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A Multi-Level Approach to Word-Formation: Complex Lexemes and Word Semantics

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Complex lexemes differ in a number of respects from simple lexemes. These differences can best be captured by a multi-level approach to word-formation that describes analysable and more or less motivated lexemes and their creation and interpretation.

In his classical book on English word-formation with the subtitle "a synchronic-diachronic approach" Marchand (^{2}1969:53ff) offers "a pattern for the description of composites" which distinguishes between morphologic shape, morphologic structure, grammatical deep structure, grammatical and semantic content, and what he called "type of reference". By this term he understands "selectional patterns of information" relating complex lexemes to underlying sentences. Word-formation is thus regarded as pertaining to several interrelated levels.

More recent treatments by Kastovsky (1977) and Dressler (1979) go in the same direction. The former considers word-formation to be "at the crossroads of morphology, syntax, semantics, and the lexicon", while the latter proposes "a polycentristic theory of word formation" with basically the same "semi-autonomous components" (1979:426). In the following it will be shown that even more levels and distinctions have to be taken into account and that only an integrated approach can capture all aspects of complex lexical items.

The levels and approaches to be recognized include six points:

1. An analytic and a synthetic procedure must be distinguished, and the latter presupposes the former. The analytic view-point starts from a structured lexeme (e.g. *theatregoer*) and, by paraphrasing, arrives at an underlying syntactic group or sentence. The synthetic method, often found in generative treatments, takes a proposition or sentence as the starting point (e.g. *someone goes to the theatre*) and derives a reduced syntagma from it. Additional semantic features have to be added in the process, such as [+ Habitual] with *theatregoer,* or [+ Purpose] in *writing-table, drawbridge.*
2. A methodological separation between synchronic and diachronic aspects is absolutely necessary. The speaker has no historical memory. Although the verb *peddle* is genetically derived from *pedlar/peddler,* synchronically *peddler* is an agent-noun derived from the verb *to peddle.* On the other hand, lexicalization and some aspects of productivity can only be explained diachronically. The diachronic yield of certain patterns must, however, not be confused with the present-day creativity of *ad hoc* formations, such as

'contextuals' (in the sense of Clark & Clark) and 'deictic compounds' (in the sense of Downing).

3. "Morphologic shape" could be considered independently of meaning, according to Marchand, by describing *craft/s/man* as 'noun + *s* + noun', *pott/er* as 'noun + suffix' and *re/write* as 'prefix + verb'. Obviously such a description in terms of morphemes and word classes alone, misses important differences, such as those between *crybaby* and *drawbridge* (both V + N) or *steamboat* and *girlfriend* (both N + N). Semantic aspects must be included in the description, as soon as we compare suffixes like *-er* in *bak/er* (Agent), *blott/er* (Instrument), *sleep/er* meaning 'train with beds' (Adverbial of Place). On the other hand, the following are all agent-nouns in spite of different morphologic shapes: *grave-diggER, cut-throatØ, car-THIEF, cookØ* [where Ø symbolizes a zero-morpheme]. In nominal compounds such as *opera house, gunpowder,* and *baking-powder* a common semantic feature [+ Purpose] can be established, but this, obviously, does not exhaust their semantic analysis.
4. The syntactic level is most obviously relevant in nominalizations, which according to Motsch, function as syntactic recategorizations. The examples *his rapid drawing of the picture, theatregoer, latecomer,* and *essay-writing* can and must clearly be related to sentences. This is more difficult with composites not containing a verb, and completely unrevealing with lexemes such as *whitish* and *booklet.* Again, a combination of the syntactic description with semantic aspects seems most rewarding. This can be done by assigning the head or 'determinatum' of the complex lexeme to a specific deep case in the underlying sentence. Thus superficially similar words can be distinguished such as *payER* (Agent), *cookER* (Instrument), *mournER* (Experiencer), *containER* (Object) but also ambiguous lexemes such as *dishwashER* (Agent or Instrument), *dinER* (Agent or Locative), *payMENT* (Object or Activity).
5. An independent semantic analysis is required for the lexical aspects of word-formation, i.e. the inclusion of complex words in the lexicon. This is tied up with the naming function of lexemes and is particularly relevant for the gradual 'lexicalization' process and its result. By this term I understand the phenomenon that complex lexical items, by frequent usage, may lose their syntagmatic nature and tend to become units with specific content (cf. Lipka 1981). This involves a demotivation and idiomatization, as in *blackboard, holiday, watchmaker, highwayman,* and *forehead.* Here the border between complex and simple lexemes becomes fuzzy.
6. Pragmatic aspects, finally, must be considered, both with respect to the naming function of complex lexemes and the level of 'parole'. The interpretation by the hearer/reader of 'contextuals', such as *pumpkin-bus, to bottle (demonstrators),* and 'deictic compounds' such as *the applejuice seat* (meaning 'the seat in front of which a glass of *applejuice* had been placed') clearly depend on context and situation. Often extralinguistic knowledge

of the world is also relevant, e.g. when analysing Downing's *cowtree,* which we would not presumably interpret as *'tree* on which a *cow* sits'. Although one may argue that all such formations show systematic ambiguity, on the level of 'langue', their actual interpretation on particular occasions is determined by pragmatic factors. Functional considerations may also be regarded as belonging within the domain of pragmatics. Complex lexemes serve various functions, such as classifying (e.g. *wine glass, beer glass; front door; bilge water*), naming (e.g. *Reagonomics, space shuttle*), pronominalization in texts (as in the sequence: spring thaws begin to *break up* the winter ice. Taking advantage of the *breakup* ... etc.), and finally the function of information condensation (e.g. *pen friend* defined in the *Dictionary of Contemporary English* as 'a person, esp. in a foreign country, whom one has come to know by the friendly exchange of letters, but whom one has usu. never met'). Thematic meaning on the basis of a topic-comment structure is also signalled by complex lexemes as in *apple-eating* vs. *eating-apple.*

Only a multi-level approach can do justice to all aspects of word-formation. A morphological and a limited syntactic description may be given independently of meaning. However, an adequate account must recognize the role of semantics on all levels and their interrelation. While deep cases and pragmatics, on the level of 'parole', presuppose a sentence semantics and a text semantics respectively, all the other aspects of complex lexical items fall within the domain of word semantics.

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