

Noun incorporation in English deverbal compounding: Lexical and semantic factors in incorporability*

Pilar Guerrero Medina
University of Córdoba, Spain

1 Introduction

Mithun (1984: 848) uses the term “incorporation” to refer to “a particular type of compounding in which a V and a N combine to form a new V”, where “the N bears a specific semantic relationship to its host V”. The example from Mokilese in (1) illustrates Mithun’s type I incorporation (or “lexical compounding”). The independent object in (1a) contrasts with the construction in (1b), where the verb and the incorporated noun are juxtaposed “to form an especially tight bond” (1984: 849):¹

- (1) a. *Ngoah kohkoa oaring-kai.*
I grind coconut-these
‘I am grinding these coconuts.’
- b. *Ngoah ko oaring.*
I grind coconut
‘I am coconut-grinding.’

There are three further kinds of incorporation in Mithun’s 1984 typology: in type II (“the manipulation of case”) an oblique object is advanced to the (vacated) position of the incorporated object; type III (“the manipulation of discourse structure”) serves to background information within a particular portion of discourse; finally, in type IV (“classificatory noun incorporation”) the incorporated (generic) noun acts like a qualifier of the verb.

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¹ Mithun’s type I incorporation (or “lexical compounding”) also includes cases of morphological compounding in languages where the bond between the verb and incorporated noun is much tighter than in simple juxtaposition.

Accepting Feist's 2013 argument that noun incorporation is common and productive in English,² this squib explores the main lexical and semantic motivating factors of incorporability in English deverbal compounding.

2 Noun incorporation in English deverbal compounding

Drawing mainly on Mithun (1984), Rice & Prideux (1991) and Feist (2013), this section touches upon the (interrelated) issues of name-worthiness, referentiality and transitivity in their relation to deverbal compounding as a form of noun incorporation in English.

2.1 Lexical function of noun incorporation

According to Mithun (1984: 848), “verbal compounds are coined as names of recognizable activities”, as shown in (1b), where the NV compound refers to the institutionalized activity of coconut-grinding. Verbs containing incorporated nouns “indicate unitary, institutionalized activities” where the objects “simply modify the type of activity under discussion” (1984: 850). The same seems to apply to many (synthetic) deverbal compounds, regarded as instances of object incorporation in English (see Guerrero Medina 2018).

Rice & Prideaux's (1991: 284) examples show that, while finite verb forms frequently resist incorporation in English, the degree of acceptability increases for incorporated non-finite formations without a temporal profile:

- (2) a. *He *weightlifts/weightlifted* professionally.
 b. *Weightlifting* is a good complement to aerobic exercise.
 c. He's a champion *weightlifter*.
- (3) a. *They *piano-move/piano-moved* during the music festival.
 b. *Piano moving* is hard work.
 c. The *piano-movers* were well paid.

While the (a) sentences in (2) and (3) illustrate unacceptable cases of incorporation, gerunds and *-er* agentives in (c) and (d) are felicitous constructions in English. Note that the examples in (2c) and (3c) illustrate *-er* nominalizations, where the incorporated argument is a direct participant. However, deverbal *-er* compounds also allow for other semantic interpretations, including formations such as *sea robber* or *night walker*, where the incorporated noun has a locative or temporal function (see Mackenzie 1996: 139).

² Feist's 2013 four structural types of incorporating constructions in English manifest properties associated to Mithun's types I-III, and, perhaps less clearly, of type IV.

The lexical function of incorporation, as defined by Mithun (1984), corresponds to Downing's (1977) notion of "name-worthiness". Citing Zimmer (1971), Downing notes that compounds are used "to denote 'relevant categories' of the speaker's experience" (1977: 823). We have seen that lexicalized incorporated forms frequently occur as *-er* and *-ing* nominalizations, as illustrated in (2) and (3), but it is not easy to determine when (and why) a novel compound becomes a lexicalized compound with a unitary function (see Downing 1977: 839). While compounds such as *cheese-eater* or *meat-eater* can be considered to denote name-worthy categories in English,³ *butter-eater* does not seem to have acquired such clear status as a unit (see Matthews 1991: 84).

However, as Downing observes, "the name-worthiness of the category denoted does not serve as an absolute constraint on the formation of a compound, but rather as a constraint on the contextual range within which the compound may be used" (1977: 838). Note that a (non-lexicalized) compound like *the sandwich eater* in (4) is simply a "deictic" compound (Downing 1977: 899), based on a relationship that has been temporarily encoded by the speaker in the compound name:

- (4) You look as lovely as the Hoover Dam today, Ellen. (...) Would you care for a cheddar and flounder open-faced sandwich? No, thanks. But I'm melting the cheese with the radiant power of your glowing beauty. Well... Thanks. When finally, the impossible happened, and Ellen said yes to a date with *the sandwich eater*. (COCA 1993)⁴

We could say that *the sandwich eater* in (4) does not denote a "name-worthy category" but represents a "name-worthy entity" (Downing 1977: 823; my emphasis).

