The Structure and Functions of the English Nominal Groups within the English Grammar Structure

Bassey Ekpenyong & John Nkpot Tanyi
Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Calabar, Nigeria
drbaekpenyong@yahoo.com, tanyi.john@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the nominal group structure within the grammatical framework of the English language. Further investigations were carried out on the functions performed by the sub-structure within the larger clause structure on the one hand and the rank-shifted approach was adopted. A total of 14 (fourteen) randomly selected sentences were isolated and 25 (twenty-five) nominal groups were isolated and analyzed. The study found a preponderance of rank-shifted structures within the 'q' element with its attendant difficulty in pedagogical placement considering its similarity with the clause structure in non-simple sentences. This finding demands further explications for a fuller outcome in grammatical conceptualization of English.
(Word count: 105)

Key terms: English nominal group, structure, functions, contexts.

Introduction

In this work, we have discussed the nature of the nominal group, the structure or constitution of the nominal group in English. This was followed by an assemblage of nominal groups isolated from written and spoken communication in English.

Any discussion on the nominal group must account for the compositional or constituent structuring of the group. In the first instance, it should be noted that in talking about groups in language analysis, we are referring to "an expansion of a word or a combination of words built up on the basis of a particular logical relation that

appears intermediate between the rank of a clause and that of a word" (Halliday 1985, p. 159). It is a grammatical unit below the clause but not less than the word. In the grammatical rank scale, the group occupies the middle position as follows:

    Sentence
    Clause
    Group
    Word
    Morpheme
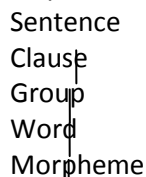
Invariably, the sentence comprises the clause; the clause comprises the group which is in turn composed of words and words are made up of morpheme(s). This arrangement forms an orderly hierarchy which is however not very strict as it is possible to find a clause functioning within a group or a group functioning in the slot of a word within the structure of the group. This notion is referred to as rank shifting.

The group unit operates within the structure of the clause which in its basic form carries the subject slot, the Predicator slot, the Complement slot and the Adjunct slot. In this configuration, the nominal group almost always realizes the subject and the complement in their full possibilities. When the nominal group is found within the Adjunct, it can be said to have rank shifted to occupy a particular slot within the adjectival group or the adverbial group or the prepositional group which realizes the adjunct basically.

Our investigation in this study is to find out how the nominal groups behave in English. The nominal group in English "is typically a group with a noun or pronoun as its head" (Bloor & Bloor 2004, p.31). Wallwork (1978) also asserts that the nominal group has a head word (a noun or a pronoun) which is indispensable or a compulsory element where the nominal group is a clause (pp.70-74). Sometimes, it is difficult to identify the head. The head word in the nominal group may be preceded by the parts called the modifier. It may also be succeeded by the part called the qualifier. The structure of the nominal group therefore is (m) h (q) signifying that the (m) and (q) elements are optional while there may be many modifiers; it is often difficult to find more than vone or two qualifiers.

The m parts can further be labeled as deictics-d-(determiners), ordinal -o- (numerals), epithets -e- (colour terms), etc. In the final analysis, a piece of language patterned as a sentence consists of morphemes patterned into words, words patterned into groups, groups patterned into clauses, clauses patterned into sentences. The sentences too can be of different kinds, major and minor, and the major and minor themselves comprise many different types.

2.0 English Nominal Group: A General Characterization
The nominal group in English comprises three elements: the modifier (m), the head h and the qualifier (q). The letters represent the elements respectively of the three elements as represented above, the h element, not enclosed, is the compulsory element. A single word functioning as the head can constitute a group. Invariably, other elements (m) and (q) are optional.

The modifier element comes before the noun or pronoun (the head) and can occur in a large number while the qualifier element comes after the head in a few numbers. The head is usually one unit; a single word or in a compound form.

