

Historical productivity of VERB-NOUN compounds in English

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Abstract. English shows an exocentric verb-noun compound type with an uninflected verb followed by a noun object, e.g. *pickpocket*, where noun *pocket* is the object of verb *pick*. These “*pickpocket* compounds” first appeared in English under French influence post-1066 (Marchand 1960:37–39). We delve into English *pickpocket* compounds with the OED as our primary source. Despite fluctuations in frequency for individual forms throughout their history, we demonstrate pockets of productivity analogically involving compounds with similar semantics and compounds with the same verb as first member, or similar nouns as second. These were productive enough to compete directly with and even be preferable to more usual noun-verb compounds with similar meaning and components; for instance, *sweepchimney* (1657) predates *chimneysweep* (1709) by decades. Particularly telling regarding productivity into the 20th century are over 20 *pickpocket* coinings by humorist James Thurber (1951). These examples show that although *pickpocket* compounds have always been rare, they have enjoyed sustained productivity in English. Viewing these compounds through an analogical lens, versus a general compounding rule, better predicts the pockets of observed productivity.

Keywords. compounding; productivity; Middle English; Anglo-Norman; morphological borrowing

1. Introduction. We start with the observation that present-day English has words such as *scarecrow*, *breakwater*, and *dreadnought* which turn out to have a morphological history in common. This connection is that all are exocentric Verb-Noun compounds, with neither member inflected and neither serving as the head of the compound. Moreover, their basic meaning in each instance is typically ‘an X that VERBs the NOUN’, with the noun second member serving as the direct object of the verbal first member. Thus, a *scarecrow* is an entity that scares crows, a *breakwater* is an entity that reduces or blocks (i.e., ‘breaks’) waves near a shoreline’, and a *dreadnought* is a war ship so powerful that it fears (i.e., ‘dreads’) nothing (i.e., ‘nought’). We call these “*pickpocket* compounds”, based on a modern example that is fairly common and fairly transparent, referring to a person who picks someone’s pocket.

Old English composites with verbs, by contrast, are right-headed endocentric Noun-Verb compounds, e.g. *reord-berend* ‘speech-bearing (person), speech-bearer’, where the first element, the noun, is the direct object of the verbal second member. In fact, no *pickpocket* compounds are found in Old English; rather, *pickpocket* compounds first appeared in English under French influence in the period after the Norman invasion of England in 1066.

Marchand (1960) gives *traylebastoun* (dating from 1305) ‘a violent evil-doer in the reign of Edward I; a particular brigand or hired ruffian,’ a borrowing from Old French, as the earliest *pickpocket* compound. However, Hughes (2012) has pointed to a significantly earlier instance of

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such a compound in the form *catchpole* ‘tax-collector’ (c.1200), literally ‘one who chases hens (as payment of taxes)’ from Old French *chacepol*. This form is reassessed in Marshall & Joseph (to appear), who argue that it was not interpreted as a compound but rather as a monomorphemic simplex word.

The exocentric *pickpocket* compound type has remained a part of the grammar of English since its first entry into the language, but it has always been somewhat marginal throughout its roughly 800-year history in English; in fact, many such compounds have fallen out of currency in the modern day. Nonetheless, they show limited spurts of productivity, as we demonstrate here.

2. Defining terms. It is essential first to give a clear characterization of what we mean by PRODUCTIVITY. We take it to refer to the ability of a word-formation process to create new lexemes; in our view, it is not a binary notion, with a process being either productive or unproductive; rather, we see it as a scalar notion, from highly productive to productive in a limited domain to completely unproductive.

An example of the first type is the highly productive process of nominalizing an adjective with the suffix *-ness*, i.e. ADJ + *-ness* => NOUN. The high degree of productivity of *-ness* is indicated by its application to adjectives added relatively recently to the lexicon of English, e.g. to *uptight*, an adjective attested mostly starting in the 1960s,¹ forming a noun *uptightness*, attested first in 1969; so also for other neologistic adjectives, e.g. the *Urban Dictionary* (s.vv.) has both *sus* ‘questionable, dishonest’ and the *-ness* derived noun *susness*.

