



INTERPLAY OF STRUCTURE AND MEANING: SEMANTIC TRANSPARENCY OF COMPOUND WORDS

Zhuzhuna Gumbaridze¹, Tamta Popkhadze²

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ABSTRACT

The internal structure of words, as one of the most fundamental components of language, operates within a rule-governed linguistic system. However, human vocabulary functions dynamically, allowing for creativity in word formation through processes such as compounding. This manuscript provides a structural and semantic analysis of Georgian compounds highlighting the characteristics and challenges associated with the meaning predictability of these complex lexical units. The analysis is supported with data from a study on the predictability of meaning of a selected set of 30 Georgian compounds conducted with non-native speakers of Georgian. The study examines the linguistic knowledge of speakers, which encompasses not only the ability to segment spoken language into meaningful units but also the capacity to specify the morpho-syntactic characteristics of individual words within their mental lexicon. On the basis of findings, potential outcomes are hypothesized and discussed in the results section highlighting that highly predictable composites have clear meanings derived from their components, while less predictable ones require contextual knowledge.

Key words:

Composites, Predictability, Semantic, Transparency, Constituents

¹ Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (Georgia), Department of European Studies;

² Akaki Tsereteli State University (Georgia)

Corresponding Author:

Zhuzhuna Gumbaridze, Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, 35, Ninoshvili Str., Batumi, Georgia

E-mail: zhuzhuna.gumbaridze@bsu.edu.ge

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, compounding has emerged as a significant area of interest for applied linguists. The quest for a comprehensive understanding of language as a linguistic system – through the analysis of the form, meaning, and function of words – has led to comparative-contrastive analyses across different languages, facilitating a closer examination of linguistic typology. It is evident that form, meaning, and function are interrelated; this interconnectedness underpins the expressive and communicative functions of language. To effectively navigate and shape our conceptual universe, individuals must possess linguistic competence, which encompasses both organizational and pragmatic approaches. Any discourse on language use necessitates an exploration of the relationships among the components of language competence. Therefore, grammatical competence remains a central concern in language usage. Grammar encompasses not only the principles of word formation and the combination of words – traditionally classified as morphology and syntax – but also the rules governing the interpretation of meanings in words, phrases, sentences and texts. In this context, compounding has garnered considerable attention due to the challenges it presents for both non-native and native speakers.

Interpretation of a compound word presents several challenges due to semantic nuances, cultural context, morphological differences, polysemy, etc. The main reason for the difficulties associated with interpretation of compound words is that the semantic relationships between the constituents are not always clearly and overtly manifested. According to Booij (2005), the base word has a focal point in the semantic interpretation of a complex word and the productivity of compounding in many languages is mostly attributed to its semantic transparency and versatility. He also claims that when two elements combine to form a compound, their semantic relationship is not overtly indicated by formal markers. Instead, speakers interpret the connection by relying on the meanings of the individual components, their background knowledge, and, at times, contextual cues from usage. Meanings must be inferred from broader linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge, which significantly aids in the adequate interpretation of compounds.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Compounding, as a linguistic phenomenon, involves the simultaneous engagement of morphological, syntactic, and semantic processes. This multifaceted nature of compounding facilitates the formation of new words in languages through regular patterns derived from pre-existing lexical items. Compounds play an integral role in our linguistic repertoire, enabling the concise expression of complex concepts and ideas in everyday communication. Consequently, compound nouns are prevalent across languages, despite their nuanced usage and distinct characteristics. In linguistic theory, robust claims regarding compounding have emerged. Bauer (2001) provides a comprehensive definition of a compound word characterizing it as a lexical unit composed of two or more elements, each of which can function as an independent lexeme in different contexts, while demonstrating phonological and grammatical isolation from conventional syntactic structures. He highlights the complex

nature of the phenomenon: a compound can be defined as a lexical unit containing two or more components, where each component can independently function as a lexeme in different contexts. Additionally, compounds exhibit some degree of phonological and/or grammatical separation from regular syntactic patterns.

