

Complex affixes and expletive morphs: The case of circumfixes

David Erschler

Department of Foreign Literatures and Linguistics, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
erschler@bgu.ac.il

I propose a mechanism whereby complex affixes can emerge. Building upon the finding that Linearization precedes VI, I propose that displacing a VI from its locus of linearization is penalized by grammar. If such displacement is needed to satisfy the subcategorization requirements of a given VI, an expletive exponent can be inserted in the original linearization locus. In particular, if the morpheme is linearized as a suffix but the only matching VI is subcategorized as a prefix, the prefixal VI and the suffixal expletive create a circumfix. The evidence comes from Svan (South Caucasian, Georgia).

DATA. Svan features a large number of ostensibly circumfixal markers, i.e. obligatory co-occurring prefixes and suffixes. Moreover, prefixes and suffixes that participate in circumfix formation cannot occur without an accompanying suffix or prefix, respectively.

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|-----|----|-----------------------|----|----------------------------------|
| (1) | a. | masdar nominalization | b. | supine nominalization |
| | | li-tr-e | | la-tr-a |
| | | NMZ-drink-NMZ | | NMZ-drink-NMZ |
| | | 'act of drinking' | | '(in order) to drink' |
| | c. | ordinal numeral | d. | attenuative form of an adjective |
| | | me:-sm-e | | mə-ʃx-a |
| | | ORD-3-ORD | | ATT-black-ATT |
| | | '3rd' | | 'blackish' |

Circumfixes are robustly present in Svan inflectional morphology. E.g., almost any verb has a masdar and a supine nominalization (1a-b); the comparative and the superlative degrees of an adjective are normally marked circumfixally (3); some nouns exhibit circumfixal marking in the plural (2).

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|-----|--------|-------------------|--------------------------|------|-----------------|-----------|
| (2) | Sg | Pl | | Sg | Pl | |
| | χeχw | læ-χχw-a | 'wife' | ʧ'æʃ | la-ʧ'ʃ-a | 'husband' |
| | ɖʒəmil | la-ɖʒmil-a | 'brother (for a sister)' | tsæl | la-tsl-a | 'peer' |

At least in some instances, the prefixal and the suffixal part cannot be assigned separate functions. E.g., the comparative and superlative degree markers differ both in their suffixal and prefixal parts.

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|-----|---------|---------|--------------------|--------------------|
| (3) | | basic | comparative | superlative |
| | 'white' | twetne | xo-ttwen-a | ma-ttwen-e |
| | 'red' | ts'ərni | xo-ts'ran-a | ma-ts'ran-e |

Some of the prefixes that participate in a circumfix are highly specialized. For instance, *xo-* is only present in the comparative degree circumfix, and *li-*, only in the masdar circumfix. On the other hand, no suffixal part only occurs in a single circumfix.

The prefixal part of a circumfix never undergoes suppletion. On the other hand, the suffixal part may have suppletive allomorphs, as illustrated for the masdar in (4).

- (4) **li-tr-e** NMZ-drink-NMZ; **li-gwn-i** NMZ-cry-NMZ; **li-jmax-w**NMZ-be.enemies-NMZ

The attested prefixal parts are underlyingly *li-*, *la-*, *le-*, *l-*, *m-*, *me-*, *ma-*, and *xo-*. *IV-* and *mV-* are not decomposable into separate *C-* and *-V-* exponents. The attested suffixal parts are underlyingly *-i*, *-e*, *-w*, and a floating feature [+front] that docks on the last vowel of the base (*cf.* Trommer 2015 on circumfixes whose part is a floating feature). The choice of the vowels in the prefixal and suffixal parts of a circumfix is not determined phonologically.

ANALYSIS. I adopt the proposal that Linearization precedes Vocabulary Insertion (e.g., Arregi & Nevins 2012; Kalin 2022). Specific VIs can be displaced to meet their own

phonological requirements, see Kalin (2022) and Kalin & Rolle (2024) for an argument in favor of splitting the original concatenation locus of a morpheme and the subcategorization requirements of specific VIs that expone it.

I propose that at this concatenation stage, Svan circumfixes are linearized as suffixes, *cf.* the proposal of Tebay 2025 that the circumfix *ke-...-an* in Indonesian is linearized as a prefix. The evidence comes from the behavior of circumfixes with a phrasal scope and the fact that some circumfixes alternate with suffixes.

Circumfixes with a phrasal scope. The prefixal part of a circumfix with phrasal scope consistently docks on the final phonological word of the phrase (5b,d). That suggests that it is associated with the right edge of the respective string.

- (5)
- | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------|--------|----|---------------------|--------------|
| | Possessive | | | | |
| a. | xofa | tsxa | b. | [χofa lə-tsxæ-j] | (txe:re) |
| | big | claw | | big POSS-claw-POSS | (wolf) |
| | 'big claw' | | | 'big-clawed (wolf)' | |
| c. | Cardinal | | d. | Ordinal | |
| | woxwifd-æ:fd =i | ifgwid | | woxwifd-æ:fd =i | me-ʃgwid-e |
| | 5-10 | =& 7 | | 5-10 | =& ORD-7-ORD |
| | '57' | | | '57 th ' | |

Alternation between a circumfix and a suffix. The attenuative circumfix *m- ... -a* (1d) has a purely suffixal allomorph, *-a:ra*, for non-color adjective, e.g., *netsn* 'narrow' vs. *netsn-a:ra* 'narrowish'. The plural circumfix *la-...-a* (2) only occurs in a closed class of nouns, while the default marking of the plural is suffixal in Svan.

Now, I propose that Svan requires the original linearization locus of a morpheme to be filled with some overt phonological material. Accordingly, the derivation proceeds as follows. Assuming that Vocabulary Insertion and linearization proceed from the bottom of a tree, the structure that needs to be linearized is shown in (6a). Linearization results in the string in (6b). Vocabulary insertion produces (6c). Given that VI *A-* is phonologically specified as a prefix, it docks at the nearest suitable position (6d).

However, the position in the original concatenated string needs to be filled, which is done by inserting an expletive exponent *E-* in that position (6e).

- (6)
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|----|--|----|---------------------------------------|
| a. | $ \begin{array}{c} \text{YP} \\ \diagdown \quad \diagup \\ \text{XP} \quad \text{Y}^0 \\ [\omega \ \omega \ \omega] \end{array} $ | b. | $[\omega \ \omega \ \omega] - [Y]$ |
| | | c. | $[\omega \ \omega \ \omega] - [A-]$ |
| | | d. | $[\omega \ \omega \ A-\omega] - []$ |
| | | e. | $[\omega \ \omega \ A-\omega] - [-E]$ |

I leave it for further research to find out what determines the choice of the expletive. Languages may vary in whether the requirement to fill the linearization locus is operative.

The analysis proposed here is somewhat similar to Late Fission. The latter is driven by an incomplete discharge of the features of a given morpheme by the available VI (Noyer 1992 and the subsequent literature). The crucial difference is that on my proposal, the expletive insertion is driven not by the non-discharge of some morphosyntactic features but rather by the need to preserve the initial concatenation order, *cf.* the idea of Crysmann & Bonami (2016: 321) that a morph may expone no features at all.

CONCLUSION. I advance a novel proposal about the derivation of circumfixes. It is not mutually exclusive with other such analyses – conceivably, different circumfixes have different derivations, possibly even in a single language. More generally, the idea that displacement of VIs from the locus of linearization of the respective morpheme is penalized in grammar would explain the relative rarity of infixes or genuine, i.e. underlyingly monomorphemic, circumfixes.