



CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION IN THE FORMATION OF IDIOMATIC COMPOUND NOUNS

Ibodullayev Tolmas

Independent researcher of



Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

Abstract. This thesis investigates the cognitive mechanisms underlying the formation of idiomatic compound nouns through the lens of Conceptual Integration Theory, also known as Blending Theory, as developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002, 2003). Idiomatic compound nouns such as *scarecrow*, *hotdog*, and *pickpocket* exhibit non-compositional meanings that cannot be derived from the simple addition of their constituent parts. This paper argues that such compounds are the products of systematic conceptual blending processes involving two or more mental input spaces, selective projection, and emergent structure. By analysing a range of endocentric and exocentric idiomatic compounds, the study demonstrates that Conceptual Integration Theory provides a principled explanatory framework for understanding how novel and entrenched meanings arise in nominal compounding. The discussion addresses implications for language pedagogy, lexicography, and natural language processing.

Keywords: conceptual integration, compound nouns, blending theory, idiomaticity, non-compositionality.

Introduction. Compound nouns constitute one of the most productive word-formation processes in English, yielding forms that range from semantically transparent expressions such as *teacup* (a cup for tea) to thoroughly opaque items such as *humbug* (a fraud or deception). Between these poles lies a rich class of idiomatic compound nouns—items whose meanings cannot be recovered through the simple addition of their parts. A *hotdog* is not a canine of elevated temperature, a *scarecrow* is not literally engaged in the act of frightening corvids, and a *blackbird* is not merely any bird that happens to be black. These compounds are linguistically significant precisely because they challenge the principle of compositionality, which holds that the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts and the rules by which they are combined (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003).

Traditional accounts of compound semantics have struggled to explain the non-compositional residue that idiomatic compounds exhibit. Generative approaches tend to treat them as lexical exceptions—stored whole in the mental lexicon and therefore requiring no compositional derivation. However, this position leaves unexplained the systematic patterns that recur across idiomatic compounds: the metaphorical extensions, the metonymic shifts, and the event-structural compressions that speakers reliably produce and hearers reliably interpret.



This thesis adopts Conceptual Integration Theory (CIT), also known as Blending Theory, as its analytical framework. Developed by Fauconnier and Turner (1995, 2002, 2003), CIT posits that meaning construction is a dynamic, on-line cognitive operation in which elements from two or more mental input spaces are selectively projected into a blended space, yielding emergent structure that is present in none of the inputs alone. The central argument advanced here is that idiomatic compound nouns are not lexical accidents but rather the products of systematic conceptual blending processes. Each constituent of the compound activates a mental space, and the compound as a whole directs the hearer to construct a blend whose emergent meaning constitutes the idiomatic reading. By examining a range of endocentric and exocentric compounds, this paper demonstrates that CIT offers a principled, cognitively motivated account of how such meanings arise and become entrenched.

Conceptual Integration in Idiomatic Compound Nouns

Idiomatic compound nouns may be understood as fully entrenched blends—conceptual integrations that have undergone lexicalisation and are now stored as single units in the mental lexicon (Sadiqzade, 2025). Unlike novel blends, which require on-line construction and conscious inferential effort, entrenched blends are retrieved holistically, their internal blending architecture no longer actively computed during comprehension. Nevertheless, the traces of that architecture remain recoverable through analysis, and it is these traces that reveal the systematic cognitive operations at work.

Endocentric Idiomatic Compounds

In endocentric compounds, the head noun designates the general category of the referent, while the modifier restricts or characterises it. In transparent cases, this restriction is literal; in idiomatic cases, the modifier operates metaphorically or metonymically, highlighting a property of the head through a conceptual mapping rather than a direct denotation.

Consider *blackbird*. Superficially, the compound appears transparent—a bird that is black. Yet its conventional meaning is far more specific: it denotes a particular species (*Turdus merula*). The BLACKNESS input has been metaphorically reinterpreted through cultural entrenchment; blackness no longer functions as a simple colour predicate but as a compressed identity relation linking the blend to a specific natural kind. The emergent structure—specificity of species reference—exceeds anything supplied by either BLACK or BIRD alone.

