A Comparative Study on English and German Word-formation

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Abstract

Both English and German are West Germanic language that belongs to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family, which consequently result in the high similarity in their vocabulary. Compounding, affixation, conversion and abbreviation are the four major word-formation methods. Knowing their word-formation similarities and differences can help us better mastering the words of both English and German.

Keywords

Word-formation methods, comparative study, English, German.

1. Introduction

Both English and German are West Germanic language which belongs to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family, the largest language family in the world[1]. They share the same origin, languages of the Germanic tribes from the northwestern Europe. Although after years of separation and development, especially after the language reform of the 16th century, great changes have taken place in English and German, their main vocabulary, the basic unit of the two languages, are still closely connected.

Nowadays, as the wheels of history progress ahead, both English and German vocabulary are increasing explosively, while most of them are merely created through word-formation methods on the basis of the already existing words which are quite limited. According to some German linguists, the basic German vocabulary is about 5000 by the 17th and 18th century. So, if one can have a working knowledge of word-formation methods, then he can master the myriads of vocabulary much more easily.

According to the morphological classifications, both English and German belong to the inflectional language. And most of English and German new words are created through four major word-formation methods[2]: compounding, affixation, conversion and abbreviation. But there still exist some slight differences.

2. The Comparison of Compounding

Compounding boasts a very important role in English and German word-formation. It is a process of word-formation by which two independent words are put together to make one word. The word formed in this way is called compound. It can be formed by nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns and prepositions, etc. Perhaps because of the language economy principle, this kind of method is actively used in both English and German for it can avoid a lot of syntactical redundancies.

English and German compounds are almost the same in many ways. According to the part of speech of the compound, compound can be divided into many kinds: compound nouns, compound adjectives, compound adverbs, compound verbs, etc. Syntactically, the part of speech of the compound is generally determined by the part of speech of the second element[3]. Let's look at some examples.

Table 1: English Compound

Part of speech	Compound methods	Examples
Noun	Noun + Noun	note+book=notebook
	Adjective + Noun	green+house=greenhouse
	Verb(Gerund) + Noun	swimming+pool=swimmingpool
Verb	Noun + Verb	tooth+ache=toothache
	Adverb + Verb	out+break=outbreak
Adjective	Adjective + Adjective	dark+blue=darkblue
	Noun + Adjective	tax+free=taxfree
	Adjective + Participle	good+looking=goodlooking

Table 2: German Compound

Part of speech	Compound methods	Examples
Noun	Noun + Noun	Personal+Amt=Personalamt
	Adjective + Noun	hoch+Schule=Hochschule
	Verb + Noun	schreib+Tisch=Schreibetisch
Adjective	Adjective + Adjective	dunkel +blau=dunkelblau
	Noun + Adjective	Blitz+schnell=blitzschnell
	Verb + Adjective	Sehen +wert=sehenwert
Verb	Adjective/Adverb + Verb	fern+sehen=fernsehen
	Noun + Verb	Rad+fahren=Radfahren

Except for these compound methods that are similar with English word-formation, there are other compound methods in German. For example:" Numeral + Noun, Adverb + Noun, Preposition + Noun, etc."

We should also pay attention to the way of writing compound in both languages.

Similarities:

1.The compound can be written solid, such as watermelon and Wassermelone.

2. Both languages have some letters to connect the two independent words. In English there are –s-, -o-, -i-, -a-; in German there are –s-, -en-, -e-,-o-, -i-, etc.

Differences:

1. In English, a hyphen is often used to connect the two parts, while in German, it is rarely used.

2. In English, compound can be written open, while in German it can't. For example we can write "atom bomb" in English but it won't be allowed in German. Its right form should be "Atombomb".

3. The Comparison of Affixation

Affixation can be said to be the most productive word-formation method in both English and German. It is generally defined as the formation of words by adding word-forming or derivational affixes to bases. This process is also known as derivation, by which new words are derived from old or base forms. Words formed in this way are called derivatives. According to the position which affixes occupy in words, affixation mainly falls into two subclasses, namely prefixation and suffixation[4].

