

## Compound nouns in Politics

### Nouns (identifying people and things)

#### Compound nouns

##### 1 Nouns used as adjectives

In the noun + noun structure, the first noun functions like an adjective and describes the second noun. Very often, the first noun answers the question *What kind?*

- a bank transfer (a kind of transfer)
- work experience (a type of experience)
- a bank loan (a kind of loan)
- a work permit (a type of permit)

We can also make compound nouns when the first noun ends in *-ing*:

- the training budget
- a spending review
- a turning point

##### 2 Singular with a plural meaning

In a compound noun the first noun is usually singular, even if it has a plural meaning:

- a record store (a store that sells records)
- a cheque book (a book containing cheques)
- a car factory (a factory that produces cars)

Nouns in numerical expression are always singular:

- a four-star hotel
- a five-year plan
- a 35-hour week
- a 50-dollar bill
- a 10-ton truck
- a million-dollar loan

However, the *s* is kept on the first noun in the following expressions:

- accounts department
- clothes store
- customs officer
- futures market
- goods train
- incomes policy
- needs analysis
- overseas branch
- savings account
- sports car
- sales policy
- works manager

##### 3 Choice of structures

Sometimes only one construction is possible:

- a breach of contract (NOT \*a contract's breach, a breach contract)
- the terms of reference (NOT \*reference terms, terms' reference)
- Peter's friends (NOT \*the friends of Peter, Peter friends)
- a traffic jam (NOT \*a traffic's jam, a jam's traffic, the traffic of jam)
- a silicon chip (NOT \*a silicon's chip, a chip's silicon, a chip of silicon)

Sometimes it is possible to use two structures but it is not possible to use all three:

- the decision of the board
- the board's decision (NOT \*the board decision)
- the responsibilities of the project manager
- the project manager's responsibilities (NOT \*the project manager responsibilities)

## In English, there are three main ways of putting two nouns together:

- 1. noun + 's + noun:** *William's car, my son's name, the board's decision, New York's museums, yesterday's papers, ...*  
→→→ see "English Possessive" on your own grammar book
- 2. noun + preposition + noun:** *a round of talks, an item of news, a barrel of oil<sup>1</sup>, the theory of relativity, the middle of the meeting, letters from home, ...*
- 3. noun + noun** →→→ compound nouns

The choice of structures depends on what the dictionary suggests – sometimes only one structure is possible (e.g. *bank account, income tax, a breach of contract, the terms of reference, a feeling of disappointment, and so on*)

→→→ see "Notes on Word Clusters", Unit 1, a.y. 2024/2025

A "compound word" or simply a "compound" is a **new word made up of two or more other words** – i.e. formed by joining two or more existing words. It means that each part of a compound must be able to occur on its own as a word. Here follow some examples of **compound nouns** in the domains of politics, economics and law:

- *birth control* → from *birth* (n) + *control* (n)
- *brain drain* → from *brain* (n) + *drain* (n)
- *consumer confidence* → from *consumer* (n) + *confidence* (n)
- *data-processing* → from *data* (n) + *processing* (verbal n)
- *headhunter* → from *head* (n) + *hunter* (n)
- *human rights* → from *human* (n) + *rights* (n)
- *labo(u)r force* → from *labo(u)r* (n) + *force* (n)
- *luxury goods* → from *luxury* (n) + *goods* (n)
- *market survey* → from *market* (n) + *survey* (n)
- *paperwork* → from *paper* (n) + *work* (n)
- *underground* → from *under* (prep.) + *ground* (n)

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the noun+noun structure in such a case – i.e. *an oil barrel* – refers to the container without its content.

- *workforce*, from *work* (n) + *force* (n)

The **final part** of a typical compound is called the **head** of the construction, determining its word-class; whether the compound noun is countable or uncountable; and much of its semantic properties. It is **preceded by one or more (→→→→ lexical chain) modifier** as in the following examples:

- *2022 US mid-term election*
- *EU job vacancies*
- *infringement procedure*<sup>2</sup>
- *Israel-Palestine war map*
- *London visa rejection*
- *majority voting system* (also called *first-past-the-post system* and *winner-take(s)-all system*)
- *New Year Address*

As to the **spelling** of compounds, there are three forms:

- **hyphenated compounds**, such as *all-party support*, *bank loan*, *bridge-building*, *corporation tax*, *credit card*, *cross-bencher*<sup>3</sup>, *debit card*, *front-runner*, *list price*, *newspaper report*, *price list*, and so on;
- **open compounds**, such as *currency crisis*, *exchange rate*, *Home Office*, *Home Secretary*, *interest rate*, *mass media*, *payment terms*, *peace talks*, *tax policy*, and so on;
- **solid compounds**, such as *businessperson*, *turnover*, *startup*, *upstart*, *boardroom*, and so on.

