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Compounding: syntax or morphology?

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In the preceding subsections we have alluded to the possibility that compounding may not be regarded as a word-formation process, but rather as a syntactic process, hence outside the realm of morphology. This line of argument has been taken by a number of scholars and in this section we will take a closer look at the merits and problems of such approaches.

Proponents of a syntactic view of compounding put forward that the very productive class of noun-noun compounds in particular results from a syntactic rule which states that in a **noun phrase** (abbreviated as 'NP') not only adjectives, but also nouns can modify the following noun. This rule is schematized in (35a) and illustrated with the examples in (35b) and (35c):

(35) a. NP → article {adjective, noun} noun

b. the long marathon

c. the Boston marathon

The curly brackets in (35a) indicate that either an adjective or a noun may occur in this position. The rule reads like this: 'a noun phrase may consist of an article, and adjective and a noun, or of an article, a noun, and a noun'. The element immediately preceding the rightmost noun of the phrase (i.e. the head of the phrase), modifies the phrasal head. In (35b) the modifier is an adjective, in (35c) it is a noun. Although rule (35a) looks like a wonderful way to get rid of the category of compounds (and thus streamlining our theory of language), it has the considerable disadvantage that it does not explain why the majority of adjective-noun combinations are usually stressed on the noun and have the flavor of phrases, while noun-noun combinations are usually stressed on the first noun and have the flavor of words, i.e. of being compounds.

On the basis of this last considerations we are tempted to say that there is no syntactic rule such as (35a). This would be, however, somewhat premature,

because there is a set of constructions where nouns should indeed be analyzed as phrasal premodifiers of other nouns. Consider the data in (36):

(36) the New York markets a
three-syllable word
the two-year period

One would perhaps want to argue that *New York markets*, *three-syllable word* and *twoyear period* are compounds. However, such an analysis creates problems with regard to the insertion of adjectives, which, surprisingly, is possible:

(37) the New York financial
markets a three-syllable
prosodic word the two year
probationary period

If *New York markets*, *three-syllable word* and *two-year period* were really compounds, it would be impossible to insert an adjective between the two nouns. This can be seen with structures that are uncontroversially regarded as compounds:

(38)	waterbird	*water wild bird
	jellyfish	*jelly floating fish
	rain forest	*rain tropical forest

How can this puzzle be solved? One way out is to look again at our stress criterion. The structures in (36) have in common that they are stressed on the rightmost element of the phrase, while the data in (38) have left-ward stress. This may be taken as an indication (though not proof, see our discussion in section 1.3) of the phrasal status of the entities in (36) and (37). Now, if we

assume that these structures are indeed phrases, then it does not come as a surprise that we can insert an adjective between the two nouns in (37). In sum, the syntactic behavior and the stress pattern **together** strongly argue in favor of a phrasal analysis of these specific constructions. But does that mean that all compounds are phrasal, or that all compounds with final stress are phrasal? I don't think so. We could also argue that there are only some restricted classes of nouns whose members are allowed to act as syntactic modifiers of nouns. Two of these classes are exemplified above (i.e. nouns indicating a location and nouns incorporating a numeral), and it remains to be shown which other classes can be established.

In their textbook on English words, Stockwell and Minkova seem to adopt a compromise position with regard to the question of whether compounds are syntactic or morphological objects. They restrict the notion of compounding to composite words that have taken on a unique new meaning that is not completely inferrable on the basis of the two elements involved (Stockwell and Minkova 2001:13). In doing so, they distinguish between what they call lexical and syntactic compounds. While lexical compounds are non-transparent, syntactic compounds are always transparent and are "formed by regular rules of grammar" (*op. cit.*). According to this view, everything that is regular is conceived as syntactic and everything that is lexicalized and idiosyncratic is morphological. Such a view is, however, highly problematic, since, as we have seen in the previous chapters, morphological processes are often quite regular and regularity alone is not a sufficient criterion to distinguish between word-formation rules and syntactic rules. But which criteria could help us to solve this problem? The question of whether a process that combines words into larger entities is morphological or syntactic in nature has already been in focus when we discussed conversion. There, we have argued that syntactic and morphological processes can be distinguished by a range of properties, some of which we discussed in chapter 5, for example that complex words can display all

kinds of exceptional properties, whereas syntactic patterns and their interpretations tend to be rather exceptionless. Below I summarize some differences between sentence structure rules and word structure rules (see Katamba 1993:217 for a similar list):

(39)

	word structure rules	**sentence structure rules**
a.	may change word-classes (as in conversion)	do not change the word classes
b.	may be sensitive to the morphological make-up of bases	are not sensitive to the internal structure of words
c.	often have arbitrary exceptions and not their output is often lexicalized	their output is normally lexicalized and there are usually no arbitrary exceptions
d.	are rarely recursive (only some	are highly recursive prefixes)

The criteria (31a) and (31b) have already been discussed in the preceding chapter in the context of conversion. Their relevance with regard to compounding is, however, very limited since compounding in English is not word-class-changing and there are no restrictions observable as to the morphological structure of the elements involved. With regard to the criterion (31c) we could state that the different systematic and not so systematic stress patterns observable with certain sets of compounds are the kind of arbitrary exceptions characteristic of word structure rules. Furthermore, as correctly pointed out by Stockwell and Minkova, compounds are often lexicalized, a property not typical of syntactic phrases. Criterion (31d) is again not easy to interpret for compounds. We have said above that recursion is a well-known property of noun-noun compounds, which rather points towards their syntactic status. However, some prefixes are also recursive, which shows that the avoidance of recursion in suffixation may be an artefact of the selectional properties of most affixes and not a sign of a

deeper structural difference between syntax and morphology. For example, the verbal suffixes *-ify, -ize* or *-ate* never attach to any type of verb, not only not to verbs that already have the same suffix. Hence, the combinations **-ify-ize* and **-ate-ize* are just as impossible as the recursive combination **-ize-ize*.

Applying the criteria listed in (31) does therefore not conclusively solve the problem of the syntactic or morphological nature of compounding, although they may speak slightly in favor a morphological view of compounding.

What would be needed to really decide on this issue is a well-defined theory of syntax, which makes clear statements about the nature of the mechanisms it employs. Currently, there are many syntactic theories on the market whose underlying assumptions concerning the role of morphology in grammar greatly differ, which makes it virtually impossible to solve the problem of compounding without reference to a particular theory of grammar. Given the nature of this book as an introduction to word-formation that does not assume prior training in syntactic theory, we leave this theoretical issue unresolved. Chapter 7 will take up the question of the syntax-morphology connection again in a more general perspective.