

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## The Tips on Teaching Compounds

Hsien-Hung Lin

Lecturer, Department of Applied English, I-Shou University, Taiwan

### Abstract:

*To teach compounds effectively, this paper aims to explore the rules in terms of their grammatical categories, stress, and meaning. The study shows that there are two rules to predict the grammatical categories of compounds:*

*Generally speaking, if the head of compounds is the content word, the grammatical categories of compounds are determined by the right-hand words.*

*If the head of compounds is the function word, the grammatical categories of compounds are usually determined by the left-hand words.*

*In addition, there are several rules to determine the stress of compounds. For example, the primary stress of noun compounds is placed on the first element, and light stress is on the second. Also, the meaning of the head of the compound seems to be central to the meaning of the whole compound. The pedagogical implications are also suggested.*

**Keywords:** Compounds, head, stress

### 1. Introduction

There are several ways in which new words may be created. They are abbreviations, blends, derivational formation, backformation, acronyms, and compounds. First of all, entirely new, previously non-existent words can enter a language through a process of abbreviation or shortening. For example, abbreviations such as *T.V.* and *O.K.* have come to replace longer words, television, and okay. New words can also be formed from existing ones by various blending processes. According to Fromkin et al. (2003), blends are parts of the words that are combined to become a new word. Brunch, from *breakfast + lunch*, and motel from *motor + hotel* are examples of blends.

Additionally, the words '*progressive*' and '*regressive*' (from progress and regress, respectively) are formed through a process called derivational formation. The word '*backform*' is created by a process called backformation. Backformation is a term used to refer to an abnormal type of word-formation when a shorter word is derived by deleting an imagined affix from a longer form already present in the language (Crystal, 1997). Acronyms are words derived from the initials of several words. LASER from 'Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation' is one of the acronyms. Finally, two or more words may be joined to form new, compound words. The words '*boyfriend*' and '*girlfriend*' are examples of compounds.

According to Bauer (1983), Stockwell & Minkova (2001), Wardhaugh (1995), and Shie (2002), it is universally acknowledged by linguists and language researchers that compounding is a rich source of new words in English. Many compounds have entered the English language, such as *spacemen*, *bus stops*, *mother-in-law*, *bad-tempered*, *moon-walk*, and many others. This indicates that compound words are pretty common in present-day English.

To teach English compounds more effectively, there are three research questions to be explored:

- Is the grammatical category of compounds predictable?
- How are compounds stressed?
- Are there any generalizations about the meaning of compounds?

To find out the answers to these questions, we first examine the given definitions of compounds, followed by the differentiation between compounds and phrases. Next, we will explore the types of compounds. Then, the heads of compounds will be examined. After that, we will deal with how compounds are stressed. And finally, we will discuss the meaning of compounds. Pedagogical implications will be drawn as a conclusion.

### 2. Definitions of Compounds

Classical grammarians often speak of compounding whenever two or more words are joined together in such a way that their independent status is not altogether obliterated. Thus, Webster II distinguishes:

- Copulative compounding, for example, lions and tigers, in which the elements are coordinated,
- Dependent or attributive compounding, in which one element stands in an oblique (e.g., genitive or instrumental) relation to the other, for example, the lion's foot, and
- Descriptive compounding, in which one element qualifies or describes the other, for example, houseboat, pea pod (Gleitman, 1970:71)

However, Ball (1939) claims that copulative compounding and dependent or attributive compounding cannot be viewed as properly compounded. Instead, they are viewed as words preferably not compounded.

So what are the words properly compounded? In light of Ball's viewpoint, two or more words used together to convey a unit idea (literal or not literal) that cannot be conveyed by them either at all or clearly in unconnected succession are properly compounded (i.e., joined together either with or without a hyphen). Also, compound words for which a hyphen is not specifically provided are written as solid compounds. The examples cited below are: solid compounds, *airship*, *heartstrings*, *carefree*, *fireproof*, *gainsay*, and *woodwork*.

Fromkin et al. (2003) provide simple, easily-understood definitions for compounds. They point out that two or more words may be joined to form new, compound words. Whether a compound is spelled with a space between the two words, with a hyphen, or with no separation at all depends on the idiosyncrasies of the particular compound, as shown, for example, in *blackbird*, *gold-tail*, and *smoke screen*.

Although two-word compounds are the most common in English, it would be difficult to state an upper limit: Consider *four-time loser*, *three-dimensional space-time*, and *bad-tempered mother-in-law*. In the present study, we will not consider compounds with more than two words because two-word compounds are the most common in English.