Hotdog provides a more striking example. The HEAT input does not literally describe a dog; rather, the compound blends cultural associations with street food, the elongated shape of the sausage, and the speed of preparation into a single nominal concept. Jacobs and Dell (2014) demonstrated through phonological planning experiments that *hotdog* is processed as a single lexical unit rather than as the

compositional combination of *hot* and *dog*, providing psycholinguistic evidence that the blend has become fully entrenched.

Scarecrow exemplifies a further blending mechanism: event compression. The compound evokes an agent that scares crows, compressing an entire event structure—an agent performing an action upon a patient—into a single nominal unit. The blend integrates elements from an ACTION input (the act of scaring) and a PATIENT input (crows as targets) and projects them onto a nominal frame, producing an emergent artefact concept: a humanoid figure placed in a field to deter birds. The vital relation of INTENTIONALITY is compressed into the blend, as the scarecrow is conceptualised as possessing the purpose of frightening, even though it is an inanimate object (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

Exocentric Idiomatic Compounds

Exocentric compounds present a more radical departure from compositionality, as the referent is not a subtype of either constituent. The compound *pickpocket* denotes a person—a thief—yet neither *pick* nor *pocket* denotes a person. The blend integrates an event schema (the act of picking from pockets) and projects it onto a nominal agent frame, yielding the emergent category of a human agent defined by a characteristic action. The vital relation of CAUSE-EFFECT is compressed: the person is identified with the event they habitually perform (Purinanda, 2022).

At the far end of the opacity continuum lies *humbug*. Here, the original input spaces are no longer recoverable to the modern speaker; the blend is so deeply entrenched that its etymology is effectively opaque. The compound illustrates the endpoint of a process that CIT terms *semantic bleaching*: over time, the emergent blended meaning suppresses the constituent meanings, and the compound comes to function as an unanalysable lexical atom. Yet even in such cases, the historical record reveals that blending was the generative mechanism; *humbug* likely originated as a blend of elements connoting deception and worthlessness, compressed into a single dismissive epithet (Sadiqzade, 2025).

Vital Relations and Semantic Bleaching

The formation and stabilisation of idiomatic blends are governed by what Fauconnier and Turner (2002) term *vital relations*: identity, analogy, cause-effect, part-whole, role-value, and intentionality. In *greenhouse*, the vital relation of CAUSE-EFFECT is at work: the glass structure causes a warming effect that promotes plant growth, and this causal chain is compressed into a single nominal unit. The compound is semi-opaque: hearers can partially recover the inputs (GREEN as metonymy for growing plants; HOUSE as an enclosure) but the full meaning—a glass structure for controlled horticulture—requires access to the blend.



Semantic bleaching operates as a diachronic process whereby the emergent meaning of the blend progressively supplants the meanings of its constituents. As speakers encounter the compound in contexts where only the blended meaning is

relevant, the activation of the original input spaces weakens, and the compound migrates from a semi-transparent blend to a fully opaque lexical item. This trajectory—from novel blend to entrenched idiom—is the cognitive counterpart of lexicalisation, and it explains why idiomatic compounds resist compositional parsing even though they were originally motivated by transparent blending operations (Diyanati et al., 2022).

Conclusion. This thesis has argued that idiomatic compound nouns in English are not lexical anomalies but the systematic products of conceptual blending. Drawing on Fauconnier and Turner's (2002, 2003) four-space model, the analysis has demonstrated that compounds such as *blackbird*, *hotdog*, *scarecrow*, *pickpocket*, and *humbug* acquire their non-compositional meanings through selective projection from multiple input spaces, the compression of vital relations, and the development of emergent structure within the blended space. The process of lexicalisation transforms initially novel blends into entrenched lexical units, producing the opacity that characterises fully idiomatic compounds.

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