

# Debonding of affixoids: a comparative constructionist account

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Kristel Van Goethem  
*F.R.S.-FNRS, Université catholique de Louvain*

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I will analyze a specific mechanism of linguistic change by which new adjectives and adverbs may be created out of former compound members or affixoids. This process is called ‘debonding’ by Norde (2009) and is one of the three types of degrammaticalization she distinguishes. I will demonstrate that debonding occurs in several European languages; examples will be provided from French, English, Dutch and German, mostly drawn from the web via *Google News* (news.google.com) and the COW corpora Colibri<sup>2</sup> web interface (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012).<sup>1</sup> However, the process will be shown to be strongly impacted by the semantics of the original morpheme and language-specific morphological properties such as the degree of compound cohesion and the complexity of the inflectional system. The data will be described and analyzed from a constructionist approach to language and language change (among others Booij 2010; Traugott & Trousdale 2013).

As for the outline of this article, I propose first to provide a brief presentation of the theoretical framework (Construction Grammar and Construction Morphology) (Section 2). Next I will discuss the concept of debonding, describe its main characteristics, define its constraints and provide examples from the four European languages mentioned above (Section 3). In the final section, I will integrate the theoretical perspective and the empirical observations by advancing a constructionist account of the process of debonding (Section 4).

## 2. Construction Grammar and Construction Morphology

### 2.1 Construction Grammar

Construction Grammar is a relatively recent usage-based approach to language, language acquisition, language variation and language change. Crucial to this model is the concept of ‘constructions’; these are conventional form-meaning pairings and are considered the fundamental units of the linguistic system. Constructions vary in size and complexity (cf. Goldberg 2006); the minimal linguistic construction being the word in Booij’s model of Construction Morphology (Booij 2010) (cf. 2.2). Inspired by Goldberg’s leading definition of a construction (Goldberg 1995: 4)<sup>2</sup>, constructivists have so far mainly focused on multi-word units with a non-predictable form or meaning aspect. An example can be provided by the French reduplicative emphatic coordination construction [ $X_1$  *mais alors*  $X_2$ ] (cf. Van Goethem et al. 2013), illustrated in (1):

- (1) [...] car la mort de ces 12 personnes montre bien à quel point nous avons un gros, **mais alors très très gros** problème avec l’idée même de ce qu’est la liberté.  
‘[...] since the death of these 12 people shows to which extent we have a *big*, *but then very very big* (lit.) problem with the idea of what freedom is.’  
[http://www.economiamatin.fr/news-charlie-hebdo-theorie-complot-conneries-betises-sannat, 09 Jan. 2015]

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the COW corpora and project, see <http://webcorpora.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> “C is a CONSTRUCTION iff<sub>def</sub> C is a form-meaning pair  $\langle F_i, S_i \rangle$  such that some aspect of  $F_i$  or some aspect of  $S_i$ , is not strictly predictable from C’s component parts or from other previously established constructions” (Goldberg 1995: 4).

The sequence *mais alors* literally means ‘but then’, but in this specific pattern it is used to coordinate two (almost) identical elements,  $X_1$  and  $X_2$ , to create an emphatic effect. In example (1), the adjective *gros* ‘big’ is reduplicated by means of coordination with *mais alors* in order to put emphasis on the huge proportions of the problem. The emphasis is even reinforced by the insertion and reduplication of *très* ‘very’ before  $X_2$ . Since the semantics of the components *mais* ‘but’ and *alors* ‘then’ do not allow to predict the emphatic interpretation, we are dealing here with a construction.

Constructions exist at different levels of schematicity; a distinction can be made between fully schematic constructions (e.g. [ $X_1$  CONJ  $X_2$ ]), semi-schematic constructions or constructional idioms combining lexically filled positions with open slots (e.g. [ $X_1$  *mais alors*  $X_2$ ]) and substantive constructions (e.g. [*gros mais alors très très gros*]). Constructions are linked to each other by inheritance relations and, as a consequence, language can be considered a complex network of constructions.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 Construction Morphology

