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# On The Semantics Of English Coordinate Compounds

Vincent Renner

## 1. Introduction

In the current literature on English compounding, the most common terms to designate those compounds whose internal semantic relation is coordinate (ex.: *space-time*, *bittersweet*, *st`p-g`*) are *dvandva* and *c`pulative c`mp`und*.<sup>1</sup> Several morphologists — e.g. ten Hacken, Plag, and Katamba and Stonham<sup>2</sup> — consider that the two terms are synonymous, and they use them indiscriminately. *Dvandva* is however an ambiguous term as other linguists — e.g. Arnaud and Bauer<sup>3</sup> — use it only in the case of heteroreferential coordinate compounding, i.e. for compounds composed of two nouns whose denotata are unfused (ex: *dinner dance*, *tract`r-trailer*). They do so in accordance with the historical meaning of the term, which was originally used by Sanskrit grammarians to designate heteroreferential coordinate compounds.<sup>4</sup> This ambiguity sometimes leads to confusion, as the following remark by Plag<sup>5</sup> shows: “*It is `ften stated that dvandva c`mp`unds are n`t very c`mm`n in English (e.g. Bauer 1983:203), but in a m`re recent study by Olsen (2001) hundreds `f attested f`rms are listed, which sh`ws that such c`mp`unds are far fr`m marginal.*” When using *dvandva*, Bauer refers to non-embedded heteroreferential compounds (ex.: *Alsace-L`rraine*), whereas Olsen’s corpus contains almost exclusively either homoreferential or embedded heteroreferential compounds (ex.: *dancer-singer*; *patient-d`ct`r [partnership]*). The extension of the concept DVANDVA sometimes includes compounds whose elements are not simply juxtaposed. Bauer<sup>6</sup> applies the term to syndetic coordinate compounds (ex.: *bubble-and-squeak*, *milk-and-water*), even though he stresses that these compounds differ from true *dvandvas* because a coordinator is inserted

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Pierre Arnaud, Nicolas Ballier, Laurie Bauer, and Diana Lewis for helpful comments on earlier versions of this research. Errors are my own.

<sup>2</sup>Ten Hacken, 122; Plag, 146; Katamba and Stonham, 333.

<sup>3</sup>Arnaud, 4; Bauer, *Gl`ssary `f M`rph`l`gy*, 41.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Olsen, 281-4.

<sup>5</sup>Plag, 147.

<sup>6</sup>Bauer, *English W`rd-F`rmati`n*, 207.

between the two nouns. Boisson<sup>7</sup> does the same, and he even adds a blend, *Oxbridge* (< *Oxford* + *Cambridge*), to his list of nominal dvandva compounds.

Coordinate compounds such as *player-manager*, *pale-dry*, and *cock-chill* do not have pride of place in the literature on English compounding. This is due to the fact that such compounds are infrequent — Arnaud<sup>8</sup> estimates for instance that 98% of the nominal compounds listed in the COD10 are subordinate, which means implicitly that coordinate compounds count for no more than 2%.<sup>9</sup> It is unfortunate that this relative numerical paucity hides the fact that these compounds are highly remarkable from a semantic standpoint, and the present article aims to offer new insight on their behaviour, which is far from uniform, and gives rise to a complex typology.

## 2. Definition

A compound is coordinate only if it is composed of two elements that belong to the same lexical category and are co-hyponyms. These criteria are however not sufficient to determine the coordinate status of a compound, and the use of a definitional test-sentence is necessary. The first one that comes to mind serves to verify that the *X.Y*<sup>10</sup> compound corresponds to a coordinate paraphrase. The test “(an) *X.Y* is (an) *X* and (a) *Y*” is passed by a large number of noun-noun compounds that are intuitively coordinate, but it is in some cases negative for compounds that are non-subordinate, such as *wolf-dog*<sup>11</sup> (\**a wolf-dog is a wolf and a dog*) and *southeast* (\**southeast is south and east*). In addition, the test is positive for compounds such as *carrier pigeon* and *manservant*, even though the first noun is clearly subordinate to the second one (the compounding elements are not co-hyponyms; the first noun is used to mark function or gender). The same problem arises with adjective-adjective and verb-verb compounds: the test “*t* be *X.Y* is *t* be *X* and

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<sup>7</sup>Boisson, 427-8, 573, 661.

<sup>8</sup>Arnaud, 4.

<sup>9</sup>This observation is not universal: coordinate compounds are common in many languages from Continental East and South-East Asia (Wälchli, 215).

