word formation process/ lexeme origin</b>	<b>Absolute frequency</b>	<b>Relative frequency</b>
<b>Acronyms</b>	10	5.71%
<b>Affixation</b>	6	3.43%
<b>Back-formation</b>	3	1.71%
<b>Blending</b>	10	5.71%
<b>Borrowing</b>	15	8.57%
<b>Clipping</b>	16	9.14%
<b>Compounding</b>	65	37.14%
<b>Conversion</b>	2	1.14%
<b>Reduplication</b>	0	0%
<b>Semantic change</b>	48	27.42%

Table 1: Word formation process and lexeme origin frequencies.

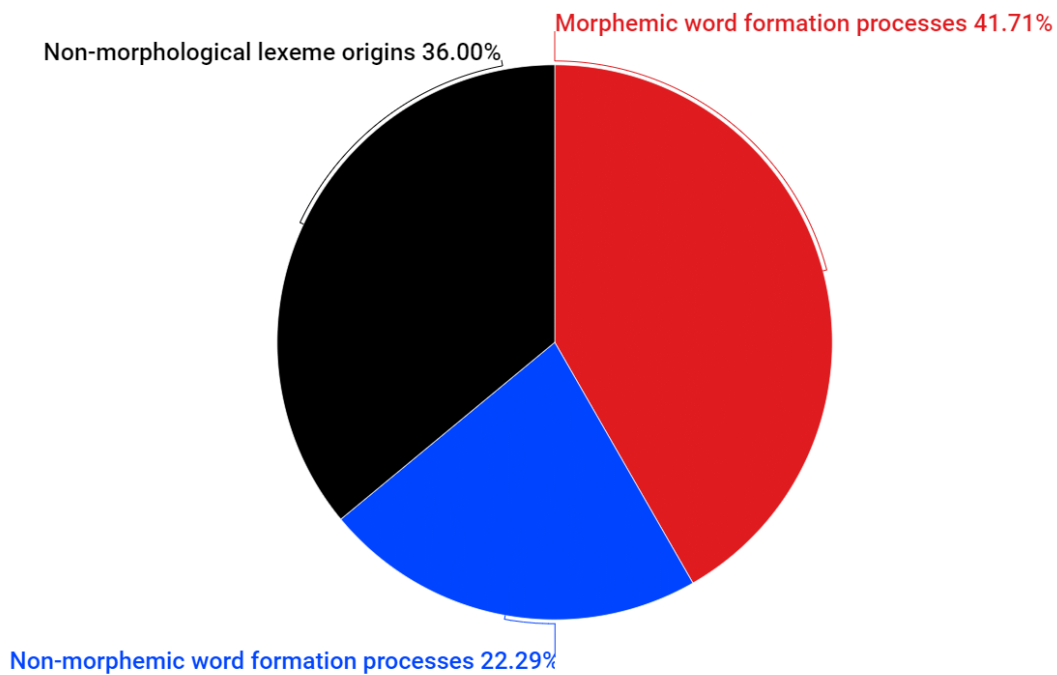
The word formation processes in Table 1 can be divided into three categories as follows:

- **Morphemic word formation processes:** Affixation, compounding, conversion
- **Non-morphemic word formation processes:** Acronyms, back formation, blending, clipping, reduplication



- **Non-morphological lexeme origins:** Borrowing, semantic change

Figure 1 reveals that morphemic word formation processes could be observed the most, accounting for 41.71% (73 words) of *Cyberpunk*'s terms. Non-morphological lexeme origins made up 36% (63 words) and non-morphemic word formation processes 22.29% (39 words) in total.



**Figure 1: Distribution of non-morphological lexeme origins, non-morphemic and morphemic word formation processes by percentage.**

## 5. Discussion

As previously mentioned, compounding is the dominant word formation process brought to light by this quantitative analysis. While the process of reduplication was not observed at all. However, this paper only covered eleven of the 97 official *Cyberpunk* books available as of August 2022. Since the amount of analyzed data only applies to approximately 11% of the *Cyberpunk* franchise as a whole, it could be argued that the relative distributions are not representative of all *streetslang* word formation processes and lexeme origins. As such further research may be required to find out whether this trend continues in the books not covered in this paper.

The approach of isolating *streetslang* by running every word through COHA to extract exclusively *Cyberpunk* terms could be seen as problematic. There is no guarantee that words not observable via COHA queries are Pongsmith's original creations. They could be part of a not comprehensively documented variety. That is to say that just because terms such as *inkman* do not have matches in COHA they are not used by people in real life.

