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Problems of Word Order in the English Noun Phrase among Secondary School Students in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract:

The English noun phrase is exceedingly complex. The Head-word can be modified by a number of other grammatical elements such as determiners, intensifiers, adjectives, etc. These modifiers of the head-word are properly ordered and rule-governed. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine word order in the English noun phrase and show how this can pose a problem to the second language learner in the Nigeria situation. The study adopted the case study research design. The data for the study were collected through the test administered to two thousand final year students randomly selected from twenty government owned secondary schools in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The theoretical framework employed was Rod Ellis procedural analysis of errors. The findings of this study reveal that learners experience some difficulties in the placement of modifiers in the English noun phrase. The study recommends that teachers should emphasize the established order of modifiers especially the pre-modifiers in the English noun phrase and where possible, use language games to teach the students to overcome the problem. The study concluded by noting that if serious attention is given to the order of pre-modifiers in the noun phrase, the problems students have in ordering words in the English noun phrase would be greatly reduced.

Keywords: Modifiers, pre-modifiers, head-word, noun phrase, word order

1. Introduction

All the several thousands of words in human language belong to a highly restricted set of word-level categories such as nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjective etc. in practice, it is also possible for major word-level categories to expand into their corresponding phrase level categories by the addition of other words. The resultant construction due to the addition of other words to expand a major word – level category is known as a phrase. A phrase according to Ndimele (1996, p.19) is defined as ‘a group of related words which is grammatically equivalent to a single word and which does not have its own subject and predicate’

Mulvey (2002) also states that a phrase is a group of words without a subject and verb used as a part of speech. Radford (1988, p.65) observes that sentences are not only built out of words belonging to various word-level categories but also out of phrases belonging to the corresponding set of phrasal categories. Phrases, like words are internally structured. Words are not lumped in a phrase in a haphazard manner. The arrangement of words within phrases follow a particular pattern depending on the rules that operate in the language.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Head-Word

The head is the most essential part of the phrase because it determines the nature of the overall phrase and its name. Ndimele (1992, p.5) observes that it is a general property of phrases that ‘every phrase or maximal projection must have a head which gives the phrase or the maximal projection its essential character or which determines the nature of the overall phrase’. Hurford (1994, p.171) also notes that ‘phrase often consist of several words clustered around a particular head-word which in some sense carries the central idea in the meaning of the whole phrase. Huddleston (2002, p.26) further defines a phrase as ‘a type of construction containing a head element optionally accompanied by one or more dependents’.

Depending on the head-word, the major types of phrases are Noun Phrase (NP), Verb phrase (VP), Adjectival Phrase (Adj P), Adverbial Phrase (Adv. P) and Prepositional Phrase (PP).

2.2. The English Noun Phrase

A noun phrase is a group of words that are joined together following the rules of the grammar of the language where the most important element is the noun. The other elements which occur either before or after the noun are its various modifiers which limit or specify the reference of the noun. A noun phrase consists of a noun as head alone or

accompanied by one or more modifiers. According to Yusuf (1997, p.8) ‘The noun phrase is the category that codes the participants in the event or state described by the verb’. He further explains that ‘the NP is headed by the noun (N) or pronoun (when it will not be modified)’. Hence, when a pronoun is the head of a noun phrase, it is not accompanied by any other grammatical elements. Crystal (1996, p.86) observes that a noun phrase is ‘a string of words which all depend on the noun in some way’. He further states that the noun is the most important word in a noun phrase’

Syntactically, the noun phrase can bear some grammatical relations within a sentence such as subject, direct object, indirect object or object of a preposition. Quirk et al (197, p.137), Leech and Svartvik (1975, p.215) affirm that a noun phrase can function as the subject, object or complement of a clause. Mufwene (1998, p.69) states that ‘the noun phrase (NP) is a phrase which is typically headed semantically by a noun in the sense that this is the component without which we would not be speaking of a noun phrase in the first place’. It is the presence of a noun as the head that signals the presence of a noun phrase.

