



“All those Elvis-meets-golf-player looks”: A corpus-assisted analysis of creative compounds in fashion blogging



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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of compounds as creative forms of self-expression in a leading fashion blog (Style.com), where users engage in conversations about fashion. The aim was to determine to what extent and how compounds are used by fashion bloggers, with particular attention to creativity, and how this usage may be influenced by the online communicative context. Compounds are notoriously difficult to investigate due to their marked structural variation and inconsistent orthographic representation. However, thanks to a corpus-assisted approach, it was possible to first systematically identify compounds in the blog, and then analyze them in context to detect forms, patterning, functions and creative usage. Most compounds functioned as adjectives, in line with the descriptive and evaluative nature of fashion discourse. However, a high level of creativity was seen in compounds with uncommon structural components (e.g., verb+preposition as in *go-to*), novel combinations (e.g., *skull-embellished*), creative recycling of participial constituents (e.g., *-inspired*, *-inducing*), and especially phrasal structures that trigger striking mental images (e.g., *stripper-cum-S&M freak*). The study contributes to a better understanding of how bloggers use creative language to construct their identities as members of a distinctive and cohesive social community.

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1. Introduction

Over the years, linguists have shown considerable interest in compounding as a process for generating new words and creating novel units of meaning from existing words. According to Katamba (2009: 101), “compounds are complex words containing at least two bases that are themselves words”. Similarly, Bauer (2003: 40) defined compounding as the “formation of a new lexeme by adjoining two or more lexemes”. While these straightforward descriptions capture the basic componential dimension of compounds, there are several other issues that come into play. For example, Bauer (2006: 485) argued that lexemes in compounds must be independent from each other. In this sense, *greenhouse* would be a compound, whereas the reduplicative *namby-pamby* would not, as the two elements are interdependent and cannot stand alone. With particular reference to phrasal structures, there are contrasting viewpoints as to their status as compounds. Bauer (2006: 485) maintained that items such as *love-in-a-mist* are not compounds because they are derived from the lexicalization of a syntactic structure, and thus strictly interdependent. In contrast, Carter and McCarthy (2006: 321) described items such as *right-of-way* as *phrasal compound nouns* with two dependent elements

joined by a preposition, also pointing out that they are among the most common types. Bauer et al. (2013: 437) returned to this issue when discussing “so-called ‘phrasal compounds’”. They excluded items such as *book-turned-movie*, *mother-in-law* and *take-it-or-leave-it* (though the latter two are classified as compounds by Quirk et al. (1985), but included items linked by *cum* (e.g., *cozy-cum-corny*) as similar to appositional compounds, e.g., *actor-director* (Bauer et al., 2013: 438). Challenges have also arisen when trying to distinguish compounds from multi-word units (MWUs). For example, Bauer and Renouf (2001: 111) consider the hyphenated premodifier in *patient-satisfaction study* to be part of a MWU, and therefore not a compound, though they admit possible problems with this interpretation. In the same vein, Granger and Paquot (2008: 33) noted that decisions about whether an item is a compound or a MWU are often “quite arbitrary”. As Bauer (2006: 497) aptly summed up, compounds are lexical items “whose ultimate status and unity is still not entirely clear”.

A systematic description of the components of English compounds has also been problematic. The right-hand element has traditionally been classified as the *head* (Williams, 1981), which also determines the word class of the compound. Accordingly, *pan* is the head of *saucepan* which functions as a noun. In such cases, the compound is actually a hyponym of its right-hand element. However, Bauer and Renouf (2001: 103–104) noted that compounds do not always follow these rules (e.g., *pickpocket*, *egghead*,

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after-tax). Some compounds are left-headed (e.g., *attorney general*) or even lacking a clear head (e.g., *has-been*). Moreover, the right-hand element does not always determine the word class of the compound. In fact, items such as *high profile* or *top quality* often function as adjectives rather than as nouns (Katamba, 2009).

Compounds can also be difficult to distinguish on the orthographic level. Their representation in writing is quite inconsistent (Lieber and Štekauer, 2009). In fact, it is possible to find variations of the same compound across dictionaries, e.g., *coffee-pot*, *coffee pot* and *coffeepot* (Bauer, 2006: 485), an example that illustrates the three orthographic variants of English compounds: hyphenated, separate and closed (or solid). Thus, the presence of a hyphen is not always a reliable indicator, particularly in the case of compound nouns.

One approach that has instead found consensus is description based on the grammatical function of a compound, further articulated according to the word class of the components (Bauer, 2006; Katamba, 2009). For example, compound nouns are described as N+N (e.g., *schoolhouse*) or Adj+N (e.g., *blackberry*), while compound adjectives are described as Adj+Adj (e.g., *squeaky-clean*) or N+Adj (e.g., *ice-cold*). Because this approach is based on objective descriptions, in the upcoming analysis I also adopt it to analyze compounds according to grammatical function and compositional structure (e.g., the adjective *eye-catching*=N/Adj+present participle).