The complexity of compound words has been extensively discussed by various scholars (Monsell, 1985; Sandra, 1990; Lin, 1999; Gibbs, 1989; Nunberg, 1994; Ó Séaghdha, 2008; Schafer, 2015; Reddy et al., 2011) in terms of semantic transparency, literality, meaning predictability, and compositionality. Schafer (2015) defines semantic transparency as “a measure of the degree of how well we can associate the current meaning of a complex word to both the meanings of its individual parts and the standard patterns for combining those meanings” (Schafer, 2015:1). Many researchers, including Schafer (2015), Sandra (1990), and Libben (2003) propose a binary distinction between transparent and opaque compounds, proposing a scalar notion of semantic transparency. In this framework, compounds with fully transparent and predictable meanings occupy the higher end of the scale, while those with opaque and less predictable meanings reside at the lower end. Schafer (2015) further notes that the mid-range of this hierarchy consists of combinations exhibiting varying degrees of relatedness between constituent meanings and the overall meaning of the compound, along with differing degrees of predictability based on standard combining practices. Empirical investigations of this phenomenon have demonstrated that compounds can be semantically analyzable and may be categorized as either decomposable or non-decomposable. It is hypothesized that compounding is not a strictly rule-governed process; due to its idiosyncratic nature, not all languages employ compounding with equal flexibility. When addressing the compositional nature of compounding, it is crucial to recognize the ongoing debate within linguistics regarding the distinction between compounds that function as words and those that operate as phrases. Ó Séaghdha claims that “there is a tendency among linguists to view compounding as a particularly ill-behaved phenomenon that does not fit into standard categories” (Ó Séaghdha, 2008:16). Reddy, McCarthy, and Manandhar (2011) analyze compositionality judgments for various compound nouns framing compositionality as an issue of literality. They define a compound as compositional if its meaning can be derived from the literal meanings of its constituent parts. Their classification system categorizes compounds into four distinct classes based on the presence of constituent words in hypernymy hierarchies or definitions of the compound, providing a framework for understanding the relationships between constituents and the compound's overall meaning.

Reddy, McCarthy, and Manandhar (2011) outline four key patterns in the relationship between compound nouns and their components: 1. Both words appear either in the definition or in the hypernymy hierarchy of the compound (e.g., swimming pool); 2. Only the first word is present in the definition or hierarchy, while the second word is not (e.g., night owl); 3. Only the second word exists in the definition or hierarchy, but not the first (e.g., zebra crossing); 4. Neither word appears in the definition or hierarchy (e.g., smoking gun). The underlying idea behind these patterns is that when a word retains its literal meaning within a compound, it is likely to be reflected in its definition or hierarchical structure.

Libben (2003) further emphasizes that compounds occupy a unique position at the intersection of words and sentences reflecting the properties of linguistic representation in the mind and grammatical processing. This growing interest in the complexity of compounds has shifted focus to the distinctions between compounds and complex nominals. Compounds are viewed not merely as semantically transparent or opaque combinations but as phenomena that share characteristics with other complex nominal structures. This perspective encourages a comprehensive examination of the distinctions among various types of multiword combinations, including compounds, phrases, complex nominals, and pseudo compounds.

The distinction between endocentric and exocentric compounds has garnered significant attention in recent research. A number of recent research studies (Schäfer (2018), Reddy, Siva, Diana McCarthy & Suresh Manandhar, 2011) have shown that the theme of headedness is given a central attention. However, detection of the semantic basis of compounding as a whole and differentiation between heads and modifiers remains the subject of debate. Scalise, Fabregas and Forza (2009) assert that identifying a compound as endocentric or exocentric hinges on the concept of the head. They categorize exocentricity into three types: categorical, semantic and morphological. Additionally, the influence of pragmatics on the semantics of compounds has been acknowledged by several scholars. Ó Séaghdha (2008) notes that many compound nouns describe relations of location, possession, or topic asserting that regularities in compound meanings emerge from cognitive models rather than a finite set of rules. Event frames also play a key role in this process, as we instinctively categorize entities according to the typical events they are involved in or linked to (Ó Séaghdha, 2008:20).

