

THE STRUCTURE OF NOUN PHRASE IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to analyze the noun phrase structure in English. It further tries to look into the various constituents that make up the noun phrase structure using Huddleston's (1988) Structuralist Model of Grammar theory as its theoretical framework. The general composition of the noun phrase structure is realized in two different distinctive forms, which include a single-word noun without any accompanying unit and a noun class item plus other constituent units. These constituent units are the pre-head dependents and the post-head dependents respectively. Each of these structures has units that work in a distinctive form in order to precede or to follow the head noun in the noun phrase structure.

Keywords: *sentential, constituent, noun phrase, structure.*

Introduction

The concept of phrase is very important in English. It is a syntactic item that runs through the construction of every sentence. It is actually made up of words that are strung together to form one common relationship which acts as an independent building unit. Such unit is often labelled with different nomenclatures of individual word classes which head the entire structure thereby making it to be noted as a single recognised characteristic reference.

A phrase is characteristically identified in context by its form and by its syntactic function in the sentence. The relationship between the phrase structure and its associated head item is a descriptive one. The phrase structure is always made to become just a realisation of the syntactic events for the grammar of the language to work sporadically. In effect, each constituent item in the phrase structure is found to be a different set of category which “operates as an element in the grammatical structure of the next higher units” (Thakur 2011:147). This means that each grammatical item feeds on the other unit next to it so that individual subject item could be sequenced as a complete composite form. In theory, grammatical relations between these individual phrase constituents require a frequent account on the basis of structural description. In its sole reference to sequence, individual constituent items set a very different limit across the larger scale which requires that each unit becomes covertly part of the exponent of other linguistic variables.

The phrase theory often displays a role as a product of systemic variable where the linear arrangement of constituent units is ordered under a successive scheme of $X^nY^nZ^n$ pattern (Halliday 1961). The range of this pattern ($X^nY^nZ^n$) represents a theoretical restriction that shows that each unit is reliable and expected to occupy at least a single slot relative to argument in its context of use. This means that the class of the phrase structure accounts on the likeness of events and its frequency in the construction (Halliday 1961).

Traditionally, a phrase structure is seen as a word or words without a substantive finite verb (Omorodion 2009). This form of looking at the phrase may not be too operative and suitable in some context because it dwells solely on semantic

grounds, rather than any other means through which a phrase is identified in context. As a result, it always poses a threat to the grammatical analysis of structures that are deemed to be phrase element any time an attempt is made to deal with a suitable definition. As a strong grammatical term, however, a phrase can be identified in a sentence through an approach called “systemic constituent test approach”. This approach deals with a step – by – step means of looking at how a phrase structure should be in English. It is an approach which is purely grammatical and reflects practically, the occurrence of words in any given sequence. Accordingly, the “systemic constituent test approach” adopts five keenly acceptable models that are used to identify and theoretically analyze a phrase structure. In this case, a structure can be classified as a phrase if it could be seen as a representation of at least all or some of the following tunes of actions including being a group of words or a word, the individual word or words should work as a unit on their own, it should be headed by a class item, it is formed without a subject-predicate structure and should be substituted or replaced by a single word.

Every phrase item has an obligatory item within its structure. Such an obligatory item grammatically controls other units present and determines their gnomonic role in the constituent. Indeed, it is the head item that names the constituent category of phrase being it a noun, verb, adverb, adjective, preposition any other propositional forms. This means obviously that the sequence of elements realizing the constituent component of a phrase is only implied to the choice of the class item present. However, the structure of a phrase may or may not be limited to specific head. Those phrases that are limited to specific head are the headed phrases and those that are not are the non-headed

phrases (Quirk et al 1985). A headed phrase construction has only one obligatory item within the unit. The sequence of other accompanying elements represents a subordinate material in the power of modification which expands and operates as a syntactic entity occurring before and after the constituent of the unit head in order to determine the character of such phrase (Finch 2000; Chomsky 1957; Quirk et al 1985).

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Huddleston's (1988) Structuralist theoretical model of grammar. According to the model, every noun phrase is patterned with two different syntactic structures. These syntactic structures may include a single-word noun alone serving as the phrase element and a noun serving as the head plus other grammatical units. Huddleston (1988) labels these grammatical units as the pre-head dependents and the post-head dependents respectively. To him, the pre and the post-head dependents are not obligatory units as it may occur in the process of noun "phrasalization", but are brought together in order to play a peripheral function by complementing the head noun, either to define it or describe it in the surrounding context. He diagrammatically presents the noun phrase model in the following form: {Pre-head dependent} + Noun head + {Post-head dependent}

Huddleston's (1988) noun phrase model is similar to ones propounded by Halliday (1961), Quirk et al (1985), and Downing and Locke (2006). Thus, the elements that can fill both the pre-head and the post-head positions are the same. In each case, the NP is any underlined grammatical structure which has a noun as its head. This may be a pronoun, nominal element, or prototypical noun serving as the only grammatical item within the NP (see Aarts 2001; Annan 2014; Biber et al 2002; DeCarrio

2005; Finch 2001; Huddleston 1988; Leech et al 1982; Lamidi 2000; Murthy 2007; Thorne 1997). Such dependent items may either precede or follow the head in a congruent manner to become part of the NP. Accordingly, the structure of the NP may be realised as a sole and obligatory noun (\emptyset +NH); a pre-head item and a noun head (Pre-head +NH); the noun head and the post-head dependent item (NH+Post-head), and pre-head item and the noun head and the post-head item (Pre-head + NH + Post-head). Thus, even though these patterns look structurally different they are similar in function (Annan 2014).

