The Compositionality of Blending – More than Compounding?

Today I will present a linguistic phenomenon to you that is rarely paid attention to. I am talking about blends or so called portmanteau words like BRUNCH, MOTEL, OXBRIDGE, and many others. Words like these spread widely not only in English, but increasingly in German, too. Here we have well known words like JEIN, OSTALGIE, or TEURO. It is not at all a marginal process, what is shown by Thurner's Portmanteau Dictionary with more than 2000 entries or my own German corpus with more than 1500 items collected over the past few years.

The aim of this talk is to give a short overview on this phenomenon and present the results of my investigations with respect to the linguistic properties and makeup of those expressions. Due to our conference motto I will focus on aspects of compositionality on all linguistic layers; because of the interdisciplinarity of our conference I will try to keep the subject as understandable as possible.

First of all, let me define the notion of blending, as it resulted from my analysis of some hundred blends. All blends have one feature in common: the irregular fusion of two expressions by the process of blending leads to a loss of at least one phonetic segment in one or both of the two source words, be it by phonetic overlap like in BAROCOCO, by truncation like in BRUNCH, or by overlap and truncation simultaneously like in MOTEL. Thus, blending always condenses the source items with respect to the phonetic source material. This phonetic saving is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition: We need, additionally, the aspect of intentionality in order to separate blending from the phenomenon of contamination, where two words combine undeliberately to a new fuse word. Although being structurally identical to blends, contaminations like NUMBEROUS instead of NUMEROUS are just speech errors. Finally, with respect to the meaning construction, we have to stipulate *complete* integration of the source meanings in order to discriminate blendings from pure parodistic blend-like expressions like BEATSTEAKS, the name of a pop band having nothing to do with beefsteaks. Summing up, a blend is, by definition, the *intentional* combination of *two formerly independent lexical* expressions U and V to a new expression W such that *at least one* phonetic segment *is saved* by overlap and/or truncation. You find a more elaborate definition in the appendix.

Because of the necessary phonetic saving and the irregular fusion of two expressions in the blending process, the hearer has a problem when encountering a blend: in order to be able to interpret the portmanteau word correctly, at first the hearer has to extract and reconstruct the possibly fragmented source words from the blend. This process cannot be rule based for two reasons: Firstly, the length of the fragment of a source word présent in the blend may range from only one phonetic segment like in FACHO meaning a female

macho, up to the entire phonetic material like in BEATLES meaning something like beating beetles, and thus it is not predictable how much material from the source words is actually transferred to the resulting blend. Secondly, the position and distribution of the source words' fragments within the blend are not predictable either and depend on the phonetic makeup and similarity of U and V. Thus, the hearer has to guess by association and assonance which lexical items are indicated by the fragments. Take as an example the blend BASEKETBALL: You intuitively may guess that the source words must be BASEBALL und BASKETBALL. A much harder one, however, is MAGALOG meaning a combination of a printed magazine and a catalog. If there is only one phonetic segment of a source word left in the blend, one has difficulties to guess the corresponding full lexeme at all: GOON means a mixture of a gorilla and a baboon. Nevertheless, if one carefully analyses the linguistic data, there is a finite set of basic structural types of blends the hearer intuitively uses in decoding and reconstructing the full source expressions. The structural classification consists of sixteen basic types, discriminated by only four binary features. At least two types of them may be called prototypical with respect to their structural makeup, exemplified by BRUNCH and SLANGUAGE. Unfortunately, I can not go into further details here.

