

Title:

From noun to evaluative adjective: conversion or debonding?

Dutch *top* and its equivalents in German

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Abstract:

In this study, we address the ways in which nouns can give rise to new adjectives in Dutch and German. More specifically, the focus is on words with an evaluative meaning that can be used in a wide range of morphological and syntactic constructions in recent (and informal) language use (e.g., German *Hammervorstellung* ‘very good performance’, *hammer film* ‘fantastic film’). In the literature, two distinct hypotheses can be found to account for the adjectival uses of such evaluative nouns: the ‘debonding’ hypothesis implies that the intensifying bound morpheme has developed into a free morpheme; the ‘conversion’ hypothesis suggests that the new adjectival uses are the result of a syntactic reanalysis of an N to an A that takes place in the predicative position. As a case study, we analyze the synchronic bound and free uses of Dutch *top*, and we compare them with German *top* and *spitze*. We conclude that the emergence of the adjectival uses of these morphemes imply an interaction between both processes, conversion and debonding.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we will address the ways in which nouns can give rise to new adjectives in Dutch and German. More specifically, the focus will be on words with an evaluative meaning that can be used in a wide range of morphological and syntactic constructions. For instance, the Dutch noun *reus* ‘giant’ can be used as an intensifying prefixoid (viz a compound member characterized by semantic specialization (Booij 2010: 57)) in nominal (1a) and adjectival compounds (1b), but can besides also be found as a free adjective (1c) and even as an adverb (1d) (see Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014).

- (1) a. Was dit maar zo dan zou het een **reuzetijd** zijn voor de astronomen om die
verschijnselen te bestuderen (NLCOW2012-00X: 97339326)
(If only this would be the case then it would be a ‘giant time’ / great time for the
astronomers to study these phenomena)
- b. We zijn **reuzebenieuwd** naar ons kindje, duurt nu echt niet lang meer!
(NLCOW2012-00X: 1103349398)

(We are ‘giant curious’ / tremendously curious to see our baby, now it really does not take long anymore!)

- c. Ik zou het gewoon weg [sic] **reuze** vinden als je eens langs kwam.

(NLCOW2012-00X: 58105846)

(I would just find it ‘giant’ / great if you came along once)

- d. Onze kinderen hebben zich **reuze** vermaakt (NLCOW2012-00X: 887443565)

(Our kids enjoyed themselves ‘giant’ / tremendously)

In German, similar cases can be found in informal language. An example is the use of *Hammer* (lit. ‘hammer’) as an intensifying prefixoid in nominal (2a) and adjectival compounds (2b). The word can also be used as an adjective, attributively (2c) as well as predicatively (2d).

- (2) a. das war ja eine **Hammervorstellung** am Samstag (DECOW2012-01: 842690358)

(that was a ‘hammer’ / very good performance on Saturday)

- b. Aber ich finde es echt **hammerhart**, was an der Schule Deiner Tochter abgelaufen ist (DECOW2012-01: 919906514)

(But I really find it ‘hammer hard’ / extremely hard what happened at the school of your daughter.)

- c. Infernal Affairs, **hammer** Film aus Hongkong (DECOW2012-00: 213767518)

(Infernal Affairs, ‘hammer’ / fantastic film from Hong Kong)

d. Das Bühnenbild war **hammer** (DECOW2012-00: 198764709)

(The stage setting was ‘hammer’ / fantastic)

Hence, synchronic language use reflects a widespread distribution of such evaluative elements. It is obvious that the adjectival (and/or adverbial) uses are in most cases very recent¹ and often still restricted to (very) informal language use, as attested on the web, which is the case for the preceding examples all drawn from the COW2012 web corpora (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012).

The question however arises how to account for these new adjectives and/or adverbs. Are they diachronically related to the corresponding prefixoids or did they directly derive from the corresponding nouns? Both hypotheses can be found in the literature. The former hypothesis implies that the intensifying bound morpheme has developed into a free morpheme, by means of a process called ‘debonding’ (Norde 2009). Van Goethem & De Smet (2014), for instance, demonstrate how nouns may turn into adjectives via debonding in Dutch, English and French. The latter hypothesis, on the other hand, suggests that the new adjectival uses are the result of an N to A ‘conversion’, subsequent to a syntactic reanalysis that would take place in the predicative position with later on extension to other contexts and uses (as a prefixoid, an attributive adjective, and possibly an adverb). This view is supported by Pittner & Berman (2006) and Berman (2009) for examples from German. Whereas the debonding hypothesis suggests that prefixoids are the source of the new adjectives, the conversion

1 In the case of *reuze* adjectival use is, however, already observed at the beginning of the 20th century (see Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014).

hypothesis supports the idea that predicatively used nouns are at the heart of the new categories. According to the first hypothesis, context expansion takes place from the bound morpheme to the attributive position and later on to the predicative one. The conversion hypothesis, on the other hand, postulates the reverse path of context expansion. The confrontation of both hypotheses has never been studied so far in the literature: studies dealing with this topic explain the rise of these new evaluative adjectives either by debonding or conversion. The tension between both hypotheses will be the central topic of this paper.

In the next sections, we will adduce arguments for both points of view. We will start with the conversion hypothesis (2.1) and oppose it to the debonding hypothesis (2.2). In Sections 3 and 4, then, we will collect and analyze corpus material from the COW webcorpora (Schäfer and Bildhauer 2012) to examine the validity of both analyses. We will present a detailed synchronic case study on Dutch *top* ‘top’ (Section 3) and compare the results with data for German *top* and *spitze* (which is semantically equivalent in its evaluative use) (Section 4).

The comparison of Dutch and German in this domain will allow us to measure the impact of particular language-specific factors on the observed category changes. It is a well-known fact that German has a more complex inflectional system than Dutch, which could be an obstacle to the N to A category change, since the newly formed adjectives would have to conform to the inflectional rules of German. Still, we will need to find an appropriate account for the cases in which the category changes do occur.

By means of our case studies, we will demonstrate that the debonding and conversion hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, if the language-specific

constraints allow for it, both processes may strongly interact with each other. In other words, it will be shown that the new evaluative adjectival uses may result from different source constructions, viz the compound pattern and the predicatively used noun. As such, we will provide additional evidence to support the more general claim that language change, more often than presumed, involves a multiplicity of sources and pathways (see De Smet, Ghesquière and Van de Velde (Eds) 2013 on “multiple source constructions in language change”).

2. Category change from noun to adjective

In general, it can be stated that the category change from noun to adjective is quite marginal in Dutch and German. In comparison, this type of category change seems to be more regular in English which might be favored by the fact that English adjectives are not subject to inflection. De Smet (2012), for instance, describes the pathways taken by the English nouns *fun* and *key* in their recent development into adjectives. *Fun* being a mass noun does not need a determiner in predicative position; this licenses, according to De Smet (2012: 622), its reanalysis into an adjective (3a), and the gradual acquisition of a number of typically adjectival uses such as degree modification (3b) and attributive use (3c):

- (3) a. ‘That’s not work, that’s **fun**,’ declared Dolly. (1914, COHA, in De Smet 2012: 622)

- b. It was **rather fun** playing at being a bachelor again. (1935, COHA, in De Smet 2012: 622)
- c. and then slowly he began to realize the **fun** meaning of the thing. (1944, COHA, in De Smet 2012: 622)

Conversely, De Smet (2012: 623-625) points out that the locus of reanalysis of English *key* is probably not the predicative position, but the attributive one. Support for this claim can be found in the unambiguously adjectival uses in which *key* is modified by the degree adverb *very*: the sequence ‘very key’ occurs more frequently than expected in attributive (4a) than in predicative position (4b):

- (4) a. We are totally independent, and that’s a **very key** point. (2002, COCA, in De Smet 2012: 624)
- b. Oh, absolutely. Cars are **very key**. (2003, COCA, in De Smet 2012: 624)

The question whether English sequences such as *key point* in (4a) should be analyzed as compounds or phrases is since long an object of much debate (see for instance Plag *et al.* 2008, Giegerich 2009 and, more generally Schlücker & Hüning (Eds) (2009) on the distinction between compounds and phrases).² It can at least be stated that their degree

2 For an overview of the criteria to distinguish English phrases from compounds in the literature, see also Van Goethem & De Smet (2014: 262-264).

of cohesion is much weaker than that of Dutch and German compounds. From this point of view, the pathway taken by English *key* from nominal premodifier to attributive adjective, with later on context expansion to the predicative position, is very reminiscent of the process of debonding that will be explored in Section 2.2. Conversely, the category change in the predicative context described for English *fun* will be shown to be completely in line with the claims made by for instance Pittner & Berman (2006) and Berman (2009) about the N to A conversion of German intensifying nouns. These claims will be presented in the following section (2.1).

2.1. *Conversion*

Conversion is usually defined as “the derivation of a word without any phonological change of its base word” (Booij 2002: 134).³ With regard to the formation of adjectives, morphological conversion is usually treated as a marginal process at best. Erben (2000: 101), for instance, claims that conversion is not relevant for the formation of adjectives in German, and Olsen (1990) even calls it ungrammatical.

