How nouns turn into adjectives: The emergence of new adjectives in French, English and Dutch through debonding processes

1. Introduction

In this paper we investigate how new adjectives can arise from (semi-)bounded nouns in French, English and Dutch. Examples (1-3) illustrate three such new adjectives for each of the three languages:

- (1) FR: *Ajoutons que le chiffre des abstentionniste [sic], qui depuis ma naissance est **record** à chaque scrutin, est de 7.218.592.*
'(...) the figure of the abstentionists, which has been at record levels ever since I was born (...)' (*GlossaNet*, 1 July 2001)
- (2) ENG: *The U.S. (...) has said it will do more in terms of intelligence-sharing to [...] stop some of the killings, and really restore some -- some law and order in these pockets of lawlessness that -- that tend to be along some very **key** border areas.* (*COCA*, 2010)
- (3) DU: *De binnenstad staat immers op een **reuze** betonnen plaat van 12 ha tussen twee heuvelruggen, waaronder alle gemotoriseerd verkeer moet parkeren zodat het ganse centrum overdag een grote voetgangerszone is.*
'The town centre is indeed built on a gigantic sheet of concrete of 12 ha between two ranges of hills, under which all motorized traffic has to park so that the entire centre is a large pedestrian zone by day.' (*news.google.com*, 7 July 2011)

For each adjective, the historical source is a noun used in a compound or compound-like sequence, as in (4-6). The precise morphological status of these sequences differs somewhat across the three languages (see below), but in general terms, the noun at issue each time starts out as part of a bounded unit with the following (Dutch, English) or preceding (French) element. Within this unit, it is low in 'nominality' in that it does not single out a separate discourse participant and cannot select its own modifiers (e.g. **the key_i word ... it_i ...*; **the [small key]_{NP} word*).

- (4) ***Chiffre record** du chômage dans la zone euro*
'Unemployment at record level (lit. record figure of unemployment) in the Eurozone' (*LaLibre.be*, 31 August 2012)
- (5) *Well, new – new is the **key word**.* (*COCA*, 2011)
- (6) *met een muffin of **reuzekoek** naar keuze*
'with a muffin and a huge biscuit (lit. giant-biscuit) of your choice' (*Google*, 5 October 2012)

The emergence of free adjectival uses out of such (semi-)bounded nouns can therefore be thought of as *debonding*. As defined by Norde (2009:186), debonding is a type of degrammaticalization, involving "a composite change whereby a bound morpheme in a specific linguistic context becomes a free morpheme". While the cases of debonding at issue here may not (always) qualify as instances of degrammaticalization, as they mostly concern strictly lexical items, they show all the hallmark features of debonding, that is *severance* (i.e. decrease in bondedness), *flexibilization* (i.e. increase in syntactic freedom), *scope expansion*

(for instance, from attributive to predicative scope, cf. (4) vs (1), or from bare noun to (lexicalized) noun phrase, cf. (5-6) vs (2-3)) and *recategorialization* (from noun to adjective).

Processes of debonding differ from morphological derivation through conversion. The debonding process whereby a noun is transformed into an adjective depends on the occurrence of the noun in the specific morphosyntactic constellation of compound(-like) sequences, and typically occurs when the noun has already obtained some qualifying adjective-like function (see below). The process is therefore more akin to reanalysis and actualization (De Smet 2012). This is also reflected in its gradualness. Earlier work on specific instances of debonding in the three languages shows that a new adjective does not adopt the grammatical and inflectional behaviour of adjectives all at once but typically acquires adjectival features in piecemeal fashion and often incompletely (De Smet 2012, Van Goethem 2012, Van Goethem and Amiot 2011, 2012, Van Goethem and Hiligsmann *forthc.*). For instance, in the case of debonding, attributive uses of the new adjective tend to appear before predicative uses. This is in line with the more general idea that gradualness marks out debonding and degrammaticalization from (mostly abrupt) morphological processes such as conversion, which are considered cases of lexicalization (Brinton and Traugott 2005; Norde 2009).¹

In previous studies, we investigated debonding in French *clé* 'key' (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012, Van Goethem 2012), *charnière* 'lit. hinge; pivotal' (Van Goethem and Amiot 2011), *géant* 'giant, great' (Van Goethem and Hiligsmann *forthc.*) and *limite* 'lit. limit; borderline' (Van Goethem and Amiot 2012), English *key* (De Smet 2012) and Dutch *reuze* 'giant' (Van Goethem and Hiligsmann *forthc.*). In this paper, we develop a comparative analysis of the observed processes in the three languages, arguing that at least three factors affect debonding and that their impact may vary from one language to another. As such, the factors can account for both similarities and differences between debonding processes in the three languages. The factors are:

- a. the semantics of the noun subject to debonding;
- b. the degree of prosodic and morphological cohesion of N+N sequences;
- c. the presence of adjective inflection in the language and the resemblance of a compound element to an inflected adjective.

Thus, with regard to the semantics, debonding in all three languages is typical of nouns with a qualifying function. However, next to the semantic factor there are further language-specific constraints on debonding. These account mainly for differences in the incidence of debonding, and also for differences in how debonding proceeds. For instance, the English sequences with *key* and their French counterparts with *clé* act differently from the Dutch compounds with *sleutel*- (e.g. *key economic sector*, *secteur économique clé*, **sleutel economische sector*) (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012, Denison 2001, De Smet 2012). Specifically, we argue that the likelihood of debonding is also subject to the degree of cohesion of the N+N sequences, manifested, among others, through spelling and word stress. Dutch N+N sequences show stronger cohesion than their French and English counterparts, explaining the lower incidence of debonding in Dutch. Finally, reanalysis of a noun as an adjective may be favored in languages with little or no inflection on the adjective, as in French and English respectively. This again disfavours debonding in Dutch. However, the

form of most debonded Dutch adjectives indicates that the Dutch linking morpheme *-e-* can be reinterpreted as an inflectional affix, thereby occasioning reanalysis.

