

1 Introduction: Why is verbal composition not a productive word-formation pattern in the English language?

1.1 Context and motivation

“Compounds are important objects of morphological investigations, because compounds are present in all languages of the world” (Dressler 2006, 23). The combination of at least two free lexical morphemes, as we define compounding here, is a highly productive word-formation pattern also in the English language. In light of this, it is all the more astonishing that verbal compounds seem to be very rare. Lexemes like *to babysit*, *to spoon-feed* or *to footnote* may superficially look like compounds, however they are back-formations or conversions from underlying noun or adjective compounds. *To babysit*, for instance, is a back-formation from the nominal compound *babysitter*; the adjective *spoon-fed* served as the basis for *to spoon-feed* and *to footnote* was converted from a homonymous compound noun.

This being the case, these lexemes are what has been termed ‘verbal pseudo-compounds’ (Marchand 1969, 101), namely, lexemes which at first glance look like compounds, but in reality derive from different word-formation patterns. Among linguists there is a broad consensus that, apart from preparticle verbs like *to outrun* or *to overestimate*, genuine “[v]erbal composition does not exist in Present-day English”, as Marchand (1969, 100) put it. He even goes so far as to claim that “verbal composition [...] does not seem to have existed in Germanic at all” (Marchand 1969, 100). This statement is highly interesting for the purpose of this study, as it forms the basis for the overriding research question.

1.2 Research questions and hypotheses

There is a range of linguistic literature that challenges Marchand's statement and returns to the question of whether genuine verbal compounds do actually exist in English. Different authors arrive at slightly different conclusions, but eventually all agree on the fact that such lexemes represent an extremely odd and unproductive phenomenon of the English language. Some authors (who do research in this field) attempt to classify the different types of verbal pseudo-compounds, among them, for example, Marchand's pupil Dieter Schrack (1966), who in his doctoral thesis classifies verbal compounds from early written records until about 1900 with a strong focus on the diachronic development of the different types. Another scholar, whom I will not focus on in this study, is See-Young Cho (2002), whose descriptive work on verbal compounds includes aspects like orthography, stress patterns and peculiarities in morphology. He at least partly refuses to accept Marchand's statement of the nonexistence of genuine verbal compounds by giving evidence from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). A similar procedure can also be found in Erdmann (1999), who in his paper "Compound verbs in English: Are they pseudo?" tries to refute Marchand's statement by providing counterexamples and referring to historical data recorded in the OED. However, he explains all those cases as analogous formations rather than as genuine compositions. Moreover, his findings do not seem to overrule Marchand's statement in general, since they are exclusively based on written data.

I do not wish to go that far and claim that genuine verbal compounds are absolutely impossible, since exceptions to the rule (like nonce-formations and possibly some single unclear cases) can surely be found. This topic has been addressed repeatedly, the common ground being that there is a consensus about the fact that English verbal compounds are extremely rare and do not follow a general, productive word-formation rule. In this book, I therefore do not intend to investigate this topic further, but, instead, to shed light on the question of *why* verbal composition is apparently not a productive word-formation pattern in the English language. Why is it possible to say *I can lipread* (which is a back-formation), but not *I *bookread*? What

is wrong with *to *cardrive*, when we can use the (back-formed) verb *to slavedrive*? From a primarily cognitive-linguistic perspective, the present book also answers the following sub-questions: What are possible reasons for the prevention of the lexicalization or even the formation of such lexemes? What are the restrictions in the English language which prohibit them? Are there cognitive phenomena which explain why lexemes like *to babysit* cannot be compounded directly, but need an intermediate compound noun or adjective? These highly interesting but still astonishingly basic questions have not been seriously dealt with in the existing literature so far, thus making this topic all the more interesting and exciting.

The very fact that such verbs, as Marchand notes, do not seem to exist in any Germanic language indicates that the reasons may not only lie in the internal make-up of the English language, but strongly points to the possibility that language-independent, e.g. cognitive, factors could be important, too. However, the present study is confined to verbal compounds in the English language, although this topic has also been addressed for other Germanic languages¹.

