

An analysis of compounding in English

Jana Bérešová^{a**}, Trnava University in Trnava, Slovakia, Slovakia

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Abstract

Word formation processes contain compounding as one of the principal processes. In English, forming new words by compounding has been recognised since the language of Anglo-Saxons started to develop. The study aims to search for examples of compounds used in contemporary literary prose, focusing on the conceptualisation of reality. Our study will be based on an analysis of excerpted examples that will be sorted according to common features of the way the language users perceive and capture reality. To create and transfer new meanings effectively, compounding seems to be productive as two or more words are combined and function as a single word. The meaning of the compound is influenced by the meanings of its constituents and the relationship between them. Different combinations of meanings are determined by the way extralinguistic reality is classified by the language community.

Keywords: Compounding, conceptualisation, English, extralinguistic, semantics;

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Jana Bérešová, Trnava University in Trnava, Slovakia, Slovakia
E-mail address: jana.beresova@truni.sk

1. Introduction

The most frequent word formation process is a derivation, which is used to form new lexemes by adding prefixes and suffixes, which change the meaning of the word class. These prefixes and suffixes are added to the base form. However, compounding is a process during which independently existing bases are combined to form new lexemes. To distinguish them from other phrases, the elements of a compound cannot be freely replaced by other words. When a substitution occurs in compounds, the meaning changes (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finnegan, 1999).

Some criteria for identifying compounds are phonological as the primary stress of the compound is on a syllable in the first word. When compounds are written as separate, unhyphenated words, syntactic criteria can be used, which means that two or more words are treated as one unit. Two or more words constitute a compound when they can be moved, elided or substituted for a single unit by the syntax (Katamba, 2009). Widdowson (1997, p. 60) clarifies the role of syntax emphasising that ‘the words are compounded into a fixed association which syntax cannot meddle with’, adding that once the words are separate in the expression, ‘they are not independent as grammatical constituents’.

As Biber et al. (1999) claim words such as blackbirds and bluebirds refer to different kinds of birds without any reference to colour. According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (OALD), blackbirds can be black (males) or brown (females) or with dark shiny feathers and bluebirds are birds with blue feathers on their back or head (Hornby, 2010). However, they belong to different species of birds. While searching for their Latin and Greek names, it was found out that *Turdus merula* (blackbird) and *Sialia sialis* (bluebird) do not contain any colour reference and Latin and Greek nomenclatures are based on different principles. The two-term naming system (binomial nomenclature) is a formal system of naming species, in which the first part of the name identifies a group of animals or plants, more closely related than a family, but less similar than a species (the genus) and the specific name is used to identify the species within the genus. Slovak terms are formed on the same principles but in contrast, to Latin and Greek, the names of birds such as *drozd čierny* (blackbird) and *salašník modrý* or *salašník modrochrbtý* (bluebird) use colours in the nomenclature of zoology, but colours do not distinguish birds into different species as mentioned above concerning English.

1.1. Purpose of the study

Different languages classify reality in different ways. People use a language to act upon their environment and to cope with reality by classifying, organising and bringing it under control by a process of conceptual projection. Lipka (2002, pp. 71–72) considers language as ‘equivalent to a particular conceptual system employing which we perceive, structure, organise and understand the infinite flow of impression from the world we live in’. Every language has its lexical items through which the concepts and shades of meaning can be expressed. Whether these expressions are similar or different is based on the way reality is perceived by the users of a particular language. The study aims to search for examples of compounds used in contemporary literary prose, focusing on the conceptualisation of reality.

2. Materials and method

Different classifications of reality have become a challenge to find out some answers to the questions concerning English compounds and their Slovak equivalents. The idea behind our study was to search for samples that represent contemporary English and become aware of their use in authentic material.

2.1. Data

The material which was selected to be analysed was a book (contemporary literary prose) written by Bryndza (2016), a British person living in Slovakia. His book called *The Girl in the Ice* (Bryndza, 2016) has become the international #1 bestseller, having sold over 1 million copies.

