

Compounding in English and Italian: a contrastive relationship between concept formation and word-formation

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1. Introduction

Each language may be seen as the condensation and the precipitate of all the cultural experiences of the people who speak it, and every aspect of their lives is reflected in the words they use to talk about themselves and the world around them (Algeo 1991). In order to understand the complexities of the various facts of language, linguists often advocate the necessity of comparing at least two languages, because the transfer of words and mental schemes from one code to another entails the comparison of processes that go on unconsciously in day to day communication among native speakers.

This paper refers to a process of lexical morphology which proves that the differences between English and Italian are due to the Germanic origin of the former and the Romance origin of the latter, and the few similarities originate from a cross-lexical interference which bears witness to the ratio of influence of English on Italian and of Italian on English. Its aim, as indicated in the sub-title, is to develop a contrastive relationship between concept formation and word-formation through a three-phase process.

The first phase offers an overview of the basic distinguishing criteria for compounding in English and Italian, and focuses upon the semantic and syntactic properties of the head. The second considers the problem of unitary meaning of the compound as a whole and its degree of comprehensibility in the two languages. The third phase provides a range of examples of English compounds in a variety of Italian contexts and viceversa, to bear witness to the sociocultural stimuli which have motivated the essentially lexical contributions to *Itangliano* (highly anglicized Italian), or of Italian to English (McArthur 1992: s.v. Italian).

2. Basic Criteria

Compounding is one of the most fertile sources of new words in both English and Italian, and it has been defined in a number of ways, each of which focuses on a limited number of its characteristics to the exclusion of certain others. A vast amount of literature has sprung up around the subject in the last thirty

years, and the difference in emphasis of the few definitions quoted below, reflects the linguistic approach of each individual author.

Marchand, in his diachronic-synchronic analysis of word-formation, writes:

The coining of new words proceeds by way of combining linguistic elements on the basis of a determinant/determinatum relationship called syntagma. When two or more words are combined into a morphological unit on the basis just stated, we speak of a compound. (Marchand 1969: 13)

Matthews, for whom morphology is a fundamental area of linguistic theory, defines compounding as "a process by which a compound lexeme is derived from two or more simpler lexemes" (Matthews 1991: 82) and Bauer (1983: 28) gives the following definition of compounding: "When two (or more) elements which could potentially be used as a stem are combined to form another stem, the form is said to be a compound".

In order to distinguish compounds from free phrases it is generally accepted that their component parts must be inseparable and that no other lexical item may be inserted between them. Scalise (1994: 139-140) mentions the syntactic unity of the compound as the first distinguishing criterion of a list which characterizes Italian compounds, whereby insertions are not allowed and the component elements have a fixed position, i.e. syntactic rules cannot intrude. a) *Giorgio porta ombrelli*, can be extended to *Giorgio porta grandi ombrelli*; b) *Il portaombrelli di Giorgio* cannot become **Il porta-grandi-ombrelli di Giorgio*.

The same applies for English, as observed by Adams (1973: 57) among others, who underlines the distinction between compounds and free phrases or syntagmas by using a testing device. The aim is to explain and demonstrate by evidence which restricting rules motivate the difference between two model-sequences "small talk" and "wet day" through the dialogue interplay of questions and answers:

Can the adjective be premodified by an adverb? We can say 'wet day', but not 'very small talk'; can it assume the comparative form? 'Wetter day' is possible, but not 'smaller talk'. Can it occupy the predicative position in a sentence with the head noun as subject? 'The day is wet' makes sense but not 'the talk is small'.

The logical conclusion of the above test is that "small talk" is a compound, but "wet day" is a free phrase.

There are languages where simple words and phrases frequently alternate, or where a large number of relations are expressed by cases or by prepositions, and other languages where the same relations are rendered by compound words; that

is why Bloomfield (1933: 183) states that compound words occupy an intermediate position between morphology and syntax.

In the early nineties, Scalise (1992: 175-199) wrote of Italian compounds that it is always possible to distinguish between compounds and other constructions, if we consider that morphology is basically different from syntax. The theoretical framework within which he carried out his analysis was, as he himself stated, that of lexical morphology; and his assertion that morphology and syntax are different implies the inviolability of the spatial distribution of words in compounding, as opposed to the mobility of the order of words in sentences. His assertion that compounding is a lexical process that in principle is independent from syntax does not rule out the fact that at the same time it must cooperate with it (Scalise 1992: 197).