3.1. Prefixation

Prefixation is the formation of new words by adding prefixes to bases. In English, prefixes mostly do not change part of speech but only modify words' meaning. Therefore, the classification of English prefixes is mostly based on their meaning, which can be classified as follows:

(1) Negative prefixes: a-, dis-, in-(il-,ir-,im-), non-, un;

(2) Reversative prefixes: de-, dis-, un-;

(3) Pejorative prefixes: mal-, mis-, pseudo-;

(4) Prefixes pf degree or size: macro-, micro, under-, over-, hyper-, ultra-, extra-, arch-, super-, sub-, out-, sur-, mini-, co-;

(5) Prefixes of orientation and attitude: anti-, contra-, counter-, pro-;

(6) Locative prefixes: extra-, fore-, inter-, intra-, tele-, trans-;

(7) Prefixes of time and order: ex-, post-, pre-, re-;

(8) Number prefixes: uni-(mono-), bi-, tri-, semi-(hemi-), multi-(poly-);

(9) Miscellaneous prefixes: auto-, neo-, pan-, vice-, proto;

(10) Conversion prefixes: a-, be-, en-(em-),

According to statistics, there are more than 50 English prefixes that are similar to German prefixes, such as anti-/anti-, ko-/co-, konter/counter, miss-/mis-, etc. But German verbal prefixes is more complicated than English. It can be divided into detachable prefixes, undetachable prefixes and both detachable and undetachable prefixes.

3.2. Suffixation

Suffixation is the formation of new words by adding suffixes to bases. Different from prefixation, suffixation mainly changes the original word's part of speech, while the original meaning only change slightly. According to this, we can divide English suffixation into noun suffixes, adverb suffixes, adjective suffixes and verb suffixes. For example, in German, words end with -ant, -er, -eur, -ist, -or, etc. are masculine nouns; words end with –keit, -heit, -in, etc. are feminine nouns; words end with –chen, -lein, -tum, etc. are neuter nouns.

4. The Comparison of Conversion

Conversion is a method of turning words of one part of speech to those of a different part of speech. This method usually takes place in simple words, because derivatives have suffixes which explicitly suggest their parts of speech. Other parts of speech convert into verb or noun appears the most in English, while in German other parts of speech convert into noun is of the highest frequency.

4.1. Other Parts of Speech Converted into Verb

English nouns and adjectives often converted into verbs without changing its form, for example, we can convert " love" to "to love", "narrow" to " to narrow", while we must add verb ending "–en" or "–n" when changing German nouns and adjectives into verbs, for example, we add "-en" on "Besuch" to build its verb form "besuchen" and add "-en" on "krank" to build "kranken".

4.2. Other Parts of Speech Converted into Nouns

In English almost all monomorphemic verbs can be used as nouns, which are semantically related to the original verbs in various ways, for example "doubt" suggests "a state of doubting". In German, many verbs can be converted into nouns. Here are the most important two methods:

(1) Infinitive can be directly converted into neuter noun, for example, "leben" can be converted into "das Leben";

(2) Verb stems can be converted into masculine nouns, for example, "schlagen" can be converted into "der Schlag".

Unlike verbs, not all adjectives can be fully converted into nouns. Some of them are completely converted which are called full conversion, such as "a native" "a white"; others that are partially converted are called partial conversion. They must be used together with definite articles such as "the poor" "the disabled". In German, after the adjectives are converted into nouns, they still change as adjectives, which to some extent resemble English partial conversion.

Except for verbs and adjectives, there are other parts of speech that can be converted into nouns, and most of them exist in fixed phrases, such as "ups and downs" "pros and cons" "vom Ich zum Wir".

4.3.   Other Parts of Speech Converted into Adjectives

The present and past participles of a number of English verbs have evolved into the present or past participle adjectives such as "astonished" "astonishing". The first and second participle of German also can be used as adjectives.

Both English and German nouns can be used as adjectives such as "sports meeting" and "Peters Vater".

5.   The Comparison of Abbreviation

Abbreviation is a shortened form of a written word or phrase used in place of the whole. Now days, with the development of society, languages are making rapid progress. For the consideration of language economy principle, mounts of abbreviations emerges, which we can fully felt through the news report. The most common ones are as follows.

1.   Initialisms

Words formed from the initial letters of words and produced as letters are called initialisms. For examples, VOA=Voice of America, die EU= die Europäische Union.

2. Acronyms

Words formed from the initial letters of words and produced as single words are called acronyms. For examples, OPEC=Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, die NATO= North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

3. Clipping

Clipping is the process by which parts of the word have been cut off. It may occur at the beginning of the word, for example, phone=telephone, Bus=Omnibus; it may occur at the end of the word, for example, memo=memorandum, Uni=Universität; it may also occur at the front and back of the word, for example, flu= influenza.

6.   Conclusion

Word-formation is a subject that worth deep exploring. From the above comparison we can see that comparing with the old English and old German, modern English is quite different from modern German. It doesn't have to consider too much about the complicated gender, number, case and person system, hence more flexible and more energetic word-formation ability. In the past, the words we learn are all well-established in the dictionary, but language is in a permanent state of renewal and change, new entries are constantly added for the need of expressing new concepts, products, technologies, etc. If we don't have a working knowledge of word-formation methods, we can barely understand the newly created words correctly. What's more, knowing the word-formation methods can also be of great importance in helping us to enlarge our vocabulary. But we should aware that word-formation rules are not fixed, there always being exceptions.

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