

## A Contrastive Investigation of English and Persian Compounds: Implication for EFL Instruction

Javad Hayatdavoudi<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

\*Corresponding author.

Email: hirkania.2700@yahoo.com

Received 25 June 2011; accepted 29 July 2011

### Abstract

The present article aims to give a descriptive-analytical account of English and Persian nominal and adjectival compounds. Compounding is a productive process of word formation which is frequently used to add to the lexical repertoire of all languages. This article will attempt to come up with an inclusive typology which can account for both Persian and English compounds. Then some issues pertaining to the orthography, stress pattern, meaning and headedness in compounds will be discussed. There appears to be relationship between the orthography and stress pattern of English compounds. Subsequently, some implications for EFL instruction in terms of the interactive effects of Persian and English compounds will be discussed.

**Key words:** Nominal and adjectival compounds; Word formation; Headedness

Javad Hayatdavoudi (2011). A Contrastive Investigation of English and Persian Compounds: Implication for EFL Instruction. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 1(1), 53-57. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1927024020110101.050>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1927024020110101.050>

### INTRODUCTION

As Yule (1996) asserts, new words and meanings are constantly being added to the lexical repertoire of all human languages. A number of word formation processes are incessantly at work to proliferate the lexicon of languages to help account for new ideas, concepts and objects and their socio-cultural functions. Compounding

is one of these processes which can be broadly defined as the conjoining of two or more lexical items to create new words. Fromkin and Rodman (1988) suggest that “compounding is a common and frequent process for enlarging the vocabulary of all languages” (p.136). Transformational-generative theory of linguistics proposed by Chomsky (1965) offers a framework for word formation processes whereby words are created by the combination of free and bound morphemes. For example, the bound morpheme ‘un’ can be combined with ‘tie’ to produce untie as a verb. This is the process of inflection which must be distinguished from compounding because in compounding, two free morphemes are joined to form a new one (e.g. market + place = marketplace) while in inflection, a bound morpheme is attached to a free morpheme to serve a new semantic or syntactic function (e.g. adjective + ly = adverb, as in physical + ly = physically).

Fromkin and Rodman (1988) indicate that “there is almost no limit on the kind of combinations that occur in English” (p.136). Thus, an adjective can combine with an adjective (e.g. bittersweet), with a noun (e.g. sweetheart) and with a verb (e.g. highborn). As well, a noun can combine with an adjective (e.g. headstrong), with a noun (e.g. sportsman) and with a verb (e.g. spoon-feed). English compounds may be distinguished from non-compound counterparts by the word stress patterns. For example, blackbird as a compound is different from *black bird* as a noun phrase in that the compound receives the primary stress on its first element (‘black’ bird) while the noun phrase receives almost equal accent on its either constituent (‘black’ bird).

According to Bateni (1985), the morphological structure of words in Persian involves roots, prefixes and suffixes. Every word should obligatorily bear a root while the attachment of prefixes and suffixes are optional. For example, the word *savarkar* (*horse rider*) is made up of two roots, namely, *savar* and *kar*. In Persian, a variety

of nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs can combine and make new compound items; noun+ adjective: *sar xosh* (jolly), adjective+ noun: *xosh rekab* (well-steered), adverb+ noun+ verb stem: *hamechiz dan* (know-it-all).

One of the functions of compounds is the brevity they offer the language and language users in suggesting different ideas. Instead of going to lengths to say ‘a man who participates in sports’, the speaker would simply say ‘sportsman’. There are different types of compounds in English. They can be broadly categorized as a) primary compounds in which the second constituent is not a verb (e.g. blackboard), b) endocentric compounds in which the second constituent is the head word and the first functions as the modifier of the second (e.g. mailman is essentially a man who delivers mails), c) exocentric compounds in which there is no semantic head (e.g. headstrong is neither a head nor strong. The Persian example for this type of compound is *lakposht* (turtle) which is neither a *lak* nor *posht*), and d) copulative compounds in which each element bears some aspect of the meaning of the compound (e.g. northwest is partly north and partly west. The Persian example is *shirberenj* (rice cooked with milk) which is both *shir* (milk) and *berenj* (rice)).

## A TYPOLOGY OF ENGLISH AND PERSIAN COMPOUNDS

Bagheri (1998) presents an inclusive taxonomy to account for both Persian and English nominal and adjectival compounds. This classification assigns the compounds into three major categories including compounds with the second element as the semantic head, compounds with the first element as the semantic head, and copulative compounds.

