Comparing compounds: A corpus study of Swedish compound nouns in English-German contrast

(Full paper)

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This is a corpus study investigating Swedish compound nouns in English and German contrast. On the face of it, the three languages seem to be similar in their compounding preferences (*dopaminsystem* (Sw.); *dopamin system* (En.); *Dopaminsystem* (Ge.)). However, our translation corpus data partly indicate considerable differences between the languages, as illustrated in (1) and (2):

(1)

krigsslutet		(Sw. original)
war-[s]-end-DEF		
the end of the war		(En. translation)
das	*Kriegsende*	(Ge. translation)
the-DEF	war-[s]-end	

(2)

skrivbordslådan		(Sw. original)
desk-[s]-drawer-DEF		
desk drawer		(En. translation)
die	*Schublade ihres Schreibtisches*	(Ge. translation)
the-DEF	drawer her-GEN desk-GEN	

In (1), the German translation matches the Swedish compound (see, Teleman et al. 1999: II: 42–47), while English opts for a postmodifying prepositional phrase. Conversely, (2) illustrates a noun sequence in English (Smitterberg 2021), similar to the Swedish original, but a genitive paraphrase in German. Previous studies have observed high correspondence rates – about 70% − between English noun sequences and German and Swedish compounds (Authors forthcoming; Berg 2017). However, it is unclear to what extent these frequency observations are 'skewed' since these studies only use English noun sequences as the starting point. Therefore, the present study instead departs from Swedish compound nouns and aims to explore: (i) the proportions of English and German compounds or noun sequences as translation correspondences to Swedish compounds, (ii) the distributions of other types of correspondences such as genitives and prepositional phrases, and (iii) what these results tell us about language-specific preferences and translation effects.

The study is based on the non-fiction XXX University English-German-Swedish corpus (Authors forthcoming). XXX consists of, e.g., popular science texts, biographies and self-help books amounting to approximately half a million words of each source language with translations into the two other languages. Using a Python script, we retrieved words tagged as nouns (and their translations), which were then classified, manually removing all Swedish non-compound nouns. The material comprises 1000 Swedish original instances with their English

and German translations, and 1000 Swedish compounds translated each from English and German originals. The results are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Our quantitative findings suggest that Swedish compounds are rendered as English noun sequences (*familjemedlemmar* ['family-members'] > *family members*) or solid compounds (*grundvatten* ['ground-water'] > *groundwater*) in much lower proportions (50%) than in German (80%) (see also Carlsson 2004: 75 on German-Swedish similarities in compounding). As for 'non-compound' correspondences, English appears to use premodifying adjectives as correspondences (*månadstidning* ['month-magazine'] > *monthly magazine*) to a higher extent than German (15% vs. 5%). We also observe that English translators often use 'simple' noun correspondences (*vetemjöl* ['wheat-flour'] > *flour*), which account for almost 25% of the tokens (vs. 8% in German). From this, it appears that Swedish and German are more similar to each other than to English.

References

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