Around the same time, Lieber's contributions on English compounds and contemporary morphology offered an integrated range of morphological, syntactic and phonological material in a unified framework, where careful consideration was given to generative morphology and its relation to syntax (Lieber 1992). The set of criteria for compounding in English and in Italian illustrated below takes Lieber and Scalise¹ as the main sources of reference.

English native compounds are divided into synthetic compounds and root or primary compounds: synthetic compounds are those in which the second stem is derived from a verb; in fact they are also called verbal, deverbal, verbal nexus compounds. Examples: a) *truckdriver*, *meateater*; b) *truckdriving*, *meateating*; c) *powerdriven*, *motheaten*.

The first or left-hand stem in a synthetic compound acts as an argument of the second or right-hand stem, its head: a) *truckdriver* (X drives a truck); b) *meateating* (X eats meat); c) *powerdriven* (X is driven by power). Root or primary compounds derive from different combinations of categories: N+N *file cabinet*, *towel rack*; N+A *sky blue*, *leaf green*; A+A *icy cold*, *red hot*; A+N *hard hat*, *bluebird*; A+V *dryfarm*, *wetsand*; N+V *handmake*, *baby-sit*; V+N *drawbridge*, *cutpurse*; V+V *stir-fry*, *blow dry*.

All root compounds are syntactically righthanded and most of them are also semantically righthanded; only prepositions, when they are constituents of root compounds, cannot occupy the position of head, as demonstrated by the following examples taken from Selkirk (1982: 14-15): P+N *overdose*, *uptown*, *inland*; P+A *overwide*, *underripe*, *overabundant*; P+V *outlive*, *overdo*, *offset*.

In English, compounding may further be subdivided according to the form class of the resulting compound, or according to semantic criteria into endocentric compounds, exocentric compounds, copulative or dvandva

1 See in particular the two articles which appeared in *The Morphology of Compounding*, a monographic issue of the *Journal Rivista di Linguistica* 4/1 (1992).

compounds and appositional compounds (Bauer 1983: 30). In Italian compounds are usually classified after the lexical category of their potential stems, the sum of which generally results in the lexical category N (noun), except for the combination A+A which maintains the category A (adjective). Other combinations of categories are available in principle but they are non-existent or non-productive in practice.

The crucial issue in compounding is to find a criterion which unequivocally distinguishes compounds from non-compounds. The majority of works on English compounds propose a set of criteria for distinguishing compounds from phrases summarized in the following list: 1) inseparability; 2) the position of stress; 3) spelling; 4) lexicalized meaning; 5) lack of inflection on the first stem (Lieber 1992: 83-84; Bauer 1978a 1983b; Marchand 1969).

Italian compounds are generally non-recursive, i.e. *cassapanca* (box seat) or *capostazione* (station master) cannot serve as constituents of other compounds (Scalise 1992: 196), while in English recursivity is normal for compounding as proved by the examples quoted in Selkirk (1982: 15): a) *bathroom*; b) *towel rack*; c) *bathroom towel rack*; d) *bathroom towel rack designer*; e) *bathroom towel rack designer training*.

Dressler (1988) asserts that there are also examples of recursivity of compounding in Italian such as: a) *sala personale viaggiante* (railway personnel staff room); b) *sala grande personale viaggiante* (large railway personnel staff room). In the second example the atomicity of compounding is violated, because *sala grande*, which might be a compound in principle, is not used in practice, therefore Dressler's assertion is debatable, on the grounds that the status of the second construction is more of the type abbreviated syntax. It can't rank among some phrasal compounds studied by Lieber (1992a: 11; 1992b: 205) where no modifier can be inserted between the phrasal elements preceding the head noun and the noun i.e.: a) *A pipe and slipper husband*; b) **A pipe and slipper docile husband*.

