English affixal nominalizations across language registers

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With the recent growth of interest in the study of language use, as opposed to linguistic structure, affixal nominalizations have also found their way into explorations of register variation. In a seminal analysis of systematic differences between language varieties (i.e. the multi-dimensional analysis developed by Biber 1988), nominalizations are one of several dozen of linguistic features that define so-called dimensions of variation along which registers can be contrasted. In this way, linguistically defined features pertaining to formal structure, such as derived nominals, inform the study of language use, conditioned by contextual and situational factors. Biber's analysis recognizes the role of nominalizations, albeit somewhat indiscriminately: they are considered as a unified category without distinguishing between distinct types of the rightmost suffixes, let alone the varied structure of the base form.[1] Consequently, any potential significance of morphological make-up goes unnoticed.

This paper sets out to fill in this research gap by looking deeper into the morphological complexity of English abstract nominalizations[2] and considering its relevance for the distribution of nominalizations across registers. With this aim in mind, both quantitative and qualitative analyses of corpus data are carried out – the former is based on frequency of occurrence and the latter draws on information pertaining to morphological status and identity. Namely, root–suffix and suffix–suffix combinations are distinguished and shown to have different effects on the productivity and distribution of the rightmost suffix. Similarly, in suffix–suffix combinations, the identity of the penultimate affix is a significant factor. This has been noted in works on affix ordering (e.g. Hay 2003, Hay and Plag 2004, Plag 1999, Plag *et al.* 1999) although attention tended to be focused on global affix productivity. The present study looks at yet another variable in the equation – that of register. The conclusion is drawn that claims about an affix's distribution must necessarily be revised to accommodate finer distinctions concerning the combinations of that affix with distinct types of base forms. The study is based on the text samples of the British National Corpus and its internal division into language registers.

Biber, Douglas (1988) *Variation across Speech and Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Biber, Douglas, Susan Conrad and Randi Reppen (1998) *Corpus Linguistics. Investigating Language Structure and Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Biber Douglas, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad, Edward Finegan (1999) *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Pearson Education Limited.

Hay, Jennifer (2003) *Causes and Consequences of Word Structure*. New York and London: Routledge.

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Plag, Ingo (1999) *Morphological Productivity. Structural Constraints in English Derivation*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

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[1] Biber (1988) considers nominalizations as a whole. Biber et al. (1998) and Biber et al. (1999) indicate in very general terms the varied distribution of some suffixes. No mention is made as to base-internal complexity.

[2] The nominalizations investigated are action-denoting Nomina Actionis and Nomina Qualitatis, which denote properties.