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Word Formation in Esperanto between Akademio and Functional Discourse Grammar

Review of the book

**Jansen, Wim. 2024. *Vortfarado en Esperanto*.
Rotterdam: Bero.**

Abstract: This paper situates Wim Jansen's posthumous monograph *Vortfarado en Esperanto: Funkcigramatika analizo* within two scholarly traditions: the doctrine of word formation issued in 1967 by the Akademio de Esperanto, building on the analyses of René de Saussure, and the contemporary theory of Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008). Jansen describes Esperanto morphology as a four-part lexical machinery comprising direct stem-to-word conversion, derivation, compounding, and incorporation, all residing in the lexicon and formalized through lexical functions in the sense of García Velasco and Keizer (2014). I argue that his account converges with the Akademio's classical position on a small set of substantive points, but reframes it on a wholly different theoretical level: where the Akademio offers a normative system rooted in the *Fundamento*, Jansen offers an explanatory model grounded in production-oriented grammar. The convergences and divergences are examined in detail, with particular attention to the status of root categories, the lexical-versus-grammatical character of *-ig* and *-iĝ*, and the analysis of endocentric and exocentric compounds.

Keywords: Word formation; Functional Discourse Grammar; Akademio de Esperanto; René de Saussure

1 Introduction

Esperanto has been the object of more than a century of grammatical reflection, but for most of that period at least one dominant question has been normative: how should one form words correctly? The two reference grammars on every Esperantist's desk, the *Plena Analiza Gramatiko* (Kalocsay

and Waringhien 1985; henceforth PAG) and the *Plena Manlibro de Esperanta Gramatiko* (Wennergren 2020; henceforth PMEG), are both presented as normative guides to correct usage. Wim Jansen (1948–2024), Special Professor of Interlinguistics and Esperanto at the University of Amsterdam from 2002 to 2013, devoted the last twenty years of his life to a different question: not whether a given derived word is correct, but why the system that produces it works as it does, and where it fails its users. His monograph *Vortfarado en Esperanto: Funkcigramatika analizo*, completed shortly before his unexpected death in February 2024 and published posthumously by Eldonejo Bero in Rotterdam (Jansen 2024), is the synthesis of that project.

This article has three aims. First, it summarizes Jansen’s analysis and its empirical base. Second, it places that analysis next to the doctrine of word formation officially adopted by the Akademio de Esperanto in 1967, a doctrine that itself rests on the work of René de Saussure. Third, it asks what is gained, and what is lost, when one moves from a normative system rooted in the *Fundamento* (Zamenhof 1905) to an explanatory model rooted in Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008, henceforth FDG; García Velasco and Keizer 2014).

2 Jansen’s project in outline

Jansen organizes Esperanto word formation around four lexical procedures, each treated in a chapter of the monograph: direct stem-to-word conversion (“parolpartoj”), derivation through prefixes and suffixes, compounding, and incorporation. The first chapter, the theoretical pivot of the book, is a revision of his earlier essay “Radikoj kaj vortoj en Esperanto” (Jansen 2013), and the chapter on compounding extends his “Compounding in Esperanto” (Jansen 2020). The book may therefore be read as the consolidation of an explicit research program.

The empirical anchor for the theoretical claims is a tally of root types in Antoni Grabowski’s 1888 translation of Aleksandr Pushkin’s short story “Метель” (*La neĝa blovado*, ‘Blizzard’). Grabowski’s translation has a special status in Esperanto literary history: it is the first published literary work in Esperanto whose author is not Zamenhof himself, and through it the language demonstrated that it could function as a literary instrument independent of its creator. Jansen counts roots from this corpus and tabulates them by syntactic position (verb, noun, adjective, adverb), producing the central Tables 4 and 5 of the monograph.

