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From Noun to Evaluative Adjective: Conversion or Debonding? Dutch *Top* and Its Equivalents in German

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In this study, we address the ways in which nouns can give rise to new adjectives in Dutch and German. More specifically, the focus is on words with an evaluative meaning that can be used in a wide range of morphological and syntactic constructions in recent (and informal) language. For example, the German noun *Hammer* 'hammer' can be used in *Hammervorstellung* 'very good performance' or *hammer film* 'fantastic film'. In the literature, two distinct hypotheses can be found to account for the adjectival uses of such evaluative nouns. The debonding hypothesis states that the intensifying bound morpheme has developed into a free morpheme. The conversion hypothesis suggests that the new adjectival uses are the result of a syntactic reanalysis of an N as an A that takes place in the predicative position. In our case study, we analyze the synchronic bound and free uses of Dutch *top*, and we compare them with German *top* and *spitze*. We conclude that the emergence of the adjectival uses of these morphemes points toward an interaction between both processes involved, conversion and debonding.

1. Introduction.

In this paper, we address the ways in which nouns can give rise to new adjectives in Dutch and German. More specifically, the focus is on words with an evaluative meaning that can be used in a wide range of morphological and syntactic constructions. For instance, the Dutch noun *reus* 'giant' can be used as an intensifying prefixoid (namely, a compound member characterized by semantic specialization, see Booij 2010:57) in nominals, as in 1a and in adjectival compounds, as in 1b. It can also be

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found as a free adjective, as in 1c, and even as an adverb, as in 1d (see Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014).

(1) a. Was dit maar zo dan zou het een **reuzetijd** zijn voor de astronomen om die verschijnselen te bestuderen.

'If only this would be the case then it would be a **great time** (lit. 'a giant time') for the astronomers to study these phenomena.'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 97339326)

b. We zijn **reuzebenieuwd** naar ons kindje, duurt nu echt niet lang meer!

'We are **tremendously curious** (lit. 'giant-curious') to see our baby, now it really does not take long anymore!'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 1103349398)

c. Ik zou het gewoon weg [sic] **reuze** vinden als je eens langs kwam.
'I would just find it **great** (lit. 'giant') if you came along once.'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 58105846)

d. Onze kinderen hebben zich **reuze** vermaakt.
'Our kids enjoyed themselves **tremendously** (lit. 'giant').'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 887443565)

In German, similar cases can be found in informal language. An example is the use of *Hammer* lit. 'hammer' as an intensifying prefixoid meaning 'fantastic, extremely' in nominals and adjectival compounds, as in 2a and 2b, respectively. The word can also be used as an adjective—attributively, as in 2c, as well as predicatively, as in 2d.

(2) a. Das war ja eine **Hammervorstellung** am Samstag.
'That was a **very good** (lit. 'hammer') performance on Saturday.'
(DECOW2012-01: 842690358)

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b. Aber ich finde es echt **hammerhart**, was an der Schule Deiner Tochter abgelaufen ist.

'But I find it **really terrible** (lit. 'hammer hard') what happened in your daughter's school.'
(DECOW2012-01:919906514)

c. Infernal Affairs, **hammer** Film aus Hongkong
'Infernal Affairs, **fantastic** (lit. 'hammer') film from Hong Kong'
(DECOW2012-00: 213767518)

d. Das Bühnenbild war **hammer**.
'The stage setting was **fantastic** (lit. 'hammer').'
(DECOW2012-00: 198764709)

Hence, synchronic language use reflects a widespread distribution of such evaluative elements. It is obvious that the adjectival (and/or adverbial) uses are in most cases very recent and often still restricted to (very) informal language, as attested on the web. This is the case for the preceding examples, which are all drawn from the COW2012 web corpora (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012).[1]

The question is how to account for these new adjectives and/or adverbs. Are they diachronically related to the corresponding prefixoids, or did they derive directly from the corresponding nouns? Both hypotheses can be found in the literature. On the one hand, the former hypothesis states that the intensifying bound morpheme has developed into a free morpheme, by means of a process called DEBONDING (Norde 2009). Van Goethem & De Smet (2014), for instance, demonstrate how nouns may turn into adjectives via debonding in Dutch, English, and French. The latter hypothesis, on the other hand, suggests that the new adjectival uses are the result of an N-TO-A CONVERSION, subsequent to a syntactic reanalysis that would take place in the predicative position and later extend to other contexts and uses, such as a prefixoid, an attributive

[1] In the case of *reuze*, adjectival use is, however, already observed at the beginning of the 20th century (see Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014).

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adjective, and possibly an adverb. This view is supported by Pittner & Berman (2006) and Berman (2009) for examples from German.

Whereas the debonding hypothesis suggests that prefixoids are the source of the new adjectives, the conversion hypothesis supports the idea that predicatively used nouns are at the heart of the new categories. On the one hand, according to the debonding hypothesis, context expansion proceeds from the bound morpheme to the free morpheme in the attributive position and later on to the predicative position. The conversion hypothesis, on the other hand, postulates the reverse path of context expansion. The contrast between the hypotheses has never been studied in the literature: Studies dealing with this topic explain the rise of these new evaluative adjectives either by debonding or conversion. The tension between the hypotheses is the central topic of this paper.

In the next sections, we adduce arguments for both points of view. We start with the conversion hypothesis (section 2.1) and contrast it with the debonding hypothesis (section 2.2). In sections 3 and 4, then, we present and analyze corpus material from the COW webcorpora (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012) to test the validity of each analysis. We present a detailed synchronic case study on Dutch *top* 'top' (section 3) and compare the results with data for German *top* and *spitze* (which is semantically equivalent in the evaluative use to Dutch *top*, section 4).

The comparison of Dutch and German in this domain allows us to measure the impact of particular language-specific factors on the observed category changes. It is a well-known fact that German has a more complex inflectional system than Dutch, which could be an obstacle to the N-to-A category change, since the newly formed adjectives would have to conform to the inflectional rules of German. Still, we need to find an appropriate account for the cases in which the category changes do occur.

Our case studies demonstrate that the debonding and conversion hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, if the language-specific constraints allow for it, the processes may interact closely with each other. In other words, it is shown that the new evaluative adjectival uses may result from different source constructions, namely, the compound pattern and the predicatively used noun. Thus, we provide additional evidence to support the more general claim that language change, more often than commonly presumed, involves a multiplicity of sources and pathways (see De Smet et al. 2013).

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2. Category Change from Noun to Adjective.
In general, it can be stated that the category change from noun to adjective is quite marginal in Dutch and German. In comparison, this type of category change seems to be more regular in English, which might be due to the fact that English adjectives are not subject to inflection. De Smet (2012), for instance, describes the pathways taken by the English nouns *fun* and *key* in their recent development into adjectives. Being a mass noun, *fun* does not need a determiner in predicative position. This licenses, according to De Smet (2012), its reanalysis as an adjective, as shown in 3a; it then gradually acquires a number of typically adjectival uses such as degree modification, as shown in 3b, and attributive use, as shown in 3c.

(3) a. 'That's not work, that's **fun**,' declared Dolly.
(1914, COHA, in De Smet 2012:622)

b. It was **rather fun** playing at being a bachelor again.
(1935, COHA, in De Smet 2012:622)

c. And then slowly he began to realize the **fun** meaning of the thing.
(1944, COHA, in De Smet 2012:622)

Conversely, De Smet (2012:623–625) points out that the locus of reanalysis of English *key* is probably not the predicative position, but the attributive one. Support for this claim can be found in the unambiguously adjectival uses in which *key* is modified by the degree adverb *very*: The sequence *very key* occurs more frequently than expected in attributive position, as in 4a, than in predicative position, as in 4b.

(4) a. We are totally independent, and that's a **very key** point.
(2002, COCA, in De Smet 2012:624)

b. Oh, absolutely. Cars are **very key**.
(2003, COCA, in De Smet 2012:624)

The question whether English sequences such as *key point* in 4a should be analyzed as compounds or phrases has long been an object of much debate (see, for instance, Plag et al. 2008, Giegerich 2009 and,

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more generally, Schlücker & Hüning 2009 on the distinction between compounds and phrases).[2] It can at least be stated that their cohesion is much weaker than that of Dutch and German compounds. From this point of view, the pathway taken by English *key* from nominal premodifier to attributive adjective, and later to predicative adjective, is very reminiscent of the process of debonding explored in section 2.2. Conversely, the category change in the predicative context described for English *fun* is shown to be completely in line with the claims made by, for instance, Pittner & Berman (2006) and Berman (2009) about the N-to-A conversion of German intensifying nouns. These claims are presented in the following section.

2.1. Conversion.

Conversion is usually defined as "the derivation of a word without any phonological change of its base word" (Booij 2002:134).[3] With regard to the formation of adjectives, morphological conversion is usually treated as a marginal process at best. Erben (2000:101), for instance, claims that conversion is not relevant for the formation of adjectives in German, and Olsen (1990) even calls it ungrammatical.

