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# Denominations of humans: the case of compounds in English

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Abstract

In English, the lexicon is one of the many areas affected by the asymmetry in the treatment between humans and inanimates. We observe that human animate nouns are more opaque than inanimate nouns. The study focuses on compounds. We compare compounds denoting human animates to those denoting inanimates. Among nouns that denote humans, there are proportionately few compounds. This small proportion reveals a tendency for human animate nouns to be *opaque*, as compounds are relatively transparent, at least more so than other complex nouns. We propose that this is due to the way we conceptualize humans, i.e. as more than the sum of their parts. Humans resist transparent denominations because reducing a person to one characteristic amounts to ignoring his or her essential complexity. We take this to be a manifestation of *anthropocentrism* in language. When human animate nouns *are* compounds (in spite of their tendency to be opaque), they exhibit two semantic characteristics that are not shared by inanimate nouns. The first one is that they tend to be derogatory. This again indicates that humans cannot easily be reduced to one characteristic. If they are, denominations tend to be negatively loaded. The second one is that they often involve the representation of a *personal relationship* (for example, a *paper boy* delivers newspapers, i.e. comes to someone's place). Transparency is meaningful.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Scope of the study

We look at nouns that denote humans, more specifically compound nouns, e.g., *milkman*, *postman*, *cabin boy*, *fair-weather friend*, *farmhand*, *hairstylist*, *yes-man*, etc. We define compounds as words made up of two independent bases, one of which is a head (a *flag*

*pole* is a type of pole, not a type of flag) (Bauer 2009: 343 and 348, Bauer and Huddleston 2002: 1630-1631, Katamba 1994: 264, Plag 2003: 5).<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 *Aim of the study*

We will show that compound nouns that denote humans are comparatively not very numerous. In our corpus (described below), out of 7,196 nouns (of all types, simple and complex), 1,028, i.e., 14%, denote humans. Out of the 2,420 compound nouns of our corpus, only 164, i.e. 7% (half the proportion), denote humans. Humans are therefore less likely to be denoted by compounds than other entities are.

Moreover, when compounds do denote humans, they tend to exhibit two semantic characteristics (which may or may not co-occur).

1. Out of the 164 human compounds, 67 (41%) are derogatory (i.e. show a critical or disrespectful attitude to the referent). For instance, a *pack rat* is someone who compulsively collects useless or dirty things, a *faintheart* is less brave than one would like, a *Valley girl* (a fashionable teenage girl from the San Fernando valley in California), is from a more affluent part of town, and is for that reason ridiculed.

2. In addition, 118 human compounds (72%) signal that the referent is viewed as participating in an *interpersonal relationship* (i.e. a relationship where two or more participants *interact*). For example, a *hairdresser* works for someone (on someone's hair), a *salesman* and a *paper boy* come to someone's place to sell or deliver something to them.

Most compounds (93%) exhibit at least one of these two features. In 15% of cases, the two characteristics co-occur. For instance, a *gadfly* is a person who hassles you (interpersonal feature) and the denomination is negative (derogatory feature).

These semantic characteristics, observable in compounds that denote humans but not in others, illustrate the human vs. non-human asymmetry in people's representations of the world, and consequently in language. As humans, we assign a special status to humans.

Compound nouns that do not denote humans (such as *armchair*, *TV screen*, *copy book*, *pine tree*, *chestnut tree*, etc.) do not tend to be derogatory or to encapsulate a personal relationship with another person in their meanings. *Copy book* is not derogatory, whereas *copy cat* is (imitating someone else is seen negatively).

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<sup>1</sup> Let us bear in mind, however, that there are compounds that do not have an obvious head, e.g., *singer-songwriter* (Bauer 2009: 349).

The reason for studying compounds, rather than any other type of noun, simple or complex, is that they are less opaque (i.e. more transparent), than other types of constructed words. It is admittedly true that a compound such as *darkroom* illustrates an opacification process (the meaning is more than the sum of the parts), but *within the domain of word-formation* compounds are *less* opaque than other types of constructed words. If we posit a hierarchy of opacity within the lexicon, compounds are the least opaque (after conversions). There are several reasons for maintaining this.

First, we recognize bases (*dark* and *room*). In a suffixed noun such as *driver*, we do recognize *-er*. However it is not a base, and its meaning is not very specific. In most cases it denotes an agent, but in some cases it does not, as testified by *keeper* in *she's a keeper* ('someone who should be kept'), or *scratcher* in the sense of 'lottery ticket which has to be scratched'. Moreover, it can denote animates (*killer*) and inanimates (*painkiller*). Another major difference between bases and suffixes is that bases are autonomous, as they belong to syntax, which, contrary to the lexicon, is transparent, in the sense that the meaning of the whole is predictable from the meanings of the parts (Malmberg 1977: 383-411). Even if the lexicon as a whole is characterized by opacity, we may posit degrees of opacity. Simple nouns are the most opaque, and compounds, being made up of two bases, are the least opaque, with the exception of conversions (*to smile--a smile, to spy--a spy*). Conversions can indeed be said to be very transparent, as there is no morphological or phonological difference between the base and the derived word, and as the meaning of the derived word is close to that of the base.