2.1 Three semantic root categories

On the basis of these counts and of much earlier theoretical work, Jansen distinguishes three semantic categories of Esperanto roots: situational roots (**SIT**), prototypically realized as verbs (*kuri, legi, doni*); entity roots (**ENT**), prototypically realized as nouns (*homo, kato, tablo*); and qualifying roots (**KVL**), prototypically realized as adjectives or adverbs (*alta, longa, bela*). The diagonal of his tables is heavily populated, but every off-diagonal cell is also attested: the system is not deterministic but probabilistic. A root may in principle take any part-of-speech ending, with the proviso that off-prototype combinations require semantic reinterpretation (e.g., *belo* “beauty as abstract entity”).

2.2 Derivation as a lexical operation

In his second chapter Jansen argues that affixation in Esperanto belongs to the lexicon, not to the grammar. He applies the seven criteria proposed by García Velasco and Keizer (2014) for distinguishing lexical derivation from grammatical inflection, and concludes that Esperanto affixes satisfy the lexical criteria: they encode lexical meaning, can apply recursively (as in *arbar-et*), often change the part-of-speech category, can become semantically opaque (*vortaro* “dictionary”, not merely “collection of words”), and include both prefixes and suffixes, whereas inflection in Esperanto is exclusively suffixal and semantically empty.

Jansen formalizes the operation by means of a lexical function λ associated with each affix, writing for example $\{\text{fal dis}\} > \{\text{disfal}\} > \text{disfali}$. A striking sub-claim concerns *-ig* and *-iĝ*. Jansen distinguishes a homonymous pair: *-ig*₁ / *-iĝ*₁ are lexical suffixes that operate on entity and qualifying roots (*edzigi* “to make someone a husband”, *paliĝi* “to turn pale”), but *-ig*₂ / *-iĝ*₂ as applied to situational roots are grammatical, since they merely adjust the valency of a verb (*fermi* $\leftrightarrow$ *fermigi*) without any change in semantic category. This is, in his analysis, the only properly grammatical operation in the entire word-formation system, and – not coincidentally – the one that learners of Esperanto most often find opaque.

2.3 Compounding: endocentric and exocentric

Jansen’s third chapter treats compounding as a lexical, not a syntactic, process. He follows Zamenhof’s third rule that a compound consists of two elements with the head on the right, but he reinterprets it as the combination of *roots*, not words. Endocentric compounds such as *vaporŝipo* (“a kind of ship”) are formalized as $(\text{ŝip} : \text{vapor}) > (\text{vaporŝip}) > \text{vaporŝipo}$, with the colon

reading “modified by”. Exocentric compounds like *altforno* (“blast furnace”, not merely “high oven”) and the entire family of *longnaza*-type adjectives behave differently: their meaning cannot be projected from a head plus a modifier, and the whole compound functions as a new root. Jansen argues that the *longnaza* type is in fact the closest Esperanto comes to the *redneck*, *Braunhemd*, *caschi blu* pattern of European languages, with the proviso that the corresponding noun (**longnazo*) is unattested and Esperanto must use the suffix *-ul* to substantivize: *ruĝnukulo*, *blu-kask-ulo*.

2.4 Incorporation

The final chapter, on incorporation (*enkorpigado*), adds another element. Jansen identifies cases such as *Diservi*, *fĥskapti*, *akvokondukilo*, *ĉeovalkuracisto* as instances of substantive incorporation into a verb stem, and discusses adjective incorporation in a parallel section. He treats incorporation as a fourth lexical procedure on a par with the other three, completing the architecture of the FDG model for Esperanto.