An example of the second type, a process of limited but real productivity, is seen in the *-th* nouns of dimension derived from adjectives (e.g. *width*, from *wide* + *th*) where the dialectal innovation *heighth* (vs. standard *height*) shows the extension of the *-th* suffix to a form it did not occur with before;² that extension can be interpreted as limited productivity for *-th* within the restricted domain of dimension adjectives. The situation with limited productivity within a closed set of forms can be viewed as a kind of analogy, with the outlier form, in this case *height* — an outlier since it did not have *-th* — assimilating morphologically to the prevailing, but limited, pattern with *-th*. Still, whether it is called analogy or something else, the extension of the suffix to an adjective that did not previously have it, shows this limited sort of productivity. An example of the now completely unproductive end of the spectrum would be the *-le* suffix meaning ‘to do repeatedly’ as in *tramp-le* and *wrest-le*.

3. *Pickpocket* compounds and productivity. When the *pickpocket* type first entered English from French (c. 13th/14th centuries), these forms were totally novel, and thus somewhat marginal. In fact, since they entered English from outside, i.e. from another language, one could say they necessarily came in at the margins, crossing over the French-English language boundary, as it were, into English (see Neikirk-Schuler 1996 on this view of borrowings). These first *pickpocket* compounds were borrowed wholesale from French (see Marshall & Joseph, to appear), but as more and more entered the language and knowledge of French among English speakers increased, these compounds became analyzable and able to inspire new analogous compounds. They were never highly productive (thus unlike *-ness*), and always marginal within English,

¹ The OED (s.v.) does give an example from 1934 (from J. W. Cain’s *Postman always rings twice*) but considers it “an isolated early example”; it is written as two words in this early instance.

² We realize that the *-th* suffix did attach to *high* in earlier English but via a regular sound change, the *-th* became *-t* after the final fricative of *high*. Still, synchronically for the stage of English we are focusing on, there was no *-th* per se in the noun derived from *high*.

losing out to native compound types such as NOUN-VERB-*er*. However, Marchand (1960: 37) lists a dozen early examples (14th -15th centuries) and then observes that “there has been an uninterrupted flow of coinings ever since.” Despite being on the lower end of the productivity scale, these coinings nevertheless represent productive formations. Gast (2008: 280) claims they have decreased in number since the 16th century, becoming relatively unproductive today. At one time, however, *pickpocket* compounds were available for new word formation and creative word-play.

We can demonstrate that despite fluctuations in frequency for individual forms throughout their history, pockets of productivity can be identified that analogically involve *pickpocket* compounds with similar semantics, compounds with the same verb as the first member, and compounds with similar nouns as the second member — see Figure 1.

