

Processes of Word Formation/ part 1

Compounding

Compounding forms a word out of two or more root morphemes. The words are called compounds or compound words.

In Linguistics, compounds can be either native or borrowed.

Native English roots are typically free morphemes, so that means native compounds are made out of independent words that can occur by themselves. Examples:

mailman (composed of free root *mail* and free root *man*)

mail carrier

dog house

fireplace

fireplug (a regional word for 'fire hydrant')

fire hydrant

dry run

cupcake

cup holder

email

e-ticket

pick-up truck

talking-to

Some compounds have a preposition as one of the component words as in the last 2 examples.

In Greek and Latin, in contrast to English, roots do not typically stand alone. So compounds are composed of bound roots. Compounds formed in English from borrowed Latin and Greek morphemes preserve this characteristic. Examples include *photograph*, *iatrogenic*, and many thousands of other classical words.

Note that compounds are written in various ways in English: with a space between the elements; with a hyphen between the elements; or simply with the two roots run together with no separation. The way the word is written does not affect its status as a compound. Over time, the convention for writing compounds can change, usually in the direction from separate words (e.g. email used to be written with a hyphen. In the 19th century, today and tomorrow were sometimes still written *to-day* and *to-morrow*. The *to* originally was the preposition *to* with an older meaning 'at [a particular period of time]'. *Clock work* changed to *clock-work* and finally to one word with no break (*clockwork*). If you read older literature you might see some compound words that are now written as one word appearing with unfamiliar spaces or hyphens between the components.

Another thing to note about compounds is that they can combine words of different parts of speech. The list above shows mostly noun-noun compounds, which is probably the most common part of speech combination, but there are others, such as adjective-noun (*dry run, blackbird, hard drive*), verb-noun (*pick-pocket, cut-purse, lick-spittle*) and even verb-particle (where 'particle' means a word basically designating spatial expression that functions to complete a literal or metaphorical path), as in *run-through, hold-over*. Sometimes these compounds are different in the part of speech of the whole compound vs. the part of speech of its components. Note that the last two are actually nouns, despite their components.

Some compounds have more than two component words. These are formed by successively combining words into compounds, e.g. *pick-up truck*, formed from *pick-up* and *truck*, where the first component, *pick-up* is itself a compound formed from *pick* and *up*. Other examples are *ice-cream cone, no-fault insurance* and even more complex compounds like *top-rack dishwasher safe*.

There are a number of subtypes of compounds that do not have to do with part of speech, but rather the sound

characteristics of the words. These subtypes are not mutually exclusive.

Rhyming compounds (subtype of compounds)

These words are compounded from two rhyming words.

Examples:

lovey-dovey

chiller-killer

There are words that are formally very similar to rhyming compounds, but are not quite compounds in English because the second element is not really a word--it is just a nonsense item added to a root word to form a rhyme.

Examples:

higgledy-piggledy

tootsie-wootsie

This formation process is associated in English with child talk (and talk addressed to children), technically called hypocoristic language. Examples:

bunnie-wunnie

Henny Penny

snuggly-wuggly

Georgie Porgie

Piggie-Wiggie

Another word type that looks a bit like rhyming compounds comprises words that are formed of two elements that almost match, but differ in their vowels. Again, the second element is typically a nonsense form:

pitter-patter

zigzag

tick-tock

riffraff

flipflop

Derivation Derivation is the creation of words by modification of a root without the addition of other roots. Often the effect is a change in part of speech.

Affixation (Subtype of Derivation)

The most common type of derivation is the addition of one or more affixes to a root, as in the word *derivation* itself. This process is called affixation, a term which covers both prefixation and suffixation.

Blending

Blending is one of the most beloved of word formation processes in English. It is especially creative in that speakers take two words and merge them based not on morpheme structure but on sound structure. The resulting words are called blends.

Usually in word formation we combine roots or affixes along their edges: one morpheme comes to an end before the next one starts. For example, we form *derivation* out of the sequence of morphemes de+riv+at(e)+ion. One morpheme follows the next and each one has identifiable boundaries. The morphemes do not overlap.

But in blending, part of one word is stitched onto another word, without any regard for where one morpheme ends and another begins. For example, the word *swooshtika* 'Nike swoosh as a logo symbolizing corporate power and hegemony' was formed from *swoosh* and *swastika*. The *swoosh* part remains whole and recognizable in the blend, but the *tika* part is not a morpheme, either in the word *swastika* or in the blend. The blend is a perfect merger of form, and also of content. The meaning contains an implicit analogy between the *swastika* and the *swoosh*, and thus conceptually blends them into one new kind of thing having properties of both, but also combined properties of neither source. Other examples include *glitterati* (blending *glitter* and *literati*) 'Hollywood social set', *mockumentary* (*mock* and *documentary*) 'spoof documentary'.

The earliest blends in English only go back to the 19th century, with wordplay coinages by Lewis Carroll in *Jabberwocky*. For example, he introduced to the language *slithy*, formed from *lithe* and *slimy*, and *galumph*, (from *gallop* and *triumph*. Interestingly *galumph* has survived as a word in English, but it now seems to mean 'walk in a stomping, ungainly way'.

Some blends that have been around for quite a while include *brunch* (breakfast and lunch), *motel* (motor hotel), *electrocute* (electric and execute), *smog* (smoke and fog) and cheeseburger (cheese and hamburger). These go back to the first half of the twentieth century. Others, such as *stagflation* (stagnation and inflation), *spork* (spoon and fork), and *carjacking* (car and hijacking) arose since the 1970s.

Here are some more recent blends I have run across:

mocktail (mock and cocktail) 'cocktail with no alcohol'
splog (spam and blog) 'fake blog designed to attract hits and raise Google-ranking'

Britpopoperati (Britpop and literati) 'those knowledgeable about current British pop music'

Words in English public website
Ling 216
Rice University
Prof. S. Kemmer