Word Order Distribution in the English Noun Phrase

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Abstract

This study was carried out to investigate the word order distribution of English Noun Phrases (NPs) by using Saussure's notion of structural linguistics and Reid's meaning-based approach. The data from non-literary texts and short stories were examined to see if they comply with the patterns of NPs which have been proposed by other traditional linguists. The results of this study revealed that both literary and non-literary writings share similar word order distribution of simple noun phrases (i.e. 'determiner + modifier + head noun') with some slight differences pertaining to the positions of the modifiers in both texts. The analysis can be further improved by focusing on one category of word order distribution to identify the occurrences and to precisely elaborate on the occurrences of the word order.

Keywords: noun phrase, word order distribution, sign-based theory, meaning-based approach, functional explanation, modifiers

1. Introduction

Many people believe that the function of language is to express and communicate meanings Trask (1999). However, from other evolving definitions, it can be said that linguistic signs cannot explicate anything by themselves unless "they are coupled with the goal-directed principles that guide the way people actually employ signs in the communication of messages" Reid (1991). It is understood here that language users play an essential role in selecting language features to signify a certain message and determine the meaning of the words or sentences Bertolo (2001). Valin and Lapolla (1997), strongly professed that in English and many other languages, the arrangement of words is a vital factor in determining the meaning of an utterance. Functionalists view that the linguistic forms are distributed the way they are because they have meanings that contribute towards the intended message while the traditional linguists see the grammar of a language as a set of rules which specify all the possible grammatical structures of the language and focus more on the grammatical structures and their relationship to each other. Prescriptive grammar, for instance, states rules about how people ought to speak, as it focuses on the notion of grammatical and grammatical sentences, and disregards how meanings are obtained out. Thus, till today, the exact nature of NPs in English has not been carried out using empirical means, as pointed by Govindasamy and David (2002). In relation to this, English word order patterns are considered as one of the better primary resources confounding textual features that second language learners encounter.

In relation to this, this paper investigates the word order distribution and its functions in the English noun phrase system. Additionally, this paper seeks to find out whether the word order patterns are identical in both literary and non-literary texts.

2. Literature Review

Different perspectives of language: Graddol, Cheshire and Swann (2003), defined language as "a complex system of communication, and an important task of linguistics is to describe this system, analyzing the relationships that exist between different components". Reid, Otheguy and Stern (2002), stated that meaning

functions to explain the distribution of linguistic forms rather than being itself the object of explanation. Based on this, Reid (1991), proposed the idea that language is two-faced: inwardly and outwardly. Meanwhile, Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2003), also asserted that all human languages use a finite set of discrete sounds or gestures that are combined to form meaningful elements or words. We usually assume that we use language to say what we mean. However, the processes by which we create 'meaning' are actually very complicated because there are several 'models' of meaning. Semantically speaking, the arrangement of a combination of words in a specific order allows us to understand the meanings that the sentences have. In order to have effective communication between a speaker and a listener, the phrases that are uttered by both sides should be well-organized according to the language system that they speak.

Meaning construction: As indicated by Finegan (1999), words are the centerpiece of language. In terms of grammar, there are two parts: morphology which deals with the structure of words and syntax which deals with the way in which words are combined together. Jackson (1992) & Robinson (2003), claimed that there are two systems of construction in operating language. One deals with a semantic system (which is concerned with the meaning relations between elements of construction), while the other deals with a grammatical system.

In general, words do not usually occur in isolation. Indeed, in isolation, some words seem to have so many potential meanings which sometimes bring difficulties for us in understanding a text or utterances. In getting the meaning, we have to consider the meanings of words and their grammatical properties, and see how they relate to each other. Gleason (2001), also asserted that many words have more than one meaning, that is, from two aspects. One is the linguistic meaning, in which the word represents some abstraction of what members of a speech community might agree about the connotation of the term, and the second is associative meaning, which is the psychological significance that the word has for a particular individual. Dixon (1991), stated that words are related to their referents in an arbitrary and symbolic way, defined by social convention.

