

Afterthoughts on Semantics of Compounds

Anahit Hovhannisyan

Department of Humanities and Arts, Shirak State University, Gyumri Paruyr Sevaki St., 4 Building, Gyumri, Armenia.

***Corresponding Author:** Anahit Hovhannisyan, Department of Humanities and Arts, Shirak State University, Gyumri Paruyr Sevaki St., 4 Building, Gyumri, Armenia.

Abstract:

This paper is primarily devoted to outlining the word-formation trends in English, specifically to compounding. Firstly, we trace a variety of attempts seeking to expose various approaches connected with word derivation, secondly, the paper reports research findings from semantic classification of compounds. Compounding has been the subject of great many linguistic discussions. However, we have shown in the article that further insights into this subject-matter can expose unexpected trends. Somehow the research touches upon the semantics of compounds, i.e. semantic relationships reigning between its constituents. Specifically, an attempt is made to clear up the matter concerning the definition of compounds; as we can't find a straightforward answer to this question we try to seek areas of agreement among this great diversity of opinions.

Keywords: Semantics of compounds, endocentric compounds, exocentric compounds, transparent/non-transparent compounds, opaque meaning

Introduction

In the frame of this chapter, we will first address the issue of the distinction between various word-building means in English. The coverage of word formation in English is quite wide. One of the most widely used ways to form new words is affixation, comprising prefixation and suffixation. Whereas clipping, blending, acronym and compounding have their own rules in forming new words.

In the context of word-formation, the process of compounding plays a major role in English, as well as in many other languages. When creating new words in English, the processes of word-formation take place in the human mind. Linguists talk about the word-formation process of compounding, when two existing free lexical morphemes are combined to form a new free lexical morpheme. There are several possible combinations of different word classes, for example a noun and a verb (*hand-wash*), an adjective and a verb (*software*),

a preposition and an adjective (*overactive*) and many more. However, one cannot randomly join words to form a new word. The combination of two words is not considered to be a compound when one of the elements does not carry any new information. For instance the sequence *egg bird* would not be considered to be a word, because all birds come from eggs. Since *egg* does not carry new information, the sequence is not a compound (Aitchison 2004: 151).

As hinted above, compounding is the focal theme of the topic. And aiming to reveal its semantic, structural dimensions we shall firstly try to find a demarcation line between compound words and phrases.

Compounds and Phrases: Distinctive Features

Separating compounds from phrases is no easy task, and scholars are not agreed upon the question of relevant criteria. Generally are outlined four main criteria: *phonological, morphological and syntactic, graphic; graphic*

criterion of solid or hyphenated spelling. Some scholars, find it not reliable as firstly, there is no consistency in English spelling in this respect; with different dictionaries, different authors the spelling varies, so that the same unit may exist in a solid spelling (headmaster) and with a hyphen(head-master). Yet, as I. Arnold states:” if we take into consideration the comparative frequency of solid or hyphenated spelling of the combination in question, the criterion is fairly reliable (Arnold 1973:33). The lack of uniformity in spelling, however, is the chief reason why many authors consider this criterion insufficient. Some combine it with *the phonic criterion of stress*. There is a marked tendency in English to give compounds heavy stress on the first element.Two major stress rules are important for the differentiation between compounds and phrase: the “nuclear stress rule” and the “compound stress rule”.(Chomsky and Halle 1968:17).

As to *morphological criterion*, they are manifold. A. Smirnitsky introduced the criterion of *formal integrity—structural integrity*. He compares the compound *shipwreck* and the phrase *thewreck of the ship* comprising the same morphemes and expressing the same meaning, they stand in a very different relation to the grammatical system of the language (Смирницкий,1998:33).

