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COMPOUNDING IN INTERNET SLANG: WORD FORMATION IN DIGITAL ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper examines compounding as a word-formation process in contemporary internet slang, drawing on a self-compiled corpus of English-language posts collected from TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) in 2025–2026. Grounded in the morphological frameworks of Katamba (1993), Bauer (2001), and McCulloch (2019), the study analyses a range of single-word and multi-word compounds — including doomscroll, girlboss, face card, and beige flag — according to their morphosyntactic structure and semantic type. The findings confirm that noun-noun compounding is the most productive structural pattern in the data, and that the majority of attested forms are exocentric, with meanings that depend on cultural context, metaphor, and irony rather than compositional logic alone.

Keywords: Internet linguistics, digital English, Slang, digital discourse, word formation processes

1. Introduction

Language has always been a living thing, but the internet has put it on fast-forward. In the space of a few decades, digital communication has given rise to a recognisable variety of English with its own grammar, aesthetics, and lexicon – a lexicon that is updated in near real-time by millions of anonymous contributors across platforms, memes, comment sections, and viral threads. Within this variety, new words are coined at a pace that no dictionary can comfortably keep up with, and they spread, mutate, and sometimes die just as quickly. Understanding how these words are formed is not merely a curiosity for linguists but a window into the cognitive and social dynamics of contemporary digital culture.

Recognizing this, the present study examines one of the most fundamental and productive of all English word-formation processes: compounding, and its role within internet slang. Compounding, the joining of two or more free morphemes to form a new lexical item, has been a cornerstone of the English lexicon since its earliest recorded history (Katamba, 1993). What this paper argues is that compounding has found a particularly fertile new environment in the informal, fast-moving, and often irony-saturated register of digital English. And it is worth studying.

2. Literature review

The study of word formation has long been a central concern in linguistic morphology, and compounding stands out as one of the most ancient and productive processes through which English speakers have expanded their lexicon. This section provides the theoretical grounding for the present analysis, drawing primarily on Katamba's (1993) foundational treatment of morphology, complemented by Bauer's (2001) work on morphological productivity and McCulloch's (2019) examination of digital language.

2.1. Compounding: Basic notions

Compounding is the process by which two or more free morphemes i.e. words that can stand independently, are joined to form a new lexical item with a unified meaning. Katamba (1993) defines a compound as a word that consists of two or more bases, each of which could function as an independent word in the language. What distinguishes compounding from other word-formation processes such as derivation is that both constituent elements carry full lexical meaning, and their combination yields a new concept that is, to varying degrees, semantically greater than the sum of its parts. One example of this is *schoolboy*, which combines two fully independent nouns: school and boy (Katamba, 1993, p. 305) into a single lexical unit denoting a specific kind of boy.

One of the defining features of English compounds is their orthographic instability. Unlike many other languages where compounds have a fixed written form, English permits the same compound

to appear as a single word (also called "closed" word such as *schoolboy*), a hyphenated form (president-elect), or two separate words (also called "open word" as in ice cream), often depending on register, platform, or individual stylistic preference. Katamba (1993) acknowledges this variability and notes that orthography alone cannot serve as the primary criterion for identifying a compound; the decisive test is whether the two elements form a single phonological and semantic unit. In digital contexts, as will be shown in the analysis below, this orthographic fluidity is particularly pronounced.

2.2. Types of Compounds in English

Katamba (1993) classifies English compounds primarily according to two criteria: their morphosyntactic structure, that is, the word classes of their constituent elements, and their semantic relationship to those elements, particularly the question of headedness.

In terms of structure, compounds can be formed from virtually any combination of word classes. The most productive pattern in English is the noun + noun compound, as in schoolboy, policewoman, and post office (Katamba, 1993), but adjective + noun (greenhouse, blackbird), verb + noun (pickpocket, bedroom), and noun + adjective combinations are all well attested. The internal syntactic relationship between the two elements is not overtly marked and must be inferred from context and convention. This is a feature that gives compounding considerable semantic flexibility and, as will be seen, makes it particularly well suited to the free, context-dependent register of internet slang.

Compounds are traditionally distinguished from phrases by their "fixedness". As Plag (2018) notes, it is impossible to insert additional words between the two elements of a compound: while *post office* is a well-formed compound, *post an office* is entirely unacceptable. In this respect, compounds behave similarly to idioms, and Dressler (2007) has termed this property idiom-likeness i.e. the resistance to internal modification that marks a compound as a single, indivisible lexical unit rather than a freely constructed syntactic phrase.