The theoretical positions of linguists regarding compounding underscore the importance of integrating morphological, semantic, and pragmatic considerations in analyzing compounds. Moreover, the significance of "semantic transparency," which measures the degree to which the meaning of a multimorphemic combination is related to its constituents, is paramount. As Schafer (2018) elaborates, a scalar hierarchy can be established where combinations with fully predictable meanings occupy the top positions, while opaque combinations with less predictable meanings reside at the bottom. Schafer's scale of semantic transparency allocates the middle position to "combinations with varying degrees of relatedness between the constituents' meaning and the meaning of the whole, and with varying degrees of predictability based on typical ways of combining these constituents" (Schafer, 2018:1). Schafer's semantic transparency scale places in the middle those combinations where the relationship between the meanings of individual components and the overall meaning varies, as well as those with different levels of predictability based on common patterns of combining these components (Schafer, 2018:1).

In summary, terms such as "semantic transparency", "meaning predictability", "literality", and "compositionality" are often used interchangeably in linguistic theories. This suggests a convergence in the approaches and models employed by linguists to explore the phenomenon of compounding. Reddy, McCarthy and Manandhar (2011) conducted an empirical study of English compounding utilizing Mechanical Turk to analyze compositionality judgments based on the literal use of individual constituents within phrases.

Their dataset included both scalar compositionality judgments and literality scores for each component word. In this paper, we pursued the primary objective: to validate the concept of semantic predictability in Georgian compounds, specifically focusing on the meaning predictability of Georgian composite nouns (a term we adopted in this study). In particular, in the study compounds were analyzed with denotata that may be intrinsically or extrinsically determined. Accordingly, semantic transparency spectrum in our study was focused on transparent composites as well less/non-transparent ones:

1. Transparent Composites

Compounds like "წვერ-ულვაში" (tsver-ulvashi), meaning "beard and moustache," which exemplifies high semantic transparency. Both constituents - "წვერი" (tsveri, "beard") and "ულვაში" (ulvashi, "moustache") – retain their individual semantic values, enabling straightforward compositional interpretation. Both constituents retain their individual meanings within the composite, allowing for straightforward semantic analysis. Specifically, "beard" refers to the hair that some men allow to grow on the lower part of their face (CIDE-Cambridge International Dictionary of English), while "moustache" denotes hair that a man grows above his upper lip (CIDE). Consequently, the composite is predictable, interpretable, and semantically analyzable.

2. Less/Non-Transparent Composites

Compounds like "წუთისოფელი" (tsutisopeli) and "პირუტყვი" (pirutkvi) demonstrate more complex semantic relationships. "წუთისოფელი" (literally "minute's world") references the transient nature of existence, while "პირუტყვი" (literally "mouth-speechless") denotes cattle (domesticated large ruminant animals, such as cows and oxen) (CIDE). In these cases, the relationship between the meanings of the constituents and the overall meaning of the composite is not overtly marked, leading to challenges in predicting their meanings based solely on their parts. These examples reveal semantic opacity where constituent meanings do not directly predict the composite's meaning. Despite the apparent opacity in these latter examples, some predictions regarding their meanings can still be posited. The processing of such composite models requires a comprehensive analysis that incorporates linguistic and psycholinguistic factors, as well as cognitive and socio-emotional strategies, including logical reasoning, hypothetical judgments, explanatory frameworks, associative thinking, and requests for clarification.

Thus, in the analytical framework, our morpho-semantic analysis categorizes two-constituent compounds across a semantic predictability continuum:

a) Semantically Transparent (Predictable):

- Both constituents demonstrate clear derivational relationships;
- Meaning readily inferable from component parts.

b) Partially Transparent (Less Predictable):

- One constituent maintains literal semantic connection;
- Partial meaning derivation possible;
- Requires contextual or cultural knowledge.

c) Semantically Opaque (Unpredictable):

- No discernible derivational relationship between constituents;
- Meaning fundamentally disconnected from component semantics;
- Requires extensive contextual interpretation.

