The semantic function of affixation in a corpus of Old English derived nouns

ROBERTO TORRE ALONSO

Universidad de La Rioja

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the function of Old English affixation in terms of meaning modification. For this purpose, a corpus has been analysed of 4,084 derived nouns retrieved from the lexical database of Old English Nerthus (www.nerthusproject.com). Extensive data analysis shows that there are differences in the semantic function of affixes, which can be related to the change undergone by the type of derivational morphology of Old English, which shifted from variable bases (stems) to invariable bases (words). The conclusion is reached that affixes add new meaning when attached to derived nouns whereas some examples have been found of lack of semantic modification when the input to the morphological process is an underived form.

KeyWords: Morphology, word-formation, affixation, semantics

Resumen

*Durante el periodo de inglés antiguo se produjo un cambio tipológico, por el cual las nuevas creaciones léxicas dejaron de estar basadas en formas variables (stems) y comenzaron a basarse en formas invariables (palabras). Así, asumiendo que este cambio tipológico se ha completado de manera homogénea, podemos analizar la formación de palabras en relación con lexemas existentes en la lengua. Desde una perspectiva semántica, este trabajo pretende definir las implicaciones que la adición de afijos tiene en la creación léxica. El estudio de un corpus de 4.084 predicados obtenidos de la base de datos Nerthus_(*www.nerthusproject.com*) muestra divergencias semánticas en la incorporación de afiijos a palabras que han sido previamente derivadas. Los afijos aportan significado cuando la base es afijada, sin embargo, con bases cero derivadas se observan casos donde la adición de afijos no implica modificación semántica.*

Palabras Clave: Morfología, formación de palabras, afijación, semántica

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

This paper aims at describing, in a tentative way, the initial steps undertaken in the semantic study of Old English word formation, in the corpus provided by the database *Nerthus* (Martín Arista *et al.* 2009). For so doing, a total of 4,084 derived predicates have been reviewed in a double analysis. In the first place, a morphological deconstruction of the predicates has been carried out, following the methodological principles stated in *Fundamentos empíricos y metodológicos de una base de datos léxica de la morfología derivativa del inglés antiguo* (Torre Alonso *et al.* 2008), which allows to identify the individual constituents taking part in each word formation. Secondly, a contrastive analysis has been made, by which the meanings

[1] This research has been carried out with the funding of the *Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia* through the grant FFI2008-04448/FILO.

of the base constituents and those of the resulting derived predicates are compared, thus allowing for a more concrete view of the function of affixation.

The semantic studies of the Old English lexicon so far have been based upon text translations. This fact is responsible for the major shortcomings of this type of analysis. Translations do not constitute systematic and stable analytical processes, and not unconnected to it, translations may be imbued with lexicographical bias. The existence of a corpus that allows for the identification of the different constituents of complex words, and the ordering of related words around morphologically related families constitutes a gigantic step forward in the functional and semantic studies of Old English affixation.

Nonetheless, until the morphological analysis *Nerthus* aims at is fully developed, I am forced to trust and operate with the existing dictionary definitions, some of which are theoretically old-fashioned while others are not complete yet. As for the semantic value of affixes, several works have been devoted to establish the meanings and functions of these bound morphemes. Difficulties arise first in what scholars decide to be grammatical or lexical elements, on the establishment of a close set of affixes. Not less important is the overlapping of functions a single affix may carry out, thus leading to an extension of their semantic definitions. Last but not least, spelling variations lead to the mixing and overlapping of affix forms, creating an obscure and not-easy-to-explore field of analysis.

While these questions will be treated in turn, I shall not close this section without devoting a word to recursivity and recategorisation.. According to Martin Arista (2009) these two phenomena constitute the basis of a morphological study on word formation. This paper aims at examining the consequences of affixation upon already derived bases, and try and establish differences between the relationship among the different derivational processes taken into account, that is, affixation (both prefixation and suffixation), compounding and zero-derivation.