2.2. Types of compounds in English

From a semantic standpoint, Katamba (1993) follows the established distinction between endocentric and exocentric compounds. An endocentric compound, according to him, is one in which the whole is a hyponym of its head: a schoolboy is a kind of boy, a greenhouse is a kind of house, and a policewoman is a kind of woman. Plag (2018: 135) holds that the vast majority of compounds in English can be interpreted such that the left-hand member modifies the right-hand member in some way. In the compound black tea, for instance, black functions as a modifier and tea as the head, such that the compound denotes a specific type of tea rather than a tea that is black in the literal sense. This modifier-head relationship corresponds directly to what Katamba (1993) identifies as the right-hand head rule, whereby the rightmost element of a compound determines both its grammatical category and its semantic class. The meaning of the endocentric compound is largely, if not fully, predictable from its parts.

By contrast, an exocentric compound has no internal semantic head. Katamba's examples are instructive here: a *scarecrow* is not a kind of crow, a *redhead* is not a kind of head but a person with red hair, and a *butterfinger* is not a kind of finger but a clumsy person. The meaning extends beyond either constituent element, frequently relying on metaphor or cultural knowledge. A third, less frequently discussed type is the copulative (or dvandva) compound, in which both elements function as co-equal semantic heads, as in *singer-songwriter,* denoting an entity that is simultaneously both things. Katamba (1993) also lists reduplicative compounds (as in *knock-knock*) and appositional compounds in which each constituent element refers to the same referent rather than one modifying the other.

2.3. Productivity in Word Formation

The concept of productivity is central to understanding why certain word-formation processes are used more than others in specific registers or communities. Bauer (2001, p. 18) defines a word-formation process as productive "if it can be used synchronically in the production of new forms". Crucially, productivity is not a binary property but a gradable one: some processes are highly productive, generating new words freely and frequently, while others are restricted or semi-productive, applying only to limited sets of bases or in constrained contexts. Bauer (2001) further draws an important distinction between productivity and creativity. To him, productivity refers to the largely unconscious, rule-governed generation of new words following established patterns, whereas creativity

refers to the more deliberate and playful coining of forms that may deviate from or extend existing rules. Both are operative in natural language, and both are highly relevant to internet slang.

Katamba (1993) similarly addresses productivity, noting that a morphological rule is productive when it can be freely applied to a large number of bases to produce new words. He observes that productivity is constrained by phonological, morphological, and semantic factors. According to him, the endocentric noun + noun pattern, for instance, as in *schoolboy*, and *teapot*, is among the most productive in English precisely because it imposes minimal phonological or categorial restrictions on its bases.

2.4. The Internet Slang (or Dialect) of Now

The language of the internet is not simply standard, or even, informal English transposed onto a digital medium. On the contrary – it is a distinct register or variety with its own norms, aesthetics, and word-formation tendencies. McCulloch (2019) argues that social media and digital platforms constitute a vast, unedited laboratory of informal writing in which language changes faster and in more inventive ways than in any previously documented context. Crucially, she observes, even the most seemingly absurd or irregular-looking slang found online, follows genuine underlying patterns, which is something that lies in the core of this paper, too.

McCulloch (2019) introduces the concept of internet people, a typology that classifies users according to when and how they came to digital communication, arguing that these different cohorts developed distinct linguistic norms and sensibilities. The youngest cohort i.e. those who grew up with smartphones and social media as a given, are the primary producers and consumers of the slang examined in this study. It is within these communities that compounding proves especially productive.

Generally, compounding plays an important role in English word-formation, and is one of the most frequently used methods to create new words in English. Due to its importance, compounding has been widely and extensively explored from the phonological (Plag, 2018), morphological (Masini, 2009; Scalise and Vogel, 2010), syntactic (Peter and Neeleman, 2010), cognitive (Jarema, 2020; Fehringer, 2012) and computational (Pirrelli et al., 2010) perspective.

The study of internet language and slang has similarly attracted growing scholarly interest. Lihawa et al. (2021) conducted a corpus-based qualitative investigation of Generation Z slang, drawing on Callahan's Generation Z Dictionary as their data source. Their analysis identified eight distinct word formation processes operating within this variety, including fanciful formation, blending, clipping, conversion, suffixation, and reduplication, with compounding being the most prominent. This finding lends direct support to the premise of the present study, namely that compounding is not merely one among many equally active processes in informal Gen Z internet discourse, but rather its primary engine of lexical expansion. The language of internet memes, as a related form of online discourse, was similarly examined by Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Shalevska (2018), who approached digital language as a coherent and rule-governed communicative system rather than a deviation from standard norms. More recently, Shalevska (2024) has further demonstrated that internet slang is not the exclusive domain of native English speakers, finding that EFL speakers readily adopt and deploy Generation Z slang in their own digital communication. The present study builds on this body of work.

3. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach (Schreier, 2012) in order to examine the structural and semantic properties of compounds found in contemporary internet slang. Rather than seeking to quantify the frequency of particular forms across a large dataset, the qualitative orientation of this study prioritises depth of analysis over breadth, allowing for close morphological and semantic scrutiny of individual examples and the patterns they instantiate. This approach is well suited to the exploratory and descriptive aims of the paper. The data for this study were drawn from a self-compiled corpus of English-language posts collected from two major social media platforms: TikTok and X (formerly Twitter). These platforms were selected on the grounds that they represent two of the most active and linguistically generative spaces in contemporary digital communication, each with distinct but overlapping user communities and content cultures. All posts included in the corpus were published in 2025 or 2026, ensuring that the data reflect the most current stratum of internet English. The sampling procedure was purposeful in nature, following the principles outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Rather than seeking a random or representative sample of all content produced on these platforms,

examples were selected on the basis of their relevance to the research focus. Once collected, the data were organised through thematic grouping into two main analytical categories: single-word compounds and multi-word compounds. Within each of these categories, examples were further classified according to the morphosyntactic structure of their constituent elements. This classification draws directly on the theoretical framework established in the literature review, particularly Katamba's (1993) typology of English compounds.

4. Results and discussion

Following are the compounds identified in the corpus, organised by structural type into single-word and multi-word compounds, and further classified according to their morphosyntactic composition. Within each subsection, individual items are analysed in terms of their constituent elements, their semantic relationship, and where relevant, the social or cultural context that shapes their meaning. The section concludes with a typological overview classifying the attested compounds as exocentric, endocentric, or copulative.

4.1. Single-word compounds

Single-word compounds represent the more morphologically integrated end of the compounding spectrum. In these forms, two or more free morphemes have been fused into a single orthographic and phonological unit, with the resulting compound functioning as a new lexical item whose meaning is not always predictable from its parts.

4.1.1. Noun-noun compounds

Noun-noun compounds are among the most productive structural types in English morphology, and this productivity extends robustly into internet slang. In a noun-noun compound, the rightmost element typically functions as the head, determining the compound's broad semantic category, while the left-hand modifier specifies or restricts that category in some way (Plag, 2018). As the examples below illustrate, however, internet slang frequently pushes against this compositional logic: even structurally transparent noun-noun compounds often carry connotations, ironies, or cultural resonances that no formal analysis of their parts could fully predict. Some of the noun-noun compounds identified in the corpus include:

- Clickbait (click + bait) – content designed to attract clicks through sensationalism or exaggerated framing, prioritising engagement over informational value.
- Ragebait (rage + bait) – content deliberately crafted to provoke anger or outrage in its audience, often circulated to maximise algorithmic visibility.
- Corecore (core + core) – an aesthetic trend on TikTok that mocks the overuse of the -core suffix by applying it reflexively; the compound is notable for being formed from two identical suffix, making it a rare case of reduplicative compounding in internet slang.
- Girlboss (girl + boss) – originally a term of empowerment denoting an ambitious, self-made woman, increasingly used ironically online to critique performative feminism or hollow hustle culture.
- Babygirl (baby + girl) – a term of endearment applied, often with ironic affection, to a male figure perceived as soft, vulnerable, or emotionally expressive; its online usage inverts conventional gender expectations.
- Looksmaxxing (looks + maxxing) – the practice of optimising one's physical appearance through various means; derived from looks (physical attractiveness) and *maxxing*, itself a neo-combining form meaning to maximise. Though the -maxxing element introduces a verbal dimension, the base compound is noun-noun in structure.

4.1.2. Adjective-noun compounds

Adjective-noun compounds are formed when a modifier denoting a quality or property combines with a noun head. In standard English, this pattern is well attested in forms such as *blackbird* (Katamba, 1993), where the adjective restricts or qualifies the head noun. In the internet slang data, adjective-noun compounds show a notable tendency toward semantic drift: the adjectival element

frequently retains only a vestigial or metaphorical connection to its original meaning, and the compound as a whole acquires pragmatic functions (like hedging, and intensifying) that extend well beyond straightforward description. Such compounds include:

- Deepfake (deep + fake) – AI-generated media in which a real person's likeness, voice, or actions are synthetically replaced or fabricated; the adjective *deep* references deep learning, the underlying technology.
- Highkey (high + key) – used as an intensifying adverb or adjective meaning openly, obviously, or to a great degree; *key* here functions as a metaphorical scalar noun, with high marking intensity.
- Lowkey (low + key) – the semantic counterpart to highkey, indicating something subtle, understated, or not fully acknowledged; frequently used to hedge or soften a claim.
- Deadass (dead + ass) – an emphatic adverb or adjective meaning completely serious or absolutely; *dead* functions as an intensifier and *ass* as a reinforcing expletive noun, a pattern common in vernacular English.