3. The Properties of the Head

Both Italian and English compounds can be analysed as the collocation of a head and a modifying element, but the head/modifier relationship is variably sequenced in the two languages. English vernacular compounds are formed on principles typical of the Germanic languages (McArthur 1992: s.v. compound) and follow the sequence modifier/head: a) *pocket knife*; b) *telephone box*; whereas those of foreign origin, mainly calques from French, follow the sequence head/modifier: a) *ambassador extraordinary*; b) *consul general*; c) *secretary general*; d) *governor general*; e) *Postmaster General*; f) *court martial*. In Italian the sequence head/modifier is more common than its opposite, as the two sets of examples

demonstrate. 1. a) *nave ospedale* (hospital ship); b) *cassaforte* (safe = box + strong); c) *marcia forzata* (forced march = march + forced); d) *città giardino* (garden city = city + garden); e) *pescepalla* (puffer fish = fish + ball); f) *chiave inglese* (Allen key = key + English). 2. a) *gentildonna* (gentlewoman); b) *belle lettere* (fine arts = fine + letters); c) *maremoto* (tidal wave=sea + quake); d) *terremoto* (earthquake = lands + quake); e) *vasodilatazione* (vasodilation = vessel + dilation).

In both languages we register the presence of the category of classical compounds, which derive from Latin and Greek word-forming systems, such as: *biografia*/biography; *agricoltura*/agriculture, which passed into Italian through Latin and into English through French.

In order to serve the purpose of this section of the paper, let's consider the compound proper and focus on the constituent which acts as the head, in order to analyse two of its properties which are shared by the description of compounding in the two languages: the syntactic and the semantic properties. It has already been pointed out that in the majority of English compounds the head is located on the right, whereas in Italian the more productive type of compound is left-headed, but apart from the differences of position, the head passes on its category features to the entire compound word, therefore syntactically and semantically the head is the constituent which dominates the compound.

If a language like English sets the parameter for right-headed compounds, it is not difficult to identify the head, but in Italian, where the position alternates, identification is possible by applying the test suggested by Scalise (1994: 127), where in order to identify the lexical category of the compound *cassaforte* (safe = box + strong) formed by N+A, we need to answer the question: "Is it a noun or an adjective?". The appropriate answer is: "*cassaforte* is a noun", therefore it can be inferred that the head is the constituent with the same lexical category noun, that is *cassa*. The same type of question may be posed to identify the semantic category: "is it a *cassa* or is it a *forte*?" (Is it a box or is it a *strong?). As the compound refers to a type of *cassa*, the semantic head is also *cassa*.

All compounds have a syntactic head but there is a category where the semantic head is missing. It is the category of exocentric compounds. They are generated by the standard rule for compounding, yet, for the purpose of semantic interpretation, a special stipulation is required to state that a *white collar* is a person who works in an office and a *casco blu* is a United Nations soldier, because they don't convey the meaning X is a kind of Y, that is a *white collar* is a kind of collar or a *casco blu* is a kind of helmet. When the semantic head is outside the compound, it is impossible to work out the meaning from the sum of the meanings of its constituents. Since exocentric compounds are not subject to compositionality, they are opaque like idioms, but unlike idioms, they each

have idiosyncratic rules of semantic interpretation and therefore they should be listed in the lexicon (Katamba 1993: 319-321).

4. Meaning and Comprehensibility

B. Warren (1978: 36 ff.) suggests that the information structure of a compound may be compared to the information structure of a sentence, and she refers to the Prague school studies on Functional Sentence Perspective (Mathesius 1961) to support her thesis. Warren's integrated semantic approach goes back to the Functional Sentence Perspective to demonstrate that as it has been possible to establish that thematic and rhematic elements tend to occur in certain positions in sentences, according to different degrees of communicative dynamism, in the same way it is possible to perceive that the elements of compounds have different degrees of communicative dynamism.

Since most English compounds obey the Right-hand Head Rule (RHR) (Katamba 1993: 311), the standard information structure for compound nouns in English is that the rhematic element tends to precede the thematic element: a) *sugar bowl*, b) *cradle song*; whereas the supremacy of left-headedness in Italian compounds follows the information-structure theme/rheme, showed in the examples: a) *marcia forzata* (forced march), b) *cassaforte* (safe).

