
The archbishop's archevil archenemy:

Contrastive perspectives on the emergence of an intensifying prefix

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When studying intensification, i.e. the modification of the scalable property of a lexical element by means of a semiotic resource (Cotgrove 2025), it can prove insightful to combine a diachronic with a contrastive perspective to assess cross-linguistic and language-specific pathways of development, taking into account the entanglement of language and culture as well as the contingencies of language-internal developments. In this paper, we examine a morphological phenomenon – the set of cognate prefixes including English *arch-*, Dutch *aarts-*, German *erz-*, and French *archi-* – that presents a particularly interesting case of intensification as it points to complex configurations of conceptual mappings determining its present-day usage.

We address the following research questions: Firstly, when and how did *arch-* develop into a (semi-)productively used pejorative intensifier? Secondly, is the pejorative meaning a property of the intensifying affix/the construction or does it rather arise from its bases? And thirdly, which commonalities and differences do the pathways of development of *arch-* and its cognates show across four different languages (German, Dutch, English, French)?

Drawing on data from the COW family of corpora (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012) as well as the TenTen corpus family (Jakubiček et al. 2013), we use a semantic vector-space approach to examine how homogeneous or heterogeneous the bases of the pattern are. This helps identify the level of abstraction at which a construction operates in a language at a given period. Applying these methods to diachronic data also enables us to identify emerging semantic classes of bases that lead to productive uses of the pattern at intermediate, meaning-based levels, and helps us to address both research questions. The cross-linguistic comparison between the three “Germanic sandwich” languages German, English, and Dutch on the one hand and French on the other also reveals interesting differences regarding the pathways of the intensifier in different languages and contexts.

References: • Cotgrove, L. (2025). Novel methods of intensification in young people’s digitally-mediated communication. In L. Cotgrove, L. Herzberg, & H. Längen (eds.). *Exploring digitally-mediated communication with corpora*. De Gruyter, 137–162. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111434018-007>. • Jakubiček, M., Kilgarriř, A., Kovář, V., Rychlý, P., & V. Suchomel (2013). *The TenTen Corpus Family*. <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/cl2013/doc/CL2013-ABSTRACT-BOOK.pdf> • Schäfer, R. & F. Bildhauer (2012). Building Large Corpora from the Web Using a New Efficient Tool Chain. In N. Calzolari et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of LREC 2012*, 486–493.