

# Summary of 'Borderline Cases in Morphology, a study in language change'

## 1. Introduction

This book is a study on language change. Not about particular changes in a past but about three processes that take place before our eyes and are traditionally considered irregular and unsystematic. These three processes are all part of morphology as they deal with word formation, but the notion morpheme does not play any role in the changes. This may be the reason why these three processes of word formation have been dismissed as accidental phenomena that do not deserve further analysis or, at best, are considered borderline cases. Possibly the emphasis that has been placed on the very convenient and useful concept of the morpheme in the first half of the twentieth century (see Bauer 2020: 459) has led to dismissive attitudes with regard to processes in which the morpheme plays no role. The present study shows this attitude to be incorrect. The changes discussed are indeed systematic.

The underlying assumption of my research has steadfastly been that word-formation processes are systematic, not random or haphazard, based on the rationale that, if language changes were haphazard, interlocutors would see their chances of properly understanding each other heavily diminished. In addition, it is *a priori* highly unlikely that word formation consists of two completely different parts: a morphemic one which is systematic and a non-morphemic one which is not. The results presented in this volume show, as is to be expected, that non-morphemic processes of word formation are not at all chaotic.

The phenomenon underlying the three non-morphemic word-formation processes presented in Section 2 below has turned out to be excellently describable in terms of a notion derived from the theory of diacrisis developed by the Polish linguist Ludwik Zabrocki (1907–1977). Zabrocki went in search of similar or common parts of otherwise different words. These similar or common parts appeared to have a certain reality in the minds of the language user even though they were not morphemes. Take, for example, the Dutch words *bast* 'bark', *last* 'load' and *kwast* 'tassel', or the English words *last*, *mast* and *vast*. These words, the Dutch as well as the English ones, have a final segment in common, /ast/ and /ɑ:st/ respectively. Such a common segment, a 'confusivum' in Zabrocki's terminology, not only has a certain reality as end rhyme of the words in question but also may function, especially when a certain semantic aspect is associated with it in the mind of the language user, as a starting point for paradigmatic word formation based on analogy. This is clearly the case in the three processes discussed in this book. The data examined in this study mainly come from English and Dutch. Incidentally, however, data from Frisian, Afrikaans, Swedish, German, Polish, French, Spanish and Italian are also analysed.

## 2. Word-formation processes

Three non-morphemic processes of word formation have been analysed in the research presented here: suffix reinterpretation, clipping, with a focus on embellished clipping, and blending.

### 2.1 Suffix reinterpretation

In the chapters 2 and 3, I discuss suffix reinterpretation. The English word *neonatology* can serve as an example. According to the OED, *neonatology* is formed on the basis of the noun *neonate*, a backformation of *neonatal*, plus a final part *-ology*. The normal suffix, however, is *-logy*, as, for instance, in *biology*, *geology* and *theology*, all three originating from Greek forms, plus the suffix *-logy*, also derived from a Greek base. The question now is: how could *-logy* change into *-ology*? The answer is obvious. A naive language user perceives that the words *biology*, *geology* and *theology* share a common final part, which is *-ology*.

The words also share a semantic aspect, namely ‘name of a scientific discipline’. Consequently, the language user associates this aspect with the common formal part, the confusivum, and subsequently starts to use it as if it were a suffix by pasting it on to *neonat(e)*, hereby forming *neonatology*. As soon as this happens more often, *-ology* develops into an allomorph of *-logy* and thus acquires suffix and morpheme status.

## 2.2 Clipping

The second process of non-morphemic word formation, clipping, is discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

Clipping means that a word can be curtailed. Examples are the English clipped forms *tute* from *tutor*, *vet* from *veterinarian* or *celeb* from *celebrity*. It must be clear that the morpheme does not play any role in this process of shortening, which should be considered a type of word formation; rather the pieces involved in this process are stressed syllables. Next to this process of shortening into CVC-syllabic lexemes, a new disyllabic clipping process has appeared over the past 75 years in American English, an example being *psycho* from *psychopath*. A fair amount of these disyllabic clipped forms shows final *-o*. In chapter 4, it is shown that it is plausible that this new phenomenon has arisen under the influence of immigrant languages, most likely Italian, but a Spanish influence cannot be ruled out either. Based on a number of similar disyllabic, clipped forms with final *-o*, an idea developed in the minds of the speakers similar to what we saw in the case of *-(o)logy*.