The "unitary" function of noun incorporation is often used figuratively in English (see Feist 2013: 174). For example, the lexical compound *cherry-picking* has developed a (pejorative) figurative interpretation:⁵

³ The name-worthiness and unitary function of the compound *meat eater* are clearly manifested in the creation of the blend "meater", as attested in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) in 1920: *The "meater" lives at higher pressure and exhausts his energy quicker than the non-meat-eater.*

OED s.v. "meater (n.), sense 2," July 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7937231476>

⁴ Examples marked COCA have been taken from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (Davies, 2008-).

⁵ According to the OED, the figurative use of *cherry-pick* with the meaning "to choose selectively (...) from what is available" is from 1923: *The agreement is now in force. We cannot cherry-pick any part of it.*

OED, s.v. "cherry-pick (v.)," July 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9725456802>.

- (5) Even beyond the *cherry-picking*, Romney is wrong to say that 20 million Americans will “lose” their insurance. (COCA 2012)

As a nominal compound which denotes a “recognisable” activity, *cherry-picking* in (5) illustrates Mithun’s type I incorporation. However, the way in which “cherry” qualifies the finite verb *cherry-pick* in (6), used here as an inflected transitive verb form, resembles the classificatory relation in Mithun’s type IV, where “a generic N is incorporated to qualify the V” (1984: 874):

- (6) We *cherry-picked* only the most important data points, focusing especially on those aspects where improvements are needed. (COCA 2012)

Incorporating forms such as *spoon-feed* or *spoon-feeding*, mostly used in a disapproving sense, as in (7), also reveal how noun incorporation can result in “the enhancement of figurative language” (Feist 2013: 175):

- (7) a. You need to *spoon-feed* them the information and make sure they understand. (COCA 2019)
 b. Flat Earth News made some strong points about the increasing dependence of cash-strapped newspapers on government *spoon-feeding* (...). (COCA 2014)

2.2 *Semantic factors of incorporability: referentiality and transitivity*

The morphosyntactic form of the incorporated construction has an effect in the incorporated noun, reducing its individual salience both syntactically and semantically (Mithun 1984: 850; Rijhoff 2002: 56; Smit 2005: 102; Feist 2013: 163). As shown in (8), the syntactic and semantic reduction of the body part *hand(s)*, incorporated into the predicator in *hand-hold*, allows the affected participant (*people*) to assume a “primary case role” (Mithun 1984: 858) in the clause:⁶

- (8) Her job was to help people make the connections they needed if they were Greens, or cautiously *hand-hold* them through the delays. (COCA, in Feist 2013: 170)

The referentiality of the incorporated noun is, however, “a subtle issue” (Mithun 1986: 34). As noted earlier, *sandwich* in (4) refers to an entity which has been

⁶ Formations such as *hand-hold* or *spoon-feed(ing)* resemble Mithun’s type II incorporation, “used to manipulate the assignment of case roles within clauses” (1984: 890). See also Feist (2013: 160) and Smit (2005: 111).

presented in discourse: *the sandwich eater* is “the eater of the cheddar and flounder open-faced sandwich” and not “the eater of sandwiches”. The fact that incorporated objects are unmarked for number and definiteness in English does not necessarily mean that they are non-specific.⁷

The question of (high) transitivity also deserves consideration in this connection. According to Mithun (1984: 863), “a certain degree of affectedness must be predicated of the incorporated object to license incorporation”. Rice & Prideaux (1991: 289) also regard the affectedness of the object as a semantic factor in incorporability: “Incorporated objects are characteristically indefinite and nonreferential, but the underlying action must be construed as sufficiently dynamic, effective, and directed towards a good direct object or else incorporation is disfavored”.

However, low transitivity does not always act as a constraining factor in English. The difference between *dog-killer* (derived from the highly transitive verb *kill*) and *dog-bather* cannot be explained in terms of the degree of affectedness of the object. We could say of someone that they are a *dog-bather*, if we were using the term to denote a profession. Also, in the metonymic compound *cliffhanger*, where the incorporated form is not a direct participant, the propositional form corresponding to the original use of the term (“someone hanged from a cliff”) does not manifest high transitivity. It is rather the salience of the event, as perceived by the community of speakers, that determines its potential to denote a name-worthy category.

3 Final remarks

This squib has examined noun incorporation as a common type of word compounding process in English, “with a variety of forms going far beyond those that Mithun and others have given such as *baby-sitting* and *berry-picking*” (Feist 2013: 165).

Name-worthiness, determined by the salience of the event denoted by the compound, can be said to act as the main lexical motivating factor of noun incorporation in English. As Mithun (1984: 848) notes: “Compounding is done

⁷ This is also the case in Mithun’s type III incorporation, where the identity of the incorporated object is often established in the preceding context. Glosses and translations for her (59) example from Huathla Natuatl are: Speaker A: *Where is knife I I-it-want now* ~ ‘Where is the knife? I want it now.’ / Speaker B: *He (he)it-knife-cut bread* ~ ‘He cut the bread with it (the knife).’ However, as Mithun (1984: 866) herself observes, in this type of construction, the I(ncorporated) N[ouns] themselves are not, strictly speaking, referential.”

for a reason. Some entity, quality, or activity is recognized sufficiently often to be considered name-worthy in its own right.”

According to Mithun (1986: 33), “[i]ncorporation as a stylistic device is notoriously fragile”. However, the transparency and compositionality of noun incorporation, as well as its unitary function, encourage the use of innovative formations, frequently amenable to figurative interpretations in English.

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