Creative Compounding in English

The Semantics of Metaphorical and Metonymical Noun-Noun Combinations

Réka Benczes
Eötvös Loránd University

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by Réka Benczes

To István

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Abbreviations

CCED	*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*
DOS	*Dictionary of Symbols*
ICM	Idealised Cognitive Domain
LDOCE	*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*
Országh	Országh–Magay: *Angol–Magyar Nagyszótár* [English–Hungarian Dictionary]
PDEI	*Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms*
wordspy	http://www.wordspy.com
wikipedia	http://en.wikipedia.org

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Notation

italics	example
'...'	definition
"..."	1. English equivalent
	2. underlying relative clause (or sentence)
Capitalisation	1. ICM (Body ICM, Constitution ICM, etc.)
	2. participant in an ICM (Agent, Instrument, etc.)
SMALL CAPS	1. conceptual metaphor
	2. conceptual metonymy
	3. domain (in a blend network)
	4. image schema
	5. semantic pole of a symbolic unit
<...>	element (in a conceptual metaphor or blend network)

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and some basic concepts

In an interview with Bill Wyman, the former bass guitarist of Rolling Stones, the conversation turned to his favourite pastime, metal detecting, and the journalist asked Wyman what his old bandmates thought about his passion for "land fishing".[1] Although Wyman simply replied that the others did not attach too much importance to his hobby, what is linguistically significant about *land fishing* is that it represents one of the most creative processes of the English language: the ability to create and understand compound expressions that have been formed by utilising the endless possibilities of metaphor and metonymy. As it is evident to both Wyman and the interviewer, and the larger readership of the article, *land fishing* has got nothing to do with catching fish; it refers rather to the activity of seeking out treasure hidden in the ground with the means of a metal detector. Why can we use *land fishing* in order to speak about metal detecting? Why can we be sure (as in the case of the interviewer), that when confronted with such an expression — in an appropriate context — the referent of the expression will be immediately understood even if it happens to be a construction which the reader of the article had not been previously familiar with?

The answer lies in conceptual metaphor and metonymy, notions that entered semantic discussion and analysis with the advent of cognitive linguistics. As it has been demonstrated by cognitive linguists and psychologists, it is with the help of metaphor and metonymy that we are able to understand and talk about basic emotions such as love, anger or fear, or more abstract concepts such as friendship, business or society. The all-pervasiveness of metaphor (and metonymy) also shows up in the semantics of a noun–noun compound such as *land fishing* for instance, where the activity of fishing metaphorically stands for the activity of metal detecting: the person doing the fishing is metaphorically understood as the person looking for treasure, the fishing rod metaphorically stands for the metal detector, and the happy moment of finally catching a fish is interpreted as finding treasure hidden in the ground. The fact that we are able to access this metaphor so effectively when coming across the term *land fishing* can be accounted for by a number of reasons. First, we are required to perform such "metaphorical operations" quite often when coming across metaphor-based constructions, and therefore we are responsive to contextual cues that induce us to search for a metaphorical interpretation of a given

1. Source: *The Times*, Supplement *The Knowledge*, p. 46, 26 March 2005.

lexical item.[2] Second, our familiarity with English noun–noun compounding tells us that such combinations show a degree of compositionality; that is, the overall meaning of the compound is motivated by the meaning of the constituents. Therefore, the two constituent nouns of *land fishing* provide us with considerable linguistic support by evoking separate concepts, one for land-related activities and pursuits (as evoked by *land*), and one for fishing (as evoked by *fishing*), which prompt us to look for associations between these separate concepts so as to arrive at a possible interpretation that fits the immediate context of the expression, a process that is called conceptual integration or blending. Third, the unconscious and ubiquitous use of metaphor (and metonymy) in everyday language and thought means that we are able to employ a vast repository of metaphorical and metonymical associations quickly and efficiently when encountering noun–noun compounds such as *land fishing*.

Noun–noun compounds have been at the forefront of linguistic analysis for a number of well-founded reasons. Not only do they form the largest group of compounds in English (Algeo 1991),[3] but children learn to produce this type of compound the earliest, from around the age of two (Clark 1981). However, what is most remarkable about these compounds is the diversity of semantic relationships that can exist between the two components on the one hand, and between the individual elements and the compound as a whole on the other. Nevertheless, however diverse the semantics of noun–noun combinations may be, many linguists have attempted to systematise the constraints that apply in their creation and interpretation.

The most traditional and pervasive semantic classification of compounds used in linguistic literature is based upon the work of Leonard Bloomfield (1933), who suggested that compounds fall into two main groups. In endocentric constructions, the compound is the hyponym of the head element: *apple tree* is a kind of tree. In the case of exocentric or "headless" constructions, however, the compound is not a hyponym of the head element, and in the majority of cases there is some sort of met-

2. I have found plenty of webpages on the Internet related to fishing where the expression *land fishing* refers to fishing performed from land, not from water (from a fishing boat for instance).

3. A fifty-year-long research into the emergence of new words in the United States (Algeo 1991) has managed to shed some light on contemporary word formation patterns. According to the data, compounding is the most productive word formation process: 68% of the new expressions were grouped into the combining category. More interestingly, 90% of the compounds were nouns. John Algeo explains this bias towards nominal compounds on two accounts: first, there are "more new things to name" (p. 7) than events or qualities — it is very rare that we have to name a new action, but we do come across new objects all the time. Second, one of the features of English is the preference to put semantic information into a noun. As there is no grammatical objection to having a noun in a modifier position before another noun, there is no particular need for distinct adjectives.