For Dutch, it has been claimed that "there is no conversion of nouns or verbs into adjectives" and "that there is only conversion into verbs and nouns" (Booij 2002:137). N-A pairs do exist in the non-native lexicon of Dutch (for example, *het/de periodiek*$_{N}$ 'the periodical'–*periodiek*$_{ADJ}$ 'periodical'), but according to Booij (2002:137), in most cases "the meaning of the noun can be defined more easily as a compositional function of that of the adjective, than vice versa." A *periodiek* 'periodical' is a journal with a *periodiek* appearance.

German words such as *ernst* 'serious', *schmuck* 'pretty', *schade* 'too bad', *angst* 'anxious', *feind* 'hostile', and *schuld* 'guilty' are often mentioned as exceptional cases of N-to-A conversion resulting in

[2] For an overview of the criteria for distinguishing English phrases from compounds, see also Van Goethem & De Smet 2014:262–264.

[3] Besides category change or conversion, other terminology can be found in the literature, such as IMPLICIT DERIVATION (German *implizite Ableitung*, Erben 2000:101), IMPLICIT TRANSPOSITION or ZERO-DERIVATION (Dutch *impliciete transpositie* or *nulafleiding*, Booij & Van Santen 1998:30).

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defective adjectives that can in most cases only be used predicatively. Attributive use is not possible.

(5) a. Der Mann ist **schuld**. / (der *schulde Mann)
the man is guilty
'It's the man's fault.'

b. Dem Kind ist **angst**. / (das *angste Kind)
the.DAT kid.DAT is anxious
'The child is anxious.'

c. Die Frau ist jemandem **feind**. / (die *feinde Frau)
the woman is someone.DAT hostile
'The woman is hostile to someone.'

Moreover, adjectival use of *angst* or *feind* is becoming more and more outdated and restricted to certain idiomatic constructions, such as *angst und bange* 'worried to death' and *jemandem spinnefeind sein* 'to hate someone'.

Because of this defectivity, there has been a lot of discussion about the status of these words: Are they really to be analyzed as adjectives (Donalies 2002:133)? Usually, a derivational (or compositional) alternative is found next to the converted adjective: *angst–ängstlich* 'anxious', *ernst–ernsthaft* 'serious', *feind–feindlich* 'hostile', *schuld–schuldig* 'guilty'. Eichinger (2000:169), therefore, suggests that German does not really need this type of conversion. Derivation and compounding yield "better" adjectives, which can be inflected and (therefore) used in attributive position, too, as in *das ängstliche Kind* 'the anxious child'.[4]

[4] This is also true for color adjectives such as *aubergine* or *bordeaux*, often classified as adjectives in German as well as in Dutch. They are, however, problematic in attributive use, and both languages allow for the use of compounds instead (such as German *auberginefarben* and Dutch *auberginekleurig* 'aubergine-colored'). Again, these complex words can be inflected and they behave like regular adjectives in all contexts.

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While this seems to confirm the marginal status of N-to-A conversion, there is a group of nouns that does allow for this type of category change. As pointed out by Pittner & Berman (2006) for German, this N-to-A conversion occurs (with limited productivity) in substandard varieties. In particular, in youth language new adjectives are derived from nouns in evaluative expressions. This includes adjectives with a negative value (such as *mist, scheiße, kacke*, all meaning 'shit'), adjectives that can be used as evaluative intensifier with any specific connotative value (such as *hammer* 'fantastic' lit. 'hammer'), and adjectives such as *klasse* 'great, awesome, neat' or *spitze* 'top' that indicate a positive value.

According to Pittner & Berman (2006) and Berman (2009), such adjectives have to be seen as the product of a conversion process in predicative use. This is, however, not to be seen as a case of morphological conversion in the strict sense, which would imply a productive morphological pattern of category change. Instead, one is dealing here with a syntactic reanalysis triggered by an ambiguous use in a particular syntactic context, namely, the predicative one. In constructional terms, this syntactic reanalysis is the result of CONSTRUCTIONAL OVERRIDE and COERCION (Michaelis 2004): The noun used predicatively begins to show adjectival properties because the predicative position is typically filled by adjectives.[5] The relevant steps can be illustrated as follows, with *Bombe* 'bomb' used metaphorically as an equivalent for *fantastic*:

(6) a. Das Wetter ist **die Bombe**
'The weather is **fantastic** (lit. 'the bomb').'
(DECOW2012-00: 344731138)

b. Ich habe es mit Adobe Acrobat erstellt und die Qualität ist **Bombe**!
'I made it with Adobe Acrobat and the quality is **fantastic** (lit. 'bomb')!' (DECOW2012-00: 122362013)

[5] See Lauwers 2014 for an application of the concepts of constructional override and coercion to French nouns used in adjectival contexts.

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c. Der Freistoss von Grlić ist **bombe**!
'The free kick by Grlić is **fantastic** (lit. 'bomb')!'
(DECOW2012-00: 719211895)

While 6a is a clear example of *Bombe* being a noun, accompanied by its article, 6b,c are ambiguous. *Bombe* could be a bare noun or adjective. The only clue is the spelling of the first letter (capital or not). This is of course a highly problematic criterion, but since all nouns in German are spelled with a capital letter, one might assume that the lowercase letter <b>, as in 6c, can be seen as an indication that the writer might interpret *bombe* as an adjective.

There are, however, more criteria. While 7a is an example of an NP with an inflected adjective (*total-e*), 7b, despite the capital, and 7c seem to be examples of an adjective accompanied by an intensifying adverbial (*total*).

(7) a. Die Stimme ist **die totale Bombe**.
'The voice is **absolutely fantastic** (lit. 'the total bomb').'
(DECOW2012-00: 576901309)

b. Und die Stimme ist einfach **total Bombe**!
'The voice is just **absolutely fantastic** (lit. 'totally bomb')!'
(DECOW2012-00: 614665045)

c. Trotzdem sieht das Spiel eigentlich **total bombe** aus.
'Nevertheless, the game looks **absolutely fantastic** (lit. 'totally bomb').' (DECOW2012-06: 1009330511)

Moreover, like all adjectives, *bombe* has to be negated with *nicht*. Negation with *kein/e(r)* leads almost automatically to the literal interpretation of the noun *Bombe* 'bomb'.

(8) a. Der Stil war jetzt **nicht bombe**, aber ich konnte damit leben
'The style was **not fantastic** (lit. 'not bomb'), but I could live with it.'
(DECOW2012-06: 701238416)

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b. Ich finde sein Rap sowohl technisch als auch inhaltlich **nicht Bombe**, aber...

'Technically and with respect to its content, I find his rap **not fantastic** (lit. 'not bomb'), but...' (DECOW2012-06: 845751199)

Replacing *nicht* by *keine* in these examples would lead to semantically odd sentences.

Although *bombe* behaves like an adjective in predicative position, there are arguments against its adjectival status. Words such as *bombe* or *klasse* cannot be inflected, which becomes problematic in attributive position, where German adjectives need to be inflected for gender, number, and case. Therefore, the status of these words is controversial in the literature (Elsen 2011:163). Example 9 demonstrates that the absence of inflection cannot be the consequence of the stem ending in schwa, since the ordinary adjective *böse* 'evil' is inflected, while evaluative *klasse* 'neat, great' is not.

(9) a. *ein böser Mann* 'an evil man', *ein böses Kind* 'an evil child', *eine böse Frau* 'an evil woman', *die bösen Männer* 'the evil men'

b. *ein klasse (*klasser) Mann* 'a neat man', *ein klasse (*klasses) Kind* 'a great child', *eine klasse Frau* 'a neat woman', *die klasse (*klassen) Männer* 'the neat men'

Adjectives such as *klasse* 'great, neat', *bombe* 'terrific', and *schrott* 'bad, absurd' are used more frequently in predicative than in attributive position. When used attributively, they do not adopt all the characteristics of normal adjectives. Therefore, Pittner & Berman (2006) and Berman (2009) suggest that it is the predicative position that has to be seen as the source context of the reanalysis:

> It is argued that N→A conversion is linked to the predicative position, which, due to its syntactic and semantic characteristics, is well suited to conversion. Once the adjectival use is established in the predicative position, it can spread to other syntactic environments.
>
> (Pittner & Berman 2006:233)

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The predicative position seems to be the ideal locus for this type of category change, not only because nouns can be used without a determiner in this specific context, but also because adjectives are not inflected in the predicative position, both in German and Dutch. Hence, the distinction between nouns and adjectives is probably most blurred in this specific syntactic context and may therefore license N-to-A reanalysis.

Not only in German, but also in Dutch, certain nouns may be used predicatively with an evaluative value, especially in informal language; the use of a determiner may then be obligatory, as in 10, optional, as in 11, or ungrammatical, as in 12.

(10) a. Uiteindelijk stort ik mij toch op de films (RIO is **de max** trouwens) en series.[6]

'Eventually I throw myself into films (RIO is by the way **terrific**) (lit. 'the max') and series.'

(NLCOW14AX01: 474420222)

b. *RIO is **max**.

(11) a. Een depressie is **de hel**
'A depression is **hell** (lit. 'the hell').'

