Auspicious Compounds[*]

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides additional support for the widely held view that the first member of a synthetic compound cannot correspond to the external argument of the (verb within the) head. Apparent counter-examples of the form *city-employee* from Lieber (2001) are re-examined and contrasted with minimally different examples; the conclusion is that there is a subtle, yet I believe secure, contrast in meaning between the acceptable and unacceptable cases, and that the acceptable cases do not involve a true external argument.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely held that the non-head member of a synthetic or verbal compound may be associated with a theta-role of the (verb in the) head. In canonical examples such as *truck driver* and *meat-eating*, the non-head satisfies the Theme theta-role associated with the direct object in the corresponding (active) VPs: *one who [drives trucks]* and *one who [eats meat]*. It is also widely held that this association is subject to the restriction that the non-head noun cannot be associated with the (underlying) external argument or subject of the head (DiSciullo and Williams 1987, 30, Roeper and Siegel 1978, 205, Selkirk 1982, 34). Thus, examples such as **kid eating* and **girl swimming*, intended to mean 'eating by kids' and 'swimming by girls' are unacceptable (examples from Selkirk 1982, 34)).

Authors have differed on the precise formulation of this restriction (e.g., whether it is subjects that are excluded or external arguments, or all but "immediate" arguments as in Mead 1988), and thus on the accounts offered. Nevertheless, there is a near consensus that the theta-role corresponding to the external argument of a transitive verb (typically Agent) is not available to the non-head member of a synthetic compound.

In a recent paper, Lieber (2001) has challenged this received view on the basis of examples such as *city employee*, in which the non-head appears to correspond to the agent (external) argument of the transitive verb *to employ*, thus: *Sam is a city employee* apparently licenses the inference *The city employs Sam.* In what follows, I will propose an alternative to Lieber's interpretation of the compound *city employee* and suggest that the non-head in these constructions corresponds not to a true external argument but rather to an adjunct with a meaning something like "in, at or under the auspices of" an institution or administration. I suggest that Lieber's proposal (and the theory which underlies it) fails to draw an important distinction in a variety of near-minimal pairs based on her examples.

2. APPARENT EXTERNAL ARGUMENT COMPOUNDS

To Lieber's example (1a) one may add a variety of examples with the same general structure but varying the choice of verb stem. My own intuitions, and those of colleagues consulted, is that such examples are unremarkable and readily understood. This suggests that there is a productive pattern to be accounted for. The paraphrases given are intended to highlight the interpretation of the non-head noun as the external argument of the verb; these will be challenged below.[1]

(1) a. *city employee*   'one who the city employs'
    b. *university employee*   'one who the/a university employs'
    c. *McGill employee*   'one who McGill employs'
    d. *UN evacuee*   'one who the UN evacuated'
    e. *US bombardee*   'one who the US bombarded'
    f. *Chrétien appointee*   'one who Chrétien appointed

Lieber offers an account which admits of the examples in (1) while properly excluding examples such as **girl-swimming*.[2] The account is based on the principle in (2) (=Lieber's (15)), which I have simplified here in order to avoid discussing aspects of Lieber's theory not directly pertinent to the main point.

(2) Principle of Compound Interpretation [PCI] (simplified)
    "In a configuration in which two [stems] are juxtaposed or concatenated, co-index the […] first stem with the highest available (i.e., […] unindexed) argument of the second stem."

For compounds of the *–er* type at least, the PCI is more or less equivalent to the *First Sister Principle* (Roeper and Siegel 1978), the *First Order Projection Condition* (Selkirk 1982) and the *Argument Linking Principle* (Lieber 1983). These state (effectively) that if the verb stem can take an internal argument, then the first noun must correspond to this internal argument.

Where the PCI differs from earlier approaches is in the notion of "availability". The PCI allows an external argument of the verb in the head to be accessible to the non-head, just in case the internal argument theta-role has already been satisfied.[3]

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[1] The interpretations under scrutiny here are independent of questions of the interpretation of *–ee* nouns themselves, on which see Barker (1998). In the examples at hand, the *–ee* noun refers to the theme / direct object of the corresponding active verb.

[2] In point of fact, Lieber's account will exclude (1c-f) since she assumes referential opacity, i.e., that the "first-stem of the compound is non-referential in interpretation" (p.1). I will ignore this assumption in what follows, as it appears to be incorrect, but is independent of the main issue of external versus internal arguments.

[3] This is not quite accurate, but it suffices for the point to be made here. By stating the PCI as picking out the "highest available" argument (rather than the lowest), Lieber appears to make coindexation with the Agent the "normal" case and examples like *truck-driver* the special case, possible only when the Agent is linked (to *–er*, see below). It is not clear to me how *–ing* compounds fit into this picture; since the "R" argument (see below) is free, *kid-eating* should either be impossible, or should be preferentially interpreted with *kid* associated with the higher (Agent) argument of the stem *eat*. If I have understood Lieber's proposal correctly, changing the PCI to read "lowest available" argument would avoid this potential

Lieber suggests that this is precisely what the suffix *-ee* does (see also DiSciullo and Williams, 1987, p. 41). Thus, in the same manner that a deverbal *–er* noun is associated with ("binds" or "controls") the external argument of the verb (*an employer* is 'the one who employs'), so a deverbal *–ee* noun binds the internal argument of the verb (*an employee* is 'the one who someone employs'). This may be indicated with coindexation, for example by adopting the notation of an "R" argument (mnemonic for referential) for nouns from Williams (1981). The analysis of *employee* is schematized in (3).

