Abstract The ‘traditional’ distinction of compounds into endocentric (Eng. door-knob) and exocentric (pickpocket) is based on the presence or absence of a head constituent (Bloomfield, Language, Holt, New York, 1933); since the early eighties, the syntactic notion of ‘head’ has been extended also to derivation, claiming that English derivational suffixes, as e.g. -ness, are heads, either in an absolute sense or in a categorial sense (see Williams Linguist Inq 12:245–274, 1981; Lieber On the organization of the lexicon, Indiana university Linguistics Club, Bloomington, 1981; Lieber, in Yearbook of morphology 1989, Foris, Dordrecht, 1989; among others). In this paper, we shall first review some key issues in the morphological notion of head, illustrating well-known problematic cases, and then we shall discuss the Construction Morphology approach to headedness in derivation and compounding (Booij in The Oxford handbook of compounding, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009; Booij, in Cross-disciplinary issues in compounding, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2010a, 2010 Booij, Construction morphology, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010b). The stipulation of a hierarchical lexicon with subschemas expressing intermediate generalizations is a powerful theoretical device in accounting for a phenomenon as headedness variation, as we shall show with a Vietnamese case study; also, inconsistencies in word-class assignment in derivation will be dealt with in a constructionist perspective. Moreover, we shall discuss the consequences of a constructionist approach to the distinction between compounding and derivation.

Keywords Compounding · Derivation · Construction Morphology · Head · Inheritance · Vietnamese · Italian

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Constructions and headedness in derivation and compounding

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1 Introduction

The notion of ‘head’, a central one in modern linguistics since American Structuralism (Scalise and Fábregas 2010), is the basis of the fundamental distinction between endocentric compounds, i.e. compound words containing a head (Eng. door knob), and exocentric compounds, i.e. compounds in which none of the constituents may be regarded as the head (Eng. turnkey), which dates back to Bloomfield (1933). Also, at least since the early eighties, some linguists have proposed that heads play a role in other areas of morphology too; by the mechanism of ‘percolation’, a derivational suffix as Eng. -ness projects the world class characterization of noun onto the complex words it helps to form, as e.g. happiness (Zwicky 1985; see Lieber 1981, 1989); such affixes, thus, are said to be the head of the derived word.

The application of a syntactic notion of head to morphology, however, has generated much discussion in the literature. In the early days, it was also assumed that the head in a complex word was consistently located on the righthand side (Williams 1981); it was later suggested that the position of the head is a parameter, i.e. it is either to the left or to the right, depending on the language (Lieber 1981; Selkirk 1982). Still, in several languages, as e.g. Mandarin and Vietnamese, we have both left-headed and right-headed compounds which are productively formed and, thus, a parametric approach proves to be inadequate (Hoeksema 1992; Ceccagno and Basciano 2007; Booij 2010a, b; among others). In often-quoted papers such as Zwicky (1985) and Bauer (1990), strong doubts are cast on the feasibility of defining derivational suffixes as heads and, indeed, on the equivalence between syntactic and morphological heads. The head of a complex word has been defined according to different points of view: semantics (a compound is a hyponym of its head; see Allen 1978), ‘formal’ features (a complex word has the same word class as its head), the position of inflectional markers (the head is the “morphosyntactic locus”), or a combination of those aspects (Scalise et al. 2009). Given the difficulties which are met in defining the head of a complex word, a deconstruction of this notion has also been proposed: for instance, according to a recent proposal, in a complex word one may identify a semantic head, a categorial head and a morphological head, which do not necessarily coincide (Scalise et al. 2009; Scalise and Fábregas 2010; cf. Di Sciullo and Williams 1987; Scalise 1994). This, however, amounts to implying a relevant difference between syntactic and morphological heads, since the former are apparently “always absolute and never relative” (Beard 1998).