

Introduction to the Special Issue

“Unlocking evaluative morphology: Conceptual and methodological challenges”

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This special issue emerges from the workshop “Unlocking evaluative morphology: Conceptual and methodological challenges” at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, March 14-15, 2024, funded by the *SLE Research Grant – Joint Initiative (2022)*. The workshop was concerned with the morphological expression of evaluative semantics (Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015), such as diminution (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994), intensification (Rainer 2015) or approximation (Masini, Norde & Van Goethem 2023).

Evaluation is a broad concept, covering a wide array of values that are not always easy to distinguish from each other. Within approximation, for instance, we may identify privativity (Cappelle, Daus & Hartmann 2023), vagueness (Masini & Micheli 2020), depreciation (Amiot & Stosic 2022), fakeness (Van Goethem & Norde 2020) and many others. On the formal side, evaluation can be expressed by prefixes such as *pseudo-* (Vassiliadou et al. 2023; Van Goethem, Norde & Masini 2023), suffixes such as *-ish* (Eitelmann, Haugland & Haumann 2020), prefixoids such as German *Hammer-* ‘fantastic, very’ (Norde & Van Goethem 2018), or reduplication such as *Mädchen-Mädchen* ‘girly girl’ (Frankowsky 2022). On all levels, moreover, we find overlap and competition – similar values can be expressed by different bound morphemes and vice versa, often within one and the same language.

Inspired by the contributions and discussions held during the workshop, this special issue aims to advance our understanding of evaluative morphology by addressing three central questions:

1. Which evaluative values can be expressed morphologically and how are they related to each other?
2. How do morphological expressions of evaluation compete? Can they reinforce one another?
3. What is the relationship between evaluative morphology and evaluation on other levels (e.g. free adverbials)? Again, is there competition and / or reinforcement across linguistic levels?

The contributions collected here all offer empirically grounded perspectives, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative corpus-based methodologies, on both well-established evaluative

phenomena (such as intensification) and understudied values (such as approximation or aspectual evaluation). Together, these studies illuminate the complex interplay of semantic values, formal mechanisms, and usage patterns that shape evaluative morphology across languages, and highlight the conceptual and methodological advances that allow us to unlock this domain of research.

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Paper summaries

Bert Cappelle, Robert Daugs & Stefan Hartmann

“From *arch-atheist* to *archi zinzin*: Tracing historical and contemporary roots of evaluation and intensification in a set of cognates”

Cappelle, Daugs and Hartmann investigate the morphological behaviour of a set of cognate prefixes expressing negative evaluation (English *arch-*, Dutch *aarts-*, German *erz-*, and French *archi-*) and explore whether negative evaluation arises from the prefix itself, from the bases it attaches to, or from usage contexts. Applying a semantic vector-space analysis to the English dataset, the authors identify three semantic clusters in contemporary English: one with neutral meaning (e.g., *archbishop*) and two with negative evaluative meaning (e.g., *arch-conservative*, *arch-enemy*). From a cross-linguistic perspective, they identified both parallels and differences in the cognate prefixes: for instance, in French *archi-* has developed in a very productive and neutral intensifier, not restricted to negative bases (e.g., *archi-favori* ‘top favourite’).

Stefania Spina & Aivars Glaznieks

“Morphological and syntactic adjective intensification in L2 Italian and German in a multilingual context”

The study by Spina and Glaznieks is about how young South Tyrolean learners use intensified adjectives in L2 German, compared to findings from a previous study on L2 Italian. Although Italian and German share morphological and syntactic means of intensification, each also has language-specific intensifying strategies such as Italian suffixation in *-issimo* and German compounds like *knallvoll* ‘very full’. Adopting a Diasystematic Construction Grammar approach, the authors examine how these intensifying strategies interact and compete in L2 production. The results confirm earlier tendencies: the frequency of intensified adjectives in the input and learners’ proficiency levels are the strongest predictors of whether learners choose morphological intensification in German over syntactic intensification. Overall, the most frequent diaconstruction is syntactic intensification with a degree adverb (e.g., *sehr schön*, *molto bello*), but learners also use familiar, entrenched morphological forms (e.g., German *wunderschön*, Italian *bellissimo*).

Carmen Mellado Blanco & Pedro Ivorra Ordines

“Blows of meaning: Morphological creativity in the construction [*a* N-suffix_{singular.blow} *limpio*] in Spanish”

In their study, Mellado Blanco and Ivorra Ordines examine the Spanish semi-schematic construction [*a* N-suffix_{singular.blow} *limpio*]. Because this is a syntactic pattern which includes a morphological element (the evaluative suffix *-azo*, *-ada*, or *-ón*) to express ‘blow’ or ‘impact’ (e.g.,

a cuchillada limpia ‘in a knife fight’), their study shows the interaction between phraseology and morphology within the Construction Grammar framework. The combination with the intensifying adjective *limpio* ‘clean’ (over)accentuates the intensifying value of the pattern. Drawing on an extensive dataset from the *esTenTen18* corpus, the study explores how lexicalized and creative slot fillers behave within the construction and highlights a continuum of linguistic creativity related to different degrees of semantic coercion.

