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The Use of the Term 'combining form' in Some Monolingual English Dictionaries[1]

Abstract

This paper examines the use of the term 'combining form' in eight English monolingual online dictionaries. The definitions given for this compound as a headword are compared and analysed, and the lexical categorization of the examples cited in the definitions is also checked against their categorization as headwords. Thus the internal consistency of these dictionaries can be scrutinized, and the similarities and the differences in the treatment of certain bound morphemes that linguists normally classify as 'combining forms' can be revealed in these dictionaries and even within the same dictionary family.
Keywords: combining form, dictionary, lexicography, prefix, suffix

1   Introduction

In English morphology, bound morphemes are often divided into two main groups: affixes (prefixes and suffixes) and combining forms. The term 'combining form' is believed to have been used for the first time in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*) in 1884 for the categorization of a certain type of bound morpheme ("combining", *OED*[2]; "combining form", Merriam-Webster). Definitions of the above terms have appeared in numerous works on English morphology and linguistics, and as an example, I would like to cite here the ones from *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*:

a) 'affix': "A type of MORPHEME that is added to a BASE or ROOT morpheme to produce an inflected or derived form, such as –*s* added to *house* to form *houses* and *re-* added to *write* to form *re-write*" (2018: 13).

b) 'combining form': "In WORD FORMATION, a BASE designed to combine with another, either also a combining form or a free word: *bio-* with –*graphy* to form *biography*, *mini-* with *skirt* to form *miniskirt*" (2018: 150).

Scholars have written extensively on the difficulties of distinguishing affixes and combining forms in some cases; for example, Marchand discusses the origin and the use of the latter term and the role of such elements in English word formation, and criticizes the *OED*'s use of it in

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[1]   I would like to dedicate this paper to Sándor Martsa, my greatly respected colleague and my former head of department at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary.

[2]   The full references to the dictionary entries are given in the 'References' section.

some cases (1969: 131-134). However, this paper does not intend to give an overview of these problems. The aim here is to scrutinize the lexicographical use of the term 'combining form' in some well-known monolingual English dictionaries.

The Oxford Companion to the English Language briefly discusses the use of the term in lexicography, too, and states that "Most dictionaries follow the *OED* in using *combining form (comb. form)* to label such classical elements, but the name is not widely known. In appendices to dictionaries and grammar books, combining forms are often loosely referred to as roots or affixes (…). They are often referred to as affixes because some come first and some come last, but if they were affixes, a word like *biography* would have no base whatever" (2018: 151). This quotation shows that a detailed examination of the use of the term 'combining form' in lexicography may prove to be useful.

The following aspects were considered relevant and were thus examined in the course of the research:
1. Do these dictionaries have 'combining form' as a headword?
2. If they do, then how do they define it? What approach is used? Are functional and/or semantic characteristics given?
3. What examples are given in the definitions? How are the examples categorized when they appear as headwords? Is the categorization consistent with what is stated about the given example in the definition?
4. Which dictionaries distinguish prefixes, suffixes and combining forms, and which ones do not?
5. Is the lexicograpical practice consistent in the case of dictionary 'families'?

2   Dictionaries examined

Eight online dictionaries were examined:
1. The Oxford English Dictionary (*OED*) (oed.com);
2. Oxford Dictionaries (oxforddictionaries.com); monolingual English version; henceforth Oxford Dictionaries;
3. Oxford Learner's Dictonaries (oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com); the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary; henceforth the *OALD*;
4. Merriam-Webster online dictionary (www.merriam-webster.com); henceforth Merriam-Webster;
5. Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary (www.learnersdictionary.com); henceforth Merriam-Webster L;
6. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (www.ldoceonline.com); henceforth Longman;
7. Macmillan Dictionary (www.macmillandictionary.com); British version; henceforth Macmillan;
8. Cambridge Dictionary (dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/); Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus; henceforth Cambridge.

These dictionaries were chosen because they represent various lexicographical traditions, are among the most often used English monolingual dictionaries by both native speakers and learners, and some have two online versions: one for native speakers and the other one for

learners. Thus comparison could be made between various lexicographical traditions as well as between dictionaries for native speakers and learners.

3   'combining form' as a headword

All the examined dictionaries have 'combining form' as a headword in an entry, with the exception of the *OED*. This is all the more suprising, as this term was used for the first time in this dictionary in 1884 ("combining, n", *OED*). 'combining form' is listed as a compound in the entry for "combining", noun. It does not provide a definition, but refers the user to the second of the two quotations given as illustrative examples, which is a definition from B. Bloch & G. L. Trager's *Outline of linguistic analysis*, published in 1942. This quotation will be discussed later. (The first quotation is that of the first attestation from 1884.) Note, however, that this entry was first published in 1891, and it has not been fully updated since then (ibid).