Therefore, if we posit a scale of transparency amongst complex words, compounding ranks very high.

We insist on the notions of opacity and transparency because they will be crucial to account for the differences between compound nouns denoting humans and other compound nouns. We aim to show that transparency takes on a particular meaning when applied to humans.

### 1.3 *Research gap*

The difference between human and non-human compound nouns does not seem to have been studied very much. It is not mentioned in works devoted to compounding, such as Lieber and Štekauer (2009) or Scalise and Vogel (2010), among others. There is one reference

to a difference in meaning concerning compounds on the criterion of animacy in Bauer and Huddleston (2002: 1652). These authors note that exocentric compounds, i.e. compounds that do not denote a subcategory of the head noun (e.g., *birdbrain*), are likely to be derogatory when applied to humans. We aim to show that this tendency holds for *all* types of compounds.

#### 1.4 *Corpus and method*

In order to achieve our aim, we looked at compound nouns denoting both humans and non-humans. More specifically, we looked at lexicalized compounds (as opposed to free formations, which appear in discourse), i.e., those that are listed in the dictionary. Indeed, our aim is to test the hypothesis that the human vs. non-human distinction has an impact even at the level of the lexicon.

We used the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, from which we extracted 7,196 nouns, which we compiled in a spreadsheet.<sup>2</sup> We listed the first entries for each letter (the first ten pages of each letter unless there were less for a particular letter, e.g., *z*), in order to avoid having a list of words all starting with the same letter. We listed the various sub-entries of each word that we selected, as these correspond to different meanings. For instance, in our spreadsheet we have two entries for *deadline*: “the latest time or date by which something should be completed” and “a line drawn around a prison beyond which prisoners were liable to be shot (historical).”

Out of this list, 2,420 nouns are compounds. We include all types of compounds.<sup>3</sup>

- Noun + noun, which is the largest subgroup (*boyfriend, woman doctor, manservant*).
- Verb + noun (*hovercraft, playpit*). Let us note that Bauer (1983: 205) includes *cut-throat, kill-joy, pickpocket, spoilsport, breakfast* in this pattern, but we follow Mignot (2012b: 419-432) in treating them as conversions. Therefore, we did not include them in this study.
- Adjective + noun (*deep structure, new town, fast food, software*). Let us note that it can be difficult to decide whether a given adjective + noun sequence is a compound or not: *blackbird* is a compound (a kind of bird) but *black bird* is not (it is a bird which is

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<sup>2</sup> Microsoft® Excel® for Mac 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See Bauer (1983: 202ff and 2009: 343-356) for a typology of compounds, which is slightly different from the one presented here.

black). One criterion to distinguish between the two is stress: there is one primary stress in a compound, whereas an adjective + noun sequence has two.

- Preposition + noun, such as *in-crowd*, *off-islander*, and *afterheat*.
- Adverb + noun. This is a pattern that is not very productive, as it only works with adverbs of time or place, e.g., *now generation*.
- Dephrasal compounds, such as *lady-in-waiting*, *son-in-law*, *love-in-a-mist*, *Darby and Joan* (in *that Darby and Joan feeling* for instance).

Let us add that we included compounds that have at least one clipped base (*sci-fi* for *science-fiction*, *sitcom* for *situation comedy*).

Let us also note that, following Lieber (2004: 48), we chose to include in our corpus ‘synthetic compounds’ (also called ‘verbal nexus compounds’) such as *bus driver*, even though there is some discussion as to their status (Bauer 2009: 353, Lieber 1983: 251-286, Lieber 2004: 48). *Bus driver* can be seen as belonging to derivation (*bus drive* + *er*) or compounding (*bus* + *driver*), as *driver* is derived from a verb (*drive*), and *bus* is an argument of that verb.

We excluded blends (e.g., *chunnel*), as they do not lend themselves to a clear analysis into morphs and therefore exhibit a lower degree of transparency (Bauer 1983: 234).

We included both early and late stress compounds, e.g., *farm hand* (early stress) and *baby brother* (late stress), following Bauer (1983: 104) in assuming that stress is not a criterion to decide whether a sequence is a compound or not, particularly in the case of noun compounds.

