

On Some Idiosyncrasies Exhibited by the Plural of Compounds

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Abstract: A substantial amount of research has been conducted on the subject of English compounding. In the vast majority of situations, compound nouns are made up of two juxtaposed stems. Their behaviour is primarily determined by the degree of fusion of the constituent elements, which, in turn, entails that a rule which will apply to all scenarios is difficult to devise. However, several groupings of compounds, be they endocentric, exocentric, appositional, etc., exhibit a degree of regularity. Generally, one member in the compound functions as a modifier, thus ascribing a specific feature to the other element, namely the head of the compound. As a result, the structure operates as a hyponym of the head since the modifier has constrained the category to which the head refers. The present study scrutinizes several semantic and pragmatic factors which qualify these (ir)regularities.

Keywords: *compounding, irregular plural, invariable nouns, level-ordering, modifier.*

1. Introduction

In the domain of word formation, there seems to exist a paradox in the relationship between inflection and compounding. For instance, significant support justifies the restriction that prevents a regular plural from being inserted inside compound nouns. Forms such as:

*books shelf
*pencils boxes
*girls friends

are regarded as grammatically unacceptable. However, the constraint is no longer enforced and the restrictions appear to be disregarded in certain compound nouns which circulate freely, such as

- new books shelf;¹
- publications catalogue.

¹ One of the posited explanations (cf. Alegre and Gordon, 1996: 65, Jaensch et al., 2014: 324, etc.) is that such structures may be grammatically acceptable in 'the case of compounds modified by an adjective'.

Several methods have been posited in order to allow the identification of acceptable ways of identifying solutions which, in some situations, might presuppose a lexicon-syntax relationship (Alegre and Gordon 1996, Jaensch et al 2014, Berent and Pinker 2007, Haskell et al. 2003, Pinker 1999, etc.).

2. General considerations

In terms of inflection, morphology on the first noun is rather infrequent in N + N compounds. For instance, even though one is a theatre enthusiast and loves going to the theatre, that person is called a *theatre goer*, even though evidence will have it that it is more than just one theatre which is probably frequented. The plural inside the compound, namely **theatres goer*, is considered unacceptable, even though it depicts reality more accurately. The noun phrase accepts plurality only after the *-er* derivation and compounding processes are finalised (cf. Radford et al. 2009: 191, Pinker 1999, Berent and Pinker 2007, Jaensch et al. 2014). The only acceptable form of plurality is *theatre goers*, thus focusing on the multiplicity of persons rather than the locations they go to. Radford et al. provide similar examples and note that

it is a well-known observation that the simple nouns appearing in the compounds *taxi-driver*, *road-mender*, *horse-rider* cannot be pluralised (**taxis-driver*, **roads-mender*, etc.), despite the fact that a taxi-driver usually drives more than one taxi, a road-mender typically mends many roads, etc. (...) the formation of compounds like those (above) is entirely rule-governed. Consultation of a lexical entry produces the base form of a verb, which undergoes *-er* suffixation. Further consultation of the lexicon produces a noun which then enters into a compound with the derived nominal (... the processes take place in this order rather than the reverse). We now consider the interaction of these processes with plural formation. (Radford et al. 2009: 191)

This process entails that, even though the modifier noun is employed semantically to denote plurality, it is the singular or base form which is to be used in the compound. Nonetheless, there appears to exist no constraints on the following examples, and plurality is rendered as acceptable in noun compounds such as:

goods train	blues band
goods wagon	blues musician
goods yard	blues singer,

which can even allow of pluralization of the head of the compound, that is *goods trains*, *goods wagons*, *goods yards*, *blues bands*, *blues musicians*, *blues singers*. The plural form inside the compound is not part of the regular plural inflections, since *goods* and *blues* are plural invariable or uncountable nouns. In fact, they behave as substantivized adjectives when receiving the inflection, their singular form (*good* and *blue*, respectively) pertaining to the adjective class². However, the *-s* inflection is not dropped even though the first

² Note that both *good* and *blue* may assume nominal roles in contexts such as ‘for the good of X’, ‘for one’s own good’, ‘to have a blue with somebody’, ‘a shade of blue’, etc.

