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Compounds as a Window into the Grammar of Reduced Registers

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Abstract

In the absence of any restrictions on utterance length, fully formed sentences are usually the norm. But when space is limited, as in telegrams, headlines, and social media platforms like Twitter, an elliptic language variety – reduced register – is born. The fundamental question is what linguistic and cognitive principles are responsible for packaging information into a tight space. Using search queries as a case study, we demonstrate that the process of reduction involves restructuring of linguistic material and that the main grammatical mechanism responsible for restructuring is compounding – concatenation of adjacent words into a novel linguistic unit. The results of three studies demonstrate productivity of compounding in search queries and shed light on the nature of grammar that generates them. Rather than assuming a deletion mechanism or a domain-general information theoretical principle, we argue that queries are generated by a qualitatively different mechanism – linear grammar (Jackendoff & Wittenberg, 2017).