A Linguistic-Gestalt Approach to English Compounds

by
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PART I: PARTS OF SPEECH: Let's assume that there are approximately ten parts of speech, as follows: Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs, Pronouns, Prepositions, Conjunctions, Expletives, Interjections, and Auxiliaries. Now Let's assume, as Charles Fries and others have done, that these ten parts of speech fall into two major classes: Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, and Adverbs on one hand and everything else on the other hand, and let call the first set "Content Words," and the second set "Function Words," with there being five basic differences between these two master part-of-speech categories:

1). Content words are real-world based, while function words are not.

2). Content words cannot be guessed in a Cloze test, while function words can.

3). Content words are an open set, while function words are a closed set.

4). Content words can be inflected, while function words cannot.

5). Content words more characteristically receive stress than do function words.

6). Content words enter into compounds much more easily than do function words.

Because of their real-world grounding, content words are more concrete and more basic than are function words. Whereas content words are used to talk about the real world, function words are used merely as traffic signals to show how the content words are relating to each other. Therefore, a preposition shows the grammatical relationship between a noun and another noun; a conjunction shows the relationship between a clause and another clause (though sometimes these clauses can be truncated); an expletive marks the place of a grammatical subject and shows that the real subject has been linguistically postponed; etc.

It is the content words that carry the load of communication, and since communication is the major function of language, the content words are more important to the discourse than are the function words. This fact is supported by studies in first language acquisition, second-language acquisition, and delayed language acquisition. In first-language acquisition there is a stage called the telegraphic stage at which all of the

function words are systematically deleted while the content words are systematically retained. There is also evidence that with second-language acquisition communication is still more important than grammatical correctness, for in a number of articles in *Developmental Psycholinguistics:Theory and Applications*, it is shown that ESL learners tend to learn highly communicative structures before they learn lowly communicative structures regardless of the order in which these structures are taught. Notice also that pidgins around the world are very similar to the telegraphic stage of language development in dropping function words while retaining content words. And for everybody, whenever we must drop words to save money (as in a telegram), it is again the function words that are expendable. As Roger Brown puts it, the function words are "an intricate sort of ivy to grow up between and upon the major construction blocks, the nouns and verbs."(Brown, p. 249)

But it is not enough to say that content words are more concrete or basic than are function words. We can even rank the various classes of content words in terms of concreteness or basicness. When we do, we discover that Nouns are more basic than Verbs, which are more basic than Adjectives; which are more basic than Adverbs. Nouns are more basic than Verbs because an action or state of being is impossible without something to act or be. The same is true of modification. An Adjective must have a Noun for it to modify. The Adverb is the most abstract and least basic of the content classes because it modifies a Verb (which must be a predication of a Noun), or an Adjective (which must be a modification of a Noun), or another Adverb (which must be a modification of a predication of a Noun).

PART II: THE STRUCTURE OF ENGLISH COMPOUNDS: One of the important features of the content words is that they freely enter into compounds with other content words. This is true of Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, and Adverbs. To show how productive this process is, please consider the following matrix in which each of the four content classes forms a compound with every other content class:

	NOUN	VERB	ADJECTIVE	ADVERB
NOUN	shirt sleeve	boardwalk	carte blanche	salt away
VERB	open heart	makeshift	look sharp	run down
ADJECTIVE	greenhouse	freefall	bitter-sweet	blackout
ADVERB	overcoat	downpour	off-white	down and out

What is true of Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, and Adverbs is also true of Adjectives derived from Verbs (i.e. the Present and past participles):

	VERB + ING	VERB + EN
NOUN	soul-searching	house broken
VERB	riproaring	blindfolded
VERB + ING	crumbling building	reading-based
VERB + EN	closed meeting	broken hearted
ADJECTIVE	safe keeping	old-fashioned
ADVERB	undertaking	downtrodden

Expressions where the verbals come before the regular content classes can also be cited:

VERB + ING	VERB + EN
NOUN	
running battle	collapsed lung
VERB	
flying leap	forced smile
ADJECTIVE	
looking good	frozen stiff
ADVERB	
coming-out	worn-out

The paradigmatic displays above give only part of the story. Suppose for example, a compound is formed by juxtaposing one Noun with another Noun. There must be some syntagmatic information provided in order to correctly analyze the compound. "Killer shark" is a Subject Complement followed by a Subject; it is derived from a sentence like "The shark is a killer." Now consider "rattle snake." This is a Direct Object followed by a Subject, the original sentence being something like "The snake has a rattle." The Subject and Direct Object could be in their more usual order, as in "knife wound" from "The knife made a wound." Another possibility for Noun + Noun compounds is Subject + Object of Preposition. "Ash tray" comes from "The tray is for ashes," but again the order can be reversed, since "chocolate bar" comes from "The bar is made of chocolate." It is even possible for Noun + Noun compounds to be derived from Direct objects and Objects of Prepositions (usually in reversed order). "Someone makes sauce from apples," and this gives us the compound "apple sauce."