The phonetic composition of a blend does not follow rules, but it is driven by patterns. As long as there is a chance for the hearer to reconstruct the source words at all, blends are communicatively well-formed. An ill-formation is not even possible with respect to its morphological structure. Take BASKETBALL again: the fragment BALL, which is a morphological element too, belongs to both source words BASEBALL und BASKETBALL. We are unable to determine which of the source words provides the morphological head, i.e. the rightmost element determining syntactic and semantic behavior, because – due to phonetic overlap – both words BASEBALL and BASKETBALL may be the head. Even worse is the case with BLEEN meaning a mixture of the colors blue and green: the fragment -EEN is not a morphological unit at all, thus it can't be the head of a blend, can it? How, then, are we able to compose the resulting syntactic category in order to use such a word within a sentence? In the case of BLEEN or BASEKETBALL it may nevertheless be simple, because the two source adjectives or nouns result in an adjective or a noun, correspondingly. However, if the phonetic mixture of two expressions is also accompanied by a morphological mixture of two different source categories, we have to employ another strategy: POSITRON is a fusion of POSITIVE and ELECTRON resulting in a noun. Obviously and mostly, the morphological head is taken from the fragment which occupies the regular head position, i.e. the reconstructed rightmost element. Yet, in some rare cases, the head is even to the left: STEVIL, composed of STEVE and EVIL, is such a clear example. Thus, sometimes the interpreter can and must deviate from the normal interpretation strategy typically assuming the head to the right and invert the regular order.

In most cases, normal compounds follow a determinant-determinatum structure, i.e. one element determines the second semantically: for instance, a hotline is a kind of line, a happy hour is a kind of hour. A related case are so called possessive compounds, where the first element also specifies the second, but the head constituent refers to something different from the denotation of the head: a skinhead is not a head, but a person having or possessing a certain kind of head, a hatchback is not a back, but a car having a back with a kind of hatch (German KLAPPTÜR). A third basic sort of compounds is of coordinative reading: the denoted entity is something or somebody having the properties of both elements, for example a COMPOSER-CONDUCTOR is someone being both a composer and a conductor, NORTHWEST can be conceptualized as a direction partially to the north and partially to the west. This type may be called symmetrical, because the two components could be swapped, i.e. a conductor-composer should be the same as a composer-conductor. This coordinative type in English is marginal; more prominent types of compounds are of the asymmetrical determinative and possessive types.

The restricted productivity of the coordinative type may be one reason why blending can be seen as an often employed substitute solution to express coordinated or unified concepts. Baseketball is a game mixing elements of both basketball and baseball, bleen is a color mixing blue and green, brunch is a meal unifiying features of both breakfast and lunch. It is not quite clear whether we could alternatively speak of BÁSKETBALL-BÁSEBALL, BRÉAKFAST-LÚNCH, or BLÚE-GRÉEN using coordinative compounds instead. If these words are well-formed at all, they do not only run the risk of being interpreted as determinative compounds, meaning, for instance, a blueish green, but generate different meanings even in the coordinative reading: BLÚE-GRÉEN does *not* denote a fuse color of blue and green, but signifies a mixture of two colors in the sense of interchangeably arranged strips or check-patterns of blue and green. In contrary, because concepts fused by blending do not have a head being specified by another element, BLEEN unifies both concepts of blue and green in a balanced way so that no component receives semantic prominence. With blends one can express concepts that are not immediately expressible by one word.

With respect to the coordinative semantic relation between the two blended words we may distinguish several specific types expressing different conceptualisations of unifying the constituents' denotations. I will discriminate at least six types of coordinative semantic concept composition and provide appropriate examples, respectively.

Firstly, the relation of CROSSING U and V, meaning that the features of the two source items U and V are mixed so that the resulting denotation contains some elements of U and some elements of V in a balanced way. The prototypical crossing is that of animals and plants, like in CHURKEY and POMATO; beings sharing features of animals and plants are called PLANTIMALS (e.g. slime fungus). But also persons may be crossed, for instance

parents name their children after themselves, as in ADNELLE from ADDISON and NELLY; in one Star Trek episode of ‚Voyager' Tuvok and Neelix were fused to Tuvix. Further instances are language fusions like SPANGLISH and instruments like BANJOLIN.