In our comprehensive approach to analyzing Georgian linguistic composites, we employed “A Comprehensive Georgian – English Dictionary” (<http://www.nplg.gov.ge>) as a primary lexicographic resource. Our methodological strategy involved a systematic taxonomic classification of compound words through a nuanced three-fold categorization model:

1. Predictable Composites (P);
2. Less Predictable Composites (LP);
3. Unpredictable Composites (U).

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

3.1. Participants

In order to investigate the semantic transparency of compound words in Georgian on the basis of verbatim translations of constituents in English, we employed an experimental research methodology. This approach involved distributing a list of selected compound words to non-native participants for whom English was a foreign language (36 international BA students, aged 18 - 21 and 8 visiting professors, aged 37 – 78) on academic mobility at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (BSU) during the period 2022 – 2024), accompanied by instructions to rate their understanding of each compound's meaning based on the literal translation of its components.

3.2. Instrument

Our research employed a structured approach to evaluate semantic transparency in compound words translated from Georgian to English. Participants were presented with a series of compounds and asked to assess their semantic predictability using a standardized instrument.

The assessment tool consisted of a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5), allowing participants to indicate their level of agreement with specific statements regarding semantic transparency. We categorized

compounds into three distinct groups based on theoretical predictions about their transparency levels:

For Predictable Composites (P), participants evaluated whether "the meaning of this compound is clearly predictable from the meanings of its individual components." These compounds were hypothesized to demonstrate high semantic transparency, with constituent meanings directly contributing to the overall interpretation.

In the case of Less Predictable Composites (LP), participants assessed whether "the meaning of this compound is somewhat predictable from its components, but requires additional interpretation." This intermediate category captured compounds where some semantic relationship between constituents and whole was maintained, but with partial opacity requiring interpretive effort.

Finally, for Unpredictable Composites (U), participants indicated their agreement with the statement that "the meaning of this compound cannot be predicted from the meanings of its individual components." These compounds represented cases of semantic opacity where constituent meanings provided little guidance toward understanding the compound's actual meaning.

This tripartite classification system enabled us to examine semantic transparency as a continuum rather than a binary property, allowing for more nuanced analysis of how non-native speakers process compound meanings when presented with literal translations from Georgian to English.

This study excluded the analysis of typical compound combinations that are structurally identical to sets of space-separated words commonly found in English compounding patterns, such as "swimming pool," "bank account," "balance sheet," "application form," "summer holidays," and "climate change." Instead, we focus on composites as firmly lexicalized two-word compositional units (whether hyphenated or unhyphenated) whose meanings are not necessarily derived from the meanings of their constituent elements. Our analysis emphasized compositional patterns of these units examining the meanings of the individual components in relation to the overall semantic interpretation of the combination. We evaluated these composites through a constituent-based model considering the degree of semantic transparency of each unit. To this end, we employed the terms "transparent/predictable" and "opaque/unpredictable" compounds and made predictions regarding the relative difficulty of understanding these aspects, particularly in the context of potential English counterparts of Georgian composites. This approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the interplay between form and meaning in compound constructions.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The dataset for this study comprised a total of 30 composites of high frequency from The Georgian National Corpus (<http://gnc.gov.ge/gnc/concordance>) (Table 1).

No	COMPOSITE	LITERAL MEANING	PREDICTABILITY	INFERRED MEANING
1.	კარ-მიდამო (kar-midamo) n. C1: კარი /door C2: მიდამო/ surroundings	house & yard, house & outbuildings	LP	door frame
2.	ვაი-ვაგლახი (vai-vaglakhi) n. C1: ვაი/weeping and wailing, cries of woe, groaning C2: ვაგლახი /call of woe, trouble	cries of woe; trouble; misery	P	weeping
3.	მისვლა-მოსვლა (misvla-mosvla) n. C1: მისვლა/going C2: მოსვლა/coming, arrival	coming and going; traffic, contact	P	coming and going
4.	მამასახლისი (mamasakhlisi) n. C1: მამა/father C2: სახლის/of the house	village headman; monitor; (group) supervisor arc. household/family/c ommunity male head; paterfamilias	U	-
5.	მუქთამჭამელი (muktamchameli) n. C1: მუქთა/free, gratuitous C2: მჭამელი/eater	freeloader	LP	cheap eater
6.	წუთისოფელი (tsutisopeli) n. C1: წუთი/minute C2: სოფელი/village	transient world, lifespan	U	-
7.	წვრილშვილი (tsvrileshvili) adj C1: წვრილი/thin C2: შვილი/child (son, daughter)	smb with small children	LP	thin child
8.	მშიერ-მწყურვალი (mshier-mtkurvali) adj. C1: მშიერი /hungry C2: მწყურვალი /thirsty	hungry and thirsty	P	hungry and thirsty
9.	გლახა-მათხოვარი (glakha-matkhovari) n. C1: გლახა/destitute; pauper C2: მათხოვარი/ beggar	beggar	LP	poor beggar
10.	დედაკაცი (dedakatsi) n. C1: დედა/mother C2: კაცი/man	woman, married woman; wife; female servant; coward	U	-
11.	ლუკმაპური (lukmapuri) n. C1: ლუკმა/morsel, bite, mouthful (of food) C2: პური/bread	morsel to eat; fig daily bread	P	a morsel of bread
12.	ხელ-ფეხი (khel-pekhi) n. C1: ხელი /hand, arm C2: ფეხი/leg	arms and legs, limbs; hands and feet	U	-