part of a compound comprises a noun which, seemingly, may also exhibit a singular form. Take, for instance, compounds with *customs* or *arms*:

customs clearance	arms deal/trade
customs duty	arms control
customs building/post	arms embargo
customs officer/agent/official	arms race
customs declaration/form/formality	arms industry
customs control	

Even though the singular form nouns *custom* and *arm* are in free circulation, they are not the corresponding singular counterparts of *customs* and *arms*, their plural forms entailing semantic shift and thus implying that there is a distinct lexeme from the one associated with the form without the inflection³. When plurality of the compounds is envisaged, the head nouns simply assume the plural form whenever grammatically acceptable: *customs controls*, *customs duties*, *customs officers*, *customs formalities*, *arms deals*, *arms races*, *arms dealers*, etc. Lederer (1999: 22) (apud Pinker 1999: 180) phrases this into a humorously devised interrogation:

<<Doesn't it seem just a little loopy that we can make amends but never just one amend; that no matter how carefully we comb through the annals of history, we can never discover just one annal; that we can never pull a shenanigan, be in a doldrum, or get a jitter, a willy, a delerium tremen, a jimjam, or a heebie-jeebie?>> Lederer is alluding to pluralia tantum. (Lederer 1999: 22, apud Pinker 1999: 180)

Plural invariable/uncountable nouns do not always exhibit consistent behaviour in N + N compounds. Whereas the above examples include the plural form of the number defective noun inside the compound, namely the first noun used in the plural form, there are instances when the plural invariable noun drops the -s inflection. Consider nouns such as *binoculars*, *spectacles* or *trousers*, which, when used in compounds, based on the aforementioned examples, should just be juxtaposed with the head noun and create combinations of the kind:

*binoculars glass	*trousers leg
*spectacles case	*trousers bottom
*trousers pocket	

Such defective nouns are constrained to the employment of the plural form due to the fact that either the possible counterpart singular noun does not exist in the language⁴, or, if it does, it entirely depicts a distinct semantic implication⁵. However, when used in premodifying position in the compound, they assume a singular form: *a binocular glass*, *a spectacle case*, *a trouser*

³ *Customs* and *arms* are employed in these compounds as plural invariable/uncountable nouns ending in -s, thus distinct from the regular plural forms the countable nouns *arm* and *custom* assume.

⁴ There are no nouns exhibiting the form *trouser* or *binocular*.

⁵ Even though there is a singular noun form *spectacle*, its regular plural, *spectacles*, and the plural invariable *spectacles* are merely homographs.

pocket, trouser leg, trouser bottom. A possible explanation may be formulated underlining that, from a grammatical and phonological point of view, they convey the characteristics specific to plurality, although from the semantic perspective they are regarded as singular. This perspective advocates, according to Haskell et al., a prediction that: h

bifurcate pluralia tanta⁶, which are phonologically plural but semantically singular, should be the complement of irregular plurals such as mice (phonologically singular but semantically plural). Thus, like irregulars, bifurcate pluralia tanta have one strike against them, and therefore should be intermediate in acceptability between singulars and regular plurals. According to the level-ordering account, because these nouns are idiosyncratic forms, they should be stored in the lexicon, and therefore pattern with singulars⁷. (Haskell et al. 2003: 132)

These forms of plural invariable nouns are perceived and interpreted by some grammarians (cf. Pinker 1999 etc.) as stored or memorised roots, due to the fact that a noun such as *binoculars* is not formed by means of inflecting *binocular* for plurality. They formulated hypothesis is that the plural invariable nouns are frequently employed in premodifying position within the N+N compound with their root form depleted of -s due to their ‘regular-sounding phonology’ (Haskell et al. 2003: 130, Jaensch et al. 2014: 322). As Pop (2021: 83) notes, ‘in several situations it becomes evident that the phonological host and the structural and semantic host are not always identical’. This does not mean that they appear only with this form inside compounds, but rather that, on a preference scale, the singular forms of regular nouns are favoured extensively over plural invariable nouns.