A confusivum *-o* found in a series like *dipso*, *homo* and *psycho* does not only show [+short] or [+disyllabic] but also [+informal], [+human] and [+pejorative] features. As such it was felt to be some kind of suffix that could be added to clipped monosyllabic forms as is the case in *lesbo*, from *lesbian* and truncated to *lesb-*. This type of clipped neologism is called embellished clipping by Bauer and Huddleston (2002: 1636). Chapter 4 also shows that embellished clippings are not the end point of the change. Consider, for example, the recently coined form *weirdo*. There is no shortening or clipping in this case; on the contrary, the word form has been enlarged. What should be noticed is that the base word *weird* is monosyllabic, just like the roots in embellished forms such as *lesbo* and *Afro*. In addition, the new word *weirdo* fits beautifully into a series to which also *lesbo* belongs. They share an informal character, refer to human beings and are used with a pejorative meaning. This has suggested to me the new term ‘pseudo-embellished clippings’. Although originally final *-o* had no morphological status in a word like *psycho*, this changed during the historical process: at a certain moment final *-o* received suffix status. First it could only be pasted to monosyllabic clipped forms, subsequently also to monosyllabic lexemes.

Final *-o* had widespread success all over the world. In chapter 4, I show how it found its way into languages such as Swedish, Dutch and even German, where the borrowing of final *-o* is especially interesting, since German features its own, competing suffix-like element *-i* as in *Studi* from *Student* ‘student’ and *Ossi* from *Ostdeutscher* ‘East-German’. The introduction of the disyllabic-clipping pattern in Dutch appears to be fostered by the trochaic character of Dutch words in general. In addition, the new disyllabic word-formation pattern appeared to have consequences for the order of constraints in Dutch, as formulated within an Optimality Theory framework. The order that makes monosyllabic clipped forms possible had to be reversed for disyllabic clipped words.

## 2.3 Blending

The last word-formation process that is discussed in this study is blending. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are devoted to it. Blends are words that are made up of parts taken from two other words. Examples of recent English blends are *chumocracy* from *chum* + *democracy*, *covidiot* from *Covid* + *idiot*, *Twitterverse* from *Twitter*

+ *universe* and *Weimerica* from *Weimar* + *America*. Recent Dutch blends are: *balkon(n)ade* from *balkon* ‘balcony’ and *serenade* ‘serenade’, meaning a ‘serenade presented from a balcony during lock down’, *habitoor* from *habitat* ‘habitat’ + *kantoor* ‘office’ ‘an office with all the benefits and conveniences that makes one feel like at home’, *skyperitieven* from *Skype* ‘Skype’ and *aperitieven* ‘have an aperitif’, meaning ‘have an aperitif with somebody via Skype’, or *vaccinazi* from *vaccin* ‘vaccine’ and *Nazi* ‘Nazi’, a ‘term of abuse used by vaccine opponents against advocates of vaccination’. My analysis confirms that blends consist of the initial part of the first source word and the final part of the second source word, for example, *Wei-* from the first source word *Weimar* and *-merica* from the second *America*. Both the first and the second source word can be incorporated as a whole into the blend, as some of the examples show.

After an extensive, hopefully even exhaustive, survey of the literature about blends, I show that the second source word has priority over the first in the formation of blends. The initial part of the second source word, for example *democracy*, is cut off, or, to use the appropriate jargon, is truncated. The stressed syllable must be preserved in the remaining part, which leads to the final segment *-mocracy*. Truncating operates from left to right in the second source word, since the final part has to be retained. The direction is reversed in the first source word, since the initial part of this source word has to be preserved. The segment *-mocracy*, which has no morphological status at all, now becomes the head, or anyway the formal head, of the final blend. This head determines the stress pattern and the syllabic structure of the resulting blend or, to put it differently: a blend copies the prosodic and syllabic structure of the original second source word.