As stated in Tomori (1977, p. 58), English allows up to eleven modified items before the head as follows:
    All (1) the (2) first (3) five (4) strong (5) huge (6) rotund (7) young (8) white (9) African (10) sea (11) horses (head).
    It should be noted that English allows for a specific order of occurrence of the modifiers, usually referred to as the order of the adjectives as follows:
    General Word-Age-Size-Colour-Participial-Origin-Type.
    Unless for extra-semantic effect or poetic alternation, it is abnormal to interchange the position of the individual modifier elements.
The structure of the modifier element may be univariate or multivariate. It is univariate when all the words represent a particular slot in the pre-head structure e.g.
    General payment office.

Both 'general' and 'payment' occupy a particular slot and refers to the same head (office). In contrast, there may be more than one slot element in the pre-head structure as follows:

The intelligent young man.

Here, 'the' occupies a distinct slot before 'intelligent' and 'young' which also occupies a separate slot in the pre-head structure. This is multivariate structure because the position of 'the' is distinct.

As stated earlier, the nominal group in English can be complex as in:

All the other ten very worn school books in the library.

Or simple as in:

The man himself.

The nominal group is complex when there are many items realizing a particular element in structure as in the first example above. It is simple when each of the slots in the structure is realized by one element each.

The head word is classified according to the patterning of modifier and qualifier with which it occurs. Since it is possible to have simple nominal groups, there is the notion of class substantive i.e. those words which operate the head element. They are nouns and pronouns only.

Pronouns are not usually modified, though they can be qualified. The qualifiers of pronouns are themselves clauses or groups or somewhat restricted types as in:

Anyone [who comes here] will be punished.

In particular, English pronouns cannot be modified by the definite or indefinite article. Also, proper nouns serving as heads can neither be modified nor qualified. To this extent, pronouns and proper nouns serving as head words differ from other types of items that can serve as head words.

Before proceeding to further discuss the 'h' element, we can specifically classify the 'm' slot into the following word classes:

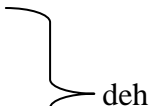A - deictic (at which operates the word-class determiner)
O – ordinal (at which operates the word-class numeral)
E – epithet (at which operates the same word class adjective)

A look at the deictic element, d, reveals some general features of English expressions. There are the possibilities like the predeictic (all, both, half), the deictic (the, this, that, his, its, Akpan's mothers, my, a, any, another, no, neither, every, several, an) and the post deictic (other, same). An essential characteristic of the 'h' element in the English nominal group is that it contains the final stressed syllable as in:

> The blue house
> The green leaf
> The old woman ⟩ deh
> The (q) element comes after the head. It can be a single word, (an adjective, a pronoun or an adverb) as in:

> Ngozi herself h (q) = pronoun
> Programme on air h (q) = adverbial
> Anyone fair h (q) = adjective
> An observable feature of the 'q' element in English is that it is typically realized by a complete group or clause. That is, another complete unit operates as an element in the structure of the nominal group. This phenomenon is called "rank-shifting" e.g.

> The man [who came here yesterday].
> M   h   q
> The explanation here is that in the grammatical rank scale, the group comes after the word and before the clause. The clause is therefore higher in rank than the group. It is used in analyzing the components of the sentence. For example, a sentence is said to contain a clause or clauses. A group contains a word or words. When, therefore, we have a clause, as in the example above, functioning in a slot, in the group structure, it is said to be rankshifted.

3.0 Contexts of Occurrence

Contexts of occurrence is a term we have coined based on the fact that language is not realized in isolated sentences but by a varying number of utterances or sentences which somehow hang together to form a coherent stretch of language of whatever length either spoken or written, a text. This is closely related to the attempt to describe the purposes to which language is put.

In the consideration of the purposes and contexts, important questions like what is the language being used for? What is the purpose of utterance a,b and c are asked.