13.	ქება-დიდება (keba-dideba) n. C1: ქება/praising C2: დიდება/ lauding, glorifying	glorifying, extolling	P	praising
14.	ცხვირ-პირი (tskhvir-piri) n. C1: ცხვირი/nose C2: პირი/mouth	(human) face	P	face
15.	გლეხკაცი (glekhkatsi) n. C1: გლეხი/peasant C2: კაცი/man	peasant (male)	P	peasant
16.	სიგრძე-სიგანე (sigrdze-sigane) n. C1: სიგრძე/length C2: სიგანე/width, breadth	length and breadth	U	-
17.	კალო-საბძელი (kalo-sabdze) n. C1: კალო/threshing floors C2: საბძელი/silo	threshing floor(s) and silo(s);	P	threshing floor
18.	მამაკაცი (mamakatsi) n. C1: მამა/father C2: კაცი/man	man, male adult	U	-
19.	ქვეშაგები (kveshsagebi) n. C1: ქვეშ/under C2: საგები/ bedding	mattress; bedding	P	under- bedding
20.	თოფ-იარაღი (top-iaraghi) n. C1: თოფი/gun C2: იარაღი/weapon	firearms and weapons	LP	gun
21.	ვაჟკაცი (vazhkatsi) n. C1: ვაჟი/male person, boy, lad, young man, son, man of courage, brave C2: კაცი/man	(grown-up) man; warrior; strong; courageous, ready to fight	LP	brave boy
22.	გულშმატკივარი (gulshematktivroba) n. C1: გული/heart C2: შმატკივარი /fan, supporter	fan, supporter	LP	die-hard fan
23.	გულსტკივილი (gulstkvili) n. C1: გული/heart C2: ტკივილი/pain	woe, heartache	LP	pain in the heart
24.	სახლ-კარი (saxhl-kari) n. C1: სახლი/house C2: კარი/door	house and ground	LP	house-door
25.	შუაგული (shuaguli) n. C1: შუა/middle C2: გული/heart	middle, mid part	U	lukewarm

26.	ჭიშკარი (chishkari) n. C1: ბჭე/big door C2: კარები/door	(main) gate	U	-
27.	მერალა-ბალახი (mkrala-balakhi) n. C1: მერალი/ stinking, foul (-smelling) C2: ბალახი/ grass	mugwort, feverfew	P	stinking grass
28.	სახნავ-სათესი (sakhnav-satesi) n. C1: სახნავი/arable land C2: სათესი/for sowing, seedbed;	arable (land)	P	arable land
29.	პირუტყვი (pirutkvi) n. C1: პირი/mouth C2: უტყვი/ Speechless	cattle	U	-
30.	ხელისგული (khelisguli) n. C1: ხელის/of a hand C2: გული/heart	palm	U	hand over hear

Note: C1 – Component 1; C2 – Component 2

Table 1. Composites used in the study

Using high-frequency words from the corpus not only helped to ensure that participants' difficulty with understanding compounds derived from semantic opacity rather than simply encountering rare or unfamiliar vocabulary but also offered several important advantages such as statistical reliability, representative language use and practical application for language learners and users.

