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On the Description of Compounds

0 The following is an attempt to lay down a pattern for the description of compounds. Taking into consideration morphological, grammatical, and semantic aspects of the compound, a satisfactory description should, I think, comprise the following factors: morphologic shape, morphologic structure, grammatical deep structure (syntactic relations in the underlying kernel sentence and type of reference), semantic content. In addition to this information which applies to compounds in general, meaning that it is indispensable for the description of any compound, supplementary information would be required for the description of particular types.

Morphologic Shape

1 As pointed out, our first task is the description of the morphologic shape of a given compound. This description is equivalent to a statement of the morphemic elements which form the compound. The notation will be as follows: *steamboat* = *steam* sb + *boat* sb, *craftsman* = *craft* sb + *s* + *man* sb, *blackbird* = *black* adj + *bird* sb, *baker* = *bake* vb + *-er* sf, *potter* = *pot* sb + *-er* sf, *rewrite* = *re* prf + *write* vb. A clear knowledge of the content of the morphemic constituents is, of course, a precondition which excludes ambiguities arising from homophony, for instance. Morphemes are signs, i.e. expression-content units. Without knowing the semantic content of the two words *mill*¹ and *mill*² we could not undertake to describe the compounds *windmill* and *sawmill*. Before describing *craftsman* we must know that *craft* is not a synonym of *ship*. In order to describe the two compounds *corn belt* and *safety belt* correctly we have to state the difference between the two words *belt*. Though the two are basically the same sign, the *belt* of *corn belt* denotes a 'belt' in a figurative sense as "belt-like area" while in *safety belt* we have it in the sense of "belt as considered a device, an instrument." Once these semantic features are known the meaning of the compound is more or less automatically directed toward a certain sense relation, excluding others. *Corn belt* will then be interpreted as "area where one grows corn" or "where corn grows" but *safety belt* can only be interpreted as "device that is instrumental in securing our safety." Cf. 3.57.

Morphologic Structure

2 After describing the sequel of morphemic constituents we shall have to state the immediate constituents and give what will be called the description of morphologic structure. All morphologic composites are based on the same syntagmatic pattern "determinatum determined by determinant." This linguistic principle will equally apply to other languages. The structural order of English compounds is that of "determinant/determinatum" (abbreviated as dt/dm), meaning that the determinant precedes the determinatum. The combinations mentioned under 1. would then be transcribed as follows: *steam/boat*, *crafts/man*, *black/bird*, *bak/er*, *pot(t)/er*, *re/write*.

On the plane of the linguistic system the description of the morphologic structure of a compound or, for that matter, any composite, is thus an easy problem as the structure will invariably be that of dt/dm. On the plane of realization which I will call "norm," using a term Coseriu has introduced,¹ the description of a compound is a much more complicated matter. The semantic character of the constituent morphemes will play an important part for the analysis as will be seen below (3). But the structural pattern itself is not unimportant. The dt/dm relationship excludes certain possibilities. Though *bulldog* may be analysed either as "bull-like dog" or as "bull-baiting dog," yet it cannot be interpreted as basically "a bull," but according to the principles of morphologic structure in English must be considered "a dog." The determinatum is always that part which can represent the whole combination. If the determinatum is called B, then AB must be B. This restricts the possibilities of analysis considerably. The principle implies that *loaf sugar* is basically *sugar*, but that *sugar loaf* is basically *loaf*, that *beet sugar* is *sugar* but that *sugar beet* is *beet*. A *school grammar* is different from a *grammar school*, *birdcage* from *cage bird* by virtue of the same grammatical element of word order.

On this restricting basis of the determinant/determinatum relationship the meaning of a compound is largely predictable. The semantic content of the constituents in conjunction with grammatical deep structure (see 3) and morphologic structure (2) assign a compound a meaning that only deliberate joking can sometimes construe differently or give a new interpretation.