(NLCOW14AX01: 1292146)

b. Kleding kopen is **hel**[7]
'Buying clothes is **hell**.' (NLCOW14AX01: 563759505)

[6] *Max* in this case is probably an abbreviation of the noun *maximum*. It should however be observed that whereas *maximum* is a neuter word in Dutch (*het maximum*), the intensifying use of *max* is necessarily preceded by the determiner *de*.

[7] As observed by one of our anonymous reviewers, the use of predicative *hel* without a determiner is possibly a calque from English.

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(12) a. Niets dan superlatieven over het vlees, maar ook de vis is **klasse**

'Nothing but superlatives about the meat, but the fish is **first-class** too (lit. 'class').' (NLCOW14AX01: 13486760)

b. *maar ook de vis is de **klasse**

Just as in German, the predicative use of bare Dutch evaluative nouns may be reinterpreted as adjectival, and language users may therefore extend the use of these intensifiers to new unambiguously adjectival contexts. This can be illustrated, for instance, by Dutch *klasse* that can be modified by degree adverbs, as in 13a, and used attributively, as in 13b.

(13) a. Het ontwerp is **echt klasse**, de afwerking is oke en de prijs stelt tevreden

'The design is **really first-class** (lit. 'class'), the finish is okay and the price is satisfying.' (NLCOW14AX01: 340006326)

b. Ard schreef: 'Makaay was voor Feyenoord **een klasse spits**'

'Ard wrote: 'Makaay was a **first-class** (lit. 'class') forward for Feyenoord.' (NLCOW2014: 16970305)

As claimed before, this kind of adjectival use should, in our view, be distinguished from true morphological conversions, which would explain why Booij (2002) does not mention N-to-A conversion. Nouns and verbs obtained by conversion—such as *de gek* 'the madman' or *fiets-en* 'to cycle'—immediately adopt the syntactic and morphological behavior typical of nouns and verbs. In contrast, the adjectival uses of nouns such as *klasse* are subject to rigid syntactic and morphological constraints—they are highly context-sensitive—and may expand in a gradual way. For example, *klasse* does not have the typical adjectival morphological comparative and superlative forms (**is klasser dan*, **is het klassest*), and their analytic comparative and superlative forms are very rare and sound odd *(?is meer klasse dan* lit. 'is more class than', *?is het meest klasse* lit. 'is the most class'). These observations also hold for English: De Smet &

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Van de Velde (2014) claim that new English denominal adjectives, such as *sneak*, are often defective (for example, *a sneak atomic attack* versus **very sneak*).

In sum, the hypothesis formulated for German by Pittner & Berman (2006)—we still refer to it as the conversion hypothesis for the sake of convenience—is not implausible for Dutch, but it may, like in German, not result in full-fledged adjectives. In the next section, we examine the extent to which the debonding hypothesis could provide an alternative explanation for adjectives derived from (bound) nouns in Dutch and German.

2.2. Debonding.

Debonding is one of the subtypes of degrammaticalization distinguished by Norde (2009). The process is defined as "a composite change whereby a bound morpheme in a specific linguistic context becomes a free morpheme" (Norde 2009:186) and is typically marked by the following parameters: SEVERANCE (the emergence of free morphemes out of bound morphemes), RECATEGORIALIZATION (category change), SCOPE EXPANSION (for example, scope over a phrase), and FLEXIBILIZATION (syntactic context expansion; Norde 2009:186–227). Norde (2009) focuses on the debonding of clitics, and inflectional and derivational affixes. Norde & Van Goethem (2015) demonstrate that (Dutch) affixoids may undergo debonding as well.

Just like the context-sensitive N-to-A category change described in the preceding section, debonding and subsequent recategorialization also differ from morphological derivation through conversion. As stated in Van Goethem & De Smet 2014:253,

> [debonding] depends on the occurrence of the noun in the specific morphosyntactic constellation of compound(-like) sequences, and typically occurs when the noun has already obtained some qualifying adjective-like function […]. This is also reflected in its gradualness.

Logically, when an affixoid undergoes debonding and is reanalyzed as an adjective, attributive uses tend to appear before predicative uses (see the case study on French *clé* in Amiot & Van Goethem 2012 and Van Goethem 2015, and the study on Dutch *reuze* in Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014).

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Van Goethem & De Smet (2014) investigate how the debonding process in Dutch, English, and French is impacted by three different factors: (a) the semantics of the bound noun or affixoid subject to debonding, (b) the degree of prosodic and morphological cohesion of the sequence, and (c) the impact of adjective inflection in the language. With regard to the semantics, debonding in all three languages is typical of nouns with a qualifying (often evaluative/intensifying) function, for example, *un secteur économique clé* 'a key economic sector'.

Besides this semantic constraint, there are further language-specific, essentially morphological, constraints on debonding, namely, compound cohesion and inflection. These constraints account for the fact that the English sequences with *key* and their French counterparts with *clé*, for instance, act differently from the Dutch compounds beginning with *sleutel*, for example, **sleutel economische sector* (Amiot & Van Goethem 2012). Van Goethem & De Smet (2014) therefore argue that the likelihood of debonding largely depends on the degree of cohesion of the compounds or compound-like sequences, manifested, among others, through spelling and word stress. Since Dutch compounds show stronger cohesion than their French and English counterparts, debonding is less likely to occur in Dutch.

Finally, as already observed in the previous sections, reanalysis of a noun as an adjective may be favored in languages with little or no adjectival inflection, as in French and English, respectively. For the same reason, debonding is disfavored in Dutch.[8] Van Goethem & Hiligsmann (2014) investigated the debonding of the Dutch prefixoid *reuze*, derived from the noun *reus* 'giant', and confirmed that its autonomous uses may display all of the typical parameters of the process. Some relevant examples are given in 1 above: In 1c, *reuze* acts as a predicative adjective, which is suggestive of its flexibilization. Example 1d demonstrates that the prefixoid can be recategorized not only as an adjective, but also as an adverb. Example 14 illustrates the possibility of scope expansion,

[8] Van Goethem & De Smet (2014) furthermore argue that in the case of Dutch, an additional process should be taken into account, that is, the possibility of clipping of N+A compounds, for example, *stapel* 'madly in love' lit. 'pile' < *stapelverliefd* 'madly in love' lit. 'pile-in love'. See also Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014 on the possible clipping of Dutch compounds beginning with *reuze* 'great, very' lit. 'giant'.

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reuze being used as an attributive adjective with scope over an entire noun phrase: *megalithische steenblokken* 'megalithic blocks of stone'.

(14) Onder de sedimentlagen dook een verbazingwekkende en geheimzinnige steenstructuur op met **reuze** megalitische [sic] steenblokken.

'Under the sediment layers popped up an amazing and mysterious stone structure with **gigantic** (lit. 'giant') megalithic stone blocks.'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 112920660)

The fact that as an adjective and adverb *reuze* preserves the form of the prefixoid *reuze* (as in *reuzespannend* 'very exciting') and not that of the corresponding noun (*reus* 'giant'), as well as its intensifying value, provides strong support for the debonding account: *Reuze* is just not a plausible outcome of N-to-A conversion.[9]

Van Goethem & De Smet (2014) do not include German in their analysis of debonding processes. However, drawing on their data, they assume "that a language such as German, characterized by very cohesive compounds and a more complex inflectional system than Dutch will even allow less debonding or may exploit yet other pathways" (Van Goethem & De Smet 2014:272). This might be a plausible explanation for the absence of the debonding analysis in the literature on German, where the emergence of intensifying adjectives is seen exclusively as a case of syntactic reanalysis (conversion; see section 2.1).

There are, however, indications that debonding might play a role in German, too. Norde & Van Goethem (2014), for instance, present some evidence for debonding in the case of the adjectival use of German *riesen* 'giant'. Because of its form, this case cannot be analyzed as conversion from the noun *Riese* 'giant'. It has to be seen as a reinterpretation of the

[9] The diachronic data described in Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014 support the analysis of *reuze* in terms of debonding. Initially the noun *reus* had the literal meaning *giant* and could also have a qualifying (*enormous*, *huge*) or classifying function (*belonging to a group of species characterized by large size*). During the 19th century, when embedded in compounds, the morpheme grammaticalized from the noun into an intensifying prefixoid meaning 'great; very'. Subsequently, from the 20th century on, *reuze* developed adjectival and adverbial uses.

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first element of the nominal compound, including the linking element *-n-* (for example, *Riesenaufwand* > *riesen Aufwand* 'giant effort'), which competes against the derivational adjective *riesig* 'giant'.

