

THE SEMANTICS AND STRUCTURE OF CREATIVE COMPOUNDS: A CASE STUDY OF STUPIDITY

Beata Kopecka

Abstract: The paper analyses the rise and semantics of near-synonyms of the noun *fool* showing how creative speakers of English are when making reference to those lacking intelligence. In particular, it focuses on compound formations allowing us to make reference to the concept <STUPIDITY>, such as, for instance, the noun forms *scatterbrain*, *lowbrow*, *mooncalf*, *numskull*. The analysis concentrates on the semantics of compounds, with special attention paid to the role of the mechanisms of semantic shift that is metaphor and metonymy. The issue is tackled from both the diachronic and synchronic perspective, which approach allows us to detect changes, as well as certain established patterns in the lexicalization of the concept <STUPIDITY>. The lexemes under analysis have been selected primarily from the *Longman Synonym Dictionary (LSD)* and *Historical Thesaurus (HT) of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*.

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In English the concept of <STUPID PERSON>, that is one 'deficient in judgment or sense, somebody acting or behaving stupidly, a silly person, a simpleton', can be primarily accessed by means of the noun *fool*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* data, this lexeme entered the stock of English language in the 13th c. as only a mildly negative term of reference. In Biblical use it denoted vicious or impious persons. Over centuries the noun *fool* has gained more negative connotations in general use and, significantly, it has developed a number of near-synonyms. The body of near-synonyms of the noun *fool* consists of both monomorphemic and polymorphemic items. The primary aim in this paper is to concentrate on compound formations focusing on their semantic organization as well as syntactic structure. Both of these aspects are closely connected with the notion of transparency. Special attention will be paid to the role of mechanisms of semantic change in the construction of the compounds. The items for analysis derive first of all from the article headed by the noun *fool* in the *Longman Synonym Dictionary (LSD)*. As specified in the dictionary, the lexemes listed are considered to be part of *contemporary international English*. This basic list is arranged by lexemes contained in the *Historical Thesaurus (HT)*, being part of the electronic version of the

Oxford English Dictionary (OED), under the heading *fool*. The notion *creative compounds* is used following Benczes (2006), who applies this term to noun-noun formations whose interpretation relies on the mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy. Here the denotation of the term is wider as it covers also other compound lexemes whose meaning can be interpreted on the basis of any of the two mechanisms of semantic change.

When looking at the body of data, it is not difficult to observe that some of the compounds in the group are semantically more transparent than others; namely it is possible to interpret their meaning on the basis of the compound's constituents (cf. Bloomfield 1933). Actually full transparency can be expected only in the case of endocentric compounds, where the head element – usually the right-hand constituent – indicates the class of referents, whereas the modifier – most often the left-hand constituent – restricts its meaning. Hence, within the group of lexical items studied a relatively high degree of transparency can be claimed in the case of compounds with the right-hand element *fool*. In the collection of *LSD* data there is only one such compound. This is the case with the quasi-proper name *tomfool* (*Tom Fool*, *tom-fool*) which used to mean 'mentally deficient person' (14th c. – 19th c.), and which in the 18th c. started to be used with reference to 'a foolish or stupid person, one who behaves foolishly', as in the following *OED* citation (1881) "*If... they were not clergymen, I should say they were all tom-fools*". As suggested in the *OED* the quasi-proper name is more emphatic than *fool* standing on its own, and the *Merriam Webster Dictionary (MWD)* defines the meaning of the compound as 'a great fool'. The semantics of the left-hand constituents *Tom* seems – at least at first sight – unrelated with the concept of <STUPIDITY>. It has to be noted, however, that *Tom* is an abbreviated form of a popular Christian male name Thomas. Most probably due to its popularity, this name gained the status of a metonymic vehicle and started to function as a generic name for any male representative of common people as early as in the 16th c. (cf. *Tom, Dick and Harry, Tib and Tom*). This common occurrence, as well as the Biblical connotations with Doubting Thomas, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ, may have led to the name's association with some negative qualities, and hence its appearance in the compound.¹ The *Middle English Dictionary (MED)* confirms that in Mid.E. *Tom* was a male name used with familiarity or contempt. Apart from the compound discussed, the name *Tom* occurs in other compounds referring to 'a stupid, foolish person', such as *Tom-noddy*, *Tom*

¹ For the analysis of axiological load in the case of proper names see, for instance, Kopecka (2011a).

