Zinaida CAMENEV, Olga PASCARI
Universitatea Liberă Internaţională, Chişinău, Republica Moldova

THE DEGREE OF SEMANTIC INDEPENDENCE OF ELEMENTS IN IDIOMATIC AND NON-IDIOMATIC COMPOUNDS

It is possible to say that all languages are investigated daily because they change every time. Word composition is one of the most productive ways of word-formation. This type of word-building, in which new words are produced by combining two or more stems, is one of the three most productive types in Modern English, the other two are conversion and affixation. Compounds, though certainly fewer in quantity than derived or root words, still represent one of the most typical and specific features of English word-structure (Арнольд, 1986, p.108).

Compounds are described from different points of view and are classified according to different principles: parts of speech they represent, means of word composition, degree of semantic independence of elements, and the syntactic structure. The article is fully devoted to the degree of semantic independence of elements.

Non-idiomatic Compounds

There are non-idiomatic compounds with a perfectly clear motivation. Here the meaning of the constituents add up in creating the meaning of the whole and the referent either directly or figuratively. Thus, when the combination *seaman* was first used it was not difficult to understand that it meant "*a man professionally connected with the sea*". The word differentiated in this way a sailor from the rest of making. When aviation came into being the same formula with the same kind of motivation was used to coin the compound *airman*, and also *aircraft* to name the machines designed for air-travel, differentiating them from sea-going craft. *Spaceman , spacecraft and spaceship*, build on the model of *airman, aircraft, and airship* are ready understood even when heard for the first time. The semantic unit of the compounds *seaman, airman, spaceman, aircraft, spacecraft, airship, and spaceship*, is based on the fact as the conquest of the sea, air and outer space advanced, new notion were created, notion possessing enough relevant distinctive feature to ensure their separate existence. The logical integrity of the new combination is supported by solid spelling and by the unity of stress. When the meaning is not only related to the meaning of the parts but can be inferred from it, the compound is said to be transparent or non-idiomatic. The non-idiomatic compounds can easily transformed into free phrases: *air mail* - "*mail conveyed by air*" or *night flight* - "*flying at night*". Such compounds are like regularly derived words in that their meaning is readily understood, and so they need not be listed in dictionaries.

The focus of great interest is the semantic aspect of compound words, that is, the question of correlations of the separate meanings of the constituent parts and the actual meaning of the compound. Or, to put it in easier terms: can the meaning of a compound word be regarded as the sum of its constituent meanings?

To try and answer this question, let us consider the following groups of examples.

(1) *Classroom, bedroom, working-man, evening-gown, dining-room, sleeping-car, reading-room, dancing-hall.*

This group seems to represent compounds whose meanings can really be described as the sum of their constituent meanings. Yet, in the last four words we can distinctly detect a slight shift of meaning. The first component in these words, if taken as a free form, denotes an action or state of whatever or whoever is characterised by the word. Yet, a sleeping-car is

BDD-A3141 © 2010 Editura Europlus
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:06 UTC)

not a car that sleeps (cf. a *sleeping child),* nor is a dancing-hall actually dancing (cf. *dancing pairs)* (Quirk, 1997, p.96).

Idiomatic Compounds

On the other hand, a compound may be very different in meaning from the corresponding free phrase. These compounds are called idiomatic. Thus *a blackboard* may be not a board at all but a piece of linoleum or some other suitable material. Its colour is not necessary black.

G.Leech calls this not idiomatic but petrified meaning; the expression in his opinion is suggestive of solidifying and shrinking of the denotation , of the word becoming more restricted in sense. His examples are: *a trouser-suit* which is not just a "*suit with trousers"* but "*suit with trousers for women"*. He also compared *wheel-chair* and *push-chair*, "chair which has wheels and chair which one pushes". They look interchangeable since all *push-chair* have wheels and almost all *wheel-chairs* are pushed , and yet *wheel chairs* are for invalids and *push-chairs* for infants.

A compound may lose its motivation and become idiomatic because one of its elements is at present not used in the language in the same meaning. The word *blackmail* has nothing to do with "*mail 'post"*. Its second element, mow obsolete except in Scottish , was used in the 16th century meaning "*payment exacted by freebooting chiefs in return for immunity from plunder*". This motivation is now forgotten and the compound is idiomatic. We shall call idiomatic such compound the meaning of which is not a sum of the meaning of the determinant and the determinantum (Leech, 1974, p.34).

The shift of meaning becomes much more pronounced in the second group of examples.

