

When “noun” meets “noun”: a cross-linguistic look at complex nominals

Convenors

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Subfields

Typology, Word Formation, Semantics

Keywords

Complex nominals, NN compounds, multiword expressions, naming strategies.

Research question

The workshop’s goal is to investigate the strategies employed by the languages of the world to create complex denotations by using two (or more) nominals.

Deadlines

Provisional abstract (300-word): **25 October 2016** (to be sent by email to the convenors)

Revised abstract (if accepted): **15 January 2017**

Description

Compounding is one of the most widespread methods of word-formation in the world’s languages. That being the case, one might expect typological studies of compounding to offer interesting insights into the nature of conceptualization. So far, however, cross-linguistic research has not been very revealing in this regard. Bauer’s (2001) investigation of an areally and genetically balanced sample of 36 languages has surprisingly few generalizations to report; Guevara & Scalise (2009), drawing on a database of 80,000 compounds, limit their conclusions to mostly formally defined scales of preference; while Štekauer, Valera & Körtvélyessy (2012) are primarily interested in the presence or absence of different types of compounding in their sample of 70 languages.

Two reasons can be posited for this state of affairs. Firstly, previous studies have aimed to cover the full range of compounding. Given that different types of compound often exhibit different properties (e.g. Mandarin has right-headed nominal compounds and left-headed verbal compounds), this can complicate the typology unnecessarily. Secondly, the purely formal point of departure of these studies leads to issues with cross-linguistic identification and the risk of excluding potentially interesting phenomena from the investigation. For example, while admitting Ger. *Eisenbahn* [iron.track] ‘railway’, most definitions of compound exclude Fr. *chemin de fer* [track PREP iron] ‘railway’, even though the constituent meanings, the resultant meaning, and presumably also the underlying cognitive processes, are essentially identical.

This workshop adopts a different perspective, one that involves a simultaneous narrowing and broadening of scope. First of all, instead of examining the whole gamut of compounding, it starts out from the more uniform phenomenon of noun-noun compounding. This represents a narrowing of scope. Secondly, it adopts a functional rather than a formal approach to defining the object of study, which results in a broadening of scope. This is because the *function* of noun-noun compounds – to provide names for complex concepts that involve two entities – is not theirs alone.

Thus, in addition to **noun-noun compounds** (e.g. *Eisenbahn*) and **prepositional compounds** (or “phrasal lexemes”, e.g. *chemin de fer*), the same function is carried out by **relational compounds** in Slavic languages (e.g. Rus. *železnaja doroga* [iron.ADJZ road] ‘railway’) and constructions that “compete” with them (Rainer 2013), **izafet constructions** in Turkic (e.g. Tur. *demir.yol.u* [iron.road.IZ] ‘railway’), **construct state**

constructions in Semitic (e.g. Modern Hebrew *mesila.t barzel* [track.CON iron] ‘railway’), and **genitive-like constructions** in many languages from around the world (e.g. Malagasy *lala.m.by* [road.PERT.iron] ‘railway’).

What all of these constructions have in common is that they serve to name a complex concept via the combination of two “Thing-roots” (Haspelmath 2012), between which there is an unstated (or underspecified) relation. They are all *binominal naming constructions* (BNCs).

The commonality between such constructions can also be viewed in terms of Štekauer’s model of onomasiological word-formation, according to which they are all Type 3 naming units (where “the determined (actional) element is not linguistically expressed”, Štekauer 1998:10). Adopting this perspective encourages two further refinements, again involving a simultaneously narrowing and broadening of scope. The first is the exclusion of complex nominals of Štekauer’s Type 1 and Type 2 that contain an “Action-root”. As a consequence, synthetic compounds like *truck-driver* are considered *out of scope*. This is justified on the grounds that the presence of an actional element (here: DRIVE) may be expected to involve different formal and semantic parameters, which (again) would complicate the typology unnecessarily.

The second refinement is based on the recognition that nominalizing affixes, like Eng. *-er* and Slovak *-ica*, and noun classifiers like Bora *-heju* (‘hole-like object’) can play one of the “nominal” roles in a Type 3 complex nominal. At least in terms of the cognitive processes involved, there is no difference between Eng. *banker* and *bankman*, despite one being formed through derivation and the other through compounding, or between Bora *túú.heju* [nose.CM(hole)] and Indonesian *lubang hidung* [hole nose], both of which mean ‘nostril’. Consequently, adnominal nominalizations and noun classifier constructions that consist primarily of two nominal or nominalizing elements fulfil the basic criterion and are considered *in scope*.

This approach to complex denotation cuts across traditional boundaries between morphology and syntax, and between compounding and derivation: it “divides the cake” in a new way that might reveal new insights into language and conceptualization.

The goal of this workshop is to explore semantic and morphosyntactic aspects of BNCs as defined here, along with frequency, productivity, and competition between different strategies, across a broad range of languages. In particular, papers are sought that investigate BNCs through

- studies of individual languages, in particular, lesser-studied and non-SAE languages
- contrastive studies of languages, in particular those closely related genetically
- typological and areal studies
- studies that address cognitive aspects of complex nominals (cf. Pepper to appear)

Papers that highlight the permeability of the boundaries between compounding and syntax, and between compounding and derivation are especially welcome.

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