### The Second Element as the Semantic Head

In this type of compounds, the second constituent bears the main semantic properties of the whole compound structure. For example, blackbird is essentially a bird with an attribute of a certain color (black). The Persian compound *pirezan* (old woman) is essentially a *zan* (woman) who is *pir* (old). Among the compounds with the second element as the semantic head, there are types of compounds in which the second constituent is the syntactic head as well. That is, the second element, in addition to its semantic features, percolates its syntactic features to the whole compound too. For instance, in noun+ adjective compounds, the second constituent, which is an adjective, renders the whole compound an adjective. Pitch dark and crystal clear in English and *zan zalil* (henpecked) in Persian fall into this category. The same relation can also be found in adjective +noun combinations whereby the second constituent, the noun, percolates both its semantic and syntactic features to the compound. Examples for English and Persian include:

English	Persian
Madman	Tond bad (gale)
Hard disk	Piremard (old man)
Freshman	Chehelsotun (a building with supposedly 40 columns)
Short story	Rast dast (right-handed)
Wetland	Nowrouz (new year’s day)
Downtown	Gerd bad (whirlwind)
Green card	Bala tane (bust)
Wetsuit	Chap dast (left-handed)

However, there are also types of compounds in Persian in which the first constituent, which is an adjective, is the syntactic head percolating its syntactic features to the whole compound.

Siah del (crude-hearted)
Sefid rou (fair-skinned)
Bad seresht (ill-natured)
Nik sirat (well-natured)
Xosh tip (good-looking)

This is because Persian is flexible enough to have either element of a compound function as the syntactic head. Therefore, the above examples of adjective+ noun compounds function as adjective syntactically while it is still the second element, noun, which is their semantic head.

In case the two elements of the compound belong to the same grammatical category (e.g. noun+ noun or Adjective+ adjective), either constituent functions as the syntactic head. For example, English words such as keyhole, sunlight, post office, policeman, book case, fingernail, apple tree, woodland, chairman and headmaster are compound nouns in which either element is a noun. Again, while both constituents function as the syntactic head simultaneously, it is the second element which is the semantic head. In this sense, headmaster is essentially a master who is appointed as the head of a school or department, or book case is a case in which books are shelved. Persian examples of this category include *karxane* (factory), *kolah gis* (wig), *shah kar* (masterpiece), *golbarg* (calycle), *zour xane* (a traditional gym), *?ab nabat* (hard chocolate), to name but a few.

### The First Element as the Semantic Head

This category cannot account for English compounds since as foroodi Nejad and Paradis (2009) assert, “English favors right-headedness, so the rightmost constituent hold the core meaning of the compound”. On the other hand, Persian is variable in terms of headedness allowing the leftmost constituent to function as the semantic head as well. Thus, Persian nominal and adjectival compounds may be either right-headed (e.g. *gol?ab* (rosewater)) or left-headed (e.g. *mahi germez* (red fish)). They contend that though right-headed compounds abound in Persian, left-headedness should be considered as the default Persian compound structure.

In Persian compounds with the first element as the

semantic head, the leftmost constituent percolates its semantic features to the whole compound while the syntactic head may be either the first or the second element. In such compound words as *taxte siah* (blackboard), *pedarbozorg* (grandfather), *madarbozorg* (grandmother), *bache kuchulu* (kiddy), *kadu tanbal* (pumpkin), *limu shirin* (sweet lemon) and *shir xoshk* (dried milk), the first element is a noun and the second is an adjective. In these examples, the first element is both the semantic and syntactic head of the compound. Accordingly, *bache kuchulu* is a compound noun syntactically and a *bache* (kid) who is *kochulu* (young) semantically.

There are other examples in which the first element is an adjective and in the meantime both the semantic and syntactic head of the compound. Examples of such compound type include *?asheq pishe* (love-fancier) and *por ?ab* (juicy), among others. A good many of Persian compounds are benevolent enough to distribute the semantic and syntactic functions between their constituents equally. In some compounds, the first element is the semantic and the second is the syntactic head of the compound.

Rou sefid (innocent)  
Del nazok (squeamish)  
Del nagaran (worried)  
Del xaste (bored)  
Pa berahne (barefooted)  
Sar zende (lively)  
Sebil koloft (boor)

There are still examples of Persian compounds in which either element functions as the syntactic head simultaneously while it is still the leftmost element which percolates its semantic properties to the whole compound.