Secondly, we have the relation of COMBINING U and V, meaning that the resulting denotation contains all features of both U and V additively. One well known example is OXBRIDGE or CAMFORD meaning a collection containing the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Another prominent instance is STAGFLATION, which denotes a kind of economic malaise with attributes of stagnation and inflation. DYNAXITY was intended as something which exhibits features of dynamicity and complexity, and FLEXECURITY is something providing flexibility and security at the same time. Finally, a KIDULT is a collective term coined by the television industry denoting the set of kids and adults especially from age 12 to 34.

Thirdly, the relation of CONFIRMING U by V. Here, two near-synonyms are superposed to intensify or confirm the meaning of one source word by the other. Some examples are DISASTROPHE, GUESTIMATE, SNOOPERVISE, and ALONELY. Often blends of this category are intentional imitations of unintentional contaminations, which mostly fuse synonymous expressions.

Fourthly, the rare relation of CONTRADICTING U with V, where the meanings of the two source items are near-antonyms. For instance, FACTION is intended as something which may be fiction and fact at the same time, maybe the cloning: on the one hand it is reality with respect to the cloning of animals, on the other hand it is still a fiction with respect to the successful cloning of humans. A FACTION may also be interpreted as a novel written in the style of a fiction but being based on facts. Another instance of the contradictory relation may be FRENEMY or FROE meaning that someone is a friend in one sense and an enemy in another. A prominent German example is JEIN.

Fifthly, the general relation of CONNECTING U and V in different ways. For example, EURASIA may be interpreted as the contact or intersection area between Europe and Asia; TEXICO is called a town in New Mexico in near contact to West Texas. BERLINDAU may be called the route between Berlin and Lindau connecting these two cities with respect to postal or travelling aspects. WINTEL is called the tacit alliance between Intel and Windows, because they are connected by common interests.

Sixthly, the very rare relation of COMPROMISING on U and V, i.e. create a middle or neutral position, like the gender-neutral HUWOMAN blending the components HUMAN, MAN and WOMAN, or the also gender-neutral pronouns HESH or SHIM.

By compounds, you may at best express the relation of U combining with V as in COMPOSER-CONDUCTOR, create a compromise concept between U and V like in NORTHWEST, or realize the connective relation of U and V like in BERLIN-LINDAU. Confirming U by V, contradicting U with V, and mainly crossing U with V is not reasonable or possible with

compounds. Certainly, the semantic capacity of blends exceeds the capabilities of coordinative compounds in English and German.

So far we have only *touched* the problem of determinative blends. Of course, there are many instances of this sort, and most of the blends are indeed determinative. I found a set of about two dozens of determinative relations recurring both in word and phrase blends. But the share is much lower than with normal compounds. The trends in blends go clearly towards a coordinative reading, not only in English, but also in German. One may even state that the coordinative relation of crossing is the protoypical intention behind blending at all. The reason may be iconicity: what is blended phonetically, must be blended semantically or conceptually too, thus conveying an additional instruction for the hearer to integrate the source meanings to a composed meaning in a certain way: do not just construct the meaning as you have learned to do with normal compounds, but additionally test and employ the strategy of unifiying two entities, be it conceptually or perceptually – in the latter case think for instance of computer morphings of animals.

An interesting question still to be answered is the problem of identifying what was first: the idea of a certain mixture of two entities before having any semantic representation and expressive devices like blends, or contaminations in the sense of speech errors merging two linguistic forms unintentionally and thereby suggesting certain conceptual or perceptual fusions, being imitated and extended to non-synonymous meanings?

The imitation is certainly only one of several intentions behind creating and communicating a blend. Either this results in a pun just for amusement or for attracting attention, like THE PRINCE OF ALES generating the connotation of Charles being a drinker, or it may be used for the purpose of product naming like the well known INFINEON, NESCAFE, or OSRAM. Communicative saliency of blends applies also to those coinages being primarily created for semantic reasons, for example to create and/or name a new concept or entity with certain properties like POSITRON or CHUNNEL. Often, blends were created for one specific context, for example as a newspaper headline; yet, the portmanteau creation survives, if speakers need and adopt the word and its concept – think of CAMCORDER. The survivers are mostly those blends created for semantic and not for pragmatic reasons – take as examples DJANE, MOTEL, or STAGFLATION.

