

Semi-productivity and the semantics of derivation

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In this talk I will explore the relationship between quantity and representation by looking at a set of suffixes that form nouns from nouns in English. It is often assumed that low quantity of output is correlated with a low-level means of formation, namely analogies, whereas high quantity is correlated with generative rules. Analogies are frequently described as bottom up generalizations based on a few stored exemplars and subject to exceptions. Rules are understood as top down generative mechanisms that are independent of stored exemplars and are relatively exceptionless. My aim in this talk is to argue, as others have done before, that the distinction between analogy and rule is a false one, and that there is no necessary connection between quantity and type of representation. Indeed what we need if we are to make progress in understanding the mental lexicon is a more nuanced approach to modeling word formation and specifically areas of productivity in word formation. My claim is that the closer we get to the right mode of representation, the more productive individual affixes will begin to look. The particular direction I'll take this in has to do with understanding the semantic characteristics of a set of affixes and the bases that they select, specifically the suffixes *-hood*, *-ship*, *-dom*, *-let*, and *-ling* in English. These might at first appear to be poster-children for semi-productivity, and therefore good candidates for analysis by analogy. However, what I will show is that a close look at the pattern of attachment of these affixes proves otherwise. Using the lexical semantic representations of Lieber (2004, 2007) plus a set of Optimality Theoretic output constraints for derivational semantics reminiscent of those proposed by Plag (1999) for phonological conditions on affixation, we can model the patterns of productivity of these affixes quite closely.

References

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