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COMPOUNDING

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Outline

This chapter is concerned with compounds. Section 1 focuses on the basic characteristics of compounds, investigating the kinds of elements compounds are made of, their internal structure, headedness and stress patterns. This is followed by descriptions of individual compounding patterns and the discussion of the specific empirical and theoretical problems these patterns pose. In particular, nominal, adjectival, verbal and neoclassical compounds are examined, followed by an exploration of the syntax-morphology boundary.

1. **Recognizing compounds**

Compounding was mentioned in passing in the preceding chapters and some of its characteristics have already been discussed. For example, in chapter 1 we briefly commented on the orthography and stress pattern of compounds, and in chapter 4 we investigated the boundary between affixation and compounding and introduced the notion of neoclassical compounds. In this chapter we will take a closer look at compounds and the intricate problems involved in this phenomenon. Although compounding is the most productive type of word formation process in English, it is perhaps also the most controversial one in terms of its linguistic analysis and I must forewarn readers seeking clear answers to their questions that compounding is a field of study where intricate problems abound, numerous issues remain unresolved and convincing solutions are generally not so easy to find.

Let us start with the problem of definition: what exactly do we mean when we say that a given form is a compound? To answer that question we first examine the internal structure of compounds.

1.1. What are compounds made of?

In the very first chapter, we defined compounding (sometimes also called composition) rather loosely as the combination of two words to form a new word. This definition contains two crucial assumptions, the first being that compounds consist of two (and not more) elements, the second being that these elements are words. As we will shortly see, both assumptions are in need of justification. We will discuss each in turn.

There are, for example, compounds such as those in (1), which question the idea that compounding involves only two elements. The data are taken from a user's manual for a computer printer:

(1) power source requirement engine communication error
communication technology equipment

The data in (1) seem to suggest that a definition saying that compounding involves always two (and not more) words is overly restrictive. This impression is further enhanced by the fact that there are compounds with four, five or even more members, e.g. university teaching award committee member. However, as we have seen with multiply affixed words in chapter 2, it seems generally possible to analyze polymorphemic words as hierarchical structures involving binary (i.e. two-member) sub-elements. The above-mentioned five-member compound university teaching award committee member could thus be analyzed as in (2), using the bracketing and tree representations as merely notational variants (alternative analyses are also conceivable, see further below):

(2) a. [[[university [teaching award]] committee] member]

1.2. More on the structure of compounds: the notion of head

The vast majority of compounds are interpreted in such a way that the left-hand member somehow modifies the right-hand member. Thus, a *film society* is a kind of society (namely one concerned with films), a *parks commissioner* is a commissioner occupied with parks, *to deep-fry* is a verb designating a kind of *frying*, *knee-deep* in *She waded in knee-deep water* tells us something about how deep the water is, and so on. We can thus say that such compounds exhibit what is called a **modifier-head structure**. The term **head** is generally used to refer to the most important unit in complex linguistic structures. In our compounds it is the head which is modified by the other member of the compound. Semantically, this means that the set of entities possibly denoted by the compound (i.e. all film societies) is a subset of the entities denoted by the head (i.e. all societies).

With regard to their head, compounds in English have a very important systematic property: their head always occurs on the right-hand side (the so-called **right-hand head rule**, Williams 1981a:248). The compound inherits most of its semantic and syntactic information from its head. Thus, if the head is a verb, the compound will be a verb (e.g. *deep-fry*), if the head is a count noun, the compound will be a count noun (e.g. *beer bottle*), if the head has feminine gender, the compound will have feminine gender (e.g. *head waitress*). Another property of the compound head is that if the compound is pluralized the plural marking occurs on the head, not on the non-head. Thus, *parks commissioner* is not the plural of *park commissioner*; only *park commissioners* can be the plural form of *park commissioner*. In the existing compound *parks commissioner*, the plural interpretation is restricted to the non-head and not inherited by the whole compound. This is shown schematically in (4), with the arrow indicating the inheritance of the grammatical features from the head. The inheritance of

features from the head is also (somewhat counter-intuitively) referred to as **feature percolation**:

The definition developed in section 1.1. and the notion of head allow us to deal consistently with words such as *jack-in-the-box, good-for-nothing* and the like, which one might be tempted to analyze as compounds, since they are words that internally consist of more than one word. Such multi-word sequences are certainly words in the sense of the definition of word developed in chapter 1 (e.g. they are uninterruptable lexical items that have a syntactic category specification). And syntactically they behave like other words, be they complex or simplex. For example, *jack-in-the-box* (being a count noun) can take an article, can be modified by an adjective and can be pluralized, hence behaves syntactically like any other noun with similar properties. However, and crucially, such multi-word words do not have the usual internal structure of compounds, but have the internal structure of syntactic phrases. Thus, they lack a right-hand head, and they do not consist of two elements that meet the criteria of our definition. For example, under a compound analysis *jack-in-the-box* is headless, since a *jack-in-the-box* is neither a kind of box, nor a kind of *jack*.