

Ice-blue, dog-tired and bad-ass: Nouns as adjective modifiers and intensifiers.

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Keywords: Construction Grammar, Construction Morphology, compounding

In other Germanic languages (e.g. German, Dutch or Swedish), nouns serving as adjective intensifiers are or used to be productive schemas that are often described as affixoids (e.g. Booij 2010; Booij & Hüning 2014; Hüning & Booij 2014; Norde & Goethem 2014). However, in English this schema is less common and not yet systematically explored in the literature. This study aims at filling this gap with an explorative corpus study within a Construction Morphology framework (e.g. Booij 2010). It analyses the present-day usage of English adjectival compounds with a noun serving as the modifier to an adjective, often also with an intensifying function.

Examples range from colour terms like 'ice-blue', 'blood red' or 'pitch-black' that are deeply conventionalized with a very restricted number of collocates (e.g. Partington 1993: 180) and often carry comparative meaning. However, in some cases, the comparison becomes semantically bleached and subject to constructionalization, leaving an intensifying effect as examples such as 'stone-drunk' or 'dog-tired' show (cf. Plag 2003; Hüning & Booij 2014). This is particularly evident in cases where the schema is used for adjectives that are semantically incompatible with the original comparative meaning such as in 'pitch-white'.

Another example is the use of the '-ass' affixoid. This pattern deviates from the more general [NA]A compound schema because in this case the noun as the right constituent modifies the adjective which is head and the left constituent of the compound. The schema originates in metonymic and metaphorical expressions developed from 'bad-assed' to 'bad(-)ass' where the affixoid's meaning tends to be bleached in favour of an intensifying meaning. The semantic bleaching is particularly apparent in examples such as 'wild-ass guess' where the second constituent has just an intensifying function and no longer carries its original metonymic and metaphorical meaning.

The project is based on a quantitative analysis of data retrieved from web corpora and aims at answering the following research questions:

I. Which (sub)schemas can be identified in the English [NA]A construction?

II. How do the subschemas differ regarding collocating adjectives and degree of productivity? This is based on a corpus analysis of collocational preferences of the different subconstructions and different measures of productivity.

III. Which subschemas can be described as affixoids? Which role does analogy play in the coining of new instances?

I argue that English has a range of different subschemas that make use of the general NA compound to modify adjectives. Some of these subschemas have developed into what can fruitfully be described as affixoids where the initial comparative meaning is bleached in favour of a more general intensifying meaning. These schemas are expected to be more productive, being extended to a range of different adjectives and coining more hapax legomena in the corpus.

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