2. EXPLORING A DATABASE CORPUS OF DERIVED NOUNS

The database *Nerthus* (www.nerthusproject.com) upon which this research is based, includes morphological and semantic information compiled from different sources, mainly from *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Clark Hall, 1996), but also from *An Anglo-Saxon dictionary* (Bosworth and *Toller*, 1973) and *The student's dictionary of Anglo-Saxon* (Sweet, 1976). Without taking more dictionaries into account, some differences in the meanings offered for some predicates arise, as (1) demonstrates:

(1)

mierring: (CH) ‘hindering, squandering, waste’; (Sweet) ‘leading astray, squandering, waste’; (BT) ‘(I) hindering, leading astray, (II) squandering, waste’

mearcung: (CH) ‘(-) marking, branding; mark, characteristic; (+/-) description, arrangement; constellation; title, chapter’; (Sweet) ‘(ge-) marking, mark, characteristic; marking out, description; constellation’; (BT) ‘(I) a marking, mark; (II) a marking out, description, arrangement, disposition’

Differences lay not only on the meanings provided, but on the morphological form the predicate has when it is assigned a precise meaning, and on the distribution and organisation of the meanings assigned to the dictionary entry. Thus, we can observe that Bosworth and Toller (1973)separate meanings according to different senses of words, while Clark Hall (1996) prefers a separation according to the morphological structure of the word based on the presence or absence of the prefix *ge-*. Sweet also takes this factor into account, thus allowing of another element of divergence between these proposals. For Sweet (1976), the meanings ‘marking, mark, characteristic’ apply when the predicate *mearcung* is prefixed, while Clark Hall (1996) includes these meanings, when the predicate lacks *ge-*.

Erasing these differences is what a corpus-based study aims at. But for so doing, a definite, precise and well-established corpus of analysis must be defined. In this case, I deal with a total of 4,084 affixed Old English nouns obtained from the database *Nerthus*. I shall not begin without acknowledging the manner in which the inventory of affixes involved in the creation of derived nouns has been established. Affixed predicates are formed by the attachment of a bound morpheme to a free predicate, both in its prefield or in the postfield, in the case of Old English. As for compounding, it includes those complex predicates formed by means of the combination of two free lexemes. Nevertheless, the distinction between bound and free morphemes is not clear in functional terms. Mairal Usón and Cortés Rodríguez (2000-2001) have analyzed derivational morphemes as predicates, thus doing away with the distinction between free forms (lexemes) and bound forms (derivational morphemes) because both are listed as predicates in the lexicon. In the same line, Martín Arista (2008, 2009) has demonstrated that the same word-functions can be performed by free and bound morphemes, that is, there is no functional difference between the insertion of a free or a bound form into the word slots. Although the borderline between derivation and compounding is not always clear, the distinction between both processes is maintained in this analysis in order to perform

the gradual study of processes and focus on the restrictions that may be imposed on the different combinatory elements. This distinction however, poses the problem of 'affixoids' (Kastovsky, 1992), borderline cases between derivation and compounding. They are elements that exist as independent lexemes in the lexicon of the language and which are going through a process of grammaticalization, whereby a lexical item becomes a bound form (Bauer, 2007). The inventory of affixoids includes the prefixoids shown in (2a) and the suffixoids in (2b):

(2)

a. *æfter-* 'after', *be-* 'by, near', *fær-* 'calamity, sudden danger, peril, sudden attack', *for-* 'before, from', *fore-* 'before', *forð-* 'forth, forwards', *ful-* 'full', *in-* 'in', *of-* 'over, above', *ofer-* 'over', *on-* 'on', *to:-* 'to', *ðurh-* 'through', *under-* 'under', *up-* 'up', *ut-* 'out, without', *wan-* 'lack of', *wið-* 'with, near, against', *wiðer* 'against' and *ymbe-* 'around, about'.
b. *-bora* 'bearer', *-do:m* 'doom, condition', *-ha:d* 'person, condition, state', *-la:c* 'play, sacrifice', *-mæ:l* 'mark, measure', *-ræ:den* 'terms, condition' and *-wist* 'being, existence'.