4.1.3. Verb-noun and noun-verb compounds

Verb-noun and noun-verb compounds represent a structurally mixed category in which one element carries verbal force and the other nominal force, though the distribution of these roles varies across individual forms. Some compounds in this group originate as nouns that have been reanalysed and put to verbal use through functional shift; others are formed by combining a verb stem with a nominal element to produce a new lexical item, as in:

- Gatekeep (gate + keep) – to withhold information, access, or membership from others, typically to preserve exclusivity; structurally a verb-noun compound reanalysed as a verb.
- Catfish (cat + fish) – to deceive someone by assuming a false online identity, usually for romantic or manipulative purposes; originally a noun (the animal), reanalysed online as a verb through functional shift.
- Brainrot (brain + rot) – a state of mental dullness attributed to excessive consumption of low-quality or repetitive online content; used both as a noun describing the condition and, attributively, to describe the content itself.
- Doomscroll (doom + scroll) – the compulsive act of continuously consuming negative or distressing news online, particularly on social media; functions as both verb and noun.
- Breadcrumbing (breadcrumb + -ing) – the behaviour of giving someone just enough intermittent attention to maintain their interest without genuine commitment; the base compound *breadcrumb* (noun) is verbalised via the inflectional suffix -ing.

4.2. Multi-word compounds

Multi-word compounds differ from their single-word counterparts in that their constituent elements remain orthographically separate, which can make their status as compounds, rather than ordinary noun phrases or collocations, a matter of some analytical debate. The criterion applied here follows the standard diagnostics outlined in the literature review: semantic non-compositionality, fixed internal structure, and the inability to freely modify constituent elements (Katamba, 1993; Plag, 2018). By these criteria, all items in this section qualify as compounds despite their open spelling, as their meanings are conventionalised and not freely derivable from the combination of their parts.

4.2.1. Noun-noun compounds

As in the single-word data, noun-noun compounds represent the largest subcategory among multi-word forms. The structural pattern remains consistent with the modifier-head template described above, but the semantic range is considerably broader. This is exemplified by:

- Lore post (lore + post) – a post dedicated to extensive backstory, world-building, or contextual history, whether about a public figure, a community, or a fictional universe.
- Slop farm (slop + farm) – an account or platform dedicated to producing mass quantities of low-quality, often AI-generated content purely for engagement or monetisation.
- Sleep debt (sleep + debt) – the cumulative deficit of sleep resulting from consistently insufficient rest; borrowed from health discourse.
- Main character (main + character) – the sense that one is, or is performing as, the protagonist of one's own life; applied both sincerely and ironically to describe self-centred or dramatically heightened behaviour.
- Face card (face + card) – one's physical attractiveness regarded as a form of social capital; the phrase *your face card never declines* is a common accompanying expression, extending the financial metaphor.
- Girl dinner (girl + dinner) – a meal consisting of small, miscellaneous, low-effort items assembled rather than cooked, celebrated as a form of chaotic self-sufficiency; the compound carries a tone of ironic domesticity.
- Girl math (girl + math) – a humorous mode of rationalising purchases or decisions through creative, self-serving logic; like *girl dinner,* the *girl-* modifier signals a register of irony.
- Side eye (side + eye) – a sideways glance expressing scepticism, suspicion, or disapproval; used online both literally and as a reaction or commentary label.
- Aura points (aura + points) – a gamified metaphor for social or personal charisma, in which actions are described as gaining or losing points toward one's overall perceived coolness.

