Complexity enhancement in German nominal compounding

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Morpho-theoretically, diachronical discontinuities as well as synchronical restrictions can serve as important evidence for a possible (ongoing) language change. Against this backdrop, the talk aims to investigate the question of a potential complexity enhancement in the diachronic development of nominal compounding, especially with an eye on the first constituent (such as book shelf).

Looking at the history of German and related languages, it shows up that diachronic drifts have taken place here: Some morphological restrictions have been omitted, while others have been established. This is linked to word classes and markedness. For instance, before Middle High German (MHG), ‘simple’ V+N-compounds (such as rîb-îsen ‘grater’ > rîben ‘to rasp’, îsen ‘iron’ or NHG Schwimm-bad ‘swimming pool’) cannot be attested due to an earlier restriction in favor of N+N-compounding in (pre-)Old High German (OHG) and other Germanic languages. At the same time, also some deverbal nominalizations (e.g. derived with -ung, -nis) cannot be attested as first constituents.

In contrast, consider present day German (PDG) compounds with complex first constituents (1–2):

(1)  Fallschirm-spring-benutzung-s-anweisung ‘instruction of parachute usage’

(2)  Fahrgast-datenbank-reservierung-s-abfrage ‘request of passenger’s reservation database’

As seen by the examples, one could speak of a diachronic complexification taking place at the first constituent with an omission of ‘simple’, but strict OHG N+N-compounding in favor of other word classes (especially verbs) and, additionally, an integration of productively derived nouns.

In PDG, some different restrictions can be observed. For instance, nominalized infinitives cannot appear as first constituents (cf. *Schwimmen(s)bad, *Rauchen(s)verbot, *Helfen(s)angebot). The same holds for certain deverbal nominalizations such as -erei-nouns (such as Husterei ‘coughing’, cf. ?Husterei-anfall ‘cough attack’). Furthermore, the ‘quirky’ phenomenon of interfixation can be attested in PDG (such as Bild-er-geschichte/Bild-geschichte ‘picture story’), especially together with nominalizations (see 1–2), but its distributional properties seem to be quite arbitrary (cf. Stellung-s-wechsel vs. Stellung-nahme). Against this backdrop, this raises the question as to how synchrony and diachrony can be reconciled, and the more, how the concept of complexity enhancement can be asserted.

For this purpose, the talk combines synchronic and diachronic research in the framework of historical countability research by taking a closer look at language-specific morphosyntactic developments of the first constituent, morphological productivity, the morphological status of involved word classes (such as Schlaf-N??/V??-zimmer) and by pointing to familiar results from language typology, psycholinguistics, and child language.