Cony (Coney), Tom Towly. Interestingly, the compound *Tom-noddy* (19th c.) is a mirror construction of *Tom Fool*. Namely, the right-hand element *noddy* developed in the 16th c. the sense-thread ‘a fool, a simpleton’, the sense of which – as indicated in the *OED* – is at present obsolete and rare. Hence, the compound *Tom-noddy*, as used in the following *OED* quotation: (1863) *Our brother John does at times contrive to make a prodigious Tom-noddy of himself*; is only diachronically analyzable and diachronically relatively transparent. It has to be noted that the compound *Tom-noddy* was commonly used in the 19th c. and, just as its headword, is currently obsolete.

With the exception of the compound *tomfool*, the great bulk of compounds in my data are exocentric formations with varying semantic makeup. More specifically, they can be referred to as *bahuvrihi* compounds which according to Marchand (1960: 42) denote “(...) one who or that which is characterized by what is expressed in the compound”. In all of them the mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy come to the fore, displaying different combinations. What follows is an analysis of their structure.

First of all, the right-hand position in many compounds meaning ‘a fool’ is frequently occupied by the noun *head*, as exemplified by the following formations listed in the *LSD*: *blockhead* (16th c.<), *addle-head* (17th c.<), *dunderhead* (17th c.<), *saphead* (18th c.<), *pinhead* (19th c.<), *fathead* (19th c.<), *knucklehead* (20th c.<). The *HT* adds further examples following the same pattern. These are: *sheep’s head* (16th c.), *fool’s head* (16th c.), *logger-head* (16th c.), *dosser-head* (17th c.), *buffle-head* (17th c.), *mudhead* (18th c.), *hulver-head* (18th c.), *thick-head* (19th c.), *dumbhead* (19th c.), *bone-head* (20th c.). A glance at the two sets proves that starting from the 16th c. up to the present day the lexeme *head* in combination with other lexemes has been readily used with reference to human beings lacking the ability to think or act rationally.

What is more, the list can be enriched by lexemes which used to refer to the human head at one time or another, such as *skull*, *pate*. Namely, in modern English *skull* means ‘the bony structure containing the brain’, but the *OED* quotations from between 16th – 19th centuries attest to the sense-thread ‘the head as the seat of thought and intelligence, commonly with allusion to dullness of intellect’. Likewise *pate*, is currently used as a humorous reference to ‘the top of one’s head, especially bald one’, but previously it had the meaning ‘head, skull’ (14th c.). With these two items the list of *x-<head>* compounds becomes enriched with such formations as: *numskull* (also *numbskull*) (18th c.<), *addle-pate* (17th c.<), *dunder-pate* (19th c.).

It has to be noted that the compounds above are semantically headless, hence using Marchand's (1960: 11) terminology "(...) the determinatum is implicitly understood but not formally expressed". Nevertheless, syntactically most of them can be analysed as MODIFIER + HEAD formations. The lexical item *head* functioning as the syntactic head of the compound provides a direct link to the concept <PERSON> due to the metonymic relationship BODY PART (head) FOR PERSON.² The head is a body part that is visible at first glance, indispensable and unique for everyone. Importantly, it is also the visually salient container for the brain, which in turn is directly responsible for human mental abilities. Hence the connection between the lexical item *head* and the concept <PERSON> can be obtained through the interaction of three specific metonymic relationships:

BODY PART (*head*) [CONTAINER (*head*) FOR CONTAINED ('brain') (ORGAN 'brain' FOR ITS FUNCTION (ability to think))] FOR PERSON

A slightly less complex combination, and hence more direct cognitive link, can be posited for the compounds with the right-hand element *brain*, that is: *harebrain* (*hare-brain*) (16th c.<³), *scatter-brain* (18th c.<), *rattlebrain* (18th c.<), *addle-brain* (19th c.<), *featherbrain* (19th c.<), *bird-brain* (20th c.<).

