

Scaling morphosemantic transparency/opacity: a corpus-linguistic and acquisitionist study of German diminutives

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The judicious use of electronic corpora allows new possibilities in the study of word formation. In contrast to the usual way of contrasting morphosemantic transparency (or compositionality) and morphosemantic opacity (or non-compositionality) in a dichotomous way, we will present a ten-step-scale from maximum transparency to total opacity, exemplified with the common German diminutive suffixation in *-chen* and in Austro-Bavarian *-erl*, e.g. step 1 *Superfrau-chen* ‚super-woman-DIM‘ vs. step 3 in the main meaning of *Frau-chen* = *Frau-erl* ‚woman/mistress-DIM‘ (of her dog or cat)‘; step 2, because preferentially used only for women and children: *Jäck-chen* ‚jacket-DIM‘ vs. step 1 *Jack-erl*; step 8 *Mäd-chen* = *Mäd-erl* = *Mäd-i* ‚girl‘, without a base, but with synonymous diminutive suffixations. The data consist of approximately 15.000 different diminutives which have at least 5 tokens in the Austrian Media Corpus (AMC), which is an exhaustive electronic collection of all the Austrian print media of the last two and a half decades.

Our corpus-linguistic investigation allows new insights into problems of distribution of type and token frequency according to degree of morphosemantic transparency/opacity, derivational series, family size (where we demonstrate that, and explain why, its common operationalisation is excessively simplified), left- vs. right-branching of trimorphemic diminutives, gender bias in diminutive compounding, rivalry between diminutive suffixation (where we will contrast Austrian Standard German with Italian, and with an outlook on Polish), and the status of lexical blocking, which does not apply to pragmatic variants with morphosemantic transparency step 1.

Acquisition data come from three longitudinal corpora and from 24 children of a transversal quasi-longitudinal study. Here the order of acquisition of diminutives according to the ten-step scale of morphosemantic transparency/opacity proves that young children definitely prefer morphosemantic transparency over opacity much more than adults. In regard to suffixation rivalry, lexical blocking appears to have not yet developed, which fits the primary pragmatic meaning of diminutives, which emerges earlier than their morphosemantic meanings. This supports our claim about the priority of morphopragmatic over morphosemantic meaning of diminutives.