Content at the Level of Grammatical Deep Structure

3.1 As all composites are syntagmas, i.e., grammatical entities, they must be explainable from an underlying sentence whose syntactic

¹ E. Coseriu, "Sistema, norma y habla," *Teoría del lenguaje y lingüística general* (Madrid, 1962), pp. 11-113.

relations they mirror. This underlying grammatical relationship will be called grammatical deep structure. The combination *dining room* is explainable from "(we) dine in the room," the compound *eating apple* is based on "(we) eat the apple," *steamboat* is explained from "steam (operates) the boat," *oil well* from "the well (yields) oil." The kernel sentence should not contain composite forms (such as *goodness*, *maker*, *arrival*) as these are themselves nominalizations of sentences.

3.2 It will be found that the problem of grammatical relations is closely tied up with the semantic content of the constituents. For the purpose of our investigation we shall consider only combinations of free morphemes, that is compounds. The interrelation between grammatical relation and semantic content of the constituents is most clearly seen in combinations containing a verbal element, called verbal nexus combinations. The syntactic relations between certain verbs and certain substantives are by no means arbitrary. The only possible relation existing between *eat* and *apple* is that of Predicate-Object. The apple cannot possibly eat so the Subject-Predicate relation is excluded, nor can we conceive of *apple* in the function of Adverbial Complement (**eat with, in, on etc. the apple*). *Dine* and *room* are only linked by a relation Predicate-Adverbial Complement while any other syntactic relation is inconceivable.

3.3 By pairing certain substantives and verbs it is usually easy to find out which grammatical relations are possible and which are semantically excluded. A Predicate-Object relation will naturally be realized in combinations with transitive verbs. Examples are: *make* and *shoe* (*shoemaker*), *sweep* and *chimney* (*chimney sweep*), *pick* and *pocket* (*pickpocket*), *deal* and *car* (*car-dealer*), *mince* and *meat* (*mincemeat*), *draw* and *bridge* (*drawbridge*), *shed* and *blood* (*bloodshed*), *keep* and *book* (*book-keeping*, *book-keeper*). Other than Predicate-Object relations are excluded. Shoes do not make, chimneys do not sweep, pockets do not pick etc. The semantic content of the respective words predicts a certain syntactic relation.

3.4 When we said that the grammatical relation between two words is in most cases unambiguously clear, we were restricting this observation to combinations with a verb as one of the constituents. It is thanks to the verbal element that both grammatical and semantic clarity is achieved in the analysis of compounds. Things are, however, more complicated when the compound lacks a verbal element. Verbal nexus compounds are complete sentences in nominalized form. Non verbal nexus combinations are not semantically unambiguous as the verbal element of the sentence is missing. The semantic and syntagmatic relations are explicit in verbal

nexus combinations whereas they are only implicitly understood in non-verbal combinations. This has been stated in greater detail elsewhere.² In *prose writer* both syntactic relations and semantic content are explicit while in *prosaist*, owing to the lacking predication element, the verb, the syntactic relations are only implicitly present. Whereas *steam-propelled boat* is both grammatically and semantically clear as a nominalization of "steam propels the boat," *steamboat* cannot claim this explicitness though no ambiguity arises. Nobody would dream of analysing *steamboat* as "steam-producing boat" (parallel to *oil well*). The semantic content of the constituent morphemes calls for a fairly well predictable semantic and syntactic relation. It will be seen however that in non-verbal nexus compounds, which do not contain an overt indication of a verbal nexus, the grammatical relations are less in evidence than semantic patterns.

A Subject-Predicate relation may be expected with intransitive verbs combined with certain substantives. *Cry* and *baby*, *shine* and *sun*, *quake* and *earth* could only form the nexus "the baby cries," "the sun shines," "the earth quakes" respectively. On the other hand, a Predicate-Adverbial relation is expected with other intransitive verbs when combined with substantives. We ride *on* a boat, go *to* a play, fight *for* freedom, fish *with* a fly, swim *in* a pool, and no other than Predicate-Adverbial relations appear thinkable between the respective verbs and the substantives. Occasional theoretical ambiguities do occur. Between *bus* and *stop* we could imagine the sentence "the bus stops" as well as "something stops the bus" (cf. *door stop*). However, the characterization of *stop* as a transitive verb would solve the "ambiguity." That in the linking of *wash* and *machine*, *blow* and *torch*, *whet* and *stone* we may hesitate between a Subject-Predicate relation ("the machine washes") and a Predicate-Adverbial relation ("we wash with the machine"), etc. is due to the basic semantic sameness of the concepts "material agent" and "instrument."