Nevertheless, the constraints regarding plurality are, at times, related to lexical entries. As Berent and Pinker note,

interestingly, the reluctance to use plural nonheads is not manifested by irregulars, as we see in contrasts like *mice-infested* (cf. **rats-infested*), *teethmarks* (cf. **claws-marks*), and *men-bashing* (cf. *guys-bashing*)’ (...). According to the words-and-rules theory, the difference between regular and irregular plurals inside compounds is significant because it exemplifies a qualitative difference between the psychological processes that generate regular and irregular forms. Word-word compounds exclude plurals that are generated as complex inflected words by the grammar, but admit plurals that are stored in the lexicon as simple roots or stems. (Berent and Pinker 2007: 130, 131)

Irregular plurals are, as a matter of principle, more likely to be employed in the plural of compounds (cf. Radford et al. 2009, Alegre and Gordon 1996, etc.).

3. Level-ordering and compounding

The constraints specific to inflection and compounding may account for and explain, at least partially, the regulations pertaining to word-formation.

⁶ Haskell et al. (2003: 132) employ the concept of ‘bifurcate pluralia tanta’ to refer to ‘bifurcate objects, i.e. objects with joined symmetrical parts, such as *pants, scissors, and binoculars*’.

⁷ A different look is shared by Jaensch et al. (2014: 322) who note that ‘the constraint does not hold for so-called nonbifurcate pluralia tantum nouns such as *news* or *clothes* that tend to maintain their /s, z/ final codas inside compounds (e.g. *news reader, clothes hanger*)’.

Kiparsky (1982) (apud Berent and Pinker 2007: 132, Alegre and Gordon, 1996: 66) attempts to regulate the phenomenon by means of introducing the notion of 'level' of rules, each level (out of the possible three) occurring in an ordered fashion. According to this principle, inserting regular plural forms before the nouns are compounded is not feasible due to the encroachment on the ordered levels, as inflectional plurality is a rule generated within level 3, whereas compounding occurs within level 2. Considering that the order of the levels is not observed and backtracking seems to be involved, the addition of the -s inflection is deemed ungrammatical. The ordered occurrence of the levels entails for level 1 rules specific to derivation which affect and alter the stem. This level comprises even irregular forms such as irregular plurals, namely words which have to be memorized or learnt by heart as they are generated in the lexicon rather than grammar. The fact that they are generated at level 1 may constitute a valid explanation for their acceptance of plural forms inside compounds, even before compounding occurs. This constitutes, in fact, level 2, including compounding and other regular derivational regulations. Level 3 incorporates inflectional morphology regulations, including the insertion of regular plurals. An oversimplified schemata of the level ordering may look like:

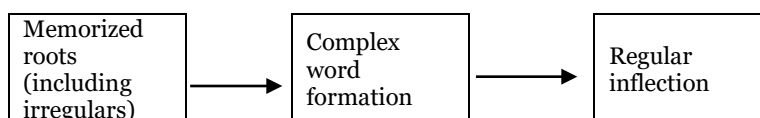


Table 1. Kiparsky's three-levelled schema rules (adapted from Pinker 1999: 180)

Sneed (2002: 620) enlarges the schemata and provides several properties of the three level-ordered rules, exemplifying them:

	Examples	Properties
Level 1	+ion, +ous, +th, in+ mouse, mice, arms, rat	Derivational, irregular, semantically idiosyncratic, host deforming, stress shift, vowel reduction
Level 2	#ness, #ism, #er, #ist, un#, compounding mouse eater, mice eater, arms race, rat eater	Derivational, non-deforming, (more) semantically predictable, productive
Level 3	#s, #ed, #ing Mouse eaters, mice eaters, arms races, rat eaters	Regular inflections, non-deforming, semantically predictable

Table 2. Examples and properties of level-ordered rules (adapted from Sneed 2002: 621)

According to the three ordered levels and Pinker's exemplification,

the word *mice*, stored as a root in the first box, is available as an input to the compounding rule in the second box, where it is joined to *infested* to yield *mice-infested*. *Rats*, however, is *not* stored as a memorized root in the first box; it is formed from *rat* by a regular inflectional rule in the third box, too late to feed the compounding rule in the second box. Hence, we get *rat-infested* but not *rats-infested*. (Pinker 1999: 181)

