

Review of Mattiello, Elisa. 2022. *Transitional Morphology: Combining Forms in Modern English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 978-1-009-16828-1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009168274>

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COMBINING FORMS¹

Originally defined in English morphology as “stems of full words in Latin or Greek” (Marchand 1969: 131), combining forms (hereafter, CFs) remain a subject of debate in morphology, among other reasons, for the difficulty in establishing their boundaries and, as a result, for their heterogeneity and the heterogeneity of the forms they can be a part of.

Elisa Mattiello’s monograph reviews CFs following the traditional structure of a research article or a thesis, i.e., with an introductory chapter (pp. 1–8), a chapter for conclusions (pp. 204–211), and chapters on the ‘Background of Combining Forms’ (Chapter 2, pp. 9–65), ‘Dataset and Methodology’ (Chapter 3, pp. 66–78), ‘Neoclassical Combining Forms’ (Chapter 4, pp. 79–105), ‘Abbreviated Combining Forms’ (Chapter 5, pp. 106–145), ‘Secreted Combining Forms’ (Chapter 6, pp. 146–186) and ‘Splinters or Combining Forms in the Making’ (Chapter 7, pp. 187–203) in between. The book also contains the usual ancillary material, such as lists of figures (pp. vii–ix) and tables (p. x), a preface (pp. xi–xii), an appendix (pp. 212–226), a reference list (pp. 227–235), and a subject index (pp. 236–238).

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These contents are not intended to separate the various units that can be merged under such a general term as ‘combining form’. Therefore, they do not face the question of the defining properties of each subtype of CFs compared with other morphological units, at least not with a view to subclassification, even if this question underlies the entire book. Instead, the goal is “[...] to fill the descriptive and theoretical lacuna surrounding CFs as well as to offer a broad spectrum along which new English CFs can be arranged” (p. 2). In this regard, the main tenet of the book is precisely that “[...] CFs are an independent morphological category within word-formation [...] with its own locus within the morphological ecosystem of modern English” (p. 204). The contribution of the book can be best assessed in this light, that is, as a review of the range of cases that can be brought under a umbrella term as defined in a non-exclusive way, namely:

[...] initial or final bound morphemes which are either allomorphic variants of classical Latin or Greek words [...] or shortenings of [...] English words [...], often with the intervention of a secretion process [...] (pp. 2–3).

The boundaries set for the concept CF make allowance for splinters too, and, while these boundaries may be acknowledged or not, they qualify as the book’s understanding of transitional morphology as “[...] a continuum rather than separate classes of word-formation [...]” (p. 3).

Based on the above, the book surveys the main positions on CFs available in the literature from Jespersen (1942) onwards, first by specific positions on their nature (Section 2.1) and then by a theoretical framework (Section 2.2). The literature review is well-organized and presents efficiently the various ways in which the topic has been discussed. The coverage is wide as regards theoretical frameworks, reaching beyond the concept under scrutiny, to cover also crucial notions such as analogy or productivity. While the references stand out notably for major inclusions like Tournier (2007), further references can be added on the reflections put forward regarding several central points, both within the framework of word-formation processes and otherwise, for instance, the very nature of compounding and of various shortening processes (cf. Baeskow 2004; Scalise and Bisetto 2009; Bauer 2019), or the role of analogy (cf. Fertig 2013; Bauer 2019). Some of these additions are Kirkness (1995), Lüdeling *et al.* (2002), Bauer (2014), or Olsen (2014). These references are in order if a comprehensive account is intended not just for English, a boundary that, like the focus on CFs, is incidentally not explicit in the title. The book leaves room for further discussion regarding the classification of CF types (which the author lists according

to the etymological process involved and their position, pp. 62–65), especially as it deviates from others (Warren 1990: 65). The concept ‘Transitional Morphology’ is reviewed according to four major properties: 1) dynamism and directionality, 2) boundaries, 3) (non)-prototypicality, and 4) graduality vs. dualism. The review includes cases that can be viewed as instances of transitional morphology in several languages, then overviews cases in English, and finally focuses on CFs.

The author describes the procedures used for data collection, selection and analysis, namely a semi-automatic compilation of the entries provided in the online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*² (hereafter, OED): The resulting dataset is a 2,280-entry starting list of entries where the term ‘combining form’ occurs in the dictionary entry plus specific cases cited in the literature, the latter added in view of the OED’s lack of consistency (pp. 68–69). This initial dataset is narrowed down by a chronological criterion (only the period 1950–2000 is researched, p. 72) to reach a final list of 81 cases: 27 secreted forms, 21 abbreviated forms, 19 neoclassical forms, and 13 splinters (p. 74). The cases retrieved are then searched for in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA; Davies 2008–) and the *News on the Web* corpus³ (NOW) based on string matches up to the limit of 1,000 concordances (p. 75). The *Google Book Corpus* (GBC; Davies 2011–) is also used for chronological comparison of data distribution (p. 76). As far as the methods are concerned, the book briefly discusses alternative procedures and reveals the author’s awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of each. This shows also in particularly relevant stages, such as in the selection of the productivity measures used in the data from the period 1990–2020. In this matter, the author deviates from Baayen (1993) in the value of hapax legomena as relevant indicators of productivity (pp. 77–78). Like with many other data-based research projects, it is debatable how data selection procedures may affect the results, especially in this particular area, considering it is not easy to tell what the entire list of relevant cases and their concordances may be, and how an extended dataset might demand a revision of the resulting picture, if at all.