Syntactic categories of nouns: In explaining the structures of noun phrases, Stageberg and Oaks (2000), claimed that nouns do not all behave the same way and may be placed in various subclasses according to their behaviour. As stated earlier, the noun phrase consists of a head noun together with all the modifiers that accompany it, before and after.

For example:

(i)   *All my many old school <u>friends</u> of other days*

       modifiers   Head noun   modifiers

          who have passed away

Between the determiner and the head noun is the position for the adjective. For instance:

(ii)   <u>*determiner*</u>   <u>*adjective*</u>   <u>*head noun*</u>

          That   low   fence

However, the same position is also occupied by nouns that modify the noun as in example this example:

(iii) <u>*determiner*</u>   <u>*adjective*</u>   <u>*head noun*</u>

          Our   garden   fence

          Their   wire   fence

When an adjective and a noun both precede the noun head, the adjective precedes the modifying noun, thus:

(iv)   *determiner   adjective   noun   head noun*

          Our   sturdy   garden   fence

          Their   low   wire   fence

However, it is claimed that the pattern of 'determiner + adjective + noun + head noun' is ambiguous, as the adjective may modify the first or the second noun.

Consider this example:

(i)   a decent college graduate

This phrase may either mean "graduate of a decent college" or "decent graduate of a college". The overlapping of stress patterns may play a part in such ambiguities such as in the case of the following example:

(ii)   those hot car deals

Due to the different stress pattern, this sentence might have two different interpretations. It can be either 'hot car-deals' (car deals that are hot) or 'hot-car deals' (deals in hot car). On the other hand, it is claimed that the possessive of common nouns (not proper nouns) appears between the determiner and the noun head. For instance, these examples show the pattern:

(vii)   _determiner_   _possessive of common nouns_

        The   summers

    adjective   _noun_   _head noun_

      red   garden   roses

However, it is possible to have this kind of phrase, even though it sounds like normal English:

(x) _determiner_ _nouns_ _possessive of common nouns_   _head noun_

     The   garden   summer's   roses

In this case, Govindasamy (2007), concluded that the possessive of common nouns occurs anywhere between the determiner and the noun head, except between the Noun and Head Noun. However, according to Chandler (2002), most of the English noun phrases are introduced by a determiner. He claimed that after the determiner, we may see one adjective or two, (extremely rarely more than two), followed by the noun. The basic structure of the noun phrase is (determiner) + (adjective(s)) + noun which means that any noun phrase must have a noun or pronoun in it, and that noun or pronoun may or may not be preceded by a determiner and one or more adjectives, in that order. This is to say that the ordering of the noun phrase is fixed and unalterable. In order to strengthen his claim, he gives these examples:

(i) that big black cat

(ii) that cat big black

According to him, the sentence in (i) is grammatical and acceptable, while the sentence in (ii) is not. However, he agreed that beyond this basic description, the noun phrases are rather complicated i.e. with further items such as quantifiers and partitives (coming in front of the noun) and prepositional phrases (coming after the noun as the postmodifiers).

The Structuralist Approach: Language as a system of signs: The structuralists often viewed language as a semiotic system, because language has been thought to be a system where the individual elements ("signs") take their overall meaning from how they are combined with other elements Stageberg and Oaks (2000). According to Willis (2003), this *Structuralist Paradigm* discusses how language which has been thought as an abstract system by linguists should be analyzed. However, Carter (2001), modified the '*Structuralist Paradigm*' such that the scientific nature of the paradigm becomes apparent. In defining and categorizing signs, Saussure terms 'a sign' (e.g. a word) as consisting of two parts. One part is the sound form, and the other part is its meaning. For example, a '*man*' has its meaning because '*man*' is not '*woman*'. The sound form of "*man*" which is [mæn] only has its meaning when it is attached to the concept of '*man*'. Meanwhile, a '*tree*' also has its own meaning because it is different from other signs. We can say that a sign serves as an entity which allows someone to interpret something that represents meaning in reference to something else. This happens due to the "arbitrariness of the linguistic sign" which revolves around the idea of form and meaning.

