The question of productivity has become one of the central empirical problems of word-formation. In most current approaches to morphological productivity (e.g. Bauer 2001, Bolozky 1999, Plag 1999), the existence of a continuum is acknowledged, at the one end of which we find completely unproductive patterns and at the other we find highly productive patterns with a number of intermediate cases between the two poles. As a consequence, various ways of measuring how productive a particular pattern is have been proposed in the relevant literature. In most recent publications, authors agree on three appropriate ways of measuring productivity: 1. measures based on dictionary listings, 2. measures based on the analysis of corpora, and 3. measures based on psychological tests on native speakers’ intuition, also referred to as elicitation tests. (cf. e.g. Bolozky 1999)

This paper highlights results from an ongoing study on verbal prefixation in English of the kind download, upgrade, overachieve, underexpose, etc., in which all three approaches to measuring productivity have been (or will be) applied. One of these approaches – namely a dictionary-based investigation carried out on the basis of the OED – will be presented in more detail. Applying the definition of productivity as the number of new forms occurring in a specified period of time (Rainer 1987), which can be carried out on the basis of a reliable chronological dictionary like the OED (cf. e.g. Neuhaus 1973), yielded results which seem relevant to the synchronic as well as to the diachronic dimension of the issue.

As it seems, the widespread belief that verbal prefixation weakened from the Middle English period onwards because of its gradual replacement by the postposition of the prefixes forming the so-called phrasal verbs (cf. e.g. Meyer 1975: 3-4, Burnley 1992: 445) or by Romance loanwords possibly has to be reconsidered. The results of the present study show that the verbal patterns under investigation behave similarly to a number of other derivational patterns and methods of enlarging the vocabulary.

Thus, together with a corpus-based analysis of the productivity of verbal prefixation in English and with elicitation tests, the study can confirm Lutz’s view that “[s]ome native prefixes have continued to be productive until today, in spite of massive French and Latin influence; they are combined with both native and borrowed stems” (Lutz 1997: 260) and that “prefixing has not been abandoned altogether in English” (ibid.: 284).