(2) *Blackboard, blackbird, football, lady-killer, pick pocket, good-for-nothing, lazybones, chatterbox.*

In these compounds one of the components (or both) has changed its meaning: *a blackboard* is neither a board nor necessarily black, *football* is not a ball but a game, *a chatterbox* is not a box but a person, and *a lady-killer* kills no one but is merely a man who fascinates women. It is clear that in all these compounds the meaning of the whole word cannot be defined as the sum of the constituent meanings. The process of changing the meaning in such words has gone so far that the meaning of one or both constituents is no longer in the least associated with the current meaning of the corresponding free form, and yet the speech community quite calmly accepts such seemingly illogical word groups as *a white blackbird, pink bluebells* or an entirely confusing statement like: *Blackberries are red when they are green.*

Yet, despite a certain readjustment in the semantic structure of the word, the meanings of the constituents of the compounds of this second group are still transparent: you can see through them the meaning of the whole complex. Knowing the meanings of the constituents a student of English can get a fairly clear idea of what the whole word means even if he comes across it for the first time. At least, it is clear that a *blackbird* is some kind of bird and that a *good-for-nothing* is not meant as a compliment (Арнольд, 1986, p.112).

(3) In the third group of compounds the process of deducing the meaning of the whole from those of the constituents is impossible. The key to meaning seems to have been irretrievably lost: *ladybird* is not a bird, but an insect, *tallboy is* not a boy but a piece of furniture, *bluestocking,* on the contrary, is a person, whereas *bluebottle* may denote both a flower and an insect but never a bottle.

Similar enigmas are encoded in such words as *man-of-war* ("warship"), *merry-go-round* ("carousel"), *mother-of-pearl* ("irridescent substance forming the inner layer of certain shells"), *horse-marine* ("a person who is unsuitable for his job or position"), *butter-fingers* ("clumsy person; one who is apt to drop things"), *wall-flower* ("a girl who is not invited to dance at a party"), *whodunit* ("detective story"), *straphanger* (1. "a passenger who stands in a crowded

BDD-A3141 © 2010 Editura Europlus
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:06 UTC)

bus or underground train and holds onto a strap or other support suspended from above"; 2. "a book of light genre, trash; the kind of book one is likely to read when travelling in buses or trains").

The compounds whose meanings do not correspond to the separate meanings of their constituent parts (2nd and 3rd groups listed above) are called *idiomatic compounds,* in contrast to the first group known as *non-idiomatic compounds.*

The suggested subdivision into three groups is based on the degree of semantic cohesion of the constituent parts, the third group representing the extreme case of cohesion where the constituent meanings blend to produce an entirely new meaning (Bauer, 1983, p.45).

The following joke rather vividly shows what happens if an idiomatic compound is misunderstood as non-idiomatic.

Patient: They tell me, doctor, you are a perfect lady-killer.

Doctor: Oh, no, no! I assure you, my dear madam, I make no distinction between the sexes.

In this joke, while the woman patient means to compliment the doctor on his being a handsome and irresistible man, he takes or pretends to take the word *lady-killer* literally, as a sum of the direct meanings of its constituents.

In conclusion we would like to say that the degree of semantic independence of elements is of great importance. If we examine the non-idiomatic compounds they seem to represent compounds whose senses can really be described as the sum of their constituent meanings. As for the idiomatic compounds their meanings do not correspond to the separate meanings of their constituent parts. They are based on the degree of semantic cohesion of the constituent parts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Арнольд И. В. (1986). *Семантическая структура слова в современном английском языке и методика ее исследования*. Moscow: Visshaia shcola.

Bauer, L. (1983). *English Word Formation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leech, G. (1974). *Semantics.* London: Penguin Book.

Quirk, R. et al. (1997). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Essex: Longman.

RÉSUMÉ

LE DEGRE D'INDEPENDANCE SEMANTIQUE DES ELEMENTS DANS LES COMPOSES IDIOMATIQUES ET NON-IDIOMATIQUES

La composition est l'un des trois moyens les plus productifs de la formation des mots en anglais contemporain. Les composés sont décrits à partir de différents points de vue et sont classés à leur tour selon des principes différents : soit prenant en compte les parties du discours qu'ils représentent, soit les modes de composition, ou bien le degré d'indépendance sémantique des éléments, ou, enfin, leur structure syntaxique. L'article est entièrement consacré au du degré d'indépendance sémantique des éléments constitutifs à la fois dans les composés idiomatiques comme dans les composés non idiomatiques. En ce qui concerne les composés non idiomatiques, nous pouvons dire que leur signification peut être déduite à partir des parties constitutives. Par exemple, il est facile de comprendre ce que signifie "classroom" ou " bedroom mean". Par contre, dans les composés idiomatiques, étant donné que le sens global ne représente plus la somme des sens constitutifs, il est pratiquement impossible de reconstruire la signification à partir leurs parties constitutives. Par exemple, " horse-marine" est loin d'être un cheval marin, mais une personne inapte pour le poste qu'elle occupe

Mots-clés : *Idiomatic, meaning, compound word, constitutive element, and degree semantic independency.*

BDD-A3141 © 2010 Editura Europlus

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:06 UTC)