In the first pattern which has a noun head as the only obligatory element or (\emptyset + Noun head), the NP is identified by just a single word item which becomes the only “central element of” a noun phrase typically realised by a noun or pronoun (Downing and Locke 1992:408). It also be called a bare noun (DeCarrio 2000), and it is usually a noun or the pronoun which has been drawn from “concrete entities such as persons (*man, sister, boy*), objects (*table, house, pen*), animals (*cow, tiger, bird*), places (*restaurant, London*), institutions (*government, department*), materials (*iron, glass*), and also to names of actions (*driving, laughter*), relationships (*marriage, oppression*), qualities (*beauty, speed*), emotions (*happiness, joy*), phenomena (*rain, death, luck*), concepts (*justice, truth*), and many other classes of entities” (Rodríguez-Navarro 2004:252). From grammatically and structural relations, these words identified above could be used as noun phrases in their own right. These single word item noun phrases remain the only compulsory units in both the subject and object functions without any modifying structure within the context that they are associated with as in: Joe can play piano. Or He drinks chocolate; etc

The second pattern which involves a pre-head dependent item and the noun head (Pre-head + NH), simply makes use of grammatical structures that come before the noun head (i.e. pre-head) and it represents a system of words which occur as a constituent with unlimited members, sub-classified into “micro-grammatical units” based on their functional label within the context that such units would occur in. This means that, even though, the pre-head constituents are optional, they produce a very strong relationship to co-index with the noun head. According to Huddleston (1988), the pre-head dependent is basically made up of either a determiner (such as *articles* (the, a, an); *quantifiers* (e.g. some, few, many, etc); *possessive pronouns* (e.g. my, your, his, her, our, their, etc); *demonstrative pronouns* (e.g. this, that, these, those, etc); interrogative pronouns (e.g. whose car, which book, etc); personal pronouns (a.k.a. pronominal determiners e.g. We teachers; you guys, etc); distributives (e.g. every, all, each, etc) and *compound expressions* (e.g. a few, a little, many a, what a, etc). Some if not all these determiners occur in complementary distribution with one another or they all mutually exclusive to one another.

On the other hand, modifiers are open class structures that come together to form a noun phrase. These open class structures are grammatical items that affect the meaning of the head item in some way such as quantifying the head or limiting the head into “the membership of an exclusive set”(Oliveira 2013:8). The truth conditions of these modifiers are positioned to form an indivisible unit with “the noun referent from others in the surrounding context” (Rodríguez-Navarro 2004: 254). Grammatically, there is no obvious restriction to the exact number of modifying classes that could precede the noun head. This suggests that those elements that occur in the modifier

position may be “optional” and may be present in order to “semantically restrict the denotation of the head” (Huddleston 1988:93). Some of the items that can fill the modifier position are adjectives (including general adjectives, numerals, compound adjectives and participles), modifying noun used, adverbs and clause.

In the case of NP with a noun head and post – head dependents (Post-head + NH) pattern, the post – head dependents being grammatical units which occur after the noun head actually help to “. . . specify the referent” in the noun phrase and “add supplementary information about it. When they specify or identify the head, they have a restrictive function; when they only give extra information, they have a non-restrictive or non-defining function” (Oliveira 2013:9). In this relation, the kind of information that these post dependent items carry would always function in a way that would complement the role of the headword. The post dependents’ position is occupied by elements of various forms which are realized by any of the following: adverbs; adjectives or adjectival phrase; prepositional phrases; clauses; noun appositives and reflexive pronoun.

Some other times, a clause sometimes acts as a complement of the noun head in the phrase (noun) structure. As a complement item, the clause may be “introduced by a relative pronoun or adverb” to form what is called a relativizer (Downing & Locke 2006:449). The relativizer always refers “back to the head of” the noun phrase, “which is termed as the antecedent” (ibid.). Some of these relativizers are “who, whom, whose, which, that, where, why and zero” (ibid.). This may be in various forms such as relative clause which is introduced by “wh” words, a “that” clause, “– ing” participle clause, “– ed” participle clause and the “to – infinitive” clause. All of these clause

segments are used in the post-modified position “to add supplementary information” to the referent head item which has been identified in the structure (Downing & Locke 2006:447). They actually become part of the phrase structure and must not be seen as a separate clause item in the construction.

