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Semantic classification of compound words in English Lexicology

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Abstract
This article examines the semantic classification of compound words within the framework of English lexicology. It aims to identify and analyze the main types of compounds based on the relationships between their components and the meanings they convey. The study explores various semantic categories, including endocentric, exocentric, copulative, and appositional compounds, highlighting their structural and functional characteristics. Special attention is given to the ways in which meaning is derived from the interaction of constituent elements and how semantic transparency or opacity influences interpretation. The research employs descriptive and analytical methods to systematize existing theoretical approaches and provide illustrative examples from modern English usage. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of word formation processes and demonstrate the significance of semantic classification in enriching vocabulary and improving linguistic competence.
Keywords: Compound words, semantic classification, endocentric, exocentric, copulative, semantic relations, structure, meaning, vocabulary.

INTRODUCTION

The study of compound words occupies a central position in English lexicology, as compounding represents one of the most productive means of vocabulary expansion. Beyond their structural formation, compound words reveal complex semantic relationships that contribute to meaning construction in the language. The semantic classification of compound words, therefore, provides valuable insight into how meaning is organized, interpreted, and systematized within the English lexicon.

This article aims to explore the semantic types of English compound words by examining the relationships between their constituent elements and the overall meaning they convey. Particular attention is paid to categories such as endocentric, exocentric, and copulative compounds. By analyzing these classifications, the study highlights how compounds function not only as lexical units but also as carriers of cultural and cognitive information. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of word-formation processes and semantic structures, offering a systematic approach to interpreting compound words in modern English.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The semantic classification of compound words in English lexicology is primarily based on the relationship between the meanings of their constituent elements and the overall meaning of the compound. Compound words, formed by combining two or more lexical units, function as single semantic entities, yet their internal structure often reflects varying degrees of semantic motivation and transparency. Understanding these relationships allows linguists to categorize compounds into several semantic types. One of the most widely recognized classifications distinguishes *endocentric, exocentric, and copulative (coordinative)* compounds.

1. Endocentric compounds are words containing a “head” that determines the general semantic category of the compound

while the other element functions as a modifier. Endocentric compounds are often contrasted with *exocentric* (headless) compounds, where the meaning is not derived from either component, such as *scarecrow* (not a type of *crow*) or *redhead* (a person, not a type of *head*). They are generally classified by their head's part of speech *(nominal, verbal, adjectival)* or by their semantic relationship, typically being right-headed in English:

a. Nominal Compounds: The head is a noun, often resulting in a noun that is a specific type of the head word. Nominal compounds (or compound nouns) are formed by joining two or more words to create a single noun, acting as a new unit of meaning. Common types of nominal compounds include:

- *Noun + Noun: toothbrush*, *wallpaper*, *coffee cup*, *table salt*;
- *Adjective + Noun: blackboard*, *software*, *greenhouse*, *high school*;
- *Verb (-ing) + Noun: washing machine*, *swimming pool*, *frying pan*;
- *Noun + Verb (-ing): haircutting*, *signmaking*;
- *Verb + Noun: breakfast*, *dashboard*, *playground*;
- *Noun + Prepositional Phrase: mother-in-law*, *editor-in-chief*;
- *Preposition + Noun: underworld*, *overcoat*, *input*.

b. Adjectival Compounds: The compound behaves as an adjective. They are formed by joining two or more words, usually with a hyphen when appearing before a noun, to act as a single descriptive phrase. Common types of adjectival compounds include:

- *Adjective + Past Participle: old-fashioned*, *well-behaved*, *kind-hearted*
- *Adjective + Present Participle: good-looking, easy-going, slow-moving;*
- *Noun + Present Participle: record-breaking*, *man-eating*, *time-consuming;*
- *Noun + Past Participle: sun-dried, hand-painted, home-made, heart-broken;*
- *Noun + Adjective: sugar-free*, *ice-cold*.
- *Adjective + Noun: short-term*, *long-term, long-distance*.
- *Number + Noun: two-part*, *five-star*.

