

## German Compounds of the Type Noun + Adjective (umweltfreundlich) and Their Reproduction in English

Wolfram Wilss

Volume 24, Number 2, juin 1979

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/004606ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/004606ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

### ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Wilss, W. (1979). German Compounds of the Type Noun + Adjective (umweltfreundlich) and Their Reproduction in English. *Meta*, 24(2), 232–239.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/004606ar>

# German Compounds of the Type Noun + Adjective (umweltfreundlich) and their Reproduction in English\*

In every natural language, there are word-formation patterns (henceforth WFP) which play a predominant role in the collective linguistic behaviour of a language community and which therefore are particularly productive in language usage.

One of the characteristic WFP of contemporary German are compounds consisting of a noun plus an adjective (henceforth NAC) :

(1) maschinenlesbar/machine-readable, gebührenfrei/postage-free, farbenblind/colour-blind.

Such NACs can be found in a large variety of types, occurring in almost all areas of written communication, above all in technical-language texts, in advertising language, in the language of public administration, but also in newspaper language. Certain NAC-types are interconnected with certain discourse types ; thus, it can easily be shown that specific NAC-types occur almost exclusively in technical-language texts (see below).

Conversely, in oral communication NACs are less frequent ; this is probably due to the fact that NACs are complex sense-units more easily digestible for the text recipient in written rather than in spoken form. This does, however, not apply to lexicalized items or to items which, as a result of their « analogy appeal », are in the process of being lexicalized. Such items are, e.g., NACs with « -freundlich » as a headword (Determinatum) :

(2) umwelt-, kinder-, benutzer-, verbraucher-, haut-, service-, regierungs-freundlich.

Evidence for the semantic complexity of NACs could be furnished by research in German-English machine translation. To write a programme for the analysis of NACs is probably extremely difficult, if not impossible. Hence, it is, in the long run, probably more economical to store such items en bloc with their respective target-language equivalents and thus to enable the machine to take care of such items by carrying out relatively simple « matching » procedures. But this is by the way.

In linguistic studies focussing on problems of contemporary German, this WFP is — relative to its communicative significance — rather underrepresented.

---

\* This text is the slightly modified version of a paper presented at the AILA World Congress, University of Montreal, August 1978.

The little research that has actually been accomplished is mainly devoted to classificatory aspects on the basis of de-formalized transformational procedures and to the establishment of criteria for the subdivision of NACs into genuine NAC-types and noun-derivational types. What I mean by the latter type, I would like to demonstrate with the help of the following examples :

(3) arbeitsgerichtlich, automatentheoretisch, kulturgeschichtlich, völkerrechtlich, parteipolitisch, volkswirtschaftlich, fachsprachlich, übersetzungswissenschaftlich, textlinguistisch, faktorenanalytisch, landeskundlich, prädikatenlogisch, gesellschaftskritisch, parteiorganisatorisch, beschreibungsmethodisch, forschungspraktisch.

That NAC-items of the type « naturwissenschaftlich » are controversial in classificatory aspect becomes obvious, if we realize that « naturwissenschaftlich » can formally be interpreted both as a compound of the noun « Natur » and the adjective « wissenschaftlich » or as an adjective derivation from « Naturwissenschaft », the adjectivization being accomplished by adding to « Natur » + « Wissenschaft » or « Naturwissenschaft » the adjective ending « -lich ». My own opinion is that the examples listed under (3) cannot possibly be regarded as genuine NAC-occurrences because they are invariably marked by the semantic factor « pertaining to the respective nominal compound » and, in view of their semantic homogeneity, are irrelevant for our investigation which is motivated by the existence of a WFP marked by a multitude of semantic relations between the headword (the adjective), and the pre-posed modifier (the noun).

This motivation is intensified by the lack of enthusiasm displayed by the makers of monolingual German and bilingual German-English dictionaries in handling this WFP. The rather scanty coverage of this WFP is probably due to two facts :

1. the already-mentioned extraordinary productivity of this WFP which makes it very difficult for lexicographers to keep abreast of new developments and to distinguish between items worthy of lexicographical treatment and short-lived items coming into and going out of use according to individual communicative needs and the dictates of linguistic fashions ;
2. the rather disproportionate inventory of NACs in German and English and the frequent untranslatability of German NACs on the basis of lexical one-to-one-correspondences, a point to which I shall have to come back later on.

The essential feature of NACs is that, although formally of lexical status, they must contextually be interpreted as syntactic units, or, in Coseriu's terminology, as « sekundäre Strukturen » (1976, 21).