PART III: PROBLEMS: But so far, I have painted an overly optomistic picture. The paradigms and suggestions for syntactic coupling above are presented as if there were no contrary examples. Furthermore they suggest that there is nothing more to be considered. This is just not the case. There are many so-called problems related to the formation of compounds in English. These are *so-called* problems because there is a good chance that they are not *problems* at all—only *surprises*. And when viewed as suprises, these so-called problems become not something to be dreaded or explained away, but rather become exciting little puzzles to activate the mind both in the process of generating compounds and in the process of analyzing compounds that are already generated.

Ambiguity: Consider first the "problem" of ambiguity. Children don't consider compound-ambiguity in any way a problem. On the contrary, they consider it a

delight. In *The Youth Market,*, Melvin Helitzer and Carl Heyel tell about a child who asks another child "Where do you have your hair cut?" The second child responds that he has his hair cut at a particular barber's shop and then the asker of the original question doubles up with laughter and says, "Oh, really, I have mine cut on my head." (Helitzer, p. 115)

Literalization: Charles Darwin once had an experience involving compound-ambiguity that illustrates a more sophisticatedof humor. Darwin was visiting the country home of a friend, and the two boys of the family decided they would play a practical joke on him. They went on an insect hunt, and found a centipede, a butterfly, a grasshopper, and a beetle, and they made a strange looking composite insect by gluing together the centipede's body, the butterfly's wings, the grasshopper's legs, and the beetle's head. After they had carefully glued all of these parts together they took it to Darwin and told him that they had caught it in the field, and they wanted to know what kind of a bug it was. Darwin thought for a moment and then asked the boys, "Did you notice whether it hummed when you caught it?" They answered that it did, and Darwin then said, "Then of course it is a humbug." Darwin was playing with the literal and productive compound formation, "hum bug," that is a bug that goes "hum"as contrasted with its homononymic figurative or idiomatic counterpart, "humbug," a form that because it is an idiom is not analyzable into its various parts any more than the boys' bug was. Like the boys' bug it was unique and idiomatic and therefore generalizations could not be drawn from its existence.

The Misinterpreted Compound-Gestalt: Most compounds are ambiguous for the same reason that most small children's sentences are ambiguous. In both cases (the compound or the one word holophrastic sentence) we have a complete sentence truncated into a shorter and simpler structure. But during the trunication process, important grammatical information is frequently lost. Of course we normally have in our heads rules of disambiguation based on cultural expectations that apply quickly and subconsciously so that we are seldom aware that any ambiguity ever existed; however, consider the person with not quite so much cultural awareness. Robin Williams as Mork is talking to a prisoner who says "I got caught shoplifting," to which Mork replies, "Wow, you must be strong."

In the work he is doing with Gestalt Linguistics, George Lakoff explains that our experiences do not allow us to interpret the expression "cement truck" as a "truck made out of cement," even though that interpretation is syntactically just as plausible as is "truck for carrying cement." Lakoff further explains that in order to understand such a simple compound as "topless legislation" we have to set up a series of linkings. "Topless legislation" is legislation which relates to districts which have bars which have dancers which have dresses which are topless. At each of the stages in this linking process there is a totally senseless expression if viewed in isolation—that is without taking the rest of the chain into account. Thus, "topless legislation" is NOT legislation without a title; a "topless district" is NOT a district under the cover of clouds or smog; a "topless bar" is

NOT a bar without a roof; and a "topless dancer" is CERTAINLY NOT a dancer without a top. If the chaining process were not taken into account, then we would have to change the name of most "topless dancers"to the superficially more accurate "top-FULL dancers." But the chaining process **IS** in effect. And it is a very important tool for communicating relationship making everything so dreadfully literal and explicit.

Let me give just one more example of a misleading analysis that results from not seeing enough links in the chain. In a particular "Mutt and Jeff" cartoon strip a person knocks on the door and says, "Is Mr. Mutt at home? I'm from the collection agency! I'm a bill collector." Jeff, who answers the door is completely unfluffed. "Oh, great! Come in. Have a seat. I'll be with you in a second!" he says. And when he returns, "Here's a whole bunch of them! Come back next month and I'll give you another batch." The "problem" with "bill collector" is the same as that of "topless legislation." A "bill collector" does NOT collect bills, as the surface structure of the compound would suggest; rather, he collects the *money* that is associated with the bills. A person who doesn't interact properly in our culture, like the alien Mork, or like the literal-minded Jeff, is going to misinterpret this compound. And he will also have difficulty figuring out the meaning of a "hot water heater," and a "boiling teakettle."

