Abstract

Languages have syntactic units of different types and sizes. These syntactic units are themselves formed of smaller units and also go together to form larger units. In English, for example, the sentence consists of phrases with different labels and functions. Some of these phrases are obligatory such as noun phrase and verb phrase; others are optional like adverb phrase and adjective phrase. The present paper examines the structure of the noun phrase in English and discusses its different functions and semantic roles. A number of grammar books have been consulted for the purpose of giving a multi-perspective account of the noun phrase with regard to its formal, functional and semantic features. The study has revealed that in terms of structure the noun phrase appears in different forms and structures ranging from single words to clauses. As far as function and meaning are concerned, the noun phrase has multiple functions and meanings depending on its position within the larger syntactic unit which is the sentence.

Introducing Phrases

1.1 Definition

A phrase is, as Crystal (1992) defines it, “an element of structure typically containing more than one word, but lacking the subject-predicate structure usually found in a clause.” Finch (1999), in his definition of ‘phrase’, states “a phrase is a syntactic unit which typically consists of more than one word and is intermediate between word and clause level in sentences.” He adds that in a phrase words go together to form a ‘single syntactic entity’ which can be moved ‘around’ and also substituted by another word. As an illustration, he gives the following example in which the words in bold are capable of both movement (as in 1.b.) and substitution as in (c):

(1.a) The man went **down the hill**.
(b) **Down the hill** went the man.
(c) He went **there**.
Quirk et al. (1985: 42) place grammatical units in a hierarchy of potential size and extensibility; at the top of that heirarchy is the sentence, ‘the highest unit’, and at the bottom, the morpheme ‘the lowest unit’, with the phrase being intermediate between the clause, ‘the second highest unit’ and the word ‘the second lowest unit’. This can be made clear below:

Highest unit: **Sentences**, which consist of one or more:
- **Clauses**, consist of one or more
- **Phrases**, which consist of one or more
- **Words**, which consist of one or more

Lowest unit: **Morphemes**

### 1.2 Form and Function

‘Form’, on the one hand, refers to the internal structure of the grammatical unit and in the case of phrases, the form of a phrase is determined by the word which has a primary and obligatory function within it. Thus, we distinguish five kinds of phrase which are as follows:

1. **Verb phrase** consists of a main verb which either stands alone as the entire verb phrase, or is preceded by up to four verbs in an auxiliary function:
   - (2.a) The ship **sank**
   - b. The ship **may have been being sunk**.

2. **Noun phrase** consists of a head, which is typically a noun (e.g. ‘trip’ in the sentence below), and of elements which (either obligatorily or optionally) determine the head and (optionally) modify the head, or complement another element in the phrase:
   - (3) I remember a good **trip** that I once had.

3. **Adjective phrase** consists of an adjective as head, optionally preceded or followed by modifying elements:
   - (4) The weather was **incredibly pleasant enough to be enjoyable**.

4. **Adverb phrase** is similar to adjective phrase in its structure, except that it has an adverb, instead of an adjective, as its head:
   - (5) I spoke to him **as clearly as I could**.

5. **Prepositional phrase** consists of a preposition followed by a prepositional complement, which is normally a noun phrase:
   - (6) I met her **at the corner of the street**.

‘Function’, on the other hand, refers to the syntactic behaviour of a lower unit within a higher unit (in the case of ‘phrase’ or ‘the clause’). The five kinds of phrases mentioned above can function as four clause elements ‘subject, object, complement, and adverbial’. The diagram below, adapted from Quirk et.al (1985: 60), illustrates the way these phrase types function in the clause as the upward-pointing arrows show:
The broken arrows on the right indicate that adverb phrases and prepositional phrases can exceptionally function as subjects and that prepositional phrases can exceptionally function as complements (Ibid), as in the following examples:

(7) *In the garden* is where she likes to sit.

(8) *Very elegantly* is how she walks.

(9) He is not *in the mood* right now.

The noun phrase, as indicated in Figure 1.1, can function as any of the clause elements except ‘verb’ and it is this, besides the different semantic roles associated with these clause elements and the different forms NP may take, what makes the discussion of the NP interesting. The following section will discuss, in some detail, the NP syntactically (form and function) and semantically (semantic roles).

