

Particle-prefix-iteration in German verb formation – synchronic and diachronic perspectives

Iteration as a morphological process can be observed exemplarily in German word formation and especially in prefixation. But first, it is necessary to distinguish between two types of iteration, which should be called “elementary” (iteration of the same element) and “structural” (iteration of an element of the same type). With regard to word formation, elementary iteration is limited only to a few cases and can be found in the nominal domain: *Ur-ur-ur-großmutter*. This is made possible above all by the iterative meaning of this prefix, negation prefixes such as *un-*, on the other hand, appear prototypically limited to onetime use: *?un-un-schön*.

In contrast to the nominal parts of speech noun and adjective, the primary domain of prefixation (and the related particle verb formation) in German is the verb (cf. Fleischer/Barz 2012: 86), which is why this paper focusses on verbal word formation. Interestingly, elementary iteration does not occur in the verbal domain (**be-be-laden*, **an-an-melden*), but structural iteration does, understood as a combination of two verbal pre-elements: *miss-ver-stehen*, *vor-an-melden*. Based on the common distinction between verbal prefixes and particles, four groups are conceivable here in principle (prefix + prefix, prefix + particle, particle + prefix, particle + particle), which, however, show clear differences in their word formation and productivity (cf. Albers 2019). Especially particle-prefix combinations are relatively frequent and productive.

This field has been studied sparingly so far (Kühnhold 1974, Korencsy 2002, Albers 2019), but it offers at least two interesting aspects concerning iterativity:

1. It showcases some structural restrictions of iteration that arise from different phonological and morphosyntactic properties of verbal prefixes and particles.
2. Although these formations are not very frequent in contemporary German, there were quite a lot of types during earlier periods. The significant decrease of these formations seems worth investigating.

Ad 1:

The combination of two unstressed prefixes is not possible for primarily phonological reasons (this is also why there is no *ge-* when forming the participle of prefix verbs). Only few prefixes can be combined this way, whereby in these combinations one prefix receives a stress: *miss-áchten* vs. *míss-ver-stehen*. This concerns primarily the prefixes *miss-*, *über-* and *unter-*. In these cases, the differentiation between unstressed prefixes and stressed particles becomes obscured, which can lead to uncertainty in question of separability (cf. Becker/Peschel 2003).

Moreover, the combination of two usually separable verb particles can lead to syntactical problems by using finite V2-forms: *?Ich voranmelde*, *?Ich melde vor an*. Therefore, Freywald/Simon (2007) speak of verb that cannot be used V2. Most of these formations can be described as backformations.

Ad 2:

In addition to these theoretical and synchronic considerations on the iteration and combination of verb particles and prefixes, the diachronic perspective also plays an important role: whereas in contemporary German only about 2% of all complex verbs have a “double-prefix”

(Kühnhold 1974), such complex pre-element structures were significantly more common in earlier language periods. For example, Korencsy (2002) and Albers (2019) show for the verb particle *ab-*, that in Middle (90 types) and Early Modern High German (144 types) there were significantly more formations than in contemporary German (only 17 types). Korencsy (2002: 123) even assumes that these particle-prefix combinations can be found for almost every prefix, which still has to be checked empirically.

Several questions arise at this point, for example: For what reasons did these formations evolve in earlier language periods and what are the reasons for the later rapid decrease? In addition to claimed morphosyntactic difficulties, semantics aspects can be brought into play here: For example, the pre-elements may have been combined for intensification of certain meaning, which may have become obsolete. Most double prefixes in Early Modern High German are “oftmals ohne Bedeutungsveränderung in einfacher Präfigierung belegt“ (Korencsy 2002: 130): *ab-ge-mähen*; *ab-mähen*.

On the other hand, semantic shifts in the area of prefixes and particles may have led to redundancy, which is especially true for the prefix *ge-*, that was later grammaticalized from word formation to inflection. The semantic bleaching made this prefix dispensable in numerous word formations.

It is the aim of this paper to shed some light on these double complex verb formations from both a synchronic and diachronic point of view and show theoretical aspects of this special type of iteration.

References

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