For Dutch, it has been claimed that “there is no conversion of nouns or verbs into adjectives” and “that there is only conversion into verbs and nouns” (Booij 2002: 137). N-A pairs do exist in the non-native lexicon of Dutch (e.g., *het/de periodiek*_N ‘periodical’ – *periodiek*_{ADJ} ‘periodical’), but according to Booij in most cases “the

3 Besides category change or conversion, other terminology can be found in the literature, such as ‘implicit derivation’ (German ‘implizite Ableitung’, Erben 2000: 101), ‘implicit transposition’ or ‘zero-derivation’ (Dutch ‘impliciete transpositie’ or ‘nulafleiding’, Booij & Van Santen 1998: 30).

meaning of the noun can be defined more easily as a compositional function of that of the adjective, than vice versa”: a *periodiek* ‘periodical’ is a journal with a *periodiek* appearance (Booij 2002: 137).

German words like *ernst* ‘serious’, *schmuck* ‘pretty’, *schade* ‘too bad’, *angst* ‘anxious’, *feind* ‘hostile’, *schuld* ‘guilty’ are often mentioned as exceptional cases of N to A conversion resulting in defective adjectives that can in most cases only be used predicatively. Attributive use is not possible.

- (5) a. der Mann ist **schuld** ‘it’s the man’s fault’ (der *schulde Mann)
b. dem Kind_{DATIVE} ist **angst** ‘the child is anxious’ (das *angste Kind)
c. die Frau ist jemandem_{DATIVE} **feind** ‘the woman is hostile to someone’ (die *feinde Frau)

Moreover, adjectival use of *angst* or *feind* is becoming more and more outdated and restricted to certain idiomatic constructions: e.g., *angst und bange* ‘worried to death’ and *jemandem spinnefeind sein* ‘to hate someone’.

Because of this defectivity, there has been a lot of discussion about the status of these words: are they really to be analyzed as adjectives (Donalies 2002: 133)? Usually, we find a derivational (or compositional) alternative next to the converted adjective: *angst* – *ängstlich* ‘anxious’, *ernst* – *ernsthaft* ‘serious’, *feind* – *feindlich* ‘hostile’, *schuld* – *schuldig* ‘guilty’. Eichinger (2000: 169), therefore, suggests that German does not really need this type of conversion. Derivation and compounding yield ‘better’

adjectives: adjectives that can be inflected and that can (therefore) be used in attributive position, too (*das ängstliche Kind* ‘the anxious child’).⁴

While this seems to confirm the marginal status of N to A conversion, there is a group of words that does allow for this type of category change. As pointed out by Pittner & Berman (2006) for German, it can be used (with limited productivity) in substandard varieties, in particular in youth language, for the formation of new adjectives out of nouns in evaluative expressions. They distinguish words with a negative value (like *mist*, *scheiße*, *kacke*, all meaning ‘shit’), words that can be used as evaluative intensifier with any specific connotative value (like *hammer* lit. ‘hammer’), and words like *klasse* ‘classy’ or *spitze* ‘top’ that indicate a positive value.

According to Pittner & Berman (2006) and Berman (2009), such adjectives have to be seen as the product of a ‘conversion’ process in predicative use. This is, however, not to be seen as a case of morphological conversion in the strict sense, which would imply a productive morphological pattern of category change. Instead we are dealing here with a syntactic reanalysis favored by an ambiguous use in a particular syntactic context, the predicative one. In constructional terms, this syntactic reanalysis is the result of ‘constructional override’ and ‘coercion’ (Michaelis 2004): the noun, used

4 This is also true for colour adjectives like *aubergine* or *bordeaux*, often classified as adjectives in German as well as in Dutch. They are, however, problematic in attributive use and both languages allow for the use of compounds instead (like German *auberginefarben* and Dutch *auberginekleurig* ‘aubergine-coloured’). Again, these complex words can be inflected and they behave like regular adjectives in all contexts.

predicatively and without a determiner, inherits adjectival properties because the predicative position is typically filled by adjectives (see Booij 2015 (this issue) for a more detailed discussion on the distinction between conversion and constructional override, and Lauwers 2014 for an application of the concepts of constructional override and coercion to French nouns used in adjectival contexts).

The relevant steps can be illustrated as follows with *Bombe* ‘bomb’, which can be used metaphorically as an equivalent for ‘fantastic’:

- (6) a. Das Wetter ist **die Bombe** (DECOW2012-00: 344731138)
(The weather is ‘the bomb’ / fantastic)
- b. Ich habe es mit Adobe Acrobat erstellt und die Qualität ist **Bombe!**
(DECOW2012-00: 122362013)
(I made it with A.A. and the quality is ‘bomb’ / fantastic!)
- c. Der Freistoss von Grlic ist **bombe!** (DECOW2012-00: 719211895)
(The free kick by Grlic is ‘bomb’ / fantastic!)

While (6a) is a clear example of *Bombe* being a noun, accompanied by its article, (6b) and (6c) are ambiguous. *Bombe* could be a bare noun or adjective. The only clue we have is the spelling of the first letter (capital or not). This is of course a highly problematic criterion, but since all nouns in German are spelled with a capital letter, one might assume that the lowercase letter , as in (6c), can at least be seen as an indication that the writer seems to interpret *bombe* as an adjective.

There are however more criteria. While (7a) is an example of an NP with an inflected adjective (*total-e*), (7b), despite the capital, and (7c) seem to be examples of an adjective accompanied by an intensifying adverbial (*total*).

- (7) a. Die Stimme ist **die totale Bombe** (DECOW2012-00: 576901309)
(The voice is ‘the total bomb’ / absolutely fantastic)
- b. und die Stimme ist einfach **total Bombe!** (DECOW2012-00: 614665045)
(The voice is just ‘totally bomb’ / absolutely fantastic)
- c. Trotzdem sieht das Spiel eigentlich **total bombe** aus (DECOW2012-06: 1009330511)
(the game looks ‘totally bomb’ / absolutely fantastic)

Moreover, like all adjectives, *bombe* has to be negated with *nicht*. Negation with *kein/e(r)* leads almost automatically to the literal interpretation of the noun *Bombe* (‘bomb’).

- (8) a. Der Stil war jetzt **nicht bombe**, aber ich konnte damit leben (DECOW2012-06: 701238416)
(The style was ‘not bomb’ / not fantastic, but I could live with it)
- b. Ich finde sein Rap sowohl technisch als auch inhaltlich **nicht Bombe**, aber feier den Typen einfach seit Jahren (DECOW2012-06: 845751199)

(Technically and with respect to its content, I find his rap ‘not bomb’ / not fantastic, but...)

While *bombe* behaves as an adjective in predicative position, there are also arguments against the adjective-status. Words like *bombe* or *klasse* cannot be inflected, which becomes problematic in attributive use, where German adjectives need to be inflected for gender, number and case. Therefore, the status of these words is controversial in the literature (Elsen 2011: 163).

Example (9) demonstrates that the absence of inflection cannot be the consequence of the stem ending in schwa, since the ordinary adjective *böse* (‘evil’) is inflected, while evaluative *klasse* (‘classy; great, neat’) is not.

- (9) a. ein *böser* Mann ‘an evil man’, ein *böses* Kind ‘an evil child’, eine *böse* Frau ‘an evil woman’, die *bösen* Männer ‘the evil men’
- b. ein *klasse* (*klasser) Mann ‘a classy man’, ein *klasse* (*klassen) Kind ‘a classy child’, eine *klasse* Frau ‘a classy woman’, die *klasse* (*klassen) Männer ‘the classy men’

Adjectives like *klasse* ‘classy’, *bombe* ‘terrific’ and *schrott* ‘bad, absurd’ are used more frequently in predicative than in attributive position and when used attributively they do not adopt all the characteristics of ‘normal’ adjectives. Therefore, Pittner & Berman

(2006) and Berman (2009) suggest that it is the predicative position that has to be seen as the source context of the reanalysis:

It is argued that N→A conversion is linked to the predicative position, which, due to its syntactic and semantic characteristics, is well suited to conversion. Once the adjectival use is established in the predicative position, it can spread to other syntactic environments. (Pittner & Berman 2006: 233)

The predicative position seems to be the ideal locus for this type of category change, not only because nouns can be used without a determiner in this specific context, but also because adjectives are not inflected in the predicative position, both in German and Dutch. Hence, the distinction between nouns and adjectives is probably most blurred in this specific syntactic context and may therefore license N to A reanalysis.

Not only in German, but also in Dutch, certain nouns may be used predicatively with an evaluative value, especially in informal language use; the use of a determiner may then be obligatory (10), optional (11) or ungrammatical (12):

(10) a. Uiteindelijk stort ik mij toch op de films (RIO is **de max**⁵ trouwens) en series.