**Forms, Functions, and Semantic roles of Noun Phrase**

This section gives an account of the noun phrase (NP) forms first, then of its functions and their related semantic roles.

**2.1 NP Forms**

NP, as Stagaberg (1979: 185) says, “consists of a noun and all the words and word groups that belong with the noun and cluster around it.” An NP may be very simple consisting of one word only: a proper noun ‘John’ or a pronoun ‘they’, but it may be an “indeterminately long and complex structure” having a noun as head preceded by other words such as an article, an adjective, or another noun, and followed by a prepositional phrase or by a relative clause (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 17). The following table adapted from Quirk et.al (1985: 62) gives an illustration of the possible NP forms:
Table 2.1 Possible Forms of NP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>determinative</th>
<th>premodification</th>
<th>Head</th>
<th>postmodification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice’s</td>
<td>fine warm</td>
<td>Him</td>
<td>with her red hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that</td>
<td></td>
<td>peter</td>
<td>in the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all those</td>
<td></td>
<td>wedding</td>
<td>last year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>better</td>
<td>days</td>
<td>than that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the</td>
<td>best</td>
<td>story</td>
<td>that I ever had</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>trip</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>trip</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>that I once had</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for the NP head, it can be, apart from a noun, a pronoun as in:

(10) I hurt *myself.*

Or an adjective (plural personal e.g. ‘the French’ as in the French nation, and singular non-personal abstract, e.g. ‘the evil’ as in that which is evil, (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 69). In addition Leech, Deuchar and Hoogernraad (1982: 61) mention an ‘enumerator’ and a ‘genitive phrase’ as other possible NP heads which can be shown in these examples:

(11) The greedy will take all *three.*

(12) We stayed at *John’s* for the night.

2.2 Functions and Semantic Roles of NP

NP may have different functions in the clause and a semantic role is associated with each function. The semantic role describes the status of an NP in relation to the action or state denoted by the verb.

2.2.1 Subject

An NP functions as the subject of the verb when it precedes the verb in the clause, as in:

(13) *John* came early.

The semantic roles of the clause element “subject” are as follows:

1. **Agentive**: “the typical semantic role of a subject that has a direct object: it indicates the animate participant that instigates or causes happening denoted by the verb” (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990: 209). The following example illustrates this:
(14) Mary is mowing the grass.

2. **Instrumental**: a part from its agentive function, the subject frequently has an instrumental role; that is “it expresses the unwitting (generally inanimate) material cause of an event” (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 172) as shown below:

(15) The avalanche destroyed several houses.

3. **Affected**: “with intransitive verb, the subject also frequently has the affected role that is elsewhere typical of the subject” (ibid). This can be illustrated below:

(16) Jack fell down.

(17) The pencil was lying on the table.

This semantic role can also be applied to the subject of the intensive verbs, as the following example shows:

(18) The pencil was on the table.

(Ibid)

4. **The recipient subject**: the subject may have a recipient role with verbs such as 'have, own, possess, and benefit (from), as exemplified below:

(19) Mr. Smith has given his son a radio.

So now his son has/owns/possess the radio.

(Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990: 211)

Verbs such as ‘see, know, or enjoy’ which do not denote any action require an experiencer subject (Yule, 1985: 117), as seen in the following examples:

(20) I saw the accident.

(21) She enjoyed the concert.

5. **Locative, temporal and eventive**: The subject may have the function of designating the place (locative subject) or time (temporal) of the state or action. Consider these two examples:

(22) This jar contains coffee. (locative subject)

(23) Yesterday was a holiday. (temporal subject)

(Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990: 212)

Eventive subjects (with abstract noun heads designating arrangements and activities) differ from others in permitting intensive complementation with a time adverbial (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1972: 173), e.g.

(24) The concert is on Thursday.