### 3. Compounds vs. Phrases

A question is often asked: How can we distinguish the differences between phrases and compounds? Take 'wet day' and 'small talk', for example. Is 'wet day' and 'small talk' a phrase or a compound? To differentiate them, Adams (1973) suggests employing the following three tests:

- Can the adjective be premodified by an adverb?  
It is ok to use 'very' to modify 'wet day', but not 'small talk.'
- Can it assume the comparative form?  
'Wetter day' is possible, but not 'smaller talk'.
- Can it occupy the predicative position in a sentence with the head noun as subject?  
'The day is wet' makes sense, but not 'The talk is small'.

So we can conclude that 'small talk' is a compound, but 'wet day' is a free phrase.

Moreover, stress plays a crucial part in distinguishing compounds from phrases. For example, the written form 'lady killer,' if not pronounced, can be ambiguous. It may be a compound noun in which the primary stress is on the 'lady' and means slayer of ladies. It may also be a free phrase in which lady functions as an adjective, and the primary stress is on the second word. In that case, 'lady killer' means the slayer is a lady. Obviously enough, stress determines not only the meaning but also a noun compound or a free phrase. Look at the following examples, which make this point more distinctive:

ladyBUG (= a bug lady)                      ladyBIRD (= a bird lady)  
LADYbug (= a species of bug)              LADYbird (= a small round beetle)

The examples LADYbug and LADYbird (where capital letters indicate the location of the heaviest accent) are compounds, and ladyBUG and ladyBIRD (where the primary stress is on the second word) are phrases.

### 4. Types of Compounds

There are four major types of compounds in English:

- Noun compounds,
- Verb compounds,
- Compound adjectives, and
- Compound adverbs

Selkirk (1982) asserted that compounds in English are a type of word structure made up of two constituents, each belonging to one of the categories, noun, adjective, verb, adverb, and preposition. The compound itself may belong to the category of noun, verb, adjective, and adverb.

Noun compounds may consist of a noun, verb, preposition, adjective, and adverb on the left and a noun on the right.

Examples:

Noun + Noun    Verb + Noun    Preposition + Noun  
string apron    rattle snake    onlooker  
Adjective + Noun    Adverb + Noun  
running battle    overcoat

Verb compounds may consist of a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and preposition followed by a verb.

Examples:

Noun + Verb    Verb + Verb    Adjective + Verb  
boardwalk    makeshift    flying leap  
Adverb + Verb    Preposition + Verb  
downpour    outlive

It should also be noted that verb compounds may arise in three different ways:

- By backformation from noun or adjective compounds,
- By zero derivation from noun compounds and less often, in the same way as other types of compounds,
- By linking two words together (Adams, 1973:105)

Examples:

- Backformation from noun or adjective compounds--*air-condition*, *mass-produce*, *backform*, and *book-keep*.
- Compound verbs formed by zero derivation--*blue-pencil*, *cold-shoulder*, *court-martial*, and *pitchfork*.
- Verb compounds from other sources--*half-starve*, *half-close*, *volume-expand*, and *short spin*.
- Compound adjectives may consist of a noun, adjective, adverb, and preposition followed by an adjective.

Examples:

Noun + Adjective	Adjective + Adjective
headstrong	bitter-sweet
Adverb + Adjective	Preposition + Adjective
off-white	overwide

Compound adverbs may consist of a noun or an adverb followed by an adverb; they may consist of a preposition or an adverb followed by a noun. The following examples are taken from Roach (2000) and Grant (2001).

Examples:

Noun+ Adverb	Adverb+ Adverb
head-first	north-east
Preposition + Noun	Adverb + Noun
outside	downtown

Two-word noun compounds are the most common in English (Burling, 1992; Huddleston, 1984; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Compound adverbs, however, are the least common ones. Having demonstrated the types of compounds, we will proceed to discuss the heads of compounds in the following section.

#### 4.1. Heads of Compounds

What is a head? What role does it play in the compounds? According to Fromkin et al. (2003), the rightmost word in a compound is the head of the compound. For instance, the words '*pocket*' and '*cold*' are the heads of the compounds *pickpocket* and *icy-cold*, respectively. The head of each compound determines its broad meaning and grammatical category. Generally speaking, the part of speech of the whole compound is the same as the part of speech of the right most member of the compound, which is termed the head of the compound (Selkirk, 1982).

Now consider the examples presented in the above section.

##### 4.1.1. Nouns

Noun + Noun	Verb + Noun	Preposition + Noun
string apron	rattle snake	onlooker
Adjective + Noun	Adverb + Noun	
running battle	overcoat	

##### 4.1.2. Verbs

Noun + Verb	Verb + Verb	Adjective + Verb
boardwalk	makeshift	flying leap
Adverb + Verb	Preposition + Verb	
downpour	outlive	

##### 4.1.3. Adjectives

Noun + Adjective	Adjective + Adjective
headstrong	bitter-sweet
Adverb + Adjective	Preposition + Adjective
off-white	overwide

In the examples cited above, it is very interesting to see that the categories of the compounds are decided by the right-hand words. That is:

- If the right-hand word is a noun, the compound is a noun,
- If the right-hand word is a verb, the compound is a verb, and
- If the right-hand word is an adjective, the compound is an adjective

The examples above can apply the right-hand-word rule to generate the same grammatical categories. However, we do find some counterexamples to this rule.

