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A brief look at the types of compounds
and “bahuvrihi” in English**

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What do we mean when we speak of ‘words’? If you had to define what a word is, you might first think of the word as a unit in the writing system. The notion of what a word is, should, after all, not depend on the fancies of individual writers or the arbitrariness of the English spelling system. The second problem with the orthographically defined word is that it may not always coincide with our intuitions. Thus, most of us would probably agree that girlfriend is a word (i.e. one word) which consists of two words (girl and friend), a so-called **compound**. It has been argued that the word could be defined in four other ways: in terms of sound structure (i.e. phonologically), in terms of its internal integrity, in terms of meaning (i.e. semantically), or in terms of sentence structure (i.e. syntactically). We will discuss each in turn. In many languages (including English) the word is the unit that is crucial for the occurrence and distribution of stress. Spoken in isolation, every word can have only one main stress, as indicated by the acute accents (´) in the data presented in (3) below (note that we speak of linguistic ‘data’ when we refer to language examples to be analyzed).

cárpentertéxtbook
wateranálisis
federalsýllable
motherunderstand

While **apártmentbuilding** is two orthographic words, it is only one word in terms of stress behavior. The same would hold for other compounds like *trávelagency*, *weather forecast*, *spáceshuttle*, etc. What exactly do we mean when we say that a given form is a compound? To answer that question we first examine the internal structure of compounds. We defined compounding (sometimes also called composition) rather loosely as the combination of two words to form a new word. This definition contains two crucial assumptions, the first being that compounds consist of two (and not more) elements, the second being that these elements are words. As we will shortly see, both assumptions are in need of justification. A compound word is a union of two or more words to convey a unit idea or special meaning that is not as clearly or quickly conveyed by separated words. Compound words may be hyphenated, written open (as separate words), or written solid (closed).

A hyphenated compound—also called a unit modifier—is simply a combination of words joined by a hyphen or hyphens. The hyphen is a mark of punctuation that not only unites but separates the component words; thus, it aids understanding and readability and ensures correct pronunciation. Words are hyphenated mainly to express the idea of a unit and to avoid ambiguity.

shell-like
cloud-to-ground strokes
well-to-do
roof-to-wall construction

An open compound is a combination of words so closely associated that they convey the idea of a single concept but are spelled as unconnected words:

lowest common denominator
canyon head

A solid (closed) compound combines two or more words into one solid word (e.g., breakdown).

The use of compounding in our language is an evolving process. As expressions become more popular or adopt special meanings, they follow a gradual evolution from two or more separate or hyphenated words to single words.

audio visualaudio-visual.....audiovisual
copy editor.....copy-editorcopyeditor
wild life.....wild-lifewildlife

Because word forms change constantly, it is important to remember that the rules for compounding cannot be applied inflexibly.

A common semantic classification of compounds contains four types:

1. **endocentric**
2. **exocentric (also bahuvrihi)**
3. **copulative (also dvandva)**

4. appositional

An endocentric compound consists of a head, i.e. the categorical part that contains the basic meaning of the whole compound, and modifiers, which restrict this meaning. For example, the English compound doghouse, where house is the head and dog is the modifier, is understood as a house intended for a dog. Endocentric compounds tend to be of the same part of speech (word class) as their head, as in the case of doghouse. (Such compounds were called *tatpuruṣa* in the Sanskrit tradition.)

Copulative compounds are compounds which have two semantic heads. Appositional compounds refer to lexemes that have two (contrary) attributes which classify the compound.

Type	Description	Examples
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Endocentric	A+B denotes a special kind of B :	darkroom, small talk, saucepan
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Exocentric	A+B denotes a special kind of an unexpressed semantic head:	skinhead, paleface (head: 'person'), couch potato, long legged, careworn, cardsharp, bellboy, butterfingers, showoff, eyewitness,
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Copulative	A+B denotes 'the sum' of what A and B denote:	bittersweet, sleepwalk, slowdown.
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Appositional A and B provide different descriptions for the same referent: actor director, maidservant, upend

Most natural languages have compound nouns. The positioning of the words (i. e. the most common order of constituents in phrases where nouns are modified by adjectives, by possessors, by other nouns, etc.) varies according to the language. While Germanic languages, for example, are left-branching when it comes to noun phrases (the modifiers come before the head), the Romance languages are usually right-branching. In terms of part of speech, nominal compounds fall into the **three** subclasses, involving **nouns**, **verbs** and **adjectives** as non-heads. Noun-noun compounds are the most common type of compound in English. The vast majority of noun-noun compounds are right-headed, i.e. they have a head and this head is the right member of the compound.

For example,

laser printer, book cover, letter head

redneck, loudmouth, greenback

Pickpocket, cut-throat, spoilsport

The forms in (a) all have in common that they are noun-noun compounds and that they denote a subclass of the referents of the head: a laser printer is a kind of printer, a book cover is a kind of cover, a letter head is the head of a letter. We could say that these compounds have their semantic head inside the compound, which is the reason why these compounds are called endocentric compounds. As for other examples they are not considered to be a noun-noun compound because of the reason they are not formed by two nouns. For instance, a **redneck** is not a kind of neck but a kind of person who is poor white person without education, especially one living in the countryside in the southern US, who has prejudiced (= unfair and unreasonable) ideas and beliefs, **loudmouth** does not denote a kind of mouth but again a kind of person who a person who talks a lot, especially in an offensive or stupid way, and the same holds for greybeard someone who is with grey beard. Similarly, in (c),

apickpocket is not a kind of pocket but a thief who steals things out of pockets or bags, especially in a crowd, a ***cut-throat*** is someone who cuts throats, and a ***spoilsport*** is someone who spoils enjoyable pastimes of other people, a person who stops other people from enjoying themselves.

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