2.2.2 Object (Direct and Indirect)

An NP which follows a transitive verb is the object of that verb as in the following example:

(25) The teacher greeted his students.
A verb like ‘greeted’ which requires one object is called a monotransitive verb. When two NPs come after a verb, the first is called indirect object and the second the direct object. This example shows this:

(26) The headmaster gave George a new book.

Verbs requiring two objects are called ditransitive verbs. The typical semantic role of the direct object is that of affected participant: “a participant (animate or inanimate) which does not cause the happening denoted by the verb, but it is directly involved in some other way,” as in:

(27) James sold his digital watch yesterday.

(Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990: 209)

Apart from the affected object, other semantic types of direct objects are the ‘locative object’ and the ‘effected object’. An example of the ‘locative object’ is:

(28) The horse jumped the fence. (…jumped over the fence)

(Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 174)

An effected object is one that “refers to something which exists by virtue of the activity indicated by the verb,” (Ibid). The two examples below illustrate this:

(29) Baird invented television.

(30) I am writing a letter.

Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 213) add another semantic role to the direct object that is ‘eventive’ which takes the form of a deverbal noun preceded by a common verb of general meaning, such as ‘do, give, have, make, take’. They comment that this role is semantically an extension of the verb and bears the major part of the meaning. Compare:

(31.a) They are arguing.
(b) They are having an argument.

As for the indirect object, its most typical function is that of recipient, i.e. “an animate participant being passively implicated by the happening or state” (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 171). This example shows this:

(32) I've found you a place.

As an exception to the rule that the indirect object has the role of “recipient” Quirk and Greenbaum mention the “affected role” which, they say, happens when ‘give’ (or sometimes related verbs like ‘pay’ or ‘owe’) has “effected” object as direct object and “affected” object as indirect object. This can be illustrated by these examples:

(33) I paid her a visit.
(34) I gave the door a couple of kicks.

2.2.3 Complement (Subject Complement and Object Complement)

In addition to being the subject, an NP can also be the complement of the subject when it occurs after certain verbs such as ‘be’, ‘become’, ‘seem’ which are called copula verbs or
linking verbs since they join the subject and the complement together, (Close, 1975: 21). This function is shown in the following examples:

(35) Tom was my best friend.
(36) John became a doctor.

Certain verbs such as ‘name’, ‘elect’, ‘consider’ require in addition to the object an object complement which can be an NP as in:

(37) I thought him the captain.
(38) They name their daughter Enda.

The complement, whether subject or object, has the semantic role of the attribute for which, Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 209-210) distinguish two subtypes: “identification” and “characterization” as in the examples below:

(39) Kevin is my brother.
(40) They named their daughter Enda.
(41) He is a good student.
(42) I consider him a friend.

“Attributes” as Greenbaum and Quirk remark may be “current” normally with verbs used statively or resulting attribute (i.e. from the event described by the verb) with verbs used dynamically. Consider these examples:

(43) He seems an old man.
(44) They consider the operation a success.
(45) He became our neighbour.
(46) They elected him the president.

2.2.4 Adverbial

An adverbial, which is normally realized by an adverb or a prepositional phrase, can also be realized by a noun phrase expressing time as in:

(47) He was there last week.
(48) I go to the cinema two times a month.

The NP adverbials ‘last week’ and ‘two times’ have the semantic roles of fixed position on a temporal scale and duration respectively (Quirk et.al., 1985: 481-482).

2.2.5 Prepositional Object

Finally, an NP can function as a complement to the preposition in a prepositional phrase as in the examples below:

(49) I was sitting on a wooden chair.
(50) It started to rain early in the morning.
Such noun phrases will have the semantic roles of the adverbial they function within, that is of spacial and temporal, respectively.

**Conclusion**

The noun phrase is one of the most important phrasal categories because of the different forms it takes, different functions and semantic roles it has in the clause.

As for NP form, it may be as simple as a single word or as complex as the clause. The central part of the NP is the head which is normally a noun but it can be a pronoun or an adjective.

With regard to function, NP can function as any of the clause elements (Subject, Object, Complement, Adverbial) except the verb. Related to each of these clause elements which are realized by NP are a number of semantic roles describing the way this element is involved in the action or state denoted by the verb.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