The syntactic nature of this WFP is shown by the fact that any NAC, by intuition-controlled paraphrasing operations leaving internal semantic relations intact, can be transformed into syntactically and/or lexically modified clauses or sentences :

(4a) Dies ist ein benutzerfreundliches Dokumentationssystem ;  
Dies ist ein Dokumentationssystem, mit dem der Benutzer leicht umgehen kann ;

Mit diesem Dokumentationssystem kann der Benutzer leicht umgehen ;  
 This is a documentary system which can easily be handled by the user ;  
 The user has little difficulties in handling this documentary system.

(4b) Fachsprachen sind gruppenspezifisch ;  
 Fachsprachen dienen bestimmten Gruppen von Sprachbenutzern als Kommunikationsmittel ;  
 Sprachen, die bestimmten Gruppen von Sprachbenutzern als Kommunikationsmedium dienen, werden als Fachsprachen bezeichnet ;  
 Technical languages serve as a communicational tool to specific groups of language users ;  
 Languages which serve as communication tools to specific groups of language users are called technical languages (special-purpose languages).

Another factor worth mentioning is the semantic versatility of NACs. Let us look at the following series of clauses :

(5a) Seine Schuld ist sonnenklar ;  
 Das Wasser ist kristallklar ;  
 Der Himmel ist sternenklar ;  
 Die Maschine ist startklar ;  
 Das Mittel wäscht scheibenklar ;

These five examples can be paraphrased as follows :

(5b) Seine Schuld ist zweifelsfrei ;  
 His guilt is beyond doubt ;  
 Das Wasser ist so klar wie Kristall ;  
 The water is crystal-clear ;  
 Der Himmel ist so klar, daß man die Sterne sehen kann ;  
 The sky is so clear that one can see the stars (shining) ;  
 Die Maschine ist klar zum Start ;  
 The aircraft is ready for take off ;  
 Bei Verwendung dieses Mittels wird die Windschutzscheibe wieder klar ;  
 The use of this liquid makes windscreens clean again.

More complicated aspects or paraphrasing NACs come out in the following examples :

(6) Dieser Film ist lichtempfindlich ;  
 This film is sensitive to light ;  
 Bonn ist sicherheitsempfindlich ;  
 Bonn is inclined to produce over-reactions if security is at stake.

The semantic versatility of NACs can in extreme cases amount to semantic ambiguity which can only be eliminated contextually. Again a couple of examples :

(7) Der Keller ist bombensicher ;  
 The basement is bomb-proof ;  
 Die Sache ist bombensicher ;  
 Nothing can possibly go wrong in this deal ;  
 Die Straße ist schneesicher ;  
 The road remains snow-free in winter (maybe as a result of the construction of a road-heating system) ;  
 Das Skigebiet ist bis Mai schneesicher ;  
 Good skiing conditions are guaranteed in this area until May.

The examples which I have presented so far show that NACs are formally compact and at the same time semantically elastic sense units which enable a lan-

guage user to practise rather discriminate communicative strategies. The often-heard statement that the apparent indeterminacy of participial constructions increases the communicative leeway of a language user is basically true also of NACs (Wilss 1978). The high communicative value of NACs is the result of the implicit character of the semantic dependency relations between noun and adjective. These relations must be derived from the respective context ; as a consequence, NACs are only to a limited extent amenable to classification into syntactico-semantic paradigms. Seen against this background, NACs represent a specific type of compounds which Jespersen — in a general fashion — has characterized as follows : « The merit of compounds lies in their conciseness... compounds express the relation between two objects or notions but say nothing of the way in which the relation is to be understood. That must be inferred from the context or otherwise... » (1954, 137).

This statement is the peg for the second part of this paper. It is aimed at three targets :

1. a corpus-based analysis of syntactico-semantic dependency relations between the two elements of NACs ;
2. a discussion of difficulties in the transfer German-English of such compounds ;
3. a provisional exploration of the applicability of the results of 1. and 2. to text-type-specific, linguistically and psychologically founded teaching procedures in the field of interlingual transfer.

Now, as a starting point for the discussion of 1., it is helpful to state that one can distinguish in the realm of NACs, just as in the realm of other compound types, e.g., German noun + noun compounds, several levels of complexity. The lowest level is constituted by monolingually (and bilingually) lexicalised NACs (Lipka 1977) :

(8) schuldbewußt/guilt-conscious, anspruchsvoll/fastidious, einwandfrei/impeccable, kristallklar/crystal-clear, eiskalt/ice-cold, narrensicher/fool-proof, grasgrün/grass-green, saphirblau/sapphire-blue, federleicht/as light as a feather, rabenschwarz/pitch-dark, geschäftstüchtig/smart, hauchdünn/paper-thin.

The language user has internalised such NACs to such a degree that he regards them as lexical units. Hence, Lipka is probably right in calling these NACs « Moneme » (1966).