Domain Of Modification: Robert Orben explains that it's very easy to make a "baby buggy." All you have to do is "tickle its toes" (Orben, p. 9). G. G. Pocheptsov tells about a person who walked into some law offices, and asked, "I am looking for a criminal lawyer. Have you any here?" "Well, we're pretty sure we have" was the reply "but we can't prove it." In both of these cases, there is a problem with the domain of the modification. In the expression "How do you make a baby buggy?" it is possible that the headword is "buggy" and that the modifier is "baby" but that is not the only interpretation, for it is also that the headword is "baby" and the modifier is "buggy." Stress the word "baby" (the first word in the construction), then "baby" is nothing more than a modifier of "buggy." We stress "buggy" (the second word in the construction), then the direction of modification is reversed. With the expression "criminal lawyer," the direction of modification is again reversed by changing the stress pattern of the expression.

The "Problem" with Hyphens: In an article entitled "Damned Hyphen," Dwight Bolinger of Harvard University discusses the use of hyphens in longer compounds. He says, "Something has to be done. . . to retrain the sadists in our culture who reason that if an ice cream carton is a carton for ice cream, canned baby food ought to be food for canned babies" (Bolinger, pp. 297-299). Bolinger is suggesting that there is a difference in interpretation between "canned-baby food" and "canned baby-food." But more importantly, he's suggesting that rules of inference are necessary in interpreting a sentence, and anyone who thinks that baby food is food for canned babies is not using these rules of inference sensibly.

In his *On Language,* William Safire makes a similar observation about the ambiguity of longer compounds, as he quotes from Henry Fowler's *Modern English Usage* as follows: "A little used car is not necessarily the same as a little-used car." (Safire, p. 137) In newspaper headlines, the "problem with hyphens" is compounded (pun intended). Bob Beamesderfer, one of the students in my "Current English Usage Class" told me about a headline than ran in a local paper:

SQUAD HELPS DOG BITE VICTIM

A well-placed hyphen would have made this headline a little bit less ludicrous:

SQUAD HELPS DOG-BITE VICTIM

In reality, the hyphen is not the only punctuation device for showing concatination (or compounding) in English. The normal evolution of a compound would be as follows:

FIRST STAGE: ham and eggs

SECOND STAGE: ham-and-eggs

THIRD STAGE: hamandeggs

FOURTH STAGE: mnx (or something of the sort)

William Safire discusses the tendency in English of going from the first or second stage to the third stage. Safire discusses examples given by Emerson Stone of CBS News Radio which have entered this third stage: "anymore," "golfball," "awhile," "someday," "lifework," "everyday" (as an adverb), "alright," and "grassroots." Safire extrapolates to the future: "Where will it all end?" Are we headed toward collapsing all the 600,000-odd English words into one long word? Imnotsurethatsalltothegood." (Safire, p. 13)

Safire is making an important point—though he is overstating it a little. Some purists are already upset with various contractions we have in English. They don't like words like "don't," "doesn't," "haven't," "hasn't" "aren't," "isn't," and "weren't," and of course they are livid whenever they hear or see "ain't." But the contraction process in English speech has gone much further than this, and the same contraction process is also making intrusions into the writing system. The expressions "used to," "supposed to" "have to," and "has to" have all lost to the voicing at the end of the first word as this word assimilates to the closely concatenated last word. We now, therefore, see spellings like "hafta." The English modal system is undergoing a similar evolution:

FIRST STAGE: "would have"

SECOND STAGE: "would of"

THIRD STAGE: "would a"

FOURTH STAGE: "woulda"

This is a frequent construction, because it happens whenever we have *any* modal followed by a perfect construction.

Or consider the English paraphrastic future. Again we can see it in stages:

FIRST STAGE: "going to"

SECOND STAGE: "gonna"

THIRD STAGE: "onna"

Even the non-paraphrastic English future has stages of cohesion as "shall" and "will" are kept separate at the most formal stage; they are merged to "will" at a less formal stage, and become "'ll" at the even-more informal levels.

This portmanteau process of making a single word out of a of number of words is an important process in filling lexical gaps in English. Lewis Carroll used the process effectively in *Alice in Wonderland,* where "slithy" comes from "lithe" and "slimy;" "mimsy" is "flimsy" and "miserable," and "the wabe" is called that because it goes a long **way** before it and a long **way** behind it.

