Names or descriptions: The status of French nominal constructions with *à* in comparison with German and Greek

In French, the preposition *à* is often used to introduce a PP-modifier of a noun. Two typical contexts of use are illustrated in (1).

(1) a. la réponse à la question numéro 1
('the reply to the question number 1',
i.e. the reply to question 1)
b. une soupe aux choux
('a soup with-the cabbages', i.e. a cabbage soup)

In (1a), the choice of the preposition is determined by the noun *réponse* and the noun phrase following *à* is an argument. In cases such as (1b), two nouns are combined to name a concept. The preposition gives some information about the relationship between the two nouns, but otherwise, (1b) is similar to N+N compounds in English or German.

In order to investigate the naming function of nouns with a modifier introduced by *à*, we collected a set of over 3,500 multi-word expressions using the French *Wiktionnaire* as a basis. As a way of assessing the similarity to compounds, we looked at German and Greek translations of a randomized sample of 350 expressions. German and Greek are both languages in which compounding is often used to come up with a new name when a concept needs to be named. However, the use of compounding in the two languages is different.

In the analysis, we had to make a distinction between two semantically different classes. A large subset of the expressions contains names of species of animals and plants. In the sample of 350, 112 expressions belong to this class (32%). All other expressions were taken into the second class. In both classes, we have expressions with or without a definite article.

We found that German translations were overwhelmingly compounds. In Greek, we find three common types of translation, illustrated in (2).

(2) a.	pâte à sucre	('paste with sugar', i.e. sugar paste)
	ζαχαρόπαστα	('sugar-paste')
b.	parc à bébé	('park for baby', i.e. pen)
	παιδικό πάρκο	('child$_{ADJ}$ park')
c.	épingle à chapeau	('pin for hat', i.e. hatpin)
	καρφίτσα καπέλου	('brooch hat$_{GEN}$')

In the French examples in (2), we see how the meaning of *à* ranges from 'with' to 'for'. This indicates that the role of the preposition can hardly be interpreted as determining the relation between the two nouns. In the Greek translations, we find a compound in (2a), a relational adjective in (2b) and a genitive noun in (2c). The translation types in (2b-c) correspond to the most common procedures for rendering German and English compounds in Romance and Slavic languages.

On the basis of the German and Greek translations we found for the French expressions, we argue that it is worth distinguishing two constructions with *à* illustrated in (1), one descriptive and the other belonging to word formation, similar to N+N compounds in German. The latter is used in particular for the names of species.