Consider the following compound adverbs, as shown in the previous section.

Examples:

Noun + Adverb	Adverb+ Adverb
head-first	north-east
Preposition + Noun	Adverb + Noun
outside	downtown

The above examples indicate that the grammatical categories of some compound adverbs, such as *head-first* and *north-east*, are determined by the right-hand words. However, the grammatical categories of compound adverbs, such as *outside* and *downtown*, are not decided by the right-hand words since the heads of both compounds are nouns.

Now, let us examine another type of compound completely different from the four major types of compounds discussed.

Examples:

Noun + Preposition	Verb + Preposition	Adjective + Preposition
hanger-on (noun)	run away (verb)	worn out (adjective)

The above examples cannot apply the right-hand-word rule to generate the same part of speech because the right-hand words in each example are prepositions. As we can see, when a compound consists of a noun and a preposition, its part of speech is a noun; when a compound consists of a verb followed by a preposition, its grammatical category is a verb. In addition, when a compound is composed of an adjective followed by a preposition, its grammatical category is an adjective.

To conclude this segment, we can formulate two rules to predict the grammatical categories of compounds:

- Generally speaking, if the head of compounds is the content word (such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs), the grammatical categories of compounds are determined by the right-hand words
- If the head of compounds is the function word (for example, preposition), the grammatical categories of compounds are usually determined by the left-hand words

#### 4.2. Stress of Compounds

Stress plays an important role in providing compounds with certain characteristics, which in turn helps to categorize compounds. Generally, compounds possess three different stresses: primary (strong), secondary (intermediate), and tertiary which is weak (Gleitman, 1970).

As far as stress is concerned, the question is quite simple. When is primary stress placed on the first constituent word of the compound and when on the second? A few rules can be given, although these are not completely reliable. Below we will explore the stress of compound nouns, compound verbs, adjective compounds, and adverb compounds.

Compound nouns characteristically have a strong stress on the first element and weaker stress on the second element (Sun, 2005; Roach, 2000; Kelly, 2000; Bowen, 1975). This very feature is also used to distinguish the differences between compound nouns and free phrases. The primary stress of the two-word compound below lies in the first noun. We can write this feature as follows:

N1 N2 (BOY1 friend2)

The compound noun '*boyfriend*' is pronounced BOY friend (where capital letters indicate the location of the heaviest accent), not boy FRIEND.

Roach (2000) pointed out that in compound verbs, which are made up of an adverb plus a verb and written as one word, strong stress usually falls on the second element of the compound and light stress on the first:

underSTAND    overLOOK    overRUN  
overFLOW    outRUN    overDO

However, when verb compounds consist of a noun followed by a verb, strong stress usually falls on the first element of the compound and light stress on the second. The examples below are taken from Celce-Murcia et al. (1996):

- HOUSEsit
- BABYsit
- LIPread
- HANDcuff
- GHOSTwrite

The accentuation of the verb compounds, to some certain extent, is more variable and hard to be predicted than the noun compounds. For instance, the accent falls on the first element, as in 'HOUSEsit', but the accent falls on the second element, as in 'bluePENCIL.'

As you will see, the adjective compounds actually take two stress patterns. When an adjective compound is in attributive position, the accent will normally fall on the first element, as in 'HAND-picked men,' and a 'MOTH-eaten suit.' In the examples above, HAND and MOTH indicate the location of the heaviest accent. In the predicative position, the accent is often on the final element: the men were hand-PICKED (Adams, 1973; Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). However, it is not always so in every case. For example, 'mock-HEROIC' seems to be accented on the second element, even in the attributive position. In short, the accentuation of adjective compounds, like the verb compounds, seems to be, to some extent, more variable than that of nominal compounds.

Now, consider the stress of compound adverbs. When compounds function as adverbs and indicate location and direction, they are usually final-stressed:

head-FIRST    north-EAST    downSTREAM  
downTOWN    overSEAS    outSIDE

In some cases, stress is used to contrast the meaning. For example, 'WAR crime' is a particular kind of crime, and 'SUNDAY school' is a particular kind of school. Accordingly, the emphasis in both cases is on contrasting the first element. Still, we can find an example to contrast the second element.

Example:

I said eyeBROW, not eyeLASH.

In the above example, the second elements contrasted are BROW and LASH.