3 The Akademio’s doctrine of word formation

The Akademio de Esperanto, founded in 1908 as the Lingva Komitato and renamed in 1948, is the body charged by the Declaration of Boulogne with watching over the language’s development in conformity with the *Fundamento de Esperanto* (Akademio de Esperanto, n.d.). For the present discussion, the relevant document is the decision of 1967, recorded in the first volume of the *Aktoj de la Akademio*, by which the Akademio formally approved a theory of Esperanto word formation by a vote of 34 to 1 (Akademio de Esperanto 1967).¹

The 1967 doctrine recognizes three fundamental categories of roots, classified according to the meaning of the root itself rather than its surface ending: *O-radikoj* or substantive roots (*arb-*, *hom-*, *ide-*), *A-radikoj* or adjectival roots (*grand-*, *bel-*, *laŭt-*), and *I-radikoj* or verbal roots (*kur-*, *sid-*, *pens-*). The three principal endings *-o*, *-a*, *-i* function in two distinct ways: applied to a root of their own category they merely supply grammatical information (for example *-o* to *arb-* yields the noun *arbo*, which is what one would expect), but applied to a root of a different category they additionally introduce semantic content (for example *-o* on *kur-* produces *kuro*, an act of running, which is a semantic shift, not a free choice).

1 I need to add here that I am currently a member of the Akademio.

The intellectual lineage of this doctrine is explicitly acknowledged. The Akademio credits René de Saussure, Swiss mathematician, brother of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose *Fundamentaj reguloj de la vort-teorio en Esperanto* (Saussure 1915) had defended Esperanto against the criticisms of Louis Couturat and other Idists by formulating a principle of necessity and sufficiency for the analysis of compound and derived words. Saussure's principle was already accepted by the Lingva Komitato in 1913. The Akademio also credits Kálmán Kalocsay's elaboration of the theory in PAG, which made the distinction between direct and inverse word-forming effects systematic enough to be teachable.

4 Convergence and divergence

The central convergence between Jansen and the Akademio is the recognition that Esperanto roots carry semantic categories independent of their inflectional ending, and that combining a root with an ending of a different category produces a predictable but non-trivial semantic shift. This is, in its essence, the Saussurean position: the system is logical, but the logic operates on the meaning of the root, not on its surface form. Jansen's three categories (SIT, ENT, KVL) map almost perfectly onto the Akademio's three (I-, O-, A-roots), though Jansen subdivides the ENT category into substantive sub-types (existential, locative, temporal, qualitative, abstract, and so on).

The differences are nevertheless considerable, and they are differences of theoretical level rather than of empirical claim. Three are worth highlighting.

First, status. For the Akademio, the doctrine of root categories is normative: it is approved by vote and is intended to settle questions of correct usage. For Jansen, root categories are empirical hypotheses about the lexical organization of the language, to be tested against corpora such as *La neĝa blovado* and to be revised if the data require it. The Akademio's three-way distinction is presented as a matter of policy; Jansen's three-way distinction is presented as a working theory that could in principle be falsified.

Second, framework. The Akademio inherits its theoretical apparatus from Saussure and Kalocsay, who worked in the descriptive tradition of early-twentieth-century European structuralism. Jansen works inside FDG, a contemporary functionalist framework that distinguishes four parallel levels of representation (interpersonal, representational, morphosyntactic, and phonological) and organizes them in the direction of speech production (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008). FDG separates frames from lexemes and locates lexemes at the representational level, words at the morphosyntactic

level. This gives Jansen a principled reason to place Esperanto roots in the lexicon without assigning them a part of speech: the part of speech belongs to the morphosyntactic level and is supplied by the ending. The Akademio's distinction between O-, A-, and I-roots is, in FDG terms, a representational-level distinction that the Akademio captures but cannot motivate.

Third, the status of *-ig* and *-iĝ*. This is the most substantive divergence, mentioned above. The Akademio treats *-ig* and *-iĝ* as ordinary derivational suffixes, on a par with *-ar*, *-ej*, *-ec*, and the rest. Jansen, applying the García Velasco and Keizer (2014) criteria, distinguishes a lexical *-ig*₁ / *-iĝ*₁ from a grammatical *-ig*₂ / *-iĝ*₂. Only the lexical variants belong in the lexicon; the grammatical variants are valency-changing operators that adjust transitivity and belong to the morphosyntactic level. Jansen makes the further empirical claim that this is precisely the locus of the system's pedagogical opacity: learners struggle with *-ig* and *-iĝ* not because the rule is poorly stated, but because Esperanto requires every situational root to be specified as transitive or intransitive in the lexicon, and the choice cannot be made on intuitive grounds. This is a diagnostic claim that the Akademio's normative framework cannot accommodate, because there is, by hypothesis, nothing wrong with the system to diagnose.