Therefore, irregular plural nouns may be employed with their plural form inside the compound noun since they are generated within level 1, thus one level before the compounding stage⁸. Due to the fact that regular plurals are generated only within level 3, thus only after the compounding stage is finalized, they can no longer be employed with the regular plural form inside the compound. This does not, however, entail that irregular plural forms are frequently employed inside compounds. In fact, notwithstanding the nature of the premodifier in the compound, be it regular or irregular, the preferred form of the noun is, in the vast majority of situations, the singular one. A feasible explanation may be formulated along the intrinsic role of compounds and their semantic inferences. They are normally employed to depict kinds rather than individuals, namely, to refer to the concept involved instead of depicting the multiplicity of actants. For instance, the compound *a dog-breeder*, where both the head noun *breeder* and the premodifying noun *dog* are used with their singular form, does not depict a person who breeds one dog, but rather the interaction between the referent and the initial nonhead noun. As a result, as Berent and Pinker remark,

the base form of English nouns are not so much singular, referring to one individual, as unmarked for number, referring to the kind denoted by the noun. (...) As a result, in most cases the base form of the noun is more semantically appropriate in the compound. (Berent and Pinker 2007:133)

The studies show that speakers would rather make use of singular form nouns to the detriment of plural invariable ones, finding them more appropriate, and, at the same time, favouring pluralia tantum nouns over regular plural nouns (cf. Haskell et al. 2003: 133).

This sort of generalization can be refuted by some counterexamples such as *enemies list*, *claims application*, *counterexamples list*, or *publications catalogue* (cf. Berent and Pinker 2007: 163, Alegre and Gordon 1996: 69, Haskell et al. 2003: 123, etc.). Various explanations have been forwarded attempting to explain particular compounds, one of the proposed solutions for *publications catalogues* being that *publications* in this context denotes not a multitude of instances of the same copy but rather different publications, while, at the same time, exhibiting a higher level of abstractness (cf. Sneed 2002: 624) in comparison to more specialized terms such as *booklet*, *magazine*, etc.

The theory advocated by Alegre and Gordon (1996: 69) posits that there are at least two compounding constructions in the English language, this enabling the integration and explanation for the occasional presence of the regular plurals inside compounds. One structure comprises the compounding of a root or stem to a noun, whereas the other one compounds a whole phrase to a noun. The former disfavours regular plurals inside the compound, whereas the latter allows of regular plurals in noun phrases of the kind *a seat-of-the-pants executive*.

⁸ This explains the grammatically acceptable plural forms inside compounds specific to pluralia tantum nouns such as *alms-giving*, *customs officer*, *arms embargo*, *goods train*, *blues musician*, etc., as well as to irregular plural nouns such as *teeth marks* (cf. Alegre and Gordon 1996: 69)

4. A generalized approach

In their vast majority, compound nouns consist of two juxtaposed stems. Compound noun combinations are represented graphically in three different ways: an unbroken orthographic word spelt solid, two orthographic words, or hyphenated words. Due to the fact that the behaviour of compounds largely depends on the degree of fusion of the constituting elements, Duțescu-Coliban (1986: 184) notes that a rule to cover all situations can hardly be given. A certain regularity, however, can be detected in particular groups of compounds. The most general rules that can be drawn are:

4.1. The final element of the compound receives the –s inflection:

a) when the last element in the compound is a **noun**:

babysitters	box-offices
boyfriends	deputy marshals
footsteps	inmates
grandparents	lovebirds
horsemen	man-eaters
housekeepers	pencil boxes
lawmakers	screwdrivers
showrooms	snack-bars
skinheads	talk-shows
sweethearts	theatre-goers
toothaches	woman-haters

b) when none of the elements making up the compound is a noun, it is the final element that will receive the inflection for the plural. Irrespective of the part of speech the constituents happen to belong to, if their fusion is (almost) complete, the compound behaves and is considered, particularly in informal usage, as a single noun and pluralizes the last element in the combination.

die-hards	break-downs
dugouts	castaways
flashbacks	grown-ups
forget-me-nots	hand-outs
good-for-nothings	knockouts
merry-go-rounds	newborns
outputs	ready-mades
roundabouts	show-offs
stick-in-the-muds	stand-bys
will-o'-the-wisps	take-offs

Some collocations, having been employed for such an extensive amount of time, have reached a stage where they can be considered compounds nowadays. It is the case of –ful compounds, such as *handful*, formerly ‘*a hand full of*’. They observe the standard constraints imposed on the plural of compounds, that is: *spoonfuls*, *mouthfuls*, *handfuls*, *bucketful*, etc.

