

# What's the Meaning of a Nominal Root?

## Insights from Experiments into Denominals and Similarity

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### AIMS

- Are all denominals derived from (nominal) roots?
- What aspects define the meaning of a root (shape/material/use)?

### LIT REVIEW

- Kiparsky (1997): There is a **structural distinction** between **true denominals** (noun-derived) & **pseudo denominals** (root-derived)

- a. #Lola taped the poster to the wall with pushpins. (true)
- b. He hammered the desk with his shoe. (pseudo)

- Harley & Haugen (2007): the distinction is pragmatic (you can tape with band-aids!)
- => Even true denominals are root-derived.
- Need for **experimental work!**

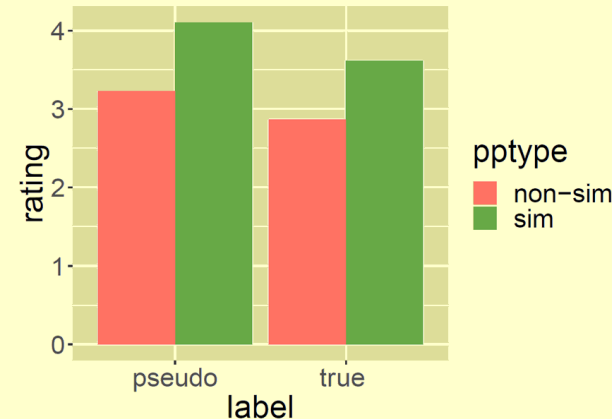
### DATA

- The data was collected online.
- A total of 323 American and British speakers participated in the experiments.

### ❖ Exp 1 (N= 100): Rating sentences from 1 to 5

- a. He crowned her with  
# a hat/a rose garland (true)
- b. Tom paddled the canoe with  
a board / # a spoon.(pseudo)

**The distinction between true and pseudo denominals is pragmatic, not structural!**



⇒ **All denominals are derived from roots**

### ❖ Exp 2 (N = 60): Comparative similarity (best predictor)

Which is more similar to *paddle*? *board/spoon*

### ❖ Exp 3 (N = 103): Independent similarity

How similar is *board/spoon* to *paddle*? Rate from 1 to 5.

### ❖ Exp 4 (N = 60): Forced choice task

Which is more similar to *paddle* in terms of shape/material/use?  
*board/spoon*

**Acceptability is best accounted for by comparative similarity of the PP to the root in all aspects (shape, material, use).**

### IMPLICATIONS

- 2 views on root meaning:

A. **Pustejovsky** (1995): nominal concepts expressed by roots express a multitude of aspects: a function (*telos*) and a mode of composition for the parts, i.e., *qualia structure*.

B. **Dowd** (2010): some nominal concepts are defined by function (*hammer*), whereas others by form/mode of composition (*tape*)

- Our research supports Pustejovsky (1995): **comparative similarity** predicts the results better than similarity in only one aspect (shape/material/use).
- Some functions can only be performed by objects with certain specific properties



The illusion that some concepts are exclusively defined by form/mode of composition.

### References

Dowd, 2010. *Snippets*. • Harley & Haugen, 2007. *Snippets*. • Kiparsky, 1997. In *Complex Predicates*. • Pustejovsky, 1995. *The Generative Lexicon*.