I.Arnold claims, some transformational procedure may also prove to be helpful. A phrase like a *stonewall* can be transformed into the phrase *a wall of stone*, whereas a *toothpick* cannot be replaced by a pick for the *tooth*. Thus, impossibility of transformation proves the structural integrity of the word as compared with the phrase, yet the procedure does not work in some cases. As for the *semantic criterion* advocated by the scholars, a combination forming a unit expressing a single idea which is not identical in meaning to the sum of the meanings of the components in a free phrase. Thus, *dirty work* with its figurative meaning “dishonorable proceedings” is a compound and *dry work* (clean work) is a phrase. However, in some cases, this criterion is not sufficient either. *Hence, in the majority of cases, we have to depend on two or more types of criteria.*

Different Approaching for Classifying Compounds

A great variety of compounds yields to a great variety of classification. Compounds are written sometimes as one word (sunglasses), sometimes as two *hyphenated words* (life-threatening), and sometimes as two *separate words* (football stadium) (H.Sweet:2014:119).

Normally, the first item identifies a key feature of the second word. For example, the two bases *back* and *ache* combine to form the compound noun *backache*.

According to the part of speech to which the compounds belong are distinguished compound nouns, compound adjectives, compound verbs, compound prepositions, etc.

According to the structure of immediate constituents, I.Arnold distinguishes the following types:

1. Compounds consisting of simple stems:film-star;
2. Compounds where at least one of the constituents is a derived stem; chain-smoker;
3. Compounds where at least one of the constituents is a clipped stem: the subgroup will contain abbreviations like H-bag(handbag), X-mas (Christmas), but the first is not used in spoken language and the second is considered sub-standard.

Following all these classifications, we find it noteworthy to give a classification of compounds according to their *stylistic value*. We are in line with Prof Arnold’s statement that in this case, they are stylistically colored (either colloquial, slang, or nursery) and emotional; the emotion is not expressed in the constituents but suggested by the whole pattern (reduplication, rhyme).

Reduplicative compounds are often mixed groups containing onomatopoeic stems :hush-hush (secret), pooh-pooh(to explain contempt), blah-blah(idle talk).Nursery words such as puffy-puffy(train), etc.

Non-imitative words may also be used in reduplication and possess ironical ring: pretty-pretty (affective by pretty), goody-goody (sentimental and affected good).

Afterthoughts on Semantics of Compounds

Ablaut combinations are twin forms consisting of one basic morpheme (usually the second), which is repeated in the other constituent with a different vowel. The typical changes are

[i]-[æ]-chit-chat(gossip),dilly-dolly (loiter);[i]-[ɔ];ding-dang(the sound of a bell), ping-pong (table-tennis).

They may be classified *according to the type of composition* too.

The predominant type is a mere juxtaposition without connecting elements: heartache, heart-break, etc.

- Composition with a vowel or consonant as a linking element. The examples are very few: speedometer, Afro-Asian, statesman, handicraft.
- Compounds with linking elements by preposition or conjunction stems: *son-in-law*, pepper-and-salt, up-to-date, etc. Hence, is defined as a special subgroup: asyndetic and syndetic.

Is of equal interest classification proposed by H.Sweet.The linguist discriminates three types of compounds.An open compound word is created in cases when the modifying adjective is used with its noun to create a new noun. This isn't quite the same with a modifying adjective. We just use a space between the adjective and the noun, so sometimes it can be hard to identify as a compound, however, if the two words are commonly used together, it's considered to be a compound word: *full moon*, *living room*, *real estate*, *coffee mug*.

When adverbs ending in -ly combine with another word, the resulting compound is always spelled as two separate words *largely irrelevant*, *newly formed*.

- *Closed Compound Words* look like one word. Closed compound words are usually made up of only two words. Here are some closed compound examples: notebook, Superman, bookstore (H.Sweet:2014,p 124).
- *Hyphenated Compound Words*

There are a great many grammar rules regarding *hyphens in compound words*. One

important rule of thumb to remember is that in most cases, a compound adjective is hyphenated if placed before the noun it modifies, but not if it placed after the noun.For example: long-term solution

This is not a good solution for the long term an up-to-date user guide. This user guide is not up to date (H.Sweet:2014p.127). As we can see H. Sweet's approach gives a glimpse into the composite structure of compounds, i.e. structure a whole, ignoring the semantic relationship between the two constituents of the compound. While, the semantic interplay of the constituents is one of the most interesting and significant aspects of the model, highlighting various mappings of compounds of differently structured languages.

