

Towards an ecosystem approach to word-formation



Guest lecture by Prof. Vincent Renner

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The study of competition in word-formation has attracted wider interest in recent years, but most of the research is limited in scope to a micro-level of rivalry between individual patterns of affixation (see e.g. Bauer 2006, Lindsay & Aronoff 2013, Arndt-Lappe 2014, Santana-Lario & Valera-Hernández 2018). Perspectives have been broadened by pioneer work focusing on macro-level competition, i.e. rivalry between different processes of word-formation – affixation vs conversion (Bauer et al. 2010, Naya 2017), affixation vs conversion vs deaffixation (Nagano 2008), compounding vs blending (Renner 2006), compounding vs conversion (Tribout & Villoing 2014) –, but the field still lacks a substantial research foundation. In this paper, I would thus like to move beyond individual cases of competition and I aim to delineate a whole morphological ecosystem on the basis of an onomasiological-cum-ecological approach to word-formation, using French and English as illustrative languages.

I first draw the different correspondences between the main processes and functions of word-formation and show that there is no full-scale competition, but, on the contrary, a quasi-complementary distribution between the processes which prototypically encode the transcategorial function (affixation, conversion and deaffixation), the transconceptual function (affixation, compounding and blending) and the evaluative function (affixation, clipping and replication). In the second part of the paper, I then show that in each of the three demarcated competitive subsystems, the distributional tendencies can also be claimed to be of an essentially complementary nature. In the light of Mark Aronoff's recent work on affixal rivalry (2016, 2019), which is based on the evolutionary principle of competitive exclusion, I finally conclude that like affixes, individual word-formation processes can be seen as elements that tend to settle in distinct niches of the morphological ecosystem.

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