NOUNS AND NOUN PHRASES IN ENGLISH[1]

***Abstract**: The paper presents the nouns and the distinctive properties of prototypical noun phrases. As concerns number and countability, grammatical features of the NP force or strongly favour either a count or a non-count interpretation. On the other hand, nouns accept a wide range of modifiers within the nominal. They may be inside the nominal, being called internal modifiers, or they may be external, when they are located within the NP but outside the head nominal.*

***Key-words:** noun phrases, nominals, quantificational nouns, internal modifiers, pre-head modifiers, post-head modifiers, external modifiers.*

The noun category includes words denoting all kinds of physical objects (people, animals, places, things) and substances: *apple, dog, fire, London, sister, water,* etc. We can't use this criterion for identifying English nouns, because there are many other nouns denoting abstract entities: *presence, fear, contempt, hate, recognition,* etc. Anyway, *a noun* is a grammatically distinct category of words which includes those denoting all kinds of physical objects, such as persons, animals and inanimate objects.

Dependents in the structure of the Noun Phrase (NP) are of three main types: *determiners, complements and modifiers*. The determiner is a kind of dependent found only in NP structure. It is normally an obligatory element in NPs with certain types of singular noun as head: *the* news, *some* books, *two* new films, etc. Complements have to be licensed by the head noun – as complements in clause structure have to be licensed by the head verb: *the fact that she's alive, the loss of blood*. Modifiers are the default type of dependent, lacking the special features. There is no limit to the number of modifiers that can occur in an NP: *a young woman from London who complained*.

As in clause structure we have to recognize a unit intermediate between the clause and the verb, namely the verb phrase, in the same way we recognize a unit intermediate between the noun phrase and the noun, which we call *a nominal.* In *the guy who fainted* or *a young woman*, for instance, the first division is between the determiner and the rest, with *guy who fainted* and *young woman* each forming a nominal. Dependents in the structure of the NP may be distinguished as *internal* or *external*, according as they fall inside or outside the head nominal. Complements are always internal, and determiners are always external. The modifiers can be either internal or external:

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• complement: *a* [*knowledge of Latin*], *the* [*idea that he liked it*]
• determiner: *these* [*old papers*], some [*people I met*]
• modifier: internal – *a* [*big dog*]; external – *almost the* [*only survivor*]

In many but by no means all cases, grammatical features of the NP force or strongly favour either a count or a non-count interpretation. A plural head noun will generally indicate a count interpretation. In *She described the improvements they made,* we interpret *improvements* in a count sense like that of *I suggested a few improvements* rather than the non-count sense of *There has been little improvement.*

Determinatives such as *the, this, that, what*, and *no* occur with either type of noun, but in singular NPs the determinatives are generally restricted to one or the other:

• a. *Every table was inspected.* b. *Every furniture was inspected*.
• a. *He didn't read much book.* b. *He didn't drink much water.*

Expressions like *seven days, ten dollars, two miles*, etc., are plural in form but the quantity and measure they denote can be conceptualised as a single abstract entity, and this singular conceptualisation can override the plural form in determining the form of the verb. So the following examples have plural subjects with a singular agreement form of the verb:

• *Seven days is a long time to be on your own.*
• *That seven days we spent together was wonderful.*
• *Fifty dollars seems too much to pay for a pizza.*
• *Another three* books *is all we need.*

There are a few nouns expressing quantification which can occur in the singular as head of an NP whose number for agreement purposes is determined by a smaller NP embedded within it:

Singular	Plural
[*A **lot** of money*] *was wasted.*	[*A **lot** of things*] *were wasted.*
[*The **rest** of the meat*] *is over there.*	[*The **rest** of the eggs*] *are over there*.
(not possible)	[*A **number** of faults*] *were found*.

The head of the bracketed NP in each case is marked by double underlining. Each head is singular, but the form of the verb depends on the underlined NP that is complement to the preposition *of.* The meaning of *number* is such that the embedded NP must be plural, so the bottom left position can't be filled.

Collective nouns are, in fact, certain individual or unique abstract nouns denoting collective notions, which, instead of being looked upon as wholes, appear

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in the conscience of the speaker or writer as decomposed into their elements, the consequence being that, although singular forms, they agree with the verb in the plural: *family, team, crew, jury, club, corporation,* etc. These nouns can only be used generically when they become individual or unique abstract nouns (e.g. *A family* is a group of people who are related). When particularized, these nouns may be preceded by a definite article, by demonstrative adjectives in the singular, by possessive adjectives:

His family are early risers.