The non-morphemic process of back-formation also proved to be a hurdle. This can be illustrated by looking at the noun *netrunner* and the verb *to netrun*. Both terms are part of *Cyberpunk*'s jargon, however it could not be determined whether the noun or the verb had been created first. This conundrum was resolved by classifying both as compounds.

Tabletop role-playing game rulebooks are fundamentally different from other fiction books regarding their structure. While entire cohesive sentences can be found in novels, rulebooks on the other hand often contain glossaries of in-universe terminology rather than continuous texts. This paper has explored a possible approach of collecting, classifying, and analyzing TTRPG rulebooks that could be used in future research in this particular niche.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has explored three different questions concerning the terminology of the *Cyberpunk* tabletop role-playing game franchise. First, observable word formation processes were investigated. The method of choice consisted of manually collecting data from eleven books. These data were then filtered through queries conducted with the help of the *Corpus of Historical American English*. This process brought to light 175 *street slang* terms that were then analyzed according to their word formation processes and lexeme origins. The results revealed that acronyms, affixation, back-formation, blending, borrowing, clipping, compounding, conversion and semantic change were all involved, however reduplication was not.

The second research question has focused on finding out whether a dominant word formation process can be observed. To this end the relative and absolute frequency of word formation processes and lexeme origins were determined. The result was that 37.14% of all terms were created via compounding, making it the dominant process.

The third line of investigation consisted of determining whether non-morphological lexeme origins, morphemic or non-morphemic word formation processes are more prevalent when it comes to the creation *Cyberpunk*'s neologisms. Here morphemic word formation processes were deduced to be the major type of word origin via an analysis of relative distribution, with 41.71% of *street slang* terms being created that way.

Tabletop role-playing games represent a going largely unnoticed niche when it comes to linguistic research. This research paper was a first attempt of analyzing and classifying its in-universe jargon and thusly shed some light on how it was conceived.

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## Appendix

Table 2: Compiled *streetslang* terms

Streetslang Term	Meaning	Word formation process/ lexeme origin
2020 Hindsight	The act of watching one's back	Compounding
ACPA	Assisted Combat Personnel Armor	Acronym
Afrit/Afreet	Demon (from Arabic)	Borrowing
Agent Man	Police Officer	Compounding
Agriplex	Agglomeration of farms with one central management complex	Blending
Amp	To get cyberware installed in the brain	Semantic change
Aperture-based	Very low quality, referring to ACPA without VRI	Compounding
API	Armor piercing incendiary	Acronym
B-girls	Bikini girls. prostitutes	Clipping
BD	Braindance	Acronym
Bag Man	Drug Dealer	Compounding
Bakebrain	Someone altered with cyberware to allow for the usage of data skill chips	Compounding
Banana Boys	MaxTac	Compounding
Banana Bunch	MaxTac	Compounding
Beauties	Term for ButaqualideHC1, a powerful and illegal sleeping pill	Clipping
Beav	General term for inhabitants of a <i>beaverville</i>	Back-formation
Beaverville	General name for safe suburban neighborhoods where the wealthy live (derived from the 1950s sitcom "Leave it to Beaver")	Compounding
Bennie	Someone from out of town	Semantic shift
Black Lace	A highly illegal synthetic endorphin	Compounding

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Blazebrain	Someone altered with cyberware to allow for the usage of data skill chips	Compounding
Blue Triangles	Term for triphetamines, a subcategory of amphetamines	Compounding
Boga	Something that is in fashion, vogue (from Spanish)	Borrowing
Bombshell	To evacuate quickly, to run	Semantic change
Boney	Corpse	Conversion
Booster	Term for members of gangs, who are typically outfitted with cybernetic technologies	Affixation
Boris	General term for large, typically Russian ACPAs	Semantic change
Brain Potato	A BD addict	Compounding
Brandance	A consumer VR experience that entails reliving some else's memories	Compounding
Bridge Crowd/ Tunnel Crowd	Commuters	Compounding
Buttonhead	Someone addicted to receiving electrical stimulation of the brain's pleasure centers through insertion of plugs in interface sockets	Compounding
Bwana	Mister, generally a respectful term of address (from Swahili)	Borrowing
Carbon Plague	A deadly nanite disease that feeds on CO2 and heat	Compounding
Chip	General term for any kind of data recording	Semantic change
Chip in	to buy cyberware for the first time, to try one's luck, to connect to a machine	Compounding
Choo	Excrement (from Swahili)	Borrowing
CHOOH-Head	Wild or undisciplined personnel/civilians	Compounding