The following sections contain a detailed discussion of the set of factors responsible for how debonding proceeds. As the role of semantics is the same for the three languages, it is discussed first (Section 2). The discussion of the remaining factors (cohesion and inflection) is per language, addressing debonding in French (Section 3), then in English (Section 4), and finally in Dutch (Section 5).

Before entering on the discussion, a brief word is in place on the data used in this paper. The following discussion is based on a collection of instances of debonding in the three languages. Because of differences in available resources, the way these have been gathered inevitably differs from language to language. For English, the only case of debonding we found discussed in the literature is the development of *key* (Denison 2001, De Smet 2012, Vartiainen forthc.). However, additional instances were found by searching the electronic *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* for nouns described as "passing into adjective" and a further set of examples were found by means of a sample of word forms functioning both as nouns and adjectives in the *Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)*. In order to find debonded uses in French and Dutch, we looked for recent corpus examples of a number of cases discussed or mentioned in the literature (Booij 2010, Fletcher 1980, Haeseryn et al. 1997, Mathieu-Colas 1994, Noailly 1990) via *GlossaNet*, *WebCorp* and *Google news*. The data were further enriched by our own observations, and by comparing translational equivalents between the languages.

2. Semantics

We have already observed that debonding mainly applies to nouns with a qualifying (or evaluative) function: in examples (1-3), *record* 'at record level', *key* and *reuze* 'giant' qualify the nouns or phrases they are associated with (*chiffre* 'figure', *border area*, *stap* 'step') as 'highly important'.

Classifying compounds such as Fr. *requin-marteau* / Eng. *hammerhead shark* / Du. *hamerhaai* usually do not allow debonding: **requin vraiment marteau* (lit. 'shark really hammer'), **a hammerhead blue shark*, *die haai is hamer* (lit. 'that shark is hammer') (cf. Amiot and Van Goethem 2012).² The opposition is comparable to that between qualifying and classifying or relational adjectives: while the former are gradable (7a) and can be used predicatively (7b-c), the latter are not gradable (8a, 8c) and are only used attributively (8b) (Bache 2000: 160-162, Haeseryn et al. 1997: 387, Halliday 1994: 180, Riegel et al. 1999: 355-357).

- (7) a. FR. *Le chiffre des abstentionnistes aux élections était cette année plus **élevé** que l'année passée.*
       'The figure of the abstentionists at the elections was this year higher than last year'
- b. ENG. *This area is very **important** (...)*
- c. DU. *De stap die de regering vandaag gezet heeft is **gigantisch**.*
       'The step taken by the government today is gigantic'
- (8) a. FR. *un discours présidentiel* 'a presidential discourse'; **un discours très présidentiel* 'lit. a very presidential discourse'
- b. ENG. *a musical instrument*; *This instrument is **musical**

- c. DU. *een koninklijk besluit* 'a royal decree'; **Dit besluit is het meest koninklijke* 'lit. this decree is the most royal one'

The semantic constraint on debonding is particularly evident in those cases where nouns in N+N sequences undergo a semantic shift just before they undergo debonding. For instance, English *average* first shifted from its arithmetical meaning, as in (9), to the meaning 'ordinary', as in (10), before unambiguously adjectival instances appeared, as in (11).

- (9) *The **average** price of corn* (1770, OED)
 (10) *We hence approve those dispositions and actions of voluntary agents which promote such suitable punishment, and disapprove those which hinder its infliction or destroy its effect; at the head of which may be placed that excess of punishment beyond the **average** feelings of good men, which turns the indignation of the calm by-stander against the culprit into pity.* (1832, COHA)
 (11) *I was rather disappointed in finding the present Romans a race of fully **average** capacities* (1851, COHA)

Similarly, Vartiainen (forthc.) provides collocational evidence showing that debonding in English *key* is closely linked to a semantic change into an evaluative marker.

In that light, the qualifying function of the nouns we are looking at is an important trigger in their reanalysis as qualifying adjectives. This is consistent with the fact that when they undergo debonding, they adopt, albeit gradually, the syntactic behavior of qualifying adjectives. English *key* (12) and French *clé* (13), for example, which are mostly used attributively, allow modification by degree adverbs, predicative use, attributive use with scope over a polylexical unit and comparative / superlative degree marking (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012, Denison 2001, De Smet 2012, L'heureux 2008):

- (12) a. *There are a number of reasons why people lose their hair, stress is **a very key factor**.* (Denison 2001: 129)
 b. *Claudia brings an unforgettable quality of joy to all her work that **is key** to Revlon's view of beauty.* (Denison 2001: 129)
 c. *But **the key foreign and defense portfolios** remained unchanged.* (Denison 2001: 128)
 d. *Nowhere is credibility **more key than** among Iraqis.* (L'heureux 2008: 9)
 (13) a. *Nous reviendrons sur **ce point réellement clé*** (lit. this point really key; this really key point) *pour la suite de la réflexion.* (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012: 352)
 b. *Ce livre de Zweifel **est absolument clé*** (lit. is absolutely key) *pour vous et vos collaborateurs si vous voulez une équipe gagnante.* (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012: 353)
 c. *Un diplomate français nommé à un **poste administratif clé** de l'UE* (lit. position administrative key; key administrative position). (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012: 352)
 d. *Et c'est sans doute ce point qui est **le plus clé et critique*** (...) (lit. this point is the most key and critical) (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012: 353).