The head of compounds represents the theme, the topic, it indicates that which we are talking about; the modifier, the rheme, the comment, restricts the reference of the topic either by classifying it or by identifying it. The comment has classifying function when it delimits the class, the subgroup or type of that which is indicated by the topic. A *sugar bowl* is a type of bowl for containing sugar and in the example:

- a) Sugar bowls should be made of china or silver.

the comment has a classifying function, and is paraphrasable as: (that kind of B that -verb- A), where the verb stands for the covert part of the comment. The covert comment indicates a class-delimiting feature, a feature prominent enough to distinguish this type of bowls from other bowls. In the second example:

- b) She broke the china sugar bowl yesterday.

the function of the comment is identifying because it refers to some specific, known sugar bowl. It is paraphrasable as: "that bowl is for sugar, it is specific for sugar" (that B -verb-[some specific] A). In the majority of cases it is not possible to determine, out of context, whether the comment has a classifying function or an identifying function, because in compounding the comment element can have both functions. Therefore when compounding is motivated by

the speaker's wish to refer to one or some specific referents he has in mind, it is said to be context bound and identifying. The true reference can be deduced if we know the context. There are other cases where in order to grasp the full significance of a highly idiomatized compound, it is necessary to combine a three-level competence: 1) knowledge of the world, 2) extra-linguistic experience and 3) knowledge of a particular culture, as is the case with the English examples: a) *boyfriend* (meaning sweetheart); b) *four-letter word* (meaning obscene word), c) *five o'clock shadow* (referring to a man who shaved in the morning and has stubble by evening); and the Italian ones: a) *rompicapo* (riddle, puzzle, brain-teaser = break + head), b) *rompiscatole* (nuisance, bore, a pain in the neck = break + boxes), c) *purosangue* (thoroughbred = pure + blood), d) *perdigiorno* (idler, loafer = lose + day).

When the meaning of compounds is specialized or idiomatized as in the above examples, we do not reach a satisfactory explanation simply by making the comment explicit. These compounds have a communicative dynamism which is metaphorically implied, and is indicated covertly by the comment with another feature. For example the stated feature of the comment in: *five o'clock shadow*, is a man whose beard (the shadow) is already visible at 5 p.m., although he shaved that morning, but the associated feature is indicated covertly by the comment.

Lexical units are introduced to the speech community in a defining context, and usually context enhances plausibility and helps us to decide on the correct interpretation of compounds through inferences that are plausible, but not logically necessary in a strict sense. Despite their being composed of familiar elements, many compounds such as: *redskin*, *paleface*, *long-winded* are semantically opaque if decontextualized, because their meanings cannot be reliably calculated on the basis of the meanings of their parts alone, therefore correct interpretation hinges on plausibility, reasoning and world knowledge.

In the compound bottleneck, the form-meaning relation is totally opaque, consequently the item is idiomatic and idioms cannot be compositionally interpreted, and the perception of its semantic value is holistic. The compounds quoted in the following paragraph, which have been transferred from English into Italian, naturally fall into this group.

5. Cross-linguistic Interference of English in Italian

From the sixties onwards, the impact of English on minor languages has become stronger and stronger (Potter 1976: 180-181). The habit of enriching mother tongue conversation with English words and expressions gradually spread all over Europe after the Second World War. The French use the blend *Franglais* to describe this cross linguistic phenomenon, but they tend to use the expression

in a derogative way, perhaps because they hold their own native language in higher esteem than the Italians do theirs.

In Italy the corresponding blend is *Itangliano*, a word coined by the American Giacomo Elliot (1977) and is commonly used in business where it has become a sort of status symbol. Thanks to the supremacy in this century of English-speaking countries in the domains of finance, administration, science and technology, it has become compulsory for Italian people working in these fields to be familiar with the basic English terminology. Business people, in particular, tend to master *Itangliano*, because they know that it is one of their tools for success.

(1) Dovremmo prendere un paio di *service people*² per le nostre filiali di Brescia e Palermo. (We should take on two service people for our branches in Brescia and Palermo).

The English term is more attractive than the corresponding Italian syntagma *tecnici di manutenzione* (technicians+of+maintenance). Example (1) brings us back to the core subject of this section of the paper: the motivation for the use of English compounds in Italian and the reasons that justify the presence of Italian compounds in English.

It is universally acknowledged that the category of compounding in English word-formation is very productive and some of these formations are constructed idiomatically (Katamba 1993: 72). The use of such opaque compounds as well as idiomatic language in general, is sometimes a sociolinguistic distinguishing feature adopted by speakers when they wish to be better than average in a restricted group. In the late sixties and early seventies, English expressions and compounds were the height of fashion.