<sup>10</sup>It is an acknowledged fact that the spelling of English compounds is erratic. *X.Y* is therefore used as a convention to refer indiscriminately to continuous compounds (*XY*), hyphenated compounds (*X-Y*), and discontinuous compounds (*X Y*).

<sup>11</sup>*Wolf-dog* refers here to a cross between a wolf and a domestic dog.

*Y*” is not fully adequate for A.A compounds as a subordinate compound like *red-hot* passes it while *blue-green* does not, even though its definition (“A color about midway between blue and green in the spectrum.” RHUD) shows it is not subordinate; the test “*t* X.Y is *t* X and *t* Y” is in the same way not discriminating as it is positive for almost any V.V compound, even though verbs like *blow-dry* and *crash-land*, which are made of a taxonym and its hypernym, are not coordinate, the first verb being a marker of manner that is subordinate to the second one (*blow-drying it; crashing something is a way of landing it*).<sup>12</sup>

Coordination refers to same-level ordering, which means in the present case that there is no dependency of one compounding element upon the other. It is therefore natural to assume that internal word order is somewhat arbitrary in coordinate compounds whereas it is strictly constrained in subordinate compounds. This leads to the formulation of a metalinguistic test applicable to all lexical categories: “*the compound X.Y could be named Y.X*”. This approach is superior to the previous one as it does justice to the intuitions remarked above: *dog-wolf*, *east-south*, and *green-blue* are acceptable forms, but *pigeon carrier*, *hot-red*, *dry-blow*, and *land-crash* are counterintuitive to denote the concepts associated with the corresponding X.Y forms. Passing the reversibility test is therefore a sufficient criterion to determine the coordinate status of a compound; the test is however not ideal, as it does not work with coordinate compounds whose elements denote asynchronous events or actions, such as *murder-suicide*<sup>13</sup> and *freeze-dry*.

### 3. Noun-noun compounds

In view of the data, three major semantic types of N.N coordinate compounds need to be distinguished, each one corresponding to a specific test-sentence:

i. multifunctionality test: “(an) X.Y is (an) X which/which is also (a) Y”

ii. additionality test: “(an) X.Y is (an) X plus (a) Y”

<sup>12</sup>The terms and the test are borrowed from Cruse, 139.

<sup>13</sup>This compound is bisemic: it may either refer to a suicide-bombing, in which case the two events are synchronous, or to a murder followed by the suicide of the offender, in which case the two events are asynchronous.

iii. hybridity test: “(an) *X.Y* is ab`ut midway between (an) *X* and (a) *Y*”<sup>14</sup>

This ternary division is interestingly echoed by the arrangement in Table 1, in which two features of any coordinate compound are cross-tabulated, i.e. its semantic headedness and the referential relation between the denotata of the compounding elements. Multifunctional compounds are doubly endocentric, each element being a semantic head of the whole (ex.: *a hunter-gatherer is a hunter; a hunter-gatherer is a gatherer*), whereas additional and hybrid compounds are exocentric (ex.: *\*a tract`r-trailer is a tract`r / \*a tract`r-trailer is a trailer; \*p`lyc`tt`n is p`ly(ester) / \*p`lyc`tt`n is c`tt`n*). Multifunctional and hybrid compounds denote entities formed by the fusion of the denotata of the compounding elements whereas additional compounds denote entities formed by the juxtaposition of the denotata.

Table 1

Cross-tabulation of the features *semantic headedness* and *referential relati`n* on the class of N.N coordinate compounds

	endocentric	exocentric
homoreferential	multifunctional ( <i>hunter-gatherer</i> )	hybrid ( <i>p`lyc`tt`n</i> )
heteroreferential	—	additional ( <i>tract`r-trailer</i> )

Multifunctional compounds denote mainly individuals (ex.: *hunter-gatherer, `wner-`ccupier, player-manager, student-athlete*) and artifacts (ex.: *fighter-b`mber, hammer-axe, s`fa bed*), additional compounds mainly artifacts (ex.: *camiknickers, fridge-freezer, penny-farthing, tract`r-trailer*), substances (ex.: *gum resin, p`lyc`tt`n, tarmacadam, t`xin-antit`xin*), and animate beings (ex.: *ape-man, bear cat, bull terrier, bullmastiff, tr`utperch, w`lf d`g*). The typology can sometimes be refined, as in the case of the last subcategory of hybrid compounds: *bull terrier, bullmastiff*, and *w`lf d`g* exemplify genetic hybridity, and *ape-man, bear cat*, and *tr`utperch* perceptual hybridity (*ape-man* does not denote the hybrid offspring of an ape and a man, but the “missing link” in the

