

## A new perspective on compounding as a universal

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The focus of this talk is the question of whether compounding is a universal of language. However, the goal is not so much to provide a definitive answer to this question as to raise some principled issues related to the nature of language universals and their role in grammatical theorizing. Noun-noun compounding is used as a proxy for compounding-in-general, both because this is the focus of my research, and because I want to approach the question from a new perspective. Limiting the question in this way can be justified by the fact that NN compounds appear to be by far the largest subclass of compounds.

While no-one has proposed compounding as an absolute universal, it is often suggested that it is a ‘near-universal’ or that it is ‘a common word formation process in all languages’ (implying that it is, in fact, universal). However, the evidence for such claims is slight, to put it mildly, and none of the cross-linguistic studies performed to date provide grounds for drawing any firm conclusions. As Bauer (2017) points out, the problem is compounded (!) by the fact that there is no overall agreement on the definition of a compound. Another critical issue is how prevalent compounding has to be in a given language in order to count as evidence for the ubiquity of compounding; i.e. should a language such as West Greenlandic, with just one attested compound, count as evidence?

Rather than starting from information provided by grammars, the present study – based on a varied sample of 100 languages – takes an empirically-based, onomasiological approach within a framework informed by Haspelmath’s (2010) notion of comparative concepts. The function of NN compounding is taken to be the formation of new lexical items by means of nominal modification (Croft 2021). From this perspective, compounding (e.g. deu *eisen-bahn* [iron-way] ‘railway’) is simply one of several different strategies, alongside the adpositional (fra *chemin de fer* [way PREP iron]), adjectival (rus *želez-naja doroga* [iron.ADJZ road]), genitival (kap *kil.o.s hino* [iron.OBL.GEN way]), and others. These four examples represent four types of a cross-linguistic construction called ‘binominal lexeme’.

In this talk I present a typology of binominal lexemes and characterise each of the binominal types in terms of the form of the nominal constituents and the form, locus and number of markers. I then discuss the frequencies of each type, their areal distribution, and the degree to which they compete within individual languages. I will show that noun-noun compounding is *not* a universal and that, based on the present sample, other binominal word-formation strategies are preferred in about half of the world’s languages. This prompts some reflections about what it actually means to be a ‘universal’, and the suggestion that the question of whether a p-language ‘has X’ is more usefully answered in terms of a tendency, or preference, rather than as an absolute, binary ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

**References:** Bauer, Laurie (2017). *Compounds and compounding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Croft, William (2021). *Morphosyntax: Constructions of the world’s languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Haspelmath, Martin (2010). Comparative concepts and descriptive categories in crosslinguistic studies. *Language* 86(3), 663–687.