4.2.2. Noun-adjective and adjective-noun compounds

As with the single-word adjective-noun compounds discussed in 4.1.2, the adjectival element typically encodes evaluation or degree, though in the multi-word data this evaluative function is often culturally or contextually loaded:

- Rent-free (rent + free) – describing something that occupies one's mind persistently without invitation; from the phrase *living rent-free in my head*, the compound has been extracted and used attributively.
- Red flag (red + flag) – a warning sign of problematic behaviour in a person or situation, drawn from conventional cautionary symbolism and heavily adopted in relationship discourse online.
- Green flag (green + flag) – the positive counterpart to red flag, denoting a reassuring or desirable trait or behaviour.
- Beige flag (beige + flag) – a more recent addition to the flag series, denoting a quirky, neutral, or mildly odd trait that is neither alarming nor particularly positive; the colour choice signals ambiguity and mediocrity.
- Roman Empire (Roman + Empire) – derived from the viral trend in which people reveal how often they think about the Roman Empire; used online to describe any topic, obsession, or cultural artefact that occupies one's thoughts with unexpected frequency.

4.2.3. Verb-noun and noun-verb compounds

The verb-noun and noun-verb compounds in this subcategory are unified by their basis in social action: each one names a practice, a ritual, or a mode of interpersonal conduct that has been identified, labelled, and circulated within digital communities:

- Vibe check (vibe + check) – an informal assessment of someone's mood, energy, or social compatibility; used both as a noun (to conduct a vibe check) and as a verb phrase (to vibe check someone).
- Pick me (pick + me) – a person, typically a woman, who seeks validation from others, particularly men, by distancing themselves from their own group; functions as a noun, adjective (pick-me behaviour), and occasionally verb.
- Sip tea (sip + tea) – to observe or enjoy drama or gossip without actively participating; the image is of watching events unfold while sipping tea as a neutral bystander.

- Spill tea (spill + tea) – the active counterpart to sip tea: to reveal gossip, secrets, or drama; tea here functions as a slang noun meaning insider information, and spill as the transitive verb.

4.3. Compound Types Analysis

The data reveal that the majority of compounds in the corpus are exocentric, meaning that the compound's referent falls outside the semantic class of its head. Terms such as *catfish, brainrot, breadcrumbing, face card, Roman Empire,* and *spill tea* cannot be interpreted through their constituent parts alone; their meaning is culturally or contextually constructed rather than compositionally derived. This aligns with Dressler's (2007) observation that compounds often exhibit idiom-like fixedness, and it reflects the particular pressures of internet slang, where novelty, and metaphorical creativity may be seen as the main drivers of coinage.

A smaller set of compounds is endocentric, with the head element determining the semantic category of the whole. Examples include *clickbait* (a type of bait), *ragebait* (also a type of bait), lore post (a type of post). This transparency does not, however, guarantee full predictability of meaning: clickbait and ragebait are endocentric in that both denote a type of bait, yet the figurative extension of bait from its literal sense (something used to lure an animal) into the domain of online content production requires a degree of cultural contextualisation that purely compositional analysis cannot supply. Endocentric compounds in internet slang thus occupy a middle ground: their structure is interpretable, but their meaning is fully accessible only to users familiar with the practices and platforms that gave rise to them.

One reduplicative compound is also found in the corpus – *corecore*. Reduplicative compounds, in which both constituents are identical, are structurally unusual in English and relatively rare in the general lexicon. In this case, the repetition is not merely formal but semantic: corecore uses the -core suffix against itself, compounding it with its own base to produce a term that simultaneously belongs to the -core aesthetic naming convention and parodies it. Taken together, the data suggest that internet slang exploits the full structural range of English compounding while consistently pushing its semantic possibilities toward the figurative, the ironic, and the culturally embedded. The productivity of compounding in this register reflects what Bauer (2001) identifies as the capacity of word formation processes to exceed their own formal rules: not merely filling lexical gaps but generating new conceptual categories that reshape how speakers perceive and discuss their social world.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine compounding as a word-formation process in contemporary internet slang, and the data *have delivered*. Across both single-word and multi-word forms, the corpus reveals a variety of English that is structurally consistent, semantically inventive, and – it bears saying – genuinely entertaining to analyse. Several findings deserve particular emphasis. First, noun-noun compounding emerges as the dominant structural pattern in the data, confirming at the level of internet slang what Katamba (1993) and Plag (2018) have documented for the English lexicon more broadly: this pattern's minimal formal constraints make it uniquely hospitable to new coinages. Second, the majority of attested compounds are exocentric — their meanings exceed, subvert, or simply ignore what their constituent parts would logically predict. A *catfish* is not a fish. A *face card* has nothing to do with cards. *Girl math* is not mathematics. The internet, it turns out, is as committed to metaphor as it is to memes. What these findings ultimately suggest is that the language of digital natives deserves to be taken seriously as a subject of linguistic inquiry. Internet slang is not a corruption of English; it is an extension of it – an extension that is doing exactly what English has always done, only faster, stranger, and with considerably more self-awareness.

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