Word-formation paradigms at work: on the complementarity between the semasiological and the onomasiological approach

Jan Radimský¹ and Petr Kos²

1. Department of Romance Studies, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Czech Republic
2. Department of English Studies, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Czech Republic

One of the main advantages of paradigmatic approaches to inflectional morphology is that they can successfully predict the form of cells in inflectional paradigms (cf. Paradigm Cell Filling Problem – Ackerman & Malouf, 2013). Bonami and Strnadová (2018) have shown that it is also possible to predict the content of cells in derivational paradigms. The problem is, however, that in derivational morphology it is not entirely clear what these abstract cells actually correspond to and how they are structured. The aim of the paper is to offer a solution to these questions which is based on a complementary application of recent proposals for a semasiological analysis of word-formation paradigms (Boyé, Hathout, & Roché, 2011; Boyé & Schalchli, 2016; Bauer, 2017; Bonami & Strnadová, 2018; Fradin, 2018, amongst others) with an onomasiological analysis of the coining of new naming units, an approach developed in works on word-formation following the tradition of the Prague School of Linguistics, which has had a great impact in Central and Eastern Europe (Dokulil, 1962, 1986; Štekauer, 1998).

The structuring of abstract cells in inflectional and word-formation paradigms is fundamentally different because it is based on different functional and communicational requirements. In inflection, the structuring of cells is basically dictated by the needs of syntax and highly abstract morphological categories: if a speaker needs to form an inflectional form, she has a specific lexeme as her starting point, and syntax requires that the lexeme be realized in a form which corresponds to one specific cell in a paradigm in compliance with the necessary grammatical categories. The analysis of inflection is thus a purely linguistic matter. However, the situation in word-formation is different: a speaker needs to name an extra-linguistic reality for which she cannot find an adequate unit, i.e. a lexeme or phrasal lexeme, in her mental lexicon. This initiates the process of naming, the starting point of which is not purely linguistic and should therefore be described from an onomasiological perspective.

In an onomasiological description, we firstly need to distinguish between (i) the dynamic process of coining new naming units (“naming”), (ii) the dynamic process of word-formation and (iii) the static aspect of “word-formedness”, the latter referring to the existing lexicon of complex words in the sense that it has a decisive impact on the former two aspects (Dokulil, 1962, 1986; Štekauer, 1998). Then, it seems necessary to distinguish lexical and structural meanings of naming units (Dokulil, 1962) and to determine their relationship. The starting point in naming (ad i) is the perception or conceptualization of an extra-linguistic reality, which leads to an onomasiological structure analyzable as a pair comprising an onomasiological base and an onomasiological mark (cf. genus proximum and differentia specifica in Volkmar, 2015; and local and global features in Grzega, 2007). Although this onomasiological structure can in principle be linguistically expressed by the means of syntax, e.g. a bird that creeps in trees (the treecreeper) or a device that reads data (the reader), it is very often more suitable to express the onomasiological structure in such a way that, from the perspective of syntax, we obtain a simple, atomic, unit – and this is when the means of word-formation (ad ii) come into play.¹ For the given onomasiological structure, which is the basis of the lexical meaning of the future lexical unit, the speaker searches for a suitable structural meaning – referred to as ‘word-formation cell’ – by scanning the available structural meanings, which are abstractions over the existing lexicon (ad iii) and its paradigms. The onomasiological structure, however, does not match one ideal cell in a paradigm, as is the case in inflection, but the speaker has a choice from a number of cells in different word-formation paradigms and paradigmatic systems, as different English names for the ‘treecreeper’

¹ In some cases, naming cannot be realized by the means of word-formation because there are no existing patterns (Dokulil, 1962) or the patterns available in a language are not suitable: the term ringbearer in Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings cannot be satisfactorily translated into Czech in an atomic way, so a descriptive naming unit ten, který nese prsten (‘the one who bears the ring’) has to be used instead.
with the same onomasiological structure (TREE-CREEP-BIRD) suggest: treecreeper, treeclimber, barkrunner; creeper; creep-tree; rind bird, squirrel bird; tree mouse (Desfayes, 1998). These word-formation cells may be at a different level of abstraction – from very abstract ones, such as action nouns or agent nouns, to very specific ones, such as the names for butterflies with the onomasiological structure COLOR-BUTTERFLY, the base BUTTERFLY being linguistically expressed in Czech by the suffix -ásek, cf. bělásek (‘white butterfly’), modrásek (‘blue butterfly’), and žlutásek (‘yellow butterfly’).

The paper aims to show that the key to the paradigmatic description of word-formation is the mutual relationship between the lexical and structural meanings. The identity and structure of cells in word-formation paradigms are given by the structural meanings, which are abstractions over the lexical meanings of the existing lexemes. The creation of lexical meanings, nevertheless, begins in the very process of naming by mapping a specific onomasiological structure on some of the possible structural meanings, which are more general. Consequently, the lexical meaning should not be understood as a secondary idiosyncratic shift of the structural meaning, but it is a direct reflection of the onomasiological structure. Moreover, the existing lexical meanings are a source from which the structural meaning is abstracted.²

Onomasiological approaches to word-formation have so far been applied rather sporadically and by a rule-based way (Štekauer, 1998; Volkmar, 2015), so our paper is the first to link them to recent paradigmatic theories of word-formation anchored in a tradition that goes back to Van Marle (1984). The authors aim to show that the onomasiological component is not an alternative approach to paradigmatic word-formation but rather a key that justifies the concept of paradigms in word-formation.

References


² A specific, and simpler, case are the transpositional and modificational onomasiological categories, since in these, unlike in the mutational, the structural and lexical meanings overlap.