In his theoretical model ‘Construction Morphology’, Booij (2010) applies the principles of Construction Grammar to words. He argues, for instance, that compounds can be described as morphological constructions. Nominal compounding in Germanic languages can be represented by the schema in (2), in which the left-right arrow symbolizes the link between the formal and the semantic component of the construction (cf. Booij 2010: 17):

$$(2) \quad [[a]_{X_k} [b]_{N_i}]_{N_j} \leftrightarrow [\text{SEM}_i \text{ with relation } R \text{ to } \text{SEM}_k]_j$$

The variables and indexes indicate that German nominal compounds are (mostly) right-headed: the morphological properties (category, gender, inflection) and the semantics of the right-hand member of the compound  $[b]$  are determinative of the morphological and semantic properties of the entire compound. For instance, an English compound such as *wedding dress* inherits the morphological properties of its head *dress* (e.g. nominal category) and can semantically be interpreted as ‘a dress with a specific relation to the notion of wedding’ (viz. the dress a woman wears on her wedding day).

An important advantage of Construction Morphology is that it can account for non-predictable form or meaning aspects of morphological constructions. A well-known example of unpredictable semantics in compounding is the phenomenon of ‘affixoids’: these are morphemes that still occur as lexemes, but have a specialized meaning when embedded in compounds (Booij 2010: 57). An example from Dutch is the morpheme *reuze-*, derived from the noun *reus* ‘giant’. In Modern Dutch, it can be productively used as an intensifying prefixoid in adjectival compounds such as *reuzecharmant* ‘lit. giant-charming; very charming’, *reuzegezellig* ‘lit. giant-cosy; very cosy’ and even *reuzeklein* ‘lit. giant-little; very little’. The prefixoid *reuze-* can be distinguished from its corresponding lexeme *reus* in two ways: semantically it does no longer mean ‘giant’, but has a specialized intensifying interpretation and, formally, it is linked to the right-hand member of the compound by insertion of a linking element *-e*, altering the pronunciation and spelling of the preceding phoneme ( $s > z$ ). In Booij’s model, the affixoid-nature of a morpheme such as *reuze* can be specified in a constructional idiom, which clearly indicates the conventional pairing of a partially filled compound and a specific semantic interpretation (cf. Booij 2010: 57):

$$(3) \quad [[reuze]_N [X]_{A_i}]_{A_j} \leftrightarrow [\text{very SEM}_i]_j$$

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive overview of current studies in Construction Grammar, I would like to refer to the *Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar* (Hoffmann & Trousdale 2013).

The emergence of affixoids can be analyzed as the result of either grammaticalization (cf. Van Goethem 2008) or ‘constructionalization’, when defined as the rise of new morphological constructions (Hüning & Booij 2014). The diachronic development of the Dutch prefixoid *reuze-* is described in detail in Van Goethem and Hiligsmann (2014).

### 3. Debonding

#### 3.1 Definition

Quite surprisingly, the intensifying prefixoid *reuze-* is productively used in Modern Dutch as an evaluative adjective or intensifying adverb: in (4) *reuze* means ‘great’ and is used as a predicative adjective; in (5) it acts as a degree adverb that modifies the verb *irriteren* ‘to irritate’ and means ‘a lot’.

- (4) Wij hebben deze kerst wel weer een boom, scheelt mezelf niet zoveel maar de kids vinden het **reuze**.  
 ‘We have this Christmas a tree again, does not matter so much to myself but the kids find it great (lit. giant).’  
 [NLCOW14AX<sup>4</sup>, <http://www.medischforum.nl/onderwerp/14077/2420>]
- (5) Ik ben redelijk tolerant en begripvol, maar als mensen ergens met de pet naar gaan gooien, kan me dat **reuze** irriteren.  
 ‘I am reasonably tolerant and understanding, but if people are not making efforts, that can irritate me a lot (lit. giant).’  
 [NLCOW14AX, [http://hartenziel.nl/artikel/grote\\_8\\_-\\_agnes\\_jongerus](http://hartenziel.nl/artikel/grote_8_-_agnes_jongerus)]

These adjectival and adverbial uses cannot directly be linked to the corresponding noun *reus*, for instance by a process of morphological conversion; yet the specific form ending in *-e* and the intensifying semantics are clearly reminiscent of its prefixoid use. On diachronic grounds, it can be demonstrated that the adjectival and adverbial uses of *reuze* indeed derive from the prefixoid (cf. Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014). The process by which bound elements become free again is an instance of degrammaticalization, and more precisely of so-called ‘debonding’, viz. “a composite change whereby a bound morpheme in a specific linguistic context becomes a free morpheme” (Norde 2009: 186).