BODY ORGAN (brain) FOR PERSON (perceived in relation to the organ's function)

Still another lexeme frequently occurring in the right-hand position of compounds referring to stupid people is the lexeme *wit* whose meaning is defined in the *OED* as 'the faculty of thinking and reasoning in general, mental capacity, understanding, intellect, reason'. The following compounds, with *wit* in the right-hand position, refer to unintelligent people: *half-wit* (17th c.<), *dimwit* (*dim-wit*, *dim wit*), (20th c.<), *nitwit* (20th c.<). Here a lexeme denoting an abstract notion closely connected with brain serves as a link to the concept <PERSON>. Hence the following combination of metonymic relationships can be claimed:

² For a detailed discussion of changes influenced by the BODY PART FOR PERSON metonymic relationship see, for instance, Kopecka (2011b).

³ In the *OED*, the compound *hare-brain* is annotated with the label obsolete.

CAPACITY OF BODY ORGAN (faculty of thinking) FOR BODY ORGAN (brain) → BODY ORGAN (brain) FOR PERSON (perceived in relation to the organ's function)

To summarize: the right-hand position in compound synonyms of *fool* is most often occupied by lexical items referring to the head, brain or the abstract faculty of thinking. As proved by the dates in brackets, this pattern has been continuing for an extensive period of time. Nevertheless, the lexemes *head*, *brain* can refer metonymically not only to unintelligent people, but also to those considered to be intelligent. What is more, as concluded by Allan (2008: 34) the head and brain “are very closely associated with thought and knowledge (...) and in this capacity they will naturally have a positive meaning if unmodified”. Hence, in the case of compounds it is the role of the modifier to specify the meaning. In my collection of compounds *x-<head (pate, skull)>*, *x-<brain>*, *x-<wit>* the position of the modifier is most frequently occupied by a noun, followed by adjectives and, in my set of data, one instance of a verb. To only verb form is *scatter* meaning ‘to disperse, dissipate, drive in different directions’. It is the literal sense-thread of this verb that contributes to the overall meaning of the compound *scatter-brain*, but the process denoted refers to ideas, or thoughts. People referred to as *scatter-brain* are individuals with scattered brain, that is characterized by dissipated ideas, hence illogical thinking, reasoning.

Likewise, adjectives occurring in the left-hand position also need to be interpreted literally; meaning that they indicate the negative quality of the brain/head without the involvement of either metaphor or metonymy. Hence, *addle* in *addle-head*, *addle-pate*, *addle-brain* means ‘muddled, confused, insane’, *fat* as in *fat-head* is most probably connected with the meaning thread ‘displaying the characteristics of a fat animal; slow-witted, indolent, self-complacent’. Furthermore, *thick* in *thick-head* needs to be understood as ‘(of mental faculties or actions, or of persons), slow of apprehension’. *Dim* as in *dimwit* when applied to persons means ‘intellectually somewhat stupid and dull’, whereas the adjective *dumb* as in *dumbhead* has the meaning ‘foolish, silly, stupid’. In turn, the adjective *numb* as in *num(b)skull* means ‘deprived of feelings, or the power of movement’, as well as ‘helpless, incapable’ the negative qualities of which suggest inactivity of the brain. Finally, *half-wit* is obviously a person whose wit is somehow incomplete. All in all, the following pattern can be postulated for the interpretation of the Adj.+N compounds:

ADJECTIVE (indicating a negative quality) + <HEAD>/BRAIN/WIT (INTERPRETED METONYMICALLY) = <STUPID PERSON>