In the previous section, we discussed Dutch *klasse* in the context of the conversion approach. The use of its German cognate *klasse* 'great, neat' shows some variation that might be seen as support for the debonding analysis: *ein Klassewagen / Klasse Wagen / klasse Wagen* 'a great car', *ein Klassespieler / Klasse Spieler / klasse Spieler* 'an excellent player', etc. The spelling *klasse* indicates an adjectival interpretation of the word, despite the omission of the inflectional ending *-r*. Inflected uses are attested, but only very rarely, and they are judged very odd by native speakers of German. For *klasser Spieler* we only found one example:

(15) Ein **klasser Spieler** aber was kann er gegen Yao machen?
'An **excellent player** (lit. 'class player') but what can he do against Yao?'
(DECOW2012-00: 635639557)

At first sight, the existence of such variants might be seen as an illustration of an ongoing debonding process: *Klassespieler* > *Klasse Spieler* > *klasse Spieler* > *klasser Spieler*. On closer inspection, however, frequency data do not, or at least not convincingly, support this analysis. They rather point in the opposite direction. The combination *klasse Spieler* is attested 124 times in DECOW2012-00, while *Klassespieler* occurs only 55 times. Therefore, *Klassespieler* could also be an A+N compound with the evaluative adjective *klasse* as its first element. The adjective itself, then, is probably the result of a syntactic reanalysis in predicative position, and its use in attributive position is to be seen as context expansion. The "in-between spelling" *Klasse Spieler* (with capital *K*) is not conclusive: It might be seen as an indication of ongoing debonding, but it could also be a mere spelling variant, not unusual in informal language.

In German, therefore, the conversion analysis seems to be the most straightforward explanation for the emergence of evaluative adjectives. Debonding effects might strengthen the adjectival interpretation, and in some cases (such as *riesen*), they offer an adequate explanation for the adjectival use. In what follows, we investigate if both strategies—conversion and debonding—can also account for the adjectival uses of

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Dutch *top* (section 3) and its German counterparts *top* and *spitze* (section 4).

3. Dutch *Top.*

In this section, we investigate how the adjectival uses of the Dutch noun *top* should be accounted for. *Top* is frequently used as a compound member (as in *topsport* 'top-level sport'), and more specifically, as an intensifying prefixoid (as in *topvakantie* 'excellent holiday'). The noun *top* can act as an evaluative predicate, too, with or without a determiner:

(16) a. Dampkapfilter voor 2 EUR uit de action die je zelf kunt uitsnijden is **de top**!!!

'Cooker hood filter for 2 EUR from the action shop that you can cut yourself is **excellent** (lit. 'the top')!!!"
(NLCOW14AX01: 200221779)

b. Dit is een hele gezellige winkel waar je veel kunt krijgen en het personeel is **top**.

'This is a very cosy shop where you can get a lot of stuff and the staff is **excellent** (lit. 'top').' (NLCOW14AX01: 17599092)

The data for this case study are drawn from the COW corpus, a gigatoken database of tagged and lemmatized texts from the web, compiled at Freie Universität Berlin (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012).[10] Since this corpus provides large data sets from different languages, including Dutch and German, often from informal sources such as forums and blogs, it is perfectly suited for a comparative study of innovative constructions.

For the corpus study of Dutch *top(-)*, a random sample of 1000 occurrences of both bound and free forms was extracted from the

[10] Information about the COW project can be found at http://corporafromtheweb.org/. The corpus has been available, after registration, at http://hpsg.fu-berlin.de/cow/. A new version of the corpora and of the search interface is available as of 2015 at http://webcorpora.org/.

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NLCOW2012-00X subcorpus. Our aim was to compare bound *top-* within compounds with free *top* with a potentially adjectival (or possibly adverbial) function. Therefore, we had to discard some incomplete and repeated examples, as well as a range of irrelevant hits. The latter included non-compounds beginning with *top*, as in *topper* 'topper, hit', *toppen* 'tops; to top'; *top* unambiguously used as a noun, as in *de top van de berg* 'the top of the mountain', *een zomerse top* 'a summery top (t-shirt)', *de top 10* 'the top 10'; *top* used in (English) collocations, as in *op en top* 'all over, out and out', *tip top* 'first-class, in perfect shape', *van top tot teen* 'from top to toe, from head to foot', *top down, over the top*).[11] After this clean-up of both types of sample, we ended up with 783 occurrences of bound *top-* and 126 potentially adjectival/adverbial free forms of *top* (that is, followed by a phrase or used predicatively or as an interjection).[12]

Following the previous accounts, under the debonding hypothesis attributive uses should be more frequent than predicative ones (because of the diachronic priority), and the free usages of *top* should be semantically related to its bound forms. Alternatively, under the conversion hypothesis, predicative uses should be more frequent than attributive ones (because of the predicative source context), and the free adjective *top* should preserve the semantics of the corresponding noun. In what follows, we first compare the semantics of bound and free *top(-)* (section 3.1) before examining the constructions both types of morphemes occur in (section 3.2). On the basis of these data, we determine whether free *top* should be considered the result of either N-to-A conversion or debonding of compounds beginning with *top-* (section 3.3).

3.1. Semantic Types.

With regard to the semantics of *top*, the following types can be distinguished. First, *top(-)* can have a concrete, spatial meaning: 'upper'. This meaning is restricted to the bound forms:

[11] The *de top 10* 'the top 10' type may undergo "univerbation" and is then written as one word, for example, *de toptien* 'the top ten'.

[12] However, English loanwords have not been excluded; interestingly, they often present both ways of spelling, for example, *top manager* (spelling as an English compound) versus *topmanager* (spelling as a Dutch compound).

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(17) a. Bovendien zit onder de **toplaag** vooral zand en dan klei (lijkt het) dus ik zal er sowieso nieuwe aarde op moeten storten als ik bollen wil planten.

'In addition, under the **top layer** is mainly sand and then clay (it seems), so I should throw new earth on anyway if I want to plant bulbs.' (NLCOW2012-00X: 969222)

b. Dat had ze al laten horen in de drie Mozart - aria's, beeldschoon en intelligent voorgedragen, zij het naar mijn smaak met iets te veel hoogfrequent vibrato in de **topnoten**.

'She had already shown this in the three Mozart-arias, beautifully and intelligently executed, but to my taste with a little too much high frequency vibrato in the **high notes** (lit. 'top notes').' (NLCOW2012-00X: 9356848)

Second, *top(-)* can have an abstract metaphorical meaning, expressing that someone or something belongs to the highest or best class. This meaning is by far the most frequent one when *top-* forms part of a compound: It applies to more than 91% of the 783 compounds in our sample, as in 18a,b. However, this value is also widespread in the free forms (about 44% of the data), as shown in 18c. In combination with measurable entities, *top(-)* may also mean 'maximal', as in 18d.

(18) a. Op dit festival zijn verschillende **topdansers** van over de hele wereld aanwezig om salsa workshops te geven.

'Various **top dancers** from around the whole world are present at this festival to give salsa workshops.'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 103449)

b. Je hebt hier helemaal gelijk: een sterrenrestaurant moet constante **topkwaliteit** leveren, zowel in de keuken als in de bediening.

'You are absolutely right here: a starred restaurant has to provide constant **top quality**, both in the kitchen and in the service.'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 237968)

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c. Zo komen op **top niveau** ook banen vrij.
'This way, jobs become available at **top level** too'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 12028835)

d. Na (goede) afloop bleek dat ze maar liefst 94 km reed in 35 minuten en een **topsnelheid** haalde van 193 km/u.

'Afterwards it turned out that she drove not less than 94 kilometers in 35 minutes and reached a **top speed** of 193 km/h.'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 4783532)

Finally, *top(-)* can be used with an intensifier meaning 'excellent, great, enormous(ly)'. Because of its specialized meaning within the compound, *top-* can then be considered a prefixoid (see, among others, Leuschner 2010, Hüning & Booij 2014, Norde & Van Goethem 2015). However, the use as a true intensifying prefixoid is quite exceptional: It only applies to 4.85% of the bound forms, as, for example, in 19a. As a free morpheme, on the contrary, the intensifying function is the most common one, covering more than 56% of the sample. *Top* can then be used as an attributive or predicative intensifier, as in 19b and 19c, respectively.

(19) a. We hadden wel een **toptijd** in het centrum van Milaan.
'We did have a **great time** (lit. 'top time') in the center of Milan.'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 6265357)

b. Verouderd hotel, maar **top sfeertje** hier!
'Outdated hotel, but **great atmosphere** here (lit. 'top atmosphere')!' (NLCOW2012-00X: 256595)

c. Niet alleen de expeditieweek was **top**, ook het gehele traject vanaf de kick off hebben we als prettig ervaren.
'Not only was the expedition week **excellent** (lit. 'top'), we have also experienced the whole process from the kick-off as pleasant.' (NLCOW2012-00X: 4166540)

This semantic classification is not as straightforward as it may look at first sight. The same compound can, for instance, belong to different

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semantic classes according to the context in which it is used; therefore, every occurrence had to be interpreted in a very careful way. This is especially the case for the metaphorical and intensifying semantic types, which are closely related to each other by Lakoff & Johnson (1980)'s metaphor "Good is up." For instance, *toptijd* is clearly evaluative in 19a, but when it is used to describe the achievements of an athlete, it belongs to the second semantic class and should be interpreted as "record time". Furthermore, whereas *toplaag* in 17a can be placed in the spatial category (with *top* meaning 'upper'), this is not the case in 20, where *top* means 'belonging to the best class in a hierarchy'.

(20) Het begrotingstekort en de almaar toenemende armoede zijn de eerste tekenen van verval, maar het lijkt erop dat een anonieme **toplaag** kost wat kost de macht wil houden.