(NLCOW14AX01: 474420222)

5 *Max* in this use is probably an abbreviation of the noun *maximum*. It should however be observed that whereas *maximum* is a neuter word in Dutch (*het maximum*), the intensifying use of *max* is

(Eventually I throw myself into films (RIO is ‘the max’ / terrific btw) and series)

b. *RIO is max

(11) a. Een depressie is **de hel** (NLCOW14AX01: 1292146)

(A depression is ‘the hell’ / hell)

b. Kleding kopen is **hel** (NLCOW14AX01: 563759505)⁶

(Buying clothes is hell)

(12) a. Niets dan superlatieven over het vlees, maar ook de vis is **klasse**

(NLCOW14AX01: 13486760)

(Nothing but superlatives about the meat, but the fish is ‘class’ / top-class too)

b. *maar ook de vis is de klasse

Like in German, the predicative use of bare Dutch evaluative nouns may be reinterpreted as adjectival, and language users may therefore extend the use of these intensifiers to new unambiguously adjectival constructions. This can for instance be illustrated by Dutch *klasse* that can be modified by degree adverbs (13a) and be used attributively (13b):

necessarily preceded by the determiner *de*.

6 As observed by one of our anonymous reviewers, the use of predicative *hel* without a determiner is possibly a calque from English.

(13) a. Het ontwerp is **echt klasse**, de afwerking is oke en de prijs stelt tevreden

(NLCOW14AX01: 340006326)

(The design is really ‘class’ / top-class, the finish is okay and the price is satisfying)

b. Ard schreef: ‘Makaay was voor Feyenoord **een klasse spits**’ (NLCOW2014:

16970305)

(Ard wrote: ‘Makaay was a ‘class’ / top-class forward for Feyenoord’)

As claimed before, this kind of adjectival uses should in our view be distinguished from true morphological conversions, which would justify why Booij (2002) does not mention N to A conversion. While a noun or a verb obtained by conversion, such as *de gek* ‘the madman’ or *fiets-en* ‘to cycle’, immediately adopts the syntactic and morphological behaviour typical of nouns and verbs, the adjectival uses of for instance *klasse* are highly subject to syntactic and morphological constraints – they are highly ‘context-sensitive’ –, and may expand in a gradual way. For example, it appears that adjectival *klasse* is more commonly used predicatively than attributively (Delvigne 2013), does not adopt the typically adjectival morphological comparative and superlative forms (**is klasser dan*, **is het klassest*) and the syntactic equivalents are at least to say very uncommon (*?is meer klasse dan* ‘lit. is more class than’, *?is het meest klasse* ‘lit. is the most class’). This idea is also supported by the English data De Smet & Van de Velde (2014) looked into when they claim that new English denominal adjectives, such as *sneak*, are often defective (e.g., *a sneak atomic attack* vs **very sneak*).

In sum, the hypothesis formulated for German by Pittner & Berman (2006), that we will still call the ‘conversion’ hypothesis for convenience, is not implausible for Dutch, even if it may, like in German, not result in full-fledged adjectives.

In the next section, we will examine to which extent the debonding hypothesis should be seen as an alternative pathway to derive adjectives from (bound) nouns in Dutch and German.

2.2. *Debonding*

Debonding is one of the subtypes of degrammaticalization distinguished by Norde (2009). The process is defined as “a composite change whereby a bound morpheme in a specific linguistic context becomes a free morpheme” (Norde 2009: 186) and is typically marked by the following parameters: *severance* (i.e., the emergence of free morphemes out of bound morphemes), *recategorialization* (i.e., category change), *scope expansion* (e.g., scope over a phrase), and *flexibilization* (i.e., syntactic context expansion) (Norde 2009: 186-227). Norde (2009) focuses on the debonding of clitics, inflectional affixes and derivational affixes, but Norde & Van Goethem (2015b (forthc.)) demonstrate that (Dutch) affixoids may undergo debonding as well.

Just like the context-sensitive N to A category change described in the preceding section, debonding and subsequent recategorialization also differs from morphological derivation through conversion. As stated in Van Goethem & De Smet (2014: 253), debonding “depends on the occurrence of the noun in the specific morphosyntactic constellation of compound(-like) sequences, and typically occurs when the noun has

already obtained some qualifying adjective-like function [...]. This is also reflected in its gradualness”. Logically, when an affixoid undergoes debonding and is reanalyzed as an adjective, attributive uses tend to appear before predicative uses (see the case study on French *clé* in Amiot & Van Goethem (2012) and Van Goethem (2015) and the one on Dutch *reuze* in Van Goethem & Hiligsmann (2014)).

Van Goethem & De Smet (2014) investigate for Dutch, English and French how the debonding process is impacted by three different factors: (a) the semantics of the bound noun or affixoid subject to debonding, (b) the degree of prosodic and morphological cohesion of the sequence, and (c) the impact of adjective inflection in the language. With regard to the semantics, debonding in all three languages is typical of nouns with a qualifying (often evaluative / intensifying) function (e.g., *un secteur économique clé* / *a key economic sector*). Besides this semantic constraint, there are further language-specific, essentially morphological, constraints on debonding, viz compound cohesion and inflection; these allow us to account for the fact that the English sequences with *key* and their French counterparts with *clé*, for instance, act differently from the Dutch compounds beginning with *sleutel* (e.g., **sleutel economische sector*) (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012). Van Goethem & De Smet (2014) therefore argue that the likelihood of debonding largely depends on the degree of cohesion of the compounds or compound-like sequences, manifested, among others, through spelling and word stress. Since Dutch compounds show stronger cohesion than their French and English counterparts, debonding is less likely to occur in Dutch. Third, as already observed in the previous sections, reanalysis of a noun as an adjective may be

favoured in languages with little or no inflection on the adjective, as in French and English respectively. This again disfavours debonding in Dutch.⁷

Van Goethem & Hiligsmann (2014) investigated the debonding of the Dutch prefixoid *reuze*, derived from the noun *reus* ‘giant’, and confirmed that its autonomous uses may display all of the typical parameters of the process. Some relevant examples are given under (1) above: in (1c) *reuze* acts as a predicative adjective, which is suggestive of its flexibilization and (1d) demonstrates that the prefixoid can not only be recategorized as an adjective, but also as an adverb. Example (14) illustrates the possibility of scope expansion, *reuze* being used as an attributive adjective with scope over an entire noun phrase (*megalithische steenblokken* ‘megalithic blocks of stone’).

- (14) Onder de sedimentlagen dook een verbazingwekkende en geheimzinnige steenstructuur op met **reuze** megalitische [sic] steenblokken. (NLCOW2012-00X: 112920660)
- (Under the sediment layers popped up an amazing and mysterious stone structure with ‘giant’ / gigantic megalithic stone blocks.)

7 Van Goethem & De Smet (2014) furthermore argue that in the case of Dutch, an additional process should be taken into account, that is the possibility of clipping of N+A compounds (e.g., *stapel* ‘lit. pile; madly in love’ < *stapelverliefd* ‘lit. pile-in love; madly in love’) (see also Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014 on the possible clipping of Dutch compounds beginning with *reuze* ‘lit. giant; great; very’).

The fact that as an adjective and adverb *reuze* preserves the form of the prefixoid *reuze* (e.g., *reuzespannend* ‘very exciting’) and not that of the corresponding noun (*reus* ‘giant’), as well as its intensifying value, is determinative for the debonding account: *reuze* is just not a plausible outcome of N to A conversion.⁸

Van Goethem & De Smet (2014) do not include German in their analysis of debonding processes, but drawing on their data, they assume “that a language such as German, characterized by very cohesive compounds and a more complex inflectional system than Dutch will even allow less debonding or may exploit yet other pathways” (Van Goethem & De Smet 2014: 272). This might be a plausible explanation for the absence of the debonding analysis in the literature on German, where the emergence of intensifying adjectives is exclusively seen as a case of syntactic reanalysis (‘conversion’, see 2.1). There are, however, indications that debonding might play a role in German, too.

Norde & Van Goethem (2015a (forthc.)), for instance, present some evidence for debonding in the case of the adjectival use of German *riesen* ‘giant’, which can – because of its form – not be analyzed as a conversion product from the noun *Riese* ‘giant’. It has to be seen as a reinterpretation of the first element of nominal compounds,

8 The diachronic data described in Van Goethem & Hiligsmann (2014) support the idea of debonding of *reuze*: during the 19th century the morpheme grammaticalized from the noun *reus* with the literal (‘giant’) meaning or a qualifying (‘enormous, huge’) or classifying function (‘belonging to a species group characterized by large size’) when embedded in compounds into an intensifying prefixoid, meaning ‘great; very’. Subsequently, from the 20th century on, *reuze* developed adjectival and adverbial uses.

including the linking element *-n-* (*Riesenaufwand* > *riesen Aufwand* ‘giant effort’), and it competes against the derivational adjective *riesig* ‘giant’.

In the previous section we discussed Dutch *klasse* in the context of the conversion approach. The use of its German cognate *klasse* ‘classy’ shows some variation that might be seen as support for the debonding analysis: *ein Klassewagen* / *Klasse Wagen* / *klasse Wagen* ‘a great car’, *ein Klassespieler* / *Klasse Spieler* / *klasse Spieler* ‘an excellent player’, etc. The spelling *klasse* indicates an adjectival interpretation of the word, despite the omission of the inflectional ending *-r*. Inflected uses are attested, but only very rarely and they are judged very odd by native speakers of German. For *klasser Spieler* we only found one example in DECOW2012-00:

- (15) Ein **klasser Spieler** aber was kann er gegen Yao machen? (DECOW2012-00: 635639557)
(‘An excellent player but what can he do against Yao?’)