We also took into account all *semantic types* of compounds (Bauer 1983: 30-31, Bauer 2009 : 353, Bauer, Lieber and Plag 2013: 463-483, Dressler 2006: 23-44), i.e., endocentric (those that denote a subcategory of the head noun, e.g., *milkman*) and exocentric (those that do not denote a subcategory of the head noun, e.g., (*birdbrain*) (Bauer 2008a), including those which do have an obvious head (coordinative compounds such as *murder-suicide* or *singer-songwriter*).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, compounds encapsulate a vast number of relations between the two bases. We included them all. For example, a *sun cream* blocks the sun’s rays, a *face cream* is applied to

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<sup>4</sup> These are sometimes called ‘dvandvas’. See Bauer (2008b) for a discussion of that term and the various cases it covers.

the face, a *hormone cream* contains hormones, and a *rash cream* is meant to cure a rash. This highlights the fact that a compound neutralizes several semantic relations (Allen 1978, Bauer 2009: 353, Downing 1977, Hatcher 1960, Levi 1978, Warren 1978).

## 2. *Relatively few compounds for human animates*

If we look at compound nouns taking into account what they denote, i.e., humans or inanimate entities, we observe that compound nouns are not very likely to denote humans.

### 2.1 *Quantitative results*

Our corpus includes 7,196 nouns (of all types, simple and complex), 1,028 of which, i.e., 14%, denote humans.

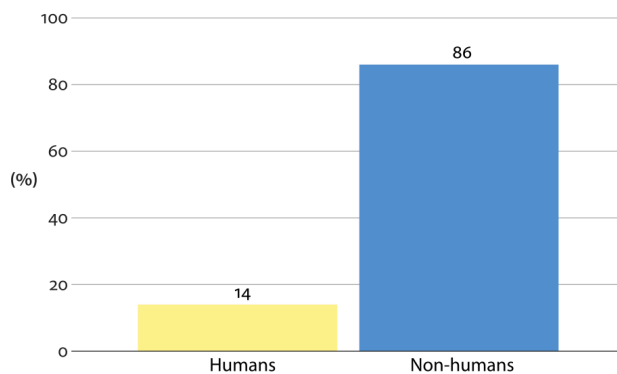


Figure 1 Proportion of humans among all nouns

In comparison, out of all the compound nouns of our corpus, only 7% (half the proportion) denote humans. Humans are less likely to be denoted by compounds. Let us note that we did not include nouns that refer to groups of humans, such as *gang* or *club*, but only those that denote individuals. The reason for that is that groups denoted by collective nouns are cognitive constructs and cannot be considered to be really animate, even though the group is made of animates.

We are only going to work within the domain of word formation (complex nouns). We will not take simple nouns into account, as simple nouns referring to humans are mostly proper nouns, which are not listed in the dictionary. The comparison with simple nouns would therefore not be relevant.

Out of the 1028 nouns denoting humans, 768 are complex. Among those, relatively few are compounds, which is illustrated in the following figure.<sup>5</sup>

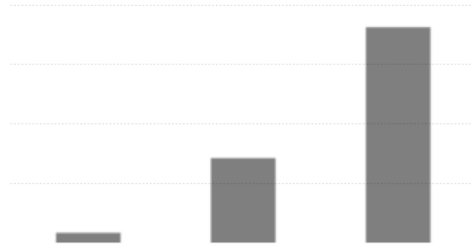


Figure 2 Fewer compounds denoting humans

Among these 768 complex nouns denoting humans, 24 are conversions (3%), 181 compounds (24%), and 456 suffixed nouns (74%). In comparison, there are 4,337 nouns denoting non-human entities. Among them, 1,993 are compounds (32%). It is therefore apparent that compounds are less likely to be used in reference to humans.

## 2.2 Interpretation of the results: the special status of humans in language

We now aim to interpret the figures. The ontological category of the intended referent seems to have a role to play in the type of noun that is selected. The human vs. non-human distinction is relevant at the level of the lexicon. This is due to the way we conceptualize humans.

2.2.1 *Animacy*. The notion of animacy is crucial in cognition and language. Some entities are animate: they can act, or are perceived as acting, of their own will. Animacy is a major distinction in human cognition, acquired from a very early age (Opfer and Gelman 2011: 215ff). Its reflection in language is well documented in a wide variety of domains (Comrie 1989: chapter 9), one of which is the classification of nouns (Aikhenvald 2003,

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<sup>5</sup> We only took into account conversions, compound nouns and suffixed nouns (i.e., 661 items) and will ignore such word formation processes as initialism (*DD* for *doctor of divinity*), clipping (*fan* for *fanatic*), acronyms (*LAC* for *leading aircraft (man)*), antonomasia (*an Einstein*). These are indeed more marginal in two ways: they are less numerous, and, contrary to the ones we take into consideration, they are restricted to the nominal category.

Corbett 1991, Craig 1986). The relevance of that distinction is also visible in personal pronouns (*he / she* vs. *it*), or relative pronouns (*who* vs. *which*).