Semantic Classification of Compounds

Applying a broad spectrum of theories sourced from different relationships we can see that either there is utter neglect of defining them or exocentric (or left-headed)compounds are considered as a special case, an *exceptional case* in the sense that they cannot be treated in the same framework as endocentric compounds. (Downing 1977). Downing considered endocentric compounds as the primary objects of their works. It can be inferred from the above-mentioned that the various classifications of exocentric compounds are distinguished either on their syntax or morphology and no further commentary on their semantics. It's a challenging task as a reference is made to the nature of their interpretation. The most traditional widespread *semantic classification* used in linguistics is the one suggested by Bloomfield, who distinguishes two main groups of compounds (Bloomfield;1933). *In endocentric constructions*(nouns) the referent is named by one of the elements, whereas in *exocentric constructions*(nouns) only the combination of both elements names the referent. Thus, *in endocentric* constructions, the compound is the hyponym of the head element: *an apple tree* is a kind of tree. In the case of exocentric or "headless" constructions, however, the compound is not a hyponym of the head element and in majority of the cases there is some sort of metaphor or metonymy at work in the meaning of the compound. For example, *blue-stocking* does not denote a kind of

Afterthoughts on Semantics of Compounds

stocking but refers to a well- educated woman. Though this classification is highly accepted by many linguists (Adams2001, Marchand1960, Ryder1994, etc.) there is mainly great diversity in defining exocentric compounds.

We try to seek areas of agreement among them. There is rather a large degree of ambiguity among linguists to what kind of compounds fall under the umbrella term exocentric compounds. For example, regarding the semantic definition of the exocentric compound, Bloomfield (1933, Marchand) outline metonymy-based noun-noun combinations completely ignoring metaphor-based constructions. In terms of semantics, Adams(1973) distinguishes both metonymy and metaphor-based compounds. Levi(1978) extends her interpretation of exocentric compounds adding the third type of exocentric constructions, the so-called synecdoche compounds. Levi(1978) in her work on nominal compounds lists three types of exocentric constructions:

1. compounds based on synecdoche such as blocked to describe people and cottontail to describe animals;
2. those based on a metaphor such as a ladyfinger(a type of pastry) or foxglove (a type of flower);
3. those which constitute coordinated structures(where neither noun can be taken as a head) such as secretary-treasurer or sofa-bed. It's quite evident that Levi's classification includes both metaphorical and metonymic ones.

Here is noteworthy to mention Katamba's view (1993), who aiming to reveal the semantics of these constructions makes a parallel between them and idiomatic expressions and comes to the conclusion that these two constructions are semantically *opaque*. Katamba (1993) views idioms and exocentric compounds with regard to their opaque meaning.

The meaning of exocentric compounds is not as opaque as it seems. Surely, there are some good seeds of reasoning in this argumentation. However, we can find in English some exocentric compounds whose meaning is less opaque.

Dirven and Verspoor (1998) are in line with Katamba's approach. Leaving behind the traditional notions of endocentricity and exocentricity the authors put into circulation the

term *transparency*, implying the transparency of meaning of compounds.