Note that reduplicative compounds are also regularly pluralized in the last element. This is the case of ablauts: *chitchats*, *knick-knacks* or rimes: *boogie-woogies*, *fuddy-duddies*, *walkie-talkies*.

Compounds made up by means of coordination by *and* form the plural by adding the -s inflection to both elements:

ins-and-outs	rights-and-lefts
pros-and-cons	ups-and-downs

On the other hand, compounds referring to names of drinks behave differently, preferring the inflection for the plural to be added to the last element: *whisky-and-sodas*, *gin-and-tonics*.

4.2. The first element is pluralized with some Latinate compounds and other patterns which include a post-modifier or a final particle. The following combinations are observed:

a) noun + prepositional phrase:

aids-de-camp	coats-of-mail
attorneys-at-law	commanders-in-chief
coats-of-arms ⁹	editors-in-chief
fathers-in-law	maids-of-honour
grants-in-aid	maids-of-all-work
ladies-in-waiting	sons-in-law ¹⁰
men-of-war	

b) noun + adjective:

letters credential	heirs apparent
poets laureate	heirs presumptive
solicitors general	notaries-public
vicars-general	postmasters-general

There is considerable vacillation, however, concerning the plural of this type of compounds made up of noun+ adjective:

court marshal – courts marshal / court marshals
attorney general – attorneys general / attorney generals
knight –errant – knights-errant/ knight-errants
poet laureate – poets laureate/ poet laureates

British English normally pluralizes the first element: *courts marshal*, *attorneys general*, *knights-errant*, whereas in American English such words often take the mark of the plural with the last element. Pârlog (1995:13) shows that British English seems to be falling into line, and *court marshals*, *attorney generals*, *knight -errants* sound quite natural.

Similarly, Hulban (2001: 55) notices the same predisposition for the following compounds:

⁹ The singular form is *coat-of-arms*.

¹⁰ The pluralization of *in-law* terms in the last element has become the standard tendency in informal American English. In British English: *sons-in-law*, whereas in American English: *son-in-laws*. This kind of plural is widely used nowadays.

mother superior – mothers superior/ mother superiors
sergeant-major - sergeants-major/ sergeant-majors

Rather more resistant to the tendency are the names of officials called *General* in civil life: *Solicitor General*, *Governor General*, *Postmaster General*, *Paymaster General*, whose plural keeps being marked by adding the –s inflection to the first element. Note, however, the spelling remarks for *attorney general* above.

For a few of the compounds, both elements will take the plural morpheme:

Lord Chancellor – Lords Chancellors
Lord Justice – Lord Justices
Knight-Templar¹¹ – Knights Templars
Lord Commissioner of the Treasury – Lords Commissioners of the Treasury

c) noun + adverbial particle.

In literary English, agent nouns in –*er* which are derived from a verb and an adverbial particle attain plurality by means of the addition of the –s inflection to the first element of the compound. The sample principle is applied to –*ing* verbal nouns followed by an adverbial particle.

droppers-in	carryings-on
goers-out	comings-in
lookers-on	goings-on
passers-by	

4.3. Both the first and last elements are pluralized. This appears when the first element in the compound is one of the nouns *man*, *woman*, *gentleman*, and *yeoman*. These appositional compounds are predicative in deep structure and serve as gender markers. It is, therefore, important to realize that this rule applies only if the first element denotes the sex of the compound:

gentleman-farmer – gentlemen-farmers
manservant – menservants
man-singer – men-singers
man-writer – men-writers
woman-doctor – women-doctors
woman-client – women-clients
woman-driver – women-drivers
yeoman-farmer – yeomen-farmers

It is interesting to mention that personal gender nouns are restricted not only to the above choices. Compounds such as *boyfriend*, *girlfriend*, *boy-king*, etc. still denote the sex of the compound, yet their pluralized form is not accepted inside the compound: **boysfriends*, **girlsfriends*, **boys-kings* (Pinker 1999: 179). The connection between lever-ordering and compounds refutes the possibility of having regular plural forms, such as *girls* or *boys*, generated la

