

Evaluating the role of the head and modifier compounds and nominal phrases in English and German

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This proposal discusses the role of the head and modifier components in English compounds and nominal phrases and German compounds. The main question under consideration is whether a particular element of a compound or a phrase is the most salient one for language users. The majority of the literature on morphology and the processing of complex linguistic structures (e.g., compounds) has traditionally emphasised the important role of the head constituent, whereas the modifier is said to further specify the head (e.g., Marchand 1960, Bauer 1983, Dressler 2006).

The present study seeks to empirically evaluate the dominant role which has been posited with respect to the head. For this purpose monolingual native speakers of English participated in a cued recall study. Findings revealed a significant interaction of modifier cues and target type (more specifically, compounds), suggesting that targets associated with modifiers are recalled better in compounds. This finding is consistent with a previous study, which revealed that modifier rather than head associates come most readily to speakers' minds. The study was replicated with German speakers. Again, the findings revealed that targets related to the modifier element are recalled significantly better than those related to the head, which is interpreted as establishing that the modifier is more salient than the head.

Two accounts for the salience of the modifier are put forward. On the one hand, the semantic information carried by the head often serves to anchor the whole structure to a particular category. The role of the modifier as an element which provides the head with further semantic specification is what contributes to its increased salience. On the other hand, the ordering of elements within the structure should also be taken into account. If the speakers' attention is drawn more strongly to the beginning of a word, then in right-headed compounds, such as those typically found in German and English, the modifier would be in a more 'privileged' position.

In conclusion, the present study casts doubt on the view that the head is the most dominant component in a complex structure. The suggestion that the modifier is semantically more salient should encourage linguists to reevaluate their concepts of the notion head and modifier.