5 Compounding: a less visible disagreement

On compounding the convergence is, on the surface, complete: both the Akademio and Jansen take Zamenhof's third rule as a starting point and both recognize that compounds are right-headed. Beneath the surface, however, the analyses diverge sharply. PAG, following Saussure, treats compounds as combinations of *words*, and the bridging vowel that often appears between the two components (*vapor-o-ŝipo*) is interpreted as a fossilized noun ending. Jansen treats compounds as combinations of *roots*, and the bridging vowel as an epenthetic phonological device required by Esperanto's low tolerance of consonant clusters. The two analyses make the same predictions for transparent endocentric cases, but they diverge on the exocentric ones, and especially on the *longnaza* type, for which Jansen offers a unified treatment as exocentric while PAG and PMEG handle each instance ad hoc.

6 What FDG buys, and what it costs

The advantage of Jansen's framework is that it provides an explanatory architecture for facts that the Akademio's doctrine merely catalogues. Why does Esperanto allow free conversion of roots across syntactic categories?

Because the grammar is organized in such a way that the lexicon contains category-neutral lexemes which acquire their part of speech only at the morphosyntactic level. Why is the system so productive? Because the lexical rules are recursive and combinable. Why does the transitivity of verbs cause persistent learner difficulty? Because the only grammatical, as opposed to lexical, operation in the system happens to be the one that requires lexical knowledge of every individual stem. These are claims that Jansen can make and the Akademio cannot, simply because the Akademio is not in the explanation business.

The cost is that Jansen's account is theoretically committed in a way that the Akademio's is not. If FDG turns out to be the wrong model of grammar, much of Jansen's argumentation falls with it. The Akademio's doctrine, by contrast, will survive any change of theoretical fashion, because it is essentially a description of the data presented in the form of a policy. The two approaches are complementary rather than competing: one is an instrument for governing usage, the other is an instrument for understanding it.

7 Conclusion

Vortfarado en Esperanto deserves to be read alongside, not against, the classical authorities on Esperanto word formation. Jansen recovers the central Saussurean insight – that root categories drive the system – and gives it the explanatory machinery it has so far lacked. He sharpens the picture in three places: by formalizing the lexical operations through the lexical function λ ; by separating the lexical and grammatical components of *-ig* / *-iĝ*; and by extending the architecture to incorporation, a phenomenon barely treated in PAG and PMEG. His untimely death in February 2024 leaves some of the ideas less developed than they might have been, but the framework he constructed is robust enough that it could be extended by other hands. The book is, as its editor Ionel Oneț writes in the foreword, an intellectual testament; it is also, and more importantly, an invitation to read the Akademio's classical doctrine as an empirical hypothesis rather than as a settled rule.

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About the author

Marc van Oostendorp is professor of Dutch and Academic Communication at Radboud University, Nijmegen. He previously held, among other positions, the chair of Interlinguistics and Esperanto at the University of Amsterdam, where he served as PhD supervisor of Wim Jansen. He is currently president of Esperanto Nederland and a member of the Akademio de Esperanto.

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Pri la aŭtoro

Marc van Oostendorp estas profesoro pri la nederlanda kaj akademia komunikado ĉe la Radboud-Universitato en Nimego. Li antaŭe okupis, interalie, la katedron pri Interlingvistiko kaj Esperanto ĉe la Universitato de Amsterdamo, kie li servis kiel doktora gvidanto de Wim Jansen. Li nuntempe estas prezidanto de Esperanto Nederland kaj membro de la Akademio de Esperanto.