2.3. The Modifiers in the English Noun Phrase

The head word can be accompanied by determiners and one or more modifiers. Some modifiers precede the head (pre-modifiers) while others follow the head (post modifiers). Thus, the structure of the English noun phrase according to Leech and Svartvik (1975, p.251) is presented below:

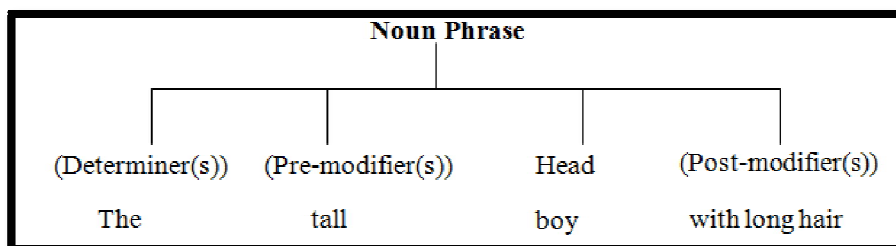


Figure 1

Eastwood (1994, p.177) also gives the basic structure of a noun phrase as follows:

Quantifier (+of)	Determiner	Adjective Modifier	Noun Modifier	Noun	Other modifiers
Each of	the	heavy	glass	doors	of the building

Table 1

Structurally, the noun phrase is the largest expression of the maximal projection of the noun. Brown and Miller (1991, p.109) posit that ‘the head must be a lexical noun’. Conolly (1991, p.1010) is also of the opinion that ‘in a noun phrase, the head, which is normally a noun or a pronoun can be preceded and/or followed by modifiers of several different types. Thus, the noun phrase can be modified by a number of other grammatical elements such as:

- Determiners
- Intensifiers
- Adjectives
- Prepositional phrase
- Subordinate clauses

2.3.1. Determiners

The determiner is a word which goes in front of a noun. Often, it is the only other word in the noun phrase. Its job is to show what kind of noun is in the noun phrase. According to Freeborn (1987, p.74), ‘determiners have a function which is to specify the reference of a noun’. Igwe (2005, p.49) affirms that the term determiners is used to specify the range of words used to identify or make reference to nouns’. Eastwood (1994, p.177) further states that ‘determiners are the articles (a, the), demonstratives (this, that....) and possessives (my, your)’. Ndimele (1999, p.102) states that ‘the determiner is a cover term for articles, demonstratives, possessives, quantifiers and numerals’. He further defines the determiner as ‘a word which signals the presence of a noun’. Determiners always precede the nouns they modify but they have different positions relative to one another. Leech and Svartvik (1975, p.226) give three categories of determiners based on the different positions as predeterminers, central determiners and post determiners. According to Quirk et al (1985, p.253) ‘the three classes of determiners have been set up on the basis of their positions in the noun phrase in relation to each other’. The determiners as pre-modifiers in the English noun phrase is summarized below:

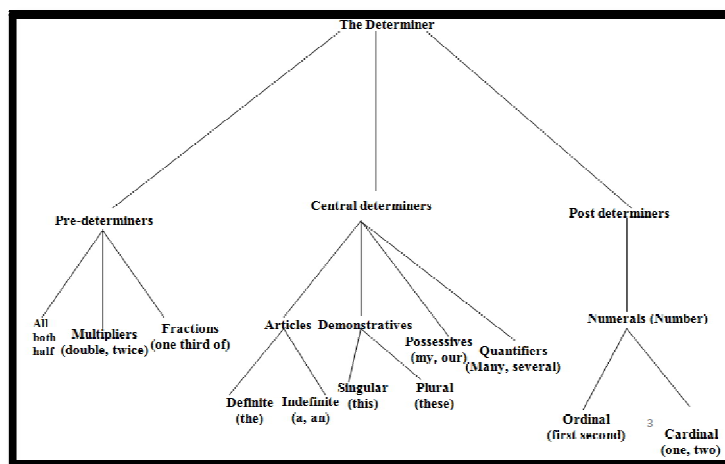


Figure 2

Pre-determiners are mutually exclusive. Cardinal numbers and quantifiers are also mutually exclusive. Ordinal numbers occur with count nouns and usually precede any cardinal number in the noun phrase.