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<sup>2</sup> "According to the EU treaties, the Commission may take legal action – an infringement procedure – against an EU country that fails to implement EU law. The Commission may refer to the Court of Justice, which can impose financial sanctions" (cfr. <https://commission.europa.eu/>). **Equivalent in Italian:** "procedura di infrazione".

<sup>3</sup> A **cross-bencher** [**equivalent in Italian:** "deputato indipendente"] is a member of the British House of Lords who does not belong to a particular political party.

Remember also the compound nouns **backbencher** (in the House of Commons in Britain and in certain other parliaments, a member who sits in the rows of seats at the back, and who does not have an important position in the government or the Opposition; **equivalent in Italian:** "parlamentare senza incarichi") and **frontbencher** (an important member of the government or the opposition in the British parliament, who sits in the front rows of seats; **equivalent in Italian:** "parlamentare che ha un ruolo importante nel governo o all'opposizione; ministro") – all of them referring to the UK Parliament.

## REMEMBER THAT

- in a compound noun **the first noun is usually singular, even if it has a plural meaning:**
  - a car factory, a shoe manufacturer, a toolbox, share price;
- **however, the ending -s is kept on the first noun in the following 'fixed' expressions (→→→→ word cluster):**
  - accounts department; clothes store; customs officer; futures market; goods train; incomes policy; needs analysis; overseas branch; savings account; sports car; sales policy; works manager, and so on;
- **when the first noun of a compound is a numerical expression, it is singular – in fact, this particular type of compound is referred to as a compound adjective by many:**
  - a *four-star* hotel
  - a *four-month* term
  - a *forty-hour* week
  - a *three-million-dollar* contract
  - a *five-year* plan
  - a *six-month* Presidency

→→→→ see also "Notes on compound adjectives", Unit 3, a.y. 2024/2025
- **a large number of compound nouns are based on the so-called prepositional and phrasal verbs, and are particularly common in newspaper reporting. Look at the following examples where the compound noun is in italics:**
  - In response to the pay offer, there was a *walk-out*<sup>4</sup> at the factory.
  - There's going to be a *crack-down*<sup>5</sup> on public spending.
  - Last month saw a tremendous *shake-up*<sup>6</sup> in personnel.
  - I never expected the *break-up*<sup>7</sup> of the USSR.

<sup>4</sup> A synonym for *strike*.

<sup>5</sup> A synonym for *action against*.

<sup>6</sup> A synonym for *change*.

<sup>7</sup> A synonym for *collapse*.

## while some of these kinds of nouns have economic associations:

- The *takeover*<sup>8</sup> of one of our leading hotel chains has just been announced.
- We're trying to find some new *outlets*<sup>9</sup> for our products.
- Take our things to the *check-out*<sup>10</sup> to pay for them.
- *Cutbacks*<sup>11</sup> will be essential until the *slowdown*<sup>12</sup> is over.
- We made a profit of £1,000 on a *turnover*<sup>13</sup> of £10,000.
- *Output*<sup>14</sup> has increased thanks to new technology.
- Investors are looking to take advantage of a post-pandemic travel rebound as lean debt and cheaper planes bolster low-cost-airline *startups*<sup>15</sup>
- EU leaders struggled to agree on a concrete strategy to contain the *fallout*<sup>16</sup> from the deadly coronavirus.
- The legislature passed a *bailout*<sup>17</sup> of the failing banking industry.

→→→→ see also "Notes on conversion",  
Unit 4, a.y. 2024/2025

In conclusion, pay attention to the so-called **lexical chain** – i.e. a more or less longer compound made up of a sequence of two or more lexical words. Be careful both in interpreting the correct logical relation between each item and in translating such chain into Italian.

Let's try to paraphrase the following "lexical chains":

- Liverpool car factory strike committee policy decision.

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<sup>8</sup> A synonym for *purchase by another company*.

<sup>9</sup> A synonym for *places to sell*.

<sup>10</sup> A synonym for *cash-desk*.

<sup>11</sup> A synonym for *reductions*.

<sup>12</sup> A synonym for *recession*.

<sup>13</sup> A synonym for *money passing through a company*.

<sup>14</sup> A synonym for *production*.

<sup>15</sup> A *startup* (also written *start-up*) is "a company that is just beginning to operate".

<sup>16</sup> An uncountable noun, often used as a synonym for "negative consequences".

<sup>17</sup> Also written *bail-out*, it is used as a synonym of "financial rescue". Compare to "bail-in".