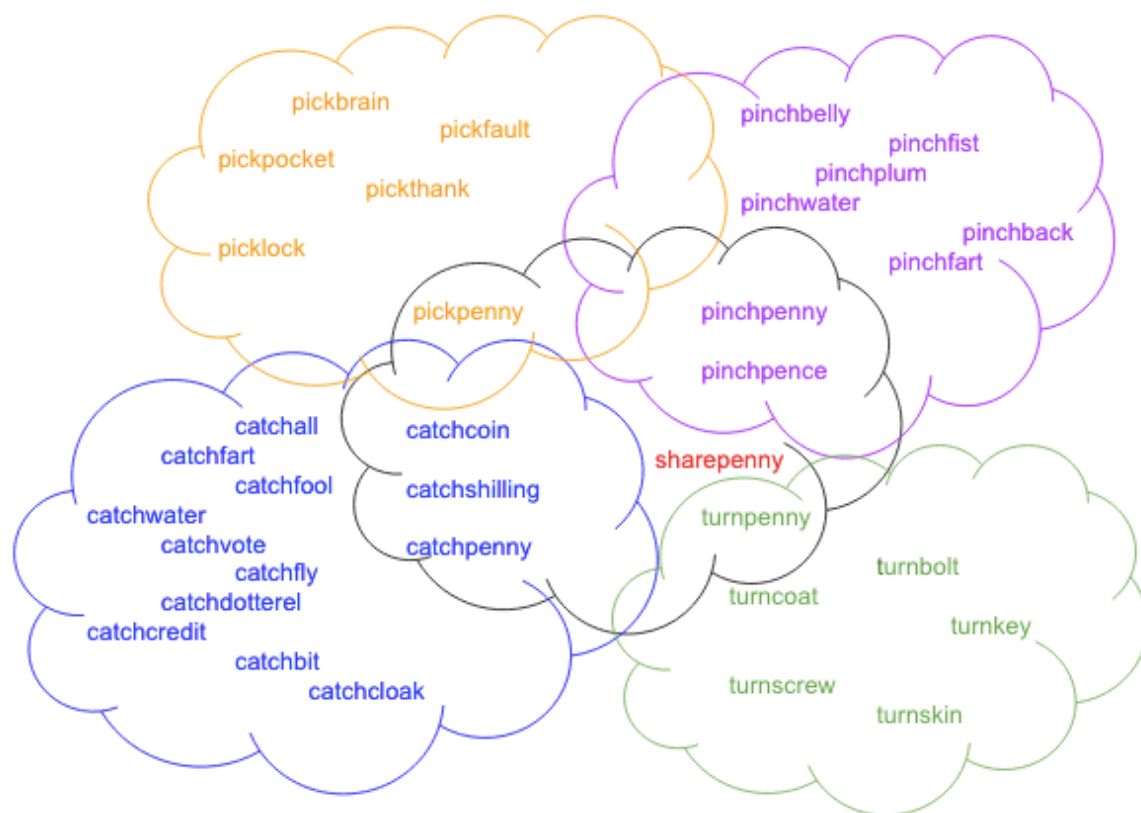


Figure 1. Overlapping pockets of productivity of *pickpocket* compounds

This diagram shows “pockets” (or clusters) with the verbs *pick*-, *pinch*-, *turn*- and *catch*- overlapping with the pocket where a coin is the noun. Many of the words in the *pinch*- and *-coin* pockets form another pocket which is not shown in the diagram, this one semantic, with meanings of ‘stingy’ or ‘greedy’, e.g. *pinchfist*, *pinchpenny*, *pinchpence*, *sharepenny*, *catchcoin*, *turnpenny*. This semantic pocket coincides with the tendency of *pickpocket* compounds to have pejorative meanings, often referring to criminals, as *pickpocket* itself does, undesirables (e.g. *turncoat* ‘traitor’, or *lickspittle* ‘parasite, toady’), or lower social ranks (e.g. *catchfart* ‘footservant’). This pejorative tendency has been present since the first introductions of *pickpocket* compounds in *traylebastoun* and *catchpole* perhaps due to their association with the presumably disliked French administration. The existence of such pockets/clusters, demonstrates productivity through analogy. Although these compounds were not highly productive in all

spheres of the language, the existence of, for example, *pinchpenny* may easily have inspired the semantically and compositionally similar *pinchpurse*, especially in the exuberant domain of insults and pejoration. The marginality of the compounds may itself contribute to their use as creative insults, since as infrequent items, they would have great “surprisal” effect and would thus attract attention, as insults are wont to do.

This playful insult aspect has even been applied to Shakespeare, whose name is itself one of the most famous *pickpocket* compounds (‘one who wields (SHAKE) a weapon (SPEAR)’). His contemporary Robert Greene criticized the young new playwright with a pun for believing he was “the only *Shake-scene* in a country,” with *scene* referring to the stage or theatre in general (Greene 1592). Greene must therefore have not only been able to parse Shakespeare’s name as a *pickpocket* compound, but to create a new compound of this type on the spot. This example offers a window into the type of situation in which many of these compounds may have been created. Someone looking for a clever insult could draw spontaneously on existing compounds to provide both a morphological model and an extra negative connotation through semantic analogy.