2.2.2 *The human vs. non-human opposition.* However, what is really relevant, beyond the animate vs. inanimate distinction, is the human vs. non-human distinction, which appears to be universal. This is also well documented: Opfer and Gelman (2011: 215ff) mention the cognitive saliency of humans, which is reflected in language (Comrie 1989: 185). Mignot (2012a: 52-54) showed that this distinction is a structuring principle of the lexicon: all nouns include a gender (in the sense human vs. non-human<sup>6</sup>) semantic feature, and there is little polysemy that cuts across the gender line, which, given the amount of polysemy in language, is remarkable. For example, *neighbor* only applies to humans. Even if two books are next to each other on a bookshelf, they are not called *neighbors*.

2.2.3 *Humans at the top of a scale.* Humanness is not just a semantic feature in binary opposition with non-humanness. It is deemed superior to its opposite. It has higher cognitive saliency, and is more highly valued.

This is evidenced in English by the fact that there are different third person personal pronouns for human males and females (*he* and *she* respectively), but not for inanimates (*it*), and not very frequently for animals (Gardelle 2006).<sup>7</sup> Being humans ourselves, we are more interested in humans. Humans rank above all other entities, and, through the process of empathy we also put our fellow speakers (i.e., humans in general) at the top. This amounts to granting humans a special status, which is the definition of anthropocentrism.

The animate vs. inanimate distinction that we mentioned earlier is therefore not simply a dichotomy, but a hierarchy (as formulated by Creissels 2006: 63), and includes the human vs. non-human hierarchy.

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<sup>6</sup> Within the non-human gender we include both inanimates and animals, as it seems that for us human speakers the human vs. non-human distinction is more relevant than the animate vs. inanimate one.

<sup>7</sup> It must be acknowledged that *he* and *she* can be used for animals, and *it* for babies, but these uses are quite restricted.

2.2.4 *The (extended) animacy hierarchy.* The ‘animacy hierarchy’ proposed by Corbett (2000: 56) following Smith-Stark (1974) reflects the fact that humans are more highly valued. It takes the following form.<sup>8</sup>

1<sup>st</sup> person > 2<sup>nd</sup> person > 3<sup>rd</sup> person > kin > human > animate > inanimate.

Corbett (2012: 92) notes that the animacy hierarchy may be viewed as a combination of smaller hierarchies, such as pronoun > noun and human > animate > inanimate, which is why it is sometimes called the ‘*extended animacy hierarchy*’ (Croft 2003: 130).

2.2.5 *Relevance of the animacy hierarchy in this study.* Our aim is to understand to what extent the hierarchy structures the lexicon. We will only retain the human vs. non-human hierarchy. We will try to show that humans are treated differently in the lexicon. This is linked to the way we conceptualize humans.

Humans are perceived as more complex than other entities: they move, they participate in many processes (sometimes in several at the same time), their appearances changes over time.<sup>9</sup> However, they need to be seen as wholes. They are more than the sum of their acts, their attributes, or their parts.<sup>10</sup> In other words, they are seen as *persons*, with a self, and an identity that remains the same throughout time (Chauvier 2003: 10).<sup>11</sup> The concept of person is admittedly fraught with complications. Does a person remain the same if they lose their memory? Are Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde the same person (Chauvier 2003: 52)? These are special cases, however, and the very fact that they stand out tells us that they do not correspond to the default conceptualization of a person.<sup>12</sup>

In the philosophical tradition there are two main ways of defining a person. The ‘reductionist’ approach, developed by Parfit (1984: 346) after Hume (2000 [1748]), proposes

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<sup>8</sup> Corbett (2012: 92) notes that this animacy hierarchy has been proposed in several variants, and under various names. For an account of the precursors, see Corbett (2000: 55-6). The modified hierarchy presented here is justified in detail in Corbett (2000: 54-88).

<sup>9</sup> This is sometimes true of animals too, but to a lesser extent (the appearance of an ant does not change as much the appearance of humans).

<sup>10</sup> This has an impact in psychology. People sometimes forget that they are more than the sum of their mistakes, which can lead to situations of ‘cognitive dissonance’ (Tavris and Aronson 2007 : chapter 1).

<sup>11</sup> This is central to our concept of responsibility, and has legal implications (Chauvier 2003: 10).

<sup>12</sup> Here we argue that the default conceptualization of a person has an impact on the lexicon. We noted elsewhere that it has implications for the grammatical system, e.g. personal pronoun *one* (Mignot 2015).

that the unity of a life involves nothing more than the various relations between the experiences that took place during that life. In other words, according to that approach, the existence of a person only consists in a series of interconnected physical and mental events (Parfit 1984: 211). The problem with that theory is that it corresponds to a *third person* point of view, as noted by Campbell (1994: 178). Indeed, in order to see a person as a series of mental states, you would have to be in the position of an observer. But we do not see ourselves in the way that an external observer would. If we were to think like that, we would be adopting a third person point of view on ourselves, when in fact people have *first person* thoughts. We therefore agree with Chauvier (2003: 117) who argues that we cannot think of ourselves in reductionist terms, i.e., we are not a transitory association of mental and cerebral states. The concept of ‘person’ encapsulates a first-person point of view (Chauvier 2003 : 117), even when we think of people other than ourselves. Indeed recognizing someone as a person involves identifying them to oneself (we both belong to the same species).

