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L-4: Morphology Pradeep Kumar Das

What is a compound?

The simplest answer to the question would be 'a combination of at least two lexical items, i.e. a combination of two bases, words, roots, free morphemes' can be called a *compound*. The underlined condition which we would except this 'combination' to imbibe is '….these lexical items should have independent status in the language i.e. they should have their independent occurrence elsewhere in the language. For example, 'green house' and 'white house' are *compounds.* We know that the individual lexical items i.e. 'green', 'white' and 'house' do occur independently elsewhere in the language. When these words occur together to qualify as a *compound*, they do not manifest their individual meaning completely. They get semantically very close and sometimes they share their meaning but in other instances they are grammaticalized in such a way that getting the meaning from the individual lexical item seems almost impossible. For example in compounds like 'school-boy' and 'university-teacher', lexical items do contribute their individual meaning to the compound words, but in case of 'blue-nose', 'lady-finger', and 'lazy-bone', no individual meaning of the lexical items seem to contribute their meaning to the compound words.

What is a phrase?

Well, a syntactic unit which contains a word or words. For example, '*the smart boy', 'the beautiful lady', 'John' and 'it'* are examples of phrases as they contain a word/ words and they are treated as syntactic constituents.

The above discussion seems to be useful in terms of distinguishing a 'phrase' from a 'compound'. However, the issue is not that simple as it looks. There are cases where it is quite difficult to distinguish a 'phrase' from a 'compound' or other way round.

Although, we would mainly focus on the 'morphological and semantic parameters' in distinguishing a phrase from compound here; however, it is worth paying attention to what researchers have pointed out in the literature.

According to some researcher, the role of phonology in the formation of compound words is important. The formation of some compounds in English is motivated by phonological patternings. In other words, some compounds are formed by joining together the pre-existing words which rhyme with each other well. Such compounds are called '*rhyming compounds*'. For example:

1. **a. black-jack b. claptrap, night-light**
2. **a. zigzag b. sing-song, tick-tock**

The researchers further mention the *orthographic device* as another parameter to distinguish a compound from a compound. The well established compound words are either written together or with a hyphen. For example, **breakfast, ice-cream, free-trade**. However, there is lack of a consistency in the convention. The very compound word 'word-formation' has been used as ***wordformation*** by Rohrer (1974), as ***word-formation*** by Bauer (1983) and as ***word formation*** by Aronoff (1976).

The next means that is used as a device to identify the compounds in English is '**accent subordination**'. According to Bloomfield (1933: Pp 228) the accent of one word dominates that of the whole compound. For example, ***ICE***-cream, ***WHITE***-house and ***GREEN***-house, in all these examples the accent of first word dominates the whole compound which is not comparable to the phrases. When these words are used as phrases, they do not follow such '*accent subordination*' pattern. In the case of phrases, both the words will have equal accent placement e.g. WHITE HOUSE, ICE CREAM and GREEN HOUSE will be the pattern when they are not uses as compound words. However, this also does not happen everywhere. We have examples like ***APPLE PIE***, ***MAN MADE*** and ***EASY GOING*** where the '*accent subordination*' rule does not seem to work.

So far so good, now let us see what do we mean by saying that the 'morphological and semantic parameters' come much handy and useful in making the distinction between a phrase and a compound.

It seems that the semantic information is the most reliable device differentiating a 'phrase' from a 'compound'. In general, the meaning of a phrase can be worked out if we know the meaning of the words it contains. For example, if we know what 'smart'

means and what ‘boy’ means and now we can fairly figure out what would be the meaning of a phrase such as ‘the smart boy’.

This is not quite true about ‘compounds’. Even if we know individually as to what ‘lazy’ or ‘bone’ means, it would be hard to speculate the meaning of a compound word ‘***lazy bone***’ in English. The same is true for ‘***green house***’ and ‘***red cap***’.

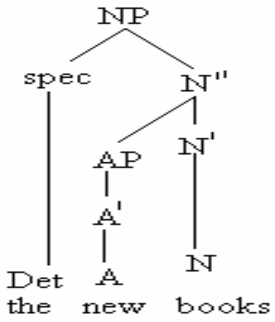
Last but not the least, the criterion that is used in differentiating a ‘compound’ from a ‘phrase’ is ‘***the notion of head-ness***’. If we examine the case of head-ness in ‘compounds’ and ‘phrases’, we can say that there is no phrase in any language that can be called a phrase without a ‘head’. It is for this reason, the phrases are said to be ‘***endocentric***’ in nature. In case of ‘compounds’ this is not necessarily the case. There are compounds that do not have ‘head’. Such compounds are called ‘Exocentric compounds’. Also, there are compounds in which both the elements are of equal status and they are heads and therefore, they are called ‘Copulative compounds’.

The notion of a HEAD in compounding:

The notion of ‘head’ plays very important role in the formation of a ‘phrase’. It is the concept of the ‘head’ which is important in forming a constituent with other words . A head has the following properties:

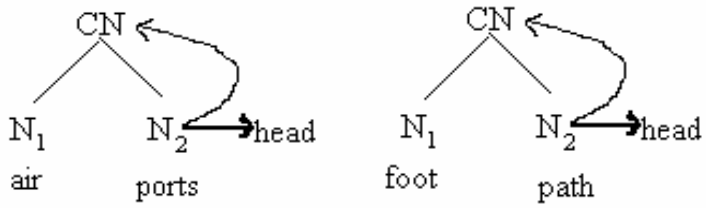
a. It assigns its categorical features to the constituent of which it is the head, e.g. the head of an NP is a noun, the head of a VP is a verb etc. So, because the noun *books* is the head of phrase *new books*, the entire phrase **[**new**]**$_{adj}$**[**books$_{n}$**]**$_{NP}$.

b. It is one level lower in the X-bar hierarchy than the constituent of which it is the head. As we can see in the tree given below, where the Noun is one level (syntactically) lower than NP.



Selkirk (1982) proposed an X-bar analysis of noun compounds parallel to the syntactic analysis of NPs in the tree-diagram given below:

a. b.



Normally compounds are classified using two criteria:

(i) Whether they have a head (Endocentric Compounds)

Ex: attorney general
notary public
un timbre poste
highcourt
book-case
motor-car

(ii) If they a head,

a. whether the head appears at the left

Ex. attorney general
notary public
un timbre poste

b. or at the right of the compound

Ex. High-court
book-case
motor-car
School-boy
High-school

(iii) The compound does not contain a HEAD (Exocentric Compounds)

Ex. green-house
lazy-bones
blue-nose
butter-finger

(iv) The compound has both the elements as the HEAD (Copulative Compounds)

Ex. North-east
South-west
Father-mother
Wife-husband