Tobin (1990), pointed out that "we make meanings through our creation and interpretation of signs" which are taking the forms of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts or objects. Such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. Likewise, Pierce also shared the same idea which is "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" Govindasamy (2007). With regards to the idea of describing language as a semiotic system, Saussure offered a "dyadic" or two-part model of the sign in his sign-based theory. He classified language as being composed of: a) a **signifier** (*significant*) - the form which the sign takes and b) the **signified** (*signifie'*) - the concept it represents Chandler (2002) and Contini-Morava and Goldberg (1995).

Sentence-based versus sign-based linguistics theory: Based on his definition of language "as a system of signs" or "a system of systems composed of various sub-systems (revolving around the notion of the linguistic sign) which are organized internally and systematically related to each other and used by human beings to communicate", Saussure manifested the relationship of the signs in an utterance through the notion of "sign-based linguistic theory". Saussure's restrictive conception on language as a system of signs that the structure of the language is actually determined by its communication functions (as the language is considered as a code consisting of meaningful signs), has always been disputed.

Saussure stated two basic points which distinguishes his sign-based theory from the sentence-based approach. It has been claimed that his **sign-based theory** deviates from sentence-based theory based on: a) the status of 'sentence meaning' and b) its mode of explanation of 'sentence-level phenomena'. To the researcher's knowledge, sign-based theory is only concerned with the idea of signs composed of form and meaning. So in this case, the syntactic rules are totally ignored as it deals with sentence-based theory only.

In sign-based theory, there is an emphasis on observing natural discourse. It includes spoken or written discourse, which deals with the situations in which actual messages are being communicated, rather than asking speakers to make judgments about sentences invented by the linguists.

However, in a rule-governed system, the relationship between meaning and the symbols employed is an arbitrary one, but the arrangement of the symbols in relation to one another is non-arbitrary. The one-to-one relationship between signal and meaning gives us the idea of one-to-one correspondence between the signaling units and the things signaled. Each sentence has a determinate number of meanings; creativity is achieved by assembling the prefabricated parts into previously unused configurations (but only ones that are legitimized by the rules Reid (1991).

In contrast, the general concept of **sentence-based theory** deals with the idea of formal determination in each sentence. For example, a singular noun must get along with a singular verb such as in "*She eats cookies*".

Sign-based studies on word order: As mentioned earlier, the present study explores the word order distribution in English noun phrases by using the sign-based approach. The reverse order signifies not only the basic modification relationship, but also the modification of a noun with a particular lexical meaning, i.e. the lexical meaning of the noun is presupposed by the adjective before modification.

3. Methodology

This research is a comparative study on the word order distribution in noun phrases for both genres of texts (literary and non-literary) through textual analysis. An analysis of the structures of noun phrases in English is provided, and the results are compared so obtained to corresponding aspects of nominal structure in English. The reason the two genres were selected for the study was to explore if there are any inherent similarities or differences in terms of word order pattern in noun phrases between them. The data for the analysis has been culled from two sources: first, 20 non-literary texts from the magazine '*Newsweek*' while, second, literary texts are extracted from 10 short stories. The 20 non-literary texts are between 1500 - 2000 words per article, while the 10 short stories which are between 2000 - 3000 words per text were selected from Pickering's compilation of fiction. The texts were chosen randomly and only noun phrases were selected from these texts to be used as the data for the researcher's analysis.