(3) a. *employ* $<\underline{\text{Ag}}, \text{Th}>$
    b. *-ee* $<\underline{\text{R}}>$ binds internal argument of stem
    c. *employee* $<\underline{\text{R}}_i, \text{Ag}, \text{Th}_i>$

The root *employ* is a transitive stem with an external Agent argument (indicated by underlining). The affix *—ee* introduces an R argument, which is coindexed with the verb's internal argument. The result, as indicated in (3c), is a noun with only one available (unindexed) argument, namely the Agent argument. Although this argument is not the internal argument of the verb, the PCI allows this theta-role to be satisfied by the non-head noun precisely because this is the highest (indeed only) available argument of the second stem. Contrast this with the result of *–er* suffixation, where the highest available argument is the Theme of the verb (see (4)), hence the familiar interpretations of *meat-eater*, *truck-driver*, etc.

(4) a. *employ* $<\underline{\text{Ag}}, \text{Th}>$
    b. *-er* $<\underline{\text{R}}>$ binds external argument of stem
    c. *employer* $<\underline{\text{R}}_i, \text{Ag}_i, \text{Th}>$

3. INSTITUTIONS VERSUS INDIVIDUALS

Lieber's account seems to overgenerate. Specifically, it predicts that the external argument should be available in *–ee* compounds with the same sort of generality as the internal argument is available in *–er* compounds (at least for those *–ee* nouns that are associated with the internal argument of the verb—see fn. 1). But this does not appear to be borne out. Thus, alongside the acceptable cases in (1) one does not find examples such as those in (5), which are unacceptable on the intended interpretation (on the judgements for (5c,e,f) see below).

(5) a. **boss employee* 'one who the/a boss employs'
    b. **manager employee* 'one who the/a manager employs'
    c. *?*Sam Smith employee* 'one who Sam Smith employs'
    d. **rescuer evacuee* 'one who the/a rescuer(s) evacuated'
    e. *?*Sgt. Jones bombardee* 'one who Sgt. Jones bombarded'
    f. *?*Bernard appointee* 'one who Bernard appointed

Note that (5a,b,d) are perfectly acceptable as compounds, but their most natural interpretation is as dvandva compounds, e.g., one who is simultaneously a manager and an employee (5b), or a rescuer who through some mishap ended up also being an evacuee (5d).

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problem, but would have no effect on the other cases she analyses, including those discussed below.

This interpretation is not relevant to current concerns. Importantly, they lack the interpretation which Lieber's account would assign to the examples in (1).

What then distinguishes the good cases from the bad? Referentiality *per se* does not appear to be at issue here. There are non-referential non-heads among the bad cases (5c,e,f), and it would seem hard to argue that proper names such as *McGill* and *US* fail to refer in the good cases in (1c-f). Instead, the distinguishing factor appears to be what the non-head member refers to. In all the cases in (1), the non-head refers to an organization or institution (I return to (1f) below). In the unacceptable cases in (5) such an interpretation is unavailable to the non-head member, and the acceptability of the compound is significantly degraded.

I suggest, therefore, that the proper interpretation of such compounds is not one in which the non-head satisfies the Agent / external argument of the head, but rather one in which the non-head is associated with a meaning typically paraphrasable by an adjunct phrase such as "in/at/under the auspices of/on behalf of" an institution or organization. Thus, the inference which the grammar licenses from (6a) is (6b) and not strictly speaking (6c).

(6) a.　　Sam Smith is a university/McGill employee
　　 b.　　Sam Smith is employed at/in the university/McGill.
　　 c.　　The university/McGill employs Sam Smith.

To the extent that (6c) may be inferred from (6b), I would have to contend that this is a fact about the world, and not strictly predictable from the argument structure of the compound in (6a). I will offer further support for this at the end of this section.

It is important to note that the meaning I am suggesting is not the (physical) locative use of *at/in*. I am not a *city employee* even though my place of employment is in a city. Rather, the meaning is the one which occurs in expressions like: *She is very senior <u>in</u> the university (administration)*. This meaning is perhaps also the one evidenced in examples such as a *Standard Life investigator*; the compound may easily refer to a person who investigates (e.g., accidents) on behalf of (the insurance company) Standard Life.

