
ON THE STATUS OF NOMINAL STRUCTURES

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Abstract: The present paper analyzes nominal structures which consist of two nouns and it aims to distinguish noun phrases from nominal compounds. It also presents the main methods used in both Germanic and Romance languages.

Keywords: *nominal structures, noun phrases, compounds*

Nominal structure consisting of two nouns have been long analyzed in order to determine if they are compound nouns or noun phrases. For example, in English, the tests taken to differentiate the compounds from phrases refer to stress, to their semantics and syntax.

1. Stress

This test takes into account the distribution of the stress on the constituents of the nominal structure. Thus, the structures in which the stress is on the first constituent, such as those in (1a), are regarded as compound nouns, while the structures in which the stress is on the second constituent are noun phrases (1b).

- (1) *a. watch-maker*
 b. steel bridge

There are also cases in which the stress is variable, which makes difficult to distinguish the nominal structures: in (2a,b) the stress is on the second constituent, and in (2a1, b1) it falls on the first constituent. The reason for which the stress ranges is related to the fact that the constituent that is used less often tends to be stressed. For example, in the case of pastry which has *cake* as constituent (Birthday cake, Christmascake) and which does not emphasize the meaning of pastry as the word *spie, tart* do, the stress is on the first constituent (2a). The same happens in the case of *oil*: the constituent that is less used is stressed (2b).

- (2) *a. apple 'pie* *a¹ 'apple cake*
 b. olive 'oil *b¹ 'corn oil* (Giegerich, 2009: 7)

Given the fact that the examples in (2) refer to the name of traditional dishes, Giegerich (2009: 7) considers these structures to be compounds. One can see that even within these

associative value. Therefore, this criterion does not appear to establish a boundary between the two categories. The problem arises in the case of the term "oil" because the stress falls differently in the structures it is used (*olive oil* versus *cornoil*). This leads to the searching of another criterion to distinguish nominal complex structures.

3. Syntax

From the syntactic point of view, the two categories can be distinguished through the following three operations: the first syntactic operation concerns the coordination of the adjunct of the head (6a), the second one refers to the modification of any of the elements of the structure (6b), and the third one to the replacement of the head with the pronoun *one* (6c):

- (6) a. *steel and aluminium bridge; wooden bridges and fences*
 *vs. *clock and watch-maker; watch-maker and repairer*
 b. *steel suspension bridge; stainless steel bridge*
 *vs. *waterproof watch-maker*
 c. *a wooden bridge and a steel one*
 *vs. *a watch-maker and a cabinet one* (Giegerich, 2004: 5,6)

Taking into account the examples above, we can now see the difference between the two categories. Therefore, unlike noun phrase, compounds may not be subject to coordination operations, modifying constituents or replacing the head noun with *one*.

The examples above show that, in English, it cannot be a clear distinction between noun phrases and compounds. While we have tried various tests to delimit the two categories, we cannot draw a sharp line as long as they are intertwined at a time.

Regarding the semantic relationship between the constituents of a complex structure, in Italian it is marked syntactically, as opposed to English:

- (7) a. *coltello da pane* b. *succo di limone* c. *porta a vetri*
 bread knife *lemon juice* *glass door*

As shown in (7), Italian presents a preposition between the head noun and the modifier leading to the nature of the semantic relationship between the two nouns. Thus, in (7a) the modifier provides information about the purpose or the function of the head-noun: *bread* specifies the object usually cut by a *knife*. In (7b), the modifier refers to the origin of the object described by the head-noun: the *lemon juice* results from squeezing the lemon. In (7c), the modifier mentions the material of the object described by the head noun: a *glass door* is a door made of glass.

In order to determine if the modifier is a prepositional phrase, Johnston and Busa¹ propose a test which involves the introduction of additional information between the head noun

¹In *Qualia structure and the compositional interpretation of compounds*, 1999.

and its modifier. Therefore, the examples in(8) and(9) have a noun phrase in which the head noun is modified by an adjunct and an adjective may appear between the head noun and the prepositional phrase:

- (8) a. *coltello sul frigo* b. *coltello tagliente sul frigo*
 (*knife on the fridge*) (*sharp knife on the fridge*)
- (9) a. *bicchiere nel lavandino* b. *bicchiere sbeccato nel lavandino*
 (*glass in the sink*) (*chipped glass in the sink*) (Johnston&Busa, 1999: 170)

Things are different in the case of the structures in (7). As we see in (10a), in Italian, the adjective cannot occur between the head noun and its modifier, but can occur only if it determines the entire structure (10b).

- (10) a. **coltello tagliente da pane* b. [*coltello da pane*] *tagliente*
 (*knife sharp bread*) (*[bread knife] sharp*) (Johnston& Busa, 1999: 171)

Based on the examples above, Johnston and Busa conclude that the Italian equivalents for the English compounds may not be modifying prepositional phrases, but rather bound elements of the Italian nominal structure.

As in Italian, in Romanian, the semantic relationship between the elements of nominal structure is syntactically marked by a preposition:

- (11) a. *carte de bucate*
 (*cookbook*)
- b. *detergent de rufe*
 (*laundry detergent*)
- c. *cutie de pantofi*
 (*shoebox*)
- d. *suc de fructe*
 (*fruit juice*)
- e. *gard de fier*
 (*iron fence*)

Although in Romanian there is only one preposition (*de* as opposed to *da*, *di*, *a*), we understand from (11a) that it is about a *book* that is used when preparing *food*, from (11b) that the *detergent* is used to wash laundry, and from (11c) that *box* is used to deposit *shoes*. In (11d), the modifier presents the origin of the object described by the head noun: the *juice* resulted from the squeezed *fruit*. In(11e), the modifier indicates the material of the object described by the head noun: a *fence iron* is a fence made of iron.

Unlike Italian, in Romania the adjective may appear between the head noun and its modifier (12-16):

- (12) a. *carte scumpă de bucate*
 b. [*carte de bucate*] *scumpă*
 (*an expensive cookbook*)
- (13) a. *detergent bun de rufe*
 b. [*detergent de rufe*] *bun*
 (*a good laundry detergent*)
- (14) a. *cutie neagră de pantofi*
 b. [*cutie de pantofi*] *neagră*
 (*a black shoebox*)
- (15) a. *suc răcoritor de fructe*
 b. [*suc de fructe*] *răcoritor*
 (*a refreshing fruit juice*)
- (16) a. *gard rezistent de fier*
 b. [*gard de fier*] *rezistent*
 (*a resistant iron fence*)

Given the examples above, we cannot consider the structures in (11) as being compound nouns. Even if they present some features of phraseological units which tend to be complex units welded by their frequent use, we also note that their welding is not complete (12-16). Thus, these structures would rather be considered noun phrases, having the following structure:

- (17) *head Noun + adjunct Prepositional Phrase*
*Prepositional Phrase = Preposition **de** + Noun Phrase complement*

Conclusions:

The study showed that we cannot draw a clear line when distinguishing between noun phrases and compounds. Although various tests to differentiate these structures have been proposed, it is very difficult to distinguish them as they become thoroughly intertwined at a time. Regarding the English language, the stress does not play a significant role in distinguishing the two categories especially when it falls on the second constituent of a complex structure. What seems to be really helpful for English is the syntactic criterion according to which, we noticed that as opposed to noun phrase, compounds cannot be subject to coordination operations, modifying constituents and replacing the head noun with the pronoun *one*. As for Italian, the Italian equivalents for the English compounds represent bound elements of the Italian complex nominal structure. As far as the Romanian language is concerned, these complex structures

would rather be noun phrases consisting of ahead – noun followed by an adjunct - prepositional phrase.

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