

THE COMPOUNDABILITY OF PHRASES? THE PHRASABILITY OF COMPOUNDS?—PREDICTIONS FOR ENGLISH/ES¹

This paper aims to demonstrate that attempts to define linguistic constructions resulting from the concatenation of linguistic units (words?) as occupying the status of *either* a phrase *or* a compound, are often futile as they are unable to account for forms which do *not* necessarily fit in to such an either/or paradigm. Hence, it appears that these constructions ought to be located on a phrase–compound gradient somewhat similar to Giegerich’s lexicon-syntax interface theory(2004;2005;2006). I will argue that the location of a linguistic construction on such a gradient is determined by syntactic, socio-cognitive and contextual factors and is therefore potentially variable. The phrase – compound relationship will be congruent to a syntactic – lexical one on the basis of which I will propose that, on the one hand, post-nominal prepositional phrase representations of the semantic relationship between the two constituents of a construction (constituting complements or modifiers as the case may be ²), are likely to indicate where the construction ought to be placed on the aforementioned phrase-compound gradient while claiming additionally, that a conceptual distinction similar to keizer’s (2004) notion of ‘conceptual perspective’ enables the user to ‘retrieve’ these constructions as either phrases or compounds in context.³ Crucial to the hypothesis will be the relationship between the notion of attributiveness and postnominal PP complements and modifiers.

It will also be argued that the notion of attributiveness is applicable to ‘secondary compounds’. The discussion will in addition, incorporate the claim

¹ I would like to thank Professor Heinz Giegerich of the University of Edinburgh for the many exciting and challenging discussions we have shared and which provided the impetus for this paper. I am also deeply indebted to two anonymous referees for their valuable comments and useful suggestions, though I do not expect either of them to endorse the theoretical framework developed here.

² Fries (1998) and Keizer (2004) have problematized the existing syntactic criterion for differentiating complements from modifiers proposed by Radford (1988) Huddleston (1984) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002). By an analysis of ‘exceptions to the rule’ as it were, they claim that a rigid distinction between complements and modifiers does not exist. It is in keeping with this assumption that reference will be made to these categories.

³ Emphasis will not be placed on the distinction between N+N and Adj+n units etc. Instead, they will be viewed as belonging to a single category. Distinctions will, however, be made between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ compounds and ‘associative’ and ‘ascriptive’ attribution.

that stress cannot be considered an important determining factor, as has been the case, since there exists at least *one form* of English, namely Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE)⁴, which whilst containing a substantive (and perhaps unique), system of compounds, does *not* utilize stress in distinguishing compounds from phrases.

Chomsky and Halle (1968) define compounds and phrases in terms of the Compound Stress Rule and Nuclear Stress Rule respectively. Accordingly, they claim that compounds exhibit lefthand stress while phrases exhibit righthand stress. Among others, Marchand (1969) Libermann and Sproat (1992) adopt stress as a criterion in attempting to define compounds and phrases. While rejecting the rigid demarcation of righthand stress for phrases and lefthand stress for compounds, Olsen (2000), nonetheless, posits her analysis of compounds vs. phrases on stress, stating that compounds may also contain endstress. More recently, Giegerich (2004;2005;2006) has argued that such inflexible classifications fail to capture the complex inter-relationships between phrases and compounds. However, he does maintain that stress is important for the analysis of the phrase/compound distinction claiming for instance that the existence of a subclass of end-stressed nouns such as *July, champagne, bamboo* etc "...predicts for compound nouns that they will have fore-stress or exceptionally end-stress", (Giegerich 2006 : 9).

Indeed it is not surprising that stress has been invoked in such analyses since many Englishes do appear to denote a correlation between stress and phrasal/compound categories, i.e. *'blackbird* vs. *black 'bird*. It is the exception – namely Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE) that has compelled me to look for an alternative explanation.⁵ In brief, the lexicon of SSLE is characterized by fore stress. Nevertheless, differences in stress *can* be observed in sentences for semantic reasons :

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- a) *The 'Chimpanzee was sitting on the bamboo tree.*
- b) *The Chimpanzee was sitting on the' bamboo tree.*

⁴ There are a number of varieties of Sri Lankan English distilled within the penumbra of Sri Lankan Englishes. In focusing exclusively on SSLE, I run the fraught risk of reinstating and legitimising the hierarchical positioning of SSLE within this paradigm, a position albeit contained within the very term *Standard* Sri Lankan English. However, this is only a preliminary investigation in terms of an already linguistically delineated form of Sri Lankan English. Doubtless, the proposed model ought to be further evaluated in relation to other varieties/forms of Sri Lankan English.

⁵ Clearly, there exist a number of Englishes with differing stress patterns. However, the ensuing discussion regarding compounds and phrases will only draw attention to the apparent alternative stress system of 'Standard' Sri Lankan English (SSLE).