When these compounds follow the noun (as a predicate adjective), they are often not hyphenated (e.g., "The story was well known"), but they are hyphenated when they come before the noun (e.g., "A well-known story").

c. Verbal Compounds: The compound behaves as a verb, though these are rarer in English. Compound verbs are multi-word units acting as a single verb, commonly categorized into phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs, and compound single-word verbs (closed or hyphenated). Common types of verbal compounds include:

- *Phrasal Verbs (Verb + Adverb/Preposition):* These verbs change meaning when paired with a particle, such as *break down*, *get up*, *hand over*, *leave behind*;
- *Prepositional Verbs (Verb + Preposition):* The verb is followed by a preposition that connects it to the object, such as *count on*, *join together*, *watch for*, *apply to*;
- *Closed Compound Verbs* (Single Word): These are compound verbs written as one word, including *babysit*, *broadcast*, *double click*, *shortcut*, *proofread*.
- *Hyphenated Compound Verbs:* Compound verbs joined by a hyphen, such as *strong-arm*, *test-drive*, or *color-code*.
- *Noun + Verb Compounds:* These compounds are often categorized as a subtype of closed or hyphenated verbs, such as *housekeep*, *spoon-feed*, or *brainwash*.

Verbal compounds are crucial in English to express specific nuances of action, direction, or state.

2. Exocentric compounds (or *headless* compounds) are words where the meaning is not determined by either constituent, representing an external entity rather than a type of one of its parts. Common types of *exocentric compounds* include:

a. Bahuvrihi compounds (Possessive Compounds): These compounds are adjectives or nouns that denote a person or object characterized by the combined constituents, often taking the form Adj + Noun or Noun + Noun. Examples: *redhead* (a person who has *red hair*), *blockhead* (a person with *a head like a block*), *sabretooth* (the most iconic animal with teeth like "sabres" is Smilodon, often called the saber-toothed cat or tiger), *egghead*.

b. Nominal compounds (N + N/V): Nominal compounds are lexical units consisting of two or more bases (e.g., nouns, verbs) that function grammatically and semantically as a single noun.

- *Noun Compounds [V + N]N:* A verb and noun combine to refer to a person or thing that performs an action, which is not a type of the noun used. Examples: *spoilsport* (person who spoils sport), *cutthroat* (a killer), pickpocket, daredevil.

- *Noun Compounds [P + N]N:* A preposition (or particle) and a noun combine to create a new noun. Examples: *underworld*, *afterbirth*, *outback*, *overcoat*.

- *Noun Compounds [V + V]N:* Two verbs combine to form a noun. Examples: *freeze-dry, stir-fry, jump-start.*

- *Noun Compounds [N + P]N/V:* A noun and a particle or adjective, often creating a noun denoting a state or a person. Examples: *dust-up* (a fight), *hand-me-down*.

- *Metaphorical Compounds:* Compounds where the meaning is entirely metaphorical, often based on [N + N] structures. Examples: *mothball*, *heartbreak*.

Exocentric compounds are commonly called "headless" because the syntactic head does not determine the semantic category of the whole word.

c. *Verbal compounds*: These compounds (often Noun + Verb or Verb + Noun) are headless structures where the compound's grammatical category and meaning are derived from a semantic head outside the phrase. They typically function as nouns (e.g., *pickpocket*) or adjectives, denoting a person or object characterized by the action, rather than the action itself. Common types of verbal compounds include:

- *Verb + Noun (VN) Compounds (Agentive/Instrumental):* These are common in English, acting as nouns denoting the agent or tool.

- *Noun + Verb (NV) Compounds (Possessive/Action):* These denote a characteristic of a person or entity. Examples: *haircut* (denotes the result, not a type of cut), *sunburn, heartbreak.*

- *Bahuvrihi Compounds (Possessive Compounds):* Though frequently Adjective + Noun , these can involve verbal elements to describe a person who possesses a characteristic. Examples: *must-have, know-it-all.*

3. Copulative / Coordinative Compounds: These compounds feature two heads that both contribute equally to the meaning. They represent a combination of two parts. Examples: *bittersweet* (something that is both bitter and sweet), *actor-manager* (an actor who is also a manager), *singer-songwriter* (a person who is both a singer and songwriter), and *actor-director* (an actor who is also a director). This type reflects a semantic relationship of addition or coordination rather than subordination.

Type	Semantic Relation	Headedness	Example
Endocentric	A is a type of B	Head-final (usually)	*Bedroom*
Exocentric	A+B relates to external C	Headless	*Redhead*
Copulative	A is combined with B	Both are heads	*Bittersweet*

In addition to structural classification, compound words can also be analyzed in terms of semantic transparency. Transparent compounds are those whose meanings can be easily deduced from their components, such as “bookshelf” or “raincoat”. In contrast, opaque compounds have meanings that are not predictable from their parts, such as “butterfly” or “honeymoon”. Between these extremes lie semi-transparent compounds, where the meaning is partially motivated but still requires some degree of interpretation.

