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Nouns and Noun-like things

We saw in the previous chapter that the subject, object, or complement of a clause could be a noun...or a 'noun-like thing'. In this chapter we have a closer look at nouns and related grammatical features.

Nouns

Most people have a fairly shrewd idea of what a noun is. Nouns tell us about people places things and ideas. They can be divided into two groups: PROPER nouns and COMMON nouns.

Proper nouns are the names of individual people, places, organisations, works of art, and so forth. The important thing about proper nouns is that they refer to things that are one-off. You can only have one *George Washington* or *Milton Keynes*. We mark this special nature by awarding initial capital letters. When official titles are used in this way we give them a capital letter:

The Hungarian Foreign Minister...

When they aren't, we don't:

...regular consultative meetings of foreign ministers...

All other nouns are common. Some people like to divide common nouns into ABSTRACT and CONCRETE NOUNS, but this is more to do with what they mean than how they behave grammatically. For example, there is little grammatical difference between these concrete nouns:

car stone book

and these abstract nouns:

dream hope idea.

A more useful way of dividing nouns is into COUNTABLE and UNCOUNTABLE. As the names suggest, countable nouns regularly have a plural form, which usually ends in 's', while uncountable nouns do not. Uncountables include all proper nouns and many (but



Some writers no longer use capital letters in this way, but the convention is still widespread.

There is more about COUNTABLE and UNCOUNTABLE nouns on pages 48–49.

not all) abstract nouns. For example, you cannot have more than one *contentment*. There is also a small group of concrete nouns that are usually uncountable, mostly things that are thought of in the mass rather than as a set of individual items: *sand, mud, ice, butter*, and so forth. But beware: almost all uncountables can become countable in special situations. For example:

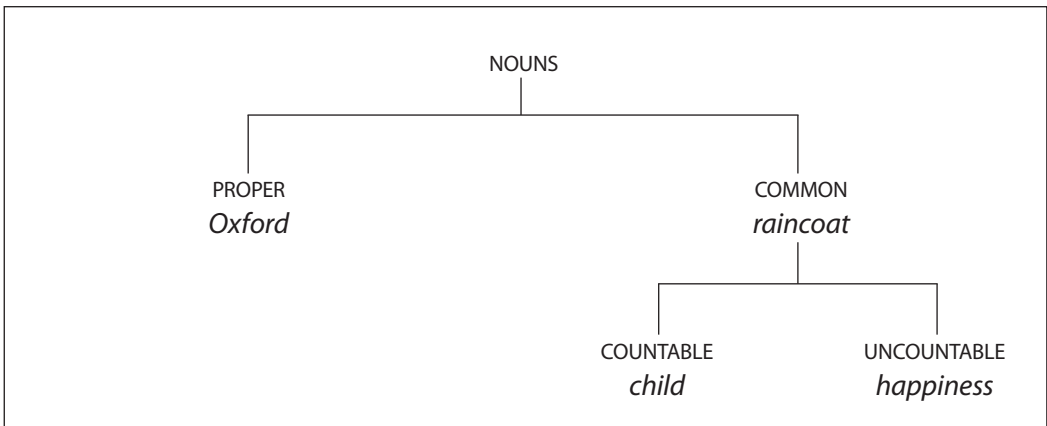
Sands of time run out for strife-torn factory

You might ask whether it matters if a noun is countable or not. The answer is that certain words cannot be used before uncountable nouns. These are words that describe quantity. They include:

each several few many

Nor can you precede an uncountable with the articles *a* or *an*. More important, it is not standard English to use *less* before a countable plural. It's *less butter* and *fewer biscuits*. But, especially in speech, more and more people are using *less* with plural nouns.

To sum up: nouns can be proper or common, countable or uncountable:



In addition, as we shall see, nouns can be turned into NOUN PHRASES and can be MODIFIED by ADJECTIVES.