Moreover, persons have a *self* (“the entire person of an individual”, according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Damasio (2010: chapter 1) explains that we humans have the ability to connect the contents of our minds to ourselves, and to *experience* this connection. In other words, we are conscious beings, which would not be the case if we were not endowed with subjectivity. The concept of ‘person’ is therefore inherently egocentric, in the sense that it includes the notion of a first person point of view. We argue that this has implications on denominations of humans. These tend to be more opaque than other nouns.

2.2.6 *Humans and the opacity requirement.* As stated earlier, we endorse the non-reductionist, i.e., the ‘holistic’ approach, which is also closest to the way we actually feel about ourselves. We are more than the sum of our parts, whether body parts, psychological states, etc. We perceive ourselves as one. This accounts for the tendency for humans to be denoted by opaque denominations. If they cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts, then the denominations that we use for them tend to be opaque. When those denominations are transparent, and therefore descriptive (at least to a certain extent), they reduce a person to one aspect.

For example, the compound *plastic lady*, which denotes a homeless person who carries her few belongings in plastic bags, is analyzable and (relatively) transparent. Although

the meaning of the whole cannot be fully deduced from the meaning of the parts, the compound is made up of two bases, which are recognizable. This denomination reduces the woman to only two features: she is a woman, and she carries plastic bags. Most of her other characteristics are left unsaid. Silence is meaningful. It is important to note that this is not the case with *plastic bag*, because it denotes an inanimate. In this case, the descriptive aspect is not a problem.

In conclusion, there are comparatively fewer compounds denoting humans because human animate nouns resist transparency.<sup>13</sup> This is a manifestation of anthropocentrism. We see others as we see ourselves, and grant people a special status. Yet, despite the tendency to avoid them, we do find compounds that denote humans. We will now take a look at them.

### **3. *The derogatory meaning of compounds which denote humans***

When we do have compound nouns that designate humans, the denomination tends to be *derogatory*. This has already been observed for exocentric compounds. For example, *birdbrain*, which denotes a human, is derogatory while *redbreast*, which denotes an animal, is not. Neither are *longleaf* and *whitethorn*, which denote plants, or *greenback* (a kind of banknote), *blackhead* (a kind of pimple), *hatchback* (a kind of car) (Bauer and Huddleston 2002: 1652).

We claim that this is true of all types of compounds, as illustrated by the following examples: a *fair-weather friend* is not a very good friend, a *fanboy* is seen as obsessive, a *deadloss* is an unproductive or useless person, a *dandiprat* is a little, insignificant or contemptible person, a *deadduck* is an unsuccessful or useless person, a *deadhead* (in one of its senses) is a boring person, a *fashion victim* submits too easily to fashion diktats to the detriment of their personality, a *halfwit* is seen as stupid and annoying, a *halfbreed* is seen as not really belonging, a *half caste*, similarly, is not really part of a group, an *ugly American* is an American tourist who does not behave well when outside of their own country, a *talebearer* is someone who gossips and creates problems.

These denominations are derogatory because, as we saw earlier, when it comes to humans, *opaque* designations are preferred. They are seen as more adequate because reducing a person to only one characteristic amounts to negating their essential complexity. The only

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<sup>13</sup> Mignot (2012b: 306) noted that the same holds for verb-noun conversions.

way not to do that is to be non descriptive, and therefore to resort to an opaque noun. Compounds being (relatively) transparent, they have a descriptive component, and are likely to be interpreted as reducing a person to one feature only. There are several (not mutually exclusive) ways in which a compound may be negatively loaded. We will look at them in turn.

### 3.1 *The process in which a person participates is negatively valued*

In some cases, it may be argued that a denomination is derogatory simply because the process in which a person participates is generally deemed unacceptable. This is the case for *copycat*, *conman*, *bank robber*. The processes of imitating, deceiving, stealing are seen as objectionable. If the same people were seen in a different light (e.g., as a brother, a father, a neighbor, a friend), less transparent denominations would be used. It can therefore be argued that transparency is likely to yield a negative interpretation.

### 3.2 *Negative connotations of the component words*

In some other cases, the component words of the compound have negative connotations, and therefore contribute to the negative interpretation of that compound. This is not always the case. In *fair-weather friend*, *fair-weather* and *friend*, taken individually, are not negative at all, but the combination of the two is: a *fair-weather friend* is not a good friend.