As for the N+N compounds, they display a bigger differentiation of composition than other combinations. In many cases one can observe a metaphor-metonymy combination. For instance, the head or brain of a stupid person is compared metaphorically to the head or brain of an animal, in that having a head/brain like a certain animal entails stupidity. In the case of the compounds *harebrain* 'a giddy or reckless person' and *bird-brain* 'a foolish person', it can be conjectured that the semantic shift relies on the assumption that the animals named in the left-hand element have little brains, smaller than the brain of a human being, hence they are unintelligent. When it comes to the compounds *bufflehead* and *sheep's head* the interpretation seems less straightforward. Namely, *buffle* is an old word for a buffalo, which animal has a relatively big head, and hence it could be assumed to possess a relatively big brain as well as a high degree of intelligence. Likewise, the head of a sheep is bigger than the head of a person. Nevertheless, animals are on a lower level of mental development than humans, and hence whatever the size of animal's head or brain, they are generally considered less intelligent than people.⁴ In the case of the compounds *hare-brain*, *bird-brain* the mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy seem to be intertwined. In detail, first due to the mechanism of metaphor the compounds *bird-brain*, *hare-brain*, *bufflehead*, *sheep's head* start to denote <stupid human brain/head>. The metaphor operates here on both elements of the compound. Next – due to the mechanism of metonymy the shift to the concept <STUPID PERSON> is possible. This is to say that while metaphor acts directly upon a compound that is a combination of two lexical items, the metonymy operates on conceptual level, namely between two conceptual entities.

The same form of interaction between metonymy and metaphor can be postulated when it comes to the interpretation of the compound *pinhead*. In the first step reference to <stupid head> is possible due to metaphorical mapping. Here the miniature size of the pinhead seems to form the background of metaphorical comparison for the head/ brain of an unintelligent person. Next, the operation of metonymy leads to the target meaning 'stupid person/a fool'.

⁴ Cf. the Great Chain of Being, as postulated by Krzeszowski (1997) among others, where the following hierarchical organization of entities is suggested: GOD>HUMAN BEINGS>ANIMALS>PLANTS>INORGANIC OBJECTS.

A slightly different model of interaction between metaphor and metonymy can be postulated for the compounds *blockhead* and *saphead*. Namely, in the case of the compound *blockhead* the head of a stupid person is compared metaphorically to a block of wood. Hence, the metaphoric source originates only in the left-hand element of the compound. Any straightforward motivation for the comparison between wood and intelligence is difficult to contrive. To my mind, it could be somewhat loosely assumed that the passivity of wood, being an inanimate entity easily carried by a stream of water, is mapped onto the brain of an unintelligent person. Allan (2008: 88, 91) relates the metaphorical connection between the concepts of <INTELLIGENCE> and <WOOD> to the notion of density understood as “(...) the property of having physically close texture”. Nevertheless, she does not elaborate on this assumption, remarking only that ‘(...) the motivation for the DENSITY mapping is not immediately obvious’. Interestingly, the connection with wood can also be observed in the case of the currently obsolete, and consequently not included in the *LSD*, compounds such as *saphead*, *sapskull*, *sap-pate*, *logger-head* and *hulver-head*. To give some details, the lexeme *sap* – in one of its sense-threads – means ‘soft outer wood, useless for most purposes’. Hence, it is clearly suggested that the *head*, *skull* is like *sap* in that it is useless for its basic purpose, namely creative reasoning. In turn, the item *logger* might, as speculated in the *OED*, be etymologically related to the noun *log* meaning ‘a bulky mass of wood’. In further course of its development the agentive suffix *-er* was added to *log* and a word was invented ‘as expressing by its sound the notion of something heavy and clumsy’. In the compound *logger-head*, *logger* might be a metaphoric allusion to the heaviness or clumsiness of one’s understanding, reasoning. Furthermore, *hulver* is now an obsolete and currently dialectal name for holly. As suggested in the *OED* quotation (a 1825) *Hulver-headed, stupid; muddled; confused; as if the head were enveloped in a hulver bush*. The compounds alluding to different forms of wood are only weakly transparent.