The next higher level of complexity are non-lexicalised, but potentially lexicalisable — and as such context-independent — NACs which contain certain standard adjectives as headwords and which can be looked upon as highly extensive paradigmatic subclasses. The dynamic power of such NACs comes out quite clearly in the following series of examples :

(9a) freundlich : benutzer-, verbraucher-, umwelt-, service-, kinder-, regime-, land-, gaspedal-, haut-, gast-, theater-, einfuhr-, familien-, konsum-, presse-, mieter-, reparatur-, wagen-, fußgängerfreundlich.

(9b) feindlich : benutzer-, verbraucher-, umwelt-, service-, kinder-, regime-, menschen-, theorie-, königs-, farben-, konsum-, presse-, empfangfeindlich. Equally productive are adjectives such as reich, bereit, sicher, freudig, bewußt, schwach, stark, trüchtig, beständig, neutral, abhängig, günstig, intensiv, frei (see Schmidt's provocative suggestion of introducing a « fernsehfreier Tag » (TV-free day) in West-Germany).

These examples again permit a conclusion which is relevant for the linguistic and communicative assessment of the phenomenon of NACs : It is obvious that for the formation of NACs, the language user primarily activates adjectives with a high degree of semantic indeterminacy, i.e., adjectives which turn out to be highly elusive if one attempts a rigorous semantic description, e.g., in the form of a semantic componential analysis or even a formalised semantic description. In view of their large compatibility range, such adjectives are, so to say, pre-programmed as standard elements for the formation of NACs ; they make it possible for the language user to practice a mode of expression which is limited to minimal semantic information, omitting everything that is contextually deducible, which, however, by exploiting contextual information to the utmost, is apt to get the thing-meant across — and thus, as a rule, to avoid communicative misunderstandings.

A very important factor for the production of NACs is the existence of pairs of adjectival antonyms :

(10) freundlich/feindlich, reich/arm, stark/schwach.

They are an essential precondition for the almost unlimited activation of the native speaker's linguistic creativity. It should be noted, however, that such linguistic coinages often tend to contain an artificial, pseudo-creative, jargon-like, exaggeratedly innovative element. And it is certainly not at all incidental that the language of advertising is responsible for a large percentage of such NAC-neologisms.

In the case of the absence of such antonymy relations, the language user can avail himself of the suffix « un- » :

(11) lichtdurchlässig/lichtundurchlässig, geräuschempfindlich/geräuschunempfindlich, arbeitswillig/arbeitsunwillig, situationsabhängig/situationsunabhängig, verkehrsgünstig/verkehrsungünstig, spionageverdächtig/spionageunverdächtig, reiselustig/reiseunlustig, verkehrstauglich/verkehrsuntauglich, verkehrssicher/verkehrsunsicher.

The examples listed under (9), (10) and (11) can be paraphrased with different degrees of linguistic investment into « kernel sentences » or « near-kernel sentences » to use a controversial term introduced by Nida into translation studies (1964 ; Nida/Taber 1969).

Relatively easy, e.g., is the paraphrasing of NACs with « reich » or « arm » as head-words :

(12) vitaminreich → x ist reich an Vitaminen ;  
fettarm → x ist arm an Fett ;

More difficulties are involved in the transformation of NACs containing, e.g., « intensiv » as head-words :

- (13) lohnintensiv → x hat hohe Lohnkosten ;  
 exportintensiv → x verkauft einen Großteil seiner Produktion ins Ausland-;  
 rechenintensiv → x hat ein großes Rechenwerk und einen entsprechend kleinen (Zentral-)Speicher ;  
 datenintensiv → x hat einen großen (Daten-) Speicher und ein entsprechend kleines Rechenprogramm ;  
 lernintensiv → x ist methodisch so angelegt, daß die einzelnen Unterrichtseinheiten einen optimalen Lernfortschritt ermöglichen (wenngleich nicht garantieren).

A third level of complexity is indicated by NACs which can only reliably be decoded in a particular context. Such NACs are rare in language usage. The rarity is a confirmation of the fact that any mode of written or oral expression is bound to rules which the language user must not break if his message is meant to reach the recipient without running the risk of communicative complications :

- (14) automatenicher (automatensichere Münzen) : Münzen, die den Besitzer von Verkaufsautomaten gegen Automatenbetrug schützen.