At first sight, the existence of such variants might be seen as an illustration of an ongoing debonding process: *Klassespieler* > *Klasse Spieler* > *klasse Spieler* > *klasser Spieler*. On closer inspection, however, frequency data do not, or at least not convincingly, support this analysis. They rather point into the opposite direction. The combination *klasse Spieler* is attested 124 times in DECOW2012-00, while *Klassespieler* occurs only 55 times. Therefore, *Klassespieler* could also be an A+N compound with the evaluative adjective *klasse* as its first element. The adjective itself,

then, is probably the result of a syntactic reanalysis in predicative position and its use in attributive position is to be seen as context expansion. The “in-between spelling” *Klasse Spieler* (with capital *K*) is not conclusive: it might be seen as an indication of ongoing debonding, but it could also be a mere spelling variant, not unusual in informal language.

In German, therefore, the conversion analysis seems to be the most straightforward explanation for the emergence of evaluative adjectives. Debonding effects might strengthen the adjectival interpretation, and in some cases (like *riesen*), they offer an adequate explanation for the adjectival use.

In the next sections, we will investigate if both strategies, conversion and debonding, are also plausible pathways to account for the adjectival uses of Dutch *top* (Section 3) and its German counterparts *top* and *spitze* (Section 4).

3. Dutch *top*

In this section we will investigate how the adjectival uses of the Dutch noun *top* should be accounted for. *Top* is frequently used as a compound member (e.g., *topsport* ‘top sport’), and more specifically, as an intensifying prefixoid (e.g., *topvakantie* ‘excellent holiday’). The noun *top* can act as an evaluative predicate too, with or without a determiner:

(16) a. Dampkapfilter voor 2 EUR uit de action die je zelf kunt uitsnijden is **de top!!!**

(NLCOW14AX01: 200221779)

(Cooker hood filter for 2 EUR from the action shop that you can cut yourself is
'the top' / excellent!!!)

b. Dit is een hele gezellige winkel waar je veel kunt krijgen en het personeel is

top. (NLCOW14AX01: 17599092)

(This is a very cosy shop where you can get a lot of stuff and the staff is 'top' /
excellent)

The data for this case study are drawn from the COW corpus⁹, a gigatoken database of tagged and lemmatized texts from the web, compiled at Freie Universität Berlin (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012). Since this corpus provides large data sets from different languages, among others Dutch and German, often from informal sources such as forums and blogs, it is perfectly suited to study innovative constructions from a comparative perspective.

For the corpus study of Dutch *top(-)*, a random sample of 1000 occurrences for both its bound and free forms was extracted from the NLCOW2012-00X subcorpus. As we aim to compare bound *top-* within compounds with free *top* with a potentially adjectival (or possibly adverbial) function, we had to discard, besides some incomplete

9 Information about the COW project can be found at <http://corporafromtheweb.org/>. The corpus has been available, after registration, at <http://hpsg.fu-berlin.de/cow/>. A new version of the corpora and of the search interface is available since 2015 at <http://webcorpora.org/>.

and repeated examples, a range of irrelevant hits. The latter included non-compounds beginning with the sequence *top* (e.g., *topper* ‘topper, hit’, *toppen* ‘tops; to top’), *top* non-ambiguously used as a noun (e.g., *de top van de berg* ‘the top of the mountain’, *een zomerse top* ‘a summery top (t-shirt)’, *de top 10* ‘the top 10’¹⁰) and *top* used in (English) collocations (*op en top* ‘all over, out and out’, *tip top* ‘first-class, in perfect shape’, *van top tot teen* ‘from top to toe, from head to foot’, *top down*, *over the top*).¹¹ After this clean-up of both samples, we ended up with 783 occurrences of bound *top*- and 126 potentially adjectival/adverbial free forms of *top* (that is, followed by a phrase or used predicatively or as interjection).

From the preceding accounts, we can assume that the ‘debonding’ hypothesis implies that attributive uses are more frequent than predicative ones (because of the diachronic priority), and that the free usages of *top* are semantically related to its bound forms; alternatively, evidence for the ‘conversion’ hypothesis could be found when predicative usage is more frequent than attributive one (because of the predicative source context) and when free *top* preserves the semantics of the corresponding noun. In what follows, we will first compare the semantics of bound and free *top*(-) (3.1) before looking into the constructions both types of morphemes occur in (3.2). On the basis of

¹⁰ The latter type may undergo ‘univerbation’ and is then written in one word (e.g., *de toptien* ‘the top ten’).

¹¹ However, English loanwords have not been excluded; interestingly, they often present both ways of spelling, e.g., *top manager* (spelling as an English compound) vs *topmanager* (spelling as a Dutch compound).

these data, we will try to determine whether free *top* should be considered the result of either N to A conversion or debonding of compounds beginning with *top-* (3.3).

3.1. *Semantic types*

With regard to the semantics of *top*, the following types can be distinguished.

First, *top(-)* can have a concrete, spatial meaning, in the sense of ‘upper’. This meaning is restricted to the bound forms:

- (17) Bovendien zit onder de **toplaag** vooral zand en dan klei (lijkt het) dus ik zal er sowieso nieuwe aarde op moeten storten als ik bollen wil planten.

(NLCOW2012-00X: 969222)

(In addition, under the top layer is mainly sand and then clay (it seems) so I should anyway throw new earth on if I want to plant bulbs)

- (18) Dat had ze al laten horen in de drie Mozart - aria's , beeldschoon en intelligent voorgedragen, zij het naar mijn smaak met iets te veel hoogfrequent vibrato in de **topnoten**. (NLCOW2012-00X: 9356848)

(She had already shown this in the three Mozart-arias, beautifully and intelligently executed, but to my taste with a little too much high frequency vibrato in the top notes)

Second, *top(-)* can have an abstract metaphorical meaning, expressing that someone or something belongs to the ‘highest or best class’. This meaning is by far the most frequent one when *top-* forms part of a compound: it applies to more than 91% of the 783 compounds in our sample (19-20). However, this value is also widespread in the free forms (about 44% of the data), see for instance (21). In combination with measurable entities, *top(-)* may also mean ‘maximal’ (22).

- (19) Op dit festival zijn verschillende **topdancers** van over de hele wereld aanwezig om salsa workshops te geven . (NLCOW2012-00X: 103449)
(Various top dancers from around the whole world are present at this festival to give salsa workshops.)
- (20) Je hebt hier helemaal gelijk: een sterrenrestaurant moet constante **topkwaliteit** leveren, zowel in de keuken als in de bediening. (NLCOW2012-00X: 237968)
(You are absolutely right here: a starred restaurant has to provide constant top quality, both in the kitchen and in the service)
- (21) Zo komen op **top niveau** ook banen vrij. (NLCOW2012-00X: 12028835)
(Like that jobs at top level become available too)
- (22) Na (goede) afloop bleek dat ze maar liefst 94 km reed in 35 minuten en een **topsnelheid** haalde van 193 km / u. (NLCOW2012-00X: 4783532)
(Afterwards it turned out that she drove not less than 94 kilometres in 35 minutes and reached a top speed of 193 km / h)

Finally, *top(-)* can be used as an intensifier and, as such, it means ‘excellent, great, enormous(ly)’. Because of its specialized meaning within the compound *top-* can then be considered a prefixoid (see, among others, Hüning & Booij 2014, Leuschner 2010, Norde & Van Goethem 2015b (forthc.)). However, the use as a true intensifying prefixoid is quite exceptional: it only applies to 4,85% of the bound forms, e.g., (23). As a free morpheme, on the contrary, the intensifying function is the most important one, covering more than 56% of the sample. *Top* can then be used as an attributive (24) or predicative (25) intensifier.

