Bachelor thesis review

Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc

Name of Student: Alexandra Zieglerová

Thesis title: *COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED TYPES OF COMPOUNDS IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE AND ENGLISH*

Supervisor: *Jeffrey Keith Parrott*

Reviewer: *Jeffrey Keith Parrott*

Scoring: 0 = unacceptable, 1 = poor, 2 = acceptable, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = excellent

Body

1. Originality of the paper and its contribution. Quality of the topic.

This ambitious thesis aims to compare compounds in English and American Sign Language (ASL). As the author points out, manually signed languages like ASL are under-analyzed in linguistics despite their profound theoretical relevance. Moreover, many people incorrectly believe signed languages to be mere iconic gesture systems or facsimiles of spoken languages, i.e. that ASL is merely signed English. If that wasn't enough, again as observed by the author, the theoretical status of compounds is uncertain and disputed terrain. Thus the thesis contributes in all of these important areas (albeit some more successfully than others).

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2. The review of previous literature on the topic. Extent and quality of the review, critical appraisal.

Considering the breadth of the thesis topic, the author does a reasonable job putting together sources. This is especially the case regarding the literature on sign language and ASL. Unfortunately, more references are needed on compounds in English or other languages; I particularly missed seeing a citation to Punske's (2016) survey article. Moreover, the author is not critical toward the compounding literature cited and does not take any stand on the various claims and theories that are mentioned. These lacunae in combination weaken the analysis and comparison of ASL compounding later in the thesis.

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3. Research goals and questions. Formulation of hypotheses.

This thesis has the worthwhile goal of contributing to both linguistic and popular knowledge of signed languages, in particular ASL. The research questions are not precisely formulated, but offer analysis and comparison of compounds in English and ASL; no hypotheses are presented. However, the lack of an articulated framework for analysis undermines the subsequent comparison.

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4. Methodology. Its description and adequacy for addressing the research questions.

The thesis employs a standard linguistic methodology, discussing examples from the literature and examples constructed by the author (not "imaginary", page 42). However, the author faced the additional challenge of glossing ASL, a manually signed language, for purposes of comparison with English. Here she succeeded; the illustration of contrastive features with minimal pairs in tables (6-10) is noteworthy for its clarity.

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5. Analysis of data, description of results, and their interpretation.

The thesis gets off to a good start by presenting some basic facts about ASL in Chapter 2, with the historical, typological, and grammatical situation mostly well explained by author. Nevertheless, I found some of the discussion unclear and hard to follow, specifically regarding the Hold-Movement model (HMM, page 19), "sequential affixation" (page 20), and "numeral incorporation" (page 21). The weakest aspect of thesis is the

author's treatment of compounds, beginning in Chapter 3 and continuing in Chapter 4. English compounds are vaguely and inaccurately described on page 29 as consisting of "two parts" (why not 'lexical morphemes') , "usually" (why the hedge, one of many) with "special meaning" (evidently untrue for the incorporation and coordinate compounds discussed in the thesis), where "each part is perfectly capable of functioning as a member of a phrase and has a meaning on its own" (evidently untrue for 'cranberry' morphemes, which are never mentioned in the thesis at all). The semantic and syntactic aspects of compounding are not clearly delineated and seem to be confused throughout, for example in the discussion of incorporation on pages 30-32 and coordinate compounds on pages 34-36. In particular, while the claim is made in several places—apparently but not obviously attributed to Bisetto & Scalise (2005)—that there is a distinction between "synthetic compound[s] – built on the basis of syntactic structures" and "root compounds which are said to be built on semantics" (page 30), the author is never explicit about what this means in formal terms or how to empirically distinguish the two types of compound. Generally the author does not make any commitments to a theoretical framework or analysis, for example mentioning both Harley's (2008) Distributed Morphology account and Lieber's (2004) lexicalist 'skeleton/body' theory, which are fundamentally incompatible. The unfortunate result is that in Chapter 4, rather little can be definitively said by author about whether there are even compounds in ASL or they are just a "hoax" (page 28). Most egregiously, something called "lexicalization" is called upon repeatedly in Chapter 4 (on almost every page) but never explained or formally defined by the author.

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6. Discussion of how the results relate to the research questions.

The author is most successful at accomplishing her goal of contributing to knowledge about ASL. I learned a lot from reading Chapter 2. However, that chapter is about 17 pages, or over 43% of the thesis, and the eponymous phenomenon of compounding gets short shrift. For the reasons elucidated above, not much comes out of the comparison of compounds in ASL. The most interesting results appear to be a linear ordering asymmetry between incorporated objects and adjuncts (39-42) as well as the ternary coordinate compounds on page 46 (but these insights are again undercut by the opaque discussion).

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7. Formal aspects. Quality of language (grammatical, lexical, and stylistic adequacy), formatting, referencing, and length of the paper.

Overall the thesis reads quite well, but there are noticeable issues with style, some grammatical errors, and a few typos throughout.

4

For the supervisor:

Evaluation of the collaboration between student and supervisor:

The author came for several consultations, but the main problem was that I did not see a complete draft including Chapters 3 and 4 until it was essentially too late for any revisions. That's a pity since I think the thesis could have been improved by reworking those chapters and the concluding discussion.

3

Supervisor's statement about plagiarism:

Neither the analysis of this thesis by the online system Theses.cz nor any other kind of examination of the text revealed a degree of correspondence with other works that would give rise to the suspicion of plagiarism or violation of copyright.

Supervisor: Jeffrey Keith Parrott

Overall evaluation of the paper:

This is a good thesis on an interesting topic. The author does a fine job of advocating for ASL and sign language in general, but the treatment of compounds should be sharpened in future work.

Note: The overall evaluation **CANNOT be computed simply as the average** of the scores awarded on the basis of the individual criteria above.

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Other comments:

I want to encourage the author to continue working on sign language linguistics at an MA or PhD level. This thesis could be substantially developed into an article or dissertation by taking a theoretical stance on the status of compounds in ASL.

Questions for the author to be discussed at the defense:

1. My first and most urgent question is what exactly the author means by "lexicalization" in ASL compounds. How is this "process" defined phonologically, syntactically, and semantically? How is it implemented formally? How does it bear on the status of compounds in ASL?

2. A second and perhaps related question is what the author thinks about "synthetic (syntactic)" vs. "root (semantic)" compounds. How are these types formally defined and how can they be recognized empirically?

Final evaluation

I **recommend** the thesis for the defense

Proposed grade: *B*

Date: 26/05/2018

Signature: