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What language processing reveals about constraints on word formation

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Morphological systems are constrained in how inflectional, derivational, and compounding processes may interact with each other. Derivational suffixes, for example, typically appear inside inflectional ones indicating that derivation can feed inflection and not vice versa. One case that has been widely studied in the psycholinguistic literature is the avoidance of plurals inside compounds in English and other languages, the so-called plurals-in-compounds effect. Compounds with singular non-head nouns (*mouse eater*) typically sound better than those with plurals, and should the non-head appear in plural form, regular plurals generally sound worse than irregular ones (**rats eater* vs. *mice eater*). Several previous studies have shown that both adult and child speakers are sensitive to this contrast, but the question of how this contrast is to be interpreted has remained controversial.

My presentation will review findings from a number of experimental studies on the plurals-in-compounds effect in English and German. We will consider results from (i) different modalities (production, judgment, comprehension), (ii) different experimental techniques (offline studies, online techniques, e.g. eye-movement monitoring during reading and listening, event-related brain potentials) and (iii) different populations (children and adults, native and non-native speakers), and it will be shown that the contrast between regular and irregular plural non-heads inside compounds is remarkably consistent across (i) to (iii). I conclude that the results can best be understood in terms of morphological and semantic constraints on word-formation processes that become operative at different points in time during processing. Alternative proposals *sans grammar* that attribute the plurals-in-compounds effect to surface-form properties or to exposure-based learning will be shown to be less successful.