Sull'autore

Marc van Oostendorp è professore di Neerlandese e Comunicazione Accademica presso la Radboud University di Nimega (Olanda). In precedenza ha ricoperto, tra l'altro, la cattedra di Interlinguistica ed Esperanto presso l'Università di Amsterdam, dove è stato relatore di dottorato di Wim Jansen. Attualmente è presidente di Esperanto Nederland e membro dell'Akademio de Esperanto.

Vortfarado en Esperanto inter la Akademio kaj la Funkcia Diskursa Gramatiko – Recenzo de la libro: Jansen, Wim. 2024. Vortfarado en Esperanto.

Resumo: Ĉi tiu artikolo lokas la postmortan monografion de Wim Jansen *Vortfarado en Esperanto: Funkcigramatika analizo* en du sciencaj tradicioj: la doktrino pri vortfarado eldonita en 1967 de la Akademio de Esperanto, surbaze de la analizoj de René de Saussure, kaj la nuntempa teorio de la Funkcia Diskursa Gramatiko (Hengeveld kaj Mackenzie 2008). Jansen priskribas la morfologion de Esperanto kiel kvarpartan leksikan maŝineraron, kiu konsistas el rekta radik-al-vorta konvertiĝo, derivado, kunmetado kaj enkorpiĝado, ĉiuj loĝantaj en la leksiko kaj formaligitaj per leksikaj funkcioj laŭ la senco de García Velasco kaj Keizer (2014). Mi argumentas, ke lia traktado konverĝas kun la klasika pozicio de la Akademio pri malgranda aro da substantcaj punktoj, sed reformulas

ĝin sur tute alia teoria nivelo: tie kie la Akademio proponas normigan sistemon enradikiĝintan en la Fundamento, Jansen proponas klarigan modelon bazitan sur produktado-orientita gramatiko. La konverĝoj kaj diverĝoj estas detale ekzamenataj, kun aparta atento al la statuso de la radikaj kategorioj, la leksika-kontraŭ-gramatika karaktero de *-ig* kaj *-iĝ*, kaj la analizo de endocentraj kaj eksocentraj kunmetaĵoj.

Ŝlosilvortoj: vortfarado; Funkcia Diskursa Gramatiko; Akademio de Esperanto; René de Saussure

La formazione delle parole in esperanto tra Akademio e Grammatica Funzionale del Discorso

Riassunto: Questo articolo colloca la monografia postuma di Wim Jansen *Vortfarado en Esperanto: Funkcigramatika analizo* all'interno di due tradizioni accademiche: la dottrina della formazione delle parole emanata nel 1967 dall'Akademio de Esperanto, basata sulle analisi di René de Saussure, e la teoria contemporanea della Grammatica Funzionale del Discorso (Hengeveld e Mackenzie 2008). Jansen descrive la morfologia dell'esperanto come un meccanismo lessicale a quattro parti, comprendente la conversione diretta da radice a parola, la derivazione, la composizione e l'incorporazione, tutti residenti nel lessico e formalizzati attraverso funzioni lessicali nel senso di García Velasco e Keizer (2014). Sostengo che la sua trattazione converge con la posizione classica dell'Akademio su un piccolo numero di punti sostanziali, ma la riformula a un livello teorico completamente diverso: laddove l'Akademio offre un sistema normativo radicato nel Fundamento, Jansen offre un modello esplicativo fondato su una grammatica orientata alla produzione. Le convergenze e le divergenze vengono esaminate in dettaglio, con particolare attenzione allo statuto delle categorie radicali, al carattere lessicale rispetto a quello grammaticale di *-ig* e *-iĝ*, e all'analisi dei composti endocentrici ed esocentrici.

Parole chiave: morfologia; Grammatica Funzionale del Discorso; Akademio de Esperanto; René de Saussure