<sup>14</sup>When the two compounding elements denote substances (ex.: *gum* and *resin, t`xin* and *antit`xin*), the hybridity test must be modified: “(an) *X.Y* is a mixture `f (an) *X* and (a) *Y*”.

phylogenesis of *H`minini*; similarly, *Ailurus fulgens* and *Perc`psis`misc`maycus* are not crossbreeds). Even though they are very scarce in English, three other types of N.N coordinate compounds need to be mentioned as they belong to semantic categories that are well-established in a wide variety of languages.<sup>15</sup> Collective, hypernymic, and tautological compounds all belong to the additional type, but they differ from the prototype as none passes the standard additionality test. In the case of collective compounds, the test is negative when the compound is in the singular, but positive when it is pluralized: *\*an Angl`-Sax`n is an Angle plus a Sax`n / Angl`-Sax`ns are Angles plus Sax`ns*.<sup>16</sup> The addition is only possible between collective entities; in the singular, the compound is semantically disjunctive: “(an) X.Y is either (an) X`r (a) Y”. *Gerund-participle*, a neologism coined by Huddleston,<sup>17</sup> is another collective compound, as the following comment shows:

*We c`ined this term precisely f`r the uni`n`f what is den`ted by the traditi`nal terms gerund and present participle because we d`n`t believe the traditi`nal distincti`n between them is s`und: in saying that such and such a frm is a gerund-participle, theref`re, we are n`t saying that it is simultane`usly a gerund and a participle, but that it bel`ngs t` a single categ`ry c`vering b`th traditi`nal`nes*.<sup>18</sup>

Hypernymic compounds differ from the prototype in so far as the addition does not simply involve the two compounding elements, but a whole set of co-hyponyms: “(an) X.Y is (an) X, (a) Y, plus their c`-hyp`nyms”. *M`n-Khmer* does not refer only to Mon and Khmer, but to a family of 147 languages including Vietnamese and Nicobarese; similarly, *s`l-fa* refers to the whole set *d`, re, mi, fa, s`l, la*, and *ti*. Finally, tautological compounds are those compounds uniting two quasi-synonyms, such as *c`urtyard, hustle-bustle*, and *pathway*.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Wälchli, 141, 143-6, 151.

<sup>16</sup>The reading of the compound is based on the sense “a member`f`ne`f the Germanic pe`ples wh` settled in Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries”.

<sup>17</sup>Huddleston, 74-5.

<sup>18</sup>Bauer and Huddleston, 1648.

#### 4. Adjective-adjective compounds

A.A coordinate compounds belong to two semantic classes. The overwhelming majority is of the additional type as they pass the test “*t` be X.Y is t` be X and t` be Y*” (ex.: *bittersweet, deaf-blind, deaf-mute, `bsessive-c`mpulsive, pale-dry, passive-aggressive*). Several additional compounds have specific semantics: *manic-depressive* is an alternate compound (“*alternately X and Y*”), *shabby-genteel* an adversative compound (“*X but Y*”); *squiggly-wiggly, teeny-tiny, teeny-weeny*, and *yummy-scrummy* are tautological compounds (“*X = Y*”). Several compounds are however not additional; it is the case of the six tertiary colours, *yell`w-`range, red-`range, red-vi`let, blue-vi`let, blue-green*, and *yell`w-green*, produced by an equal mixture of a primary colour and a secondary colour adjacent to it on the colour wheel, and of the culinary terms *medium-rare* and *medium-well*.<sup>19</sup> These compounds do not pass the additionality test given above, but they pass a hybridity test: “*t` be X.Y is t` be ab`ut midway between X and Y*”.

The semantic interpretation of a compound adjective associating two colours is often delicate. Bauer and Huddleston<sup>20</sup> consider that *blue-grey* and *`range-red* are semantically right-headed, and therefore subordinate. The two compounds are however not institutionalized, and they may refer to any shade comprised between slightly-blue grey and an equal mixture of blue and grey, between slightly-orange red and an equal mixture of orange and red. As a result, the two readings — subordinate and coordinate — coexist. The meaning of a two-colour compound is not univocal, except when semantic subordination is marked morphologically, by the addition of a suffix on the subordinate element (ex.: *`rangey-red* refers to a shade of red, *reddy-`range* to a shade of orange; *greenish-blue* refers to a shade of blue, *bluish-green* to a shade of green). The interpretative ambiguity is exemplified by the treatment of *blue-black* in dictionaries. In some, the adjective refers to bluish black:

“*Black `r dark with a tinge `f blue.*” (OEDO)

“*Black with bluish highlights.*” (RHUD)

<sup>19</sup>*Well* is a clipped form of *well-d`ne*.

