NOMINALIZATION PATTERNS IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN: A CONTRASTIVE STUDY

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It has often been noted that English nominalizations in -ing, such as (1), differ substantially from constructions with cognate suffixes in other Germanic languages, e.g. German nominalizations in -ung, exemplified in (2) (cf. e.g. Demske 1999).

(1) Labour will ban the killing of foxes. (BNC)
(2) Der Mensch in der Rüstung will fechten. (DWDS) ‘The person in the armor wants to fence’

However, to our knowledge, no systematic corpus-based study comparing these two patterns has been conducted so far. In this paper, we argue that collostructional methods provide a highly insightful method for studying these morphological patterns and comparing them with regard to their synchronic function and their diachronic development.

Drawing on several diachronic corpora – the Penn-Helsinki corpora for English and the GermanC corpus as well as the German Text Archive for German – we show that both patterns become increasingly “nominal”. While their word-formation products capture the event-like semantics of their base verbs quite faithfully in the initial stages of their development, ung- and ing-nouns denoting more concrete entities such as locations and objects (see example (2) above) become more and more prevalent. The results of a diachronic distinctive collexeme analysis (Hilpert 2006) provide a first clue for this development (see Fonteyn & Hartmann 2016). A more fine-grained semantic analysis of the individual types, tokens, and hapax legomena confirms the hypothesis that more concrete readings become more frequent over time. In addition, morphological cross-tabulation analysis (Hartmann 2014), which assesses how strongly individual bases are attracted to or repelled by specific word-formation patterns, can be used to track the diachronic changes undergone by the word-formation constructions.

Importantly, the constructionist perspective adopted here sheds new light on the diachronic development of both patterns. In earlier studies, it has been claimed that English ing-nominals, unlike German ung-nominals, remain fairly verb-like in their semantics (see e.g. Demske 2002). However, we argue that this is only true if one takes a morpheme-based view on the data, which lumps together all nominalization patterns that involve the ing-suffix. However, if one takes a constructionist schema-based perspective, in which nominal ing-forms (e.g. The killing of civilians is a crime) are distinguished from ing-nominals with clause-like internal syntax (i.e. so-called verbal gerunds, e.g. Killing civilians is a crime) it becomes clear that the development of English ing-nominals bears striking similarities to the evolution of German ung-nominals as sketched by Demske (2000) and Hartmann (2016). This shows that applying collostructional methods to comparative data can help reveal previously undetected cross-linguistic similarities in language change.

References


