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Rules or schemas in derivation

The article discusses the possible ways of description of some derivational suffixes and their word formation patterns in Hungarian. The basis of the discussion is an empirical research carried out on the material of the Hungarian National Corpus. The focus of the article is on some cases of Hungarian noun formation (cf. Keszler 2000, Kiefer–Ladányi 2000, Ladányi 2007, 2008).

One of the goals of the article is to explore the advantages/disadvantages and the effectiveness of the two characteristic ways of describing morphological (and among them derivational) phenomena: rules (cf. Plag 1999, Bauer 2001) and schemas (cf. Bybee 2006, 2007). In accordance with a rule-based morphological theory, for a pattern to be described by a (productive) rule it is necessary to be regular (and productive). In our investigation, however, there are some new derivational patterns that are problematic from the point of view of their productivity and, in some cases, even of their regularity. In these cases rules cannot (have) be(en) established (yet). The patterns concerned, however, are regular to some extent and their partial regularity can be described by stronger or weaker schemas. This means that, in the case of derivational patterns being on their way to become regular and productive, schema-based solutions are more effective.

Another goal of the article is to discuss the notion of (derivational) productivity in rule-based vs. schema-based morphology. While in a rule-based morphological theory the notion of productivity can be interpreted as system level potentiality of applying a rule, in a schema-based morphology the same notion can be interpreted as probability of applying a stronger or weaker schema in an analogical way – i.e. a theory based on analogy rather than on rules can treat regular and less regular mechanisms of word formation in a unified manner.

The two different notions of (derivational) productivity has a consequence in the relation to type and token frequency, as well. Productivity as system level potentiality does not depend on type or token frequency; on the contrary, they are derived from it (cf. Dressler–Ladányi 2000). Productivity as probability, however, is based on both type and token frequency (cf. Baayen, 1992, 1994). On the basis of the empirical material, the third goal of the article is to explore the role of frequency (and, in a sense, the role of language use) in the notion of (derivational) productivity.

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