The semantics of the compound *rattlebrain* meaning ‘an empty-headed, noisy person’ can also be explained in terms of a similar metaphor-metonymy complex with the metaphoric source located in the left-hand element of the compound. Namely a rattle is a kind of instrument or toy producing certain, frequently loud sounds, but no proper melody. What is more, the item *rattle* seems to indicate that one’s head is hollow, as a rattle, with nothing of substance inside. All in all, the metaphorical comparison of a human brain to a rattle suggests

that one's reasoning is somewhat hindered. In turn, *featherbrain*, is a person who has a brain like a feather that is 'a person with a light or weak brain'.

The set of data under analysis contains also other compounds, the interpretation of which seems to rely on a metaphor-metonymy interaction analogous to that presented above. Nevertheless, the basis for the metaphorical meaning change is highly ambiguous. Hence, *dosser* in *dosser-head* (17th c.) means 'an ornamental cloth used to cover the back of a seat, esp. a throne or a chair of state'. Likewise, the interpretation of the left-hand elements in the compounds *bonehead*, *knuckle-head* is no mean feat. Moreover, far from being clear is the connection between the concept of <INTELLIGENCE> and the lexeme *dunder* as in *dunderhead* or *dunder-pate*. In fact, as indicated in the *OED*, the origin of *dunder* in this compound is obscure.

Furthermore, apart from compounds formed with the elements referring to the concepts of <HEAD>, <BRAIN>, <WIT>, the *LSD* gives also isolated examples of other compound formations referring to foolish persons. It lists, among other compounds, two name-like forms that is *Simple Simon* (18th c.<) and *Silly Billy* (*silly billy*) (20th c.<). The *HT* adds only one compound of a similar construction - *Jack Adams* (18th c.). A random search in the *OED* resulted in a further three additions, all using the first name *Tom*: *Tom Towly* (16th c.), *Tom Cony* (*Coney*) (17th c.), *Tom Farthing* (17th c.). In comparison to the *x-head* compounds, formations resembling names are definitely far less common. What is more, with two exceptions, they seem very short-lived or even nonce formations as, frequently, the *OED* provides but a single quotation including them. Nevertheless, a few generalizing observations can be made. First of all it has to be noted that the first names *Jack* and *Tom* are very common names. When it comes to such popular names, it can be claimed that the mechanism of metonymy is at play, and the target meaning 'a fool' is explicable in terms of the metonymic relationship PROPER NAME FOR HUMAN BEING, which can be perceived as a lower-level variety of the POSSESSED FOR POSSESSOR metonymic relationship.⁵ Traces of the metonymic shift can also be detected in the combination *Tom Cony* (*Coney*). In this 17th c. compound, the right-hand element is a former common name for a rabbit⁶, which in the time period between

⁵ It has to be noted, however, that the possessor is prototypical, and probably for this reason Klepanski (2000) treats the process by which proper names acquire the sense 'woman' as a subtype of metonymy rather than metonymy proper.

⁶ According to the *OED* originally *rabbit* was a name for the young of this animal only.