'The budget deficit and the ever increasing poverty are the first signs of decay, but it seems that an anonymous **top layer** absolutely wants to preserve its power.' (NLCOW2012-00X: 10354221)

Table 1 summarizes the frequencies of the different semantic types for both the bound and free forms of *top(-)*.

Semantic types	**Bound *top-***	**Free *top***
Spatial: upper	31 (3.96%)	0
Metaphorical: belonging to the best / highest class; maximal	714 (91.19%)	55 (43.65%)
Intensifying: excellent, great, enormous(ly)	38 (4.85%)	71 (56.35%)
Totals	**783**	**126**

Table 1. Semantic types of bound and free *top(-)*.

The data show important semantic differences between bound and free *top(-)*: Bound *top-* can have a spatial meaning, albeit marginal, which is not observed in the free uses. The metaphorical meaning appears far more frequently with the bound forms, while the intensifying meaning is

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typically associated with free *top*. These semantic differences already indicate that bound and free *top(-)* are not merely spelling variants of each other. However, they do not yet allow one to determine which process—debonding or conversion—accounts for the adjectival uses of *top*. Therefore, we have to take a closer look at the different construction types in which the bound and free forms may appear (see section 3.2). For the time being, we can nevertheless advance the following hypothesis. The fact that free *top* is used significantly more often with the intensifying meaning, whereas bound *top-* is used significantly more often with the metaphorical meaning, may indicate one of the following: Either bound *top-* is not a result of debonding (but of conversion), or the debonding process involved is subject to considerable semantic constraints. The latter would be in line with Van Goethem & De Smet (2014), who demonstrate that debonding mainly applies to compound members with an evaluative meaning (see section 2.2).

As shown by the examples above, *top(-)* mostly combines with a nominal R1 (that is, the right-hand compound member in bound constructions, or the first word to the right in free constructions), even though it can also occur with words belonging to other classes (see section 3.2). When comparing the most frequent R1s, we also observed some interesting differences between bound and free *top(-)*. The most frequent R1s for bound *top-* are *sport*, *club(s)*, and *ambtena(a)r(en)* 'official(s)', whereas the most frequent R1s for free *top* are *leverancier* 'supplier', *manager*, and *secret*.[13] What also attracted our attention is that in the latter case, two out of the three nouns are English loanwords: *manager* and *secret*. The spelling of the words *top manager* and *top secret* is most probably influenced by the English spelling of compounds, even though *topmanager* also occurs—and is even highly ranked—among the most frequent compounds (in seventh position).

If one includes the less frequent nominal R1s for free *top*, a general tendency emerges: 10 out of 58 free occurrences (17.24%) involve English loanwords (*top cast, top entertainment, top service*, etc.). In contrast, this only applies to 45 out of the 774 (5.81%) compounds

[13] These results should, however, be interpreted with caution because of the considerable differences in absolute frequencies: Bound *top-* combines in 774 examples with a noun, whereas there are only 58 instances of free *top* with scope over a noun or noun phrase.

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beginning with *top-* (*topteam, topcoating, topcoach*, etc.). Even if spelling alone is not sufficient to explain the emergence of the free forms and the semantic differences observed above, one needs to take into account the English origin of certain *top*+N sequences as a crucial factor that has triggered some of the free forms.

Another formal factor that may influence the spelling of compounds was pointed out in Van Goethem & Hiligsmann's (2014) study of the debonding of Dutch *reuze-*, namely, the length and complexity of the compounds. In six out of the 58 cases (10.34%), *top* has scope over another nominal compound, as in *top handballanden* 'top handball countries'. It is very probable that this separation is motivated by a concern for the readability of compounds that would be too long and too complex if written as one word. Moreover, spelling such compounds as two words may disambiguate the scope of *top*, as shown in 21.

(21) Van **top zeurzangeres** Erykah Badu tot aan het zingende nichtje van Astrud Gilberto

'From first-class (lit. 'top') nagging singer Erykah Badu to the singing niece of Astrud Gilberto.'

(NLCOW2012-00X: 12331275)

In 21, *top* has scope over the head of the following compound, *zangeres* '(female) singer' and not over its modifier, *zeur* '(to) nag'.

3.2. Construction Types.

Table 2 compares the construction types, in which bound and free *top(-)* are found.

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R1: part of speech (POS) of the element modified by *top(-)*	**Bound *top-***	**Free *top***
N/NP (*top-* in a nominal compound/ *top* as attributive adjective)	774 (98.85%)	60 (47.62%)
Adj (*top-* in an adjectival compound/ *top* as adverb with scope over Adj)	8 (1.02%)	1 (0.79%)
Adv (*top-* in an adverbial compound)	1 (0.13%)	0
V/VP (*top* as adverb with scope over V/VP)	0	2 (1.59%)
No R1 (*top* as predicative adjective/ as interjection)	0	63 (50.00%)
Totals	**783**	**126**

Table 2. Construction types for bound and free *top(-)*.

As the results in table 2 indicate, bound and free *top(-)* occur in highly divergent construction types. Bound *top-* is almost exclusively found in nominal compounds (for example, *topvorm* 'top form', *topinkomens* 'top incomes', *topattractie* 'top attraction'). In contrast, cases in which free *top* has scope over a noun are significantly less common (about 48% of the data). As already observed, such cases include many nominal compounds borrowed from English (*top manager, top secret*) and constructions in which *top* has scope over another compound. However, there are also a few cases in which *top* has scope over a phrase, as illustrated in 22. This is a clear sign of scope expansion, one of the typical parameters of debonding (see section 2.2).

(22) Wat is het verschil tussen een **top technisch accountmanager** en een gewone technisch accountmanager?

What is the difference between a **first-class** (lit. 'top class') **technical account manager** and an ordinary technical account manager?' (NLCOW2012-00X: 6061184)

Moreover, the fact that *top technisch accountmanager* is coordinated with *gewone technisch accountmanager* indicates that *top* has the status

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of an attributive adjective, in the same way as *gewone* 'ordinary'. This status should also be assigned to *top* in 23, in which it is coordinated with the adjective *lagere* 'lower'.

(23) Bij zowel **top als lagere managers**, en politici, valt dan te constateren dat vormen van disfunctioneren die bij lagere maatschappelijke klassen tot ontslag zouden leiden, bij de toplagen dat heel vaak niet gebeurt.

'In the case of both **top and lower managers** and politicians, one can see that forms of dysfunction that would result in discharge in lower social classes, this does not happen very often in the case of the top layers.' (NLCOW2012-00X: 5823077)

In precisely half of the data, free *top* is found in predicative position or as an interjection, as shown in 24b. This implies that no immediate R1 can be identified. In all 63 cases with *top* used predicatively or as an interjection, it conveys the intensifying meaning *excellent*, which may also explain why it is so often accompanied by a degree adverb in this context. In 24a,b, the forms *absoluut* 'absolutely' and *echt* 'really' are unambiguously adverbial degree modifiers. If they were prenominal adjectives, they would have the inflected forms *absolut**e*** 'absolute' and *echt**e*** 'real'. This signals that *top* should be assigned adjectival status in these examples. *Helemaal* 'completely' in 24c is a degree adverb, without adjectival counterpart.

(24) a. Petje af Tim, ik vind het **absoluut top** wat je neer weet te zetten!

Hats off Tim, I think it's **excellent** (lit. 'absolutely top') what you are realizing! (NLCOW2012-00X: 5354449)

b. Dus Ruud gaat vanuit het motorbootje wat plaatjes schieten waarvan het resultaat op deze pagina, **echt top**!

So Ruud is going to shoot some pictures from the motor boat, from which the results [will appear] on this page, **really great** (lit. 'really top')!' (NLCOW2012-00X: 5343777)

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c. Ze moet van hem 'lieve brieven' schrijven, om duidelijk te maken dat hun relatie nog **helemaal top** is.

'He wants her to write 'sweet letters', to make sure that their relationship is still **perfect** (lit. 'completely top').'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 5465155)

These predicative cases are at the heart of our study since they may be accounted for in two ways. First, they may result from flexibilization, typically involved in debonding. This would imply that *top* has undergone context expansion from the attributive to the predicative position. Second, they may be accounted for by N-to-A reanalysis in the predicative position (conversion). However, both accounts still raise some important questions. On the one hand, as shown earlier, predicative *top*, attributive *top*, and bound *top-* are semantically very different: Predicative *top* is always intensifying; attributive (free) *top* has an intensifying meaning in five instances out of the 60 (8.33%); for bound *top-* this intensifying value is even more marginal, that is, only 4.85% of the occurrences in the corpus sample. On the other hand, if the predicative use of *top* were the result of the reanalysis of the noun *top*, one would expect the noun phrase *de top* to be used productively in this position too, but this seems not to be the case. In the original sample of 1000 random examples of free *top* (including the clearly nominal ones), only two instances of this construction occurred:

(25) a. Thailand is ALTIJD gezellig, warm of regen. Mij maakt het niet uit, er zijn is **de top**!