One way to look at the contexts of usage in English like in any other language is to look at the specific types of sentences, the basic units of grammar that occur in a particular text. Every text has one or more sentence types explainable in terms of the following characteristics.

i) **Statement (declarative structure):** the subject is always realised and normally precedes the verb phrase. Aarts (2001) describes a declarative expression (sentence) as "a syntactic configurations which usually display an unmarked order of the functional categories of subject, predictor, direct object", etc (p.58). The declarative is an utterance made for the purpose of stating something. E,g.
I like eggs.
The man planted yam.

ii) **Question (interrogative structure):** This carries a question mark in writing. It conveys utterances made for the purpose of eliciting information. Either the subject and initial element of the verb phrase are transposed or the structure is also preceded by an interrogative function item called the wh-word. E.g.
Who is this?
Where are you?

iii) **Command (imperative structure):** This carries exclamation mark or full stop. It carries utterances made for the purpose of setting someone to do or not to do something. Here, the subject is normally not realised and the verb is imperative in mood, signifying the basic form (Aarts, 2001, p. 61). E.g.
Sit down!
Go home!

iv) **Exclamation (exclamation structure):** This carries utterances made for the purpose of expressing reaction to an experience based on elements which in statements normally follow the verb placed in initial position and preceded by items such as what or how. E.g.
How great is the Lord!

It is a goal!

The exclamation mark is normal in this kind of structure. It is important to note that statements, questions, commands and exclamations structures as espoused above are deployed for different communicative roles and certain syntactic characteristics realizable in grammatical construction (Aremo, 2010). The above structures can be found in virtually all forms of expressions or texts, such as; Conversations, narratives (stories), written correspondences, drama dialogues, poetic lines, news commentaries, newspaper editorials, military commands, church sermons, etc. In each of these texts, however, there may be the dominance of one or two types of the structure listed above. We shall therefore isolate randomly sentences from the various texts available in English.

Another way to talk about contexts in any analysis of this kind is to ask where within the grammatical units (sentences, clauses, groups, words and morphemes) the nominal group can be located. Based on the earlier statement, that the clause comprises groups, it is to be expected that the nominal group functions in the clause structure either as the subject or the complement. We shall therefore in isolating sentences, also further break the sentences into clause in order to isolate the nominal groups in the slots of the subject and the complement.

4.0 Presentation of Data
Our data comprises different sentences (simple and non-simple) isolated randomly from different texts (written or spoken in English). We shall number the sentences 1 to 20 and analyse them, first into clauses and then into structural elements within the clause structure. We shall then pick out the nominal groups from the corpus for our analysis. The sentences are as follows:
1. Akpan saw Nkechi.
2. The man had built a house.
3. The old man had been writing some letters.
4. The man who came to dinner is thought to have stolen a wallet full of notes.

5. When did the old man travel?
6. Oh! What a fine well dressed girl!
7. "Nkechi; where are you going"? Asked Ngozi.
8. "I have a class at room 6 at the academic block": said Nkechi.
9. "When will that intelligent young lecturer come to the class"? Asked Ngozi.
10. "I cannot tell" answered Nkechi.
11. If I release the documents I have, all hell will be let loose.
12. Our attention has been drawn to some of our marketers, sub-contractors, architects, etc who have left the company but still go around using our samples to source jobs and in turn, supply the clients sub-standard goods not bought from the company.
13. The authority will only enter into correspondence with successful prospective constructors only.
14. Bring all you old clothes to the boutique.
15. This tree is a community's god.
16. I write to ask about your present condition of health.
17. John and Ike both belong to the football club, but John is a better player than his brother.
18. John likes playing more than his brother does and so practices more.
19. In the tournament, John exhibits a higher skill than Ike.
20. Both are however good players

5.0 Analyses of Data

Table 1

Sentence no	Structural type	Function/context	No of nominal group
1	Simple	Declarative (statement)	2
2	Simple	Declarative (statement)	2
3	Simple	Declarative (statement)	2
4	Non-simple (complex)	Declarative (statement)	2
5	Simple	Interrogative	1