4   Labels used in the entries

Dictionary	Label
OED	-
Oxford Dictionaries	grammar
OALD	grammar
Merriam-Webster	-
Merriam-Webster L	linguistics
Longman	technical
Macmillan	linguistics
Cambridge	specialized

Table 1. Labels used in the entry for 'combining form'

As can be seen above, only the *OED* and the version of Merriam-Webster meant for native speakers use no label for this compound, while all the other dictionaries do indicate that this lexical item belongs to some special field. The field itself is specified in Oxford Dictionaries and *OALD* (grammar), Merriam-Webster L and Macmillan (linguistics), but a more general label is used in Longman (technical) and Cambridge (specialized).

5   Analysis of the definitions

The definitions of 'combining form' in the examined dictionaries are given below, and are followed by a short analyis.

1. As mentioned above, instead of its own definition, the *OED* refers the user to the second illustrative quotation, which is the following:

> In Latin and other languages, many words have a special combining form which appears only in compounds (or only in compounds and derivatives)... The foreign-learned part of the English vocabulary also shows a number of special combining forms; cf. *electro-*, combining form of *electric*, in such compounds as *electromagnet*. (B. Bloch & G. L. Trager, *Outline of linguistic analysis*, published in 1942, p. 66 – cited in *OED*, "combining, n").

2. Oxford Dictionaries has the following definition: "A form of a word normally used in compounds in combination with another element to form a word (e.g. Anglo- 'English' in Anglo-Irish, bio- 'life' in biology, -graphy 'writing' in biography)" ("combining form", Oxford Dictionaries).
An explanatory note on usage is also added:

> In this dictionary, combining form is used to denote an element that contributes to the particular sense of words (as with bio- and -graphy in biography), as distinct from a prefix or suffix that adjusts the sense of or determines the function of words (as with un-, -able, and -ation) (ibid.).

3. The *OALD* gives the following definition: "a form of a word that can combine with another word or another combining form to make a new word, for example *techno-* and *-phobe* in *technophobe*" ("combining form", *OALD*).

4. Merriam-Webster contains the longest discussion of this term:

> a linguistic form that occurs only in compounds or derivatives and can be distinguished descriptively from an affix by its ability to occur as one immediate constituent of a form whose only other immediate constituent is an affix (such as *cephal-* in *cephalic*) or by its being derived from an independent word (such as *electro-* representing *electric* in *electromagnet* or *para-* representing *parachute* in *paratrooper*) or can be distinguished historically from an affix by the fact that it is borrowed from another language in which it is descriptively a word or a combining form (such as French *mal* giving English *mal-* in *malodorous*)" ("combining form", Merriam-Webster).

Then an even longer explanation follows with the title "What are prefixes, suffixes, and combining forms?" (ibid.) After explaining what prefixes, suffixes and infixes are, the editors of the dictionary elaborate on combining forms in the following way:

> A *combining form* is a form of a word that only appears as part of another word. There are a number of kinds of combining forms, each classified by what kind of word results when the form is used. For example, *-wise* in *clockwise* is an adverb combining form; *-like* in *birdlike* is an adjective combining form; *-graph* in *photograph* is a noun combining form; and *-lyze* in *electrolyze* is a verb combining form. Combining forms are similar to affixes but can have a bit more lexical substance to them. Unlike affixes, combining forms are substantial enough to form a word simply by connecting to an affix, such as when the combining form *cephal-* joins with the suffix *-ic* to form *cephalic*. A combining form can also differ from an affix in its being derived from an independent word. For example, *para-* is a combining form in the word *paratrooper* because in that word it represents the word *parachute*. *Para-* is a prefix, however, in the words *paranormal* and *paramedic*. A combining form can also be distinguished historically from an affix by the fact that it is borrowed from another language in which it is descriptively a word or a combining form, such as the French *mal* giving English the *mal-* in *malfunction*" (ibid.).

Last, the first known appearance of the term (1884) is given (ibid.).

5. Merriam-Webster L gives a much shorter definition: "a form of a word (such as *electro-* in *electromagnetic* or *mal-* in *malodorous*) that only occurs as a part of other words" ("combining form", Merriam-Webster L).