Some examples where one of the bases has a negative connotation are *ugly American* (note the adjective *ugly*), *sad sack* (an inept, blundering person--note the adjective *sad*), *a mad cap* (an eccentric person--the adjective *mad* is negative), a *ragbag* (a scruffy woman--where *rag* is a derogatory alternative to *clothes*). The nouns *deadhead*, *deadduck*, *deadloss* can also be taken as examples, as *dead* is not positively connoted. In *fag hag* (a woman who is only friends with homosexual men), both nouns are offensive. It is also the case for *damfool* (*fool* is negative, and *dam* is derived from the adjective *damned*, which expresses disapproval). In these examples, it seems that lexical choices match the semantic potential of the pattern, which lends itself to negative interpretations when applied to humans. In this respect, we can also note the derogatory metaphorical sense of some bases, e.g., *bag* instead of *woman* in *ragbag*. This can be accounted for by the fact that humans are not easily reduced to one characteristic, because that would amount to ignoring their essential complexity.

Humans are seen as a whole that transcends that complexity ~~is more than the sum of their parts~~. In these cases, the words chosen to instantiate the pattern match its negative orientation. This remark is formulated much in the spirit of construction grammar (as presented in Goldberg 1995), which holds that syntactic patterns can be interpreted as constructions that are systematically paired with a certain meaning. The idea that construction grammar applies to word formation is not new. Booij (2005 and 2009: 201-202) argues that word formation processes can also be thought of as constructions with associated meanings. We endorse Booij's claim that word formation patterns may be treated as constructions. We go further than that, in stating that meaning differs when the compound denotes a human rather than a non-human entity.<sup>14</sup> The negative orientation of compounds is only valid for humans; we therefore add a parameter to the pairing of a construction and a meaning. The negative potential of the construction is so powerful that in some cases, words that are not inherently negative will be systematically interpreted as such when used in compounds denoting humans, but not when used in compounds that denote non-humans. The lexeme *half*, for example, occurs in *halfwit*, *halfbreed*, *half caste*, which are all derogatory. In these expressions, *half* means 'not complete', 'not sufficient', i.e., has a negative bias. In other contexts however, it focuses on the existence of something rather than on the lack of it. For example, *half* can just indicate a quantity, as in *half-pint*, *half-liter*, *half-bottle*, *half-time*. In a similar way, *faint-heart* is a derogatory denomination (it means that a quality, i.e., someone's courage) is lacking, when *faint*, in other contexts, is not necessarily negative (in *She's feeling faint*, *faint* is only descriptive and is not negatively loaded).

### 3.3 *Nouns of animals*

In some other cases, the negative interpretation stems from the fact that the name of an animal is used in a compound that denotes a human, as in *jailbird* (a prisoner), *packrat* (a person who hoards things), *jackass* (a stupid person), *copycat* (someone who imitates someone else). The use of such nouns yields a negative connotation because, most of the time, calling a human by the name of an animal is not positive, since humans are at the top of the animacy hierarchy, as mentioned earlier. Note that these different cases are not mutually

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<sup>14</sup> Non-humans include inanimates and animals. There may be differences between the two, but we did not look at them. In this study, we meant to focus on (human) individuals. However, these potential differences are worth investigating.

exclusive. The compound *copycat* is derogatory because *cat* is the name of an animal, *and* because the act of imitating is deemed objectionable. The (relatively) transparent denomination yields a derogatory interpretation, because it names a human taking into account only one aspect (one thing they do).

### 3.4 *Nouns of inanimates to designate humans*

In the same way that it is derogatory to name humans with nouns of animals, it is derogatory to name humans with nouns of inanimates. Examples are *damaged goods* (a person whose reputation is damaged), *gas bag* (a person who talks idly or excessively), *mad cap* (an eccentric person), *sad sack* (an inept, blundering person), *ragbag* (a scruffy woman). Note that among inanimates, we include body parts, so that *yellow belly* (a coward) is also an example. *Fashion plate* may also be added to the list. Although it may not be obviously derogatory, it does involve a stereotype, and reduces a woman to her clothes. When applied to an inanimate (the primary meaning of *fashion plate*, i.e., a print representing a woman wearing a fashionable dress), there is nothing negative about the denomination. The expression is then merely descriptive: *plate* refers to the way the drawing was printed, and *fashion* to what the picture represents. In a similar way, even if *hot mamma* is meant to refer to a woman that you find attractive (which may seem positive), in fact the denomination can be felt as offensive.

Again we should note that in all these examples, there is nothing inherently negative in the head words (*bag*, *cap*, *sack*). In a few cases, the *first* constituent is negatively connoted (*sad* in *sad sack*, *mad* in *mad cap*, *rag* in *ragbag*). But, generally speaking, the use of either an inanimate noun or an animal noun in reference to humans is demeaning.

This tendency for compounds to be derogatory when they denote humans accounts for their possible use as offensive denominations and even insults, as happens with such nouns as *fag-hag*, *half-caste*, *half-breed*, *dimwit*, *sad-sack*, *half-wit*, *egghead*.