Following the initial assessment, a semantic analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which the meanings of the constituents aligned with the overall meaning of the compound, as well as to explore how semantic transparency varied across different types of compounds, specifically distinguishing between endocentric and exocentric formations

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines hyphenated and unhyphenated compound formations with varied semantic structures, focusing on the complex relationship between constituent elements and holistic meaning.

Figure 1 clearly illustrates the relatively balanced distribution across three categories, with a slightly higher number of fully predictable compounds. The percentage breakdown is as follows: Predictable Compounds: 37% (11 out of 30), Less Predictable Compounds: 30% (9 out of 30) and Unpredictable Compounds: 33% (10 out of 30).

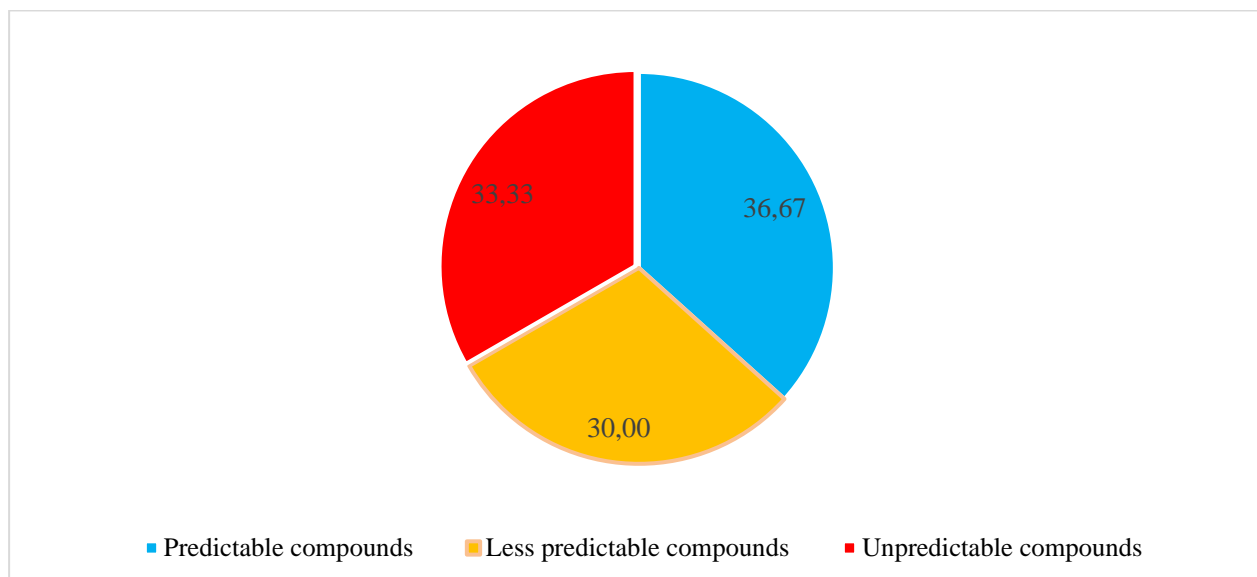


Figure 1. Distribution of compounds

Let us explore the composite “ჭიშკარი” (chishkari). Through a comprehensive analysis of etymological origins and material manifestations, this study of this mexeme illuminates the complex semantic and structural representations embedded in the concept of the gate. Etymologically, ჭიშკარი derives from the composite ბჭის კარი (bchis kari), literally translating to "gate of the fortress". This linguistic construction reveals a profound connection between architectural functionality and linguistic representation. The traditional Georgian residential gate manifested two categories: simple gates characterized by minimal architectural complexity and complex gates exhibiting sophisticated architectural interventions and decorative elements. Historical documentation from the 17th and 18th centuries suggests an architectural evolution wherein gates transitioned from mere functional structures to complex architectural elements, occasionally supporting entire palatial extensions. In western Georgia, stone-columned gates predominated that featured tripartite columnar structures with dual passage systems (pedestrian and vehicular) and had intricate ornamental decorations including symbolic representations (tree of life, vine) as well as zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs or heraldic inscriptions. Thus, the gates had the charge of socio-economic implications. The architectural sophistication of gates served as a material signifier of socioeconomic status, family wealth and social prestige. It is obvious that the term ჭიშკარი represents more than a linguistic descriptor. Alongside its cultural artifact complexity, it is a symbolic representation in traditional Georgian society which leads us to highlighting the importance of cultural knowledge to the interpretation of this composite.