'Thailand is ALWAYS cozy, sun or rain. It does not matter to me, being there is **great** (lit. 'the top')!'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 58816)

b. Jullie zijn **de top**!
You are **the best** (lit. 'the top')!' (NLCOW2012-00X: 887086)

Finally, scope over adjectives, adverbs and verbs is marginal or inexistent for both the free and the bound morpheme. Bound *top-* is almost exclusively used in nominal compounds, but adjectival/adverbial

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compounds do occur. In these cases, *top* functions as an intensifying prefixoid:

(26) a. De nieuwbouw van woningen op de resterende gemeentelijke locaties is als volgt verdeeld: eenzesde betaalbaar, tweederde middelduur en eenzesde duur of **topduur**.

The construction of new homes on the remaining municipal locations is divided as follows: one sixth affordable, two-thirds medium-expensive and one sixth **extremely expensive** (lit. 'top expensive').' (NLCOW2012-00X: 5040222)

b. Autootje **topzwaar** volgestouwd met versterkers en een drumstel.

'Tiny car **heavily** (lit. 'top heavily') crammed with amplifiers and a drum kit.' (NLCOW2012-00X: 6421617)

In the few cases in which free *top* does have scope over an adjective or verb phrase, it acts as an intensifying degree adverb:

(27) a. Maar ook dat blijft voor de coaches tot-op het laatste moment **top secret**.

'But that also remains **top secret** for the coaches until the last moment.' (NLCOW2012-00X: 359520)

b. De trainer **deed het top**.
'The coach **did an excellent job** (lit. 'did it top').'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 2890471)

From this data analysis, it can be concluded that bound and free *top(-)* display a very different semantic and constructional behavior. In the next section, we interpret these results in the light of the two theoretical hypotheses presented above.

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3.3. Debonding or Conversion?

The key question of this study is to examine if the free uses of Dutch and German intensifying prefixoids should be considered the result of a debonding process, or of an N-to-A category change in predicative position. With respect to Dutch *top*, we can now draw the following conclusions. It is true that certain free uses should probably be seen as just a matter of spelling (for example, the English borrowings and the separated spelling of long compounds, or a more general tendency to write compounds as separate words). Yet the spelling factor cannot account for the significant divergences between the bound and the free forms with respect to the semantics and construction types they appear in.

The conversion hypothesis seems to be the most logical account for the predicative uses and the use of *top* as an interjection. Although *de top* (with a determiner) does not frequently occur in predicative position (for instance, *het was de top!* 'it was great' lit. 'it was the top!'), it clearly has an intensifying value and is most probably related to the predicative use without determiner, as in *het was top* 'it was top', where *top* preserves this intensifying function. However, attributive *top* and bound *top-* are unlikely to be merely extended uses of predicative *top* since they only rarely express intensification. At the same time, these forms typically carry the metaphorical semantics of *top* 'belonging to the highest/best class', lacked by predicative *top*.

As a consequence, the debonding hypothesis is needed too, not only to account for the attributive uses with the metaphorical meaning, as in *top leverancier* 'top supplier' or *top sport* 'top sport' (even if misspelling could be at play here too), but also to capture the instances of scope expansion, such as *top technisch accountmanager* in 22. In order to explain that these kinds of attributive uses are quite marginal, we need to refer to the properties of Dutch morphology. When Dutch adjectives are used predicatively, they are uninflected, as in *het boek is mooi/de boeken zijn mooi* 'the book(s) is(are) beautiful'. In contrast, attributive adjectives mostly end in an inflectional *-e*, as in *het mooi**e** boek/mooi**e** boeken* '(the) beautiful book(s)', except when the noun is neuter indefinite singular, as in *een mooi boek* 'a beautiful book'. Accordingly, the free form of Dutch *top* is not well suited for reanalysis as an attributive adjective, unlike the Dutch prefixoid *reuze* 'giant' (Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014), which acts more frequently as an attributive adjective. Inflected forms of Dutch

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top did not occur in our corpus sample, but they do exist. The following two examples are drawn from the more recent NLCOW2014 corpus:

(28) a. Want je hebt een superrrrrrr **toppe** site echt waar.
'Because you have a **great** (lit. 'superrrrrrr top') website, really.'
(NLCOW14AX01: 665427402)

b. Zaten wel **toppe** plaatjes bij.
'There were some **great** (lit. 'top') pictures in it.'
(NLCOW14AX01: 679969589)

To summarize, we state that the predicative (intensifying) uses of *top* can be accurately explained as cases of conversion through reanalysis, whereas debonding is very likely to be involved in the rise of the attributive (mostly metaphorical) uses. It is more difficult, however, to account for the attributive intensifying uses—the ones with inflection illustrated in 28, but also the ones without inflection, as in 29.

(29) Wij hebben een uitstekende reis gehad naar Praag en door de chauffeurs (Rudy en Anita) is het een **top** vakantie geworden.

'We have had an excellent trip to Prague and thanks to the drivers [Rudy and Anita] it has become a **great** (lit. 'top') holiday.'
(NLCOW2012-00X: 9809692)

Different processes could be involved in these kinds of examples. They could simply illustrate the tendency to write compounds as separate words; they could be the result of debonding of compounds beginning with an intensifying prefixoid (for example, *topvakantie* 'top holiday'), or they could be seen as the result of context expansion of predicative *top* to include the attributive position (without, however, adopting the regular inflectional pattern of Dutch adjectives; see De Smet & Van de Velde 2014 on defective denominal adjectives).

To conclude, the case study of Dutch *top* indicates that a complex interplay of debonding, conversion, and spelling is most likely at work. The free uses of Dutch *top* derive not from a single source construction but from an intricate interaction between different sources, with the different compound types and *(de) top* used as intensifying predicates.

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These results are entirely in line with the findings reported in De Smet et al. 2013. In the next section, we demonstrate that different conclusions can be drawn from the German data.

4. German Counterparts of Dutch *Top*.

Dutch *top* has two direct equivalents in German. In section 4.1, we briefly outline the results of a study on *top* in German (Battefeld & Rawoens 2014). In section 4.2, we have a closer look at the semantics and construction types of German *spitze*, which is closely related to *top* semantically. The central aim is to explore if the free uses of German *top* and *spitze* should be accounted for by conversion alone, as suggested in the literature, or if debonding may play a role as well.

4.1. German Top.

English loan words such as *top manager* are found in many languages, and the evaluative/intensifying *top* is on its way to becoming an internationalism under the influence of English. Battefeld & Rawoens (2014) conducted a comparative study on German *top-* and Swedish *topp(en)-*, with their data also drawn from the COW corpora. Their research question is parallel to ours, too: They investigate whether the free use of *top* is to be seen as a result of conversion or debonding, and their results seem to be in line with our findings for Dutch *top*.

As in Dutch, adjectival *top* is used frequently in predicative position in German. Some examples from the German DECOW2012 corpus may serve as an illustration. In 30a, bare *top* is used predicatively, while in 30b,c, *top* is modified by an adverb. Furthermore, 30c shows that the spelling is far from consistent. Because of the preceding adverbial, *Top* has to be analyzed as an adjective here, despite being spelled with a capital.

(30) a. Die Zusammenarbeit mit Euch war **top**!
'The cooperation with you has been **excellent** (lit. 'top')!'
(DECOW2012-00: 431771550)

b. Die Musikauswahl ist zur Zeit wirklich **sehr top**.
'The music selection is **really outstanding** (lit. 'very top') at the moment.' (DECOW2012-00: 157268306)

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c. Die anschließende Massage war dann **absolut Top** und …

'The subsequent massage, then, was **fantastic** (lit. 'absolutely top'), and …' (DECOW2012-00: 103437059)

Adverbial use of *top* is also attested in German:

(31) Die Materialsammlung ist **top** aufgebaut und informativ.

'The data collection is **very well** (lit. 'top') constructed and informative.' (DECOW2012-00: 9652820)

Attributive use of *top*, however, is problematic, since *top* usually cannot be inflected:

(32) Da gibt es immer wieder eine **top** Gelegenheit sein Geld gewinnbringend anzulegen

'Again and again, there is an **excellent** (lit. 'top') opportunity to invest one's money profitably.' (DECOW2012-00: 327583858)

Inflected forms and comparative/superlative forms are only attested in very informal language or when used on purpose (as a pun). Battefeld & Rawoens (2014) mention *toppes Wetter* 'top weather', and in DECOW2012 we found an example of the comparative:

(33) Die Zimmer waren **top**, und das Essen noch "**topper**".

The rooms were **excellent** (lit. 'top'), and the food was even **"excellenter"** (lit. 'topper').' (DECOW2012-00: 1167341556)

In 34, the first *Top* has to be interpreted as the first element of a compound (*Topmarken*), while the second one is an adjective because it is preceded by an adverbial (otherwise one would expect an inflected form *absoluten*).

(34) stylische Fahrradbekleidung von **Top** Marken zu absolut **top** Preisen.
'stylish cycle clothing of **top** brands at **top** prices'
(DECOW2012-00:771494992)

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There is also a telling difference in pronunciation in this example: most likely, initial compound-stress in *Tóp Marken* versus final phrase stress in *top Préisen*.