		(question)	
6	Simple	Exclamation	1
7	Simple	Conservation (question)	1
8	Simple	Conservation (answer)	1
9	Simple	Conservation (question)	1
10	Simple	Conservation (answer)	1
11	Non-simple (complex)	Declarative (conditional statement)	2
12	Non-simple (complex)	Declarative (statement)	6
13	Simple	Declarative (statement)	2
14	Simple	Imperative (instruction)	1
15	Simple	Declarative (statement)	2
16	Simple	Declarative (statement)	2
17	Non-simple (complex)	Declarative (statement)	5
18	Non-simple (compound)	Declarative (statement)	3
19	Simple	Declarative (statement)	2
20	Simple	Declarative (statement)	2

Table 2

No	Nominal group	Element	Structure	Source

1	Akpan	Subject	H	Sentence 1
2	Nkechi	Complement	H	Sentence 1
3	The man	Subject	mh	Sentence 2
4	A horse	Complement	Mh	Sentence 2
5	The old man	Subject	mmh	Sentence 2
6	Some letters	Complement	mh	Sentence 3
7	The man who came to dinner	Complement	mhq (rankshifted q)	Sentence 4
8	A wallet full of notes	Complement	Mhq (rankshifted)	Sentence 4
9	The old man	Subject	mmh	Sentence 5
10	A fine well dressed girl	Complement	mmmmh	Sentence 6
11	Nkechi	Vocative	h	Sentence 7
12	You	Subject	h	Sentence 7
13	I	Subject	h	Sentence 8
14	A class	Complement	mh	Sentence 8
15	That intelligent young lecturer	Subject	mmmh	Sentence 9
16	I	Subject	h	Sentence 10
17	I	Subject	h	Sentence 11
18	The documents	Complement	mh	Sentence 11
19	Our attention		mh	Sentence 12
20	Architects who have left the company	Complement	hq(rankshifted)	Sentence 12
21	The authority	Subject	mhq	Sentence 12
22	All your old	Complement	mmmh	Sentence

	clothes			16
23	John and Ike	Subject (compound)	h+h (multivariate)	Sentence 17
24	A higher skill	Complement	mmh	Sentence 19
25	Good players	Complement	mh	Sentence 20

6.0   Discussion of Data and Findings

We have isolated a total of 20 sentences of various structural and functional forms. We isolated 25 nominal groups from the 20 sentences stating their functions in the clause structure of the sentences. We have also provided the constituent structures of the groups to include: h, mh, mmh, mhq, mmmmq and hq.

The h element

This is realised by the following items:

Akpan   -   proper noun
Nkechi -   proper noun
Man   -   common noun, singular, masculine
House   -   common noun
Letters -   common noun, plural
Wallet   -   common noun
Girl   -   common noun, singular, feminine
You   -   pronoun, second person, singular
I   -   pronoun, first person, singular
Class   -   collective noun
Lecturer   -   common noun
Attention   -   abstract noun
Clothes -   concrete noun
Skill   -   abstract noun
Players -   common noun, plural

From the above, we can see that in English, nouns of various categories and pronouns of diverse "person" and "number" occupy the "h" slot in the nominal group. The nouns occur in the form of proper nouns (names of persons), common nouns (generally identified in the same form), collective nouns, abstract and concrete nouns.

We discovered that the proper nouns which realize the head (h) do not take the modifier and the qualifier as do other nouns. This also holds five for the pronoun "I" and "You". This is an interesting finding which could be used to test accuracy in the productions of some non-native speaker of English who may transfer a contrasting feature from their native language into English.

The m element

We have noted from the data that the 'm' slot occurs in various forms ranging from 1 to 4. They include the following:

The	-	determiner
A	-	determiner
Old	-	epithet
Some	-	ordinal
Our	-	ordinal
All	-	numeral
Good	-	epithet

From the above, we see that the 'm' element occurs in the forms of determiner, epithet, ordinal, numeral and epithet in the structure "a fine well dressed" (mmmmh). We have determiner, epithet, epithet and the participial.

