

A corpus-based study of affixation tendencies in related academic disciplines

A work-in-progress report

Piotr Twardzisz

University of Warsaw

p.twardzisz@uw.edu.pl

This work-in-progress report presents the results of an ongoing project focusing on morphologically complex words in English as used in academic texts in the humanities and social sciences. Morphologically complex words are affixed (derived) words. Such lexical items still remain understudied in applied linguistics. Our research question is whether relatively similar academic disciplines attract their own specific affixes and derivations. Also, we enquire whether it is possible to establish a stable lexical “core” characteristic of the humanities and social sciences. In this, we seek both morphological individuation as well as stability in relatively homogenous texts.

Numerous analyses have shown that textual features such as grammatical constructions, lexical bundles (Hyland 2008: 7), or phraseology (Vincent 2013: 44), vary systematically across academic disciplines (Cunningham 2017: 72). Individual disciplines frequently develop their own patterns of discourse which tend to depart from those found in general English (Montero-Fleta 2011: 4). As for vocabulary in academic discourse, the existence of some lexical core, common to a wide range of disciplines, has also been questioned by some scholars. The behaviour of individual lexical items has been claimed to vary across disciplines as for their range, meanings, collocations they enter or frequencies that they show (Hyland & Tse 2007: 235).

Our preliminary research establishes a certain amount of stability across disciplines involving affixed words. It seems inevitable that certain cores of complex words are used by individual authors for all kinds of purposes in specialist writing across disciplines (cf. Brezina & Gablasova 2015: 17). We indicate candidate affixes which constitute the core of lexical complexity of academic texts in the humanities and social sciences. Some high-frequency, but also – unpredictably – some low-frequency, affixed words appear to be common to more varieties. We also identify affixation types which are characteristic of only certain disciplines within the humanities and social sciences.

The data are obtained from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). In COCA's academic genre (ACAD), there are ten sub-divisions. For the purpose of this study, we have selected three: history, education and geography/social sciences. Given numerous search substrings and three discipline-based sub-corpora, the analyses result in high numbers of discipline-based wordlists. Cutting-off points for high- and low-frequency items are established on the basis of the overall numbers of word types for each affix in each sub-corpus. The items retained after manual cleaning of the raw-data enter lists of morphologically complex word types for each discipline studied. Quantitative similarities and differences regarding individual affixed words in different lists are identified. Objective criteria are tested for recognizing certain word types as characteristic of the stable lexical core.

Our findings have the potential of informing both theoretical and applied morphology. The former receives systematic data and insights for measuring morphological productivity. The latter is informed about morphological (ir)regularities applicable to academic writing across disciplines.

References

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