6. In Longman, we can find the following: "a word that is combined with another word or another combining form to make a new word, for example 'Anglo', meaning 'English', in the word 'Anglo-American'" ("combining form", Longman).
7. Macmillan has the following definition: "a form of a word that has its own meaning but is used only in combination with other words to make new words, for example **-footed** in 'a **four-footed** animal'" ("combining form", Macmillan).
8. And finally, in Cambridge we can find the following: "a word or group of letters that is added to the beginning or end of words to change or add meaning: The combining form "Anglo" combines to make various words, including Anglo-American and Anglophile" ("combining form", Cambridge).

Note that if the definition simply states that a combining form can only occur as part of a word, then it will not be analysed here, as this is simply stating the fact that such lexical items are bound morphemes. It is worth noting that Longman and Cambridge identify combining forms as 'words'; Cambridge even states that it is a "group of letters" ("combining form", Cambridge). In my opinion, the least helpful of the definitions are those of Longman and Cambridge: if, for example, according to Longman, a combining form is "a word that is combined with another word or another combining form to make a new word" ("combining form", Longman), then what is the difference between a 'word' and a 'combining form'? As words are free forms, and combining forms are bound morphemes, this very important property of these lexical items is not stated in these two dictionaries; rather, they seem to imply that they have the same characteristics as 'words'.

5.1 Formal approach

It can be seen from the definitions that almost all of them contain some information about the combinational properties of combining forms: it appears only in compounds and derivatives (*OED*); is used in compounds combined with another element (Oxford Dictionaries); appears together with another word or another combining form (*OALD*); can form a word together with an affix (Merriam-Webster); combines with another word or another combining form (Longman); can only be used in combination with other words (Macmillan); is added to the beginning or end of words (Cambridge).

5.2 Semantic approach

Only three of the dictionaries make a reference to the semantic properties of combining forms. (Note that if a dictionary states that combining forms change the meaning of the word they are added to, this aspect will not be commented upon here.) Macmillan notes that such an element is "a form of a word that has its own meaning" ("combining form", Macmillan). Merriam-Webster's description, according to which "Combining forms are similar to affixes but can have a bit more lexical substance to them. Unlike affixes, combining forms are substantial enough to form a word simply by connecting to an affix," ("combining form", Merriam-Webster), is quite intriguing. One wonders what is meant by "a bit more lexical substance"? Perhaps it is Oxford Dictionaries which presents the most interesting reference to the semantic content of combining forms, as it tries to compare it to that of affixes: a "combining form is used to denote an element that contributes to the particular sense of words (as with bio- and -graphy in biography), as distinct from a prefix or suffix that adjusts the sense of or determines

the function of words". This explanation seems to suggests that prefixes modify the sense of the words they are attached to (perhaps like in *happy-unhappy* and *do-redo*) and suffixes, while also modifying the meaning, also determine the lexical category of the new word (e.g. *happy-happily, derive-derivation,* etc.); and that the semantic effect of combining forms is somewhat different in nature from those of prefixes and suffixes.

5.3   Origin and function in word formation

Only Merriam-Webster discusses the possible origin of combining forms. According to this dictionary, they can be derived from an independent word or can be borrowed from another language in which they function either as words or combining forms ("combining form", Merriam-Webster). It is also in this dictionary that combining forms that are added to the end of a word or another combining form are subcategorized according to whether they form verbs, nouns, adjectives or adverbs (ibid.).

6   Examples in the definitions

This section intends to compare theory and practice in the dictionaries by testing the examples given in the definitions against their classification as headwords.

The lexicographical classification of the items mentioned as examples in the definitions is the following: *aero-* and *electro-* (*OED*), *Anglo-*, *bio-* and *-graphy* (Oxford Dictionaries), and *techno-* and *-phobe* (*OALD*) are categorized as combining forms. (Note that the examples given in the definitions are different in all the dictionaries belonging to the Oxford 'family'.) In Merriam-Webster *cephalo-*, *electro-*, *para-* and *mal-* are all classified as combining forms, and *-wise*, *-like*, *-graph*, and *-lyze* are all categorized as a certain type of combining form, as discussed in the quotation above. In Merriam-Webster L's definition, only two of the examples mentioned in the larger Merriam-Webster's dictionary are given here: *electro-* and *mal-*, and they are both classified as combining forms. Thus these dictionaries are consistent in the treatment of these elements. However, according to both Longman and Cambridge, *Anglo-* is a prefix, which contradicts what they state about it in their definition of 'combining form' ("Anglo-", Longman; "Anglo-", Cambridge). Finally, in Macmillan, there is no separate entry for *-footed*, thus we can not learn what the lexicographers' opinion is. This means that there is a contradiction in Longman and Cambridge as far as the examples cited for combining forms and their actual classification as headwords is concerned, while Macmillan does not even have *-footed* as a headword.