### 4.3. Meaning of Compounds

The meaning of a compound is not always the sum of the meanings of its parts. For example, consider the contrast between the compounds '*alligator shoes*' and '*horseshoes*'. Alligator shoes are shoes made from alligator hide. However, horseshoes are not shoes made from horsehide but iron 'shoes' for horses' hooves (Akmajian et al., 1984). Similarly, a boathouse is a house for boats, but a cathouse is not a house for cats. (It is a slang for a house of prostitution or whorehouse.)

In the examples so far, the meaning of each compound includes, at least to some extent, the meanings of the individual parts. However, many compounds do not include the meanings of the individual parts at all. A *jack-in-a-box* is a tropical tree, and a *turncoat* is a traitor (Fromkin et al., 2003).

Nevertheless, certain generalizations can be made about the meaning of compounds. For example, an apron string is a kind of string, whereas a string apron is a kind of apron. In other words, the meaning of the head of the compound seems to be central to the meaning of the whole compound, at least for certain kinds of compounds (Selkirk, 1982).

## 5. Conclusion

In response to the first research question, two rules were formulated:

- Generally speaking, if the head of compounds is the content word (such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs), the grammatical categories of compounds are determined by the right-hand words
- If the head of compounds is the function word (for example, preposition), then the grammatical categories of compounds are usually determined by the left-hand words

Pertaining to the second research question, there are several rules found. In the noun compounds, the primary stress is placed on the first element, and light stress is on the second. In compound verbs which are made up of an adverb plus a verb and written as one word, such as *under STAND* and *over LOOK*, strong stress usually falls on the second element of the compound and light stress on the first. When verb compounds consist of a noun followed by a verb, such as *BABYsit* and *LIPread*, strong stress usually falls on the first element of the compound and light stress on the second. The adjective compounds actually take two stress patterns. When an adjective compound is in attributive position, the accent will normally fall on the first element, as in '*HAND-picked men*,' and a '*MOTH-eaten suit*'. When an adjective compound is in predicative position, the accent is often on the final element: the men were hand-PICKED. When compounds function as adverbs and indicate location and direction, they are usually final-stressed. In answer to the third research question, one generalization can be made about the meaning of the compound. That is, the meaning of the head of the compound seems to be central in the meaning of the whole compound, at least for certain kinds of compounds.

Are there any rules for teaching compounds? It is pretty obvious that the answer is positive. We did find rules for teaching compounds. Moreover, these rules can be employed to facilitate EFL learners' proficiency in English compounds. There are, however, two things to be noted. First, after examining aspects of compounds, we have found that learning the meaning of compounds could be the most difficult for foreign learners because the meaning of compounds may not be literal at all. Second, the accentuation of adjective compounds, like the verb compounds, seems to be, to some extent, more variable than that of nominal compounds. Therefore, we should urge students to devote more time to learning the meaning of compounds and pay more attention to the stress of both verb compounds and compound adjectives.

## 6. References

- i. Adams, V. (1973). *An Introduction to Modern English Word-Formation*. London: Longman Group Ltd.
- ii. Akmajian, A., Demers, R.A., & Harnish, R.M. (1984). *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- iii. Ball, A. M. (1939). *Compounding in the English Language*. New York: H.W. Wilson Company.
- iv. Bauer, L. (1983). *English Word Formation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- v. Bowen, J.D. (1975). *Patterns of English Pronunciation*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers Asia Pte Ltd.
- vi. Burling, R. (1992). *Patterns of Language: Structure, Variation, and Change*. San Diego: The Academic Press.
- vii. Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D.M., & Goodwin, J.M. (1996). *Teaching Pronunciation: A Reference for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- viii. Crystal, D. (1997). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- ix. Fromkin V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2003). *An Introduction to Language*. Boston: Heinle.
- x. Gleitman, L. K. (1970). *Phrases and Paraphrases: Some Innovative Uses of Language*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- xi. Grant, L. (2001). *Well Said: Pronunciation for Clear Communication*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- xii. Huddleston, R. (1984). *Introduction to the Grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- xiii. Huddleston, R. & Pullum, G. K. (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- xiv. Kelly, G. (2000). *How to Teach Pronunciation*. Harlow: Pearson Education, Ltd.
- xv. Roach, P. (2000). *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- xvi. Selkirk, E. O. (1982). *The Syntax of Words*. London: MIT Press.
- xvii. Shie, J.S. (2002). English hyphenated compounds. *Journal of Da-Yeh University*, 11(2), 89-98.
- xviii. Stockwell, R. & Minkova, D. (2001). *English Words: History and Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- xix. Sun, S.H. (2005). *American English Phonetics*. Taipei: The Crane Publishing Co., Ltd.
- xx. Wardhaugh, R. (1995). *Understanding English Grammar: A Linguistic Approach*. Oxford: Blackwell.