the 16th and 18th c. functioned also as a reference to ‘one easily deceived, i.e. a victim of unsuccessful cony-catching’. Here the metonymic relationship between the activity of catching rabbits and persons involved in it can be observed. In the process of compound formation, a widening of meaning took place, as a result of which in the 17th c. the quasi-proper name came to be used in the sense ‘a very silly fellow’. Here, the semantic content is retraceable only diachronically. Furthermore, in some compounds, that is *Simple Simon*, *Silly Billy*, *Tom Towly* alliteration plays an unquestionable role. What is more in the combination *Silly Billy*, with the name *Billy* being the diminutive of William, metaphoric mapping can be claimed as the compound was first used as a nickname of William Frederick Duke of Gloucester (1776–1834), and of William IV (1765–1837). In other words, any fool is like one of the William’s. Later on, as a result of meaning extension the compound acquired the general sense ‘foolish, feeble-minded person’ as proved by the following *OED* quotation: (1934) *Come, come don’t be a silly-billy*. The compound is still lively, as attested by the following *British National Corpus (BNCweb)* late 20th quotations: *I’m a silly billy, she said* (prose): *Well you are a silly billy you are* (a recorded dialogue). It has to be noted that the compound *silly billy* seems to function as a rather mild criticism of one’s stupidity. This weakly negative axiological charge can be attributed to the rhyming combination of elements, hence leading to a fanciful effect. Note that the adjectives used in quasi names; that is *silly*, *simple*, like other adjectives in the compounds discussed previously, contribute to the transparency of the compound. In turn in the semi surname *Tom Farthing*, the right-hand element seems to have been an allusion to the small size of the brain of a stupid person as *farthing* had the meaning ‘a quarter of sth’ as well as ‘sth very small, a bit of sth’ (10th>19th c). Overall, when it comes to combinations resembling names or nicknames, their origins and hence semantic history are varied. What is more, they are only weakly, if at all, transparent and they only loosely rely on mechanisms of semantic shift. In fact, some transparency can be claimed only in the case of alliterative expressions using the adjectives *silly* and *simple*.

Still another group of compounds denoting unintelligent people are formations containing an animal name in the right-hand position. Actually, the *LSD* contains only one such compound – *mooncalf* (17th c.). Nevertheless, it does not seem an isolated example when the *HT* is consulted, as then the following lexemes are added: *God’s ape* (14th c.), *nodcock* (16th c.), *silly ass* (20th c.). Animal names are frequently used metaphorically and function in language as

terms of abuse directed at people due to the metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS,⁷ but most often they are monomorphemic formations rather than compounds. It turns out that animal names used in the compounds function also as terms of abuse when used independently. For instance, the lexeme *ape* – functioning as attested in the *OED*, up to the 16th c. as a generic word for a ‘monkey’ – has been used in the sense ‘a fool’ since the 14th c. Similarly, the item *calf* meaning ‘the young of any bovine animal, and esp. of domestic cow’, has developed the transformed sense ‘a stupid person’. It has to be noted that the young of a cow is frequently connotated with years of human youth, as e.g. in the collocation *calf-time* ‘the period of youth’, and hence also with the period of immature, often stupid, behaviour. Furthermore, the lexical item *ass*, which in 16th c. was a standard term for ‘a donkey’⁸, has since 17th c. been used as a term of reproach meaning ‘an ignorant fellow, a fool, a conceited dolt’. As indicated in the *OED*, this metaphorically based sense-thread can be traced back to Ancient Greece. Namely in Greek tradition, an ass figured in fables and proverbs as a token of clumsiness, ignorance and stupidity. Importantly, by means of the compound formations the meaning ‘fool’ is intensified. So for instance, the noun *God* in its possessive form as in *God’s ape*, stresses metonymically the fact that the person referred to has been a fool since his/her birth, and hence the meaning of the compound ‘a natural born fool’. Note that according to the Catholic belief God is the creator of human beings, and hence it is possible to claim here a metonymic connection with birth. When it comes to the compound *mooncalf*, it developed in the 16th c. two related sense-threads ‘an absent-minded person (that is one who gazes at the moon that is)’ and ‘a congenital idiot, a born fool’. While the first sense-thread mentioned seems to rely clearly on the mechanism of metonymy, the interpretation of the second sense-thread is more difficult. On the one hand it can be perceived as merely intensification of the first sense-thread. On the other hand, the *OED* testifies to the original, now obsolete (16th – 17th c.) meaning of the compound *mooncalf* ‘abortive, shapeless, fleshy mass in the womb/false conception regarded as being produced by the influence of the moon’. Taking into account this additional piece of information, it can be claimed that the meaning-thread ‘a congenital idiot, a born fool’ results from a mixture of connotations based both on the mechanism of metonymy and some culture-related beliefs. Likewise, the interpretation of the

⁷ Cf. Kiełtyka (2008).

