Blocking, Intervention and Ablaut in German Verb Inflection

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German verb inflection exhibits a complex cluster of blocking and non-blocking relations. Thus in weak (‘regular’) verbs, suffixal -t in past participles blocks -n which is found in strong (‘irregular’) verbs (cf. weak ge-kauf-t, ‘bought’ vs. strong ge-sung-en, ‘sung’). In strong verbs, ablaut (or the ability to ablaut) seems to block -t not only in participles, but also in finite past tense forms (cf. sing-en, ‘to sing’ vs. ge-sung-en, ‘sung’, ich sang, ‘I sang’). On the other hand, umlaut and raising in 2nd/3rd person present forms (cf. ich befehl-e, ‘I command’ vs. er befehll-t, ‘he commands’) doesn’t show any blocking of affixal material and there is also a small class of verbs where past tense ablaut fails to block -t (ich weiss, ‘I know’ vs. ich wuss-te, ‘I knew’). Moreover, prefixal ge- – characteristic of weak and strong past participles – isn’t blocked by ablaut or suffixes nor does it block any other affix. In this talk I propose a novel analysis of the German data in Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz, 1993) which not only captures the distribution of (non-)blocking but also predicts important generalizations on the conditioning of ablaut and captures a general syncretism pattern in infinite forms previously regarded as accidental syncretism. A crucial consequence of the analysis is that blocking can not only be derived by competition for a specific structural position, but also by locality constraints on allomorphic conditioning. The phrase structure I assume for German infinite verb forms is shown in (1) (C₁ is the class feature of singen, ‘to sing’):

\[(\text{[[[Root]}_V \ C₁]_{\text{Class}} + /\text{-Past}]_{\text{Tense}} - \text{Fnite} \text{ (Restricted)}]_{\text{Fin}}\]

Only strong verbs have the class feature projection which contains different class features realized by specific ablaut vowels (cf. Müller, 2004a,2004b on class features). Infinitives have [-Fnite] in their Fin position (e.g. kauf-en, ‘buy’), participles in addition the privative feature “Restr(icted)”. [-Fnite] selects for a defective Tense head while [+Fnite] selects full-fledged Tense containing the agreement-triggering feature δ resulting in the phrase structure in (2):

\[(\text{[[[Root }]_V \ C₁ ]_{\text{Class}} + /\text{-Past δ}]_{\text{T}} - \text{Φ}_{\text{Agr}} +\text{Fnite}]_{\text{Fin}}\]

The general blocking facts are now derived by the vocabulary items (VIs) in (3):

(3) a. -t : [T +past] /[V] __ e. [] : ∅ / __ C₂
c. -d : [Restr] /-[past] __ g. C₁ : +back / __ +Past
d. -ge : [Restr]

(3a) outranks (3b) for past forms of weak verbs since it contains 2 substantial features vs. 1 in (3b). However, assuming that context restrictions can only be met under structural adjacency (Trommer, 1999,2000,2002), “/[V] __” is not satisfied in strong verbs where the class projection intervenes between V and Tense, hence no VI is inserted in past finite forms, and (3b) in all infinite forms (past/present participles and infinitives). (3c) spells out “Restr” in present tense participles - resulting in -nd, and (3d) in past participles. For singen, the class feature C₁ is realized as the floating feature +back in past participles by (3g) merging phonologically with the i of the root to give u, and as +low in past finite forms resulting in a (3f). For finite present forms an impoverishment rule removes the Tense node to allow sensitivity of class features to the Φ-features. In wissen-type verbs (by assumption of class C₂) the class root node is deleted by a zero VI spelling out the root node. Consequently the class node becomes invisible and (3a) can be inserted into Tense. Crucially, the analysis unifies all appearances of n in nonfinite forms and correctly predicts that (past) ablaut is not sensitive to Φ-features while present-tense umlaut/raising is only sensitive to these. Finally Wieses’s (2005) generalization that ablaut only targets past participles if it also targets past finite forms follows without further stipulation.