Blocking, Intervention and Ablaut in German Verb Inflection

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German verb inflection exhibits a complex cluster of blocking and non-blocking relations. Thus in weak ('regular') verbs, suffixal *-t* in past participles blocks *-n* which is found in strong ('irregular') verbs (cf. weak *ge-kauf-t*, 'bought' vs. strong *ge-sung-en*, 'sung'). In strong verbs, ablaut (or the ability to ablaut) seems to block *-t* not only in participles, but also in finite past tense forms (cf. *sing-en*, 'to sing' vs.*ge-sung-en*, 'sung', *ich sang*, 'I sang'). On the other hand, umlaut and raising in 2nd/3rd person present forms (cf. *ich befehl-e*, 'I command' vs. *er befiehl-t*, 'he commands') doesn't show any blocking of affixal material and there is also a small class of verbs where past tense ablaut fails to block *-t* (*ich weiss*, 'I know' vs. *ich wusste*, 'I knew'). Moreover, prefixal *ge-* – characteristic of weak and strong past participles – isn't blocked by ablaut or suffixes nor does it block any other affix. In this talk I propose a novel analysis of the German data in Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz, 1993) which not only captures the distribution of (non-)blocking but also predicts important generalizations on the conditioning of ablaut and captures a general syncretism pattern in infinite forms previously regarded as accidental syncretism. A crucial consequence of the analysis is that blocking can not only be derived by competition for a specific structural position, but also by locality constraints on allomorphic conditioning. The phrase structure I assume for German infinite verb forms is shown in (1) (C_1 is the class feature of *singen*, 'to sing'):

(1) $[[[[\text{Root}]_V \ C_1]_{\text{Class}} +/\text{-Past}]_{\text{Tense}} \text{-Finite (Restricted)}]_{\text{Fin}}$

Only strong verbs have the class feature projection which contains different class features realized by specific ablaut vowels (cf. Müller, 2004a,2004b on class features). Infinitives have [-Finite] in their Fin position (e.g. *kauf-en*, 'buy'), participles in addition the privative feature "Restr(icted)". [-Finite] selects for a defective Tense head while [+Finite] selects full-fletched Tense containing the agreement-triggering feature δ resulting in the phrase structure in (2):

(2) $[[[[[\text{Root}]_V \ C_1 \ ]_{\text{Class}} +/\text{-Past} \ \delta]_T \ ] \ \Phi]_{\text{Agr}} +\text{Finite}]_{\text{Fin}}$

The general blocking facts are now derived by the vocabulary items (VIs) in (3):

(3)
a.	-t	:	[T +past]	/[V] __		e.	[ ]	: Ø	/__ C_2
b.	-n	:	[T]	/ __ [-Fin]		f.	C_1	: +low	/__ +Past δ
c.	-d	:	[Restr]	/[-past] __		g.	C_1	: +back	/__ +Past
d.	-ge	:	[Restr]						

(3a) outranks (3b) for past forms of weak verbs since it contains 2 substantial features vs. 1 in (3b). However, assuming that context restrictions can only be met under structural adjacency (Trommer, 1999,2000,2002), "/[V] __" is not satisfied in strong verbs where the class projection intervenes between V and Tense, hence no VI is inserted in past finite forms, and (3b) in all infinite forms (past/present participles and infinitives). (3c) spells out "Restr" in present tense participles - resulting in *-nd*, and (3d) in past participles. For *singen*, the class feature C_1 is realized as the floating feature +back in past participles by (3g) merging phonologically with the *i* of the root to give *u*, and as +low in past finite forms resulting in *a* (3f). For finite present forms an impoverishment rule removes the Tense node to allow sensitivity of class features to the $\Phi-$features. In *wissen*-type verbs (by assumption of class C_2) the class root node is deleted by a zero VI spelling out the root node. Consequently the class node becomes invisible and (3a) can be inserted into Tense. Crucially, the analysis unifies all appearances of n in nonfinite forms and correctly predicts that (past) ablaut is not sensitive to Φ-features while present-tense umlaut/raising is only sensitive to these. Finally Wieses's (2005) generalization that ablaut only targets past participles if it also targets past finite forms follows without further stipulation.