I believe this suggestion is a radical departure from earlier views as it touches the item from more flexible angle. It's a step forward in the solution of the problem. According to the transparency of meaning the authors distinguish "*transparent*" compounds, such as *appletree* (p60). This type of compounds are analyzable and the meaning of the expression is inferred from the meaning of its components. In *partially transparent* compounds, the components are still analyzable but the semantic link between the compounds is less apparent, such as *blackbird* which does not denote a blackbird but a bird species. At the other end of the scale lie *non-transparent* expressions which Dirven and Verspoor also call "*darkened compounds*" and in this case, metaphorical or metonymical are involved in the meaning of the expressions, such as *red tape*, which does not describe a kind of tape, but refers to long irritating bureaucratic procedure. They make a remark here stating that non-transparent compounds are "easily analyzable" (pp.60-61). Despite efforts made by various findings transparency remains in many respects controversial area. A careful examination of this classification shows that endocentric compounds are defined as transparent while exocentric compounds are of two subtypes: *less transparent* and *non-transparent* or *darkened compounds*. A question then should be posed here how to define the degree of transparency if both less transparent and non-transparent compounds are defined as structurally and semantically analyzable, i.e. easily analyzable. And one more remark; the term "darkened compounds" can be successfully used for defining partially-transparent expressions as here the meaning of the whole composite is opaque too. Aiming to reveal semantic dimensions of compounds is displayed a *cognitive approach* to the study of metaphorical and metonymical compounds. The author proposes a new term "*creative compound*" for compounds whose meaning is influenced by metaphor or metonymy (Cruse, David A. 1991:9). The term "creative compound" is used in a wider sense as it is applied to cases where metaphor and metonymy act upon both the head constituent and the modifier (Cruse,

Afterthoughts on Semantics of Compounds

David A. 1991:9). This standpoint is affected by Langacker's theory of conceptual metaphor, metonymy. Cognitive linguistics claims that the way we construe events or things can also be affected by the conceptual metaphor or metonymy (Langacker 1987;1991;200). It follows that if metaphor and metonymy are everyday processes of thought metaphorical or metonymical compounds are just as normal as everyday constructions.

Conclusion

It can be inferred from the mentioned that the processing of metaphor and metonymy implies some seeds of creativity as it lies on resemblance, imagistic mapping. The application of the term creativity seems to be debatable for the following reasons.

Firstly, this term is not very workable in this case as creativity yields to the birth of less transparent constructions too.

Secondly, creativity is highly needed for translation. For expressions of the type, a translator needs to collect his/her creativity to come up with the right equivalent words. Our supposition is that while using the term creativity an emphasis is made on the process or modeling of compounds, whereas transparency/non-transparency makes an emphatic stress on the result, on the product of this process. Creativity is needed both for sides of communication: writer/speaker and the reader/interlocutor. The term transparent/non-transparent refers to the semantic relations between the constituents, on one hand, and the overall meaning of the construction on the other hand.

References

- [1] Adams I Creative Compounding in English, Lorand University 2001
- [2] Aitchison, J. Words in the Mind: An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon. 4rd ed. Oxford, UK. Basil Blackwell Publishers 2004
- [3] Arnold I The English Word, Moscow 1973
- [4] Bloomfield L. Language ,The University of Chicago Press 1933
- [5] Chomsky, N. and Halle M. The Sound Pattern of English : University of Edinburgh 1968
- [6] Dirven, R. and Verspoor, M. Cognitive Exploration of Language and Linguistics. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.1998
- [7] Downing, P. "On the Creation and Use of English Compound Nouns". Language 53(4):1977
- [8] Ginsburg Categorical Grammar and Word Formation, Moscow 1998
- [9] Katamba F. Morphology St.Martin's Press New York 1993
- [10] Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphor and Metonymy and Experientialist Philosophy, Germany 1980
- [11] Langacker W. Theoretical Prerequisites Stanford University Press 1987
- [12] Levi, Judith N. The Syntax and Semantics of Complex Nominals. New York, Academic Press 1978
- [13] Marchand, H. The Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word-Formation. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.1960
- [14] Plag I. Word-Formation in English, Cambridge University Press 2003
- [15] Sweet H. A New English Grammar, Cambridge University Press 2014
- [16] А,И, Смирницкий Морфология Английского Языка , Москва 1998

Citation: Anahit Hovhannisyan, (2020), "Afterthoughts on Semantics of Compounds", Journal of English Literature and Language; 1(1): 1-5.

DOI: 10.31829/2767-2964/jell2020-1(1)-103

Copyright: © 2020 Anahit Hovhannisyan, This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.