⁸ At present the term ‘donkey’ is favoured, with *ass* found nearly exclusively in proverbs, idioms and fables.

semantic content of the compound *silly ass* is by no means a straightforward case of animal metaphor, even though diachronic analysis clearly confirms such an assumption. Namely, the lexical item *ass* was used with reference to ‘an ignorant fellow, perverse fool, a conceited dolt’ as early as in the 16th c., that is at the time when the primary sense-thread of the item *ass* was ‘a donkey’. Nevertheless, as attested by the *OED* the compound itself belongs exclusively to the 20th c., and a synchronic analysis of the compound seems to favour a metonymy based interpretation. This is to say that in AmE *ass* is an impolite term referring to ‘the part of your body that you sit on’. What is more, since the BrE term for buttocks *arse* was phonetically too similar to *ass* meaning a ‘donkey’, the term *donkey* superseded the use of *ass* when referring to an animal. Hence, to a present-day speaker the compound receives a metonymic motivation based on the metonymic relationship BODY PART FOR PERSON. As indicated by Allan (2008:151-2) the field body parts *might be understood to motivate the ass entries* (in the field of intelligence), *even though this might not be the actual etymological roots*. Furthermore, in the interpretation of the compound *nodcock* one can rely on the notion of a metaphor-metonymy chain. Namely, *cock* functioning primarily as a name for ‘the male of domestic fowl’ (9th c.), has on the basis of the metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS developed in the 14th c. the meaning-thread ‘a watchman of the night’ and in the 17th c. ‘one who fights with pluck and spirit’. Hence, the semantics of the right-hand element of the compound *nodcock* ‘a fool, a simpleton’⁹ relied in the 16th c. on the mechanism of metaphor followed by widening of meaning to ‘any male human being’. The left-hand element *nod* being an abbreviation of the item *noddy* meaning in the 16th and 17th c. ‘foolish, silly, stupid’, restricted the compound’s meaning to ‘a fool, a simpleton’. Now the compound is used only dialectally, but taking into account the fact that in the 17th c. *cock* started to be employed in the sense ‘penis’, the synchronic analysis of the compound would favour a metonymically based interpretation relying on the metonymic relationship BODY PART FOR PERSON.

The compound *nitwit* is but another formation in which the diachronic investigation contrasts with a possible synchronic analysis. Synchronically, the compound can be analyzed as a metaphor-metonymy compound. A metaphoric allusion to the small size of a brain of an unintelligent person can be traced in the left-hand side of the compound, as the lexeme *nit* denotes, among other things, ‘the egg of a louse’. In turn the *wit* element serves as a

⁹ According to the *OED* the compound is now chiefly archaic and regional.

metonymic link to the concept <PERSON>. A *nitwit* is then a person with a very small brain. Nevertheless, even though such interpretation seems plausible it relies only on folk etymology. A diachronic analysis points out to a metonymic basis of the whole compound. In detail, as suggested in Yule (2006), the compound *nitwit* entered the stock of American English as a result of Dutch settlement in America in the 17th c. Namely, the author relates the compound to the colloquial Dutch phrase *Ik niet weet* meaning ‘I don’t know’. Consequently, from the diachronic point of view, the semantics of the compound could be attributed, apart from the process of borrowing, to the metonymic relationship HABITUAL EXPRESSION FOR PERSON, which can be considered a lower-level variant of the ACTION FOR AGENT metonymic relationship.^{10,11}