Gav mish (buffalo)  
Pesar ?amu (male cousin)  
Doxtar ?amu (female cousin)  
Saheb xane (landlord)  
Shohar ?ame (aunt's husband)  
Rud xane (river)  
Chob panbe (cork)

### Copulative Compounds

Copulative compounds have two semantic heads. That is, either element of the compound functions as the semantic head. Syntactically, the rightmost element functions as the head in English. Northwest, southeast, northeast, southwest and worker-priest are some of the English examples falling in this category. Persian copulative compounds are made up of two nouns. Therefore, the whole compound is a noun while the semantic properties of the compound can be derived from either constituent. *Cholo kebab* (boiled rice served with Persian kebab), *?aftabe lagan* (pieces of petty containers), *gaz ?anbor* (pincer), *kah gel* (thatch), *shir berenj* (rice cooked with milk) and *shir qahve* (coffee with milk) are but a few

Persian examples of copulative compounds.

## ORTHOGRAPHY AND STRESS IN COMPOUNDS

English compounds are variously spelled; they may be written with a hyphen between the words (e.g. icy-cold), with spaces between the words (e.g. shop window), or with the two words intact (e.g. homework) (see Fromkin et al, 2003). As far as stress and accent are concerned, English compounds bear different stress patterns. Sometimes, either word in a compound is stressed. Examples are noun+ noun combinations when the second constituent belongs to or is part of the first ('shop 'window); when the first noun indicate the place of the second ('corner 'shop); when the first noun can denote the time of the second ('summer 'holiday); and when the first constituent can indicate the material of which the second noun is made up ('steel 'door), while there are still exceptions. For instance, in compounds where the rightmost word is street, the word street is unstressed ('Oxford street) (Thomson & Martinet, 1986).

There seems to be relationship between the orthography of English compounds and their stress pattern. Accordingly, the compounds that are written with no space between the constituents receive stress on their first constituent while the compounds that are written with space between the constituents are variously stressed, possibly based on the context in which they occur.

However, the stress pattern in Persian compounds is much more rule-governed and consistent. According to Yarmohammadi (1995), Persian nominal compounds receive the primary stress on their rightmost constituent consistent with the stress pattern of single words in isolation. The other members of the compound receive lower levels of accent. Yarmohammadi (1995) presents a taxonomy of Persian compound structures with the same stress pattern including major types of compounds:

1. compounds made up of two or more simple or complex elements (e.g. *telefon 'xane* (telephone station), *ketab 'forush* (bookseller))
2. compound numerals (e.g. *bist-o-'seh* (twenty three))
3. conjoined nominal expressions (*raft-o-'?amad* (come-and-go))

However, there is one exception to the rightmost-element-accented rule of Persian compounds. In compounds which function as vocatives, the primary accent/stress is placed on the first syllable of the first constituent (e.g. *'ketab forush!* (oh! You bookseller.)) (p. 77-78).

## MEANING AND AFFIXATION IN COMPOUNDS

Inflectional morphemes of English always attach to the

rightmost element which is the semantic head of the whole compound (e.g. barefoot+ ed: barefooted, pighead+ ed: pigheaded). In Persian, the inflectional morphemes also attach to the second constituent. However, since the second constituent in Persian is not always the semantic head, inflectional affixes can also attach to the constituent which is not the semantic head. For example, the plural morpheme 'ha' can be attached to 'bozorg' (grand) and 'siah' (black) in *pedar bozorgha* (grandfathers) and *taxtesiahha* (blackboards), respectively (Bagheri, 1998).

The meaning of compounds can sometimes be derived as the sum of their constituent meanings. For instance, barefooted in English and *ketab forush* (bookseller) in Persian can be easily understood by knowing the meaning of their constituent parts. Nevertheless, sometimes the compound as a whole is not the sum of its individual constituents. Accordingly, laughing gas is not a gas that laughs or *sebil koloft* (boor) is not a *sebil* (mustache) that is *koloft* (thick), rather it refers to a *boorish guy* (see Fromkin et al, 2003). Besides, compounds behave as a semantic whole. This is the distinguishing factor which differentiates compounds from their non-compound counterparts. For example, beautiful flower as a noun phrase answers the question what (flower) and how (beautiful) while the compound word 'sunflower' only answers the question what (see Ahranjani et al, 2011).

## IMPLICATION FOR EFL INSTRUCTION

With regard to the discussions above, Persian compounds are structurally more complex in terms of both their diversity and morphological structure. Persian compounds can have either constituent as their semantic and syntactic head. According to Ashouri (1993), in Persian, several types of nouns, adverbs, adjectives and verb stems can be prefixed or suffixed to other constituents and create new compounds. For example, he presents a long list of compounds which can be created by the combination of words for different parts of body with constituents of different grammatical categories.