We showed that compounds denoting humans tend to be derogatory. We linked that to the way we conceptualize humans, i.e., as transcending their. This phenomenon is one manifestation of the animacy hierarchy. Contrary to inanimates, people cannot easily be reduced to one descriptive aspect. It is not a problem for a *corkscrew* to be reduced to its function, i.e., removing corks from bottles, but it would be for a human.

However, it must be acknowledged that not all compounds denoting humans are derogatory. For instance, *milkman*, *delivery man*, *hairdresser*, *boyfriend*, *flatmate* are not. We will now argue that compounds that denote humans exhibit another tendency. They encapsulate the notion of interpersonal relationship.

#### 4. *Interpersonal relationships*

The examples that we just gave illustrate the notion of ‘interpersonal relationship’: a *milkman* comes to someone’s place in order to deliver milk, a *flatmate* is someone you live with, a *hairdresser* looks after someone's hair. Similarly, a *girlfriend* is someone with whom you have an intimate relationship. Even when it does not have a romantic connotation, this denomination still involves a close (interpersonal) relationship, i.e., friendship.

We tend to have compounds when we perceive two humans as interacting. For someone who repairs a car, the standard denomination is *mechanic*. The person is viewed as working on a machine. However, the same person could be called *repair man*, but in that case, he is perceived as working *for me* (or someone else). This is what we mean by interpersonal relationship.

Our point here is to show that human compounds differ from non-human ones not just because they tend to be derogatory, but also because a number of them involve an interpersonal relationship. As compounds are (relatively) transparent, let us examine the conceptual link between interpersonal relationships and transparency.

##### 4.1 *Interpersonal relationships and transparency*

We have seen that compounds are relatively transparent. Why is the notion of transparency linked to that of interpersonal relationship?

In general terms, transparency characterizes *syntax*. Indeed, syntax can be said to be transparent because the meaning of the whole is the result of the addition of the meaning of

the parts. Malmberg calls clauses (and, more generally, texts) “large signs” (1977: 383-411) and insists on the fact that they are transparent, not opaque (1977 : 7).<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, conventional denominations have to be opaque, because they have work for everyone (within a whole linguistic community). If it were descriptive, it would be valid for some speakers, but not for others (who would not agree with the description). In this perspective, compounds, just like any other nouns, are opaque. However, within the domain of word-formation, they are *less* opaque than other types of constructed nouns (because they are made up of two bases).

To some extent, a compound is like syntax. It is (at least compared to other means of word formation) transparent. However, it still belongs to the lexicon. The transparency of such compounds can be accounted for by the fact that the denomination holds for *someone*, whoever that someone may be (not necessarily the speaker--that is the difference with syntax). Compounds denoting humans therefore tend to denote a person by stating what that person is *for me* (where *me* actually stands for anyone). The denomination encapsulates a personal component.

#### 4.2 *People who are at someone's service*

Many compounds denote people who are at someone's service. For example a *ball boy* and a *ball girl* collect balls for tennis players, a *cabin boy* waits on officers or passengers on a ship, a *call girl* is a prostitute who is called on the phone, a *faithhealer* is someone who uses faith to bring about physical healing, a *gatekeeper* is employed by the owner of a place, a *hairstylist* styles your hair, a *hall porter* helps you with your luggage in a hotel, a *shop assistant* helps you with your shopping, a *farmhand* works for a farmer, a *cleaning lady* cleans someone's place, a *yes-man* is a man who always agrees with his superiors.

Many of these compounds denote people whose jobs are not highly valued. This is illustrated by *rag man*, *rag picker* (a person who collects and sells rags), *cabin boy*, *dancing girl* (a member of a chorus in a musical, as opposed to the one who has the leading role),

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<sup>15</sup> Note that style results from the use of personal rather than conventional associations. Neveux (2013: 12) argues that poetry aims to replace conventional words by more personal (syntactic) associations, because they are more apt to convey a particular feeling. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, when Romeo says “Juliet is the sun”, it sounds more powerful than what he could have said instead, “I love Juliet”. This is because the word *love* could be used by anyone (it is conventional), whereas the sentence (an association of words) is produced by one person only and conveys more accurately, albeit indirectly, that person's feelings.

*railwayman* (a man who works on maintenance, as opposed to the staff which is higher up in the hierarchy of the company), *yardbird* (a new military recruit, particularly one assigned to menial tasks). We may compare these denominations to others that denote more highly valued occupations, and are less transparent: *dentist*, *doctor*, *teacher*, *engineer*, *professor*, *nurse*, *researcher*, *academic*, *politician*. Within a specific domain, one may compare *researcher* and *lab man* (the *researcher* is the person in charge, and the *lab man* performs menial tasks), or *engineer* and *repair man* (the *engineer* is creative, the *repair man* is not).