<sup>20</sup>Bauer and Huddleston, 1658.

“*Black tinged with blue`r with a blue sheen when caught by the light.*” (EWED)

In others, it refers to dark blue, i.e. a colour which is perceptually about midway between primary blue and black:

“*Dark blue.*” (PED)

“*Very dark blue.*” (AHD4)

“*A very dark blue that s`metimes l`ks blue and s`metimes black.*” (CALD2)

It is therefore preferable to conclude that there is no clear perceptual boundary between the hybrid coordinate reading and the subordinate reading of a two-colour compound.

## 5. Verb-verb compounds

V.V coordinate compounds belong to three semantic categories: asynchronous compounds, synchronous compounds, and disjunctive compounds. The relation of asynchrony between the compounding elements is identified through the paraphrase “*t` X and then t` Y*”. Asynchronous V.V compounds are either verbs (ex.: *dr`p-kick, freeze-dry, tie-dye*) or adjectives (ex.: *c`k-chill, drink-drive, fly-drive, push-pull, read-write, r`ll-`n r`ll-`ff, st`p-g`, st`p-start*).<sup>21</sup> Some of the deverbal compounds — *push-pull, st`p-g`, st`p-start* — differ from the prototype as their semantics include an iterative nuance, which makes them alternate compounds (“*t` X and t` Y alternately*”). The relation of synchrony is antithetical to that of asynchrony, and is identified through the paraphrase “*t` X and t` Y at the same time*”. Synchronous compounds are either verbs (ex.: *sleepwalk*,<sup>22</sup> *stir-fry*) or adjectives (ex.: *win-win, w`rk-study*). Disjunctive compounds put together compounding elements which are disjunctively related (“*X`r Y*”). This reading is exemplified by the noun *lend-lease* and the adjective *pass-fail*.

<sup>21</sup>*C`k-chill, fly-drive, push-pull, and r`ll-`n r`ll-`ff* are also institutionalized as deadjectival noun compounds.

<sup>22</sup>The verbal status of the left compounding element is not always obvious, but if the element is institutionalized as a verb, the V.V analysis of the compound seems almost irresistible, as the repeated attestation of the form *slept-walked* for instance demonstrates: “*In Germany, Stuart m`rally slept-walked thr`ugh the Reich, until the saturati`n b`mbing disturbed his peace.*”, *The Blackwell C`mpani`n t` M`dern Irish Culture*, edited by W. J. McCormack, 2001, Blackwell, p. 643; “*He t`ld us this was very necessary as he slept walked and was afraid he w`uld fall`ff this table-`ck and kill himself.*”, *Al`ng the Way*, by B. C. Fincher-Young, 2004, Xlibris, p. 144.



## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to make substantial progress in the description of the semantics of English coordinate compounds. Ten Hacken, Wälchli, and Bauer<sup>23</sup> have convincingly tackled the question of classifying coordinate compounds, but their approach is multilingual, and their English examples are too rare. The typology summed up in Table 2 is doubly original: it does not focus solely on nominal compounds, and it brings to the fore the least-known class of English coordinate compounds, that of hybrid compounds, which are relatively scarce, but appear in other languages, as in Romance, where they are attested for the three major lexical classes:

- Spanish: *gallipav`* < *gall`* “cock” + *pav`* “peacock” = turkey<sup>24</sup>
- Portuguese: *verdissec`* < *verde* “green” + *sec`* “dry” = half-dry
- Italian: *d`rmiveglia* < *d`rmire* “sleep” + *vegliare* “be awake” = a state intermediate between sleeping and being awake

Table 2  
Semantic typology of English coordinate compounds

N.N	multifunctional	
	hybrid	
	additional	prototypical
		collective
		hyponymic
tautological		
A.A	hybrid	
	additional	prototypical
		alternate
		adversative
		tautological
V.V	synchronous	
	asynchronous	prototypical
		alternate
	disjunctive	

<sup>23</sup>Bauer, *Dvandva*.

<sup>24</sup>In present-day Spanish, *pav`* denotes a turkey, and *pav` real* a peacock, but *gallipav`* was coined by the early conquistadores.

A contrastive approach is no doubt the most fruitful path to explore if one wants to delve deeper into the semantic intricacies of coordinate compounding, but this can only be done after gathering a wealth of data in a host of typologically diverse languages, and as this task cannot be automated, this domain will need a lot of collective time and effort to be precisely charted cross-linguistically.

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