



SECTION: PHILOLOGY.

SEKCJA: FILOLOGIA.

How to cite: Maharramova, M. (2024). The Role of Prefixes in German Verb Formation: A Typological Perspective. *Horizons of Innovation: Conference on Multidisciplinary Trends in Science 2024*. (pp. 348-351). Futurity Research Publishing. <https://futuraity-publishing.com/horizons-of-innovation-conference-on-multidisciplinary-trends-in-science-2024-2/>

The Role of Prefixes in German Verb Formation: A Typological Perspective

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Accepted: February 21, 2024 | **Published:** February 28, 2024 | **Language:** English

Abstract: The aim was to study the aspectual meaning of affixes in German. The methods — typological analysis of phrases with base words and derivatives to determine the change in meaning. The research results showed that semi-prefixes can provide aspectual meaning to the base word. In the theory of derivation in the German language, criteria for identifying such elements can be a formal and typological agreement with word bases. This research is important for studying the structure of language and mechanisms of new word formation in German. Its results can be used to improve methods of teaching German and develop linguistic theories.

Keywords: derivational microsystem, functional and distributional criteria, derivation, semantics.

Introduction

The grammar of the German language is quite complex to learn. One of the reasons is the presence of various morphological rules, such as gender, number, and case, as well as the unique word order in sentences. For starters, German nouns are assigned one of three genders: masculine, feminine, or neuter. This gender assignment affects the form of articles, pronouns, and adjectives that accompany the noun. Additionally, nouns can change their form depending on whether they are singular or plural, and whether they are in the nominative, accusative, dative, or genitive case.

The word order in German sentences is also different from English. In main clauses, the basic word order is subject-verb-object (SVO), but this can change depending on the type of clause and the involved elements. In subordinate clauses, the verb is often moved to the end of the clause.

Furthermore, German has a complex system of verb conjugation. Verbs can change their form based on the tense, mood, voice, person, and number of the subject. There are also separable and inseparable prefixes that can alter the meaning of a verb. Word formation in the German language is quite variable, which forces one to seek new methods for studying the typology and semantics of the language (Smolka & Ravid, 2019).

There are two criteria for identifying the derivational microsystem of prefixes: functional and distributional. The first criterion indicates the ability of prefixes to attach to different stems and form verbs (Van Goethem & Koutsoukos, 2022). The second criterion considers the position of the prefix within the word combination: its relation to the lexical base and connection to the context.

In the system of affixational means, prefixes are distinguished by their characteristics, making them unique among other affixes. They have a clearly defined position in the structure of the word, as well as structural autonomy, as they are only combined with a whole word or any part of speech. This allows them to be considered special prepositional units. Words formed with prefixes retain the morphological features of the original words.

Prefixes in the semantic aspect differ in that they specify or complement the meaning of the derived word, or provide it with modification semantics in general. This leads to a change in the lexical meaning and distribution of the word, that is, its syntactic and semantic combination with other words.

Consequently, prefixes in German play a crucial role in enriching the vocabulary and expressing nuanced meanings. They add depth and complexity to the language, allowing for a wide range of expression and variation in meaning.

Research results

Prefixes have their peculiarities, such as the ability to act as a word-forming or formative element, a limited range of action (usually within the range of verbs), the impossibility of transferring the word base from one word category to another with the help of prefixes, and the ability of the prefix to join (Sommer-Lolei, Mattes, Korecky-Kröll & Dressler, 2021). Additionally, prefixes can sometimes change the grammatical category of a word, such as turning a noun into a verb or an adjective into an adverb. Some prefixes also have specific meanings or connotations that can help to clarify the overall meaning of a word.

One of the effective methods of creating German verbs is through prefixation, that is, forming derivative words using a prefixal formant (Stupak & Baayen, 2022). A prefix is a functional morpheme that is placed before the root or another prefix, attached to the whole word, and serves a derivational and/or grammatical function. It is important to determine the meaning that specifically belongs to the prefix, not to other parts of its internal or external context (Stupak, 2020). Prefixes are "homogeneous building elements" and hold a certain position relative to the derivational base. In the word-formation microsystem, these elements interact with each other to create new lexical units (Mousikou, Nüesch, Hasenäcker & Schroeder, 2021). By examining the possibility of expressing aspectual meanings through derivational elements, it has been established that prefixes typically alter the meaning of the base verb. For example, *faulen* — *verfaulen*, *fragen* — *verfragen*, *brennen* — *abbrennen*. The corresponding prefixed verb gains a sense of process resultivity or goal attainment. German verbal prefixes such as *durch-*, *fort-*, *herum-*, *hin-*, *dahin-*, *umher-*, *weiter-* more often express ways of achieving results. In affixal markers that emphasize the duration of action in a broad sense of the word, without specifying different types of duration, prefixes like *durch-* are included as per lexicographic sources, intensifying the durative meaning of the verb *durative arbeiten* in one of the meanings of the polysemous verb *durcharbeiten* — "work continuously over a specific period."