1 Verbal compounds in the German language (e.g. *bausparen*, *notlanden*) have been thoroughly examined, for instance, in Åsdahl Holmberg (1976) and Westendorf (1985), both of which are descriptive studies with the aim of classifying the existing types. For further reading also consult Eschenlohr (1999), who investigates verbal pseudo-compounds formed by conversion and back-formation, Kauffer and Métrich, eds. (2007), containing a collection of papers highlighting a wide variety of aspects concerning verbal word-formation in German, Moser (1979), who deals with problems concerning orthography, Pittner (1998) with particular interest in noun + verb combinations and their dissociation from parallel syntactic structures, and Donalies (1996) on verb + verb combinations. Also of interest for a general reading are Stopp (1957), Wunderlich (1987) and Barz (1992).

There is in addition a range of literature on verbal compounds in the Swedish language, a good survey of which can be found in Åsdahl Holmberg (1976, 4–7). She (1976, 6) criticizes the fact that, although verbal pseudo-compounds in Swedish are commonly used and outnumber English ones, they have been ignored by Marchand and Schrack.

1.3 Delimiting the field: disambiguation of terminology

By ‘verbal compounds’ I do not mean compounds with a deverbal second constituent like *watchmaker* or *housekeeping*. Following the general convention, these will be called ‘synthetic compounds’ (see e.g. Lieber 1983, 259). Rather, the type of words I am interested in are complex lexemes like *to housekeep*, *to babysit*, *to dry-clean* or *to sleep-walk*, i.e. compound-like formations which function as verbs. Many of these lexemes have a verbal second element, but this is not a necessary precondition since there are also cases like *to bootleg* and *to cold shoulder*, which do not contain a verbal constituent at all.

Preparticle verbs like the above-mentioned *to outrun* or *to overestimate* will be excluded from my analysis², since the first constituents of such lexemes are semantically clearly distinct from the independent adverbs to which they are related. Therefore, they are generally regarded as prefixes rather than free morphemes³.

The terminology employed in linguistic literature can at times be confusing, and sometimes we are confronted with notational terms that lack a consistent usage among different authors. Therefore, a sufficiently detailed definition of the different terms as they will be used in this study is crucial. A ‘compound’ in general will simply be defined as a combination of at least two free lexical morphemes. A ‘verbal compound’ is thus one which functions as a verb. Marchand’s term ‘verbal pseudo-compound’ will be taken over, denoting a verb that has in actuality been derived from a composite nonverbal basis. Thus, a distinction has to be made between ‘genuine verbal compounds’ (henceforth GVC) and ‘verbal pseudo-compounds’ (VPC⁴).

GVCs—if they existed—would in actuality be compounded. An invented hypothetical verb *to *spongeclean* meaning ‘to clean with a sponge’, for instance, would be genuinely compounded from a noun and a verb, since a related nonverbal base lexeme does not exist.

²The same applies to verb + particle constructions like *to eat up* or *to leak out*. For more detailed reading see Lipka (1972).

³Compare Marchand (1969, 96–100).

⁴To avoid confusion, please note that the abbreviation VPC is sometimes also used for ‘verb + particle constructions’, e.g. in Lipka (1972).

VPCs like *to babysit*, on the other hand, are derivations surfacing as compounds, i.e. back-formations, zero-derivations or analogous formations.

1.4 Structure and organization of chapters

The book will be divided roughly into a theoretical introductory part, providing an overview of relevant literature on the topic, and an empirical study consisting of two parts, a corpus and dictionary analysis on the one hand, and a subsequent questionnaire study on the other.

The chapter following the introduction will provide a state of the art review of existing research on verbal compounds and pseudo-compounds. After beginning with a discussion of Marchand's structural approach, which is the starting point for the aim pursued in this book, the following subchapters will concentrate on several other important frameworks in the fields of Functional and Generative Grammar. The diverse approaches to verbal compounding include incorporation theories like those of Baker (1988) and Mithun (1984), Roeper and Siegel's (1978) so-called 'Lexical Transformation Theory', the approaches suggested by Lieber (1983) and Selkirk (1982), as well as a comparatively new framework, namely, Ackema and Neeleman's (2004) 'Morphosyntactic Competition Theory'.

Built on this theoretical foundation, chapter 3 will add a cognitive-linguistic perspective to the analysis of verbal compounds, which constitutes a field of linguistics that has not yet seriously dealt with this kind of lexemes. This chapter will therefore introduce the most important ideas, which will be central for a cognitive-linguistic approach. Based on Schmid (2005; 2011b), the different stages of compounds on their way to establishment will be reviewed, from a structural, socio-pragmatic and cognitive perspective, with a focus however on the last. Moreover, this chapter will also address several issues that are basic for a study of complex lexemes, e.g. the processes involved in conceptual combination and decomposition, as