For the purposes of this paper, the question of the separation between affixation and compounding regarding the affixoids has been solved by analysing the predicates in which these elements appear. When the number of lexicalized predicates is relevant, the affixoid has been treated as a pure affix. In the postfield, this treatment does not cause further problem, for in Modern English, those affixoids have been fully grammaticalized, as in *fre:onscipe* 'friendship' or *wi:sdo:m* 'wisdom'. In the prefield, however, the question is more complex. By assuming total grammaticalization, I am considering as inseparable some forms which can, nowadays, be detached from the base predicate, as in *incuman* 'to come in, to go into' or *forðsendan* 'to send forth'. The reason for this decision is that this analysis is more oriented towards form. at this stage of the analysis.

The full inventory of the affixes identified for this research is as follows. Brackets represent spelling variants. The prefixes are stated in (3a), while suffixes are grouped in (3b):[2]

[2] The forms in brackets represent alternative spellings.

(3)

a. *a:- (æ:-), æ:-, æfter-, and- (an-, on-, ond-), ante-, arce-, be- (bi-, bi:-, big-), ed- (æd-, et-, æt-, ead-, eð-), el- (æl-, ell-), fær-, for- (fore-), forð- , ful-, ge-, in-, med- (met-), mis-, of- (æf-, ef-), ofer-, on- (an-), or-, sa:m-, sam-, sin-, sub-, to:- ðurh-, un- (on-), under-, up-, ut-, wan-, wið-, wið er-,* and *ymb- (ymbe-).*

b. *-að (-oð 4), -noð, -uð, -eð), -bora , -do:m , -el (-ol, -ul, -ele, -la, -elle, -le, -l, -il), -els, -en (-n, -in), -en, -end, -ere (-era), -estre (-ystre, -istre), -et (-ett), -ha:d, -icge (-ecge, -ige), -incel, -ing (-ung), -la:c, -ling (-lung), -mæ:l, -ness (-nes, -nis, -nyss, -nys), -ræ:den, -scipe (-scype), -t (-ð, -ðo, -ðu)* and *-wist.*

Although the current research within the *Nerthus* group is analysing the endings *-a, -e, -o, -u*, as inflective derivatives (thus González Torres, 2009), I shall take here a more conservative perspective and treat them as purely inflective endings, leaving them out of the inventory of suffixes identified in this work.

Regarding the meaning of affixes, we must lay on their function as word formers to be consistent. The aim of affixation is to generate new meanings through new lexical forms. Following Martin Arista (2009) recursivity and recategorization are the two major properties of morphology in a functional structural approach to word-formation. Old English, a stage of the language where lexical creation was mainly based upon the use of already existing word, is a suitable language to prove this statement. (4) presents some cases of recursivity in which affixes are attached to bases previously derived on the same side of the structure[3]:

(4)

Prefixation of prefixed predicates: *underto:dal* 'secondary division' (*to:da:l* 'partition'); *ungeðwæ:re 2* 'disturbance' (*(ge)ðwæ:re* 'united', adjective).
Suffixation of suffixed bases: *cri:stendo:m mæ:nsumung, feohle:asnes*

But for the purpose of this research, recursivity has been understood in the widest sense of derivation, thus allowing for the study of affixation applied to previously derived words created by processes other than affixation as in (5).

[3] The bases of the derived words and their translations are offered in brackets.

(5)

Prefixation of compound predicates: *midyrfenuma* 'coheir' (*yrfenuma* 'heir, succesor'); *oferealdormann* 'chief officer' (*ealdorman* 'alderman, ruler, prince')

Suffixation of compound predicates: *fæstræ:dnes* 'constancy, fortitude' (*fæstræ:d* 'firm, constant'); *wordsnoterung* 'sophism'(*wordsnoter* 'eloquent, wise in words')

Prefixation of zero-derived predicates: *bi:cwide* 'byword, proverb' (*cwide* 'speech, saying, word'); *onspræ:c* (*spræ:c*);

Suffixation of zero-derived predicates: *gifung* 'consent' (*gif 2* 'gift, grace'); *wi:fla:c* 'cohabitation, fornication' (*wi:f* 'woman, female, lady');

The second main feature of morphology in an approach as the one here presented is recategorization, a function mainly fulfilled by suffixes as (6) shows:

(6)

a:birging 'taste'(*a:birgan* 'to taste, eat') (verb); *forwerodnes* 'old age' (*forwerod* 'worn out, very old') (adjective); *ha:rung* 'hoariness, old age'(*ha:r* 1 'hoar, hoary, grey, old') (adjective);