Pronouns

But before that, there is an important group of words that can also act as the subject, object, or complement of a clause: PRONOUNS. It is sometimes said that they are called *pronouns* because

There is more about PRONOUNS on pages 64–66.

they are used *instead of* nouns. This is a rather misleading oversimplification. Look at that last sentence. *This* is definitely a pronoun, but it isn't standing in for a noun. It is referring back to a whole sentence which begins, *It is sometimes said...* So it is more accurate to say that **pronouns refer back to something already written or said**. This may be:

- a noun
- another pronoun or group of pronouns
- a noun phrase (shortly to be explained)
- a section of text – part or all of a sentence, or even a group of sentences
- an idea or fact already mentioned.

In addition, you will probably have noticed that we sometimes use *it* as the subject of a sentence when it refers back to nothing at all:

It is raining.

In sentences like that, *it* is described as a DUMMY SUBJECT because in effect the sentence has no real subject. *There* can be used in a similar way:

There's a lot of politics involved.

Types of pronoun

Pronouns come in a range of shapes and sizes, according to use. They are covered in more detail in Part B and are listed here for completeness:

TYPE	EXAMPLES	
PERSONAL	<i>I / me</i>	<i>he/him</i>
POSSESSIVE	<i>mine</i>	<i>hers</i>
REFLEXIVE	<i>myself</i>	<i>themselves</i>
DEMONSTRATIVE	<i>this</i>	<i>that</i>
INDEFINITE	<i>someone</i>	<i>anyone</i>
INTERROGATIVE	<i>who</i>	<i>what</i>
RELATIVE	<i>who</i>	<i>that</i>

Pronouns in use

The best way to get a good hold on how pronouns work is to take that list and read through a piece of prose identifying the different types of pronoun used and the things they refer back to:

*'Otherwise, **he** relies on booze **you** could strip paint with.'*
*'Did **you** find **whoever** did **it**?'*
*'Find **them**?' Culley laughed. '**It** wasn't exactly a mystery. Stan wasn't eager to give evidence. **We** used a wages robbery for a couple of **them** some time later. **I** don't think **it** was **theirs**, but **it** served its purpose.'*
*'Do **you** enjoy your job?' Kelso was turning his glass and tilting **it**, to shift the ice.*
*'Well,' Culley said, '**it** beats going to the office.'*

The biggest problem writers have when using pronouns is making sure that it is clear to what or to whom particular pronouns refer.

To sum up, a pronoun can be the subject, object, or COMPLEMENT of a clause:

SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT
<i>I</i>	<i>love</i>	<i>you.</i>
SUBJECT	VERB	COMPLEMENT
<i>It</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>you!</i>

Noun phrases

We have seen that a noun can be the subject, object or complement of a CLAUSE. But nouns don't often stand on their own in this way. More frequently they form the HEADWORD of a NOUN PHRASE. Noun phrases are made up of four elements:

DETERMINER + PREMODIFIER + HEADWORD + POSTMODIFIER

Determiners

While it is true that you can use the single noun *elephants* as the subject, you cannot use *elephant*. *Elephant eats grass* is not a complete clause; it needs something else. For example:

A word or group of words that forms a CLAUSE ELEMENT (e.g. the SUBJECT) is called a PHRASE. Phrases are examined in detail in Chapter 8.

SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT
An <i>elephant</i>	<i>eats</i>	<i>grass.</i>

There is more about determiners on page 67.

The commonest type of word to come before a noun in this way is the article: *a / an / the*.

There are several other words that serve a similar purpose:

- this, that, etc.*
- my, his, her, etc.*
- some, any, etc.*

All these words help to give the noun slightly greater definition, and are called determiners.

Modifiers

Modifiers before the noun

Our noun headword *elephant* can be given a lot more definition by adding words before it to MODIFY its meaning:

SUBJECT			VERB	OBJECT
<i>A</i>	<i>hungry young bull</i>	<i>elephant</i>	<i>eats</i>	<i>grass.</i>
DETERMINER	MODIFIERS	HEADWORD		

Hungry and *young* are both ADJECTIVES modifying *elephant*. One way of building up a noun phrase is just to string a number of adjectives together before the noun:

DETERMINER	MODIFIERS	HEADWORD
<i>a</i>	<i>large purple</i>	<i>house</i>
<i>a</i>	<i>fast and powerful</i>	<i>car</i>

There is more about adjectives later in this chapter and also on pages 50–52.