7   'combining form' as a lexical category: Classification of all the examples in all of the examined dictonaries

The dictionary classification of all the examples given in the definitions and explanations in all the examined dictionaries was also looked at, and the results are presented in the table below.

Dictionary	*aero-*[3]	*Anglo-*	*bio-*	*cephal-*[4]	*electro-*[5]	*-footed*	*-graph*	*-graphy*	*-like*	*-lyze*	*mal-*	*para-*	*-phobe*	*techno-*	*-wise*
OED	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	adj.[6]	c. f.	c. f.	suff.	c. f.[7]	pref.	pref. + c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.
Oxford Dictionaries	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	adj.	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	-	c. f.	pref.	c. f.	c. f.	suff.
OALD	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	-	c. f.	-	-	c. f.	c. f.	-	c. f.	pref.	c. f.	c. f.	suff.
Merriam-Webster	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	adj.	n. c. f.	n. c. f.	a. c. f.	v. c. f.	c. f.	pref. + c. f.	n. c. f.	c. f.	ad. c. f.
Merriam-Webster L	c. f.	c. f.	c. f.	-	c. f.	adj.	n. c. f.	n. c. f.	a. c. f.	-	c. f.	pref. + c. f.	n. c. f.	c. f.	c. f.
Longman	pref.	pref.	pref.	-	pref.	-	-	suff.	suff.	-	pref.	pref.	suff.	pref.	suff.
Macmillan	pref.	pref.	pref.	-	-	-	-	-	suff.	-	pref.	pref.	suff.	pref.	suff.
Cambridge	pref.	pref.	pref.	-	-	suff.	-	-	suff.	-	pref.	pref.	suff.	pref.	suff.

Table 2. Dictionary classification of all the examples used in the definitions/explanations for 'combining form'.[8]

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3   Under *aer-* in Merriam-Webster. The references to all the entries in all the dictionaries can be found in the 'References' section.

4   Under *cephalo-* in the *OED* and Oxford Dictionaries.

5   Under *electr-* in Merriam-Webster and Merriam-Webster L.

6   Under *footed* in Oxford Dictionaries and Merriam-Webster.

7   With the spelling *-lyse*.

8   Abbreviations: c. f. = combining form; pref. = prefix; suff. = suffix; adj. = adjective; n. c. f. = noun combining form; a. c. f. = adjective combining form; v. c. f. = verb combining form; ad. c. f. = adverb combining form.

a) From the examples above it is obvious that although Longman, Macmillan and Cambridge do have a dictionary entry for 'combining form', they do not use this term in their part of speech classification. If the bound morpheme in question is to be attached to the beginning of a word, then it is classified as a prefix; while if it is to be attached to the end of a word, then it is classified as a suffix. The dictionaries belonging to the Oxford and Merriam-Webster 'families' consistently distinguish prefixes, suffixes and combining forms, although not always in the same way – this is going to be discussed below.

b) *–footed*, which is given in Macmillan as an example of a combining form in the definition of the latter, is classified as an adjective in four of the dictionaries in which it appears (*OED*, Oxford Dictionaries, Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster L), and as a suffix in Cambridge.

c) 10 of the discussed lexical items (*aero-, Anglo-, bio-, cephal-, electro-, -graph, -graphy, -lyze, -phobe* and *techno-*) are categorized as combining forms in the dictionaries that use this term.

d) As it has been shown in the section on definitions, Merriam-Webster and Merriam-Webster L classify certain combining forms according to whether a verb, a noun, an adjective or an adverb is formed with their help. Of course, this kind of classification only applies to bound morphemes that can be attached to the end of a word. Of the 6 morphemes categorized as combining forms in Merriam-Webster, the type is given for each. This is also done in the learner's version, with the exception of *–wise*, where it is not specified what lexical category can be formed with this morpheme.

e) The categorization used in Merriam-Webster always agrees with at least one of the Oxford dictionaries (apart from the above-mentioned extra information given in Merriam-Webster in the case of bound morphemes that can be attached to the end of words). It is quite intriguing, however, that the three Oxford dictionaries do not agree on categorization in 4 cases. In the case of *–like* and *mal-*, the *OED* classifies these as suffix and prefix respectively, while the other two Oxford dictionaries consider them to be combining forms. In the case of *–wise*, the situation is the reverse: this is a combining form in the *OED* but a suffix in the other two. Interestingly enough, the entries of *–like* and *mal-* have already been revised in the third edition, thus one cannot say that they contain outdated information; and *–wise* is a new entry from 2010. (The only entries which have not been updated since 1900 are *–graph* and *-graphy*, and since 1933 *cephal-*; moreover, *-lyse* is a new entry from 2016.) The case of *para-* is somewhat special, and it will be discussed in the next paragraph.