The process of debonding is central in this study. In what follows, I will show that it occurs in different European languages. However, not all of these languages display the same degree of compound cohesion as Dutch or German, for instance. In French and English, as a matter of fact, we can find noun-noun sequences such as *facteur-clé* and *key factor* that are not always in a straightforward way ranged as compounds. This makes it also difficult to consider elements such as *clé* and *key* as true affixoids, even if they have a specialized meaning (i.e. ‘very important’) within the [[N] [N]] pattern. Nevertheless, in these cases, I will still analyze the possible degree of debonding of these sequences, yet being aware of the fact that true degrammaticalization of bound morphemes may not be at stake.

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<sup>4</sup> NLCOW14AX is the Dutch COW subcorpus compiled in 2014 at the Freie Universität Berlin (cf. Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012). The other subcorpora that will be used in this study are the English (ENCOW14AX) and German subcorpora (DECOW2012).

## 3.2 Parameters of debonding

Norde (2009: 186-227) proposes four typical parameters of debonding. *Severance* most typically characterizes debonding and implies that a bound morpheme gradually develops into a free one. Debonding may also be marked by *scope expansion*, for instance when an affixoid develops scope over an entire phrase. Third, debonding often also involves *flexibilization*, which refers to the syntactic context expansion the morpheme may undergo. Finally, debonding may also cause *recategorialization*; in the cases under investigation we will be interested in shifts from nominal compound member to free adjective or adverb.

In what follows, I will illustrate these four parameters with examples from Dutch, German, English and French.

### 3.2.1 Severance

Severance implies that a bound element, such as an affixoid, is separated from its stem, or that a compound undergoes fragmentation. Dutch *top-* is productively used as a left-hand compound member such as in *topmanager* ‘top manager’ and *toplaag* ‘top layer’. In (6), however, *top* is separated from its right-hand compound member *managers* because of its coordination with the adjective *lagere* ‘lower’. In (7), French *clé* is separated from the noun *moment* ‘moment’ because of the (repeated) insertion of the adverb *vraiment* ‘really’.

- (6) Bij zowel **top** als lagere managers, en politici, valt dan te constateren dat vormen van disfunctioneren die bij lagere maatschappelijke klassen tot ontslag zouden leiden, bij de toplagen dat heel vaak niet gebeurt.  
 ‘In the case of both top and lower managers, and politicians, one can see that forms of dysfunction that would result in discharge in lower social classes, in the case of the top layers that very often does not happen.’  
 [NLCOW2012-00X: 5823077]
- (7) “Je pense que nous nous rencontrons à un moment vraiment, vraiment **clé**”, a insisté le responsable américain, (...).  
 “‘I think that we meet at a really, really key moment,” insisted the US official, (...).’  
 [[http://www.rtbf.be/info/monde/detail\\_coree-l-heure-est-critique-dit-john-kerry-aux-autorites-chinoises?id=7971235](http://www.rtbf.be/info/monde/detail_coree-l-heure-est-critique-dit-john-kerry-aux-autorites-chinoises?id=7971235), 13.04.2013]

### 3.2.2 Scope expansion

Affixoids have scope over words, such as nouns and adjectives, but never over phrases. Scope expansion can however be symptomatic of the process of debonding, as illustrated in (8) for German *riesen* and in (9) for English *key*. In (8) *riesen* has scope over the entire noun phrase *deutsche community* [sic] ‘German community’<sup>5</sup> and in (9) *key* modifies the noun phrase *economic and social changes*.

- (8) das spiel hat eine **riesen** deutsche community wo man genug hilfe findet.  
 ‘the game has a huge (lit. giant) German community where one can find plenty of support’  
 [DECOW2012-03X: 77153929]
- (9) Could a revived National Insurance system help win back support for the welfare state and address **key** economic and social changes?  
 [ENCOW14AX, [http://touchstoneblog.org.uk/category/society\\_and\\_welfare/page/3/](http://touchstoneblog.org.uk/category/society_and_welfare/page/3/)]

<sup>5</sup> In example (8), the fact that *riesen* is written with lower case is not relevant for its adjectival status (as left-hand compound member of a nominal compound it should be written with a capital), since the writer of the sentence does not seem to use capitals. Crucial, however, is that *riesen* modifies the NP *deutsche community*, not just the adjective *deutsche*.

