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Compositionality vs. non-compositionality in the mental lexicon.

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The debate about compositionality vs. non-compositionality is one of the central issues in contemporary psycholinguistic research, as well as in linguistics proper. As is well-known, the defenders of the first position hold that the mental lexicon consists of sublexical units (morphemes), which have to be combined according to appropriate phonological and morphological rules. The advocates of the alternative position hold instead that words are stored as such, disregarding their internal complexity.

Actually, with very few exceptions, the latter view has never been proposed in its most radical form. What is really at issue is the boundary between compositional and non-compositional procedures in lexical access. Indeed, we have to assume that some procedures ought to be compositional, i.e. guided by rule. However, there also seems to be massive experimental and clinical evidence that not all access procedures involve compositionality.

The paper considers the problem from the standpoint of theoretical morphology, considering the diverging requirements that the various domains and parameters put on the access procedures (cf. inflection vs. derivation, frequent vs. non-frequent words, productive vs. non-productive processes, etc.). In addition, an attempt is made to relate these domains and parameters to the varying typological properties of the languages, showing that the boundary between compositionality and non-compositionality may be relative to any specific type, rather than fixed for all languages.

Besides providing a critical assessment of the issue of compositionality, especially w.r.t. the most extreme versions propagated by generative phonology, the paper addresses the question of the proper inferences to be gathered from the available experimental works. Despite the enormous contribution of this domain of research, it is claimed that it also involves subtle problems of interpretation of the results.