- (23) We hadden wel een **toptijd** in het centrum van Milaan. (NLCOW2012-00X: 6265357)
(We did have a ‘top time’ / great time in the centre of Milan.)
- (24) Verouderd hotel, maar **top sfeertje** hier! (NLCOW2012-00X: 256595)
(Outdated hotel, but top atmosphere here!)
- (25) Niet alleen de expeditieweek was **top**, ook het gehele traject vanaf de kick off hebben we als prettig ervaren. (NLCOW2012-00X: 4166540)
(Not only was the expedition week ‘top’ / excellent, we have also experienced the whole process from the kick off as pleasant)

This semantic classification is not as straightforward as it may look at first sight. A same compound can for instance belong to different semantic classes according to the context in which it is used and therefore every occurrence had to be interpreted in a very careful

way. This is especially the case for the metaphorical and intensifying semantic types, which are closely related to each other by Lakoff and Johnson (1980)'s metaphor "Good is up". For instance, *toptijd* is clearly evaluative in (23) but when talking about the achievements of an athlete, it should be interpreted as 'a record time', and belongs to the second semantic class. Furthermore, whereas *toplaag* in (17) can be ranged in the spatial category (with *top* meaning 'upper'), this is not the case in for example (26) in which *top* means 'belonging to the best class in a hierarchy':

- (26) Het begrotingstekort en de almaar toenemende armoede zijn de eerste tekenen van verval, maar het lijkt erop dat een anonieme **toplaag** kost wat kost de macht wil houden. (NLCOW2012-00X: 10354221)
- (The budget deficit and the ever increasing poverty are the first signs of decay, but it seems that an anonymous top layer absolutely wants to preserve its power)

Table 1 summarizes the frequencies of the different semantic types for both the bound and free forms of *top(-)*. The data show important semantic differences between bound and free *top(-)*: bound *top-* can have a spatial meaning, albeit marginal, which is not observed in the free uses; the metaphorical meaning ('belonging to the best / highest class') appears far more frequently in the bound than in the free forms, while vice versa the intensifying meaning is typically associated with free *top*. These semantic discrepancies already indicate that bound and free *top(-)* are not merely spelling variants

of each other. However they do not yet allow us to determine which process (debonding or conversion) accounts for the adjectival uses of *top*; therefore we will have to take a closer look into the different construction types in which the bound and free forms may appear (see 3.2). For the time being, we can nevertheless advance the following hypothesis: the fact that, proportionally, free *top* is significantly more often used as an intensifier and much less often with the metaphorical meaning ‘belonging to the best / highest class’ than bound *top-* may indicate that it is either not a result of debonding (but of conversion) or that the debonding process of *top-* is subject to considerable semantic constraints. The latter would be in line with Van Goethem & De Smet (2014) who demonstrate that debonding mainly applies to compound members with an evaluative meaning (see 2.2.2).

Semantic types	Bound <i>top-</i>	Free <i>top</i>
‘upper (spatial)’	31 (3,96%)	0
‘belonging to the best / highest class; maximal’	714 (91,19%)	55 (43,65%)
‘excellent, great, enormous(ly)’	38 (4,85%)	71 (56,35%)
Totals	783	126

Table 1: Semantic types of bound and free *top(-)*

As can be derived from the preceding examples, *top(-)* mostly combines with a nominal R1 (i.e., the right-hand compound member in bound constructions, or the first word to

the right in free constructions), even if other word classes may also occur (see 3.2). When comparing the most frequent R1s,¹² we can also observe some interesting differences between bound and free *top*(-): the most frequent R1s for bound *top*- (*sport*, *club(s)* and *ambtena(a)r(en)* ‘official(s)’) do not figure in the top 3 of free *top*’s most frequent R1s (*leverancier* ‘supplier’, *manager* and *secret*). What also draws our attention is the fact that 2 out of the 3 nouns in this top 3 are English loanwords (*manager* and *secret*): the spelling in two words of *top manager* and *top secret* is most probably influenced by the English spelling of compounds, even if *topmanager* written in one word also occurs and is even highly ranked among the most frequent compounds (in seventh position). If we include the less frequent nominal R1s of free *top*, this tendency may be generalized: 10 out of 58 free occurrences (= 17,24%) involve English loanwords (*top cast*, *top entertainment*, *top service*, etc.), while this only applies to 45 out of the 774 (5,81%) compounds beginning with *top*- (e.g., *topteam*, *topcoating*, *topcoach*). Even if spelling alone is not sufficient to explain the emergence of the free forms and the semantic differences observed above, we need to take into account the English origin of certain ‘*top* + N’ sequences as a crucial factor that have triggered some of the free forms.

Another formal factor that may influence spelling in two words, and which was already observed by Van Goethem & Hiligsmann (2014) when studying the debonding of Dutch *reuze*-, is the length and complexity of the compounds: in 6 out of the 58 cases

12 These results should however be interpreted with caution because of the considerable differences in absolute frequencies: bound *top*- combines in 774 examples with a noun, whereas we only have 58 instances of free *top* with scope over a noun or noun phrase.

(10,34%) *top* has scope over another nominal compound (e.g., *top handballanden* ‘top handball countries’); it is very probable that this separation is motivated by a concern for the readability of compounds which would be too long and too complex when written in one word. Moreover, the spelling in two words may disambiguate the scope of *top*: in (27) for instance, *top* has scope over the head of the following compound (*zangeres* ‘(female) singer’) and not over its modifier (*zeur* ‘(to) nag’).

- (27) Van **top zeurzangeres** Erykah Badu tot aan het zingende nichtje van Astrud Gilberto (NLCOW2012-00X: 12331275)
- (From ‘top nag singer’ Erykah Badu to the singing niece of Astrud Gilberto)

3.2. Construction types

Table 2 compares the construction types of bound and free *top(-)*.

R1: part of speech (POS) of the element modified by <i>top(-)</i>	Bound <i>top-</i>	Free <i>top</i>
N / NP (<i>top-</i> in a nominal compound / <i>top</i> as attributive adjective)	774 (98,85%)	60 (47,62%)
Adj (<i>top-</i> in an adjectival compound / <i>top</i> as adverb with scope over Adj)	8 (1,02%)	1 (0,79%)

Adv (<i>top-</i> in an adverbial compound)	1 (0,13%)	0
V / VP (<i>top</i> as adverb with scope over V / VP)	0	2 (1,59%)
No R1 (<i>top</i> as predicative adjective / as interjection)	0	63 (50,00%)
Totals	783	126

Table 2: Construction types of bound and free *top(-)*

As the results in Table 2 indicate, bound and free *top(-)* occur in highly divergent construction types. Bound *top-* is almost exclusively found in nominal compounds (e.g., *topvorm* ‘top form’, *topinkomens* ‘top incomes’, *topattractie* ‘top attraction’), whereas as a free morpheme scope over a nouns is far less common (about 48% of the data). As already observed, the latter construction type is to a large extent linked to compounds borrowed from English (e.g., *top manager*, *top secret*) and constructions in which *top* has scope over another compound, but it also includes a few cases in which *top* has scope over a phrase, as illustrated in (28). This is a clear sign of ‘scope expansion’, one of the typical parameters of debonding (see 2.2).

- (28) Wat is het verschil tussen een **top technisch accountmanager** en een gewone technisch accountmanager? (NLCOW2012-00X: 6061184)
- (What is the difference between a ‘top’ / top-class technical account manager and an ordinary technical account manager?)

Moreover, the fact that ‘top technisch accountmanager’ is coordinated to ‘gewone technisch accountmanager’ indicates that *top* has the status of an attributive adjective, in the same way as *gewone* ‘ordinary’. This status should also be assigned to *top* in (29), in which it is coordinated to the adjective *lagere*:

- (29) Bij zowel **top als lagere managers**, en politici, valt dan te constateren dat vormen van disfunctioneren die bij lagere maatschappelijke klassen tot ontslag zouden leiden, bij de toplagen dat heel vaak niet gebeurt . (NLCOW2012-00X: 5823077)

(In the case of both top and lower managers, and politicians, one can see that forms of dysfunction that would result in discharge in lower social classes, in the case of the top layers that very often does not happen)

In precisely half of the data, free *top* is found in predicative position or as an interjection (31); this implies that no immediate R1 can be observed. In all 63 cases with *top* used predicatively or as an interjection, it conveys the intensifying meaning (‘excellent’), which may also explain why it is so often accompanied by a degree adverb in this context. In (30) and (31), the forms *absoluut* ‘absolutely’ and *echt* ‘really’ are unambiguously adverbial degree modifiers; if it were prenominal adjectives, they should have the inflected forms *absolute* ‘absolute’ and *echte* ‘real’. This signals that

top should be assigned adjectival status in these examples. *Helemaal* ‘completely’ in (32) is a degree adverb, without adjectival counterpart.

- (30) Petje af Tim, ik vind het **absoluut top** wat je neer weet te zetten!

(NLCOW2012-00X: 5354449)

(Hats off Tim, I think it's absolutely ‘top’ / excellent what you are realizing!)

- (31) Dus Ruud gaat vanuit het motorbootje wat plaatjes schieten waarvan het resultaat op deze pagina, **echt top**! (NLCOW2012-00X: 5343777)

(So Ruud is going to shoot some pictures from the motor boat, from which the results [will appear] on this page, really ‘top’ / great!)

- (32) Ze moet van hem ‘lieve brieven’ schrijven, om duidelijk te maken dat hun relatie nog **helemaal top** is. (NLCOW2012-00X: 5465155)

(He wants her to write ‘nice letters’, to make sure that their relationship is still completely ‘top’)

These predicative cases are at the heart of our study since they may be accounted for in two ways. First, they may result from ‘flexibilization’, typically involved in debonding: this would imply that *top* has undergone context expansion from the attributive to the predicative position. Second, they may be accounted for by N > A reanalysis in the predicative position (‘conversion’). However, both accounts still raise some important questions. On the one hand, as shown earlier, bound *top*-, attributive and predicative *top* are semantically very different, in the sense that predicative *top* is always intensifying,

attributive (free) *top* only has an intensifying meaning in 5 instances out of the 60 (8,33%) whereas for bound *top*- this intensifying value is even more marginal (only 4,85% of the occurrences in the corpus sample). On the other hand, if the predicative use of *top* were the result of the reanalysis of the noun *top*, we would expect that the noun phrase *de top* would be used productively in this position too, but this seems not to be the case: in the original sample of 1000 at-random examples of free *top* (including the clearly nominal ones), only two instances of this construction occurred:

- (33) Thailand is ALTIJD gezellig, warm of regen. mij maakt het niet uit, er zijn is **de top!** (NLCOW2012-00X: 58816)

(Thailand is ALWAYS cozy, warm or rain. it does not matter to me, being there is 'the top' / great!)