2.3.2. Intensifiers

Ndimele (1999, p.107) states that 'intensifiers refer to a small class of words whose members function as modifiers of the adverb or adjective and express the degree to which a particular quantity is present'. Intensifiers precede adjectives in the English noun phrase. They cannot directly precede the head word. They are sometimes referred to as degree modifiers. They include very, exceeding, quite, too, extremely, completely etc.

2.4. Adjectives

Adjectives are words which specify or limit the reference or attributes of nominals (nouns and pronoun) or noun phrases. Hurford (1994, p.8) defines an adjective as 'A word typically used to modify noun and describes some properties of the thing referred to by the noun such as shape, colour, age, value, size, origin or the impression it gives. Igwe (2005, p.6) states that an adjective is grammatically a part of speech used to modify or qualify a noun or pronoun'. Bolten and Gooday (1996, p.227) also observe that 'adjectives are the same before singular and plural nouns. A noun phrase can contain more than one adjective.

2.5. Prepositional Phrase

A prepositional phrase is a construction which obligatorily consists of two parts. The first part is a preposition while the second half is its complement. The complement of a preposition is typically a noun phrase. In English, it is also possible for a gerund or an embedded relative clause to serve as a complement of a preposition. Prepositional phrases include: on the table, in the corner, beyond the church, across the field etc. Freeborn (1987, p.87) also states that 'a prepositional phrase has a preposition head and NP complement. Prepositional phrases are post-modifiers of the noun phrase. According to Leech and Svartvik (1975, p.268) 'the prepositional phrase is by far the most common type of post modifiers in English'. Connolly (1991, p.104) states that 'when a prepositional phrase functions as a modifier within a noun phrase, it, too, follows the head'. Examples include

They offer some courses in linguistics
NP PP

I own the car in the garage
NP PP

The beautiful broad street of Lagos
NP PP

2.5.1. Subordinate Clause

A subordinate clause is a clause that cannot stand alone as a full-fledged sentence; hence it is not capable of independent existence. Examples include: 'which John bought', 'who seemed in a rush' etc. According to Connolly (1991, p.104) 'subordinate clauses can likewise follow the head which they modify...they also follow prepositional phrases in the same noun phrase. Examples include:

A man who seemed in a rush

NP Subordinate Clause

A man in the corner who seemed in a rush

NP PP Subordinate Clause

2.6. Order of Modifiers in the English Noun Phrase

The modifiers in the noun phrase do not occur in a random order. Within the noun phrase, the relative position of certain word class is fixed. Ndimele (1996, p.42) gives the order of pre-head modifiers in the English non phrase as follows:

- Pre-determiners
- Determiners
- Numerals
- Intensifiers
- Adjectives.

Following the order, grammatical sentences are derived:

E.g. the first three very smart giant Nigerian police dogs were killed

Pre-modifiers head

This is similar to the order given by Connolly (1991, p.102) as seen below:

- Pre-determiners
- Determiners
- Cardinal numbers
- Ordinal numbers
- Pre-modifying adjectives
- Noun (the head)
- Prepositional phrase
- Subordinate clause

Following the order above, complex noun phrases may be constructed

e.g.

All the first three very smart giant Nigerian policedogs in the cage

Pre-modifiers noun(head) PP

which John bought will be killed

Subordinate clause

A tree diagram can be drawn for the sentence below as follows:

My father bought the first three very smart giant brown well-trained Nigeria police dogs in the Kennel trained

