The English noun noun construction: a morphological and syntactic object

If morphology is the study of word structure and syntax is the study of how words are combined into larger linguistic units, then the proper criteria for the demarcation of morphological versus syntactic objects are those that distinguish words from larger constructions. Dixon and Aikhenvald (2002: 35) suggest that, cross-linguistically, the grammatical word can be defined as 'a number of grammatical elements which always occur together, in a fixed order and have a conventionalised coherence and meaning'. Other well-known criteria include the notion of the word as a minimal free form (Bloomfield 1935:178) as well as the tendency for word formation to be non-recursive. Yet it is also well-known that these criteria do not apply categorically (e.g. Matthews 1991:215, 2002:271). In the case of English, particular attention has focussed on noun noun combinations. These are widely regarded as constituting two groups, some being analysed as morphological compound nouns while others are seen as syntactic nominals, but it is equally widely acknowledged that the various criteria by which these types might potentially be recognised give contradictory results (Bauer 1998).

This paper argues that the difficulties of finding a clear demarcation between syntax and morphology reflect the fact that no rigid demarcation exists. It argues for a prototype-based rather than categorical view of words and phrases. The prototypical word is both a grammatical and a phonological unit. It consists of a string of sounds that can stand alone as an utterance but cannot be broken into smaller strings that can also stand as utterances. It does not include any recurring grammatical elements and stands in a paradigmatic implicational relationship to other word forms (Matthews 1991:187). The prototypical syntactic construction, on the other hand, not only can stand alone as an utterance but also includes smaller parts that can stand alone. Prototypically, these smaller parts have the same meaning whether they occur as free forms or as part of the construction, and the meaning of the construction itself is transparent. Between these two extremes, however, are a range of possibilities: in complex words, for example, just one part of the string might be able to stand alone. Furthermore, the possibility of a string functioning as an utterance is itself a gradient notion: e.g. some elements can occur as free forms only in a directly contrastive context. On the other hand, substrings might occur elsewhere as free forms but not with the same form-meaning correspondence as they have within the construction. This is the case, for example, with idioms and with English complex tenses, where the auxiliary does not have the same sense as the corresponding lexical verb.

When applied to the English noun noun construction, this view has implications for the architecture of grammar. In inflected languages, compounds pattern like complex words because, with the exception of the final one, the elements are uninflected, and could therefore not form utterances. In an uninflected language like English, however, both elements of a compound have the same form as possible utterances (unless one is phonologically reduced or constitutes a combining form, as in neoclassical compounds). Furthermore, compounding is a recursive process, and may even involve repetition of the same constituents, as in *table tennis table*. In these senses, then, the English noun noun construction is syntactic. On the other hand, English noun noun combinations have the same distribution as simplex nouns, and the possibility of higher level compounding is a reflection of this fact. Furthermore, they stand in paradigmatic relations to one another, such that each combination can be recognised as belonging to two 'morphological families', one consisting of all combinations that share a first constituent, the other consisting of all combinations with the same second constituent (de Jong 2002). The psychological reality of these families is demonstrated by their predictive significance in e.g. word naming and visual lexical decision studies (Baayen et al. 2010) as well their involvement in prosodic prominence (e.g. Plag 2010). In these ways, the English noun noun is morphological. The inevitable conclusion is that the English noun noun construction, rather than being in some cases syntactic and in other cases morphological, in most cases shares properties of both. This is similar to the conclusion reached by Giegerich (2005) about combinations of noun plus associative adjective in English. However, whereas Giegerich (ibid.) concluded that syntax and morphology represent two 'overlapping modules', a more radical but equally plausible conclusion would seem to be that they do not constitute discrete modules at all.

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