### 3.2.3 Flexibilization

When affixoids, or other types of compound members, undergo debonding and develop into adjectives they are -logically- first used in attributive position, as in the cases of scope expansion illustrated above. Attributive modification is still very close to the original compound pattern (e.g. *ein Hammerfilm* > *ein hammer Film* ‘a great film’). However, some compound members may also be used predicatively, such as *reuze* in (4) and *key* in (10), as a result of syntactic context expansion or flexibilization. Example (11) illustrates another type of context expansion: as a prefixoid *reuze*-combines mostly with adjectives (e.g. *reuzespannend* ‘lit. giant exciting; very exciting’), but never with verbs; during debonding it can however develop scope over verbs, as in *reuze bedanken* ‘to thank a lot’.

- (10) Sir, I am only saying that the issue of infrastructure is very **key** in resolving these problems in the long run.  
[ENCOW14AX, [http://info.mzalendo.com/hansard/sitting/national\\_assembly/2010-09-29-09-00-00](http://info.mzalendo.com/hansard/sitting/national_assembly/2010-09-29-09-00-00)]
- (11) Iedereen **reuze** bedankt voor de tips!  
‘Everyone thanks a lot (lit. giant) for the tips!’  
[NLCOW14AX, <http://www.floridaforum.nl/archive/index.php/t-212.html?s=6fbb65b3611cd15bb35f4416b0c62c85>]

### 3.2.4 Recategorialization

Finally, debonding of a morpheme may result in category change. This has already been illustrated for, for instance, the adverbial use of *reuze* in (5) and (11). In (12) German *spitze* ‘top’ is modified by the degree adverb *absolut* and is coordinated to the adjective *unterhaltsam* ‘entertaining’. Both elements signal its adjectival status, which is corroborated by the spelling with lower case *s*-. Another case of debonding is French *limite* ‘lit. limit’, which is productively used in compounds such as *cas limite* ‘borderline case’ and *vitesse limite* ‘speed limit, maximum speed’ and has recently developed adjectival and adverbial uses. In (13) *limite* acts as a degree adverb with scope over the adjective *insupportable* ‘unbearable’.

- (12) Ich finde den absolut **spitze** und unterhaltsam  
‘I find him absolutely fantastic (lit. top) and entertaining’  
[DECOW2012-00: 26576434]
- (13) Autre chose investis dans des lentilles, ça t'éviteras de jouer non stop avec tes lunettes, c'est **limite** insupportable pour ton auditoire.  
‘Another thing invest in lenses, it will avoid you to play non-stop with your glasses, that is almost (lit. limit) unbearable for your audience.’  
[<http://www.universfreebox.com/article/24057/Decouvrez-en-video-le-discours-d-Arnaud-Montebourg-devant-la-FFTelecoms>, 02.02.2014]

The debonding processes of the case studies illustrated above have been analyzed in detail in separate studies; most of these have been carried out in close collaboration with colleagues from different universities. I would like to refer the interested readers to the following articles: Van Goethem and Hiligsmann (2014); Norde and Van Goethem (2014) on the debonding of Dutch *reuze* / German *riesen* / Swedish *jätte*; Amiot and Van Goethem (2012); Van Goethem (2012, 2015) on French *clé* / English *key* / Dutch *sleutel*; Van Goethem and Hüning (2015) on Dutch *top* / German *spitze*; Van Goethem and Amiot (2012) on the debonding of French *limite*.