While the role of semantics is constant across all three languages, the remaining factors are language-specific. For instance, the semantic argument does not account for the fact that

the English sequences with *key* (12) and the French ones with *clé* (13) developed adjectival properties, while their Dutch counterparts with *sleutel*- did not (e.g. *secteur économique clé*, *key economic sector*, **sleutel economische sector*) (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012). In what follows, we will discuss the impact of the three remaining factors on French (Section 3), English (Section 4) and Dutch (Section 5).

3. French

3.1. Prosodic and morphological cohesion

In Van Goethem (2009), it was observed that French compounds differ from Germanic compounds in two important respects (cf. Zwanenburg 1992: 222). First, while Germanic compounding follows the Right-hand Head Rule (e.g. English *postage stamp*, Dutch *postzegel*), French has left-hand headed compounding (e.g. *timbre-poste*). Second, whereas languages such as Dutch and German establish a clear distinction between compounds and (lexicalized) phrases on the basis of formal criteria (spelling, word stress, loss of internal inflection markers), in French these criteria do not apply. French has no distinctive word stress, but only phrase stress. Moreover, French spelling is characterized by many inconsistencies and irregularities (e.g. *bébé-éprouvette* / *bébé éprouvette* 'test tube baby', *portefeuille* 'lit. carries/carry paper; wallet' vs *porte-monnaie* 'lit. carries/carry-money; purse') (cf. Lehmann and Martin-Berthet 2008) and many French compound-like expressions have internal inflection markers (e.g. *beaux-arts* 'fine arts', *compte-gouttes* 'lit. count(s)-drops; dropping bottle'). As a result, it is not easy to establish a clear distinction between compounds and phrases in French and compounding is often equated with the notion of lexicalization (cf. Gross 1988, 1996).

N+N sequences such as *mot-clé* 'keyword', *date charnière* 'lit. hinge date; pivotal date', *remède miracle* 'miracle cure', *cas limite* 'lit. limit case; borderline case' and *chiffre record* 'record figure', in which the N2 has a qualifying function, are bonded combinations, but their exact status is subject to considerable discussion, precisely because of the fact that the N2 is commonly found in adjectival constructions (14-16) (cf. Van Goethem 2012).³ The issue becomes even more problematic in the case of *limite*, which has even developed an adverbial use (cf. Van Goethem & Amiot 2012) (17).

- (14) *L'idée de racheter de la dette (Grecque, Portugaise, Italienne... [sic]) au travers d'Euro-obligations au lieu de compter encore sur les bons du Trésor Américain, tel serait donc un autre remède anti-crise **miracle**.*
'(...) another miracle anti-crisis cure' (GlossaNet, 18 July 2011)
- (15) *L'œuvre est **charnière** a [sic] plus d'un titre dans la carrière de Pratt comme l'observation simultanée de ses originaux permet de mieux s'en rendre compte.*
'the work is pivotal in more than one respect in Pratt's career (...)' (GlossaNet, 15 April 2011)
- (16) *On est dans la moyenne nationale. En revanche, vu notre tissu industriel, on est au-dessus d'autres territoires en termes de déchets d'entreprises. Mais la région est **pilote** dans cet objectif.*
'(...) But the region is a pilot-case (lit. is pilot) with respect to that cause' (GlossaNet, 27 April 2011)
- (17) *Je trouve ça **limite** exhibitionniste.*
'I find that almost (lit. limit) exhibitionistic' (GlossaNet, 29 January 2011)

To conclude, French N+N sequences in which the N2 has a qualifying function give evidence of little cohesion, which seems to facilitate their debonding.

3.2. Adjective inflection

French adjectives are subject to gender and number inflection, whether they are used attributively (e.g. *de jolies filles* 'nice girls') or predicatively (e.g. *ces filles sont jolies* 'these girls are nice'). At first sight, this seems to be a major obstacle for the reanalysis of nouns into adjectives, since nouns are not subject to gender inflection. However, gender inflection on the adjective is often not observable in spoken French (e.g. *un joli garçon* 'a nice boy', *une jolie fille* 'a nice girl'). Moreover, as Noailly (1990:45) correctly observes, many of the recently formed adjectives in French (ending in *-aire*, *-iste*, *-al*, *-el*) do not display gender inflection at all in (spoken) French:

- (18) a. *une annonce publicitaire* 'an advertising announcement'
- b. *une remarque sexiste* 'a sexist remark'
- c. *une plaisanterie banale* 'a trivial joke'
- d. *une contribution annuelle* 'an annual contribution'

Moreover, in some specific constructions French bare nouns (not originating from compound-like sequences) can be used predicatively without apparently encountering gender conflicts (Lauwers forthc.):

- (19) *J'ai un frère qui est très télé*
      'I have a brother who is very keen on tv (lit. is very tv)' (Lauwers forthc.)
- (20) *Le niveau zéro, [...], est très peinture, encore que quelques fortes sculptures y habitent.*
      'The ground floor is very much about painting (lit. is very painting) (...)' (Lauwers forthc.)
- (21) *Les prochaines années seront très cinéma*
      'The next few years' focus will be very much on cinema (lit. the next years will be very cinema)' (Lauwers forthc.).

All this implies that inflection should in many cases not constitute a major obstacle for the reanalysis of French nouns with a qualifying function into qualifying adjectives, especially when their endings resemble those of epicene (i.e. non-inflecting) adjectives or one of the inflected forms of a specific (i.e. inflecting) adjective:

- (22) *clé* 'lit. key; crucial' ~ *calé(e)* 'clever' (m./f. adj.)
- (23) *limite* 'lit. limit; borderline' ~ *insolite* 'unusual' (m./f. adj.), *gratuite* 'free of charge' (f. adj.) (and formal resemblance with the adverb *vite* 'fast')
- (24) *bidon* 'lit. barrel, can; fake, bogus' ~ *bon* 'good' (m. adj.)
- (25) *surprise* 'surprise' ~ *exquise* 'exquisite' (f. adj.)
- (26) *charnière* 'lit. hinge; pivotal' ~ *dernière* 'last' (f. adj.).