According to Battefeld & Rawoens 2014, more than 30% of all *top*+N combinations in German have to be classified as loans from English (nominal compounds such as *Topseller, Topmodel*, etc.). When used in German nominal compounds, *top* has an abstract metaphorical meaning in the vast majority of cases, indicating the top of a hierarchy, a high or the highest level or class (*Topspieler* 'top player', *Topqualität* 'top quality'). Related to this use, one finds evaluative *top* 'excellent, great' in compounds such as *Topfilm* 'great movie' or *Topwochenende* 'great weekend'. In these words, *top* is becoming an intensifying prefixoid. The intensifying meaning can also be observed in adjectival compounds (*topaktuell* 'very much up-to-date', *topmodern* 'very/highly modern').

In the DECOW-2012 corpus, we found much variation with respect to spelling. For *Topzustand* 'top condition', the DECOW-2012-00 corpus has 138 instances of the compound written as one word, as in 35a, which would be the "correct" spelling in standard German. However, it is also spelled with a hyphen (35b, 115 instances) or as two words, with the capital letter (35c, 126 instances) or without (35d, 63 instances).

(35) a. Die Wohnung war in einem **Topzustand**.
'The flat was in a **top condition**.'
(DECOW2012-00: 138104012)

b. Die Straße ist in einem **Top-Zustand** und …
'The road is in a **top condition** and …'
(DECOW2012-00: 106282624)

c. An sich ist das Notebook in einem **Top Zustand**.
'In principle, the notebook is in a **top condition**.'
(DECOW2012-00: 82421018)

d. Das Schlagzeug ist rot-metallic, in einem **top Zustand** und kann…
'The drum-set is metallic red, in a **top condition**, and it can…'
(DECOW2012-00: 40483232)

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Such variation in spelling can be seen as an indication of ongoing debonding and the emergence of an adjective *top* in German, whose context of use can be expanded to include both attributive and predicative positions. The use of *top* as an adjective might, of course, also be influenced by English directly, where the form is ambiguous in prenominal position as well as in the predicative position.

In contrast, the conversion path seems to be less convincing for German. As Battefeld & Rawoens (2014) have shown, the noun *Top* is hardly ever used in German. Unambiguous cases of nominal use of *Top* in predicative position are very rare. In DECOW2012-00 we only found one example of *Top* preceded by an inflected adjective:

(36) Somit ist die Hoenn mein **absoluter Top**.

> 'Therefore, the Hoenn [= region in a computer game] is my **absolute favorite** (lit. 'absolute top').'
>
> (DECOW2012-00: 1196737558)

We do, however, find many examples of the predicative types illustrated in 30, many of which are ambiguous between bare nouns and adjectives. The spelling of the first character (capital or not) does not provide conclusive evidence; it seems to be arbitrary to a certain extent. In sum, we share the conclusion of Battefeld & Rawoens (2014). The debonding hypothesis seems to provide the most plausible explanation for the adjectival use of *top* in German. Compared to our case study on Dutch, we found fewer arguments in favor of the conversion path in German.

4.2. German Spitze.

The data for our analysis of *spitze* are again drawn from the COW corpus. Like the Dutch case study, our study of *spitze* is mainly based on a selection of 1000 random examples of both its bound and free forms from the German DECOW2012-00 subcorpus. However, we also looked at other slices of the corpus for the verification and illustration of relevant cases. The main goal of this section is to compare the interplay of factors described above for the adjectival use of Dutch *top* with a semantically equivalent case.

The German noun *Spitze* is a highly polysemous word. It can be used to denote the peak (of a mountain), the top (of a tree), the tip (of a

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finger), the front (of a train), or the leading position (in sports). Top leaders or heads (of a concern) are referred to as *die Spitze*. Furthermore, *Spitze* can refer to a dig (at someone).[14] German has a corresponding adjective *spitz*, usually meaning 'pointed; sharp' (also metaphorically: *eine spitze Bemerkung* 'a sharp remark'). Other usages are found in *spitze Klammern* 'angle brackets', *ein spitzer Schrei* 'a shrill cry', or *jemanden spitz machen* 'to turn somebody on' where *spitz* means 'horny'.

While these examples only partially illustrate the semantic potential of *Spitze* and *spitz*, in this article, we want to focus on another (related) adjective: *spitze*. It is used in colloquial speech as an evaluative adjective, roughly equivalent to *super*, *fantastic*, or *excellent*. It is used predicatively in most cases, as in 37a,b, but attributive usage is attested incidentally too, as in 37c,d.

(37) a. Die Lage ist wirklich **spitze**.
'The setting is really **super/excellent** (lit. 'top').'
(DECOW2012-00: 51486)

b. Die Helfer und die Zuschauer waren **spitze**!
'The helpers and the spectators have been **fantastic** (lit. 'top')!'
(DECOW2012-02: 48842545)

c. Hier wird eine **spitze** Teamarbeit geleistet.
'Here, **excellent** (lit. 'top') teamwork is being done.'
(DECOW2012-01: 517017093)

d. kleine Werkstatt, super Service, **spitze** Preise
'small garage, great service, **excellent** (lit. 'top') prices'
(DECOW2012-02: 866215832)

The adjective *spitze* is very similar to *top* in many respects. It is related to the use of evaluative nominal compounds such as *Spitzenleistung* 'top performance' or *Spitzenpreis* 'top price'. The first element in these compounds is, however, the noun *Spitze* (not the

[14] A homonymous use of the word refers to lace, as in *Brüsseler Spitze* 'Brussels lace'.

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adjective), since all of the relevant compounds contain the linking element *-n-* which in German is only used in NN-compounds, not in AN-compounds. Since the use of *-n-* is obligatory in compounds with *Spitze* as their first element, the form *Spitzen-* can also be analyzed as an allomorphic variant of the noun, used in compounds. With respect to the semantics of the productive pattern [*Spitzen-* + $X_N]_N$, one finds two meanings that are also frequently observed in Dutch nominal compounds with *top* as their first element (see section 3.1).

In most compounds, *Spitzen-* is used with an abstract metaphorical meaning, expressing that someone or something belongs to the highest or best group or class. A *Spitzenleistung* is a performance that can be ranked very high. A soccer game between the two leading teams (*Spitzenteams*) is a *Spitzenspiel*, and a *Spitzenwein* belongs to the best wines:

(38) noch nie gesehenen Traubenqualität. Die Erwartungen an die **Spitzenweine** der deutschen Winzerelite waren entsprechend hoch.

‘unprecedented quality of the grapes. The expectations regarding the **top wines** of the German winemaker elite were accordingly high.’ (DECOW2012-00: 32068670)

Spitzen- is also used in compounds denoting the leading position (in a race, etc.), as in *Spitzenposition* ‘top/pole position’ or *Spitzenreiter* ‘front-runner’:

(39) a. Fenerbahce Istanbul hat die **Spitzenposition** im türkischen Fußball verloren.

‘Fenerbahce Istanbul has lost the **top position** in Turkish soccer.’ (DECOW2012-00: 35135187)

b. Die Konkurrenz orientiert sich immer an den Leistungen des **Spitzenreiters** ...

‘the competition is always geared to the performance of the **front runner** (lit. top-runner).’ (DECOW2012-00: 37288405)

Like *top-*, *Spitzen-* can also mean ‘maximal’ in combination with measurable entities:

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(40) Böen mit **Spitzengeschwindigkeiten** von 120 Stundenkilometer
'Gusts of wind with **maximum** (lit. 'top') **speeds** of 120 km/h'
(DECOW2012-00: 39792101)

Other examples of this type are *Spitzenwert* 'top/maximum value' or *Spitzensteuersatz* 'top/highest tax rate'.

The meaning 'top/highest' gave rise to the intensifying evaluative meaning 'excellent, great, super'. The distinctions between different meanings are, however, not always obvious nor clear-cut: There is an overlap between *highest*, *best* and the evaluative meaning, and many compounds can be used for both (such as *Spitzenteam* 'top team' or *Spitzenspieler* 'top player'). Here are some examples of the evaluative/intensifying use of *Spitzen-*:

(41) a. Der Kerl ist klasse, ein **Spitzenlehrer** und eine absolute Autorität.

'This guy is great, a **top teacher** and an absolute authority.'
(DECOW2012-00: 24098053)

b. Stallone und Statham sind ein **Spitzenteam** und Ludgren hat die beste Szene des Films.

'Stallone und Statham are an **outstanding** (lit. 'top') **team**, and Ludgren has the best scene of the movie.'
(DECOW2012-00: 31038309)

c. Für mich ganz klar ein **Spitzenkauf**.
'For me quite clearly an **excellent** (lit. 'top') **bargain**.'
(DECOW2012-00: 23099755)

d. Spider-Man—The Icon 10/10—ein **Spitzenbuch** über den Mythos Spider-Man mit tollem Bildmaterial. Top!

'Spider-Man—The Icon 10/10—an **excellent** (lit. 'top') **book** on the myth Spider-Man with great graphical material. Top!'
(DECOW2012-00: 31738197)

It is this meaning of *Spitzen-* that can also be found in the adjective *spitze*, and the obvious question is how these usages are related.