¹¹ The plural form may also be rendered for the first element: *Knights Templar*.

level 1, that is before compounding (cf. Berent and Pinker 2007: 132, Alegre and Gordon 1996: 66, Haskell et al. 2003: 123), whereas irregular plural nouns, such as *women*, *men*, *yeoman*, *gentlemen*, etc., as Sneed points out,

are already stored in their plural form at Level 1, along with pluralia tantum. They are thus available for all Level 2 processes. Regular nouns are (...) available for Level 2 processes, however, only in their singular form because only that is available at Level 1. This correctly predicts that regular plurals cannot appear in compounds, but irregular plurals and pluralia tantum are optionally allowed. (Sneed 2002: 621)

Note that when compounds with *man* and *woman* are not predicative in deep structure but rather objects in deep structure, the first element of the compound does not function as gender marker. If the sex of the compound is not directly linked to the first element, the plural morpheme goes to the second element. Thus: *man-eater* – *man-eaters*, as the first element in the compound does not mark the gender. It does not denote a male person, but rather any person, be it male or female, who eats human meat.

The same explanation also applies to: *woman-hater* – *woman-haters*.¹²

Even though the first element denotes gender, it does not refer to the doer of the action, the agent, but rather to the recipient, which functions as object in the deep structure: a person who hates women. The gender of the misogynist person is probably male and not female, if we apply the rule. This is, however, irrelevant to the discussion, as the rule stipulates that the first element, in this case *woman*, should denote the gender of the agent. As *woman* denotes here the object rather than the agent, only the last element receives the plural morpheme.

To better illustrate the discrepancy between the predicative versus objective use in deep structure, compare the plural forms and the meanings of *woman doctor*. They can be rendered in two ways, with distinct interpretations in each case.

1. *women doctors*
2. *woman doctors*

The former applies the plural morpheme to both elements due to the fact that the first element, namely *woman*, is predicative in deep structure, i.e. *the doctor is a woman*, and thus behaves as a gender marker indicating the sex of the person, a female in this case. The latter, receives the inflection for the plural only for the last element due to the fact that the first element, again the noun *woman*, functions as object in the deep structure, i.e. *a doctor who treats women*, *a doctor for women*, and therefore does not denote the gender of the person, which can be either male or female.

Other possible compounds functioning on generally the same lines are:

no gender marker	gender marker
woman killers	women killers

¹² The plural form *women-haters* is also possible, even though the meaning is rather different.

woman haters	women haters
lady-killers	ladies killers

The first column, as the heading suggests, denotes not the sex of the person but the recipient of the action. Thus, the first and second compounds denote either ‘persons who kill/murder women’, or ‘misogynists’, ‘persons who hate women’. The same compounds in the second column, carrying gender markers and thus identifying the sex of the persons, have a totally different implication. The first compound, *women killers*, depicts ‘killers/murderess(es) who are female’. If they murder other women or not, the compound no longer specifies.

The second compound, *women haters*, refers to ‘haters/persons full of hatred of the feminine gender’. It is possible, nevertheless, that these women do not hate only other women per se, but probably also men.

Rather misleading is the last compound. Even though it does appear synonymous with *woman killers*, the semantic implication of *lady-killers* is altogether dissimilar. It is actually the pluralized form of a ‘man who is extremely attractive to women’, ‘woman lover’, ‘womanizer, philanderer’, ‘a man who takes advantage of women’, ‘a ladies’ man’. *Ladies killers*, on the other hand, is synonymous with *women killers* exhibiting similar characteristics.

5. Conclusions

Despite an envisaged predilection towards a grammatical generalization undertaking explanations which comprise a vast array of situations, the formulated arguments supporting a deeply-rooted disinclination of employing regular plural or plural invariable nouns inside compounds are, at times, undermined by scores of counterexamples infringing on and restricting the generalized regulations. Further research is necessitated in order to hypothesize and accommodate, if not altogether imply distinct processes for regular and irregular plural formation and their pattern inside compounds.

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