Einführung in die deutsche Wortbildungslehre. 5., durchgesehene und ergänzte Auflage

Johannes Erben


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The last four editions have established Johannes Erben’s 'Einführung in die deutsche Wortbildungslehre’ as one of the standard works in German linguistics, and certainly in this particular area of grammar; any reviewer of the current, 5th and revised edition inevitably has to deal with the shadow of the predecessors. To cut a long story short, the Einführung is still a significant introduction to, and reference for, the field and provides readers with a clear and thorough discussion of a rather complex area of the German language, addressing fundamental questions as well as the theoretical approaches. In fact, one may wonder whether there is anything in the field the book does not cover at least peripherally.

The book is divided into four major chapters, each one divided into several subsections, and into paragraphs – 227 in all – with each of them discussing a particular aspect. While this rather unusual organisation is confusing for readers unfamiliar with the system, it quickly turns out to be a clever way of structuring the book, making navigation very easy: the table of contents enables readers to find main parts and sections by page number; the (extensive) index refers readers to the paragraph describing a particular feature. Hence, the book can be used as either a textbook or a reference.

The book opens with a brief chapter on the history of research on German word formation. Erben provides a detailed account of the research history, starting with the earliest grammar on New High German by Albertus in the late 16th century, via Grimms’ work in the 1830s, to today’s the standard works in the field.

The second chapter, Grundlagen der Wortbildungslehre provides an overview of word formation in general. Following the historic overview in the previous chapter, Erben now elaborates on the raison d’être of the field, before moving on to discuss the fundamental aspects of word formation in some detail. The first part of the chapter
focuses on the internal structure of words, while the second half provides an overview of rules underlying these structures. While, in line with the purpose of the book, the chapter focuses on examples from German, the linguistically versed reader – in particularly those with a solid background in morphology – may find it a useful addition to literature in the field, for example for cross-linguistic comparisons. Those lacking any knowledge in morphology, however, may find the chapter rather difficult to understand: key terms are often only explained peripherally.

Having discussed word formation in more general terms, the third chapter focuses specifically on the German language. The chapter is divided into two parts: part one discusses the topic in synchronic terms, with an emphasis on word formation processes through composition and derivation; the second approaches it diachronically, looking at changes in word formation over time.

The discussion of synchronic word formation is split into two sections. Both focus on the three main open word classes - nouns, adjectives and verbs – providing an extensive description. Readers well-versed in the subject can find useful graphical summaries of all formation processes; however, those unfamiliar may find them confusing at best. The first half describes word formation by composition, that is, the formation of (new) words through the combination of two or more free morphemes. Grammatical aspects, such as changes in word class, are considered, as are semantic changes, which remind the reader of sometimes rather bizarre semantic properties: Erben uses *Milchkanne*, which refers to a container used to contain milk, while *Milchglas* refers to a type of glass – not a container.

The second half provides an in-depth insight into German word derivation, that is, word formation processes which, through affixation, lead to changes in semantics and/or word class. Each derivable word class – nouns, verbs and adjectives – are discussed in-depth, highlighting basic derivational processes and shedding light on some of the obscurities of the German language. Something of particular interest for non-native speakers of German is the discussion of diminution, whereby, in addition to suffixation, the vowel of the stem changes, usually towards a more centralised articulation: *Baum* becomes *Bäumchen*, *Bursche* becomes * Bürschlein*. Erben’s elaborations shed some light on the issue, but, inevitably, fail to provide an ultimate explanation. As before, several figures summarise the main findings, providing those familiar with the subject with an easy means of quickly refreshing one’s memory.
Part B of the third chapter discusses word formation in diachronic terms, aiming at providing some insight into the historical development of word formation German and resulting inconsistencies (p. 133). And it is at this point that one starts wondering whether it would have made more sense – in terms of readability – to use more chapters as opposed to chapter, parts, sections and paragraphs; in particular cover-to-cover readers seem likely to get lost in the current structure.

Particularly interesting is the section on the influence of morphemes from other languages (§209 onwards), which describes the inclusion of foreign morphemes historically, but neglects more recent developments – particularly irritating for an edition published against the background of increasing influence of English on the German language and the sometimes stunning processes these Anglicisms undergo when incorporated into German morphosyntax.

The forth and last chapter, Versuch einer Modellskizze, attempts, as the title implies, to sketch a model of word formation, taking into account the various processes discussed throughout the book. The model, summarised in a flowchart (p161), includes lexico-semantic and syntactic as well as pragmatic aspects, addressing the potential formation of new words if required by the context.

Overall, Erben’s ’Einführung’ is still one of the most comprehensive works on the topic, covering almost everything one may ever want to know about German word formation. It is, though, not an introduction in the classical sense, but requires a reasonable level of morphosyntactic background knowledge. Even the linguistically versed may stumble on some of the terminology. Non-native speakers of German – unless of native speaker like proficiency – may want to refer to something more basic before trying their luck on the book. Nevertheless, for anyone with a more in-depth interest in the topic, the ’Einführung’ is indispensable.