

Compounding in Danish

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Abstract. Compounding is a major word formation process in Danish. Approaches currently important for examining Danish compounds are outlined, mostly based on two-constituent N+N compounds. We argue that compounding has both specific and universal features in different languages. Different types of compounds in Danish are discussed with focus on elliptical compounds, without direct semantic relations between the components. This comprehensive approach has proved useful as compounds in Danish differ considerably in semantic relations between the components. The experiment shows that for some groups of “popular” words, analogy plays a great role in the creation and interpretation of novel compounds.

Compounding is a major word formation process in Danish by which new words of any lexical category are formed. Hypothetically, a Danish compound can consist of several components and nearly all grammatical categories can represent a part of a compound word. In practice, however, the most frequent Danish compounds are binary noun-noun combinations (though two-constituent models A+N and V+N are also very common) and they obey the “right-hand head rule” meaning that the rightmost word determines the semantic and morphosyntactic properties of the whole word. In this paper we mostly consider two-constituent N+N compounds.

The interest in compounding research in different languages nowadays is caused not only by needs of machine translation, but by the simple fact that this pattern is extremely common in different languages. Investigations based on numerous language corpora (e.g. Afrikaans, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Vietnamese at alias) show an increase in numerous new models under the influence of the English language. Even languages where compounding is not a major word-formation method

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have adopted many new compound words from English, which in turn becomes a basis for creating many new nominal compounds. The pattern with a binary noun-noun combination, which is not typical for Russian, has recently become very common, e.g. *бизнес-план* (business plan), *гараж-сейл* (garage sale), *климат-зейт* (climategate), and new nominal compounds, not necessarily borrowed from English, are registered every day.

Though a major word formation process by which new words are formed, compounding in Danish has not yet been adequately explored. Studies of language-specific and universal language features were very popular at the end of the 20th century, but the aspect of compounding was totally omitted in discussions. As a result of this oversight many investigations of compounding in different languages are based on English or German and numerous findings are automatically applied to other languages.

The question of whether compound building is based on a universally applicable rule type is one of the basic concerns of compounding research. We argue that in spite of many universal features, compounding can also have specific features in languages of different families and even in closely-related languages. It is obvious that definition criteria of a compound in different languages are not universal. They differ in the realization of stress patterns, solid or hyphenated spelling, the semantic unity, and the unity of morphological and syntactical functioning (Spencer, Zwicky 1998).

Compounding explicates relations between objects, processes and phenomena in the surrounding world as well as the variety and complexity of existing and possible types of these relations. It results in the development of different semantic structures. Each language has specific features reflecting cultural and national realities and these characteristics cannot be ignored when studying compounding because they influence compound building rules. The conclusion seems evident that compound patterns typical for a certain language correlate with the given language system.

Many linguists have investigated semantic relations between constituents of nominal compounds and tried to explain how nominal compounds are semantically interpreted (Adams 1973; Downing 1977; Levi 1978; Marchand 1969; Selkirk 1982; Warren 1978). However, it has been noted that the set of compounding relations is infinite, so this approach, though useful at the first stage of investigation, is not sufficiently comprehensive and cannot provide the whole picture.

The study of semantic relations in the Danish compound resulted in a list of the most frequent types of relations between the components, e.g. *place, time, purpose, comparison, cause, belonging* etc.

The frame theory can help in the study of nominal compounds. It can be illustrated by the analysis of the Danish category *bolig* (habitation) which comprises several basic subcategories: *hus* (house), *lejlighed* (apartment), *villa* (villa), *hytte* (lodge). This group includes rather frequent words naming objects which possess a certain common feature: they indicate a place fit for human habitation. The analysis of compound subcategories helps to understand how the constituents are combined into one word and what members are found in the slots of the frame. Some of the members in this category have been used over time, e.g. members carrying the information about the object itself: material, function, style, size, place, and owner. On the contrary, some of the members are not traditional; they present information about the social status of the owner, the form of ownership, and the epoch. Among the latest members-modifiers are those describing quality characteristics and the period of use.

The frame approach is rather useful, but it cannot help to describe exocentric compounding and a large group of elliptical novel compounds, without direct semantic relations between the components. The type is rather common in Danish, but it has somehow escaped research attention. These compounds are often “occasional” combinations representing a concrete situation, e.g. *fyrværkerigrund* (fireworks ground) naming uninhabitable ground after a great fire on a fireworks factory. The study of these opaque novel compounds gives rise to the question: what is the creation mechanism of these compounds where some “occasional components” are combined to present a situation in one word? The syntactic analysis demonstrates that some intermediate members of the structure are omitted, the logical and grammatical connection exists implicitly; while explicitly only the most important key elements remain that “mark” the situation. It results in a compressed unit valid for this occasion and a language user is often forced to rely on contextual information and background knowledge. Undoubtedly, the reduction mechanism has a universal character. It is obvious that the omission is possible only if the speaker is sure that the recipient will understand him. Otherwise the purpose of communication will not be reached.

