

*Daniela Hăisan

Faculty of Letters and Communication Sciences,
Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava,
 13 Universității Street, 720229 Suceava, Romania
 e-mail: danielahaisan@litere.usv.ro

(STEREO)TYPICAL ISSUES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING
 NOUNS AND NOUN PHRASES

Abstract

Starting from our own experience of teaching morphology (the noun phrase) to first-year students, we are going to identify and label the main challenges this grammar issue poses to both English majors and minors. These challenges have to do basically with “fuzzy concepts” and the interrelation of syntax and semantics. Our beyond-methods approach, based on empirical observation(s) and assumptions as a result of closely monitoring and evaluating the learning process, heavily relies on the “organic metaphor” according to which second language acquisition is more like growing a garden than building a wall.

Keywords: noun (phrases), determiner, (pre-)modification, countability, didactics

In the first stages of learning English, it is highly probable and fairly logical for pupils to get in touch with many nouns first, before other parts of speech. In the third grade, for instance, nouns are taught in relation to verbs and only later are they introduced in separate but meaningful (from the point of view of discourse) chunks of language. In higher education, where the traditional approach of the English Language still prevails, thus entailing a strictly structuralist, rather than functional view on grammar, nouns are to be studied as part of the noun phrase.

Our own “age-old” experience of teaching morphology (the noun phrase, henceforth NP) to first-year students is going to serve as a starting point for our investigation. In the first instance we will identify and label the main challenges this otherwise easily graspable and entertaining grammar issue poses to both English majors and minors. These challenges have to do basically with concepts perceived as fuzzy, with learners being only faintly aware of the different ways words collocate in English as compared with their native language or other language(s) they study, but also with the interrelation of syntax and semantics.

A few things are to be taken into account: the first concerns age-related aspects. In first-year students we have young adults as a target, and this does not mean a critical age when learning mechanisms tend to atrophy and need to be supplemented by other compensatory ways of learning. Young adults are, on the contrary, in more ways than one, closer to 9 and 10-year-olds’ tendency to learn, according to Jeremy Harmer, “more indirectly rather than directly” (Harmer, 1991: 61). Therefore, while taking into account the three kinds of competence suggested by Tikunoff (1983, q. in Richards, 2001: 171-172), namely:

- *participative competence* (the ability to respond appropriately to class demands and the procedural rules for accomplishing them);
- *interactional competence* (the ability to respond both to classroom rules of discourse and social rules of discourse, interacting appropriately with peers while accomplishing class tasks) and
- *academic competence* (the ability to acquire new skills, assimilate new information, and construct new concepts),

*Daniela Hăisan is Senior Lecturer in Linguistics and English Language at *Ștefan cel Mare* University of Suceava, Romania. Her research interests include English morphology, terminology, cultural translation and discourse analysis. She has published widely on translation and morphosyntax.

as well as other cognitive or affective factors responsible for differences between individual learners, we will nevertheless resort to a beyond-methods approach, based on empirical observation(s) and assumptions as a result of closely monitoring and evaluating the learning process.

Secondly, it is our firm belief that the ways in which learners *negotiate meaning* pave the road towards understanding a foreign language. That is why we metaphorically perceive the process of learning another language not like constructing a wall, with “the easy grammatical bricks laid at the bottom” and the learner’s task being that of getting “the linguistic bricks in the right order: first the word bricks, and then the sentence bricks” (Nunan, 2001: 191); rather, our premise is the “organic metaphor” which sees second language acquisition more like growing a garden than building a wall. “From such a perspective, learners do not learn one thing perfectly, one item at a time, but numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly). The linguistic flowers do not all appear at the same time, nor do they all grow at the same rate. Some even appear to wilt, for a time, before renewing their growth.” (Nunan, *op. cit.*: 192) Applied to our topic, this translates as: there are gaps in the process of (teaching and) learning NPs that need identifying and and possibly filling.

One of our basic concerns in teaching noun phrases has always been that of raising awareness of the versatility of the NP as a syntactic element of a sentence, as well as of its semantic complexity. We have been able to identify via periodic evaluations the following recurring situation (related to the label “fuzzy concepts”): while it is fairly easy for the students to grasp the meaning of *noun phrase* (by associating it either with the Romanian term “locuțiune” or with the French “group nominal”), the category of *determiner* tends to remain obscure (they either mistake it for *modifier* or cannot tell the two concepts apart). Simply put, determiners, a relatively recent introduction to grammar terminology, are a cluster of words which accompany the noun (phrase) and *determine* definiteness, quantity, proximity, number or possession. Downing & Locke see it as “an element in the syntactic or ‘logical’ structure of the NG [nominal group]” (2006: 424). The easiest way out of this conundrum would be providing plenty of examples from both categories; another is to emphasize and illustrate how determiners signal a usage or a function, whereas modifiers add information (to a noun, verb or other element in the sentence). Clear-cut distinctions are often difficult to make when one comes across definitions which involve both terms, like: “A determiner is a modifier of a noun...” (grammar.yourdictionary.com/parts-of-speech/nouns/what/what-is-a-determiner.html) which readily engenders a likelihood of confusion between determiners and quantifiers as well.