(2) Il nostro servizio commerciale ha un *batting average* di 4 contratti su ogni 10 offerte presentate ai clienti. (Our commercial service has a batting average of 4 contracts out of every 10 offers presented to our customers)

Batting average is an idiomatic expression whose literal meaning belongs to the register of baseball and cricket players and refers to the average number of runs scored by a batsman in a season or in a series of matches. Metaphorically, it means somebody's record of attainment, over a period of time in his work or, as is the case in our example, a number of business opportunities.

2 Due to the popularity of American management theories, there is a marked preference for terms from American English. Examples from (1) to (10) have been taken from Elliot 1977.

(3) C'è un *build-up* di reazioni negative in tutta la fabbrica (There is a build-up of negative feeling all over the factory)

The gradual increase of reactions is expressed by a deverbal noun and an adverbial particle which develops an intensifying meaning in combination with *build*.

(4) Vogliamo fermarci un momento per un *coffee break*?³ (What about a coffee break?)

This is a N+N compound where the left-hand component modifies the head to refer figuratively to a rest during the morning or the afternoon working hours.

(5) Ai miei collaboratori dico sempre che la *dead line* è tre giorni prima di quella vera, così mi assicuro contro gli imprevisti, che ci sono sempre⁴

(I always tell my collaborators that the deadline is three days before the real one, so I am covered against unexpected problems, which always crop up).

The above is a combination A+N resulting in a N which refers to a point in time by which something must be done. Like coffee break, it does not belong to a particular register.

(6) Facciamo *fifty-fifty*? (What about dividing on a fifty-fifty basis?)

Fifty-fifty is a compound formed by the reduplication of the sign fifty, which refers to both halves. Marchand (1969: 83) mentions *fifty-fifty* as an additive combination created in 1913 which may be either an adjective or an adverb.

(7) È una *mess kingsize*.⁵ (It's a terrible mess)

For those involved in commerce and industry the compound *king-size* modifying the substantive *mess* is almost exclusively used to define a terrible mess created by persons who are not present. The peculiarity of the sequence in *Itagliano* is due to the order of elements which have been adapted to the Italian order head/modifier, whereas the correct English sequence of the compound should be modifier/head: *a kingsize mess*.

3 It seems a more elegant way of suggesting a break from work in Italian.

4 *Deadline* is a term originating in the army: the line where no man's land ended and the enemy could be expected to open fire. It gives more drama to the idea in English, in Italian once again it simply sounds more sophisticated.

5 *Kingsize* is most commonly used for cigarettes and in any case the adjective would precede the noun in English syntax.

(8) Qui abbiamo un *trade-off* fra peso e costo: più leggero lo facciamo e più ci costa. (There is a trade-off between weight and cost: the lighter we make it the more expensive it is).

A trade-off implies that one has to give something up in exchange for something else as a compromise. It is a noun compound which derives from a phrasal verb like build-up.

(9) Il consigliere delegato ci deve rilasciare una dichiarazione del tipo *arms length*. (The managing director must give us an arm's length declaration).

Literally, *at arm's length* means with the arm fully extended away from the body. In business language the expression is used to refer to fair dealings. When auditors examine the accounts of a company to see that they are in order, they usually ask the Chief Executive Officer to deliver them a written declaration stating that the year's business has been carried out in a straightforward and honest way. In written *Itangliano*, the apostrophe which marks the Saxon Genitive is omitted before -s.

(10) Le relazioni amichevoli fra *top management* e *middle management* favoriscono la cooperazione nell'azienda. (The friendly relations between Top Management and Middle Management facilitate cooperation in our company).

The two compounds are in fact more impressive linguistic solutions than the corresponding Italian compounds *quadri intermedi* (cadres+intermediate) and *vertice dirigenziale* (top+executives). The users of *Itangliano* adopt English expressions especially when in Italian the concepts they want to communicate do not have an adequate linguistic counterpart.

In day to day communication too, there are English compounds which tend to conform to Italian norms, such as *un radio pocket* instead of *pocket radio*, or which have undergone the process of clipping: a *night club* becomes *un night*.