The remainder makes the bulk of the book. From this point onwards, each chapter discusses one of the types of CFs defined in Chapter 3, plus a final chapter on splinters as CFs ‘in the making’. These chapters share the same structure, with a brief introduction and subsections. The first of such subsections presents the forms of the dataset under the

² <https://www.oed.com/>

³ <https://www.english-corpora.org/now/>

title ‘Description and Corpus-Based Investigation of Neoclassical Combining Forms’ (4.1), which is then named accordingly for each chapter to cover the types ‘Abbreviated Combining Forms’ (5.1), ‘Secreted Combining Forms’ (6.1), and ‘Splinters’ (7.1). These sections present the forms contained in the dataset as a list of separate entries (actually, subsections within subsections) in alphabetical order, first the initial CFs and then the final CFs. The entries contain a brief description of the profile of each form, lists of COCA and NOW formations as attestations of the form at issue, with specification of their raw frequency and their normalized frequency, an example, and a final paragraph as a short summary. The second subsection in each of these chapters is a presentation of quantitative data used to measure the morphological productivity of each of the CFs previously listed, both as data tables and as their resulting visual representation in the form of figures, and then commented on as a brief recapitulation again. The third subsection presents data of the most common formations according to the GBC corpus for the period 1950–2019, with figures and comments for each of the CFs selected. The overview of the contents of these four chapters on specific types of CFs is left for the conclusions, namely Chapter 8. This chapter highlights specific properties of CFs, from their origins to their productivity, with an overview of their distribution over corpus sample categories or a general account of their semantic differences. The final and main claim of the book—in line with most of the literature since Marchand (1969)—is

[...] that CFs cover a broad spectrum of word-formation processes that range from compounding [...] to shortening [...] and can even involve a reinterpretation and level of abstraction that are typical of affixation [...] (p. 204).

Heterogeneous as it is, there is still plenty of room, as the book claims, for further “[...] fine-grained qualitative and quantitative investigation” (p. 204), where the former would be particularly relevant with regard to the complex issue of categorization, especially in view of evidence presented in the book (pp. 205–207 for a short recapitulation) and elsewhere.

The Appendix lists the CFs again as a chart to display the OED’s earliest attestation year, the origin and type according to the classification used in the book, a short description of use, and some formations as illustration. In splinters, the examples present the OED’s analysis of the origin of the form in question.

TRANSITIONAL MORPHOLOGY

Transitional morphology is first presented in detail in Chapter 2, as “[...] that part of morphology that lies at the boundaries of morphological grammar or straddles the demarcation line between two (sub)components” (p. 32). In this view, the categorial space where non-prototypical representatives of specific morphological subcomponents (p. 42) may be taken as a manifestation of the same cognitive conceptualization that occurs between several categories, such as between descriptive units or between word-classes, or as the result of a descriptive relativism that is undesired or that evidences shortcomings in the standing description, in this case, of a linguistic matter.

The monograph is closer to the former than to the latter, and reviews two main cases where the line between certain word-formation processes is difficult to draw: 1) CFs vs. affixoids and affixes, and 2) CFs vs. compounds (pp. 42–65). The book’s review goes through properties or criteria for the separation, type of boundaries, and the effect of structural processes like productivity, analogy, or reanalysis, to name some of the main points. Transitional morphology being the framework of the book, the review can also be furnished with essential references on several issues, foremost among them categorization (as the properties listed above are inherent in the concept), with titles by Ray Jackendoff, George Lakoff or Eleanor Rosch to name some prominent names (with these and other key publications on the topic easily reachable in Aarts *et al.* 2004), or starting with Geeraerts’ (1989) critical analysis on this subject onwards.

In this regard, the title of the book raises expectations that are not entirely met by the contents despite their relevance. This is because, the focus being on CFs, other transitional processes (and their boundaries) are not considered, such as various subtypes of affixation (including instances of conversion if viewed as zero-derivation), or compounding vs. blending. This can be attributed to a number of factors, most of a conceptual nature, for which there is not a unanimous answer, such as, for instance, what counts as transitional morphology or what unclear categorial spaces exist between morphological processes. This does not mean that the results are irrelevant. The book provides a comprehensive corpus-based list of (potential) cases of CFs with data that may yield valuable insights. These may prove crucial for additional questions, for instance, for the study of the combinatorial possibilities and constraints of CFs across imprecise boundaries and, in general, in non-central processes or units that may be referred to, for this reason, as ‘transitional morphology’.

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