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CHOOH2	Pronounced like /tʃu:ˈtu:/, an industrial alcohol with a higher burning temperature than methanol, which is commonly used to power vehicles, but also often consumed as a drug	Acronym
Choom/ Choomba	Friend, family member (Apparently of Afro-American origin)	Borrowing
Chop	Credchip	Semantic change
Chopping	Practice of illegally decrypting a credchip	Semantic change
Chromatic Rock	A music genre, essentially combining disco aesthetics with screamed lyrics from punk and the instrumentals of rock/metal	Compounding
Chromer	Someone who enjoys destroying ACPAs, also a term for 21st century heavy metal fans	Affixation
Chunking	Eating on the run, eating while performing another task	Affixation
Cold One	Corpse	Compounding
Cold tea	Alcohol	Semantic change
Collarboy	White-collar worker	Compounding
Conapt	A condominium apartment	Blending
Corp/Corpo	Anyone working for a big corporation	Clipping
Corpse	Derogatory term for an employee of a mega corporation	Semantic change
CorpSec	Corporate security and its employees	Blending
Corpsicles	Corporate security employees	Blending
Cory Plug	A brain cortex implant which allows for the use of <i>daddies</i>	Compounding
Credchip	Portable device that stores digital currency	Compounding
Cryomax	Contemporary fashion based on 19th Century Russian clothing (Cossack boots, colorful sashes,	Blending



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	etc.) mixed with cybertechnology	
Crystal	Liquid crystal computer matrix	Semantic change
Crystaljock/ Crystaljockey	Computer user, netrunner	Compounding
Cyber-up	To get as much cyberware implanted as possible	Compounding
Cyberdeck	General term for a modem that enables one to interface with the cyberspace	Compounding
Cyberpsycho	Derogatory term for someone suffering from cyberpsychosis	Compounding
Cyberpsychosis	A mental illness, specifically a dissociative disorder stemming from the installation of too much cyberware	Compounding
Daddy	Term for data skill chips, which let you acquire certain skills upon insertion	Clipping
Data Term	A street corner information machine	Clipping
Dead Guy/Girl	People employed by mega corporations	Compounding
Deckhead	Netrunner	Compounding
Delta	An aircraft for smuggling wares	Semantic change
Deltajock	Delta pilot, air smuggler	Compounding
Deniable Person	Someone hired to feign ignorance in case a job goes wrong	Compounding
Dirtgirl	Derogatory term for a woman who was born on earth	Compounding
Dorphs	Synthetic endorphins (a designer drug)	Clipping
Draga	Expensive (from Hungarian)	Borrowing
Easy Rider	Someone who travels a lot	Semantic change
Edgezone	Gray area	Compounding
Effer/Iffer	IFAR	Acronym
Exotic	Term for humans biosculpted with non-human elements like fur, long ears, fangs, etc	Semantic change

## Appendix

Eye-Face/I-Face	Interface	Clipping
Faceman	A dealer who is subordinate of a different dealer and does their dirty work	Compounding
Firelane	Term for an area a weapon can fire into without obstructions	Compounding
Flatbacker	Prostitute	Compounding
Flatline	To kill sb.	Compounding
Fodder	Derogatory term for <i>solos</i>	Semantic change
Fried	Insane	Semantic change
Gajjin	Derogatory term for outsiders (from Japanese)	Borrowing
Gato	A smooth operator, cool person, sometimes referring to drug dealers (from Spanish)	Borrowing
Geeked	Killed	Semantic change
Genies	Term for rounds used by <i>Genius Guns</i>	Back-formation
Genius Gun	A type of gun with guided projectile technology	Compounding
Gewalt	Violence (from German)	Borrowing
Gibson	Fortune teller, psychic	Semantic change
Giri	Honor, duty, obligation (from Japanese)	Borrowing
Glass crushing	The act of firing a gun into someone's window to intimidate them	Compounding
Go kevlar	To contract the carbon plague	Compounding
Goboy	Friends	Compounding
Gomi	Trash, junk (from Japanese)	Borrowing
Gonk	Idiot, fool	Semantic change
Gyro	Small helicopter, derived from gyrocopter	Clipping
Hard	Heavily-armored, wearing an exoskeleton, to be a cool or admirable	Semantic change
Headlining	Wanted man	Semantic change