The analysis was carried out by using the sign-based and meaning-based frameworks proposed by Saussure and Reid as the words will be categorized according to their meaning. Examining the structure or word order distribution in noun phrases would enable the researcher to obtain a deep understanding of the noun phrase structures proposed by the traditionalist and descriptive linguists. The researcher basically uses the patterns that are proposed by the traditionalists in analyzing the structure of the noun phrases. However, a slightly different way of analyzing the structures was carried out as the researcher adapted the sign-based approach suggested by Saussure and Reid's interpretation of the meaning of the words in helping the researcher to categorize the words.

The Theoretical Framework: In this study, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to analyze the data. In order to make categorizations in the table, the researcher divided the features of the noun phrases into eight (8) main categories. The eight basic categories of the word order patterns which commonly occurred in noun phrases are:

 (i)   proper noun/ pronoun

 (ii)   head noun + 'Ø'/ head noun + 's'

 (iii)   descriptor (desc) + head noun

 (iv)   determiner of articles (art) + head noun

 (v)   classifier (clas) + head noun

 (vi)   possessor (poss) + head noun

 (vii)   quantifier (q) + head noun

 (viii) demonstrator (dem) + head noun

In terms of qualitative approach, the researcher first highlighted all the noun phrases based in the texts. After that, all of the related noun phrases are put under the first column (Noun Phrases) and a tick '√' is placed in the appropriate column based on their word order distribution. The categorization of these noun phrases will be based on varieties of NPs as shown above. Under each column, there are some sub-categories as some complex word order distributions exist. For example; under [descriptor + head noun], we have descriptor + determiner + head noun, determiner + classifier + head noun n etc. Later on, quantitatively, the tick '√' for each category will be counted to determine which one of them is the most common word order pattern for the English Noun Phrases, and to find out the irregularities between the two types of the texts.

4. Results and Discussion

From the findings, it is revealed that the basic word order of a simple noun phrase for both genres of texts is structured by 'determiner (articles) + modifier(s) + head noun'. In this case, the modifier(s) can either be the 'descriptor', the 'classifier', the 'possessor' or the 'demonstrator'. In analyzing the word order distribution of the English noun phrases system, the results disclose several common and irregular patterns in both genres.

In literary texts (i.e. short stories), under the category of 'Nouns', 'pronouns' contributed to the highest percentage of occurrences, that is 2509. However the findings on non-literary texts show that 'Proper Nouns' has the highest occurrence (1160), whereas there are only 856 'pronouns' in the non-literary texts. In short, it can be assumed that the usage of 'pronouns' is more frequent in literary texts as the writers use the 'pronouns' to substitute the names of the characters, the places, and etc. In some cases, the use of 'pronouns' (especially 'I') is recurrently employed and recorded high percentage in comparison to the others in a particular short story as the writer uses the pronoun 'I' as the speaker of the story.

Under the category of 'determiner', there are the 'descriptor', the 'classifier', the 'possessor' and the 'quantifier'. In 'determiner' (articles) case, the occurrence of 'determiner' (articles - 'the') + head noun' is higher than the indefinite articles 'a/an' + head noun in literary texts. 'The' + head noun has 866 occurrences in all short stories, whereas 'a/an' + head noun only has 341 occurrences. The use of 'the' + head noun is more recurrent in short stories as it signifies the definite mark of the head nouns. Moreover, in literary and non-literary texts, there are also occurrences of 'determiner (articles) + (descriptor/classifier/possessor/quantifier) + head noun'. In most cases, the 'determiner' (articles) is located in front of the noun phrases. However, there are some irregular cases whereby there is another feature located in front of the 'determiner'. For example, the findings in literary texts disclose that that there is an occurrence where there is a 'demonstrator' located in front of the 'determiner' Thus, based on this evidence, we cannot conclude that the 'determiner' (articles) is always featured in the noun phrases by always being located in front of the phrases. Rather, in certain cases, other features such as the 'demonstrator' take the place.

