

**A LOOK AT THE MORPHOLOGICAL AND SEMANTIC  
CHARACTERISTICS OF ENGLISH COMPOUNDS**

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After learning to mix vegetables with other materials to make meal for prolonging the life and to mix different metals for making alloys in order to work easily with, the primitive man also learned some characteristics of his language and its words to express his idea with different words. As a result of this he found the similarity and oppositeness in meaning, and mixing the words which we called compounding (2) to make a new word.

A compound word is a lexical item in which at least two components or roots combine to make one unit or into a morphological unit. Compounds are productive grammatical and semantic device (3), and a compound word functions as a single unit - more or less like a single word in a sentence. They are morphologically formed as both compound words and compound-complex words (4). A compound word is formed by using two or more single words as components, such as *housewife*, *gamebag*, *racehorse*, *blackboard*, etc. On the other hand, a compound - complex word contains at least a single word with suffixes. The suffix can be added either to all components, to one of them, or two of them, etc., as follows :

(high) + I (commission) + (-er) I → high commissioner  
I (sense) + (-tive) I + (plant) → sensitive plant  
(wire) + I (hair) + (-ed) I + (dog) → wire-haired dog  
I (attract) + (-ive) I + I (look) + (-ing) I + (girl) → attractive -  
looking girl

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  - (2) Hans Marchand (1969). **The Categories and Types of Present Day English Word Formation**. München: C. H. Beck p. 11.
  - (3) E. C. Traugot and M. L. Pratt (1980). **Linguistics**. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., p. 95.
  - (4) Mehmet Demirezen (1977). **A Contrastive Study of Phonology and Morphology of Compound Words in Turkish and English**. Unpublished Doctorial Thesis, Ankara, p. 50.

There is a morphological irregularity in compounding while the components are being added (5), for example, *English* and *man* can make a compound as *Englishman*, or *in* and *to* can make another compound as *into*, but *German* and *man*, *Spanish* and *man* or *in* and *through* cannot make compounds such as \**Germanman*, \**Spanishman* or \**inthrough*.

The semantic characteristics of compounds are related to their morphological, syntactical, phonological structure and their written forms as well (6). The semantic characteristics of them can be traced as follows:

i. Compounds which carry the meaning of the components, so they are fairly seen that they are transparent words (7), such as *head-ache*, *blackboard*, *postman*, etc.

ii. Compounds which carry the meaning of only one of their components may be semantically called semi-transparent compounds (8), for example, *airpocket* does not mean the pocket of the air, but really means a condition of the atmosphere that causes an airplane to drop suddenly. *Gamebag* is another example meaning a kind of bag used by hunters, it is not a bag used in play or game, in both compounds, *air* and *bag* preserve their meanings, but *pocket* and *game* do not. Compounds like these can be, some what, called as idioms.

iii. *Blackmail* and *egghead* are semantically another form or type compounds whose components completely lose their meanings, for example *blackmail* is not the mail which is black, but really means a payment of money for not making something discreditable about a person. *Egghead* does not mean one who has an egg-shaped head but means intellectual.

The meaning of these two words are not transparent, but opaque, because they are compressed metaphors or use associations, usually referred to as idioms.

iv. Compounds can have a meaning from the point of their written form whether they are written together, separate or with a hyphen between

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(5) Julia Falk (1973). **Linguistics and Language: A Survey of Basic Components and Implications**, New York: John Wiley, p. 36.

(6) Mehmet Ali Gülel (1991). **Some Semantic Problems in Teaching English to Turkish Students at University**, Unpublished Doctorial Thesis, Konya, p. 23.

(7) Stephan Ullmann (1962). **Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning**, Oxford: Basil Blackwell and Mott Ltd., p. 80.

Michael J. Wallace (1982). **Teaching Vocabulary**, London: Heinemann Educational Books, p. 89.

(8) Gülel, *loc. cit.*,

the components. The verb *to run* can be combined with a hyphen between the parts, such as *run-down*. It means not in a good condition. If the compound is written together without a hyphen, such as *rundown*, it means summary. If separately written, it means to criticize someone.

Syntactic change of the part entails the semantic structure, so the meaning of the compound automatically change (9) as in *race-horse* (a horse for race) and *horserace* (a race for horses). The stress on the parts of the compound may also cause to change the meaning of a compound. A wellknown example, *páperbasket* (a basket for paper) and *páperbásket* (a basket made of paper) can display the reality very well.

The basic process about the words to express something in different what is known as compounding. They morphologically and semantically involve some peculiarities mentioned above. Some compounds support a characteristic of idioms, and their meanings cannot be immediately determined from the meaning of the components or roots.

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(9) Gülel, *op. cit.*, p. 25.