Consequently, it might be expected that nouns such as *surprise* 'surprise' and *charnière* 'lit. hinge; pivotal', which resemble the feminine forms of certain adjectives (*exquise* 'exquisite', *dernière* 'last'), are more likely to be associated with feminine N1s (e.g. *une visite surprise* 'a surprise visit', *une année charnière* 'a pivotal year'), or, vice versa, that nouns

resembling the masculine form of adjectives such as *bidon* ('lit. barrel; fake, bogus' ~ *bon* 'good') favor use in combination with masculine N1s (e.g. *un argument bidon* 'a bogus argument'). In order to verify this, we carried out a small-scale comparative corpus study of *clé* 'key' and *charnière* 'hinge' used in predicative constructions with scope over a nominal subject. By means of the corpus tool *WebCorp* we collected 110 occurrences of *clé* in such a predicative construction from which 54 had a feminine subject (49,09%) (27). Remarkably, this proportion was 83,58% in the case of *charnière* (112 out of 134 occurrences) (28).

- (27) *Les proportions [d'un diamant] sont clés et font la différence entre la taille idéale et la taille passable.*

'The proportions [of a diamant] are key (...)'

(<http://shopfr.aol.ca/bibliotheque/acheter-une-bague-de-fiancailles/61>, *WebCorp*, accessed 29 October 2012)

- (28) *Vous sentez que cette saison peut être charnière pour vous (...)?*

'Do you feel that this season could be pivotal (lit. hinge) for you (...)?'

(<http://www.lefigaro.fr/football/2009/08/14/02003-20090814ARTSPO00355-monter-en-puissance.php>, *WebCorp*, 14 August 2009)

According to this case study, predicative *charnière* 'hinge' exhibits a marked preference for feminine subjects (e.g. *une année*, *une époque*, *une date*, etc. (*qui est*) *charnière* 'a year, period, date (that is) pivotal'), while the epicene nature of *clé* 'key' seems to be more indifferent in this respect. However, it is not absolutely sure if these results may be generalized. More case studies should be carried out to confirm this hypothesis.

Finally, it should be observed that, very exceptionally, the debonded noun may acquire gender inflection (29-30), which may even be observable in spoken French (29):

- (29) *une intelligence papillonne*

'a butterfly intelligence' (Biancotti 1983, in Noailly 1990: 44)

- (30) *L'île d'Aurigny, la plus septentrionale de l'archipel anglo-normand, occupe une position clé face au cap de la Hague*

'The island of Aurigny (...) occupies a key position (...)'

(<http://pagesperso-orange.fr/heratlas/normandi/anglonor/aurigny.htm>, *WebCorp*, 18 January 2009)

4. English

4.1. Prosodic and morphological cohesion

On the whole, the characteristics of English N+N combinations favor debonding. Some fixed English N+N combinations have a genitive 's attached to the first element (e.g. *driver's license*) and appear to be ruled out from the noun-to-adjective reanalyses that give rise to debonding – at least, no examples are attested. Most N+N combinations, however, contain no (historical) inflectional elements and, while they still show variable degrees of bondedness, as partly (and inconsistently) reflected in their spelling and prosody, several subtypes are potentially subject to debonding. This section focuses on the structural status and prosody of such N+N combinations, and compares them to A+N phrases, in order to assess the likelihood of the former being reinterpreted as the latter. It is argued that there is a grey area between

compounds and phrases, where the syntactic distinction between compound and phrase is prosodically underdetermined, and that it is primarily this grey area that facilitates the shift from one to the other.

All English N+N combinations show at least some degree of bondedness. The degree of bondedness is variable, however, and the literature therefore assumes a distinction between N+N compounds and N+N phrases, in the latter case typically referring to the first noun as a 'classifier' (Halliday 1994; Bache 2000). Generally, all N+N combinations resist separate modification of N1 and N2 (e.g. *the bridge is made of Swedish steel* > **a [Swedish steel] bridge*), and N1 is barred from independently tracking a referent in the discourse (*The steel_i bridge is massive. *It_i was produced in Sweden.*). But some N+N combinations allow *one*-substitution of N2, which is taken as a characteristic of phrasal behaviour (Quirk et al. 1985: 1332). For instance, *one*-substitution in *kitchen window frames* in (31) is allowed, implying that *window frames* functions much like the head noun in an A+N phrase, as in (32). By contrast, N+N combinations such as *bathroom*, as in (33), strongly resist *one*-substitution, pointing to a different structural status.

- (31) *In the morning, I would do four window frames. I had to leave the **kitchen ones** as they were, since the hinges weren't good there. (COCA)*
- (32) *The **smaller one** is yelling something about being from the future (COCA)*
- (33) **which room do you intend to refurbish? – The **bath one**.*

Further, some N+N combinations allow intervening material provided that the intervening element collocates with the head (*a London diplomat* > *a London foreign diplomat*). In contrast, some N+N combinations clearly do not (*bath towel* > **bath linen towel*). These tests support a structural distinction between phrases (*kitchen window frames*, *London diplomat*) and compounds (*bathroom*, *bath towel*).

The distinction shows a complicated interaction with prosody. Prosodically, phrases in English by default have (main) stress on the head. Therefore, it is generally assumed that N+N combinations with stress on the initial noun (e.g. *'bathroom*) cannot be phrases and so must be compounds.⁴ All in all, this generalization correlates well with initially stressed N+N combinations' behavior under the syntactic tests for compound status, even if the match is not perfect – witness occasional *one*-substitution in initially stressed N+N combinations.