### 3.3 Constraints

For Dutch, English and French, Van Goethem and De Smet (2014) investigate how the debonding process is affected by three different factors: (a) the semantics of the compound member or affixoid subject to debonding, (b) the degree of prosodic and morphological cohesion of the sequence, and (c) the impact of adjective inflection on the language. With regard to semantics, debonding in all three languages is typical of nouns with a qualifying (often evaluative / intensifying) function (e.g. *un secteur économique clé* / *a key economic sector*). Besides this semantic constraint, there are further language-specific constraints on debonding; these allow us to account for the fact that the English sequences with *key* and their French counterparts with *clé*, for instance, act differently from the Dutch compounds beginning with *sleutel* (e.g. *\*sleutel economische sector*) (Amiot & Van Goethem 2012). Van Goethem and De Smet (2014) therefore argue that the likelihood of debonding largely depends on the degree of cohesion of the compounds or compound-like sequences, manifested, among others, through spelling and word stress (cf. among others Schlücker & Hüning 2009 on the distinction between compounds and phrases). Since Dutch compounds show stronger cohesion than their French and English counterparts, debonding is less likely to occur in Dutch. Third, reanalysis of a noun as an adjective may be favored in languages with little or no inflection on the adjective, as in French and English, respectively. This again disfavors debonding in Dutch.<sup>6</sup>

Van Goethem and De Smet (2014) do not include German in their analysis of debonding processes, but drawing on their data, they assume “that a language such as German, characterized by very cohesive compounds and a more complex inflectional system than Dutch will allow even less debonding or may exploit yet other pathways” (Van Goethem & De Smet 2014: 272). This might be a plausible explanation for the absence of the debonding analysis in the literature on German, where the emergence of intensifying adjectives is seen as a case of conversion (cf. Section 4.3). There are, however, indications that debonding plays a role in German too, as demonstrated for German *riesen* in Norde and Van Goethem (2014) and for German *spitze* in Van Goethem and Hüning (2015).

## 4. A constructionist account of debonding

### 4.1 Multiple inheritance and multiple source constructions

As described in Section 2, a constructionist view considers language as a hierarchical network of constructions. Substantive constructions (e.g. *gros mais alors très très gros* ‘lit. big but then very very big’) are instances of semi-schematic constructions (e.g.  $[[X_1 \text{ mais alors } X_2]]$ ), which -in their turn- inherit properties from more general schematic constructions (e.g.  $[X_1 \text{ CONJ } X_2]$ ). Moreover, constructions may also inherit properties from multiple parent constructions, via so-called ‘multiple inheritance’ (cf. Trousdale 2013; Trousdale & Norde 2013):

The way in which this grammatical knowledge is organized is as a TAXONOMIC HIERARCHY (Croft 2001: 25), which connects constructions at different levels of schematicity. In this hierarchy, each construction is an instance of a more schematic construction where typically, constructions are linked to more than one parent construction, and the more specific constructions inherit properties from the more general constructions, via a “downward spreading of facts” (Hudson 2007: 21). This is called MULTIPLE INHERITANCE. (Trousdale & Norde 2013: 35)

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<sup>6</sup> Van Goethem and De Smet (2014) furthermore argue that in the case of Dutch, an additional process should be taken into account, that is the possibility of clipping of N+A compounds. See also Van Goethem and Hiligsmann (2014) on the possible clipping of Dutch compounds beginning with *reuze* ‘lit. giant; great; very’.

The idea of ‘multiple inheritance’ could be seen as the synchronic representation of the complexity of language change. Diachronic developments do not always follow linear pathways from one source construction to another target construction; a complex interplay between different sources and processes is often at stake. That is the central idea of De Smet, Ghesquière and Van de Velde’s (2013) volume “On multiple source constructions in language change”.

In the next two sections, I will demonstrate how the ideas of ‘multiple inheritance’ and ‘multiple source constructions’ can be applied to the process of debonding. I will focus on two case studies, French *clé* (4.2) and Dutch *top* (4.3).

## 4.2 French *clé*

Two phases can be distinguished in the debonding process of French *clé* and its parallel category change from noun to adjective (cf. Amiot & Van Goethem 2012; Van Goethem 2015).