On the other hand, it is only the rightmost element in English compounds which can be the semantic head to which the inflectional morphemes attach. The right-headedness is the point of structural overlap between English and Persian. Research has shown that this point of overlap may cause cross-linguistic transfer. Foroodi Nejad and Paradis (2009) investigated the cross-linguistic transfer of compound words in Persian-English bilinguals. They reported that the cross-linguistic transfer was bidirectional, that is, both from Persian into English and vice versa. Accordingly, Persian-English bilinguals in their study produced more right-headed Persian compounds comparing with Persian monolinguals. Interestingly, they reported that the same bilinguals produced more left-headed English compounds comparing with English

monolinguals. Research has also shown that Iranian English learners may develop faulty overgeneralizations of compounding in English and consequently produce deviative forms. The learners may mistakenly assume that every Persian compound should have an equivalent counterpart in English (Abedi, 2011).

Therefore, it may sound reasonable to suggest that EFL classrooms need to incorporate consciousness-raising tasks into their learning activities toward word formation in general and compounding processes in particular. In addition to language learners, translators may also have difficulty with compound combinations. Sometimes, it is not easy to find a clear-cut equivalent for a Persian compound in English or vice versa. Moreover, resorting to literal translation of a compound may result in weird items which do not convey the intended sound or sense to the target audience.

## CONCLUSION

Compounding as a productive word formation process bears a variety of issues around it. Headedness, orthography, stress and accent, meaning and inflectional properties are some of the issues raised in discussions of compound structures. Persian and English compounds share some common features in regard to headedness, meaning and affixation. However, there are also differences between them. Generally speaking, Persian compounds are more diverse and flexible. Either the leftmost or the rightmost constituent in Persian compounds can function as the semantic and syntactic head while English only allows the rightmost element as the semantic head.

This may be due to the more inclusive phrase structure rules which have rendered English a head-last language. English compounds are distinguished from non-compound combinations via stress/accent while Persian compounds generally conform to the stress pattern of single words in isolation. Semantically, compounds express a single psychological reality. That is, the whole compound acts as a single entity and indicates a single meaning and concept (Kozziel, 1973). The single meaning is sometimes the sum of individual meanings of each constituent and sometimes a different concept beyond the literal conveyance of single elements. Not only are the compounds diverse in their structure, but they are also varied in orthography. They are variously spelled. However, a close scrutiny of English compounds revealed a relationship between their orthography and stress pattern such that the compounds which are written intact invariably receive stress on their leftmost element while the compounds written with a hyphen or space between the constituents are variously accented. Overall, knowledge of compound structures is necessary for language learners both in their first and second language, which may avoid producing faulty

combinations due to erroneous overgeneralizations.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Yule, G. (1996). *The Study of Language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Fromkin, V., & Rodman, R. (1998). *An Introduction to Language*. New York: Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Mass: the MIT press.
- Batani, M. (1985). *Description of Grammatical Structure of Persian Language*. Tehran: Amirkabir publications.
- Bagheri, M. (1998). *A Semantic and Syntactic Analysis of Persian and English nominal and Adjectival Compounds: A Descriptive Approach*. Unpublished M. A thesis. Shiraz university, Iran.
- Foroodi Nejad, F., & Paradis, J. (2009). Cross-linguistic Transfer in the Acquisition of Compound Words in Persian-English bilinguals. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 12(4)*, 411-427. Retrieved July 21, 2011 from <http://journals.cambridge.org>
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2003). *An Introduction to Language* (7th ed.). Boston: Heinle.
- Thomson, A. J., & Martinet, A. V. (Eds.). (1986). *A practical English grammar* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford university press.
- Yarmohammadi, L. (1995). *A Contrastive Phonological Analysis of English and Persian: A Course Book in Applied Phonological Studies*. Shiraz: Shiraz University Press.
- Khanchobani Ahranjani, A., Halili, S., Poor Ali, S., Khalilzadeh, A., & Alishi, H. (2011, March). Turkish, English and Persian Compound Words as Lexemes. *International Journal of Academic Research, 3(2)*. Retrieved July 22, 2011 from [http://www.ijar.lit.az/pdf/10/2011\(10-44\).pdf](http://www.ijar.lit.az/pdf/10/2011(10-44).pdf)
- Ashouri, D. (1993). *Rethinking Persian Language*. Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz Publishing Co.
- Abedi, E. (2011). *Confusing Persian Compounds for EFL Elementary Learners*. Retrieved July 18, 2011 from <http://www.riz.asia/articles>
- Koziel, H. (1973). *Handbuch der Englishmen Wortbildungslehre*. Heidelberg.