



A Bonehead's Headbone

Noun compounds give a lot of bang for the buck

By [William Z. Shetter](#)

What is the difference between a car race and a race car? They are both made up of the same `car' and `race', but they clearly mean quite different things. Both of these are compounds, something English is exceedingly fond of. The greatest number of them are `noun+noun' compounds, simply two nouns thought of and acting in combination. Most of them, like these, are written as two separate words, a few have a hyphen (`coffin-nail') and some are written as one word (`basketball'). But they're all the same thing.

We all recognize instantly that a car race is some type of RACE, whereas a race car is some type of CAR. In other words, English speakers operate on the agreement that the right-hand member of any compound is going to be the key word, and that the left member will say something about it, normally by narrowing down and specifying the possibilities. Most compounds turn out to be easily expressible as an OF relation between the nouns, such as crew member `member OF the crew'. Just as common is FOR: business phone `phone FOR business'. But we also get a variety of others, like computer hacker `hacker ON the computer', cellar window `window IN the cellar', animal cracker `cracker LIKE an animal', or tear gas `gas PRODUCING tears'.

Compounds are particularly interesting because, even though they consist of nothing but two (or sometimes three) words next to each other, every one has a sort of `mini-grammar' tucked into it, like a little collapsed sentence. There's normally just one correct relation between the two nouns. But how do we know which it is? What makes magazine photographer mean `photographer FOR a magazine' (as in newspaper photographer) and not `photographer OF magazines (as in nature photographer) or even `photographer WHO IS a magazine' (as in woman photographer)? We know that air pollution is `pollution OF the air', but that noise pollution, which has exactly the same form, is not `pollution of noise' but `pollution BY noise'. We seem to know mainly via our intimate familiarity with the component words, that is the

physical relationships between the two objects in a world where we are manipulating objects all the time.

Let's take a closer look at those last two examples. Even someone who has never seen either word before would know that air is something that can be polluted, whereas noise can hardly be - in fact, we've all experienced noise itself doing some polluting. Similarly, for someone hearing the compound rock concert for the first time, the `concert' points right to the musical meaning of the word `rock', whereas in rock garden, the `garden' fits comfortably with the usual geological meaning. Though occasionally we can be ambiguous without realizing it. How do you understand the title of the recent book *Animal Dreams*? Is it `dreams OF animals' or `dreams BY animals'? It could just as well be either, and only a look at the book can decide (in fact, in this case the author intended both).

Sometimes they change before our eyes. Track record used to be used at sporting events to mean `the record set (by anyone) on a particular track', in other words `record OF a track'. But we've shifted it from the track to the person, and now it means `someone's athletic record on (any) track' (or more commonly `their record of achievement in general'), in other words `record ON the track'. But an occasional compound has a meaning that is well outside that right-hand member. These require some very special knowledge of the language, usually at the colloquial level, which means familiarity with its speakers' cultural world. A couch potato is not a type of potato at all, as it would be in seed potato, just as bonehead and airhead refer not literally to heads but to persons. Anyone who expects a snow bunny to be an animal is in for a surprise. On the other hand, a snow job really is a type of job, and snail mail is a type of mail. Here it's that first member that has gone its own metaphorical way.

But there's nothing at all widespread about this habit. Most languages go ahead and express the whole phrase that we understand `underlying' a compound, and then the key word is most often at the left. As the French do in *tremblement de terre* `earthquake', *boîte à savon* `soap dish'. Our understanding of the exact relation between the two is not all in the language so much as in our knowledge of the world. Compounds are a kind of shorthand of speech, even little `nuggets of experience'. Isn't it fantastic that English is providing us with such efficiency, making it possible to say so much with just a single pair of words?

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