Some of the literature on compounds has explored their creative dimension. This often involves some form of analogy, as in the example *scarlet-collar worker* inspired by *blue-collar worker*, cited by Benczes (2006: 187). This author introduced the term “creative compound” to refer to N+N compounds based on metaphorical or metonymical associations (Benczes, 2006: 6). She proposed Langacker’s (2000) notion of extension from cognitive linguistics to analyze creativity in N+N compounds, explaining that “the more extended a compound, the more imaginative, associative thinking is required from the listener to arrive at the compound’s meaning” (Benczes, 2006:189). Examples can be seen in *lawnmower parent* and *bulldozer parent* as “novel metaphorical compounds” that extend the meaning of *helicopter parent* from a parent who is simply protective to one who is actually intrusive (cf. Benczes, 2013: 10). Maguire et al. (2010) identified novel uses of N+N compounds, using corpus tools to extract creative combinations, e.g., *wind breeder* and *ladder breeder* inspired by the more conventional *dog breeder*. However, both of these studies looked at creativity exclusively in N+N compounds. This points to the need for additional work to analyze creative uses of compounds with other functions and compositional features, such as compound adjectives (e.g., N+Adj or Adj+Adj), which have received less attention in the literature (Bisetto and Scalise, 2005), but are common in English and also highly productive (Biber et al., 1999; Crocco Galèas, 2003).

Shifting towards the focus of present research, relatively few studies have specifically targeted English compounds in online discourse. Among these, Rumšienė (2006: 59) found that compounds accounted for many of the various neologisms analyzed in a dataset of Internet chats (e.g., *grouphug*). Hassan and Hashim’s (2010: 42) exploratory analysis of a corpus that included blogs, chats, and instant messages highlighted compounds such as *camwhore*, i.e., the clipped form of *camera+whore*. With particular reference to blogs, Wengao (2009) found compounds in a corpus of blog posts (excluding comments) about daily life experiences. These included a variety of structural compositions, ranging from nominal (e.g., *metalhead*), to adjectival (e.g., *gas-guzzling*), to phrasal (e.g., *never-to-be-opened*). Research that has looked specifically at creative uses of compounds in online discourse appears to be limited to a series of papers dedicated to N+N compounds containing the word *carbon* in the context of climate change

discourse (cf. Nerlich and Kotevko, 2009; Kotevko, 2010; Kotevko et al., 2010). For example, in the latter, the authors analyzed a corpus of blogs, news sites, and other digital sources to identify creative metaphorical uses, i.e., *carbon footprint* and *carbon addiction* derived from *carbon emissions*.

Following this brief overview of some key issues involved in defining and analyzing compounds,¹ in the next section I turn to the specific domain and communicative context of the present study: fashion discourse and fashion blogging.

2. Fashion discourse and the fashion blogosphere

Thompson and Haytko (1997: 15) characterized fashion discourse as “ways of talking about fashion”. This entails the expression of perceptions and experiences in relation to fashion, as well as ideals and images linked to self-identity.² These authors further suggested that fashion consumers perceive themselves and others in relation to certain fashion brands. Discourse about fashion revolves around products with an elaborate visual dimension based on colors, shapes, and textures that trigger well-articulated descriptions (Crawford Camiciottoli et al., 2014). In addition, fashion brands can evoke positive or negative attitudes and, according to Rageh Ismail and Spinelli (2012), consumers may even form an emotional attachment to them, particularly when associated with the iconic personalities of designers (e.g., Valentino, Calvin Klein, Karl Lagerfeld). Thus, fashion discourse is typically richly expressive on the descriptive and evaluative levels, as seen in adjectives such as *crisp*, *airy*, *chocolaty*, *timeless* and *gorgeous*, cited in Crawford Camiciottoli et al. (2014).

For the fashion discourse community, fashion journalism found in magazines and newspapers has always been an important point of reference (cf. Barthes, 1990, Rocamora, 2002). However, with the rise of new media, fashion blogs in particular have become “a central platform for the circulation of fashion-related news and information.” They are often written by “citizen journalists,” (Rocamora, 2012: 98), who are not associated with established news sources. This has re-defined the way fashion discourse is produced and consumed, also reflecting shifting business models. More specifically, fashion blogs tend to be less strictly dependent on advertising than print fashion media, and therefore have greater freedom of expression in terms of blog content (Rocamora, 2012).

With respect to other social media genres such as Twitter, used for short messages, or Facebook, used mainly for social interaction, blogs typically place more emphasis on content. Puschmann (2013: 90) described blogs as “topic-centric” (i.e., information and opinions about something in the external world) or “author-centric” (i.e., self-reflection focusing on the internal world of the author). Moreover, according to Myers (2010: 98), blogs are often expressions of “the writer’s personal aesthetic preference, moral judgement or emotional response”, through which bloggers can articulate their unique voices and construct self-identity within an online community (Miller and Shepherd, 2004). All these features make fashion blogs a popular interactional setting where enthusiasts can engage each other in extensive ‘virtual conversations’ to exchange thoughts and opinions without physical or temporal constraints (Rickman and Cosenza, 2007).

¹ A detailed discussion of the complex theoretical dimension of compounding is beyond the scope of this study. For exhaustive treatments, see Marchand (1969), Bauer (1983), Bisetto and Scalise (2005), and Lieber and Štekauer (2009).

² This tendency is also seen in such popular expressions as *making a fashion statement*, *you are what you wear*, as well as the quote *clothes make the man*, attributed to Mark Twain (Budd, 1992).

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