3.51 In another article³ I have undertaken to classify compounds of the type sb/sb according to grammatical categories present in the structure of their underlying kernel sentences, at the same time trying to set up certain semantic types within the grammatical types. Though representing only an attempt at classification, the types given there seem to illustrate the major semantic patterns. Choosing as an example of a compound the combination *water rat* we will try to find out to which type the analysis of *water rat* will conform and which types are excluded.

² On attributive and predicative derived adjectives and some problems related to the distinction (*Anglia*, LXXXIV [1966], 131-149, esp. 143-145).

³ On the analysis of substantive compounds and suffixal derivatives not containing a verbal element (*Ind. Forsch.*, LXX [1965], 117-145), quoted *non VeNe*.

3.52 Within the Subject group, grammatical-semantic criteria exclude the type *girl friend* as a pattern for *water rat*. The analysis of *girl friend* "friend who is a girl" does not apply to *water rat*, nor does the related type *oak tree* fit in as "water" does not fall under the genus "rat." The result is equally negative for the following types: *bulldog* "B resembling A" (a "rat" does not resemble "water"); *loaf sugar* "B denoting matter shaped in the form of what is denoted by A" (*rat* is not a "matter" word and *water* does not refer to "form"); *sugar loaf* "B denoting a form which consists of matter denoted by A" (*rat* does not refer to "form" though *water* may be understood as "matter"); *oil well* "B denoting something concrete seen as a producing agent which yields a concrete product denoted by A" ("rat which produces water" seems ludicrous); *marrow bone* "B which contains, has, possesses A" obviously does not apply; *brick mason* "B is a quasi agent substantive denoting a person performing an action whose goal is what is denoted by A" (applies to personal substantives which leaves out *water rat*).

3.53 The Object group is exemplified by the following types: *steamboat* "B denotes something concrete which works or functions thanks to the operating force or power denoted by A" (applied to *water rat* the analysis would be "rat operated by water"); *beet sugar* and *horse hide* "concrete substantive B denoting a product which is obtained by some manufacturing process from plant or animal denoted by A"; *candle light* and *stage fright* "concrete or abstract substantive B seen as denoting the result of an action caused by A which denotes a concrete thing;" *diaper rash* "B denotes a complaint caused by the denotatum of A." In the types *beet sugar*, *horse hide*, *candle light*, *stage fright*, and *diaper rash* A denotes the originator while B represents the result or product of the originator's activity. No such relation underlies *water rat*. The type *broomstick* is best analysed as "B denoting a concrete object which is seen as a natural part of what is denoted by A." It cannot serve as a pattern for the analysis of *water rat*.

3.54 The Adverbial Complement group, illustrated by *birdcage*, *safety belt*, and *tea time* is analysable as "B denoting the place (*cage*), instrument (*belt*), or time (*time*) designed for an activity whose goal is the denotatum of A." Obviously a "rat" is neither "a place designed to keep water," nor "the instrument with which water is kept," nor "the time when water is taken."

The only relation that seems plausible is that contained also in the grammatical Subject type *cave man*, *field mouse* "substantive denoting a person or animal whose natural habitat is the denotatum of A": *a water rat* is "a rat whose habitat is the water" (cf. other kinds such as *land rat*, *river rat*, *sand rat*, *sewer rat*).