6. The Influence of Italian on English

The presence of Italian compounds in English is far less than that of English compounds in Italian and is restricted to particular registers. The transfer of certain compounds into English often results in the deletion of one of their constituent members, i.e. the clipping of the compounds. For example *camera oscura* becomes *camera* since the modifier is no longer necessary to distinguish from other compounds with the same head. Many loan-words come from the Norman conquest of Britain, so there is a lot of French and Latin in English,

especially where law and commerce are concerned: *et cetera; in flagrante; per annum*.

However the influence of Italian culture, rather than bureaucracy and legislation, was felt very strongly after the Renaissance and especially from the eighteenth century onward, when any well educated, well bred young man of means would do the European Tour where Italy was one of the main attractions.

Naturally, terms concerning Music, Art and Architecture, slipped into English in this way, there being no literal equivalent in the English context, be it in Britain or in the United States. As far as compound words are concerned, we have already mentioned the example *camera oscura* which lost the modifier and retained only the head. The following examples in context bear witness to this cross-linguistic phenomenon:

(11) Let's go to the opera tonight. Who is the *Prima Donna*?

However, although in the context of opera a *Prima Donna* is the leading lady, in everyday conversation the Italian compound is idiomatized to mean a self-centred, arrogant woman:

(12) I can't stand her when she plays the *Prima Donna*.

French predominates for the terminology of Ballet, yet the leading female role is danced by the *Prima Ballerina*.

(13) The *Prima Ballerina* danced superbly last night.

(14) There is a wonderful use of *chiaroscuro* in that painting.

Mezzotinto, mezzosoprano, chiaroscuro are examples of Italian compounds which may be used by English speakers. The cultural stimuli for such cross-linguistic fertilization were restricted to the *litterati* or the *cognoscenti* of Albion, as they liked to call themselves, who considered Italy the cradle of culture and therefore peppered their speech with elegant-sounding Italian expressions.

7. Concluding Remarks

The prestige of *Itagliano* however, has social rather than cultural implications. The speaker of *Itagliano* is a business person, a technician, a student, or a man in the street, perhaps trying to overcome some inferiority complex by using the jargon of economic and financial power, and the frequent use of English compounds in Italian business conversation is linguistically motivated by the fact that multilayered semantic traits are condensed into one global concept, which is conveyed by a single lexical unit.

The phenomenon of English compounds borrowed by Italian started about a century before the sociolinguistic experience of *Itagliano*. Italian began borrowing compounds from English around the middle of the nineteenth century, and as it has been noticed in previous examples, some forms used in Italian consist of only one member of the English compound: *waterproof coat* is reduced to *waterproof* (1868); *smoking jacket* becomes *smoking* (1888)⁶ (Vogel 1990: 99). The first example is no longer in use but the second is still common. Other familiar reduced compounds include: *scotch* from *scotch tape*; *water* from *water closet*; *plaid* from *plaid blanket*; *snack* from *snack bar*, *beauty* from *beauty case*. Italian borrows and shortens some English compounds to a single word, but it is interesting to point out that the stem which is retained in Italian does not correspond to the stem native speakers of English would choose if they were to shorten the same compounds. An English speaker would say: "Let's go to the club"; but an Italian speaker: "Andiamo al *night*". English speaker: "Give me the jacket, please"; Italian speaker: "Dammi lo *smoking*, per piacere"; English speaker: "I need some tape"; Italian speaker: "Ho bisogno dello *scotch*". Other English compounds borrowed by Italian are retained in their full form: *T-shirt*, *pickup* (record player) (Vogel 1990: 10).

The limited number of Italian compound formations in use in the English language is more culturally than socially motivated. Historical data proves that the influence of Italian on English has continued since medieval times and most borrowings of Italian origin went into English via French. The majority of loans are restricted to literary, architectural, artistic, culinary and musical registers. Italian has been used for centuries in Europe to describe music and among the many terms involved, there are compounds such as: *bel canto*, *con brio*, *contralto*, *mezzo-soprano*, *pianoforte*, etc. English inflections apply in general use and stress and pronunciation tend to anglicize them when uttered.

In conclusion it seems inevitable that given the present-day position of the English language in business and scientific circles, the tendency to borrow compound words from English can only increase. Interestingly English, now the international language for science and technology, can be said to occupy the linguistic role held by Latin in the Middle Ages as the European language for cross-cultural communication among a number of intellectual élites.

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6 This garment is now known as a tuxedo in American English and evening jacket in British English.

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