

**Affix reanalysis and semantic enrichment:
The case of the verbal suffixes -el(e)n and -er(e)n in German, Dutch, and English**

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The verbal suffixes *-el(e)n* and *-er(e)n* and their cognates represent a common feature of Germanic languages including German, Dutch, and English (GER *tröpfeln*, DUT *druppelen*, ENG *trickle*; GER *knattern*, DUT *knetteren*, ENG *clatter*). Being formally identical to diminutives, verbs derived with the suffix *-el(e)n* have also been referred to as “verbal diminutives”. Semantically, the word formation products may display a diminutive or related meaning (e.g. attenuation, pejoration, cf. Jurafsky 1996, Weidhaas & Schmid 2015). However, there are many instances where diminutive semantics are absent and iterative meaning is predominant instead (GER *stammeln*, DUT *stamelen*, ENG *stumble*). How the derivational affix *-el(e)n* acquired an iterative meaning has remained unclear. The same holds true for iterative semantics of verbs ending in *-er(e)n*, mainly onomatopoeic words denoting sounds, particularly sounds of animals (GER *schnattern*, *zwitschern*, DUT *snateren*, *kwetteren*, ENG *chatter*, *twitter*). Sharing iterative semantics, both suffixes are partly competing (GER *schlittern*, Alemannic *schlitteln* ‘to slither’; DUT *gaggelen*, *gakkeren* ‘to cackle’).

Whereas recent schema-based approaches (Weidhaas & Schmid 2015, Audring et al. 2017) have focused on modern languages, the present account aims at shedding new light on the rise of iterative semantics from a diachronic perspective. It is argued that, primarily, the suffixes *-el(e)n*, *-er(e)n* go back to verbs derived from *nomina instrumenti* ending in *-el*, *-er* (GER *Meißel*, *Stampfer*, ENG *chisel*, *stamper*, DUT *beitel*, *stamper*). After reanalysis (*-el+en* → *-elen*; *-er+en* → *-eren*) the word formation patterns became productive and gave rise to verb doublets (MLG *stōten* – *stotteren*) and onomatopoeic words (MLG *snapperen* ‘chatter’), see (1)-(2):

- (1) MHG *meizel* ‘chisel’ – *meizel-en* → *meiz-elen* ‘to chisel’
(2) MLG *slenker* ‘sling’ – *slenker-en* → *slenk-eren* ‘to dangle’
↓
MHG *snitzen* ‘to carve’ – *snitz-elen* ‘to cut into pieces’
MLG *stōten* ‘to exhale’ – *stot(t)eren* ‘to stammer’

Building on data drawn from historical dictionaries, it is argued that the semantics of the word formation patterns result from “affix telescoping”, i.e. formal and functional fusion of two derivational affixes (cf. Haspelmath 1995). In the cases in point, the semantics of *-el(e)n/-er(e)n*-derivatives go back to *-el/-er* of *nomina instrumenti* with inherent iterative meaning. Other than *l*-diminutives, *nomina instrumenti* ending in *-el*, *-er* represent a common feature of the Germanic languages. Other sources, in particular diminutives and adjectival/comparative *-er* (DUT *beteren*, GER *bessern* ENG *to better*), are also discussed on the basis of historical data. The paper considers all three languages, however, the main focus is put on German and Dutch.

References

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