However, this research has also proved the existence of recategorization in the formation of prefixed predicates. I have identified a total of 23 predicates with this structure. Consider the cases in (7):

(7)

oferfyrr 'excessive distance'(*feorr* 1 'far, remote') (adjective); *oferwriten* 'superscription' (*(ge)wri:tan* 'to write') (verb); *unlanda:gende* 'not owning land' (*landa:gende* 'owning land') (adjective)

As stated above, in order to provide a functional explanation of process feeding or recursive word-formation in Old English complex nouns it is necessary to consider what the function of derivational morphology is, namely to generate new meanings by means of new forms.. As a result of a methodological decision made as a general guideline of the *Nerthus* project, the definitions of meanings will be dealt with once the derivational morphology of the language has been fully described and explained. Although insightful observations of

semantic primes have been carried out by de la Cruz Cabanillas (2007) and Guarddon Anelo (fc. a, b), for the time being, our research is based on the existing dictionaries, some of which are theoretically old-fashioned and others are not complete yet. In spite of this conditioning, the question must be answered, however preliminary, of the semantic compatibility of affixes raised by following Lieber (2004). Lieber states that new affixes can be attached to previouly derived words if they contribute additional meaning and remarks that "lack of content limits recursivity" (Lieber, 2004: 169) but she makes the provision that "repeating the same features is possible as long as the result is useful and interpretable" (Lieber, 2004: 166). In general, throughout the analysis of the derived nouns of Old English, I have found a meaning difference between the base and the derivative that motivates the activation of the derivational process. The only remarkable exception arises when zero-derivation feeds affixation. Excluding cases in which there is partial synonymy between base and derivative, in such a way that the derivative specializes in one of the meanings of the base, as in the afffixal *oferbru:* 'eye-brow' vs. the zero-derived *bru:* 'brow, eye-brow, eye-lid, eye-lash', there remain the instances of zero-derivation feeding prefixation given in (8a) and zero-derivation feeding suffixation given in (8b).

(8)

a. *onforwyrd* 'destruction' vs. *forwyrd* 'destruction, ruin, fall, death'
to:gehlytto 'fellowship, union' vs. *gehlytto* 'fellowship, lot'
æfgrynde 'abyss' vs. *grynde* 'abyss'
midhelp 'help, assistance' vs. *help* 'help, succour, aid'
anhoga 'care, anxiety' vs. *hoga 2* 'fear, care; attempt, struggle'
æfterle:an 'reward, recompense, restitution, retribution'
vs. *le:an 1* 'reward, loan, compensation, remuneration, retribution'
edle:an 'reward, retribution, recompense, requital'
vs. *le:an 1* 'reward, loan, compensation, remuneration, retribution'
ansto:r 'incense' vs. *sto:r 1* 'incense'
bi:swæc 'tripping up, treachery'
vs. *swic* 'illusion; deceit, treachery'

b. *a:gennes* 'property' vs. *a:gen* property, own country'
æ:bylgð 'anger' vs. *æ:bylg* 'anger'
æ:bylgnes 'anger, offence' vs. *æ:bylg* 'anger'

(ge)anbidung ‘waiting for, expectation; delay’
vs. *anbid* ‘waiting, expectation,’
by:sting ‘beestings’ vs. *be:ost* ‘beestings’
bebodræ:den ‘command, authority’ vs. *bebod* ‘command’
blinnes ‘cessation, intermission’ vs. *blinn* ‘cessation’
by:ing 2 ‘dwelling’ vs. *bu: 1* ‘dwelling’
gebu:nes ‘dwelling’ vs. *bu: 1* ‘dwelling’
(ge)ce:lnes ‘coolness, cool air, breeze’
vs. *ciele* ‘coolness, cold, chill, frost’
e:htnes ‘persecution’ vs. *e:ht 1* ‘pursuit’
e:htung ‘persecution’ vs. *e:ht 1* ‘pursuit’
fle:amdo:m ‘flight’ vs. *fle:am* ‘flight’
forebodung ‘prophecy’ vs. *forebod* ‘prophecy, preaching’
frihtrung ‘soothsaying, divination’ vs. *friht* ‘divination’
la:rdo:m ‘teaching, instruction’
vs. *la:r* ‘art of teaching, preaching, doctrine’
le:odscipe ‘nation, people; country, region’
vs. *le:od 2* ‘people, nation’
sæ:dnað ‘sowing’ vs. *sæ:d* ‘sowing’
trahtað ‘commentary’ vs. *traht* ‘text, passage; exposition, treatise, commentary’
wæ:dlung ‘poverty, want; begging’ vs. *wæ:dl* ‘poverty; barrenness’