Example 1(a) draws the listener's attention to the fact that it is the chimpanzee who was sitting on the bamboo tree while example 1(b), focuses on the object on which the chimpanzee was seated. Note that both chimpanzee and bamboo have initial stress. The distinction between compounds and phrases, however, is not reflected in the stress system of SSLE as evident in the following examples:

2

- (a) *The 'black bird in the zoo was really beautiful.*
- (b) *The 'blackbird must have been the cause of her illness.*

Except for the space between *black* and *bird* in example 2 (a) – which indicates that it is a phrase - it would be extremely difficult for someone who is unfamiliar with SSLE to work out the precise meaning of the above sentences (in terms of a phrasal/compound distinction), while to a native speaker of SSLE, it would be fairly obvious that example 2(b) is a compound since the (unfortunate?!) association between the species of *blackbirds* and bad-luck is ostensibly, a component of the 'Sri Lankan' cultural milieu. Note that the compound status of the construction in 2(b), derived in context, parallels the 'semantic opacity' of it: a member of the *species* of *blackbirds* need not be black in colour whereas the phrasal counterpart of the construction in 2(a) refers specifically to a bird who is black in colour. Arguably then, it is the conjunction of the relevant pragmatic scenario and the user's 'cognitive sense' (to be discussed below), that appears to determine the phrasal and compound status of 2(a) and (b) respectively. As indicated in the introduction, it is also possible to account for such differences between phrases and compounds on the basis of underlying syntactic features – I shall return to this shortly, but let us first review the notion of associative and ascriptive attribution.

Typically, ascriptive attribution implies that the first constituent of a potential phrase/compound construction refers to a property or entity of the second constituent (the head), i.e. *steel bridge, silk shirt, beautiful picture* (Giegerich 2006 : 2-3). *Steel* is a possible entity of a bridge, *silk* is a possible entity of a shirt and *beauty* is a possible entity of a picture. Associative modification relates to an entity *associated with* the head, i.e. *dental decay, avian influenza, school dinner, village shop etc* (Giegerich 2006: 2-3). The contrived categorization of *dental* and *avian* as associative adjectives and *school* and *dinner* as associative nouns is clearly pointless since the two 'adjectives' are not adjectives in syntactic terms – they cannot pre-modify the nominal, nor occur as predicates etc. Classifying these as a 'categorical mismatch' is in my opinion redundant as their function in constructions of the kind given above is no different to that of the associative nouns *school* and *village!*; hence my reluctance to differentiate between N+N, Adj + N units.

A further complication involves the non-inclusion of 'secondary compounds' within the purview of associativeness. Let us consider the following SSLE constructions⁶:

3

(a)	(b)	
<i>grass cutter</i>	<i>keybunch</i>	<i>grease pole</i>
<i>bana talker</i>	<i>milkrice</i>	<i>vegetable man</i>
<i>tree cutter</i>	<i>tea boutique</i>	<i>fruit man</i>
<i>kandyan dancer</i>	<i>plaintain boutique</i>	<i>cadju girl</i>
<i>tea plucker</i>	<i>sweatmeat</i>	
<i>coconut plucker</i>	<i>pirith thread</i>	
<i>hedge cutter</i>	<i>cousin sister</i>	

Arguably, the constructions in (a) are 'secondary compounds' since in each case the object of the predicate is embedded in the deverbal head, *i.e.* *cutter of grass*, *talker of bana* (*bana* being a form of Buddhist preaching), *cutter of trees*, *dancer of kandyan dances* etc. Generally the term *kandyan* may also denote a geographical location though in the case of the compound *kandyan dancer*, the pre-nominal modifier refers to the form of *kandyan* dancing as in ballroom dancing etc. Similarly, a *bana talker* is not someone who preaches Buddhist sermons but is derogatorily inferred to refer to someone who suffers from verbosity. The examples in (b) are 'primary compounds' wherein the semantic relationship between the construction and the individual words comprising the construction is often tenuous, *i.e.* *sweatmeat* refers to traditional Sri Lankan desserts, *pirith thread* to a sanctified piece of thread usually worn around ones wrist in order to ward off 'evil spirits'. The relationship between *bana* and *talker* is as arbitrary (and consequently as associative) as the relationship between *pirith* and *thread*. A comparison of all of the constructions listed in 3(a) and (b) is likely to confirm this observation. If the pre-nominal modifiers of the compounds in 3(b) are *associative* attributes (though not necessarily as will be shown below), then it is arguable that the pre-nominal modifiers in 3 (a) are also associative attributes. Therefore, I will henceforth use the term associative attribute in relation to both 'secondary' and 'primary' compounds.

As mentioned in the introduction, post-modifier semantic representations of both ascriptive and associative constructions offer a possible alternative in trying to locate these constructions on the phrasal/compound

⁶ Most of the words that may appear 'foreign' to 'non-native' speakers of SSLE are of Sinhala origin. However, Sinhala is one of two official and national languages of Sri Lanka, the other being Tamil. Unfortunately, my ignorance of Tamil has forced me to exclude examples containing words of Tamil origin- a lack that is felt deeply.

gradient. Let us examine the following examples of 'possible' phrases and/or compounds and their post-modifier semantic representations:

4a

papal murder

could mean

i murder of the pope (complement pp)

**The murder of the pope and the one of the terrorist were tragic.*

* *The papal murder and the terrorist one were tragic.*

or

ii murder by the pope (modifier pp)

The murder by the pope and the one by the terrorist were tragic.