Furthermore, noun structures can occur in a syntactic order to form a grammatical unit. In this form, the sequence of such noun phrases becomes a reflection of a catenative string. In the process of such a catenation, two or more noun phrases of the same grammatical status are “placed side by side, with one element serving to identify the other in a different way”. As a result, the second noun element is believed to be in a post-modification in order to become a “coreferential” item with the head. The second noun phrase is grammatically identified as the appositive item. According to Quirk and Greenbaum (2000), appositive nouns are normally “. . . identical in reference” and “must be included in the reference of the other” (pp.276). Appositive nouns which are found in phrase structures are of two forms: restrictive and non-restrictive in character (Quirk & Greenbaum 2000).

Accordingly, the restrictive appositive noun phrase provides information which is of much vital to the identifying appositive phrase. Such noun phrase becomes eclectically part of the identifying phrase without being marked off by commas. This restrictive form may be a prototypical phrase item or a clause. The clause item representing an appositive constituent “resembles the relative clause” and are variously marked by “abstract noun such as fact, presumption, reply, remark answer and the like” (Quirk & Greenbaum 2002:371). Restrictive appositive structure with a prototypical phrase item is exemplified in “I will visit Kweku my friend tomorrow” where

my friend is used appositively without being marked off with a pair of commas. The non-restrictive appositives provide information that is not so important, but rather serve as a catalyst. They are then seen as a “subordinate in the distribution of information” that modifies the appositive phrase in a “parenthetical relation” (Quirk & Greenbaum 2000:277; 377). Some of these constructions are often marked “off by commas or more weighty punctuation” that separate them from the phrase (Quirk & Greenbaum 2000:277). This can be exemplified as follows: “Eunice, a nurse, lives in Fumso” where *a nurse* is marked off with a pair of commas.

In addition to the appositives, reflexive pronoun items can equally occur after the noun head in a typical NP structure. This type of pronoun is variously marked by the “- self ” which serves as a morpheme that is characteristically attached to the third person pronouns like *he*, *she*, and *they* when they occur in an objective case form; thus, *her*, *him* and *them*. These can combine with “- self ” to form separate words of their own kind such as: *her* + *self* \approx *herself*; *him* + *self* \approx *himself*. Sometimes the possessive genitives like “my” and “your” can also grammatically attach with “- self ” to produce such structures as *myself* and *yourself*. Thus, the reflexive takes a plural form from “-self” to “-selves” when the pronoun it combines with is plural as in *them* + *selves* \approx *themselves*; *your* + *selves* \approx *yourselves* and *our* + *selves* \approx *ourselves*.

Consequently, reflexive pronouns can function in two different forms – emphatic and non-emphatic (Thakur 2011). These two functional roles are realised based on a particular grammatical relationship that the pronoun (reflexive) shares with other units in the sentence. In the non-emphatic function, the reflexive pronouns occur as elements of the clause

structure (Thakur 2011). Thus, to say that they form an integral part of the clause unit and that they do not share any powerful semantic force with other units in a similar relation. They are found as “completives” that form a grammatical relation with other items in the clause (e.g. *You don't seem to be yourself today; He killed himself last year.* (Thakur 2011:22)). Under the emphatic role, the reflexive pronouns are found to be “in apposition to their antecedents” (Thakur 2011:22). That is to say that they semantically add some powerful source to the head item which becomes the action performer. In this relation, the reflexive item strongly re-engineers and affirms the role of the headword. It is this form that occurs as a post-dependent item with the noun head in the noun phrase structure. They become part of the noun phrase and share a common restrictive function with the subject head item as in “President himself has to perform such functions” where *himself* is used emphatically to refer to the president.

Finally, there is yet another pattern of NP which involves a pre-head dependent, a noun head and post-head dependent. This form establishes a relation which includes all the syntactic units that can occur *before* and *after* the noun head within the NP. Thus, of all the elements found within the NP, it is the noun headword which is most important and controls both pre-head and post-head dependents. The pre-head dependent and post-head dependent are often not compulsory but they can supply information which helps to identify the referent item in the group as in: “Joseph is the leader of the inspectorate team”.

Conclusion

This study has looked at the composite structure of a noun phrase in English under the theoretical framework of

Huddleston's (1988) Structuralist Model of Grammar theory. The model sees the structure of noun phrase to be realisable with different units that may precede and/or come after the head to define its space in context. The structure of a noun phrase is identified as an endocentric type and that it depends on the other peripheral constituent units for its expansion. This shows that the NP is an integral part of every sentence where it can perform a "multiplicity of functions" as well as serves a controlling force in the English language (Quirk et al 1985:61). The perspective taken in this paper is largely descriptive and functional but a formal analysis of the NP is highly recommended so as to strike an intellectual balance in the literature on NP.

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