4.1 In general we can thus say that the semantic content of the constituent morphemes largely predicts the syntactic relation in an underlying sentence. This does not, however, imply that stating the syntactic relations is sufficient to describe the entire deep structure. Take the three compounds *eating apple*, *apple eater*, and *apple eating*, all based on the same syntactic relation Predicate-Object as evidenced in such a sentence as "someone eats apples." That *apple eater* contains the additional element "Subject" is irrelevant to the question that concerns us here. In the case of *eating apple* we are speaking of an apple fit to be eaten, in that of *apple eater* of someone who eats apples while *apple eating* denotes the activity or practice of eating apples. Obviously the syntactic relation alone will not give us the key to a compound. In order to explain the different compounds we need further information about the angle under which the statement made in the sentence is viewed so as to produce a particular type of compound. That part of the underlying sentence which is the theme of our statement becomes the determinatum of the compound. This yields either a Subject, an Object, an Adverbial, or an Activity (Predicativity) type of compound as has been explained in greater detail elsewhere.⁴ The information will be called "type of reference." *Apple eater* would be the Subject type, *apple eating* the Activity (Predicativity) type, *eating apple* the Object type while an Adverbial type would be represented by *swimming pool* from "we swim in the pool."

4.2 In non-verbal nexus combinations things are a little different. Although these compounds contain no verbal element, yet the implicit presence of a verb is obvious. In *steamboat* the general concept of "drive, move, operate" is implicitly understood so that the analysis of the compound is "boat driven by steam," explained from a sentence such as "steam drives the boat." *Oil well* is based on such a sentence as "the well yields oil" while various other patterns underlie other compounds (cf. 3.52–3.54). Despite the absence of an overt verb the Subject, Object, Activity (Predicativity), and Adverbial types of reference occur with non-verbal nexus compounds as well as with verbal nexus compounds. For details the reader is referred to *VeNe* 63–68 and *nonVeNe* 132–134.

Content at the Morphological Level

5.1 Do the description of the underlying syntactic relations and the indication of the type of kernel sentence explain the content of a compound? There are reasons of semantic content in the compound that also call for a

⁴ The analysis of verbal nexus substantives (*Ind. Forsch.*, LXX [1965], 57–71, referred to as *VeNe*).

negative answer to the above question. Take the words *drawbridge*, *writing table*, and *crybaby*. In the first, the underlying syntactic structure would be that of Predicate-Object: "(we) draw the bridge." To this would be added the information concerning the type of reference. *Drawbridge* is based on the Object type⁵ "we draw the BRIDGE." In *writing table* from "(we) write at the TABLE" we have an Adverbial⁶ type while *crybaby* from "the BABY cries" represents a Subject type.⁷ Yet these descriptions are not complete. The semantic element of the compound, "(bridge) designed to be (drawn)," "(table) designed for (the activity of writing)," and "(baby) tending to (cry)" respectively must also be stated. The semantic additions clearly lie outside the syntactic structure expressed by the underlying verbal nexus, and the information concerning the type of kernel sentence states only that one definite part of the sentence becomes the determinatum of the compound. The specific lexical meaning of the compound is embedded in neither and must therefore be explained from the compound at its surface level. It can arise only from the verbal nexus in its particular form of the morphologic structure. We remember that the verb expresses nothing but the verbal idea in abstracto without containing any actualizing elements such as tense, mode, or voice. The meaning of a compound therefore in which a substantive is determined by a verbal stem will be "sb determined by (its absolute, inherent connection with) the verbal activity." This basic meaning leads to a few sense groups, according to the semantic character of the determinatum.

5.21 When the determinatum denotes an agent or is seen as denoting an agent (person, animal, or plant), the meaning of the combination is "B denoting a person, animal, plant, or (less frequently) a concrete thing whose characteristic quality it is to perform the activity denoted by A," as in *crybaby*, *dancing girl*, *rattlesnake*, *mocking bird*, *choke apple*, *pukeweed*, *drip coffee*.