Elisa Mattiello & José A. Sánchez Fajardo

“The evaluative suffixoid *-head* and its Spanish and Italian equivalents”

Mattiello & Sánchez Fajardo zoom in on a very specific class of pejorative expressions, i.e. compounds or phrases involving the word for ‘head’ as terms of abuse in English, Spanish, and Italian. In English, specifically, these expressions refer to appearance (*chickenhead*), lack of intellect (*cheesehead*), or addiction (*crackhead*), among others. The authors queried modern web corpora (the TenTen corpora that are available on the *Sketch Engine* repository), for Spanish and Italian collocations with *cabeza* and *testa* respectively and used *AntConc* software to identify semantic clusters. The study is supplemented by a contrastive analysis based on data from the *OPUS* parallel corpora, to check how English ‘head’ compounds were translated into Italian and Spanish. The authors show that English, on the one hand, and Spanish and Italian, on the other, do not only differ morphologically (Spanish [*cabeza de X_{noun}*] and Italian [*testa di X_{noun}*] are phrases, whereas the authors argue that English *head* is best analysed as a suffixoid), they also differ in terms of semantic categories – for example, the category ‘addiction’ is only found in the *OPUS* data, as loan translations from English (e.g. Spanish *cabeza de coca* ‘cokehead’). These more restricted semantic profiles, coupled with relatively low productivity in the two Romance languages, could be due to the availability of other, morphological, constructions such as augmentatives and diminutives, with which the ‘head’ expressions compete.

Barbara Schlücker

“*Like* – a morphological evaluative loan marker in German?”

In her study, Schlücker investigates German adjectives formed with the borrowed English constituent *-like* (e.g., *bilderbuchlike* ‘storybook-like’) in order to answer the question whether the constituent qualifies as an approximative marker. While these formations express similarity and function as comparative constructions, according to Schlücker they are not approximative due to a lack of homocategoriality – most formations in German involve a category change from noun to adjective (in contrast to, e.g., most Italian *simil*-formations that have been described as approximative constructions). The paper argues that homocategoriality is a necessary condition for approximation, distinguishing it from similarity and comparison and concludes that German *-like* is not an approximative or evaluative marker.

Beatrice Bernasconi

“Between similarity, approximation, and evaluation: A corpus-based study of Russian [X-*podobnyj*]”

Bernasconi’s article investigates the Russian morphological construction [X-*podobnyj*] (formed with the adjective *podobnyj* ‘similar’) meaning ‘X-like’. Using the framework of Construction Morphology and data from the Russian National Corpus, the study examines the construction’s formal, semantic, and functional properties. Bernasconi shows that [X-*podobnyj*] is productive, especially with nominal bases, and is particularly frequent with concrete nouns referring to substances, materials, persons, and animals. The article identifies four main functions: resemblance, kin-categorization, imitation, and metaphorical evaluation. These functions are not

treated as separate accidents of usage, but as related parts of a constructional network. The study argues that the Russian pattern confirms the close connection between similarity, approximation, and evaluation in word formation.

Flavio Pisciotta

“Beyond competition: Dynamics of constructional interaction between HALFNESS evaluative constructions in Italian”

Pisciotta’s article examines the coexistence of two Italian HALFNESS evaluative constructions, *mezzo X* and *semi-X*, both historically linked to expressions of half-quantity. The study asks whether their relationship is best understood as competition or as a more complex form of constructional interaction. Combining synchronic corpus analysis with diachronic evidence, the article compares their lexical and semantic productivity, filler selection, and degree of overlap. Pisciotta shows that the two constructions partly share semantic domains, especially with adjectival fillers, and that their productivity is not clearly constrained by one another. Diachronically, *semi-X* increasingly overlaps with *mezzo X*, but without displacing it. The article therefore argues that evaluative constructions may coexist through inclusive or neutral interaction, rather than through competitive exclusion.

Caterina Mauri & Ludovica Pannitto

“Temporal, aspectual, and modal evaluation in nominal reference: The case of Italian”

This article examines how Italian speakers use nominal constructions to evaluate reference along temporal, aspectual, and modal dimensions, despite Italian lacking grammaticalized nominal TAM. Based on corpus data from ItWac, Repubblica, WikiCoNLL, and itTenTen20, the study analyses prefixes/prefixoids such as *ex-*, *neo-*, *pre-*, *post-*, *quasi-* as well as adverbial forms like *non-più* ‘no longer’, *ancora* ‘still’, *già* ‘already’, *appena* ‘just’, *forse* ‘maybe’. These forms mark referents as former, incipient, ongoing, potential, provisional, or non-prototypical members of a category. The article argues that such constructions should be understood as evaluative strategies that recalibrate the validity of nominal categorization. In doing so, they show how the noun phrase becomes a site where reference, stance, temporality, and approximation interact.

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