Furthermore, semantic relations within compounds can be classified according to the type of relationship between their components. These include *attributive relations* (e.g., *greenhouse* - a house for plants), *objective relations* (e.g., *taxi driver* – one who drives a taxi), *locative relations* (e.g., *seashore* – the shore by the sea), and *temporal relations* (e.g., *nightfall* – the falling of night). Such classifications highlight the diversity of logical and conceptual connections that underlie compound formation in English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of compound words conducted in this study reveals several important patterns regarding their semantic classification and functional behavior in modern English. Based on the selected data, compound words were successfully categorized into endocentric, exocentric, and copulative types, confirming the validity and applicability of traditional semantic classifications in contemporary linguistic research.

The results indicate that *endocentric compounds* constitute the largest and most productive group within the dataset. These compounds demonstrate a clear head-modifier relationship, where the semantic core of the word is preserved in one of its components. Examples such as “bedroom”, “schoolteacher”, and “rainfall” illustrate that the meaning of the compound can be easily inferred from its parts. This high degree of semantic transparency makes endocentric compounds particularly accessible for language learners and supports their frequent use in everyday communication.

In contrast, *exocentric compounds* were found to be less frequent but semantically more complex. The analysis shows that their meanings are often idiomatic and cannot be directly derived from their individual elements. Compounds such as *“loudmouth”*, *“skinhead”*, and *“blue-collar”* require contextual or cultural knowledge for accurate interpretation. This semantic opacity presents challenges for both learners and translators, as the meaning must often be memorized rather than logically deduced.

The study also identified a smaller group of *copulative compounds,* where both elements contribute equally to the overall meaning. Although less common, these compounds play a significant role in expressing combined or dual concepts. Examples like *“writer-director”* and *“deaf-mute”* demonstrate how semantic coordination functions in compound formation. These forms are especially productive in professional and descriptive contexts, where multiple roles or characteristics need to be conveyed concisely.

Another key result concerns the degree of semantic transparency. The findings suggest that most compounds fall along a

continuum ranging from fully transparent to fully opaque. Transparent compounds, such as toothpaste and sunlight, are dominant in technical and descriptive language, while opaque compounds, such as butterfly and deadline, are often rooted in historical or idiomatic usage. Semi-transparent compounds occupy an intermediate position, requiring partial inference and contextual understanding.

Furthermore, the analysis of semantic relations between compound elements revealed a variety of underlying patterns. Attributive relations were the most common, indicating that one element typically modifies or specifies the other. Objective and locative relations were also frequently observed, reflecting practical and real-world associations between concepts. These findings confirm that compound formation is not arbitrary but follows identifiable cognitive and logical patterns.

The discussion of these results highlights the interplay between structure, meaning, and usage in English compounds. The predominance of endocentric and transparent compounds suggests that efficiency and clarity are key factors in lexical development. At the same time, the existence of exocentric and opaque compounds demonstrates the influence of historical evolution, metaphor, and cultural context on language.

The results of this study reinforce the idea that compound words represent a dynamic and multifaceted aspect of English lexicology. Their semantic classification not only reflects linguistic structure but also reveals deeper insights into how speakers conceptualize and organize meaning. These findings have important implications for language teaching, lexicography, and further linguistic research.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the semantic classification of compound words represents a significant aspect of English lexicology, offering valuable insights into the relationship between word structure and meaning. The study has demonstrated that compound words can be effectively categorized into *endocentric, exocentric, and copulative (coordinate) types*, each reflecting distinct semantic patterns and levels of transparency.

The findings confirm that *endocentric compounds* are the most productive and semantically transparent, while *exocentric compounds* tend to be more idiomatic and require contextual interpretation. *Copulative (coordinate) compounds*, although less frequent, serve an important role in expressing coordinated meanings.

Overall, the research emphasizes that compound words are not merely structural combinations but meaningful lexical units shaped by linguistic, cognitive, and cultural factors. Understanding their semantic classification contributes to a deeper comprehension of word-formation processes and supports more effective language learning, teaching, and analysis.

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