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Heart	Liquid crystal matrix	Semantic change
Hexed	Suffering from cyberpsychosis	Semantic change
Hold down	To draw a weapon and aim it at sb.	Semantic change
Hound-Tipping	The practice of ambushing and reprogramming police robohounds	Compounding
Hover	Hovercraft	Clipping
Hydro	Hydrogen fuel	Clipping
Iceman	Someone who doesn't show or have emotions	Compounding
IFAR	Improved Finned Aerial Rocket	Acronym
Infobro	Information broker	Blending
Injun Country	Enemy territory	Compounding
Inkman	White collar worker	Compounding
Input	Girlfriend, casual lover, submissive partner in a homosexual relationship	Semantic change
Jam	to mess up, to hurt someone, to have sexual intercourse with someone	Semantic change
Jo	A nobody, possibly derived from the concept of the everyman (like in <i>average Joe</i> )	Clipping
Joanna	Female counterpart to <i>Jo</i>	Affixation
Jumbo Bird	Heavy Aerial Assistance	Compounding
Kleptoid	Thief	Compounding
Lacey	To fight in a berserk fashion, derived from the drug Black Lace	Back-formation
LEDiv	Law Enforcement Division	Acronym
Mainline	General term for a partner in a serious, long-term relationship	Semantic change
Max/Maximum	Good, superlative	Semantic change
MaxTac	Maximum Force Tactical Division, a specialized squad of the Night City Police	Blending

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	Department dealing with cybered-up psychopaths	
Meatspace	The real world (counterpart to cyberspace, term employed by netrunners)	Compounding
Metalhead	Someone who's full body is mechanical	Semantic change
Midnight Market	General term for black markets dealing in risky, highly illegal goods	Compounding
Mini-grin	Mini-grenade launcher	Clipping
Minimum	Bad, sorrowful	Semantic change
Monkey	Person using ACPA who isn't well-trained to do so	Semantic change
Mudboy	Derogatory term for a man who was born on earth	Compounding
Mushi	Computer glitch, bug (from Japanese)	Borrowing
Netrun	To interface/hack into cyberspace	Compounding (possibly back formation)
Netrunner	Person who netrunches	Compounding (possibly affixation)
Nudie	Personnel targets not wearing an exoskeleton or ACPA	Affixation
Output	Boyfriend, casual lover, dominant partner in a homosexual relationship	Semantic change
PA	Powered Armor	Acronym
Padre	Friends/member of your PA team, derived from compadre	Borrowing
Paint Boys	Yakuza	Compounding
Part Timer	A police officer or a bounty hunter working for one of the mega corporations	Semantic change
Pasta Boys	Mafia	Compounding
Polymer one-shot	A cheaply made plastic pistol	Compounding
Porky	Someone who loves or collects weapons (from <i>porcupine</i> )	Clipping

## Appendix

Posergang	A gang made up of members who all affect a certain look, style or bodysculpt-job	Compounding
Ram	Personality (from the computer jargon, RAM)	Semantic change
Reality Junkies	General term for addicts of VR, BD, video games, etc.	Compounding
Rimbo	Term for an armed, attractive, but not very intelligent young woman (combination of <i>Rambo</i> and <i>bimbo</i> )	Blending
Ripped	Assaulted	Semantic change
Ripperdoc	Surgeon specializing in the installation of illegal cyberware	Compounding
Roll up	To capture	Semantic change
Rougey	Crazy, dangerous, fanatical	Affixation
S.S.R.	Suit Systems Read, an inspection of status displays inside of an ACPA	Acronym
Samurai	A corporate-hired assassin or mercenary (from Japanese)	Semantic change
Sardine	A trooper wearing powered armor	Semantic change
Shoemaker	Someone who produces false IDs	Semantic change
Shoes	False IDs	Semantic change
Skeleton	Term for all collected electronic records kept on a person, someone's electronic identity	Semantic change
Slammit on	To get violent, to attack someone for no reason	Compounding
Slipup list	Collection of possible mistakes that could occur during an operation	Compounding
Smelly	Corpse	Conversion
Spiked	Killed	Semantic change
Sticks	Beat Cops	Semantic change

## Appendix

Stuffit	To have sex, to forget about something	Compounding
Sunnies	Term for Sonniene, a powerful opiate	Clipping
Svoluch	Someone without honor (from Russian)	Borrowing
T	Truth	Clipping
Technical penetration	Act of using mechanical/electrical means to gather information	Semantic change
Thatch	Term for a psychotic killer	Semantic change
The Man	Immediate Superior Officer	Compounding
Thirdman	A middleman in the criminal underground	Compounding
Throwbacks	Exotics	Semantic change
Tin Can	Powered Armor	Semantic change
Trash	To kill (when referring to people), to destroy (when referring to ACPAs or other equipment)	Semantic change
Tri-phets	Triphetamines	Clipping
Venice	General term for any part of a coastal city that has been flooded due to climate change	Semantic change
Vidiot	A VR or video game addict	Blending
VRcade	VR, BD and video game arcade	Blending
VRI	Virtual Reality Interface	Acronym
Yono	Lowlife, scum (from Korean Yonomoseki)	Borrowing
Zonedance	A dance battle to determine who is in control of an area or district	Compounding