2.2. Procedure

The first step to be done was to thoroughly read the chapters to identify English compounds as they can be written as one word, a hyphenated word or two separate words. To distinguish phrases from compounds, the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD) was used to consult the stress position as well as to check the placement of the word in the alphabetically organised list of words. In some cases, it became reasonable to contrast between endocentric and exocentric compounds to realise that those that are endocentric need not be listed as separate headwords in the dictionary as they are compositional and their meaning can be inferred from the meaning of the words they contain (Katamba, 2009). Another very useful criterion was that a new word is formed by combining two constituents, which are both free morphemes or contain a free morpheme (Herbst, 2010). A further criterion that distinguishes compounding from free phrases is that only the former can be analysed in terms of a modifier–head or determinant–determinatum pattern (Herbst, 2010).

After distinguishing between phrases and compounds, the next idea was to explore the patterns, based on the grammatical categories of nouns, verbs, adjectives etc. Compounds commonly have a headword that assigns its syntactic properties to the entire word (Katamba, 2009). However, each compound group can contain more patterns, and therefore it seemed to be reasonable to analyse them to get more specific categories, for example, noun + noun, adjective + noun, noun + verb, preposition + verb, adjective + adjective, noun + adjective etc.

2.3. Analysis

The collection of 70 English compound samples was to be classified into several categories based on their similar features in English. These groups were statistically analysed and compared. Each time proper information was necessary, the British National Corpus (BNC) as a valuable source and an analysis tool for vocabulary research was used. Once a new compound was found in the book, its frequency of occurrence was examined and compared with the frequencies of its synonyms. Since the BNC is based on both written and spoken English, it was possible to indicate the texts in which the selected compounds were found. The second classification of the collected excerpts was based on comparing them with their Slovak equivalents. New groups of words resulted from semantic similarities and differences between investigated languages.

3. Results

The examined pages, taken from the above-mentioned book, account for 12 pages (3,566 words and 14,743 characters). The number of samples regarding the word formation process called compounding was 70. The total number of samples was divided into 4 main categories: noun compounds – 71.43%, verb compounds – 1.43%, adjective compounds – 20.00% and adverb compounds – 7.14%. As noun compounds accounted for the largest group of the collection, it is reasonable to classify the samples using subcategories. Figure 1 shows the subcategories of noun compounds.

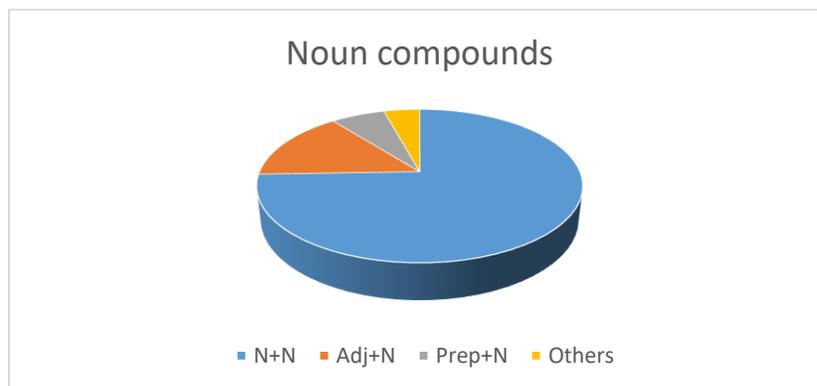


Figure 1. The patterns of noun compounds

Noun + noun compounds were the most frequent patterns (36), followed by adjective + noun patterns (7) and preposition + noun patterns (3), and two samples belonged to the group of others. The noun group needed a careful study as two-word noun compounds are commonly written as two separate words and it was necessary to distinguish them from other word strings. The next group in the number of occurrences was adjectives that contained a variety of patterns, in which either adjective + adjective (2), adverb + adjective (3), as well as adjective + noun (3), or noun + adjective (3) patterns occurred apart from others (4). Adjective compounds were either hyphenated or written as a single word. In contrast to Parrott's (2013) observations regarding the second part of the adjective compounds, in our sample collection, only 33.33% of the adjective compounds involved participle forms.

Despite only one sample representing the verb compound group, we decided to analyse it as well. Although Moon (1997) formulates the conclusion that compound verbs are typically hyphenated, our sample was a single word (*clickclack*), representing a minor category of compounds that are motivated by the phonological form involving vowel change. On the other hand, Moon's (1997) claim that verb compounds are few was confirmed. The above-mentioned information was useful for analysing data semantically. Their in-depth analysis enabled us to recognise the similarities and differences between English compounds and their Slovak equivalents.

