How to interpret roots and larger pieces of structure - a phase-theoretic perspective
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It is standardly assumed that nominal root compounding is parameterized across languages (cf. e.g. Roeper, Snyder & Hiramatsu 2002; Roeper & Snyder 2005; Delfitto, Fábregas & Melloni 2008). In Romance languages root compounding is unproductive, non-recursive and non-compositional (cf. Spanish *hombre rana* 'frogman' or French *homme grenouille* 'frogman'). In Germanic languages root compounding is productive, recursive and compositional (cf. English *coffee cup* or German *Kinderbett* 'children's bed'). Equally standardly, the distinction between the two patterns of compounding is reflected in the differentiation between lexical and syntactic word formation (cf. e.g. Giegerich 2007). If on the right track, analyses along this line beg the question of why, on the one hand, Romance does have a productive pattern of phrasal compounding (e.g. French *tasse à café* 'coffee cup') and why, on the other, Germanic shows clear instances of non-compositional highly drifted word formation (e.g. German *Kindbett* 'childbed' or English *redneck*, *catbird seat*). In other words, why do these languages display clear instances of word formation processes that go against the alleged parameter setting. Similarly, e.g. Chinese uses both compounding patterns in breakable compounds (cf. Zhang 2007), which behave either as a word or as a phrase (e.g. *dan xin* 'worry' lit. 'carry heart').

   In this paper I argue against a parametric distinction for the two types of compounding. Instead I propose an analysis that can account for the two types of compounding in narrow syntax and that is in line with the strong minimalist thesis (SMT), which says that syntax is an optimal solution to interface requirements (cf. Chomsky 2008). This analysis is based on a Phase-theoretic approach to compounding. According to Chomsky (2008) the only prerequisite for Merge is that the lexical item (LI) be specified for an edge feature (EF). Provided that roots are specified only for EFs - which is the null assumption, because otherwise they could not enter the derivation at any stage - it is in principle possible to Merge two uncategorized roots (*pace* Delfitto, Fábregas & Melloni 2008). Provided further that categorizing x-heads are Phase heads (cf. Marantz 2007), Merger of two roots does not involve a Phase:

(1)   a. Merge $\{\alpha\}$ and $\{\beta\} \rightarrow$ no Phase:

        b.

                    $\sqrt{\alpha}_{EF}$ $\sqrt{\beta}_{EF}$

When the complex root that results from the Merger in (1) is merged with a categorizing x-head, say n, the complement of the Phase-head is Spelled-Out. In this case, however, none of the roots is Spelled-Out independently and a drifted lexicalized reading ensues (cf. also Borer 2013 for a similar approach):

(2)   a.   Merger of categorizing little x-head (n in this case) $\rightarrow$ Spell-Out of complement
             of the Phase head $\rightarrow$ no independent meaning realization of roots α and β:
             drifted reading

        b.   nP

               n_{EF}
                      $\sqrt{\alpha}_{EF}$ $\sqrt{\beta}_{EF}$
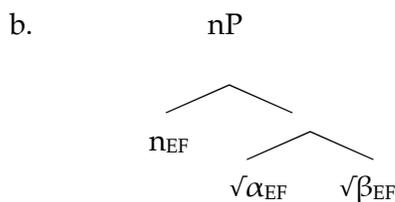
If, however, an uncategorized root is merged with a categorizing Phase-head prior to Merger with another LI, the complement domain of the Phase-head is Spelled-Out and thus the root is independently interpreted, yielding a compositional reading:
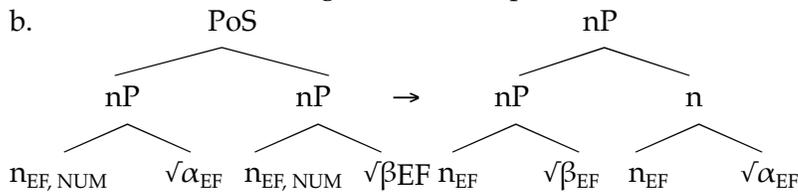
(3)   a.   Merger of root α and β respectively with categorizing little x-head (n in this case) → Spell-Out of complement of the Phase head → independent meaning realization of root α and root β respectively: compositional reading

    b.

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        nP                      nP
       /  \                    /  \
    n_EF  √α_EF             n_EF  √β_EF
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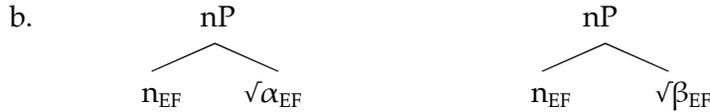
Both types of Merger lead to a point of symmetry (PoS), that has the capacity of stalling the derivation when it remains unresolved. However, the PoS get resolved for both types, albeit differently: Merger of two roots, as in (2a,b) leads to a PoS that is dissolved at PF by dynamic antisymmetry (cf. Kayne 1994; Moro 2000). This is possible, because no feature-checking operations are involved in this type of compounding.

Merger of a categorized Phase-head with another LI involves feature-checking and thus excludes a dynamic antisymmetry approach to PoS-resolution. Here the PoS is resolved by a clitic-incorporation style of head-movement (cf. Roberts 2010) that ensues from checking the number feature on the categorized n:

(4)   a.   Number checking on n → incorporation ensues (cf. Roberts 2010)

    b.

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            PoS                             nP
           /   \                           /  \
        nP      nP            →         nP      n
       /  \    /  \                    /  \    /  \
 n_EF,NUM √α_EF n_EF,NUM √βEF    n_EF √β_EF n_EF √α_EF
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Thus, the analysis to root-compounding presented here is one that is not only in line with the SMT and minimalist theorizing and that does not make use of unmotivated features or principles, but also one that ties the cross-linguistic differences between the two patterns of compounding to a microparameter that is sensitive to the properties of number-checking.

(Selected) References:

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