On the Lexical Semantics of Compounds

The type of compounds one finds in a language often depends on the classificatory scheme one starts out with and the framework of analysis at one's disposal. For a long time, English compounds have been divided into synthetic (also called deverbal) and root (also called primary) compounds. Among the former are compounds like truck driver, flower arranging, and cost containment. Among the latter are compounds like file cabinet, grass green, and black board. I will argue in this talk that our view of English compounds has been unduly constricted by this classificatory scheme, and that the scheme recently proposed by Bisetto and Scalise (2005) leads us to look more carefully at the data of compounding in English, and indeed to find a much wide range of compound types than has typically been discussed in the literature. Using the Bisetto-Scalise classification and the framework of lexical semantic representation that I developed in Lieber (2004, 2006), I will first lay out a range of compound types that are attested in English and then provide a lexical semantic analysis of them. I will concentrate especially on types of compounds that have received too little attention in the literature on English: coordinate compounds like parent-child or pass-fail; subject-oriented compounds like city employee; and compounds with deverbal elements formed by conversion like attack dog, dog attack, kick ball, or ball kick. I will also touch on the varied nature of exocentricity.