These data have to be interpreted with caution for two reasons. In the first place, the degree of synonymy of the pairs given above is open to question. In the second place, and related to the first reason, shortcomings of lexicographical work cannot be completely ruled out. Despite the little evidence that has been found and the disclaimers just given, it seems that zero-derivation can feed affixation without significant meaning change. This happens more often in suffixation than in prefixation (which is a consequence of the higher figures yielded by suffixation) and with a variety of affixes.

3. CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulties in carrying out semantic studies in diachrony, corpus-based approaches as the one here presented allow for the regularization and standardization of the analytical procedures in such a way that the inconsistencies of prior proposals can be observed and a new view on semantic research can be set on the solid grounds of systematicity. This paper just remarks inconsitencies in previous approaches, while opening the doors to new and more deep semantic analyisis to be done.

This paper puts forwards the possibility for affixes, both prefixes and suffixes, to combine with all kinds of derived predicates, and remarks the ability of some Old English prefixes to create new lexical items by means of recategorization.

As regards meaning, this paper remarks the existence of affixations in which no meaning addition is observed. However, the debate whether the existence of meaningless addition of affixes responds to the shortcomings of previous studies or responds to a regular and identifiable process is yet an open question. The fact that this phenomenon occurs only with zero derived predicates seems to indicate some degree of regularity. Very tentatively, the reason why recursivity without meaning change is allowed may have to do with the decay of zero-derivation as a productive process in the derivational morphology of Old English. More work, however, is needed in this area.

REFERENCES

Bauer, L. (2007). *The Linguistics Student's Handbook.* Edimburgh: Edimburgh University Press.

Bosworth, J., and T. N. Toller. (1973 (1898)). *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clark Hall, J. R. (1996 (1896)). *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

De la Cruz Cabanillas, I. (2007). Semantic Primes in Old English: A Preliminary study of descriptors. *SELIM* 14: 37-58

González Torres, E. (2009). Affixal nouns in Old English: morphological description, multiple bases and recursivity. PhD dissertation, University of La Rioja.

Guarddon Anelo, C. Un análisis de las propiedades combinatorias de los primitivos semánticos a través de las adposiciones complejas del inglés antiguo. *Revista de la Sociedad Española de Lingüística.* Forthcoming a.

Guarddon Anelo, C. The natural semantic metalanguageof Old English compound adpositions. *English Studies*. Forthcoming b.

Kastovsky, D. (1992). Semantics and vocabulary. En R. Hogg (Ed.) *The Cambridge History of the English Language I: The Beginnings to 1066,* (pp. 290-408). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lieber, R. (2004). *Morphology and Lexical Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mairal Usón, R., and F. Cortés Rodríguez. (2000-2001). Semantic Packaging and Syntactic Projections in Word Formation Processes: the Case of Agent Nominalizations. *RESLA* 14, 271-294.

Martín Arista, J. (2008). Unification and Separation in a Functional Theory of Morphology. En R. Van Valin (Ed.) *Investigations of the Syntax-Semantics-Pragmatics Interface,* (pp. 119-145). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Martín Arista, J. (2009). A Typology of Morphological Constructions. En C. Butler y J. Martín Arista (Eds.) *Deconstructing Constructions,* (pp. 85-115). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Martín Arista, J. *et al*. (2009). Nerthus: An Online Lexical Database of Old English. http://www.nerthusproject.com

Torre Alonso, R *et al*. (2008). Fundamentos empíricos y metodológicos de una base de datos léxica de la morfología derivativa del inglés antiguo. *Revista de lingüística y lenguas aplicadas* 3, 129-144.

Sweet, H. (1976 (1896)). *The Student´s Dictionary of Anglo-Saxon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.