A next step is clipping off a precisely equally large part from the first source word as has been truncated from the second. Subsequently, this segment must be inserted into the open spot in the skeleton of the second source word. This is again illustrated with the blend *chumocracy*. Truncation of the unstressed initial segment of the second source word *democracy* led to clipping of the part *de-*, which is a syllable. Consequently, the remaining part *-mocracy* contains an open place for just one initial syllable. The first source word, *chum*, consists of only one syllable. Therefore, this full word may be inserted into this open space, resulting in *chumocracy* after deletion of identical segments. Incidentally, truncation does not necessarily concern syllables in the process of blend formation. Take, for example, the well-known example *smog* from *smoke* and *fog*. Here truncation and insertion of an onset come into play. Blending, which is traditionally considered to be an extremely chaotic process, is thus seen to follow a strict pattern.

A small group of concatenations of word parts, however, has to be distinguished and separated from real blends: the *modern*-type combinations. *Modem*, from *modulator* + *demodulator*, is not a blend of the initial part of the first source word and the final part of the second source word but a concatenation of the initial parts of both source words. Therefore, this type had better be described as a compound of two clipped words. The stress pattern of the resulting form of these words also proves that they are compounds. As with compounds, the stress is on the first syllable whereas the stress pattern of blends follows that of the second source word.

Chapter 7 shows that blends that become popular and frequently used, or are imitated by a number of similar blends, may form a model for paradigmatic word formation. The head of a blend, for example *-tainment* from *entertainment* and attested in blends such as *docutainment* and *infotainment* can eventually develop into a free, independent lexeme. Consequently, this noun *tainment* may start to form compounds, which show standard compound stress.

So far, nothing has been said about the role of confusiva in blends. Yet confusive parts between a blend and both its source words are essential for the retrievability of the source words and the final interpretation of the blend. Thus, for instance, *Wei* in *Weimerica*, the confusivum with source word *Weimar*, and *merica*, the confusivum with source word *America*, are necessary for understanding that *Weimerica*

combines *Weimar* and *America*. To what extent confusiva are relevant in an easy retrieval of the original source words is a matter that is left to psycholinguistics for further research.

### 3. Unidirectionality

Chapter 9 deals with the development of a completely bound segment like *-tainment* in *entertainment* via blends to a free morpheme or lexeme. This chapter can be seen as an *encore*, since it does not directly relate to the three non-morphemic processes of word formation which I discuss in the rest of the book. The aim of this chapter is to find out whether there is a unique direction of morphological change as claimed in grammaticalization theory.

Three processes are analysed:

- From nominal part of a compound to affix(oid). A well-known example is the development of the Dutch lexeme *boer* ‘farmer’ from *groenteboer* ‘greengrocer’ to finally *lesboer* ‘uninspired teacher’.
- From affix(oid) to free form (adjective/adverb). An example provided is the German forms *Hammerfrau* ‘power lady’ and *Das ist hammer* ‘This is incredible’.
- From non-morphemic part of an opaque word via a libfix to a noun, for example from *magazine*, via *fanzine* to *zine*.

The direction of these three changes differs, just as the degree of change. The first process goes from free to bound morpheme, the second one is just the other way around and the last one goes from maximally bound part of a word, thus from a non-morphemic part of a word, via a bound, suffix-like segment to a free morpheme or lexeme. The conclusion must be that there is no specific or preferred direction of change, other than that which is imposed by the historical development.

### 4. Conclusion

In the final chapter of the book, I summarize my results. The conclusion must be that, contrary to what has always been assumed, the three non-morphemic processes of word formation discussed in this study are not at all chaotic or unpredictable. These processes are based on a system which arises from recognition by speakers and on subsequent productive processes based on analogy. These processes are by no means accidental and the morphological changes that result from them are recognizable to language users and can be systematized by linguists.

Language users are not aware of notions like ‘morpheme’, they simply perceive similarities and likenesses. Whether these similarities obey morpheme boundaries is, apparently, of no concern. What has turned to be of concern in some of these processes is prosody and syllabic structure but these phenomena fall outside the realm of morphology.

Similarities perceived by language users can be a starting point for productive processes of paradigmatic word formation. This study, which has mainly focused on language change, is in line with earlier work of a Dutch school of morphologists consisting of Schultink, Van Marle, Hüning and Van Santen, who concentrate on the importance of paradigmatic word formation (cf. Booij 2019: 10).