- (34) Jullie zijn **de top!** (NLCOW2012-00X: 887086)
- (You are the top!)

Finally, scope over adjectives, adverbs and verbs is marginal or inexistent for both the free as the bound morpheme. Bound *top*- is almost exclusively used in nominal compounds, but adjectival/adverbial compounds do occur; in these cases *top* functions as an intensifying prefixoid:

- (35) De nieuwbouw van woningen op de resterende gemeentelijke locaties is als volgt verdeeld: eenzesde betaalbaar, tweederde middelduur en eenzesde duur of

topduur. (NLCOW2012-00X: 5040222)

(The construction of new homes on the remaining municipal locations is divided as follows: one sixth affordable, two-thirds medio-expensive and one sixth ‘top expensive’ / extremely expensive)

- (36) Autootje **topzwaar** volgestouwd met versterkers en een drumstel .

(NLCOW2012-00X: 6421617)

(Tiny car ‘top heavily’ / extremely heavily crammed with amplifiers and a drum kit)

In the few cases in which free *top* does occur with scope over an adjective or verb phrase, it acts as an intensifying degree adverb:

- (37) Maar ook dat blijft voor de coaches tot op het laatste moment **top secret**.

(NLCOW2012-00X: 359520)

(But that also remains for the coaches until the last moment top secret)

- (38) De trainer **deed het top**. (NLCOW2012-00X: 2890471)

(The coach ‘did it top’ / did an excellent job)

3.3. *Debonding or conversion?*

The key question of this study is to examine if the free uses of Dutch and German intensifying prefixoids should be considered the result of a debonding process, or of an

N > A category change in predicative position. With respect to Dutch *top*, we can now draw the following conclusions.

Even if certain free uses should probably be seen as just a matter of spelling (think of the English borrowings and the separated spelling of long compounds, or a more general tendency to write compounds in separate words), the spelling factor cannot account for the significant divergences observed with respect to the semantics and the construction types of the bound and the free forms.

The conversion hypothesis seems to be the most logical account for the predicative uses and the use of *top* as an interjection. Although *de top* (with a determiner) does not frequently occur in predicative position (e.g., *het was de top!* ‘lit. it was the top!’), it clearly has an intensifying value and is most probably related to the predicative construction *het was top* (‘it was top’) (without determiner) in which *top* preserves this intensifying function. It is however not likely that attributive *top* and bound *top*- should (just) be considered as extended uses of predicative *top* since the latter forms only rarely express intensification; typically they carry the metaphorical semantics of *top* (‘belonging to the highest / best class’), lacked by predicative *top*.

As a consequence, the debonding hypothesis is needed too, not only to account for the attributive uses with the metaphorical meaning (e.g., *top leverancier* ‘top supplier’, *top sport* ‘top sport’) (even if misspelling could be at play too here), but also to justify the instances with scope expansion, such as *top technisch accountmanager* (28). In order to explain that this kind of attributive uses are quite marginal, we need to refer to the properties of Dutch morphology. When Dutch adjectives are used predicatively, they are uninflected (e.g., *het boek is mooi* / *de boeken zijn mooi* ‘the

book is beautiful / the books are beautiful), but attributive adjectives mostly end in an inflectional *-e* (*het mooie boek / mooie boeken* ‘the beautiful book / beautiful books), except when the noun is indefinite, neuter and singular (*een mooi boek* ‘a beautiful book). Accordingly, the form of Dutch *top* is not well-suited for reanalysis into an attributive adjective, this in contrary to the Dutch prefixoid *reuze* ‘giant’ (Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014) that acts more frequently as an attributive adjective. Inflected forms of Dutch *top* did not occur in our corpus sample, but they do exist. The following two examples are drawn from the more recent NLCOW2014 corpus:

- (39) Want je hebt een superrrrrr **toppe** site echt waar (NLCOW14AX01: 665427402)

(Because you have a ‘superrrrrr top’ / great website, really)

- (40) Zaten wel **toppe** plaatjes bij . (NLCOW14AX01: 679969589)

(There were some ‘top’ / great pictures in it)

To summarize, we could state that the predicative (intensifying) uses of *top* could be accurately explained as cases of conversion through reanalysis, whereas debonding is very likely to be involved in the rise of the attributive (mostly metaphorical) uses. More problematical, finally, is to account for the attributive intensifying uses, as the ones with inflection illustrated above, but also the ones without inflection, for instance (41):

- (41) Wij hebben een uitstekende reis gehad naar Praag en door de chauffeurs (Rudy en Anita) is het een **top** vakantie geworden. (NLCOW2012-00X: 9809692)
(We have had an excellent trip to Prague and thanks to the drivers [Rudy and Anita] it has become a top holiday)

Different processes could be involved in this kind of examples: they could just illustrate the tendency to write compounds in separate words, they could be the result of debonding of compounds beginning with an intensifying prefixoid (e.g., *topvakantie* ‘top holiday’), or they could be seen as the result of context expansion of predicative *top* to the attributive position (without however adopting the regular inflectional pattern of Dutch adjectives, see De Smet & Van de Velde 2014 on defective denominal adjectives).

To conclude, the case study of Dutch *top* indicates that a complex interplay of debonding, conversion and spelling is most likely at work; the free uses of Dutch *top* do not derive just from one source construction, but imply an intricate interaction between different source constructions (the different compound types and *(de) top* used as an intensifying predicate). These results are entirely in line with the findings reported in De Smet, Ghesquière and Van de Velde (2013) on *Multiple source constructions in language change*.

In the next section, we will try to figure out if the same conclusions can be drawn from the German data.

4. German counterparts of Dutch *top*

Dutch *top* has two direct equivalents in German. In 4.1 we will briefly outline the results of a study on *top* in German (Battefeld & Rawoens 2014) and in 4.2 we will have a closer look at the semantics and construction types of German *spitze*, which is closely related to *top* semantically. The central aim is to explore if the free uses of German *top* and *spitze* should be accounted for merely by conversion, as suggested in the literature, or if debonding may play a role as well.

4.1. *German top*

English loan words like *top manager* are found in many languages and the use of evaluative/intensifying *top* is on its way to become an internationalism under the influence of English.

Battefeld & Rawoens (2014) conducted a comparative study on German *top*- and Swedish *topp(en)*-, also with their data drawn from the COW corpora. Their research question is parallel to ours too: they investigate whether the free use of *top* is to be seen as a result of conversion or debonding, and their results seem to be in line with our findings for Dutch *top*.

Like in Dutch, adjectival *top* is used frequently in predicative position in German. Some examples from the German DECOW2012 corpus may serve as an illustration. In (42a) bare *top* is used predicatively, while in (42b) and (42c) *top* is modified by an adverb. Furthermore, (42c) shows that the spelling is far from

consistent. Because of the preceding adverbial, *Top* has to be analyzed as an adjective here (despite of its spelling with a capital).

(42) a. Die Zusammenarbeit mit Euch war **top**! (DECOW2012-00: 431771550)

(The cooperation with you has been ‘top’ / excellent!)

b. Die Musikauswahl ist zur Zeit wirklich **sehr top**. (DECOW2012-00: 157268306)

(The music selection is really very ‘top’ / outstanding at the moment.)

c. Die anschließende Massage war dann **absolut Top** und ... (DECOW2012-00: 103437059)

(The subsequent massage, then, was absolutely ‘top’ / fantastic, and ...)

Adverbial use of *top* is also attested in German:

(43) Die Materialsammlung ist **top** aufgebaut und informativ. (DECOW2012-00: 9652820)

(The data collection is ‘top’ / very well constructed and informative.)

Attributive use of *top*, however, is problematic since *top* usually cannot be inflected.

- (44) Da gibt es immer wieder eine **top** Gelegenheit sein Geld gewinnbringend anzulegen (DECOW2012-00: 327583858)
(Again and again, there is a ‘top’ / excellent opportunity to invest one’s money profitably)

Inflected forms and comparative/superlative forms are only attested in very informal language or when used on purpose (as a pun). Battefeld & Rawoens (2014) mention *toppes Wetter* ‘top weather’, and in DECOW2012 we found an example of the comparative:

- (45) Die Zimmer waren **top**, und das Essen noch “**topper**”. (DECOW2012-00: 1167341556)
(The rooms were top, and the food was even ‘topper’.)

In (46), the first *Top* has to be interpreted as the first element of a compound (*Topmarken*), while the second one is an adjective because it is preceded by an adverbial (otherwise we would expect an inflected form *absoluten*).