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The adjective might be the result of a reanalysis of the noun *Spitze*, which has been suggested in the literature. As shown in section 2.1, Pittner & Berman (2006) and Berman (2009) see the predicative use of this noun as the source context for the conversion into an adjective. The bare noun can be used to express the evaluative meaning:

(42) a. Trotz allem die Bilder sind ja wieder **Spitze**.
'Despite everything, the images are **excellent** (lit. 'top') again.'
(DECOW2012-00: 10909261)

b. Das Wochenende war einfach **Spitze**.
'The weekend has been just **fantastic** (lit. 'top')!'
(DECOW2012-00: 15677211)

The noun can also be modified by an adjective, typically *absolut* or *einsam*, in order to emphasize the positive evaluation:

(43) a. Meine verstorbene Schwiegermutter war da **einsame Spitze**.

'My late mother-in-law was **really the best** (lit. 'lonely top') in this respect.' (DECOW2012-00: 8807063)

b. die Modelle sind **absolute Spitze** und handwerklich hervorragend gestaltet

'the models are **absolutely the best** (lit. 'absolutely top') and technically very well designed' (DECOW2012-00: 20686216)

However, the categorical status of *Spitze* seems to be uncertain. This can be illustrated by examples, in which the noun loses its capital letter, as in 44a. In some contexts, the noun is even accompanied by an inflected adjective, as in 44b.

(44) a. Was das Management von GS zur Zeit macht ist einfach **spitze**.

'What the GS management does at the moment is just **great** (lit. 'top').' (DECOW2012-00: 13654612)

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b. und auch der Teil war wieder **einsame spitze**!
'and that part was **really great** (lit. 'lonely top') again!'
(DECOW2012-00: 26139261)

Clear-cut adjectival uses can be found in contexts where the adjective is modified by an adverb and used in coordination with another adjective:

(45) a. Ich finde den **absolut spitze** und unterhaltsam.

'I find him **absolutely fantastic** (lit. 'absolutely top') and entertaining.' (DECOW2012-00: 26576434)

b. Wildgruber ist **preislich spitze** und zuverlässig.

'Wildgruber is **the best** price-wise (lit. 'price-wise top') and reliable.' (DECOW2012-00: 9850733)

Attributive use of the adjective, however, is hardly observed. This usage is attested (see above in 37c,d), but it is very rare. In our sample, we found the example in 46.

(46) Super Seiten und **echt spitze** Ideen.
'Great pages and **really great** (lit. 'really top') ideas.'
(DECOW2012-00: 10957339)

The overwhelming majority of the instances of adjectival *spitze*, thus, are found in the predicative position. This is a strong argument in favor of the conversion analysis: The adjectival use has emerged in the predicative position out of the noun *Spitze*.

This does not, however, mean that debonding does not play a role at all. We do find examples of compounds with *Spitzen-*, written as two words, which might be seen as an indication that the status of *Spitzen-* is not always obvious to the writers. The word is also found without the capital letter, which might be seen as a further indication that it is sometimes interpreted as an adjective:

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(47) a. He das ist eine **spitzen** Seite, habe viel gefunden mit dem ich was anfangen kann

'Hey, that is a **great** (lit. 'top') website, I've found a lot of useful things.' (DECOW2012-00: 9507422)

b. Ich steh auf Coop Taktik Shooter am besten mit **spitzen** Story.

'I am into Coop Taktik Shooter, best with a great (lit. 'top') story.' (DECOW2012-00: 19112457)

Unless one is willing to explain such examples as spelling variants or errors, this use of *spitzen* can only be explained by debonding: The first element of the compound is reinterpreted as an adjective. It is, however, defective in that it does not show inflection. In addition, it never occurs in predicative position; it is bound to the attributive position next to the noun it modifies. Moreover, it has the same evaluative meaning as *Spitzen-* in the compound. The reanalysis might be prompted by the existence of the adjective *spitze*, with which it shares the evaluative semantics. One might even see it as an attributively used variant of this adjective.

We conclude that German has developed an evaluative adjective *spitze* through conversion, as suggested in the literature. This adjective is perfectly usable in the predicative position, but its usage as an attributive adjective is problematic. This leaves room for the debonding of *spitzen*, an alternative pathway that is not taken into account in the literature on these kinds of evaluative morphemes. Both variants are, however, restricted to highly informal use in German. The further development of *spitze* into an ordinary adjective with inflection is blocked by the inflected forms of the adjective *spitz* 'sharp': *ein spitze(n) Bleistift* would mean 'a fantastic pencil', but the inflected form *ein spitzer Bleistift* can only mean 'a sharpened pencil'. This might be one of the factors responsible for the variation and complicated development of attributive *spitze*.

5. Conclusion.

The central aim of this study was to account for the emergence of new Dutch and German evaluative adjectives with a nominal origin. Category

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change from noun to adjective is a marginal phenomenon in both Germanic languages. The fact that it is observed more frequently in English indicates that the complexity of the language-specific inflectional system has a crucial impact on this type of category change. Yet the data in this study show that certain Dutch and German nouns may be reanalyzed as evaluative adjectives, in spite of the morphological constraints, and that these forms are commonly used in informal language to express a high degree of intensification, as attested in web-blogs and forums.

In order to account for these data, we have investigated two hypotheses found in the literature. According to the debonding hypothesis, compound members may be reinterpreted as attributive adjectives and may undergo a further process of flexibilization or context expansion. In contrast, the conversion hypothesis suggests the inverse pathway: The noun is reanalyzed as an adjective in the predicative position, and the adjectival usage may then spread to new syntactic and morphological contexts. In our case study, we have analyzed the bound and free usages of Dutch *top* and compared them with German *top* and *spitze*. The three forms synchronically occur as evaluative nouns, adjectives, and compound members, and therefore serve as an ideal case study for testing the validity of both hypotheses.

As for Dutch *top*, we have observed that different processes closely interact with each other. Conversion is the most likely account of the predicative (always intensifying) usages, but it does not explain the large proportion of attributive cases with *top* meaning 'belonging to the best class'. These are clearly related to the compounds in which *top-* almost exclusively expresses this metaphorical meaning and hence suggest that debonding plays a role too. We have also observed that some free usages may be accounted for as spelling variants of the compounds written as one word (for instance, in the case of English loan compounds). However, attributive cases of *top* with scope over a phrase should definitely be accounted for by debonding. The comparison of the semantics of the bound and free morphemes and of the constructions in which they occur allow us to state that adjectival *top* has at least two source constructions: the noun used with an evaluative meaning in the predicative position and the left-hand compound member.

The data for German *top* point in the direction of the following debonding cline: *Topzustand* ('top condition') > *Top-Zustand* > *Top*

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Zustand > *top Zustand* > *Zustand ist top*. In German, compounds with *Top-* are a more plausible source of adjectival *top* than the corresponding noun because evaluative *top* entered German mainly through compounds borrowed from English, and also because the noun *Top* is not entrenched in German. Therefore the conversion pathway seems to be less likely, as also concluded by Battefeld & Rawoens (2014).

In the case of German *spitze*, however, both paths of development should be taken into account, especially when explaining the wide range of formal variants (*S/spitze* versus *S/spitzen*). While evaluative *spitze* can be explained by conversion (reanalysis of the established noun *Spitze*), the use of free *spitzen* is inevitably the result of debonding (from the allomorphic variant in compounds with *Spitzen-*). Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that the two forms have influenced each other. The use in attributive position, in particular, is most probably the result of mutual influence. The use of evaluative/intensifying *spitze* as an attributive adjective can be related to the corresponding predicative adjective, via context expansion, but it may also be linked to the nominal compounds with the semantically equivalent noun *Spitze(n)* as their first element.

At the same time, one observes—most probably under the influence of predicative *spitze*—a debonding tendency for these compound members: *Spitzen* is used as if it were an adjective, while surprisingly preserving its linking element. Expansion of debonded *spitzen* to the predicative position is, however, not observed. The adjectival status of *spitzen*, therefore, remains somewhat dubious. The formal variation found in the attributive position (as in *Spitzenspiel /Spitzen Spiel /spitzen Spiel* 'top game') is symptomatic of the uncertainty of language users with respect to the status of the first element.

To conclude, our findings support the idea that language change does not always follow linear pathways from the source construction to the target construction. In the present case study, it has been shown that multiple source constructions should be taken into account (see De Smet et al. 2013). Alternatively, pursuing the constructional perspective, newly created constructions may inherit properties from multiple parent constructions, via so-called multiple inheritance (Trousdale 2013, Trousdale & Norde 2013).

However, it has also been demonstrated that the impact of the different source constructions may be language-specific, and even

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construction-specific to a high degree. In general terms, it has been shown that the evaluative adjectives Dutch *top* and German *spitze* clearly inherit properties from two source constructions, the corresponding compound member (via debonding) and the predicatively used nouns (via conversion). However, conversion seems to be less likely in the case of German *top*. Although the complex inflectional system of German strongly counteracts the debonding process, the latter is the most plausible account for the emergence of the adjectival usages of German *top*.

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