Grammatical features of countability represent another (possibly) thorny issue. As pointed out by Downing & Locke (*op. cit.*: 405), “English obliges us to make a distinction with regard to how a referent is cognitively perceived: whether as a discrete, countable entity, such as *cow*, or as an indivisible, noncountable ‘mass’ entity, such as *beef*.” When it comes to the *count / non-count* distinction, nouns with *dual class membership* (mass nouns which can be shifted from one class (noncount) to another (count): *butter(s)*, *cheese(s)*, *water(s)*, *wine(s)*) are sometimes problematic, and this stems from being oblivious to the relativity of pluralising. Countable uses of mass nouns and uncountable uses of count nouns may prove equally problematic. It is fairly easy for Romanian speakers learning English to understand *mass nouns* if they concentrate on the idea of substance, of stuff things are made of. Nevertheless, “problem mass nouns” like *money* or *advice* or *information* or *news* may lead to concord errors or a faulty pronoun reference because, even when speaking English, they are conceptualised in Romanian terms, as countable entities.

Carefully chosen examples, however, take care even of the divergent semantics of one and the same plural form of a basically uncountable noun (as in the following joke: A: ‘*My grandfather lived to be ninety and never used glasses.* B: ‘*Well, lots of people prefer to drink from the bottle.*’). While the use of cardinal numbers to test countability is generally useful, for more accuracy one should also verify the range of determiners the tested noun admits, such as the indefinite article or the plural agreement with the verb.

As for the countability markers of non-count referents (nouns evoking various types of container, followed by *of*, also called *partitive phrases*), they fall under “vague collocations”. Criss-crossing the list of quantifiers might be necessary in order to clarify why, if Romanian “un fir de” is “a blade of” in English, “un fir de praf” is definitely not the same as “un fir de iarbă”, and why “a blade of dust” is therefore unacceptable.

One last thought on plurality: combining phonetic transcription with the regular plural forms (in *-s* / *-es*) or foreign plurals has also become a necessity with certain groups of students.

Recently coined dual gender nouns come in handy if you want to avoid sexual bias in language and criticism of sexist extremists: *supervisor* for *foreman*, *member of congress* for *congressman*, *firefighter* for *fireman*. The history of *chairman*, *chairwoman* and ultimately *chairperson* is the sort of anecdote that might function mnemonically. The association of *chairperson* with the extreme views of some feminists makes it a common source of humour, as the norm in the world of industry and commerce continues to be male domination.

On the other hand, the use of *he*, *she* and *they* as gender-neutral pronouns is also a matter of debate. *He* is no longer large enough to include *she* and is therefore considered discriminatory. For Downing & Locke, “[i]n writing, the combination *s/he* is becoming common, but it is not transferable to the spoken language. The disjunctive *he or she* becomes cumbersome if repeated too often. A further alternative, the use of *they* with both singular and plural verb forms, is becoming more extensive (...)” (Downing & Locke, *op. cit.*: 412)

Some first-year students find it hard to cope with the semantic types that genitives can display: possessive / subject / object / part-whole / measure genitives. Here, syntax is called for to clarify the mechanism. Displaying the noun’s divergent semantics into scalar terms (*e.g.* the scale of countability – in order to illustrate noun number; the scale of animacy – in order to illustrate noun gender or the genitive case) is also a valid alternative to clear-cut oppositions (*i.e.* dramatically oversimplified explanations).

As for zero articles, which are traditionally treated separately as “a subsystem of the system of determination” (Downing & Locke, *op. cit.*: 417), either a high dose of *article-omission versus zero article* or the following “test” for generic reference taken from Downing & Locke might provide the cure.

The following are generic statements in which the first noun is preceded by a definite or indefinite or zero article. Test each noun for its use with the other two articles, and say whether either of them can also be used to express generic reference.

- (1) *A liquid* has no shape.
- (2) *Gases* have no mass.
- (3) *A human being* needs the company of others.
- (4) *War* is politics carried out by violent means.
- (5) *Animals* that live in captivity play with their food as if it were a living animal.
- (6) *Television* is a mixed blessing.
- (7) *The bicycle* is a cheap form of private transport.
- (8) *The computer* has revolutionised business methods. (Downing & Locke, *op. cit.*: 465)

The distinction between *inherent* / *non-inherent* adjectives is, fortunately, an easy task for most learners, but when it comes to deciding whether a given adjective is used attributively or predicatively, in some cases, with students who do not really know their syntax, there is a tendency to assimilate anteposition of the adjective with the attributive function and postposition necessarily with the predicative function. The A-series adjectives (that are actually half way between adjectives and adverbs: *afraid*, *ajar*, *awake* etc.) are helpful in sifting through exclusively attributive or almost exclusively predicative adjectives.

Nouns functioning as adjectives (a classical instance of vocabulary overlapping with grammar) are also liable to lead to errors: **three-years-old daughter* instead of *three-year-old daughter*, **five-feet long table* for *five-foot long table*, or *criminal lawyer* taken literally, as are the so-called “pseudo-participials”: *long-stemmed*, *blue-eyed* etc.

Distinguishing pronominal deictics *this* and *that* from deictics which function as determiners is another matter that needs to be insisted upon when discussing noun phrases. Whether it is about anaphoric, cataphoric or exophoric reference or reference to people (as in self-introduction or when introducing one person to another), deictics are vital in one’s (everyday) discourse.

Prepositions or prepositional phrases as post-modifiers and exceptions related to pre-modification (*e.g.* singular concord is also acceptable with some summation plurals, provided they are premodified, as in: *Where is / are the new binoculars?*) are also among the thorny issues first-year

students are confronted with. In this particular case, tackling things little by little, either deductively or inductively, prompting them to discover the meaning rather than simply stating it, does unfortunately not always work. On the other hand, “given the right incentive, learners can teach each other” (Thornbury, 1999: 43). Encouraging them to become “active explorers of language” (Nunan, *op. cit.*: 193) and become more conscious of how grammar communicates meanings can do a lot to mitigate the losses.

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