- (34) *we sat and stared at the shows together – he liked the **crime ones**, when they were on, but he also didn't mind the **talk ones** (COHA)*

However, while initial stress can still be taken as an on-the-whole reliable indicator of compound status, final stress in N+N combinations reveals little at all. The problem is that some N+N combinations with final stress semantically strongly resemble initially stressed compound combinations. The staple examples are *Madison 'Avenue* and *apple 'pie* vs. *'Madison Street* and *'apple cake*. The argument goes that because the latter are compounds (having initial stress), the former must be compounds too, since they show exactly the same semantic relation between their two nouns (Bauer 1983: 108-9; Fudge 1984: 136; Plag et al. 2008; Giegerich 2009).

This raises the question why the same construction – N+N compounds – can have two different stress patterns. To handle this problem, it has been suggested that compounds can

have final stress but may shift to initial stress when they get more lexicalized. This view is supported by the finding that initial stress is more likely in N+N combinations when they are written as one word (Plag et al. 2008), are frequent (Plag et al. 2008), or are semantically opaque (Giegerich 2009). While this lexicalization account seems not implausible, it is hard to believe that it captures the full story, since initially stressed compounds can be coined productively, implying that initially stressed N+N compounds do not necessarily develop out of finally stressed N+N combinations. Part of the solution may also lie in semantic and analogical patterning. For example, there is a tradition of recognizing semantic classes that favour final (main) stress (see Plag et al. 2008) or specific elements that favour particular stress patterns (Plag 2003). It is fair to say then that English assigns stress to compounds variably, and that the decision which stress pattern a given compound is going to take is determined by a complex set of factors and is inevitably to some extent unpredictable.

What can all this tell us about the likelihood of debonding in English N+N combinations? For a start, some N+N combinations already show slightly lower bondedness between N1 and N2 than others. These are, moreover, the N+N combinations whose prosody is indistinguishable from that of phrases, including A+N phrases. Under such conditions, debonding processes are in principle quite likely. The first noun in such N+N combinations is prosodically indistinguishable from an adjective and, syntactically, it shows no overt evidence of its nominal status. This is an ideal breeding ground for reanalysis.

It is difficult to reliably reconstruct historical developments, since intuitions about prosodic behaviour tend to be subject to considerable variation (a fact repeatedly acknowledged in the literature, see e.g. Giegerich 2009) and because it is in any case dangerous to project present-day intuitions on historical data. Even so, in many cases, we can be fairly confident that, much as expected, the source of a new adjective is actually the first noun in a finally stressed N+N combination. This holds for N+N combinations whose first element names a colour (e.g. *apricot skin*, *amber glow*, *burgundy jacket*) or a material (e.g. *cardboard box*), where analogous N+N combinations are by default finally stressed (e.g. *steel bridge*).⁵ The same probably goes for source patterns that could be interpreted as copulative (e.g. *adolescent member*, *amateur fisherman*, *champion speller*) (cf. Giegerich 2009 and Plag et al. 2008, who both state that copulative compounds consistently have final stress). Still, in some other cases, it seems likely that the source construction is a compounding pattern with initial stress. For example, *key* first gained some degree of productivity in a range of clear compounds, all with initial stress in Present-day English (*keyword*, *keynote*, *keystone*, *keylog*). However, given that *key* often has an implicit focusing function (singling out one particular referent from a larger set), initial stress is not necessarily incompatible with an adjectival reading, since other focusing adjectives also regularly receive main stress in attributive use (e.g. *chief*, *main*, *central*, etc.). Therefore, in examples like (35)-(36), *key* may be ambiguous between a phrasal or a compound reading, despite receiving main stress.

(35) *The Germans have now placed their own men in the **key positions** and from the latest reports are beginning to show a profit.* (1926, COHA)

(36) *The **key industries** have been desperately buffeted, but somehow the British pre-war proportion of world-trade is maintained.* (1926, COHA)

In sum, while the overall situation is complicated, the character of English N+N combinations often puts little in the way of debonding and reanalysis of N1 to adjective

status. The main source of debonded adjectives is expected to be finally stressed N+N combinations, be they compounds or phrases, but even initially stressed N+N compounds can get involved in debonding processes, given the right circumstances.

4.2. Adjective inflection

Adjective inflection is absent in English and as such can form no constraint on debonding.

5. Dutch

5.1. Prosodic and morphological cohesion

As observed before, contrary to French *clé* and English *key*, Dutch *sleutel* cannot be used in adjectival constructions (Amiot and Van Goethem 2012): e.g. **sleutel economische sector* 'key economic sector', **dat is echt sleutel volgens mij* 'this is really key to me', **dat punt is het meest sleutel* 'this point is most key'. This holds for many other Dutch nouns which nevertheless productively appear as N1s with a qualifying (mostly intensifying) function in Dutch N+N (37) and N+A (38) sequences:

- (37) a. *hoofdprobleem* 'lit. head problem; main problem',
hoofdverdachte 'lit. head suspect; main suspect',
hoofdverblijfplaats 'lit. head residence; main residence',
hoofdingang 'lit. head entrance; main entrance', etc.
 b. **het hoofd financiële probleem* 'lit. the head financial problem',
*Die verdachte is echt hoofd 'lit. this suspect is really head',
*Ik heb twee verblijfplaatsen, maar deze is het meest hoofd 'lit. I have two residences, but this one is the most head'
- (38) a. *stokoud* 'lit. stick-old; very old',
stokdoof 'lit. stick-deaf; very deaf',
stokstil 'stock-still',
stokstijf 'lit. stick-stiff; as stiff as a rod', etc.
 b. **Die man is echt wel stok* 'lit. this man is really stick',
*Hij hoort niets, hij is helemaal stok 'lit. he does not hear a thing, he is completely stick'