I will close my talk with some general remarks. As Cannon (1986) pointed out, blends occur in all languages. This is not surprising for the simple reason that contaminations happen in every language, and one may guess that these slips of the tongue were intentionally imitated by others just for amusement. Another interesting aspect of blending is, that fragments like -OHOLIC from the full form ALCOHOLIC may become a kind of derivational suffix over the time, as soon as one and the same fragment is applied regularly to new words like WORKOHOLIC, CHOCOHOLIC, or COLAHOLIC. Thus, blends behave similar to

derivations with respect to the creation of such paradigms, as is also exemplified by ADVERTAINMENT, SCIENTAINMENT, and EDUTAINMENT. However, the main difference between derivation and blending with a productive fragment like -TAINMENT is that it *always* indicates and means the *full form*, quite different from a derivational suffix indicating no known full form and having only abstract meaning. Although blends are phonetically truncated, they are semantically complete with respect to the two source expressions. That blending is a productive device of word formation is not only proved by such derivation-like paradigms, but also by the capacity to take the results of blending to use them as source elements for a new blending process, recursively creating new blends, just like compounding. For example, BRUNNER is created from BRUNCH and DINNER. The conception and verbalization competence of the normal speaker seems to be improved at the time when a crucial number of portmanteau expressions is processed and thus the threshold for productive blending is exceeded. The more phonetic-structural templates there have been interpreted in everyday life, the better a speaker is able to internalize abstract blending patterns enabling him to create an infinite number of blends out of a finite lexicon. Interestingly, an adult who has never heard of blending is intuitively able to identify and interpret blends after quite a short time, as I have hopefully proved within the last twenty minutes.

Appendix

Definition

A blend is, by definition, the (i) *intentional* combination of (ii) *two formerly independent lexical* expressions U and V to a new expression W such that (iii) *at least one* (iv) phonetic segment *is saved* by overlap and/or truncation. (v) At least one segment of U and V must be present in W, respectively; (vi) at least one segment must be outside the overlap area between U and V. (vii) The used segments of U and V must combine such that they can complete each other at their respective point of clipping. (viii) The meanings of the two source expressions have to be integrated *completely*.

(i) if not, we have contaminations like NUMBEROUS (instead of NUMEROUS);
(ii) if not, we have abbreviations or acronyms; no adhoc-expressions are used;
(iii) if not, blends like RILCHIAM (Lewis Carroll) with several segments of each source word could not be explained;
(iv) if not, we have compounding/affixation; loss of segments by overlap (BAROCOCO), truncation (BRUNCH), or both (MOTEL);
(v) if not, the source word is not reconstructable from the blend at all, because it has not contributed any fragment;
(vi) if not, we have homonymous expressions like BANK (with complete overlap);
(vii) if not, incomplete words are created (only possible: W = U- + -V, or W = U- + -V/ V-/-V- + -U, etc.; not: *W = U- + V- etc.);
(viii) if not, we get a parodistic blend-like expression (blending is clipped/overlapped compounding composing *all* meanings).

Bibliography (incomplete)

Cannon, G. (1986): Blends in English word formation. *Linguistics*, 24, pp 725–753.
Grésillon, A. (1984): *La règle et le monstre: le mot-valise*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
Hansen, K. (1963): Wortverschmelzungen. *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 1, pp 117–142.
Soudek, L. I. (1978): The Relation of Blending to English Word Formation: Theory, Structure, and Typological Attempts. In Dressler, W. U. & Meid, W. (Eds.): *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Congress of Linguistics*, pp 462–466.
Thurner, D. (1993): *The portmanteau dictionary.* Jefferson: McFarland.