Compounding is a productive way of creating new words in many languages, including English and Dutch. For instance, two or more existing nouns can be combined to form a single novel noun, e.g. a slipper with a bandit or it could be called bandit slipper.

In English, only few compounds occur with a regular plural as modifier of the compound, e.g. *rats eater is not acceptable while mice eater is acceptable (e.g. Berent & Pinker 2008). In contrast, modifiers in Dutch compounds more freely take a linking element that is homographic with the regular plural form. For example, boek ('book') takes the plural form boeken, and this form is used in many compounds with boek as modifier (e.g. boekenkast 'book case', boekenlegger 'bookmark(er)', boekensteun 'bookend', etc.). Although there is form similarity in the plural ending and the linking element, it does not necessarily mean that these elements are one and the same element.

In addition, there is variation in Dutch compounds. Some compounds may exhibit two forms, one with linking en and the other without (both viskom 'fish bowl' and vissenkom 'fish + en + bowl' are acceptable names in Dutch for the same concept). English compounds seem to be less variable, though form variation (drug problem, drugs problem) has been reported in the literature.

Could modifiers ending in s in English or ending in en in Dutch be plural forms? If so, the Level-ordering Hypothesis (Kiparsky 1982) and the Words-and-Rules theory (Pinker 1999) need to be adjusted, since they exclude the use of regular inflection within words. Interestingly, according to current handbooks on morphology, a crucial characteristic of linking elements is that they are considered as meaningless (e.g. Bauer 2003 and Booij 2007), although not all researchers agree (e.g. Schreuder et al. 1998).

The present study investigates the influence of meaning (conceptual plurality) on form choices in Dutch and English. In a picture-naming experiment, native speakers of both languages were asked to provide the name of an object. The pictures contained one item to indicate the modifier of a potential novel compound or more than one item (see figure below for one of the picture sets, each participant saw only one version of the pictures; e.g. the slipper with one bandit or the slipper with more bandits; the participants did not seem to be explicitly aware of the fact that some pictures contained more items and other pictures only one).

We found that more than one bandit on a slipper leads to a higher preference to use the linking element en in Dutch, i.e. bandietenpantoffel ('bandit' + en + 'slipper') (in line with Neijt, Krebbers and Fikkert 2002). Interestingly, we found a similar effect in English, even when the pictures contained objects with names that take the regular plural form, e.g. bandits slipper. Thus, speakers of English did create compounds with a regular plural as modifier, for example words picture and hands balloon. This demonstrates the relation between conceptual plurality and form variation within compounds to be present in English as well. It is the first time that the relation between plurality and linking elements has been demonstrated for English.

Dutch and English compound word formation thus provide evidence that the Level-ordering hypothesis and the Words-and-Rules theory need to be adjusted, because the plural
ending can be used as linking element in Dutch and English compounds. The assumption that linking elements are by definition meaningless, may well be wrong. The Dutch linking element *en* is not meaningless, but is used to express plurality. In addition, the English plural ending *s* can be used as linking element to express plural semantics as well. Our study shows that form variation in modifiers of compounds is influenced by plurality.

**Figure: Example of picture set**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bandit + slipper</th>
<th>Bandits + slipper</th>
<th>Louse + slipper</th>
<th>Lice + slipper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Bandit + slipper" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Bandits + slipper" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Louse + slipper" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Lice + slipper" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**References**


