Compounding in Context

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Compounding and lexical innovation

• Compounding is the most frequent word formation process in English (Huddleston and Pullum 2002)
• Within compounding, compounds formed from two nouns are the most productive group (Bauer, Lieber and Plag 2013, p. 451)
Recent additions to the OED

**trout pout:** unnaturally swollen lips resulting from the injection of excessive collagen into the lips in a cosmetic procedure intended to enhance their appearance (June 2016)
Recent additions to the OED

**trout pout**: unnaturally swollen lips resulting from the injection of excessive collagen into the lips in a cosmetic procedure intended to enhance their appearance (June 2016)

**bucket list**: a list of things that a person hopes to experience or achieve during his or her lifetime (September 2013)
A model of compound semantics

Bell and Schäfer 2013, 2016
trout pout
trout pout
trout pout
context/world knowledge

A

\text{RESEMBLE}

B

A'

B'

(AB)'
bucket list
bucket list

context/world knowledge

specifies

initiates shifts

A

B

A'

B'

(AB)'
Historical development of words

- word formation pattern
- neologism coined
- institutionalisation
- idiomatisation
The moment a word is used any vagueness that there may be in its linguistic structure is removed

Bauer, Lieber and Plag 2013 p.30
How are compounds disambiguated?

Lexical semantics e.g. *polo umpire*

Situation of use e.g. *john man*

Encyclopaedic knowledge e.g. *transition team*

Linguistic context: the focus of this study
Finding novel compounds

- All noun-noun strings occurring within a sentence extracted from the prose fiction section of the British National Corpus
- Sample reduced to items that occurred only once in the whole corpus, and not at all in ukWaC, a much larger corpus of more than 2 billion words
- Random selection of 80 novel compounds examined in their sentential context
Hypothesis

Compounds can often be disambiguated on the basis of the immediate sentence, usually through disambiguation of the head noun.
acid cap

• It fires an explosive acid cap
• It fires an explosive acid cap
• cap = detonator, detonating device
• Head is disambiguated
property sword

• Here was Gabriel's chance to leave his wooden perch and to stand stage-centre with a huge property sword as tall as himself.
• Here was Gabriel's chance to leave his wooden perch and to stand stage-centre with a huge property sword as tall as himself.
• property = props
• Modifier is disambiguated
hardboard affair

• He'd stopped in front of the side door, a flimsy **hardboard affair** with a Yale lock, distinguished by a fist-sized hole to the side of the metal keyhole.

• He'd stopped in front of the side **door**, a flimsy **hardboard affair** with a Yale lock, distinguished by a fist-sized hole to the side of the metal keyhole.

• **affair** = door

• Head is disambiguated
chocolate shadows

- It was one of those old photographs whose dark chocolate shadows are balanced by the creamy richness of the light surfaces.
- It was one of those old photographs whose dark chocolate shadows are balanced by the creamy richness of the light surfaces.
- chocolate = sepia
- Modifier is disambiguated
Testing the hypothesis

• **Prediction 1:** Novel English compounds do not have a clear default interpretation out of context, so people will vary widely in the meanings they assign to them.

• **Prediction 2:** In written English, the immediate sentence containing a novel compound often contains enough contextual information for the intended meaning of the compound to become clear.
Testing the hypothesis

• From sample, selected compounds for which both constituents occurred at least 500 times in BNC
• Asked participants to give free paraphrases for the compound context free and in the context of the immediate sentence
• Excluded paraphrases if the participant didn’t ‘know’ either of the nouns
Coding the data

- Six teams of 4-6 students coded the paraphrases for ‘dream fleet’ using a constant comparative method
- I looked at sets of paraphrases where at least 4 of the teams agreed they should be grouped together
- I noticed that these readings could be defined in terms of the senses of the constituents
- I refined the categories using this criterion
dream fleet

• Dream
  • dream (during sleep)
  • mental state
  • goal
  • ideal

• Fleet
  • vehicles
  • people
  • group
  • brief
dream fleet

• Dream
  • dream (during sleep)
  • mental state
  • goal
  • ideal

• Fleet
  • vehicles
  • people
  • group
  • brief

Group of dreams

* A series of dreams that follow on from each other
**dream fleet**

- **Dream**
  - dream (during sleep)
  - mental state
  - goal
  - ideal

- **Fleet**
  - vehicles
  - people
  - group
  - brief

Group of goals

*A sensation of which one person's goals and dreams all come rushing into perspective*
dream fleet

• Dream
  • dream (during sleep)
  • mental state
  • goal
  • ideal

• Fleet
  • vehicles
  • people
  • group
  • brief

Ideal things
  someone's desirable or dreamt about fleet or group of things
dream fleet

• Dream
  • dream (during sleep)
  • mental state
  • goal
  • ideal

Ideal vehicles
  *top parade of cars*

• Fleet
  • vehicles
  • people
  • group
  • brief
dream fleet

• Dream
  • dream (during sleep)
  • mental state
  • goal
  • ideal

• Fleet
  • vehicles
  • people
  • group
  • brief

Ideal people

*another word for dream team*
dream fleet

• Dream
  • dream (during sleep)
  • mental state
  • goal
  • ideal

• Fleet
  • vehicles
  • people
  • group
  • brief

Brief mental state
imagination gone quickly
• Does the sentential context help to narrow down the options?
dream fleet: modifier (dream)
dream fleet: head (fleet)
dream fleet

• In the sickroom or with Diniz, Nicholas never threw doubt on the arrival of Katelina's dream fleet.
dream fleet
Questions

• What happens with other compounds?
• Are there statistically significant patterns in the interpretation of novel compounds in and out of context?
• Is world knowledge more important than linguistic context?
• To what extent do language users accommodate vagueness in compound formation?
References


Thank you!