- (46) stylische Fahrradbekleidung von **Top** Marken zu absolut **top** Preisen.
(DECOW2012-00:771494992)
(stylish cycle clothing of top brands at top prices.)

There is also a telling difference in pronunciation in this example: most likely initial compound-stress in *Tóp Marken* vs. final phrase stress in *top Préisen*.

According to Battefeld & Rawoens (2014) more than 30 % of all *top* + N combinations in German have to be classified as loans from English (nominal compounds like *Topseller*, *Topmodel*, etc.). When used in German nominal compounds, *top* has an abstract metaphorical meaning in the vast majority of cases, indicating the top of a hierarchy, a high or the highest level or class (*Topspieler* ‘top player’, *Topqualität* ‘top quality’). Related to this use, we find evaluative *top* (‘excellent, great’) in compounds like *Topfilm* ‘great movie’ or *Topwochenende* ‘great weekend’. In these words, *top* is becoming an intensifying prefixoid. The intensifying meaning can also be observed in adjectival compounds (*topaktuell* ‘very much up-to-date’, *topmodern* ‘very/highly modern’).

In the DECOW-2012 corpus we see a lot of variation with respect to spelling. For *Topzustand* ‘top condition’, the DECOW-2012-00 corpus has 138 instances of the compound written in one word (47a), which would be the ‘correct’ spelling in standard German. But it is also been spelled with a hyphen ((47b), 115 instances) or in two words, with ((47c), 126 instances) or without ((47d), 63 instances) the capital letter.

(47) a. Die Wohnung war in einem **Topzustand**. (DECOW2012-00: 138104012)

(The flat was in a top condition.)

b. Die Straße ist in einem **Top-Zustand** und ... (DECOW2012-00: 106282624)

(The road is in a top condition and ...)

c. An sich ist das Notebook in einem **Top Zustand**. (DECOW2012-00:

82421018)

(In principle, the notebook is in a top condition.)

d. Das Schlagzeug ist rot-metallic, in einem **top Zustand** und kann ...

(DECOW2012-00: 40483232)

(The drum-set is metallic red, in a top condition, and it can ...)

Such variation in spelling can be seen as an indication for ongoing debonding and the emergence of an adjective *top* in German that can be expanded to predicative and adverbial contexts. The use of *top* as an adjective might, of course, also be influenced by English directly, where the form is ambiguous in prenominal position as well as in the predicative position.

The conversion path, on the other hand, seems to be less convincing for German. As Battefeld & Rawoens (2014) have shown, the noun *Top* is hardly ever used in German. Unambiguous cases of nominal use of *Top* in predicative position are very rare; in DECOW2012-00 we only found one example of *Top* preceded by an inflected adjective:

- (48) Somit ist die Hoenn mein **absoluter Top**. (DECOW2012-00: 1196737558)
(Therefore, the Hoenn [= region in a computer game] is my absolute top /
favorite.)

We do, however, find a lot of examples of the predicative types illustrated in (42), many of which are ambiguous in that they might be interpreted as bare nouns or as adjectives. The spelling of the first character (capital or not) is not conclusive; it seems to be arbitrary to a certain extent.

In sum, we share the conclusion of Battefeld & Rawoens (2014). The debonding hypothesis seems to provide the most plausible explanation for the adjectival use of *top* in German. Compared to our case study on Dutch, we found even less arguments in favor of the conversion path in German.

4.2. *German spitze*

The data for our analysis of *spitze* are again drawn from the COW corpus. Like for the Dutch case study, it is mainly based on a selection of 1000 at-random examples for both its bound and free forms in the German DECOW2012-00 subcorpus, but we also looked at other slices of the corpus for the verification and illustration of relevant cases. The main goal of this section is to compare the interplay of factors described above for the adjectival use of Dutch *top* with a semantically equivalent case.

The German noun *Spitze* is a highly polysemous word. It can be used to denote a ‘peak’ (of a mountain), the ‘top’ (of a tree), the ‘tip’ (of a finger) as well as for the ‘front’ (of a train) or for the ‘leading position’ (in sports). ‘Top leaders’ or ‘heads’ are called the *Spitze* (of a concern). Besides that, a *Spitze* can be a ‘dig’ (at someone) and a homonymous use of the word refers to ‘lace’ (like in *Brüsseler Spitze* ‘Brussels lace’).

German has a corresponding adjective *spitz*, usually meaning ‘pointed’ or ‘sharp’ (also metaphorically: *eine spitze Bemerkung* ‘a sharp remark’). Other usages are found in *spitze Klammern* ‘angle brackets’, *ein spitzer Schrei* ‘a shrill cry’ or *jemanden spitz machen* ‘to turn somebody on’ where *spitz* means ‘horny’.

While these examples only illustrate parts of the semantic potential of *Spitze* and *spitz*, in this article, we want to focus on another (related) adjective: *spitze*. It is used in colloquial speech as an evaluative adjective, roughly equivalent to ‘super’, ‘fantastic’ or ‘excellent’. It is used predicatively (49) in most of the cases, but attributive usage is attested incidentally too (50):

(49) a. Die Lage ist wirklich **spitze** (DECOW2012-00: 51486)

(The setting is really super/excellent)

b. Die Helfer und die Zuschauer waren **spitze**! (DECOW2012-02: 48842545)

(The helpers and the spectators have been fantastic!)

(50) a. Hier wird eine **spitze** Teamarbeit geleistet (DECOW2012-01: 517017093)

(Here, an excellent team work is being done)

- b. kleine Werkstatt, super Service, **spitze** Preise (DECOW2012-02: 866215832)
(small garage, great service, excellent prices)

The adjective *spitze* is very similar to *top* in many respects.

It is related to the use of evaluative nominal compounds like *Spitzenleistung* ‘top performance’ or *Spitzenpreis* ‘top price’. The first element in these compounds is, however, the noun *Spitze* (not the adjective), since all of the relevant compounds contain the linking element *-n-* which in German is only used in NN-compounds, not in AN-compounds. Since the use of *-n-* is obligatory in compounds with *Spitze* as their first element, the form *Spitzen-* can also be analyzed as an allomorphic variant of the noun, used for compounding.

With respect to the semantics of the productive pattern [*Spitzen-* + X_N]_N we find two meanings that are also frequently observed in Dutch nominal compounds with *top* as their first element (see 3.1).

In most compounds *Spitzen-* is used with an abstract metaphorical meaning, expressing that someone or something belongs to the highest or best group or class. A *Spitzenleistung* is a performance that can be ranked very high. A soccer game between two teams heading the table (*Spitzenteams*) is a *Spitzenspiel*, and a *Spitzenwein* belongs to the best wines:

- (51) noch nie gesehenen Traubenqualität. Die Erwartungen an die **Spitzenweine** der deutschen Winzerelite waren entsprechend hoch. (DECOW2012-00: 32068670)

(unprecedented quality of the grapes. The expectations regarding the top wines of the German winemaker elite were accordingly high.)

Spitzen- is also used in compounds denoting the ‘leading position’ (in a race etc.), like in *Spitzenposition* ‘top/pole position’ or *Spitzenreiter* ‘front-runner’:

- (52) Fenerbahce Istanbul hat die **Spitzenposition** im türkischen Fußball verloren
(DECOW2012-00: 35135187)

(Fenerbahce Istanbul has lost the top position in Turkish soccer)

- (53) die Konkurrenz orientiert sich immer an den Leistungen des **Spitzenreiters** und jagt ihn (DECOW2012-00: 37288405)

(the competition is always geared to the performance of the leader)

Like *top-*, *Spitzen-* can also take the meaning ‘maximal’ in combination with measurable entities:

- (54) Böen mit **Spitzengeschwindigkeiten** von 120 Stundenkilometer
(DECOW2012-00: 39792101)

(gusts of wind with top/maximum speeds of 120 km/h)

Other examples of this type are *Spitzenwert* ‘top/maximum value’ or *Spitzensteuersatz* ‘top/highest tax rate’.

Based on these meanings, we also find *Spitzen-* being used with an intensifying evaluative meaning ‘excellent, great, super’. The meaning differentiations are, however, not always obvious nor clear-cut; there is an overlap from ‘highest, best’ to the evaluative meaning and many compounds can be used for both (like *Spitzenteam* ‘top team’ or *Spitzenspieler* ‘top player’). Here are some examples of the evaluative/intensifying use of *Spitzen-*:

(55) a. Der Kerl ist klasse, ein **Spitzenlehrer** und eine absolute Autorität.

(DECOW2012-00: 24098053)

(This guy is great, a top teacher and an absolute authority)

b. Stallone und Statham sind ein **Spitzenteam** und Ludgren hat die beste Szene des Films (DECOW2012-00: 31038309)

(Stallone und Statham are an outstanding team and Ludgren has the best scene of the movie)

c. Für mich ganz klar ein **Spitzenkauf** (DECOW2012-00: 23099755)

(For me quite clearly an excellent bargain)

d. Spider-Man – The Icon 10/10 – ein **Spitzenbuch** über den Mythos Spider-Man mit tollem Bildmaterial. Top! (DECOW2012-00: 31738197)

(Spider-Man – The Icon 10/10 – an excellent book on the myth Spider-Man with great graphical material. Top!)