As mentioned above, prefixes in the German language can give the base verb several meanings, including intensity. By adding these prefixes to base verbs, speakers can convey more specific meanings

and nuances in their language. Attaching to semantically neutral verbs, the prefixes *ab-*, *aus-*, *be-*, *durch-*, *er-*, *über-*, *ver-*, *zer-* give them a shade of intensity. Therefore, in this case, it is not about the lexical-semantic creation of iterative meaning, but about an affixal way of expressing aspectual meaning. Empirical material shows a diverse and wide group of affix indicators of the semantic category of intensity, which can be expressed, for example, by prefixes *ab-* (*abküssen*, *abfliegen*); *durch-* (*durchbürsten*, *durchlüften*); *über-* (*überversichern*, *überbewerten*), *unter-* (*unterbelasten*, *unterbelichten*). The first prefix *ab-* conveys the 'complete completeness' of the object. Joining semantically intensive verbs, the prefix *ab-* intensifies it, in the verb *abmildern* this prefix intensifies its diminishing meaning. The prefix *über-* means "above the norm", for example, *überdehnen* — "stretch too much", *überheizen* — "heat too much". The prefix *unter-*, in combination with some basic forms of verbs, gives them the meaning of intensity "below the norm", for example, *unterbewerten* — "undervalue too weakly", *unterbezahlen* — "pay worse, less". The examples are given show that the prefixes *über-* and *unter-* can form antonymous pairs and give verbs opposite meanings of intensity "above the norm" ≠ "below the norm", for example *überschätzen* ≠ *unterschätzen*, *überbezahlen* ≠ *unterbezahlen*.

The intensity of action can also be expressed by adding suffixes to the base forms of verbs. Some studies note certain differences in the gradation of meanings between base and derived verbs, for example, *frosten/frösteln* (to easily freeze), *husten/hüsteln* (to easily cough), *tanzen/tänzeln*, *lachen/lächeln* (to easily smile), *streichen/streicheln* (to tenderly stroke).

Verbal prefixes containing the meaning of the beginning of an action, so-called ingressional prefixes *los-*, *auf-*, *an-*, *ein-*, *ent-*, *er-*, are considered means of inchoativity. Among these prefixes, *los-* and *auf-* are the most productive. The prefix *los-* is used with verbs indicating movement (*losgehen*, *losfahren*, *losfliegen*, *losrennen*, *loschwimmen*), emphasizing the initial phase of the movement.

Verbs with the inchoative prefix *los-* can also characterize emotional states (*losschreien*, *losflennen*, *losfluchen*), but such examples are quite rare. Verbs with the prefix *auf-* (*aufbrüllen*, *aufschreien*, *aufglimmen*) typically express the onset of an explosive action of a short spectrum.

An exception is the verb *aufnehmen* meaning "to start doing something, to produce, to continue; to begin learning, to develop a topic," since in this case, it indicates the beginning of the evolution of an action.

In the German language, verbs with certain prefixes that have an inchoative meaning are less productive in reproducing the initial phase of an action. Among the prefixes that can give the base verb the meaning of obtaining a final result are: *ab-* indicating the cessation of an action or process: to bloom — to blossom, to burn — to burn out, to serve — to serve to the end; *aus-* indicating the cessation of an action or state: to burn — to burn out, struggle — to fight to the end, smoke — to smoke to the end; *durch-* besides its intensive meaning, also conveys a terminative meaning: to sweep — to sweep through, to investigate — to investigate thoroughly, to rot — to rot completely; *er-* indicating the achievement of a goal: to ask — to extract, to rise — to push out, to found — to research; *ver-* expressing a gradual cessation of action, exhaustion, or destruction: to bloom — to bloom off, burning — to burn out, to build — to build up, to starve — to starve off.

In the linguistic material under consideration, lexemes with all of the previously mentioned prefixes can be observed, which indicate the terminativity of an action by achieving a final or partial result (Korecky-Kröll, Sommer-Lolei, Mattes & Dressler, 2022). The most commonly used prefixes emphasizing the resulting meaning are found in units with the prefixes *ver-*, *er-*, and *ab-*. Lexemes with the prefixes *er-*, *aus-* can indicate the completion of the process of mental activity.

Thus, in many languages, including German, verb formation can be greatly influenced by the use of prefixes. Prefixes are morphemes that are added to the beginning of a base verb to create a new verb with a slightly different meaning (Adeyeye, 2021). In German, prefixes can change the aspect, mood, or meaning of the verb, and play a significant role in the language's complex verb system.

One key aspect of the role of prefixes in German verb formation is their ability to change the aspect of the verb. Prefixes play a crucial role in German verb formation, allowing speakers to express nuances of aspect, mood, and meaning. Understanding the various prefixes used in German can help learners navigate the language's complex verb system and communicate more effectively.

Conclusions

Analyzing affixational means of expressing aspectuality in the German language, it can be concluded that a group of semantic categories including duration, iterativity, simultaneity, intensity, the phase of action, and resultativity can be expressed through derivational means, specifically through prefixes. The aspect refers to the way in which the action of the verb is viewed in relation to time, as German speakers can convey information about the temporal nature of an action. Additionally, prefixes in German can also change the mood or attitude of the verb.

From a typological perspective, the use of prefixes in German verb formation reflects the language's tendency towards morphological complexity. German is considered a fusional language, which means that individual morphemes can carry multiple grammatical functions. In the case of prefixes, a single morpheme can change both the meaning and aspect of the verb, allowing for a richer and more expressive verb system.

Overall, the role of prefixes in German verb formation is a crucial aspect of the language's morphology and grammar. By adding prefixes to base verbs, German speakers can convey a wide range of nuances and subtleties in their communication, making the language both versatile and dynamic.

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