The first step is the development of a productive constructional idiom -via ‘constructionalization’ (Hüning & Booij 2014; Traugott & Trousdale 2013) -in which *clé* has the specific (metaphoric) meaning ‘very important’ when combined with a noun in a  $[[N] [clé]]_N$  compound(-like) sequence (e.g. *moment-clé* ‘key moment’, *position clé* ‘key position’ and *question-clé* ‘key question’). This semi-schematic construction can be represented as follows:

$$(14) \quad [[X]_{Ni} [clé]_{Nj}] \leftrightarrow [\text{very important SEM}_i]_j$$

However, the constructionalization of *clé* goes beyond this morphological stage since *clé* occurs in innovative syntactic constructions with the same semantics. In (7) I have illustrated that *clé* can be separated from the left-hand compound member and can be modified by a degree adverb, but *clé* can also act as a predicative adjective, as in (15):

- (15) Or, la capacité à créer de la confiance est absolument **clé** dans la relation client.  
 ‘However, the ability to create confidence is absolutely key in the customer relationship.’  
 [<http://www.letudiant.fr/jobsstages/Target-carrieres/target-carrieres-conseil-en-management/conseil-en-management-ce-que-veulent-les-recruteurs-16093.html>, 24.11.2010]

As already suggested by Amiot and Van Goethem (2012) and Van Goethem (2015), the adjectival uses of *clé* could be seen as the result of an interaction between the, closely related, morphological  $[[N] [N]]_N$  and syntactic  $[[N] [AP]]_{NP}$  constructions. The fact that *clé* developed an evaluative meaning in the former construction, typical of adjectives, may have favored this constructional ambiguity. In constructional terms, this interaction can be translated as an instance of ‘multiple inheritance’.

Schematically, this multiple inheritance can be represented as in (16):

$$(16) \quad \begin{array}{ccc} [[N] [N]]_N & & [[N(P)] [A(P)]]_{NP} \\ & \searrow \quad \swarrow & \\ & [[N] [clé]]_{N/NP} & \end{array}$$

The  $[[N] [clé]]_{N/NP}$  sequence inherits its properties from two distinct parent constructions, the morphological compound  $[[N] [N]]_N$  pattern (e.g. *poisson-chat* ‘catfish’) and the syntactic  $[[N(P)] [A(P)]]_{NP}$  pattern (e.g. *une position (très) importante* ‘a(n) (very) important position’). As a consequence, it is a hybrid between a morphological and a syntactic construction: in line with  $[[N] [N]]_N$  compounds, *clé* does for instance not (or only very rarely) display gender inflection (e.g. \**une position clé* ‘a key position’, cf. Van Goethem 2012), while it has been proven to occur in typically

adjectival constructions, for instance being modified by degree adverbs (cf. *une position absolument clé* ‘an absolutely key position’), a property inherited from its syntactic source construction.

### 4.3 Dutch *top*

In Section 3.3 I have discussed some language-specific constraints on debonding. It was claimed that debonding is more likely to occur in French and English than in Dutch and German, since the latter languages display more cohesive compounds and a more complex inflectional system, which disfavors the category change from nouns into adjectives. However, as shown by the examples throughout this paper, debonding does occur in Dutch and German, in spite of the morphological obstacles. To account for this, the notion of ‘multiple source constructions’ is again very useful. In what follows, I will show to which extent this concept is crucial to explain the emergence of the adjectival uses of Dutch *top* (cf. Van Goethem & Hüning 2015).

*Top* occurs productively as left-hand compound member in Dutch, e.g. *topsport* ‘top sport’ and *topvakantie* ‘top holiday, excellent holiday’. As a noun, it can also be used in the predicative position with a similar evaluative meaning, with or without a determiner (17-18):

- (17) De service van Fotogoed is de absolute **top**.  
 ‘The service of *Fotogoed* is the absolute top.’  
 [NLCOW14AX, [http://www.onlinefotoservices.nl/frm\\_fotogoed.php](http://www.onlinefotoservices.nl/frm_fotogoed.php)]
- (18) Als de liefde werkelijk door de maag gaat, dan is deze locatie **top**!  
 ‘If the way to a person’s heart is through the stomach, then this location is excellent (lit. top)!’  
 [NLCOW14AX, <http://www.edarling.nl/partner-zoeken/haarlem>]

Several studies on parallel cases in German (Pittner & Berman 2006; Berman 2009) argue that the adjectival use of such evaluative morphemes emerges in this predicative position, by means of N > A conversion, and should hence not be considered as the result of debonding:

It is argued that N→A conversion is linked to the predicative position, which, due to its syntactic and semantic characteristics, is well suited to conversion. Once the adjectival use is established in the predicative position, it can spread to other syntactic environment. (Pittner & Berman 2006: 233)