A similar process of word formation for these compounds can be seen into the 20th century through the example of several new *pickpocket* compounds coined by James Thurber in a humorous piece he wrote for the *New Yorker* in 1951.³ Just as with Greene’s *shake-scene*, these may not have caught on, but they demonstrate the availability of the compound type to speakers for the purposes of coining new words. Several also share their predecessors’ negative connotations such as *hissgrammar* ‘an illiterate or ineloquent person,’ *kissgranny* ‘a man who pursues older women for their fortunes,’ and *douselight* ‘kill-joy,’ itself being explained by Thurber in reference to the existing *pickpocket* compound.

We note that in principle, Thurber could have based his humorous creations entirely on other compounding patterns, especially NOUN-VERB-er, and come up with, e.g. *grammarhisser*, *lightdouser*, *grannykisser*, etc. Instead, the two compounding types exist side by side in his innovated lexicon as they do in English as a whole, with *pressgrape* explained as both a *grape presser* and a *crunchberry* and *glassgrabber* defined as a *shushlaugh*.⁴ We consider it to be a significant fact with regard to the productivity of this compound type that Thurber overtly chose to use a less common, but still available, pattern for over half of his wordsmithing. The surprisal value of this type, alluded to above, may have played a role in his choice, inasmuch as surprise is an element that contributes to the success of an attempt at humor.

4. Conclusion. One question that is worth asking here, and answering, is why a marginal and foreign pattern should remain in English for so long. We do not have a definitive answer, but we can offer some suggestions for why the *pickpocket* compound type should have persisted for some 800 years on the margins of English grammar, with limited, but nonetheless real, productivity. There seem to be at least three factors at play here.

First, we point to the formal simplicity of this compound, involving only the juxtaposition of bare root forms. Inasmuch as juxtaposition is in a certain sense the most basic of syntactic operations, and the absence of inflection and further derivational affixes, such as *-er*, gives a “stripped-

³ See Baldwin (1970) for some discussion of Thurber’s compounds, from this piece and others; she draws attention to what she calls the “playful association” of Thurber’s coinings and observes that he “invents by analogy” (p. 193).

⁴ As a nonhumorous relatively modern example, note the agentive *-er* compound *circuitbreaker* ‘a device that stops or interrupts the flow of current in an electric circuit’, attested first in 1850 (per OED), which has a synonymous *pickpocket* form *break-circuit* ‘a device for opening and closing an electric circuit’, that interestingly was first attested prior to the *-er* form, in 1849 (per OED).

down” form to work with, we suggest that the very simplicity of the *pickpocket* type made it a convenient formative type for neologisms and may well have played a role in the retention of this compound type at least into the 20th century.

Second, a further factor may involve the basic sentential word order of English. That is, the compound-internal verb-object (VO) order also matches the V-O word-order in the verb phrase. V-O order, though a possibility in Old English, competed with O-V order in that period and only came to predominate in English during the same period of contact with French during which *pickpocket* compounds were introduced. The match between the prevailing V-O order in sentences and the V-O order in *pickpocket* compounds could have enhanced the viability of the compound formation.

Third and finally, bearing in mind that many *pickpocket* compounds have a pejorative sense to them, the marginality of this formation may, unexpectedly perhaps, have helped it hang on at the margins of grammar. Their very marginality increases their expressivity due to the surprisal value alluded to above. That characteristic made this word formation pattern particularly attractive, as it was particularly well-suited for use in forming creative insults.

Thus, we advance English *pickpocket* compounding, given its long history of limited but real productivity from their origins in French⁵ to the modern day, as a compelling example of a process which occupies the central portion of the productivity scale.

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⁵ We note that the *pickpocket* type is still productive to a greater degree than in English in Romance languages, including French, Spanish, and Italian.