By analyzing the dataset, we found that the meaning of the composite is fully predictable/interpretable if there is an explicit semantic transparency between the constituents. The conclusion which our discussion here leads us to might be generalized in the following terms: it is possible to estimate compositionality of a composite if any of its constituents retains its literal meaning and is semantically analyzable. By employing this nuanced analytical framework, we elucidated the intricate semantic dynamics underlying Georgian

compound word formation. Deciphering such composite models necessitated a multidimensional analytical approach that incorporated linguistic frameworks, psycholinguistic perspectives, cognitive processing strategies, associative reasoning and contextual interpretation mechanisms.

5. CONCLUSION

Analytical classification highlights the complexities and nuances of Georgian composite word formation, emphasizing the interplay of semantic transparency and morphological structure. The findings demonstrate that meaning predictable composites exhibit high semantic transparency. Their meanings can be derived directly from their constituent elements, which retain their literal and analyzable meanings. These composites display minimal interpretative complexity and establish clear morphological and semantic relationships between components. Semantic transparency in less predictable composites is reduced, and the meaning may not be immediately apparent. Understanding such composites requires contextual or cultural knowledge. They often demonstrate higher linguistic complexity and some level of semantic ambiguity whereas unpredictable composites are characterized by semantic opacity, with no discernible derivational relationship between their constituent elements. Interpretation of these composites heavily relies on extensive contextual and cultural insights and they represent more advanced and complex morphological phenomena within the language. The study concludes that the degree of semantic transparency in composites can be systematically analyzed using a multidimensional approach that integrates linguistic, cognitive, and contextual dimensions. This framework facilitates the categorization of composites based on their predictability and the interpretative effort required for understanding their meanings.

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Author Biography

ZHUZHUNA GUMBARIDZE is an Associate Professor, PhD and Head of the BA Programme in English Philology at the Faculty of Humanities, Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (Georgia). She teaches a diverse range of courses including Lexicography, Theoretical Grammar, Communicative Grammar, Business English, and Written Communication.

Her academic interests span terminology, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, derivational morphology, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. Dr. Gumbaridze has been actively engaged in the international academic community, regularly participating in conferences focused on linguistics and education. She has authored more than 20 scholarly papers exploring various aspects of linguistics and is the author of the textbook *Practical Course of English Theoretical Grammar*.

In addition to her academic work, she is an accredited MELT Teacher Trainer certified by the British Council and ETAG.

Selected recent publications include:

- Gumbaridze, Zh., & Gvarishvili, Z. (2023). *On Politically-Driven Language Discrimination in Post-Soviet Space (From the Example of Occupied Abkhazia)*. *Balkanistic Forum*, 278 Vol. 3/2023. DOI: [10.37708/bf.swu.v32i3.16](https://doi.org/10.37708/bf.swu.v32i3.16)
- Gvarishvili, Z., Gumbaridze, Zh., Davitadze, L., & Rodinadze, Sh. (2024). *Descriptive Analysis of Translation Methodology for IATE Ecology Terms in Georgian*. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*, e-ISSN: 2544-9435. DOI: [10.31435/ijitss.4\(44\).2024.3046](https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.4(44).2024.3046)

TAMTA POPKHADZE is a PhD student in Linguistics at the Faculty of Humanities, Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (Georgia), and a Senior Lecturer in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Akaki Tsereteli State University. Her teaching and academic focus lies in the areas of linguistics and English language teaching across various levels, with a particular emphasis on language acquisition and applied linguistics.

Her research interests include terminology studies, morphology, translation theory, EFL teaching methodology, and specialized discourse analysis. Since the beginning of her doctoral studies, she has been actively involved in the international academic community, participating in numerous conferences related to linguistics and education.

Most recently, she presented at the 14th International Symposium *Intercontinental Dialogue on Phraseology*, held in Poland. Her paper, „Mapping Linguistic Nuances: Critical Examination of 'Green' Analytical Terminology in Specialized Contexts“, explored the intersection of environmental discourse and terminological precision within contemporary linguistic frameworks.