However, Van Goethem and Hüning (2015) propose that debonding and conversion are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, their corpus study even provides evidence for the fact that both processes probably support each other. Debonding of compounds beginning with *top-* was already illustrated in (6). Most likely, influence of English borrowings written in two words (e.g. *top model*) plays a role here. On the other hand, reanalysis of predicative *top* is also frequently observed, for instance when it is modified by a degree adverb, such as *absoluut* ‘absolutely’ (19) or *helemaal* ‘completely’ (20):

- (19) Zelf vind ik hun prijs / kwaliteit / service absoluut **top**.  
 ‘Personally, I think their price / quality / service is absolutely top.’  
 [NLCOW14AX, <http://www.usenetvergelijker.nl/providers/extremeusenet/>]
- (20) De weersvoorzichten zijn prima en de sfeer is nu al helemaal **top**.  
 ‘The weather forecasts are fine and the atmosphere is already absolutely excellent (lit. top).’  
 [NLCOW14AX, <http://www.maastrichtaktueel.nl/tag/muziekgieterij-maastricht/>]

With respect to the N > A reanalysis of *top*, it is revealing to compare the examples (17) and (19): in the sequence *de absolute top* ‘the absolute top’ (17), the presence of the determiner and the adjectival inflection on *-e* in *absolute* ‘absolute’ allow us to categorize *top* unambiguously as a noun; in (19),



by contrast, the uninflected form *absoluut* ‘absolutely’ should be identified as a degree adverb, which implies that *top* acts as (predicative) adjective.

To conclude, the case study of Dutch *top* indicates that a complex interplay of debonding and conversion is most likely at work; the free uses of Dutch *top* do not derive just from one source construction, but imply an intricate interaction between different source constructions, compounds beginning with *top-* on the one hand and (*de*) *top* used as an evaluative predicate on the other. The support of a second process that causes N > A category change in the predicative position may contribute to trigger debonding of Dutch *top-*, in spite of the specific disfavoring morphological conditions in Dutch.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, I have given an overview of my research on debonding of affixoids from a comparative and constructionist point of view. I have shown that language-specific properties such as the degree of compound cohesion and the complexity of the inflectional system may either favor (as in English or French) or disfavor (as in Dutch and German) the debonding process.

French compounds, for instance, seem to be subject quite often to debonding; when the semantic conditions are fulfilled (that is, the modifier part of the compound has an evaluative meaning), the insertion of a degree adverb is mostly non-problematic (e.g. *un chiffre record* ‘a record figure’ -*un chiffre vraiment record* ‘a truly record figure’). Very interestingly, Prof. Yves Charles Morin has drawn my attention to the fact that phonological parameters can also be symptomatic of a process of debonding. The pronunciation of a linking vowel (the so-called *liaison*) in *pseudo-z-agents* ‘pseudo-policemen’ between the prefix *pseudo-* and the stem *agents* may indicate that *pseudo-* is being reanalyzed as an adjective, and as a result receives plural adjectival inflection. Therefore it seems to me correct that Morin, Langlois and Varin (1990: 524) describe this kind of prefixes as ‘quasi-adjectives’. From a constructionist perspective, such hybrid constructions, with both morphological and syntactic properties, may be accounted for by ‘multiple inheritance’: they inherit properties from both a morphological and a syntactic parent construction.

In ‘disfavored’ languages such as Dutch and German, with cohesive compounds and important adjectival inflection, debonding may however still be triggered thanks to an interaction with other processes. The case of Dutch *top-*, for instance, indicates that debonding and conversion may interact with each other and that a multiple sources approach is needed to explain the rise of the (quasi-) adjectival uses of *top*.

I would be very pleased if this paper stimulates research on debonding in other languages and if the validity of the claims made for the four investigated European languages could be examined for other languages too. After the MGDLT6 conference, I had the opportunity to read a study by Xydopoulos (2009) on diminutive *psilo-* in Modern Greek, which occurs both as a bound and a free morpheme, and looks very similar to English *-ish*. The author observes that after a process of grammaticalization, accompanied by semantic change, *psilo-* “is in the process of being relexicalized on the basis of its novel use as meaning ‘a bit’” (Xydopoulos 2009: 400). This relexicalization process, triggered by the development of an evaluative (diminutive) meaning, seems to be very close, if not identical, to the processes described in this study as debonding.

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