

Derivational zero affixes

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Since the early days of Sanskrit grammars, zero affixes, i.e., phonologically null morphology with syntactic and semantic content, have proved instrumental in describing language and have consistently been employed in this sense in modern structuralist linguistics and their later adherent theories (see Bergenholz & Mugdan 2000, and Dahl & Fábregas 2018 for overviews).

The empirical challenge. If the absence of a *signifiant* challenges the traditional conception of the Saussurean sign, the postulation of zero morphemes facilitates a way to maintain the one-to-one-mapping between form and meaning in puzzling cases in which a change in meaning is not accompanied by a visible form. These phenomena are widespread across languages and they can be found in both inflection and derivation. Zero affixes have been postulated for inflectional paradigms (English singular *sheep* – plural *sheep-Ø*; *I walk-Ø* – *she walk-s*), category change morphology (*a table* > *to table-Ø*; *to walk* > *a walk-Ø*; *clean* > *to clean-Ø*), labile verb alternations (inchoative – causative verb forms: *The vase broke* – *John broke the vase*), and other cross-linguistic phenomena. In some languages, like Italian or German, zero affixation seems more limited in scope for reasons that may relate to the morphological typology of the language, language-specific morphophonological constraints and the status of the base (root vs. word), especially for conversion phenomena (Don 2005, Valera 2015). Experimental support for zero affixes has been provided via psycholinguistic studies in language acquisition, as summarized in Dahl & Fábregas (2018), and, at least for conversion from verb to noun in English, also in computational studies such as Kisselew et al. (2016).

The theoretical debate. While inflectional zero affixes seem to be widely accepted by various theoretical frameworks, there is an unsettled debate concerning the legitimacy of derivational zero forms (e.g., Myers 1984, Pesetsky 1995, Plag 1999, Lieber 1992, Lieber 2004, Borer 2013). In general, positing a contentful zero morpheme confronts us with a theoretical quandary in differentiating it from the lack of a morpheme altogether: how do we know where there is a zero affix and where there is nothing? A reasonable condition for positing a zero affix is the existence of an overt affix with a similar function (i.e., its ‘overt analogue’, Sanders 1988). In inflectional paradigms one easily finds such evidence (cf. *I walk-Ø* – *she walk-s*), but for derivation it is not always straightforward. For conversion from verbs to nouns in English, for instance, we find pairs such as *to climb* > *the climb-Ø* / *the climb-ing*, but it is debatable whether this zero affix has a coherent enough meaning to be retrieved from all such deverbal nouns: the noun *climb-Ø* denotes an event or a path, *break-Ø* may describe an event, a state or a result entity, and *cook-Ø*

unambiguously denotes an agent. Therefore, \emptyset emerges here as a nominalizer suffix with very vague meaning. Following a strong interpretation of the ‘overt analogue criterion’ (Sanders 1988), it has been argued that a zero suffix would be semantically too diverse to form a lexical entry by comparison to overt suffixes in English (Plag 1999, Lieber 2004). Another reservation about allowing zero affixes in morphological theory comes from the undesired effect of zero proliferation and the indeterminability of their ordering: we may need to distinguish endlessly many zero suffixes and prefixes without being able to establish sound criteria for their existence or interaction with each other (Anderson 1992, Bergenholz & Mugdan 2000, and Dahl & Fábregas 2018).

Alternative explanations have been put forward to account for these phenomena, among which ‘relisting’ and underspecification are two prominent hypotheses for conversion. Rather than an actual grammatical phenomenon, relisting is a form of coinage triggered by pragmatic needs, where an entry gets listed again in the lexicon with new category and associated meaning (Lieber 1981, 1992, 2004). In underspecification theories, the lexical category of words in conversion pairs gets specified only in a syntactic context (Farrell 2001). However, both relisting and underspecification fail to capture relevant morphosyntactic and phonological constraints which would be explained under a zero derivational approach (Don 1993, 2005, and Darby 2015). Furthermore, and more importantly, the issues of meaning indeterminacy, zero proliferation and ordering do not only concern derivationally linked words; inflectional zero also appears with many more facets than overt inflectional affixes do. Whether we posit several such zero affixes with each individual meaning or a heavily underspecified one, why would this be more legitimate in inflection than in derivation?

In a nutshell, the literature has highlighted various theoretical and empirical advantages and disadvantages in the use of derivational zero affixes. These heavily depend on the foundational principles of each framework and the methodology it employs, beyond the need of a faithful empirical description. For separationist theories of morphology, which keep morphophonology apart from morphosyntax and interpretation (e.g., Distributed Morphology, Lexeme-Morpheme Base Morphology), zero is just a possible spell-out like any other affix. For lexeme/word-based theories of morphology, which concentrate on words as wholes and their paradigmatic relations, zero affixes are nonexistent (e.g., Construction Morphology, Paradigm Function Morphology).

Research questions. In this workshop we aim to gather contributions that address derivational zero affixes from the perspective of the following questions:

1. What are the empirical and theoretical advantages and disadvantages of positing derivational zero affixes? How do theories successfully implement them in their systems? Why do other theories find derivational zero undesirable?
2. How do derivational zero affixes differ from the inflectional ones? Are they empirically and/or theoretically less motivated/more difficult to implement than the latter and why?

3. How do derivational zero affixes resemble or differ from overt affixes (their ‘overt analogues’)?
4. How do different theories of morphology deal with empirical phenomena for which it would be tempting to posit a derivational zero affix?
5. To what extent can language-specific properties and typological generalizations explain availability or unavailability of zero affixation across languages? What does the crosslinguistic study of conversion phenomena bring to our understanding of zero derivation, its empirical adequacy and theoretical status?

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