In view of the many semantic and contextual facets of NACs and the host of type/token occurrences of this WFP in language usage, the question of German-English transfer problems is almost imperative, all the more so since, as said before, this WFP, in the plurality of concrete cases, cannot be rendered into English literally. This statement may, at first, be somewhat of a surprise, because both languages, German and English, potentially possess the same WFP. Nevertheless, at least in the realm of linguistic usage, this WFP plays a different role in German and English. Principally this WFP is much more fully exploited in German than in English (Lipka 1966). This is obvious from the fact that there are, as a rule, German lexical correspondences for English NACs. Exceptions confirm this rule. Conversely, this is, as indicated, not the case. Theoretically, it might be possible to construe for most, if not all German NACs, English lexical equivalents, but such formations would be blatant offences against English usage norms, as can be abundantly shown by a literal transfer of German NACs of the type noun + « freundlich » into English :

- (15) umweltfreundlich (eine umweltfreundliche Maßnahme)  
 →\* environment-friendly (an environment-friendly measure)  
 → ecological measure  
 service-freundlich (ein service-freundlicher Wagen)  
 →\* service-friendly (a service-friendly car)  
 → low-maintenance car.

These examples show that a direct formal and semantic match between German and English is non-existent. It follows that the English language user is forced to execute syntactic and/or semantic shifts of expression amounting to the carrying out of non-literal transfer procedures which are conformant with English performance norms.

Here, applied translation studies are confronted with a three-phased task which will be difficult to execute for three reasons :

1. the type/token plurality of German NACs ;
2. the intuition-orientedness of analytical and transfer procedures ;
3. the impossibility of an exhaustive description of formal and semantic relations observable in NACs.

This three-phased task can, for the time being, be formulated only in the way of a research program. Applied translation studies must, possibly by utilising the insights gained by the *Stylistique comparée*, try to describe and explain the literal and non-literal transfer procedures relevant in the German-English transfer of NACs.

Second, applied translation studies must distinguish between obligatory (langue-based) and optional (stylistically motivated) transfer procedures and test the equivalence levels of the transfer results, thereby making allowance for an unavoidable but at the same time permissible degree of qualitative tolerance between German NACs and their English correspondences.

In a third step, applied translation studies must attempt to systematize the analytically gained results and to integrate them into teachable and learnable transfer regularities or translation rules (Catford 1965 ; Wilss 1977a). If such transfer regularities can be established, they could take over an important « relief function » in the activity of the translator and thus help to improve the efficiency of his performance in practical translation work.

Within the framework of this three-phased task, it is recommendable to concentrate research activities on technical-language texts for five reasons :

1. Technical-language texts play a central role in the curriculum designed for future translators and in the translation profession (Wilss 1977b).
2. Certain types of NACs possess a high frequency rate in technical-language texts.
3. Standard equivalents on the basis of one-to-one-correspondences can often be employed in the transfer of technical-language texts.
4. The denotative function of technical-language texts permits the conclusion that established NAC-patterns can easily be adopted to new communicative needs without losing their generalizing power.
5. The consistency of semantic configurations of technical-language NACs can effect a typification of transfer procedures, an effect which may come in handy in developing algorithms for the machine translation of technical-language texts.

DR. WOLFRAM WILSS



## REFERENCES

1. CATFORD, J.C. (1965), *A Linguistic Theory of Translation. An Essay in Applied Linguistics*, London.
2. COSERIU, E. (1976), « Die funktionelle Betrachtung des Wortschatzes », in : H. Moser (ed.) (1976), *Probleme der Lexikologie und Lexikographie*, Jahrbuch 1975 des Instituts für deutsche Sprache, Düsseldorf, p. 7-25.
3. JESPERSEN, O. (1954), *Modern English Grammar*, Vol. VI, London/Copenhagen.
4. LIPKA, L. (1966), Die Wortbildungstypen WATERPROOF und GRASS-GREEN und ihre Entsprechungen im Deutschen, Diss. Tübingen University.
5. — (1977), « Lexikalisierung, Idiomatisierung und Hypostasierung als Problem einer synchronen Wortbildungslehre », in : H.E. Brekle/D. Kastovsky (eds.), *Perspektiven der Wortbildungsforschung*, Beiträge zum Wuppertaler Wortbildungskolloquium vom 9.-10. Juli 1976, Bonn, p. 155-164.
6. NIDA, E.A. (1964), *Toward a Science of Translating*, Leiden.
7. NIDA, E.A./C.R. TABER (1969), *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden.
8. WILSS, W. (1977a), *Übersetzungswissenschaft. Probleme und Methoden*, Stuttgart.
9. — (1977b), « Curricular Planning », in : *Meta* 22 (1977), p. 117-124.
10. — (1978), « Syntaktische, semantische, textsortenspezifische und übersetzungsdidaktische Probleme der Wiedergabe von englischen Partizipialkonstruktionen (PKn) im Deutschen », in : *Linguistik und Didaktik* 34/35, p. 207-232.