Some compound investigations (Downing 1977; Warren 1978) suggest an interesting theme – the problem of interpretive gaps, or the possibility of certain gaps: semantic relations between the parts of a word which are theoretically possible, but are not attested in practice. While the source (something moved away from) was attested, the goal (something moved towards) was only marginally attested. Warren has found

only fourteen potential examples out of 3,994 compounds and suggests that these may not even be true examples of 'goal' compounds. In her list of relations between the parts of nominal compounds, Levi (1978) has 'from' (e.g. *store-clothes*) but not 'to' relations.

The same gap can be seen in other types of compounds; for example, while we find V+N compounds, like *print-shop* (a shop where printing takes place), there are no compounds like *go-place* (meaning a place to which someone goes). This gap also appears in synthetic compounds: *heaven-sent* can be interpreted only as sent from heaven, not sent to heaven. Similarly, *sea-going* means 'going on the sea' (not to the sea). In a synthetic compound, the crucial interpretive restriction is that the left-hand word (a noun, adverb or adjective) must be interpretable as a complement of the right-hand word (and must not be interpretable as an external argument or subject).

Interpretive gaps (maybe a better term would be semantic-syntactic gaps) have not been the object of research in Danish, though we can suppose that they exist. Comparing Danish models with the mentioned English models shows that they have different restrictions. Thus, in a Danish synthetic compound a left-hand word can be interpreted as a subject: *bankrådgivning* → *banken rådgiver* (a bank consults).

The role of analogy has always been a focus of linguistic investigations; currently we are seeing revived interest (Becker 1990; Itkonen 2005; Skousen 1989; Wanner 2006). Almost all linguists agree that existing words and phrases actually play a more important role in speech production and interpretation than abstract rules. Laurie Bauer supposes: "It might [...] be worth speculating whether language users work by analogy whereas linguists interpret such behavior in terms of rules, so that a linguist's description is inevitably a fiction." (Bauer 1983: 296).

The role of analogy in creation and interpretation of compounds has been underestimated, *though some research work has been done*. Studying the interpretation of English noun-noun compounds, Mary Ellen Ryder (Ryder 1994) presented an interesting 4-level analogy model implementing different levels from concrete to abstract nouns.

We argue that numerous compound patterns influence speakers – especially if we consider the rapid growth of Internet, and most often one

of the existing models is chosen. The process of creating new compounds based on analogy models differs fundamentally from the creation of novel compounds on the basis of certain productive rules.

There are many “popular,” frequently occurring head-components in Modern Danish, e.g.: *affære, aktion, apparat, arbejde, assistent, avis, ballade, bus, bånd, cafe, center, cirkus, debat, demokrati, død, effekt, facilitet, fest, flade, flugt, funktion, ghetto, gruppe, hus, ideologi, imperialist, imperium, kløft, konflikt, kreds, krig, krise, kult, kultur, land, landskab, linje, mafia, miljø, møde, område, pakke, pause, plan, pleje, princip, rapport, regering, safari, sag, samfund, shop, situation, skade, skov, spørgsmål, støtte, syndrom.*

The corpus-based research shows that hundreds of compounds with each of these words as a right-hand component are registered. Many of these components have undergone a semantic change and thus have become more “convenient candidates” for the combination with a modifier.

A productive analogy pattern can often start with a loanword, e.g. *kløft* (gap), which was loaned in the 1950s as a part of the compound *generationskløft* (generation gap). The component has become popular, has undergone a semantic change, and has been used as a head in many new words created by analogy: *kulturkløft, kommunikationskløft, informationskløft, forståelseskløft, tillidskløft, troværdighedskløft, uddannelseskløft.*

Another example is the analogy pattern with the head component *bombe* (bomb). The metaphorical change of this component contributed to many analogy creations: *bakteriebombe, efterlønsbombe, energibombe, fartbombe, humørbombe, kaloriebombe, miljøbombe, prisbombe, vitaminbombe.*

In modern Danish, the role of analogy becomes especially evident in compounding because this method of word formation reveals the dual nature of analogy: on one hand, its ordering, systemizing character, on the other hand, its creative, constructive nature.

Analogy also plays a very important role in the interpretation of novel compounds with no direct semantic relationship between the constituents. To investigate the role of analogy patterns, an experiment on the interpretation of opaque novel compounds was performed. Twenty informants were given different types of nominal compounds: 1) lexicalized compounds; 2) neologisms; 3) not registered, constructed words.

The results of the experiment show that the interpretative processing of novel nominal compounds is affected by analogous lexicalized compounds. The opaque compounds assuming different interpretation were interpreted in correspondence with the lexicalized compounds. The low interpretation rate is observed in the cases where the informants

had no lexicalized compound or neologism which could be used as an analogy pattern.

Due to the fact that compounds in Danish represent a very non-uniform group, a comprehensive approach using different methods is required to analyze various compound types which differ considerably in the semantic relations between the components.

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