Supposing a special sample was noticed, corpora data seemed to be necessary to check our assumptions. One of the noun compounds was the expression *petrol garage*. Due to the fact that the compound *petrol station* is more common alongside its synonym *filling station*, it seemed to be reasonable to check the frequency of occurrence of these three compounds in the BNC. While the expression *petrol station* was used in 95 hits taken from 63 texts and the expression *filling station* occurred in 28 hits used in 23 texts, the sample taken from the book (*petrol garage*) occurred only in 2 hits found in 2 texts, one published in the newspapers and one representing spoken mode.

The second word that attracted our attention was the expression *iPhone*. There were no matches for our query in the BNC. Consulting the dictionaries, it was possible to find only the expression *iPod* (Hornby, 2010, p. 823). Due to the definition of the latter, which reveals that 'i' stands for the word Internet, it was possible to discover that 'i' stands for many words apart from the Internet (originally to highlight Mac's revolutionary Internet capabilities) such as individual, instruct, inform and inspire mentioned by Steve Jobs in his presentation (Jones, 2017). This abbreviated 'i' is part of some words and behaves differently from the e-prefix.

3.1. Semantic similarities and differences between English compounds and their Slovak equivalents

The words in different languages refer to how people perceive the world and therefore languages are used to engage our extralinguistic reality. The ties between elements in compounds are established by identifying links between their significations as encoded items (via an interpretation of what meanings might have been intended by using them). All the compounds were distributed into four major groups due to their range of similarity.

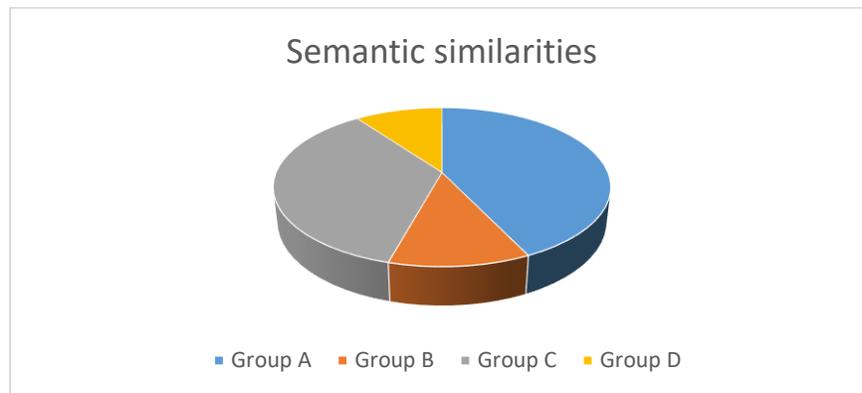


Figure 2. Semantic similarities between English compounds and their Slovak equivalents

Studying our samples, we were able to divide them due to semantic differences between the English compounds and their Slovak equivalents into several groups.

3.2. English compounds and their Slovak equivalents – semantic similarities (group A)

The first group is represented by those English compounds in which determinant and determinatum are expressed in Slovak with no semantic change. Some examples are represented by expressions such as *work placement* and their Slovak equivalents (*pracovné umiestnenie*), *human being* (*ľudská bytosť*) and *central locking* (*centrálne zamykanie*); adjective compounds were *ten-minute* (*desaťminútový*), *evergreen* (*vždyzelený*) and so on. This group can be characterised as the expressions with no semantic difference, such as *moonlight* translated on a word-for-word basis as *mesačné svetlo*, apart from another Slovak expression *mesačný svit* (moonshine). Group A was the most numerous and contained samples such as *weekend*, *long-term*, *toilet tissue*, *front seat*, *back seat* etc. It was predictable that words such as *mobile phone*, *laptop* and *text message* that are borrowed from English into Slovak would belong to this group. The total number of 30 samples accounts for 42.86% of the analysed collection.