It is this meaning of *Spitzen-* that can also be found in the adjective *spitze* and the obvious question is how these usages are related.

The adjective might be the result of a reanalysis of the the noun *Spitze*, which has been suggested in the literature. As shown in Section 2.1, Pittner & Berman (2006) and Berman (2009) see the predicative use of this noun as the source context for the conversion into an adjective. The bare noun can be used to express the evaluative meaning:

(56) a. Trotz allem die Bilder sind ja wieder **Spitze**. (DECOW2012-00: 10909261)

(Despite everything, the images are top again.)

b. Das Wochenende war einfach **Spitze** (DECOW2012-00: 15677211)

(The weekend has been just fantastic!)

The noun can also be modified by an adjective, typically *absolut* or *einsam*, in order to strengthen the positive evaluation:

(57) a. Meine verstorbene Schwiegermutter war da **einsame Spitze**. (DECOW2012-00: 8807063)

(My late mother-in-law was really top in this respect.)

- b. die Modelle sind **absolute Spitze** und handwerklich hervorragend gestaltet
(DECOW2012-00: 20686216)
(the models are absolute top and technically outstanding designed)

There seems however to be a lot of uncertainty about the categorial status of *Spitze*, which can be illustrated by examples in which the noun loses its capital letter (58a), sometimes even in contexts where it is accompanied by an inflected adjective (58b).

- (58) a. Was das Management von GS zur Zeit macht ist einfach **spitze**. (DECOW2012-00: 13654612)
(What the GS management does at the moment is just great.)
b. und auch der Teil war wieder **einsame spitze**! (DECOW2012-00: 26139261)
(and that part was really top again)

Clear-cut adjectival uses can be found in contexts where the adjective is modified by an adverb and used in coordination with another adjective:

- (59) a. Ich finde den **absolut spitze** und unterhaltsam (DECOW2012-00: 26576434)
(I find him absolutely fantastic and entertaining)
b. Wildgruber ist **preislich spitze** und zuverlässig (DECOW2012-00: 9850733)
(Wildgruber is top with regard to price and reliable)

Attributive use of the adjective, however, is hardly observed. This usage is attested (see above in (50)) but very rare. In our sample, we found this example:

(60) Super Seiten und echt **spitze** Ideen. (DECOW2012-00: 10957339)

(Great pages and really top ideas)

The overwhelming majority of adjectival *spitze*, thus, is found in the predicative position. This is a strong argument in favor of the conversion analysis: the adjectival use has emerged in the predicative position out of the noun *Spitze*.

This does, however, not mean that debonding does not play a role at all. We do find examples of compounds with *Spitzen-*, written in two words, which might be seen as an indication that the status of *Spitzen-* is not always obvious to the writers. The word is also found without the capital letter, which might be seen as a further indication that it is sometimes interpreted as an adjective.

(61) a. He das ist eine **spitzen** Seite, habe viel gefunden mit dem ich was anfangen kann (DECOW2012-00: 9507422)

(Hey, that is a top page, found a lot of useful things)

b. Ich steh auf Coop Taktik Shooter am besten mit **spitzen** Story. (DECOW2012-00: 19112457)

(I am into Coop Taktik Shooter, best with top story.)

If we do not want to explain such examples away as spelling variants or errors, this use of *spitzen* can only be explained by debonding: the first element of the compound gets reinterpreted as an adjective. It is, however, defective in that it does not show inflection and, in addition, it never occurs in predicative position; it is bound to the attributive position next to the noun it modifies. Moreover, it has the same evaluative meaning as *Spitzen-* in the compound. The reinterpretation might be eased by the existence of the adjective *spitze*, with which it shares the evaluative semantics. One might even see it as an attributively used variant of this adjective.

We can conclude that German has developed an evaluative adjective *spitze* through ‘conversion’, as suggested in the literature. This adjective is perfectly usable in the predicative position but its usage as an attributive adjective is problematic. This leaves room for the debonding of *spitzen*, an alternative pathway that is not taken into account in the literature on this kind of evaluative morphemes. Both variants are, however, restricted to highly informal use of German. The development of an attributive adjective *spitze(n)* is complicated by the confusion that may be caused by the inflected forms of the adjective *spitz* ‘sharp’. The further development of *spitze* into an ‘ordinary’, inflected adjective is blocked by the inflected forms of this adjective (*ein spitze(n) Bleistift* would be a ‘fantastic pencil’, but the inflected form *ein spitzer Bleistift* can only be used for a ‘sharpened pencil’). This might be one of the factors responsible

for the variation and the difficulties we see with respect to the development of attributive *spitze*.

5. Conclusion

The central aim of this study was to account for the emergence of new Dutch and German evaluative adjectives with a nominal origin. Category change from noun to adjective is a marginal phenomenon in both Germanic languages; the fact that is observed more frequently in English indicates that the complexity of the language-specific inflectional system has a crucial impact on this type of category change.

Still the data in this study show that certain Dutch and German nouns may be reanalyzed as evaluative adjectives, in spite of the morphological constraints, and that these forms are commonly used in informal language use, as attested in web blogs and forums, to express a high degree of intensification.

In order to account for these data, we have investigated the possible impact of two hypotheses found in the literature. Whereas the debonding hypothesis implies that compound members may be reinterpreted as attributive adjectives and may undergo a further process of flexibilization or context expansion, the conversion hypothesis suggests the inverse pathway: the noun is reanalyzed as an adjective in the predicative position and the adjectival usage may then spread to new syntactic and morphological contexts.

As a case study we have analyzed the bound and free usages of Dutch *top* and compared them with German *top* and *spitze*. The three forms synchronically occur as

evaluative nouns, adjectives, and compound members, and therefore serve as an ideal case study to examine the validity of both hypotheses.

As for Dutch *top*, we have observed that different processes closely interact with each other. Conversion is the most likely account for the predicative (always intensifying) usages, but does not allow us to explain the important proportion of attributive cases with *top* meaning “belonging to the best class”. These are clearly related to the compounds in which *top-* almost exclusively expresses this metaphorical meaning and hence suggest that debonding plays a role too. We have also observed that some free usages may just be accounted for as spelling variants of the compounds written in one word (for instance in the case of English loan compounds), but attributive cases of *top* with scope over a phrase should definitely be accounted for by debonding. The comparison of the semantics of the bound and free morphemes and of the constructions in which they occur allow us to state that adjectival *top* has at least two source constructions: the noun used with an evaluative meaning in the predicative position and the left-hand compound member.

The data observed for German *top* point into the direction of the following debonding cline: *Topzustand* (‘top condition’) > *Top-Zustand* > *Top Zustand* > *top Zustand* > *Zustand ist top*. In German, compounds with *top-* are a more plausible source of adjectival *top* than the corresponding noun, since evaluative *top* entered German mainly through compounds borrowed from English and since the noun *Top* is not entrenched in German. Therefore the conversion pathway seems to be less likely, as also concluded by Battfeld & Rawoens (2014).

In the case of German *spitze*, however, the ‘dual route’ option should again be taken into account, especially to explain the wide range of formal variants (*S/spitze* vs. *S/spitzen*). While evaluative *spitze* can be explained by conversion (reanalysis of the established noun *Spitze*), the use of free *spitzen* is inevitably the result of debonding (from the allomorphic variant in compounds with *Spitzen-*). Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that the two forms have influenced each other. The use in attributive position, in particular, is most probably the result of mutual influence. The use of evaluative / intensifying *spitze* as an attributive adjective can be related to the corresponding predicative adjective, via context expansion, but may also be linked to the nominal compounds with the semantically equivalent noun *Spitze(n)* as their first element. At the same time we see – most probably under the influence of predicative *spitze* – a debonding tendency for these compound members: *Spitzen* gets used as if it were an adjective, while surprisingly preserving its linking element. Expansion of debonded *spitzen* to the predicative position is however not observed. The adjectival status of *spitzen*, therefore, remains somewhat dubious; the formal variation found in the attributive position (e.g., *Spitzenspiel* ‘top game’, *Spitzen Spiel*, *spitzen Spiel*) is symptomatic of the uncertainty of language users with respect to the status of the first element.

To conclude, our findings support the idea that language change does not always follow linear pathways from one source construction to another target construction. In the present case study, it has been shown that multiple source constructions should be taken into account (see De Smet, Ghesquière & Van de Velde 2013), or pursuing the constructional perspective, that newly created constructions may inherit properties from

multiple parent constructions, via so-called “multiple inheritance” (Trousdale 2013; Trousdale & Norde 2013).

However, it has also been demonstrated that the impact of the different source constructions may still be language-specific and even construction-specific to a high degree. In general terms, it has been shown that the evaluative adjectives Dutch *top* and German *spitze* clearly inherit properties from two source constructions, the corresponding compound member (via debonding) and the predicatively used nouns (via conversion), but that the impact of the conversion pathway is less relevant in the case of German *top*. Even if the complex inflectional system of German attributively used adjectives strongly counteracts with the debonding process, the latter is the most plausible account for the emergence of the adjectival usages of German *top*.

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