Semantic compatibility in Old English suffixation

While previous studies in the derivational morphology of Old English are concerned with the replacement of variable with invariable base morphology (Kastovsky 2006) and the rise of analytic tendencies (Haselow 2011), thus dealing with the formal aspects of word-formation, this paper focuses on the semantics of this phenomenon and the limits of lexical recursivity. More specifically, the aim of this research is to analyze the patterns of semantic compatibility that arise in recursive suffixation, that is, in the suffixation of already suffixed nouns and adjectives (cf. van der Hulst ed. 2010). The data, including 3,701 suffixed nouns and 2,305 adjectives (types), have been retrieved from the lexical database of Old English Nerthus, which is based on the dictionaries by Bosworth-Toller, Clark Hall and Sweet. The methodology comprises two steps. Firstly, around 90 combinations of affixes are identified in the recursive suffixation of nouns and 40 in adjectives. The partial conclusion drawn after the first step of analysis is that most combinations of suffixes represent fully motivated derivation in which the formal contrast between the base and the derivative is matched by a contrast of meaning, as in ofermōd ‘pride’ > ofermōdig ‘arrogant’ > ofermōdnes ‘arrogance’. The second step of analysis is devoted to mismatches form-meaning, which can be broken down into those due to competition, including the competition of the bases of derivation, as is the case with beswīcung (<beswīcan)/beswīcenes (<beswīcen) ‘deception’, and the competition of suffixes, as in the pair healding/healdnes ‘keeping’; and those originating in the attachment of semantically redundant affixes or empty morphs (Lieber 2004), as in smēadancol/smēadancolic ‘subtle’. The following conclusions are reached. In the first place, empty morphs take part in the formation of adjectives exclusively, while there is competition in the suffixation of nouns and adjectives. Secondly, the only suffix that functions as an empty morph is -lic, which is attached after transpositional suffixes like -isc, but also after more contentful ones like -feald. Overall, the main patterns of semantic compatibility found in recursive suffixation comprise more and less meaningful affixes, that is to say contentful suffix + transpositional suffix, which results in pairs like lustbērlic/lustsumlic ‘pleasant’, and transpositional suffix + empty morph, as in heofon ‘heaven’ > heofonisec ‘heavenly’ > heofoniselic ‘heavenly’.

References

Diccionaries and databases