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that some samples were problematic and required an in-depth analysis. This group comprised compounds that reflected different cultural and societal contexts and therefore the English word *train station* is based on the transport means people use, while in Slovak *železničná stanica* (railway station) different classification and segmentation of reality are reflected. On the other hand, it is important to mention that the BNC confirmed 515 hits referring to the word *railway station* (taken from 287 different texts), while our query for the expression *train station* returned 47 hits found in 39 different texts. In Slovak, the expression *vlaková stanica*, which is the word-by-word translation of *train station*, can be heard as well, but it is not an entry in the Slovak dictionaries.

3.3. English compounds and their Slovak equivalents – partial semantic similarities (group B)

The second group contained samples, in which English compounds have Slovak compounds as equivalents; however, their wordings are different. A different approach to naming is clearly seen in the English Compound *High Street*. In the OALD (2010, p. 734), this expression is defined as the main street in which most shops are situated and therefore its semantic meaning is similar to that in Slovak, in which *hlavná ulica* is the word-for-word translation of the expression *main street*, used in American English. However, it is necessary to emphasise the role of etymology. The Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson & Weiner, 1991, p. 230) provides some explanations, one of which is related to meanings such as a highway (an elevated road) or one of the Roman roads, and another one based on a historical record from 1736 which reads that ‘High Streets ... are designed for some certain purpose, especially any public one; as, for instance, those which lead to some Temple, or the place of Justice’, emphasising that they were the most frequented or important. Nowadays, *High Street* is often used as the proper name. The use of the adjective *high* refers to the importance of the street which was originally the principal one in the town. In Slovakia, the main street was the centre in which people used to gather as the most important buildings such as churches, a town tower and a theatre was built there. Semantically, the adjectives used in both compounds represent similar ideas that the streets are the principal ones in the town.

Other words that belong to this category are words such as *clutch bag*, *headlights*, *sound system* etc. While a compound *clutch bag* is based on the combination of *clutch* (the closest meaning seems to be a tight hold on sth) and *bag*, in Slovak *listový* is an adjective derived from the noun *list* (leaf), which represents the quality of having a small distance between two opposite sides of the bag (the thickness, or better to say, thinness of the bag). While the semantic shift in the expression *headlights* is in the first part of the compound as its Slovak equivalent is *predný* (front), the semantic shift in the compound *sound system* is in the second part of the expression as the word *system* in English is replaced by the word *aparátúra* (*apparatus*). The word *system* means a set of connected devices operating together, while *apparatus* refers to a set of equipment or tools used for a particular purpose (McIntosh, 2013; Uzunboylu & Genc, 2017).

This group of compounds represents slight differences in the perception of reality, based on historical and cultural experiences of the nations. Words have changed their meanings due to the development of society.

3.4. English compounds and their Slovak one-word equivalents – partial semantic similarities (group C)

The third group contains compounds that have one-word equivalents in Slovak. This group can be represented by expressions such as *sandstone* (*pieskovcový*), *pathway* (*chodníček*), *footprint* (*stopa*, *šľapaj*), *alleyway* (*ulička*), *snow-covered* (*zasnežený*), *rowing boat* (*veslica*), *banknote* (*bankovka*) etc. The above-mentioned English expressions have their Slovak equivalents expressed by one word, the meaning of which is semantically similar to the first part of the English compounds. The second part of the English compound is usually a general word that intensifies the meaning of the first one. There was only one sample in which the second part of an English compound belonging to this category (*finger nail*) was semantically similar to its Slovak equivalent (*necht*).

Sometimes, it was not possible to sort the compounds properly as several English multiword lexical items have more than one equivalent in Slovak. Using the Slovak translation of the book appeared to have solved this problem; however, the goal of this research was to compare English compounds and their Slovak equivalents that are entries in the dictionary. Using one-word equivalents, we wanted to

emphasise that Slovak (a synthetic language) expresses meanings by using endings and therefore one-word expressions are common. On the other hand, it can be concluded that English compounds in this category were good examples of clarity and preciseness, typical for expressing ideas in English.

