

Derivational zero affixes worldwide

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Abstract

While a reasonable case for inflectional zero affixes can be made, derivational zero affixes have been underexplored partly due to the difficulty of proving their existence empirically. Using a semantic definition of derivational affixes, I show that derivational zero affixes occupy a niche in the affix inventory of languages spoken worldwide. In a sample of 120 representative languages, derivational zero affixes are attested in only six languages (5%). All of these zero affixes modify categorial or subcategorial information of their host. The identification of zero affixes is complicated by a proliferation of pseudo-zeroes which I also account for in this paper such as (sub)categorial conversion rules, ‘disfixes’, and ‘defective zero affixes’ that stand in complementary or identical distribution with overt affixes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Not all linguists agree on the existence of zero morphemes but take them as metalinguistic constructs of descriptive analysis (Anderson 1992: 86). Most scholars (Bybee 2010: 177; García and van Putte, 1989), however, accept zero morphemes as real entities in the mind of speakers, especially if they are affixes in inflectional paradigms. Derivational zero affixes have attracted much less attention due to the difficulty of delineating their concept and proving their existence empirically in languages of the world.

Part of the problem is the lack of a commonly agreed definition of inflectional vs derivational affixes. Most typologists only offer diagnostic features to make a distinction between both notions but do not provide actual definitions to begin with. Aronoff and Fudeman (2005: 162), for example, put forward the following criteria: (I) Inflection does not change the core lexical meaning and does not change the lexical category of the word to which it applies; derivation does the former and may do the latter. (II) Inflection is the realization of morphosyntactic features, i.e. those that are relevant to the syntax, such as case and number; derivation is not. (III) Inflectional morphology is more productive than derivational morphology. (IV) Derivational morphology tends to occur closer to the root or stem than inflectional morphology. (V) Derived lexemes are more likely to be stored in the lexicon than inflected forms are. Haspelmath (2002:71) and Whaley (1997:121) propose similar lists. As these features are symptoms of inflectional/derivational affixes but do not capture

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