f) It can be seen from the data above that while all the five dictionaries have *para-* as a prefix, only three of them (*OED*, Merriam-Webster and Merriam-Webster L) list it as a combining form as well. All three agree on the meaning of the combining form, which indicates something connected to a parachute, and which is different from that of the prefix(es).

para- as a prefix appears in the *OED* and Oxford Dictionaries as *para-*[1] and *para-*[2]. The meaning of *para-*[2], 'Forming words with the sense 'protection from ——'.' ("para-*, prefix*[2]", *OED*) is unique to these two dictionaries. This meaning does not appear under *para-* in the other dictionaries. As would be expected because of their size and scope, the *OED* and Merriam-Webster give the greatest number of meanings for this prefix under *para-*[1] in the *OED* and under *para-* in Merriam-Webster. The meanings mostly overlap between the two dictionaries, the most frequent ones being 'beyond, beside, parallel to', which also appear in the other Oxford and Merriam-Webster dictionaries. ("para-", Merriam-Webster, "para-", Merriam-Webster L, "para-", *OALD*, "para-*[1]*", *OED*, "para-*[1]*", Oxford Dictionaries.) (It is not the intention of this paper to analyse the similarities and the differences in the definitions and the sense structure.)

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As far as the other dictionaries are concerned, one of the meanings of the prefix *para-* in Longman and Macmillan is identical with that of the combining forms presented above: 'relating to parachutes' ("para-", Longman), and 'involving the use of a parachute' ("para-", Macmillan).

8   Conclusion

The evidence presented above reflects theoretical uncertainty concerning the meaning and lexicographical use of the term 'combining form', and the examples given for it. While all the examined dictionaries (with the exception of the *OED*) do list this compound as a headword, their definitions overlap only partly, and the examples they provide in the definitions also vary from dictionary to dictionary. As far as consistency within a given dictionary is concerned, three of the dictionaries (Longman, Macmillan and Cambridge) do define what a combining form is, however, they do not use this category in the lexical categorization of their headwords, and the examples they give in the entry for 'combining form' are either classified as prefixes (*Anglo-*) or do not appear as a headword at all (-*footed* in the case of Macmillan). While both the Oxford and the Merriam-Webster dictionaries do distinguish between prefixes and suffixes on the one hand and combining forms on the other, still, even the small set of examples examined showed that the two dictionary families do not fully agree on classification in some cases. Apart from the fact that, as mentioned above, Merriam-Webster subcategorizes final combining forms according to which lexical category the newly created word will belong to, of the 15 bound morphemes examined, Merriam-Webster did not have the same categorization for one item, -*wise*, as Oxford Dictionaries and the *OALD* (disregarding *para-* and the elements that do not occur in these two Oxford dictionaries). When comparing it with the *OED*, the differences are present for two bound morphemes (-*like* and *mal-*), however, -*wise* is classified as a combining from in both Merriam-Webster and the *OED*. Merriam-Webster and the learner version differ only in the case of -*wise*, because in the former work -*wise* is denoted as an adverb combining form, whiled in the latter simply as a combining form. Finally, when it comes to the Oxford dictionaries, Oxford Dictionaries and the *OALD* agree in categorization if the given lexical item appears in both dictionaries; however, they differ from the *OED* in the case of three bound morphemes (-*like*, *mal-* and -*wise*). As noted earlier, this is all the more suprising as these three entries have either been recently updated in the *OED* or are new ones, so they are not outdated; one would thus expect complete overlap within the same dictionary family.

The apparent lack of uniformity in the lexicographical use of the term 'combining form' in the eight examined dictionaries, and the discrepancy between its existence as a headword on its own with an explanation that would entail its lexicographical use, and the fact that this is not followed in three of the dictionaries, might cause confusion for the users. Of course, in some cases the borderline between a bound morpheme behaving as a prefix/suffix or combining form may be blurred; however, I believe that lexicographers should clearly explain the choices that they make. Another question that can be raised is whether the threefold distinction between prefix, suffix and combining form is really necessary in a learner's dictionary – especially if, for example, in a printed dictionary the headword is classified as a combining form, but then it is listed among the prefixes and suffixes in the appendices (an example for this is the 7th edition of the *OALD*). I believe that research into dictionary use

focussing on the way users deal with the information given on lexical categories could help to give an answer to this question.

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