There seem to be counter-examples to this tendency, i.e., denominations that imply a high position in a hierarchy, but they are only *apparent* counter-examples, because they do illustrate the fact that a compound involves a personal relationship when it denotes a human. Some examples are *top banana* (the most powerful person in an organization), and *gangmaster* (a person who oversees the work of casual manual laborers). The person is seen in relation with others who perform more menial tasks, and whom they supervise. This time, the denomination reflects a point of view that is not that of the person at the top but of the one deemed inferior. However, the denominations are still *subjective* in the sense that they reflect how some people feel or think about someone else, and are only valid for them. All these examples show that these compounds denote a person on the basis on what they are *for someone*.

#### 4.3 *People who come to your place*

Among the previous category, we included examples in which the people at your service come to your place. This is quite frequent, as can be seen in the following examples.

- Some deliver things. Examples are *milkman*, *postman*, *delivery man*, *iceman*, *paper boy*.
- Some come to your place to sell you things (or buy things). Examples are *salesman*, *bag man* (an agent who collects or distributes the proceeds of illicit activities), *packman*, *traveling salesman* (people who sell from door to door), *tallyman* (a person who sells goods on credit, especially from door to door).
- Some come to take things away: *garbage collector*.
- Some come to your place to perform a specific task: *gasman* (the man who comes to read the gas meter), *water man* (the man who comes to read the water meter), *cleaning*

*lady* (a woman who cleans someone's place), *handy man* (someone who comes to your place for small jobs).

- The compounds *day boy* and *day girl* denote students who attend a school only during the day, as opposed to *boarding students* (another compound). In this case, one is not exactly talking about someone's place (such as one's house or flat), but some people (the boarding students and some of the staff) do live there, which means that there is indeed an interpersonal relationship.

Some of our examples also illustrate our first sub-category, i.e., people who are at someone's service. Our categories are not meant to be tight but as descriptive as possible. We aim to bring into light the fact that there is a reason why denominations are transparent, and that they correspond, in one way or another, to personal denominations.

#### 4.4 *Entering the private sphere*

When people come to your place, they enter your private space. This is another characteristic of some compounds that denote humans. The personal sphere can be entered physically or in a more abstract (i.e., psychological) way, or both. A *hairdresser*, for example, comes close to your body. Even if one can be physically close to an inanimate (one can hold a book), that does not involve an interpersonal relationship (as the inanimate is not a person). Moreover, what we argue here is that this tendency applies to compounds rather than to simple or other constructed nouns that denote humans. What is really relevant is how we perceive the referent.

There are other compounds that involve the notion of physical proximity, whether desirable or not. *Ball-breaker* and *ball-buster* have the same meaning, i.e., a sexually demanding woman, and *jailbait* denotes an underage person with whom one is tempted to have illegal sex. A *highwayman* approaches you because he wants to rob you. In this case, entering the private sphere is obviously a threatening act. We may add that one's belongings are part of one's personal sphere, so that *safe breaker*, *safe blower*, *safe cracker* (people who rob safes) all belong to that category. In some cases, the invasion of one's personal space is less physical: a *gadfly* is someone who hassles you, as a fly would do to an animal.

However, entering someone's private sphere is not always seen as negative, as illustrated by *fancy man*, *fancy woman*, *sweetheart*, *boyfriend*, *girlfriend*, *sex-friend*, which

denote people on the criterion of what they are for someone else from an emotional, sometimes romantic, point of view. The compound *bachelor girl* may be added to the list as the person is described on the basis of her *possible* relationships. Let us also mention compounds that denote friends or companions, such as *roommate*, *bunkmate*, *flatmate*, *workmate*, *fair-weather friend*, *fag hag*, *best man*. We may finally include compounds that involve family relationships, such as *step-father*, *step-mother*, *daughter-in-law*, *half-brother*, *half-sister*, *grandchild*, *grandson*, *granddaughter*, *grandfather*, *grandmother*, *godmother*, *ugly duckling* and *young 'un* (the last two examples belonging to the list because they denote someone's child).

### **Conclusion**

We have tried to show that humans are less likely than non-humans to be denoted by (lexicalized) compounds, which are relatively transparent constructions (compared to other means of word-formation). We argue that this is due to the way we conceptualize people, i.e., as more than the sum of their parts. Reducing someone to only one characteristic amounts to ignoring a human being's essential complexity. This is what we do with compounds, as these, being made up of two bases, are more explicit than other types of nouns. *Driver* admittedly categorizes a person but the denomination does not encapsulate the notion of relationship with someone (the driver drives *a car*). A hairdresser, on the contrary, works on *someone's* hair.

This conceptualization of people also accounts for the fact that when, in spite of the tendency for humans to be designated by opaque nouns, they *are* denoted by compounds, denominations tend to be derogatory and / or to involve a notion of interpersonal relationship.

The fact that human compounds involve a notion of personal relationship, can be accounted for by the relative transparency of this word formation process. Transparency takes on a specific meaning when applied to humans.

Therefore, the animacy hierarchy does account for some phenomena at the level of the lexicon.

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