These facts suggest that Dutch N+N and N+A sequences are very cohesive, contrary to French and English ones. This strong degree of cohesion is manifested in several formal features: the sequences are written in one word and display distinctive word stress: always on the first noun in N+N sequences, e.g. *'hoofdprobleem* 'main problem', while in N+A sequences stress assignment depends on the syntactic position of the adjective: stress on the first element in attributive use, e.g. *een 'stokoude 'man* 'a very old man', stress on the second one or on both components in the predicative use, e.g. *Die man is 'stok'oud / stok'oud* 'that man is very old' (cf. Hilgsmann and Meurs 2007). Sometimes linking morphemes should be inserted between the compound members: e.g. *reuz-e-groot* 'lit. giant-big, as big as a giant'.⁶ It should be concluded that combinations as illustrated in (37a) and (38a) constitute true compounds, which do not allow confusion with (lexicalized) phrases. Because of the semantic specialization of the left-hand member and its productivity in series of semi-abstract constructions such as [*hoofd* + N] 'main N', the initial element of such compounds can even be

considered to be a 'semi-prefix' or 'prefixoid', taking part in a morphological constructional idiom (Booij 2010, 2012; Van Goethem 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012).

Whereas the strong cohesion of Dutch compounds definitely counteracts isolation or debonding of the qualifying N1, a number of counterexamples of Dutch 'semi-prefixes' appearing in adjectival (39) or even adverbial (40) constructions can still be observed:

- (39) *Echt een buitenkansje voor een nieuw appartement op een **klasse** locatie...*
'(...) a new apartment in a first-class (lit. class) location' (*WebCorp*, 6 July 2011)
- (40) *Ik moet zeggen dat de City Parade me **reuze** meeviel.*
'I have to admit that the City Parade really (lit. giant) pleased me' (*GlossaNet*, 23 April 2011)

In order to explain how the strong degree of cohesion of some Dutch compounds can apparently still be broken, other factors should be included. In what follows, we will first look at the impact of adjective inflection in Dutch (5.2.) and, ultimately, we will invoke an additional factor, absent in French and English, that can lead to adjectival uses of the N1 in N+A compounds: the possibility of clipping of Dutch N+A compounds (5.3.).

5.2. Adjective inflection

Most Dutch adjectives have an uninflected and an inflected form with *-e*. This *schwa* appears when the adjective is used attributively in combination with a masculine or feminine noun (*de groene fiets* 'the green bike'), with a plural noun (*groene boeken* 'green books') and with a definite singular neuter noun (*het lange verhaal* 'the long story'). The uninflected form is reserved to all predicative uses (e.g. *Het bier is lekker* 'the beer is good') and to the attributive use of the adjective when combined with an indefinite singular neuter noun (e.g. *lekker bier* 'good beer', *een aardig kind* 'a nice kid') (Haeseryn et al. 1997: 404-408). As a result, when an adjective is used attributively, it appears most frequently with an inflected form, as summarized in Table 1.

<insert Table 1>

Besides the strong cohesion of Dutch compounds, the importance of inflection in the attributive use of Dutch adjectives may constitute another crucial factor in explaining why the left-hand nouns in N+N compounds such as *sleutelwoord* 'keyword' and *hoofdverblijfplaats* 'lit. head residence; main residence' cannot be reanalysed as adjectives. Since these nouns are not ending in *-e*, they would in 7 out of the 8 morpho-syntactic contexts (cf. Table 1) clash with the inflection rules for Dutch adjectives (cf. *de cruciale woorden* 'the crucial words' vs **de sleutele woorden* 'the key words'; *de belangrijkste verblijfplaats* 'the main residence' vs **de hoofde verblijfplaats* 'lit. the head residence').

It is however very striking that a certain number of N1s ending in *-e* or being followed by a linking morpheme *-e* in N+N and/or N+A compounding, do occur in typical adjectival constructions, in attributive (41-42) and/or in predicative ones (43-44). Some elements can even be used adverbially, cf. (40).

- (41) *Als we de fundamente van de klassieke partijen, (...), onderuit halen zetten we een **reuze** stap richting onafhankelijkheid.*

- 'If we demolish the foundations of the traditional parties, we realize a giant step towards independency' (*GlossaNet*, 3 April 2011)
- (42) *De wijn eindigt met een lange, elegante afdrank. Te vergelijken met een échte **klasse** Champagne.*
 'The wine rounds off with a long, elegant aftertaste. Comparable to a true first-class (lit. class) champagne' (<http://www.bonsella.be/nieuwsbrief5.html>, 10 October 2012)
- (43) *Ketnet is **bere bere bere***
 'lit. Ketnet is bear, bear, bear; Ketnet is fun, fun, fun'
 (<http://www.ketnet.be/category/vrije-trefwoorden/ketnet-bere-bere-bere>, accessed 17 February 2012)
- (44) *Ik heb het één keer mogen meemaken en dat was **reuze**!*
 'I had the good fortune to experience it once and that was great (lit. 'giant')!' (news.google.com, 23 June 2011)

As a consequence, it can be assumed that the nominal ending or linking morpheme *-e* can be reinterpreted as the adjectival inflectional morpheme *-e*, occasioning reanalysis of the noun as an adjective.