It is not only adjectives that can come before a noun to modify it. In the phrase *a hungry young bull elephant*, *bull* also modifies the noun. It tells us the elephant is a male. But *bull* is a noun, and nouns are frequently used before a noun headword to modify it.

Modifiers after the noun

We can also give information to define the noun by placing words after it. For example:

MODIFIERS in a NOUN PHRASE are examined in more detail on pages 72–74.

SUBJECT			VERB	OBJECT
<i>That</i>	<i>elephant</i>	<i>behind the tree</i>	<i>is eating</i>	<i>grass.</i>
DETERMINER	HEADWORD	MODIFIER		

So the headword of a noun phrase can be both PREMODIFIED and POSTMODIFIED:

DETERMINER	PREMODIFIERS	HEADWORD	POSTMODIFIERS
<i>this</i>	<i>appealing</i>	<i>property</i>	<i>on Silver Lane</i>
<i>a</i>	<i>modern semi-detached</i>	<i>property</i>	<i>that offers good-sized accommodation</i>

Adjectives

For more about adjectives, see also pages 50–52.

We have seen one very important feature of adjectives: they are placed before a noun to modify it. Most adjectives can be used in this way, which is called ATTRIBUTIVE.

But adjectives can also be used in another way: as a complement. We can use an adjective as a subject complement. For example:

SUBJECT	VERB	COMPLEMENT
<i>Elephants</i>	<i>are</i>	<i>big.</i>

This use of adjectives is called PREDICATIVE. Most adjectives can be used both attributively and predicatively, but a few are restricted to one or other of the two categories. For example *alone* can only be used predicatively. We can't talk about *an alone person*.

Types of adjective

An important way of categorising adjectives is into QUALITATIVE and CLASSIFYING adjectives. Qualitative adjectives give information

about the qualities of the noun they modify. Examples are *big*, *hungry*, and *expensive*. Classifying adjectives place the noun into a class or category such as *pregnant*, *annual*, and *western*.

Qualitative adjectives

The categorising of adjectives might seem interesting but unimportant, except for the fact that qualitative adjectives can be graded. By putting certain words in front of them and GRADING them we can comment on how much of the quality the noun has.

Compare these three phrases:

an intelligent student

a highly intelligent student

a fairly intelligent student

The use of *highly* and *fairly* makes an *extremely* big difference to the meaning.

Qualitative adjectives can also be COMPARATIVE OR SUPERLATIVE:

ABSOLUTE	<i>big</i>	<i>beautiful</i>
COMPARATIVE	<i>bigger</i>	<i>more beautiful</i>
SUPERLATIVE	<i>biggest</i>	<i>most beautiful</i>

Single syllable adjectives and certain two-syllable adjectives add *-er* and *-est*. Most adjectives of two syllables and almost all of three or more syllables use *more* and *most*.

Classifying adjectives

Classifying adjectives cannot be graded. For example it would be odd to describe a school prize-giving as *a highly annual event*. Even so, sometimes people break this ‘rule’ to achieve a special effect, for example: *She was looking very pregnant*. The word people make most fuss about is *unique*. Since this adjective means ‘the only one of its type’, they object that it is impossible to have something that is **very** *unique*. On the other hand, there is nothing wrong with saying that something is **almost** *unique*.

Other examples of classifying adjectives are:

agricultural chemical daily female
golden magic private standard

Ordering

As we have seen, it is possible to put a string of adjectives in front of a noun to modify it. English is quite fussy about the order in which the adjectives are placed. We learn this as we learn the language and most native speakers would have no difficulty in recognising that the adjective order in this phrase is wrong:

a wooden grey large house

The general order is:

1. qualitative adjectives
2. colour adjectives
3. classifying adjectives.

So it should be:

a large grey wooden house