Compounding strategies for German nouns ending in schwa

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German compounds often include a linking element, e.g. *-s* in *Kompositionsfuge* (*Komposition* `composition' + *Fuge* `interstice') or *-n* in *Fugenelement* (*Fuge* `interstice'+ *Element* `element'). Their distribution, however, seems to be unsystematic and unpredictable. Even for the individual speaker it is not always clear which linking element to choose, e.g. *Merkmalpaar* vs. *Merkmalspaar* `feature pair' or *Sprachfamilie* vs. *Sprachenfamilie* `family of languages'. The choice of linking element is a frequent issue in laypeople discussions (e.g. *Zwiebelfisch*) as well as a disputed topic in linguistic research and a major challenge for language generation and machine translation.

I will report ongoing joint research with Tom Juzek on linking elements in German noun-noun compounds in which the first constituent is a noun ending in schwa. Linking strategies for such nouns include linking element like *-n* (*Alge+n+wachstum* `algae growth'), *-s* (*Liebe+s+brief* `love letter') or a combination of both (*Name+ns+schild* `name tag', but also deletion of the final schwa (e.g. *Glatze + Kopf* → Glatzkopf `skinhead'). Again, for some compounds we observe variation, e.g. *Asche + Becher* → *Aschbecher* or *Aschenbecher*).

We created a corpus of about 3000 nouns ending in schwa annotated for various phonological and morphosyntactic features such as syllable structure, gender, plural suffix etc. Two annotators evaluated for each noun the dominant linking strategy, i.e. the prevalent linking element. In our analysis, we try to identify predictors for the choice linking element. A linear mixed effects model suggests that none of the potential predictors in our analysis is effective. A great deal of variance remains unexplained.

The corpus study is complemented by a pilot experiment asking native speakers of German to indicate the linking strategy they would choose for combining two given nouns in compound. In addition to existing nouns, the experimental stimuli also included nonce words, also ending in schwa. While neither the corpus study nor the experiment exhibits a clear picture, the results nevertheless provide some interesting insights into the intricacies of German compounding. We find a predominance of paradigmatic linking elements, in particular a predominance of *-n* for feminine and masculine nouns. At the same time, the results for nonce words challenge the idea that *-n* is the default linking strategy for nouns ending in schwa.

In our discussion, we will try to interpret the results and extensively examine methodological issues.