Although it could be expected that the *-e*, reanalysed as inflection marker, would disappear in contexts in which Dutch adjectives are uninflected, such as the predicative construction, this is obviously not the case: in examples (43) and (44), for instance, *bere* and *reuze* are used instead of the uninflected forms *beer* and *reus* which would be ungrammatical in these contexts. Even if other invariable adjectives ending in *-e* exist in Dutch, mainly borrowed from French (e.g. *frêle* 'frail', *louche* 'shady, louch', *beige* 'beige'), their final *-e* is not pronounced in contexts where Dutch adjectives are uninflected (Haeseryn et al. 1997: 400), whereas the final *-e* of *bere* and *reuze*, for instance, is conserved in spoken Dutch.

- (45) *Dat is wel een erg **frêle*** [pronounced /frɛ:l/] *meisje!*
 'That is one very frail girl'
- (46) *Dat noem ik niet geraffineerd, maar **louche*** [pronounced /luʃ/].
 'I don't call this sophisticated, but dodgy.'

The fact that the final *-e* in, for instance, *reuze* and *bere* is still written and pronounced in predicative constructions is in conflict with the hypothesis that this *-e* has been reanalyzed as an inflectional morpheme. In order to explain this paradox, we will advance in the next Section that some predicative uses can be accounted for by clipping.

5.3. Clipping

It can be hypothesized that the reanalysis of the nominal ending or linking morpheme *-e* as an inflectional marker took place in the attributive construction (*een reuze stap* 'a giant step', *een bere film* 'lit. a bear film; a terrific film', etc.), which led to the debonding of the N+N compound, but that the predicative forms are not necessarily an extension of this attributive use. More specifically, different arguments can be advanced in favour of an alternative analysis, considering the predicatively used noun as the result of back-clipping of an N+A-compound. As such, Dutch cases of debonding illustrate the more general phenomenon whereby a single new item (in this case a debonded adjective) develops from multiple source constructions (cf. Van de Velde, Ghesquière and De Smet forthc. on multiple source constructions in language change).

a. First, a small-scale survey (with 15 Flemish speakers of Dutch) studying the semantics of adjectival *reuze* 'giant, great', used attributively and predicatively, indicates that it may have different semantic values in both constructions (cf. Van Goethem and Hiligsmann forthc.).

<insert Table 2>

The mean scores in Table 2 indicate that, used predicatively, *reuze* has a marked preference for positively loaded subjects (*feestje* 'party', *taart* 'cake') over negatively loaded subjects (*ontgoocheling* 'disappointment', *probleem* 'problem'), which are very lowly evaluated (mean scores 1.67 and 1.33 on a 5 point scale). When *reuze* is used attributively, by contrast, the average scores are not only less divergent (between 2.93 and 3.80); compared to the predicative constructions with negatively connotated nouns, the attributive ones are much better accepted (2.93 vs 1.67 for the sentences with *ontgoocheling* 'disappointment' and 3.00 vs 1.33 for the sentences with *probleem* 'problem').

In order to account for these facts, it could be advanced that predicatively used *reuze* is the clipped form of a positively connotated N+A compound (such as the very frequently observed compound *reuzeleuk* 'lit. giant-fun; terrific, great, gigantic').

b. Second, the clipping of *reuze-* from an adjectival compound is not an isolated case in Dutch of the clipping of an intensifying semi-prefix in a predicative context: *stapel* (lit. 'pile') in (47), for instance, is the result of the clipping of *stapelverliefd* 'lit. pile-in-love; madly in love'.

- (47) *Zijn eerste liefde was Carine, (...). Laurent was **stapel** op haar, zoals dat wel vaker gebeurt bij een eerste verliefdheid.*
'His first love was Carine, (...). Laurent was madly in love (lit. 'pile') with her, as is often the case with a first crush.' (GlossaNet, 18 April 2011)

It is remarkable that these clipped forms only appear in predicative contexts (**een stapel jongen* 'lit. a madly in love boy').

c. Moreover, the case of *stapel* proves that the resulting adjective should not necessarily derive from a noun ending in *-e*, since the inflection marker does not appear in the predicative construction. As a result, the clipping analysis would explain why other adjectives derived from bounded nouns and not ending in *-e*, appear as adjectives in predicative constructions (48-49), while lacking an attributive use (*een proppe zaal 'a chock(-full) room', **een spekke straat* 'lit. a blubber(-slippery) street').

- (48) *Maar dan moeten we plaatsen bespreken en gauw ook, want 't zal wel **prop** zijn.*
'But then we will have to make reservations and soon, because it will be chock-(full)' (L.H.A. Drabbe, *Levenslol*, p. 116, D. Buys, Amsterdam, [1901], database J. Hoeksema)
- (49) *Glibberig ja, om niet te zeggen **spèk-**, maar ach dat zijn ze wel gewend*
'Slippery yes, even (lit.) blubber (-slippery)'
(Jules Deelder, *Drukke dagen*, in: *De dikke van Deelder*, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 1997, p. 358, database J. Hoeksema)

As a result, we should take into account that, especially in Dutch predicative constructions, the new adjective can be the result of clipping of the right-hand member of N+A compounds, implying that a gradual process of debonding is not the only mechanism at work.

French and English, however, do not exploit this alternative pathway.

While clipping exists in French (e.g. *fac* < *faculté* 'faculty, university', *écolo* < *écologiste* 'ecological', *manif* < *manifestation* 'demonstration', *télégénique* < *télévision* 'television' + *photogénique* 'photogenic'), it cannot be assumed that the debonded predicative uses of nouns, illustrated in for instance (27) and (28), would be the result of clipping: first, this would suppose fore-clipping, while back-clipping is by far the most productive form in French, and, second, the debonded French N2 does not assume the meaning of the entire N+N sequence: (*Vous sentez que cette saison peut être **charnière** pour vous* ≠ *Vous sentez que cette saison peut être saison **charnière** pour vous*). More generally, the Dutch examples show that clipping occurs in N+A compounding with an intensifying N1, but French has no counterpart of this construction: fixed N+A and A+N sequences exist in French (e.g. *table ronde* 'round table (conference)', *premier ministre* 'prime minister', *beaux-arts* 'fine arts'), but the noun never develops an intensifying meaning and they should be considered lexicalized phrases, among others because of their internal inflectional markers (Fradin 2009).