The q element

The 'q' element is not as many as the 'm' element in our date. The data reveals all the 'q' elements are in the form of rankshifted structures as follows:

a) a wallet [[full of notes]]. m h q
b) the man [[who came to dinner]]. m h q
c) architects [[who have left the company]]. m h q

The q in (a) above is a rankshifted group which itself has the structure mmh. The q in (b) and (c) are rankshifted clauses which have the structures SPA and SPC respectively. This feature of rank shifting is a possible source of difficulty for some non-native users who may want to analyse them as separate grammatical units in the complex sentences. It is wise to recognize them as integral parts of the nominal group. As a matter of fact, embedding and nominal group complexes inherent in the q element in the nominal group, place further constraints to learners/users of English as a second language. According to Bloor and Bloor (2013), embedding occurs within the q

element in the nominal group when a prepositional phrase post modifying a headword in a nominal group contains within itself another prepositional phrase. On the other hand, nominal group complexes are realised when two or more groups combine as a single constituent to jointly fulfil subject or complement function. The source provided the following illustrative examples thus:

    a) the solution to the problem of inflation… (mhq)

    b) it proved to be *the first of many steps on the road to ruin*

    c) … Otto Loewi, an Austrian physiologist awoke in the night [….] (Bloor and Bloor pp. 147-149).

Reasoning along lines, Richard and Schmidt (2012), also consider compound nominal clauses acting as qualifiers in the nominal group as a source of problem to the learner of English as a second language. For instance, the analyst needs to note that in the sentence; "the students who enrolled late and who have not yet filled in their cards…Friday", the qualifier (q) is a compound nominal clause – "who enrolled late and who have not…." In a nutshell, the q element in the nominal group could be a rankshifted clause, a prepositional phrase(s) or apposition. These need be learnt and mastered by the second language learner to be proficient in the analysis of the language.

Summary and Conclusion

We examined the English nominal group paying particular attention to its structure and functions in contexts. In its structure or component parts, the English nominal group has three elements of structure. These are modifier (m), head (h) and qualifier (q) - mhq. The m and q elements are optional while the h element is mandatory. The h element is usually nouns or pronouns. The m element always comes before the 'h' while the q element comes after the h. When only the 'h' element obtains in a nominal group, such is described as a simple nominal group. A complex nominal group results when the m and q elements are present in the group. Although many items can occur in the m position, one item as well can occur in the m position in the nominal group. On the other hand, q is always, complex in nature because it occurs as rankshifted clauses or group complexes. Functionally, nominal group function as subject (S) and as complement (C) in the clause or sentence. Subjects and complements

could be simple or complex. Knowledge of this is very significant especially in written speech in English.

Many analysts of English as second language, could have some problem analyzing the structure of the English nominal group. This stems from the complexities inherent in the items that comprise the modifier (m) and qualifier (q). No matter the number of items found in the m position, for example, the syntactic order of deictic, ordinal, epithet and nominal (headword), must be maintained for coherence, clarity and intelligibility. The q position could be filled by items such as clauses usually in the rankshifted forms and other nominal complexes. Once these are identified and analysed as such, the issue of considering them as separate grammatical units in the complex sentences may not arise. Only nouns as headwords in the nominal group can undergo some form of modification. Pronouns as headwords in clauses or sentence(s) cannot undergo any form of modification.

REFERENCES

Aarts, B. (2001). *Modern linguistics: English syntax and argumentation (*2nd ed.). London: Palgrave.

Aremo, B. (2010). *An introduction to English sentence.* Ibadan: Scribo.

Bloor, T. & Bloor, M. (2004). *The functional analysis of English: A Hallidayan approach* (2nd ed.). London: Hodder Arnold.

Bloor, T. & Bloor, M. (2013). *The functional analysis of English: A Hallidayan approach* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

Halliday, M. A. K.(1985). *An introduction to functional grammar.* London: Edward Arnold.

Richards, J. C. & Schmidt, R. (2012). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics* (3rd ed.). London: Longman.

Tomori, S. H. (1977). *The morphology and syntax of present-day English: An introduction.* Ibadan: Heinemann.

Wallwork, J. F. (1985). *Language and linguistics: An introduction to the study of language* (2nd ed.). London: Heinemann.