Some of the problems regarding the use of singular or plural for collective nouns arise because English nouns do not have a gender. Nouns such as *committee, jury, staff, team, board, government, mankind* are collective nouns in that they denote a collection, or set of individuals. When they occur in the singular as head of the subject NP the verb can, especially in BrE, be either singular or plural, though AmE clearly favours the singular:

Singular Verb	Plural Verb
a The committee has interviewed her.	*b. The committee have interviewed her*
a. The jury is still deliberating.	*b. The jury are still deliberating.*
a. The board consists entirely of men.	*b. The crew are all over forty.*

The choice of a plural verb focuses on the individuals that make up the collection, on the members of the committee or jury or whatever, rather than on the collection as a unit, the official body that the members constitute.

The third examples are cases in which variation would be less likely. In the third (a) the property of consisting entirely of men can only apply to the board as a whole. It can't apply to any individual member of the board, so a plural verb is much less likely (though not all BrE speakers would dismiss *The board consist entirely of men* as impossible). In the third (b), by contrast, the property of being forty or older can apply only to the individual members of the crew, not the crew as a whole, and the adjunct *all* reinforces the focus on the individuals. So the third (b) with its plural agreement is much more likely than *The crew is all over thirty* (though in AmE the latter might nonetheless occur).

Nouns accept a very wide range of modifiers within the nominal. Because they are inside the nominal they are called internal modifiers. Some precede the head of the NP, while others follow.

• Pre-head modifiers

AdjP	*a long letter, this latest problem*
DP	*another two candidates*
Nominal	*a brick wall, high octane* petrol
VP	*a sleeping child, the condemned man*

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The most common type of pre-head modifier is an *adjective*, either alone or with its own dependents. Determinatives, again alone or with dependents, are modifiers when they follow a determiner rather than functioning as one themselves. The modifiers in the third example are nominals consisting of nouns, either alone or (as in the second and third examples) with their own internal dependents. Note that a modifier cannot contain its own determiner: it is a nominal, not an NP. VP modifiers as in the fourth example have either a gerund-participle or a past participle form of the verb as head.

Dependents within a pre-head modifier almost always precede the head of that modifier. To take the phrase *the recently discovered fossil*, we can say This fossil was *discovered recently* (where *dicovered recently* is a complement of the verb *be*),but we cannot refer to it with the phrase *a discovered recently fossil*. We have to place the dependent adverb *recently* before the verbal head *discovered*, to make the NP *a recently discovered fossil*.

• Post-head modifiers

PP	*food for the baby, the tree by the gate*
AdjP	*people fond of animals*
Appositive NP	*my wife Sarah*
Non-appositive NP	*someone your own size*
Finite Clause	*the knife with which he cut it*
Non-finite Clause	*a letter written by his uncle*

The PPs in the first example are not syntactically licensed by the head. AdjP in post-head position usually contains its own dependents, especially post-head ones. The AdjP shown in the second example would not be possible before the head noun. Appositive NP modifiers are distinguished from the non-appositive ones by their ability to stand alone in place of the whole NP: instead of *They invited my wife Sarah* we could have simply *They invited Sarah*. Finite clause modifiers are all relative clauses. Non-finite clauses may be infinitival, gerund-participial, or past-participial.

There is no grammatical limit to the number of modifiers that can occur within a single NP. The following examples contain two, three, four and five respectively:

• *a small black cat*
• *the three English poems they had to study*
• *an old French woman with five kids who was complaining*
• *that kind old man at the museum with the umbrella*

There are preferences as to relative order, especially among pre-head modifiers. *A small black cat*, for example, will be strongly preferred over *a black small cat*.

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Numeral modifiers usually precede adjectives, as in *the three young nurses*, but under restricted conditions the reverse order is found, as in *an enjoyable three hours*.

External modifiers in an NP are located within the NP but outside the head nominal. There are various subtypes, all highly restricted with respect to the range of expressions admitted.

• *both his friends, twice a day*
• *so dificult a question, such a problem*
• *only a scientist, the boss himself*

Those in the first example are quantificational expressions that occur before various determiners. Those in the second example are adjectives or AdjPs which occur as external modifier only before the indefinite article *a(n)*. In the third example, the modifiers do not require the presence of a determiner: they can occur, with proper nouns, as in *only Jill, Mary* herself, etc.

In all the NP examples we have shown that the head element has been distinct from the dependents and filled by a noun.
A count noun generally denotes a class of individual entities of the same kind while the non-count nouns denote physical substances.

Dependents in the structure of the NP may be distinguished as internal or external, according as they fall inside or outside the head nominal. Internal modifiers are inside the nominal, some preceding the head of the NP, and others following it. As concerns external modifiers in an NP, they are located within the NP but outside the head nominal.

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