

On the volatility of compound meaning - a content matching analysis

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It is well known that nominal root compounds in English parallel phrase structure in being recursive, compositional and productive:

(1) class room
class room window
class room window sill

It is also well known that these properties can be observed cross-linguistically (cf. Roeper, Snyder & Hiramatsu 2002; Roeper & Snyder 2005) e.g. in German (cf. Bauke 2012, 2014), but only to a certain degree. Germanic allows for recursive, compositional and productive compounding, Romance does not, Chinese seems to have both options, etc.

In Bauke (2012, 2014) I argue that German behaves more like Chinese than English in the sense that it allows for recursive, compositional and productive compounding in one pattern of compound formation, but that it also features non-compositional and non-recursive compounding in a second pattern of compound formation. The two patterns are distinguished along the lines of the presence vs. absence of a linking element, which is reanalyzed as a grammatical marker. This, however, leaves unanswered the question how English fits into this pattern, where we can observe compositional and non-compositional compounds as well, but where the two patterns cannot be identified on the basis of (the presence or absence of) grammatical markers. The unsatisfactory answer so far was that the general absence of inflectional markers in nominal root compounds in English is related to the general lack/loss of inflection in English.

In the current paper I present a Content-matching analysis based on the account in Borer (2013) that can account for the English forms as well. Compounds are the product of a simple merger operation of roots. These roots are nothing but phonological indices that are embedded in functional structure which is eventually matched with content via a search engine: en-search. Content-matching, however, is optional within certain domains and can even fail permanently while the derived structure can still survive the derivation.