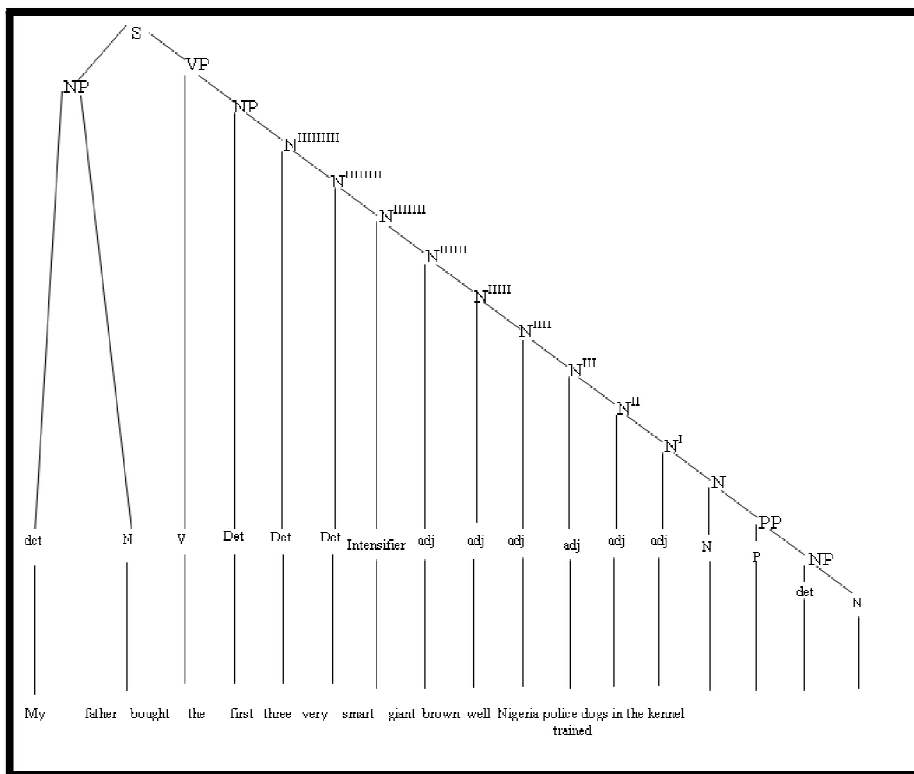


Figure 3

From the foregoing, it is clear that words are not lumped in a phrase in a haphazard fashion hence the relative position of each modifier in a noun phrase have to be learnt, understood and strictly adhered to so as to construct generally correct English sentences.

3. Theoretical Framework

Error Analysis is one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition. It is one of the steps taken in the treatment of errors made by language users. It was in the article of Pit Corder, the father of error analysis entitled 'The significance of learners Errors' (1967) that error analysis took a new turn. Corder (1967, p. 125) explains that 'systematically analyzing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching'. Thus error analysis can help the English language teachers to identify the problematic areas of language learning by providing a deep insight into the learner's second language acquisition process. For Ellis (1994, p.700) 'an error is a deviation from accepted rules of a language made by a learner of a second language. Such errors result from the learners' lack of knowledge of correct rules of the target language. Error analysis is useful in second language acquisition because it reveals to teachers, syllabus designers and text book writers of what the problem areas are. This would help to design remedial exercises and focus more attention on the 'trouble-shooting' areas. Hence, Sharma (1980) observes that 'error analysis can provide a strong support to remedial teaching. Gorbet (1979) states that the theory of error analysis proposes that in order to learn a language, a person creates a system of rules from the language data to which he is exposed and these systems enable him to use it.

Corder (1967) however explains that errors are visible proof that learning is taking place. Ellis (1994, p.48) gives the steps in any typical error analysis as:

- Collecting samples of learners language
- Identifying the errors
- Describing the errors
- Explaining the errors
- Evaluating and correcting the errors.

These steps guide any error analyst to identify the problem areas of students/learners and therefore make possible predictions. These steps are adopted in this study.

3.1. Empirical Review

Akande (2002) conducted a study on structural complexity and the acquisition of the hq (Headword/qualifiers) nominal group type in English. The aim of the study was to scientifically verify the observations that secondary school students made more mistakes when they used the hq qualifiers nominal group structures than any other structure including the modifier/head/qualifier (mhq). The data for the study were collected from 250 students randomly selected from five secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria. The findings of the study revealed that the hq type is structurally less complex than the mhq type of the noun group nominal though more difficult to acquire. This study therefore examines the complex nature of the mhq nominal group and how the complexity can pose difficulty to students in learning word order in the noun phrase in the Nigeria situation.