Last but not least the *LSD* lists such 20th c. compound synonyms of ‘a fool’ as *lowbrow*, *dingbat*, *dumbbell*, *silly date*, none of which, however, can be ascribed to the groups discussed above. Moreover, they do not have any mirror constructions in the *HT* data. The 20th c. originally Am.E. combination *lowbrow* was formed by analogy to the compound *highbrow*. The semantics of this compound relies on the layman, semi-medical assumption that people with greater intellectual potential have high foreheads and thus higher brows than others. It can be claimed that this assumption serves as a background for the metonymic shift relying on the relationship BODY PART FOR PERSON. Note, however, that unlike in other compounds of the form Adj.+N, the metonymy acts upon the combination of two lexical elements, rather than only the right-hand element of the compound. In turn, the interpretation of the compounds *dumbbell* and *silly date* relies on the mechanism of metaphor. In the case of the compound *dumbbell* it is the combined meaning of two lexical items that serves as the background for the metaphoric change, whereas in the case of *silly date* the metaphor acts only upon the right-hand element. In other words a *dumbbell* is a person whose brain is as empty as a dumbbell, whereas a *silly date* is a person who is metaphorically compared to a date. In the latter case, the metaphoric mapping between the fruit of a date palm and intelligence is far from being obvious. Equally mysterious is the relationship between the primary meaning of the

¹⁰ Cf. the use of the expression *Whither-go-ye* ‘Where are you going’, which – being a phrase employed frequently by wives to ask about their husband’s plans – acquired the sense ‘wife’ (Kopecka 2011b: 143)

¹¹ According to the *OED*, the element *wit*, in the compound *nitwit*, might be related to the Australian English word used as a signal that someone is approaching.

compound *dingbat* that is ‘money’ (19th c.) and the 20th c. sense-thread ‘a foolish, stupid person, someone crazy, insane’. The semantics of the particular elements of the compound that is *ding* ‘to deal heavy blocks, to knock, hammer’ and *bat* ‘a stick, a club’ does not show any direct relevance to the concept <FOOL> neither.

Conclusion

All in all, the compounds functioning as synonyms of the lexeme ‘fool’ show a variety of formal organization. Most of them are N+N compounds, followed by Adj.+ N compounds and isolated examples of other formations, which confirms the general tendencies in English compound formation.¹² Interestingly, the semantic makeup is varied, with mechanisms of semantic change, as well as other linguistic devices, operating at different levels. First of all, in most compounds the right-hand element receives a metonymic interpretation due to the metonymic relationship BODY PART FOR PERSON. This is the case with the x-head/brain/wit compounds; a pattern of combination which has continued in English since at least 13th c. Depending on the left-hand element, such compounds receive different interpretation. In some compounds with lexical items *head (skull, pate) /brain/wit* the left-hand position is occupied by an adjective or a verb. In such formations the metonymy acts upon the right-hand element only, whereas the left-hand element needs to be interpreted literally, as e.g. in *fathead, dimwit*. In N+N compounds one can observe different types of metaphor-metonymy interaction, as well as the involvement of other linguistic devices. In some of the N+N compound formations, the right-hand element provides a etonymic link to the concept <PERSON>, but the metaphor acting upon the meaning resulting from the combination of two lexical items involved restricts the target reference to the concept <STUPID PERSON>. This is the case with items such as, for instance, *hare-brain* and *pinhead*. In some other cases, the metaphor operates only on the right-hand element, e.g. *blockhead, featherbrain*. Some kind of involvement of the mechanisms of semantic change can also be postulated in the case of quasi names functioning as a reference to stupid people, e.g. *Silly Billy, Tom Fool*. In the case of semi-names, it is difficult to posit the existence of any specific pattern. Some general observations can be made, but each combination is to be interpreted in a different way. Furthermore, some synonyms of ‘fool’ are compounds with the names of

¹² Cf. Štekauer (2000: 99).

animals in the right-hand position. Here the metaphoric change comes to the fore, even though in some cases a contrasting interpretation assuming the involvement of metonymy is taken into account. Interestingly, in some cases a compound is a relatively new formation following the appearance of the metaphoric sense-thread of the animal name occurring in the right-hand position. In such case, the addition of the left-hand element intensifies the meaning of the right-hand item. Last but not least, some compound synonyms of 'fool' do not seem to belong to any of the above mentioned groups, and hence they require individual interpretation.

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Author:

Beata Kopecka, Ph.D., Institute of English Studies, University of Rzeszów, Rzeszów, Poland;
e-mail: kopec@univ.rzeszow.pl
