

10th Morphology Meeting (9th - 12th, May, 2002, Budapeste)

The importance of prefixes in the identification of postverbal nouns

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In Portuguese, besides suffixed deverbal nouns, there are deverbal nominal products with no derivational suffixes, which we will call ‘postverbal nouns’.

One of the problems concerned with postverbal nouns is that there are some difficulties in distinguishing them from nouns that function as base words to verbs constructed with no derivational suffixes. Table 1 summarises both constructions:

Portuguese verb and noun formations without derivational suffixation	
Verb > Noun	Noun > Verb
<i>engordar</i> ‘to fatten’ > <i>engorda</i> ‘fattening’	<i>vacina</i> ‘vaccine’ > <i>vacinar</i> ‘to vaccinate’
<i>abafar</i> ‘to suffocate’ > <i>abafo</i> ‘suffocation’	<i>rato</i> ‘mouse’ > <i>ratar</i> ‘to gnaw as a mouse’

Table 1

Those difficulties emerge from the symmetry in form between basic noun and its verbal product and between basic verb and its nominal product, since there are neither on the N > V pair nor on the V > N derivational affixes that have intervened in those constructions.

Applying different criteria based on morphophonological, semantic and syntactic structures, it is possible to establish which nouns are postverbal nouns and which are base nouns of verbal products (Rodrigues (2001)).

The criterion we intend to demonstrate here has to do with the presence of some prefixes in postverbal nouns. Taking into account that postverbal base verbs can be themselves constructed structures, we propose that it is possible to distinguish V > N from N > V formations, if the V/N items have one of a range of prefixes that only occur in one Word Formation Rule – the one that permits the construction of verbs and from which the construction of nouns is absent.

The following list (table 2) gives an idea about the prefixes that can be found in nouns that have a derivational relation with a verb. Notice that table 2 summarises prefixes that are present in a word, disregarding if they operate on the construction of it.

Prefixes	Nouns/Verbs
<i>a-</i>	<i>aninho/aninhar</i> ‘cosiness’/ ‘to nestle’
<i>ante-</i>	<i>antepaga/antepagar</i> ‘advance payment’/ ‘to pay in advance’
<i>con-</i>	<i>compartilha/compartilhar</i> ‘share’/ ‘to share’
<i>des-</i>	<i>descamisa/descamisar</i> ‘husk’/ ‘to husk’
<i>en-</i>	<i>encaixe/encaixar</i> ‘mortise’/ ‘to mortise’
<i>entre-</i>	<i>entreaajuda/entreaajudar</i> ‘mutual help’/ ‘to help each other’
<i>es-</i>	<i>esforço/esforçar</i> ‘effort’/ to strengthen’
<i>re-</i>	<i>recomeço/recomeçar</i> ‘new start’/ ‘to start again’
<i>sobre-</i>	<i>sobrevoo/sobrevoar</i> ‘flight over’/ ‘to overfly’
<i>trans-</i>	<i>transbordo/transbordar</i> ‘overflow’/ ‘to overflow’

Table 2

The next step is to insert those prefixes in the WFRs where they operate (Rio-Torto (1998)). If the prefix can only operate on a WFR that gives origin uniquely to verbs, then the noun is a postverbal noun. If the prefix can operate on isocategorical WFRs, the noun may or may not be a postverbal noun. Table 3 shows which prefixes act as operators on the construction of nouns and verbs:

Prefixes operating on Word Formation	Word Formation Rules Output	
	Nouns	Verbs
<i>a-</i>	–	<i>alojar</i> ‘to lodge’
<i>ante-</i>	<i>antemanhã</i> ‘dawn’	<i>antemostrar</i> ‘to show before’
<i>con-</i>	<i>concidadão</i> ‘fellow citizen’	<i>coobrigar</i> ‘to oblige jointly’
<i>des-</i>	<i>desonra</i> ‘dishonour’	<i>desobrigar</i> ‘to disoblige’
<i>en-</i>	–	<i>engarrafar</i> ‘to bottle’
<i>entre-</i>	<i>entressola</i> ‘insole’	<i>entressorir</i> ‘to half-smile’
<i>es-</i>	–	<i>esventrar</i> ‘to disembowel’
<i>re-</i>	<i>refilho</i> ‘second sprouting of some plants’	<i>retomar</i> ‘to retake’
<i>sobre</i>	<i>sobrecâmara</i> ‘attic’	<i>sobrevigiar</i> ‘to superintend’
<i>trans-</i>	<i>transnúpcias</i> ‘every nuptials after the first ones’	<i>transtornar</i> ‘to perturb’

Table 3

Considering the information shown on table 3, the prefixes that act on an isocategorial way, i.e. the ones that form verbs from verbs but also nouns from nouns, do not clarify if a noun that has a lexical relation with a verb is a product of that verb or if it was constructed by a prefix on a deverbal noun. On the contrary, only the prefixes that operate on a heterocategorial way (*a-*, *en-*, *es-*) allow us to identify nouns, where they are present, as postverbal products, since there is no nominal product constructed on a base noun by these prefixes.

The reasons why *a-*, *en-* and *es-*, contrarily to the majority of the prefixes, cannot operate on isocategorial WFRs and only act on verb formation seem to have a semantic foundation. Apparently, all the prefixes that occur on N > N formation have semantic values related to a non-causative view of things. On the contrary, the prefixes *a-*, *en-* and *es-* display a meaning of causativity. Causativity is related with the continuity of time. And this kind of continuity can only be expressed by verbs or deverbal products.

Concluding: in Portuguese, nouns that exhibit the prefixes *a-*, *en-* and *es-* can be stated as postverbal products, because these prefixes only operate in verb formation. These prefixes do not act on nominal formation apparently because they have a semantic charge of causativity which is inherently connected with verb category.

References:

- Rio-Torto (1998) – *Morfologia derivacional. Teoria e aplicação ao português*. Porto, Porto Editora.
- Rodrigues, Alexandra Soares (2001) – *A construção de postverbais em português*. Porto, Granito Editores e Livreiros.