The clipping trajectory of change observed in Dutch is in principle also possible in English. English allows clipping and, contrary to French, has N+A compounds of the relevant type, where the first element serves to intensify the second through a relation of comparison (e.g. *grass-green* = 'green as grass'). However, the type is not very productive in English and has never given rise to general-purpose intensifying prefix-like elements, as happened in Dutch (cf. Marchand 1969: 86-87). Most instances of the pattern are low-frequency words, and belong to an elevated register. As for clipping in English, with the exception of *comfy* (< *comfortable*), all clipped forms listed by Marchand (1969: 442-443) derive from a noun (though some may also be used adjectively, e.g. *looney* < *lunatic*, *commie* < *communist*). This again implies that the clipping trajectory in N > A changes is not particularly likely for English. Unsurprisingly, then, we found no examples of the clipping trajectory in English.

6. Conclusions

In this study, it has been demonstrated that debonding of English, French and Dutch N+N (and N+A) sequences occurs to different degrees and that, apart from the qualifying semantics of the noun subject to debonding, other, more language-specific, factors should be taken into account.

In French and English, N+N sequences display little or no (prosodic and/or morphological) cohesion and it is not (always) clear if they should be considered true compounds or phrases. Moreover, debonding is facilitated in English by the absence of adjectival inflection, while the impact of French adjectival inflection does not seem to counteract debonding of French N+N sequences.

By contrast, Dutch is characterized by very cohesive compounds, which is manifested through morphology, prosody and spelling, and Dutch attributively used adjectives occur most frequently with an inflected form. These factors clearly counteract debonding in Dutch. However, debonding does occur in Dutch when a final *-e* or linking morpheme *-e* can be reanalyzed as adjectival inflection. Besides, intensifying N1s of Dutch N+A compounds can also be isolated in predicative constructions through a process of clipping.

Drawing on these data, it can be assumed that a language such as German, characterized by very cohesive compounds and a more complex inflectional system than Dutch will even allow less debonding or may exploit yet other pathways. But this hypothesis needs to be corroborated by future research.

The contrastive discussion is also revealing about the nature of debonding processes. The literature on degrammaticalization tends to treat debonding as the exception whereas processes that cause previously free combinations to become increasingly fixed are the rule (e.g. Haspelmath 1999). While this may be true in quantitative terms, our analysis indicates that there is nothing intrinsically unlikely or even surprising about debonding. Given the right semantic and formal conditions debonding is in fact quite likely. This echoes findings by Berlage (2012) and Mollin (2012), who show that idiomatic expressions may move in the direction of lesser fixedness with surprising ease. In general, then, it can be hypothesized that the conditions debonding is subject to are inevitably different from those that apply to the fixation process it mirrors, and that a better understanding of the relation between debonding and fixation is to be gained by examining the constraints that restrain either process.

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 OED: <http://www.oed.com/>
 Google news: <http://news.google.com/>
 WebCorp: <http://www.webcorp.org.uk/>

¹ Certain form classes do allow conversion from noun to adjective or vice versa, such as English adjectives and nouns ending in *-ist* (e.g. *Buddhist*, *communist*, etc.), but those are not considered further in this paper.

² However, very occasional exceptions may be found, for instance on the Internet, such as the following French examples taken from the website forum-auto.com show : (1) *Pensez-vous que je doive acheter les WR G2 ou des pneus vraiment neige?* (7 September 2010) 'Do you think that I should buy the WR G2 or true snow tyres?'; (2) *si tu pars à la montagne et que tu y restes, prends plutôt des pneus vraiment neige, pas les généralistes!* (1 December 2008) 'if you go to the mountains and you stay over there, rather take true snow tyres, and not the regular ones!'. However, this kind of examples are not productive and do not give rise to other adjectival uses (e.g. **Ces pneus sont vraiment neige* 'lit. These tyres are really snow').

³ Van Goethem (2012) presents the arguments of the tenants of four different approaches: (i) *N2* = right-hand member of an attributive *N+N*-compound; (ii) *N2* = adjective; (iii) *N2* = "substantif épithète" ('epithet noun'); (iv) *N2* = "affixoid".

⁴ Perception studies show that the contrast in pairs like *I'talian teacher* (= compound meaning 'teacher of Italian') and *Italian 'teacher* (= phrase meaning 'teacher from Italy') is fairly easily recognized by language users (at least when the contrasting items are used in discourse contexts where stress is assigned), with compound status found to correlate not just with stress but also with duration (Farnetani et al. 1988).

⁵ Debonding with colour and material nouns nicely illustrates that debonding is at least in part also dependent on analogy. Thus, debonding is highly systematic with colour nouns, where the prototypical members of the

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category (*red, green, blue*, etc.) function both as nouns and as adjectives. By contrast, debonding is rare in material nouns, where the prototypical members are used as nouns only (*steel, wood, stone*, etc.).

⁶ The linking morpheme *-e* is added when the compound's left-hand member has an intensifying meaning and when the compound as a whole acts as an adjective, for instance *apetrots* 'lit. monkey-proud; proud as a peacock', *beregoed* 'lit. bear-good; terrific', *boordevol* 'lit. edge-full; full/filled to overflowing', *reuzeleuk* 'lit. giant-fun; terrific, great', etc. (cf. <http://woordenlijst.org/leidraad/8/3/#r8f>, accessed 17 February 2012).