

Exocentric compounds in French: an analysis without null categorizers

V-N compounds are one of the characteristics of Romance languages and have been called “exocentric compounds”, because none of the parts of the compound can be considered to be the head of the compound, accounting for its semantic, categorial and morphological properties. Instead, the head of the compound seems to be outside the compound, as in the example (1) from French, which means ‘something (a machine) that washes the dishes’.

- (1) *un lave-vaisselle*
a wash dishes
‘a dishwasher’

In syntactic approaches to morphology, very little attention has been paid to exocentric compounds. Harley (2009) was the first to propose an analysis for (English) compounds within the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz, 1993). Harley proposes that compounds consist of combined (partly) categorized roots which are dominated by a functional categorizer (Marantz 2001), which would be little *n* in the case of (1). This categorizer dominates semantic features that may be realized overtly as a suffix (as in English *dishwasher*) or as a null exponent (as in French *lave-vaisselle*).

Another analysis of Romance exocentric compounds has been proposed by Nóbrega & Panagiotidis (2020) and Nóbrega (2020). For V-N compounds the authors argue that they are “false” compounds. They do not contain an (empty) external head, realized by a little *n* that is not lexically realized. They build, instead, on an analysis put forth by Bok-Bennema & Kampers-Manhe (2006), proposing that there is a null in the case of “false” exocentric compounds such as V-N compounds, but that this null is small *pro*, functioning as the subject of the verb in a reduced relative clause. The external head interpretation of the “false” exocentric compound would result from the interpretation of small *pro*.

There has been a lot of discussion on the desirability of nulls in morphology (see, a.o., the discussion in Dahl & Fábregas 2018; Don, 1993; Don, 2023). The (over)use of zero-affixes has also led to criticisms and to alternative approaches. A syntactic approach to derivation in which the use of derivational zero-affixes is rejected is Borer’s Exo-Skeletal model (2003, 2013: Ch. 7). In Borer’s Exo-Skeletal Model, zero-affixes are banned: category-less roots can be dominated by categorized affixes or by functional projections such as DP or TP only. Bauer (2022) argues against the use of nulls in Nóbrega & Panagiotidis’ (2020) analysis.

In this paper I reject both analyses with nulls, the little *n* and the small *pro* analysis, for exocentric compounds. As Borer, I do not allow null categorizing *n* to change the category of a categorized structure. I build partly on Author (2023), who proposes an analysis for verbal and nominal nominalized infinitives in Old French and V → N conversions in modern French, which are shown to be very productive. Author (2023) proposes that in both cases there is no null *n* categorizer to account for the “nominalized” status of the infinitive and the V → N construction, but that the nominal interpretation simply results from nominal functional projections, such as NumP, DP, etc. The difference between the two types results from the number and nature of verbal and nominal functional projections, as in Alexiadou, Iordăchioaia & Schäfer (2011). Differently than in Grimshaw’s (1991) Extended Projections model and Borer’s model, in this account “nominal” functional projections may dominate “verbal” ones, without intervening overt categorizers. This was, in fact, already the case in Marantz (1997) and is defended in Borsley and Kornfilt (1999).

In this paper I add V-N compounds to the analysis. I argue that what V-N compounds such as in (1) have in common with nominalized infinitives and nominalizations of V is that there is a default masculine gender interpretation. This points to the absence of a nominal

categorizer or a small *pro* to express an exocentric head. Functional verbal and nominal projections or their absence are sufficient to derive the correct interpretations, as in Borer’s model. For the default masculine compound in (1) I propose structure (2):

- (2) [DP [NumberP [GenP [ClassP [TP [VoiceP [Voice’ root [NumberP [GenP [ClassP root]]]]]]]]]]
 [+count] [3sg]

V-N compounds in French (or in Romance in general) do not only consist of compounds with default masculine gender. There are also V-N compounds that refer to persons and may be masculine or feminine, depending on the referent, such as *un(e) casse-cou*, lit. ‘a male or female break-neck’, meaning ‘a daredevil (m/f)’. Although in the case of compounds referring to persons an analysis with the help of a nominal categorizer or a small *pro* would seem to be more natural than in the case of default masculine gender V-N compounds, since in both types of analyses person (and gender) features could be inserted, I propose in this paper that even in this case the choice of nominal functional projections (in the sense of Grimshaw 1991) and their feature content will be sufficient to account for the animate interpretations.

For default masculine compounds (and nominalized infinitives and V → N conversions) in French I propose, building on Author & Author (2016), that both Gen(der)P and DP contain an unspecified uninterpretable gender feature. Preminger (2011) claims that if those features on the host which were supposed to be valued by the target noun phrase are not valued, they retain their preexisting or default values. Author and Author (2016) extend this analysis to default masculine animate DPs in French such as *un enfant* ‘a male or female child’, for which they assume that it has no gender features, and suggest that when the unspecified gender feature on D and Gen remains unvalued, default masculine gender results. In the case of default masculine compounds the uninterpretable unspecified gender features on D and Gen remain unvalued, because a “head” noun of the DP is missing, resulting in a default masculine form. I propose that in the case of animate V-N compounds the gender feature is interpretable in GenP and uninterpretable in D, as in the case of *le garçon* ‘the boy’ in Author and Author’s (2016) analysis. Although there is no “head” noun in the case of the animate compound, the interpretable valued gender feature on the head of GenP, can be provided by a referent in the situational or linguistic context. The valued interpretable gender feature on Gen may serve to value the unspecified uninterpretable feature on D. I show how the analysis of V-N compounds can be extended to exocentric P-N compounds.

Bauer (2022) states that exocentricity in word-formation is a difficult area and that there have been multiple hypotheses to deal with it. This paper joins this tendency in that presumed “real” (little *n*) or “false” (small *pro*) exocentric heads are banned from the analysis and that an analysis on the basis of the mixing of functional projections and their features is proposed.

Selected references

- Bauer, L. 2022. Exocentricity yet again: A response to Nóbrega and Panagiotidis. *Word Structure* 15(2), 138–147. * Borsley, R.D. & J. Kornfilt. 1999. Mixed extended projections. In Robert D. Borsley (ed.), *The nature and function of syntactic categories* (Syntax and semantics 32), 101–131. Leiden: Brill. * Dahl, E. & A. Fábregas. 2018. Zero morphemes. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. * Don, J. 2023. Category change without overt marking. In P. Ackema, S. Bendjaballah, E. Bonet & A. Fábrega (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Morphology*, 387-418. Malden, MA, Wiley Blackwell. * Grimshaw, J. 1991. Extended Projections. Ms., Brandeis University. * Harley, H. 2009. Compounding in Distributed Morphology. In R. Lieber & P. Stekauer (eds). *Oxford Handbook of Compounding*, 129-144. Oxford: OUP. * Nóbrega, V.A. & P. Panagiotidis. 2020. Headedness and exocentric compounding. *Word Structure* 13(2), 211–249. * Preminger, O. 2011. Agreement as a fallible operation. Cambridge, MA: MIT dissertation.