With this in mind, let us return to the examples in (5c,e,f), which the reader may well have felt were not nearly as bad as I have characterized them above. The interpretation I have suggested above leads to the expectation that examples of the form [Proper-Name V-ee] will be acceptable only to the degree to which the proper name can stand for an institution or organization. The examples in (5c,e,f) were chosen to include names which are not suggestive of any institution or organization, but it is often possible to find a way of construing a name as standing for some institution. Though the distinction is subtle, those I have canvassed have agreed that examples like those in (5c,e,f) are acceptable only to the extent to which this institution reading is available, with apparently gradient absolute judgements seen as a reflection of the accessibility of the relevant reading in a given elicitation context. Thus, consider the expression *the Sam Smith nominee (for the annual award)*. To my ear, this is infelicitous in a context where Sam Smith is a member of the public who happens to have made a nomination, but far more felicitous if Sam Smith heads an important nominating committee (e.g., the Sam Smith committee).[4]

The limiting case, perhaps, is when the name of an individual can be taken to represent an institution, even though the individual may not perform specific actions. This is the case of

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[4] This leads to the expectation that the first usage should be felicitous when intended sarcastically.

political (and university) administrations, for example, where the proper name *Chrétien* may be seen as designating the administration which he heads, rather than the person himself. The approach outlined here suggests that (1f) *a Chrétien appointee* should be a possible designation for someone appointed under the auspices of the Chrétien administration (for example, in the name of Chrétien) but need not actually have been appointed by Chrétien himself. To my ear, in such a scenario, (7a) is true, while (7b) is false.

(7) a.　　Sam Smith is a Chrétien appointee.
　　b.　　Chrétien appointed Sam Smith.

4. MISSING BY-PHRASES

If the contrasts in (1) versus (5) are general, there are really two ways to go. On the one hand, it could be argued, as I have done above, that agents/external arguments are systematically excluded from non-head position in compounds and that in the apparent good cases in (1), there is an alternative, non-external thematic source for the agent-like interpretation. On the other hand, one could admit all cases in the syntax/morphology and try to find a pragmatic factor to exclude the unacceptable cases; this is the tack Lieber would have to take in order to maintain her theory. In the preceding section, I have sketched what the interpretation would be that gives rise to apparent agents in compounds, providing thus a *prima facie* argument for the received wisdom. There is, though, an additional argument noted by Glyne Piggott (personal communication 10/2002) which supports the view defended here.

　　The standard treatments of argument structure in deverbal morphology relies on alternations in which the arguments of the verb correspond to optional PPs in the NP, as in (8). Note in particular that the agent argument of the verb is canonically expressed as a *by*-phrase in the deverbal NP, even in compounds such as (8b).

(8) a.　　Romans destroyed the city ~ the destruction of the city by Romans.
　　b.　　lions eat meat ~ the eating of meat by lions ~ meat-eating by lions
　　c.　　Company X employs children ~ the employment of children by company X

　　Theta-roles which are bound during the course of the derivation are not available to be associated with either the non-head of a compound or a PP. Thus, **an eater by lions* is unacceptable (the Agent role is bound by the R argument of the noun), and for the same reason *a lion-eater* can only be interpreted as 'one who eats lions' and not 'a lion which eats'. The core of Lieber's analysis of *city-employee* is that the *—ee* suffix binds the internal argument of the stem; she contends that *city* may pick up the Agent role because that role is free in *employee* (see (3)). This approach makes the clear prediction that the Agent role should be available to be expressed as a *by*-phrase when it is not associated with the first argument of the compound. This prediction appears to be systematically false for all the cases discussed in (1) and (5), as shown in (9).

(9) a.　　*an employee by the city / McGill / the boss …　　　cf. (… of/in/at NP)
　　b.　　*an evacuee by the UN / rescuers
　　c.　　*a bombardee by the US / Sgt. Jones
　　d.　　*an appointee by Chrétien / Bernard

The examples in (9) provide further support for the view that nouns such as *city* in *city-employee* do not correspond grammatically to the agent role of the verb stem *employ* in the same way that the *by*-phrase does in the examples familiar from the literature, nor in the same way that non-head nouns in examples like *truck-driver* satisfy the internal argument of the verb stem. Exactly the alternations which are diagnostic of argument structure in the internal-argument cases are absent in the *city-employee* cases.

5. CONCLUSION

The received view of argument structure in compounding is that the non-head member of a synthetic compound cannot be associated with the external argument of the verb stem in the head. Lieber (2001) has presented a class of apparent exceptions, exemplified by *city-employee*. The characterization she offers, however, threatens to overgenerate and leaves no obvious account of the unacceptability of the examples in (5). In addition, treating *city* as an external argument in such cases appears to make the wrong predictions about alternations with *by*-phrases as shown in (9). I have suggested here that the distinction between the acceptable cases in (1) and the unacceptable cases in (5) lies in the accessibility of an interpretation whereby the non-head member is interpreted not as the external argument of the corresponding verb, but rather as a particular kind of adjunct, which surfaces in PPs of the form "under the auspices of" or "on behalf of". Such an interpretation is very close to what may be expressed with an institution-denoting nominal in the external argument position of a clause, which leads to the impression that external arguments are appearing in compounds. I have suggested, though, that the interpretations may indeed be teased apart, and when they are (as in (7)) it is only the "auspicious" reading which is available.

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