The papal murder and the terrorist one were tragic.

b

terrorist murder

could mean

i *murder of the terrorist* (complement PP)

**The murder of the terrorist and the one of the psychopath were tragic.*

**The terrorist murder and the psychopath one were tragic.*

or

ii *murder by the terrorist* (modifier PP)

The murder by the terrorist and the one by the psychopath were tragic.

The terrorist murder and the psychopath one were tragic.

4a i and 4b i suggest that the *ungrammaticality* of the pro-form *one* substitution is due to the representation of the pre-nominal modifier as a post-modifier complement PP. More specifically, complements do not normally follow substitute *one* while adjuncts may do so, (Radford :1988 ; Huddleston :1984). Hence, 4 a ii and 4 b ii are perfectly acceptable. However, for users of the language, it is fairly obvious that the respective ambiguities in both constructions do not command equal status. Many would under 'non-exceptional' contexts associate *papal murder* as referring to the murder of the Pope while *terrorist murder* would probably be interpreted as an act of murder by a terrorist. Consequently, it can be argued that *papal murder* seems to favour a complement PP interpretation whereas *terrorist murder* seems to favour a modifier PP interpretation. It follows then that a complement PP interpretation denotes compound status while a modifier PP interpretation denotes phrasal

status. What is significant is that both constructions are amenable to either interpretation, the choice being the result of a simultaneous collaboration between the speakers intuitive 'feel' for the language and the relevant context/s.

It is this 'feel' for the language that I wish to account for on the basis of an appropriation of Keizer's (2004), notion of 'conceptual perception' for the analysis of compound/phrase distinctions. Drawing on the notions of schematheory and General knowledge structures (GKSs) Keizer argues that "...given the associative nature of our memory...an activated knowledge structure will evoke a number of related knowledge structures, which in turn will call up yet other structures," (2004: 342). She provides the example of *church* which she claims will automatically invoke a plethora of knowledge ordered hierarchically in which there is likely to be a slot for *spire*, while *spire* is in turn likely to invoke a different hierarchy of knowledge structures in which *church* may occupy a larger structure. She also makes further reference to connectionist or network models (e.g. McClelland and Rumelhart, 1986a,b qtd. in Keizer 2004: 344), which claim that "...what is stored in memory is not the representation of an entity ...but the connection strengths between units that allow this pattern to be recreated,"(344). Such an approach could account for how and why users of a language are able to 'retrieve' the relevant semantic connotations of ambiguous phrasal/compound constructions such as *papal murder* and *terrorist murder* as required by the context.

Ascriptive attributes, e.g. *beautiful house* and *wooden house* are clearly phrasal owing to the fact that firstly, the nature of ascriptive attributes represent properties of the head and therefore demonstrate unambiguous semantic relationships while secondly, a semantic PP representation of such a construction will nearly always be a modifier PP:

i.e. *The house that is beautiful remained.*

The house of wood collapsed.

Note that as mentioned previously, it is the syntactic definitions of Fries and Keizer regarding complements and modifiers upon which I have developed my hypothesis. Accordingly, the word *of* need not signify a complement but could be the preposition of a modifier as exemplified in *The house of wood and the one of stone collapsed.*

Associative attributes, however, are not so easily defined. Consider *terrorist murder*. A definition of a terrorist is very likely to entail the 'potential for murder' in which case the relationship between the two constituents could be ascriptive. This argument would explain why it appears to invoke a phrasal rather than a compound interpretation. The pre-nominals in 3(b) are also associative but represent complements when represented as post-nominal constructions, i.e. *cadju girl- a girl who sells cadjunuts with long hair and the one with short hair* and, *matchbox - a box of matches with stripes and one with squares etc* and are therefore compounds. It seems then, that while ascriptive

attribute constructions are clearly phrasal, associative attribute constructions can be either phrases or compounds depending on how 'lexicalised' they are. Specifically, there appears to be a tendency for associative attribute constructions to move in the direction of lexicalisation and thereby evolve along the phrasal/compound continuum coupled with the simultaneous transformation of a given semantic post-nominal PP from being a modifier to being a complement. A possible explanation for this might be the tenuous and arbitrary link that exists between the constituents of associative constructions, which imposes enormous demands on the grammatical competence of its users. Lexicalisation is likely to relieve the cognitive system of such a burden. The progression of these categories in to the final state of lexicalisation will, in turn, be accompanied by the user's increased dependence on 'conceptual perception' enabling him/her to retrieve these 'semantic systems' or *compounds* in context, and thereby engage in the concomitant process of both reflecting and constructing a complex of communicative and cognitive expressions/'realities'.

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TANYA N. I. EKANAYAKA