In terms of the 'possessor', it is noted that in both types of texts, the 'possessor' is always located before the 'descriptor', the 'classifier' or even the 'quantifier' as in 'determiner (articles) + possessor + classifier + head noun'. On the other hand, in most cases, the 'quantifier' can be located in front of the phrase, either followed by the 'determiner' (articles), the 'descriptor', or the 'classifier' and the head noun. The results on literary texts show that there is occurrence whereby the 'quantifier' is located in front of the 'demonstrator'. In addition, in all noun phrases, it is observed that the 'descriptor' always comes before the 'classifier'.

To conclude, it can be said that in both genres of texts, all the 'modifiers' are not in a fixed position, except the 'head noun' which is always located at the end of a noun phrase. Regarding the word order distribution of noun phrases in English, the findings on literary texts (i.e. short stories) reveal that, in most cases the noun phrases are structured by 'determiner (articles) + possessor / quantifier/ descriptor / classifier + head noun'. However, in certain cases, the 'demonstrator' takes place in front of the 'determiner'. Findings on non-literary texts also show the same patterns, but there is no occurrence of the 'demonstrator + determiner (articles) + head noun' reported.

In terms of the functions of word order distribution in noun phrases, findings reveal that the 'determiner' (articles) functions to give a reference to the head noun. For example, 'a/an' provides a clue that the identification of the doer is vague whereas 'the' provides a more precise reference of the head noun. 'Descriptor' on the other hand offers a description on the head noun, while in classifying and giving a specific type or class to the head noun, the 'classifier' plays a role. Besides, the use of 'possessor' is meant to signify the possession of something by an identity (person or objects). In referring the quantity of an item, the 'quantifier' is used. Meanwhile, the 'demonstrator' ('this', 'these', 'that' and 'those') is used to imply the level of proximity of the noun (from the speaker). In another sense, 'this' implies proximity (to the speaker), while 'that' implies non-proximate or distant (from the speaker).

The results on both genres of texts show that there are some occurrences of irregular word order distribution of noun phrases. In categorizing the noun phrases into their categories, the literary texts (i.e. short stories) posed several difficulties due to the informal language that is used. Thus, in solving this problem, the researcher decided to apply the pragmatic way in defining the meaning of the word(s). Instead, in certain cases, there are some cases whereby the numbers are not the 'quantifier', rather they are classified as the 'classifiers'. In this case, the researcher is applying the pragmatic way in defining numbers as to make it plausible with the sentence's message.

5. Conclusion

This study which was oriented on functional explanation and the idea of structuralism is an attempt to provide a solution for the lack of understanding of the word order distribution of noun phrases. Based on the findings from the study, some conclusions can be reached. In the first place, it is found that based on 'sign-based' theory, it has proven that language features such as noun phrases can be learnt as a system as all of the noun phrases can be classified into categories according to their functions. Thus, it can be assumed that in this study, the noun functions can appear to have a relational meaning amongst themselves as all of the nouns have their meaning based on the 'difference' that they have from the others. The end result of this study shows that in both genres – literary and non-literary texts have similar word order distributions of the noun phrases. The 'modifiers' in all the noun phrases are flexible in nature and they can be positioned anywhere to suit the intended message of the speaker. The findings reveal that the 'determiner' is not always positioned at the head of the phrase. Rather, in certain cases where the 'demonstrator' occurs, the 'determiner' is located after the 'demonstrator'. Thus, in this particular structure, the 'demonstrator' comes first, followed by the 'determiner' and 'head noun'. The findings also show that the 'possessor' can be located anywhere between the 'determiner' and the head noun. However, in another case, it was noted by the researcher that throughout the analysis, the 'descriptor' was found to be positioned before the classifier in all of the noun phrases such as in 'determiner + descriptor + classifier + head noun'. Thus, the claim made by [26] that the ordering of the noun phrase is fixed and unalterable is totally rejected by the researcher on the basis of her findings. The findings reveal that the position of the 'modifiers' (descriptor, classifier, quantifier, possessor and demonstrator) is not fixed; rather they can occur anywhere dependent on the intended message that the speaker wants to deliver to his or her listener.

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