5.22 When the determinatum is a substantive denoting a place, instrument, or a period or point in time, the meaning is "place, instrument, time inherently connected with the activity denoted by A," as in *writing table*, *bakehouse*, *washing machine*, *whetstone*, *closing-time*, *washday* which in the case of place and instrument-denoting determinata leads to the idea of purpose. *Writing table*, *bakehouse*, *washing machine*, and *whetstone* are therefore best described as "B denoting a place or an instrument designed for the activity denoted by A," though this description is merely another aspect of "inherent connection with the activity."

⁵ cf. *VeNe*, 65.

⁶ cf. *VeNe*, 67-68.

⁷ cf. *VeNe*, 63-65.

5.23 A concrete object, less frequently a person, may be seen as the inherent goal of the activity expressed in the verbal stem. This will in most cases lead to the same idea of "destination" we find in the place and instrument group so that *drawbridge* naturally comes to mean "bridge designed to be drawn."

It therefore depends on the kind of rapport the speaker sees established between the verbal activity and its agent, goal, place, time, or instrument whether one or the other sense group applies. In each of the preceding groups the character of inherent relation differs, but in most cases there is a semantic factor in the nominal compound that is not contained in the syntactic deep structure and also lies outside the type of kernel sentence.

5.24 In the above group of verbal nexus substantives the combinations where a strong lexical element seems to be lacking form a minority. Words of the *mincemeat* type appear to be satisfactorily described by a statement of the underlying syntactic nexus. *Mincemeat* is "meat that has been minced," *borehole* is "hole that has been bored," *punch card* is "card that has been punched," *skim milk* is "milk that has been skimmed." The only content element that has been added is that of "time" which the verb stem itself does not express. The non-lexical character of these nominalizations is also evident from the fact that many combinations of this type have by-forms with a participle as first element (*minced meat*, *skimmed milk* and others, which gives these syntactic groups the character of nominalizations of sentences of the type "B has been A-ed").

Grammatical and Semantic Content

6.1 With regard to content there is a basic difference between combinations which restrict the expression of content to the underlying syntactic relations and others where the grammatical relations are combined with semantic features. Compound agent substantives can be formed ad libitum so to speak because they represent nothing but the syntactic relation underlying them in the deep structure. *Apple grower* is merely the nominal transform of the sentence "a man grows apples." Any other combination based on the same underlying structure of Subject-Predicate-Object can follow: *cotton grower*, *wheat grower*, *tobacco grower* / *apple eater*, *apple picker*, *apple peeler*, all defined as "one who performs what is denoted by the verbal nexus Predicate-Object!"

6.2 It would not, however, be correct to think that the expression of grammatical relations is only characteristic of verbal nexus combinations. The adjectival type *colorblind* owes its almost unlimited productiveness to the fact that the relation underlying such combinations is one of Predicate

(Complement)-Object: "he is blind with regard to color," without additional semantic content. On the other hand, not all verbal nexus combinations are satisfactorily explained in syntactic terms. For illustration the reader is referred to the description of *whetstone* and *writing table* (5.1–5.22).

6.3 The following verbal nexus types are fairly well described as nominalizations of underlying sentences, meaning that they do not contain additional semantic elements which are not stated in the kernel sentence. The Subject types *watchmaker* "one who makes watches," *car dealer* "one who deals in cars" (Subject-Predicate-Object relation), *playgoer* (Subject-Predicate-Adverbial relation), the Object type *mincemeat* (Predicate-Object relation), the Activity type *earthquake* (Subject-Predicate relation), *bloodshed*, *self-rule*, *bookkeeping* (Predicate-Object relation), all "act, fact of what the verbal nexus denotes," the Adverbial types *freezing point* "Point when freezing occurs," *closing time* "time of closing" (Predicate-Adverbial Complement relation).

6.4 The verbal nexus types that combine the expression of grammatical relations with that of semantic content are the following. The weak Subject type *chimney sweep*, denoting people of lower occupation, the type *pickpocket*, derogatory as applied to human beings (both Predicate-Object relation), the Object types *drawbridge* and *eating apple* (see 5.1–5.22), the Adverbial types *writing table*, *washing machine*, *bakehouse*, *whetstone*, and *washday* (see 5.1–5.22).

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