Priscilla Tyler points out that e. e. cummings also has some nice blends, such as "just-spring," "puddle-wonderful" and "mudlusious." In an article entitled "Linguistic Criticism and Literature in Four Centuries," she tells about a French girl studying English who came up with the phrase "bored as a stiff." Professor Tyler analyzes this formation as follows:

This brilliant combination of "stiff as a board," and "bored stiff" and "bored to death" would go beyond the reach of most native English speakers, apart perhaps from children." (Tyler, p. 58)

But although Professor Tyler's insightful analysis of the French girl's idiom is powerful and poetic, I wonder if she hasn't underestimated the process for "most native English speakers." In an article entitled "Collegiate Slang: Aspects of Word Formation and Semantic Change," Richard Seymour notes some blends made up by native English speakers. He discusses "scuzzy," as in the expression "Your teeth are scuzzy." This expression appears to be made up of "fuzzy" and "scummy." He also talks about "gritch" means"grouchy female," as coming from "grouchy" and either "witch" or-"bitch" or both. He also discusses "scrummy" from "scumptious" "yummy," and "fantabulous" from "fantastic" "fabulous," and "twud"from "twit" and "stud." The

explanation for this last blend is that a "twit" is someone who thinks studying is important and doesn't date every often. The opposite of a "twit" is a "stud," an athlete who dates constantly. A "twud" therefore, is someone who is smart and studies a lot, but who nevertheless is an athlete and someone who parties a lot as well. A "twud" therefore is sort of the "Jack-Armstrong-the-All-American-boy" of the campus. (Seymour, pp. 13-21; Limpapath, 3-4 and 6)

Other Concatination Problems: A number of authors have expressed concern that the compounding process is using up words in idiom information and making them unusable elsewhere in the language. William Safire states the problem as follows:

> . . . certain adjectives have affixed themselves to institutions. The Ways and Means Committee is always "the powerful Ways and Means Committee," and the Chrysler Corporation is now "the ailing Chrysler Corporation." (For a time, "financially troubled Chrysler Corporation" had a fling, but the brisk "ailing" won out.) Children reared on TV and radio news think one auto manufacturer is named "Ayling-Chrysler." (Safire, p. 32)

Safire continues later in *On Language:*

> My own pet peeve is the phrase "pet peeve." Doesn't anybody have any other kind of peeve? Alliteration is dandy. . .but can't we try "favorite fury" or "preferred provocation"? One of these days, I'm going to get a dog and name him "Peeve," so I can introduce him to friends in the ecstasy of exasperation with "This is my pet, Peeve. (Safire, p. 203)

In "A Pretty Kettle of Cliches," Sydney Harris voices a similar concern with the process of idiomatization:

> I should like to read or hear, just once, about tacks that aren't brass, questions that aren't moot, coasts that aren't clear, fates that aren't worse than death, and a mean that isn't golden. And, just once, a null without a void, a might without a main, a far without a wide, a six of one without a half-dozen of the other, tooth without nail, and ways without means. And just once, an unfit fiddle, a warm cucumber, a young hill, a stupid owl, a hard impeachment, a black elephant, a sage's paradise, feet of gold, the pepper of the earth, an unbloated plutocrat, and a sad Lothario.

Then of course there's the leading critic of the cliche, Edwin Newman. In *Strictly Speaking*, he talks about marathon labor negotiations:

> If the employer representative finds the going hard, and is clearly winded, he may have to yield a whopping wage increase to get some rest. Whenever this happens, it raises one of the most intriguing questions in American journalism: When does an increase begin to whop?

In *Sharing Ideas*, Joel Goodman enters the idiomatization process at a different point—before the idiom has been formed. He suggests that speakers should be "tasteful" when talking to restauranteurs, "powerful" when speaking to electric companies, "primary" when speaking at elementary schools, "Doleful" when speaking to pineapple packers, and "guarded" when on the platform at a meeting of the Brinks organization (Goodman, p. 34).

PART IV: CONCLUSION: I hope that this article has demonstrated that the compounding process in English is a powerful process, that it is largely rule-governed, and that when there is not enough structure left after the rules of deletion have been applied, the rules of inference take on a major role in the interpretation process. I hope I have also shown that the rules of inference have important semantic constraints (in terms of chainings and other gestalts), and that they do not always result in complete closure. But then, only someone like Edwin Newman or William Safire or Sydney Harris would want complete closure anyway—and I even suspect that *these* authors have their tongues in their cheeks a great deal more often than most people realize.

So next time you encounter an enigma of English compound formation, like the structural difference between "maternity dress" and "paternity suit," do not dispair. (Hill, p. 497) Delight in the mystery. And assume the posture of Newton Minow, chairman of the FCC, who was asked if he agreed that television is a "vast wasteland." His response was simple and straightford: "It's not vast to me. I have a ten-inch screen."

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