3.5. English compounds and their Slovak equivalents – semantic differences (group D)

The fourth group comprised words that are different in the examined languages. In English, the shelf that is in front of a car and used for storing small things is called a *glove compartment* consisting of the words *glove* (a piece of clothing worn on the hand for warmth) and *compartment* (a container). Its equivalent in Slovak *odkladacia priehradka* means a container for storing small things. In this case, it is possible to say that once a non-native speaker is exposed to an English compound, he/she can guess the meaning from the context; however, he/she is not able to translate the Slovak expression into an appropriate English equivalent. Another compound in this group was the word *hedgerow* meaning ‘a line of different types of bushes to separate fields etc.’ (McIntosh, 2013, p. 725). Its Slovak equivalent *živý plot* means a fence made of natural plants (animate fence). The third expression that justifies semantic differences between the examined compounds is the word *off-license* meaning ‘a shop that sells mainly alcoholic drinks’ (CALD, 2013, p. 1064). This word is translated into Slovak as *obchod s liehovinami* (a shop with alcoholic drinks). This English compound has its equivalents in different varieties of English such as *a liquor store* in American English and *a bottle shop* in Australia; however, etymologically, the British word was derived from the expression referring to the shop that has a license to sell alcohol for consumption only off the premises.

The last group also comprised English compounds that have Slovak one-word equivalents semantically different such as *shop window* (*výklad*) and *headphones* (*slúchadlá*). The words are governed by the social conventions of society in which a particular language is spoken. The English compound *headphones* are a combination of two words: *head* expressing a part of the body on which something is worn and *phones* as instruments that use sound, while Slovak *slúchadlá* clearly refers to listening. However, in English, another expression exists. The compound *earphones* refer to *ears* as organs for listening and *phones* in the same meaning mentioned above. Another example to be discussed is the expression *shop window* and its Slovak equivalent *výklad* or *výkladná skriňa*. While in English, the second-word *window* refers to the glass that enables the public to see what is inside, the first-word *shop* directly points to the place where it is situated (McIntosh, 2013). The Slovak word *výklad* is derived from the verb *vykladať* meaning ‘to display’ and the noun *výklad* is the place where the things are displayed. The longer term *výkladná skriňa*, in which the latter means ‘wardrobe’, shifts the meaning towards clothes that are either hung or that belong to a person, but the word does not refer to shopping.

Classifying this group of compounds was a laborious process as it was important to recognise any differences to conclude.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to present some issues related to English compounds focusing on them from respective perspectives. Although the number of samples was limited, some problems were revealed. The first problem for non-native speakers might be a distinction between a phrase and a compound due to different approaches in the orthography of the latter. This required the verification of some multiword expressions in the dictionary or the use of the classification criteria mentioned in the introduction of this paper. Consulting dictionaries and the BNC confirmed our assumptions regarding some expressions.

An in-depth analysis of 12 pages (3,566 words) provided us with 91 excerpts – compounds, out of which 15 were orthographically separate and 21 were the same expressions repeated more than once. Statistically, they account for 1.97%; however, this number does not include that some of them were mentioned more times as their occurrence in the examined text was statistically insignificant (2.57%). A collection of English excerpts was divided into four groups due to their similarities and differences with their Slovak equivalents. However, the first analysis of the excerpts was based on their parts of speech classification as we tended to find out the proportion of different parts of speech. The statistical data confirmed our expectations based on the theoretical framework. As regards verb compounds, this group was represented by one sample and therefore it is not possible to draw valid conclusions.

In general, based on quantitative and qualitative data gained in research, we can conclude that compounding still belongs to a productive way of word formations in English. On the contrary, Slovak expressions corresponding to English compounds were single words (24%), being able to express semantic meaning. In English, we found out some expressions in which the use of multiple-word expression makes the meaning clear and it is impossible to have any doubt about the meaning, for example, pine tree and elm tree are used apart from single words pine and elm. Another example was the expression *front passenger seat*, the Slovak equivalent of which is *predné sedadlo* as *driver's seat* has its equivalent in the language (*vodičovo sedadlo*).

The use of the BNC enabled us to reveal that every writer can choose his wording and the chosen words do not need to belong to the most frequent words in contemporary English. A literary work has its artistic value and can educate its readers on how to use the language properly. One of its impacts on readers is the enrichment of their vocabulary.

Compounds are expressions, the meaning of which is based on a combination of ideas and views on the aspects of our reality and therefore it was possible to discover the main differences between perceiving reality in different language communities. Our research has proved that English describes reality in a more precise and explicit way.

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