Bamigbola (2015) in her study on complex sequences of the English Nominal group examined how sequencing affects users' understanding and interpretation of the English nominal group and attempted to prescribe guidelines to the different challenges which complex ordering of the nominal group poses to users of English as a second language. Her findings revealed that the complex ordering of the English nominal group has a significant impact on language users' understanding and interpretation of statements and that many of the difficulties confronting users of English as a second language have to do with inadequate mastery of the structure of the nominal group. Her findings show that the structure of the English nominal groups can be very complex hence, users of the language need adequate mastery of its structure and usage. This study therefore fills that gap by presenting the rules that will guide learners to the mastery of the structure of the noun phrase.

Bamigbola's finding agree with the opinion of Okanlawon and Oluga (2008) that some of the problems can be addressed through a comprehensive study and examination of the explanations given by different linguists on the English nominal group. Hence, this study does such examination and explanations to help address the difficulties students face in ordering modifiers in the English noun phrase.

Options	No of Students	Error Identification	Error Description and Explanation	Correction
1a) The Six all young very dark - complexioned Nigerian captains	187	i) The six all ii) (ii) Young very	Wrong order of determiners Adjective before intensifier	All the six Very young
b) the very young six all dark-complexioned Nigerian captains	849	i) Young six ii) Six all	Adjective before numeral Post determiner before pre-determiner	Six young All the six
c) All the very six dark-complexioned young Nigerian captains	899	i) Very six ii) Dark-complexion young	Intensifier before pre-determiner Wrong order of adjective	Six very Young dark-complexioned
d) All the six very young dark-complexioned Nigerian captains	65	-	-	Correct word order
2(a) The two very first ugly big white boxes	353	Two very first	Wrong order of determiners and intensifier	First two very
b) the very two fire ugly big white boxes	963	Very two first	Intensifier before determiners and cardinal before ordinal	First two very

Options	No of Students	Error Identification	Error Description and Explanation	Correction
c) The first two very ugly big white boxes	48	-	-	Correct word order
d) The two first very ugly big white boxes	436	Two first	Cardinal before ordinal	First two
3(a) His brown Chinese eyes very lovely	133	Eyes very lovely	Pre-modifiers used as post modifiers	Very lovely eyes
b) His very Chinese brown lovely eyes	643	Chinese brown lovely	Wrong order of adjectives	Lovely brown Chinese
c) His very lovely brown Chinese eyes	316	Eyes very	Head word used before pre-modifiers	Very lovely brown Chinese eyes
d) His very lovely brown Chinese eyes	908	-	-	Correct word order
4(a) A police very smart giant Nigerian dog	132	Police very	Intensifier after noun	Police dog
(b) A very smart giant Nigerian Police dog	570	-	-	Correct word order
(c) A very giant Nigerian smart police dog	732	Giant Nigerian smart	Wrong order of adjective	Smart giant Nigerian
(d) A Nigerian very giant smart police dog	566	(i) Nigerian very giant (ii) Giant smart	Wrong intensifier and adjective order Wrong adjective order	Very giant Nigerian smart giant
5(a) This is the Nigerian student very brilliant young	443	Student very	Noun before intensifier	Very + adjectives before students
(b) This is the young very brilliant Nigeria student	324	Young very	Intensifier before adjective	Very young
(c) This is the very brilliant young Nigerian student	423	-	-	Correct word order
(d) This is the brilliant very young Nigerian Student	810	Brilliant very	Intensifier before adjective	Very brilliant
6(a) Her three new Japanese friends	669	-	-	Correct word order
(b) Her three Japanese new friends	312	Japanese new	Wrong order of adjectives	New Japanese
(c) He Japanese three new friends	47	Japanese three	Adjective before determiner	Three Japanese
(d) Her new three Japanese friends	972	New three	Adjective before determiner	Three new
7(a) John's five chemistry expensive books	612	Chemistry expensive	Wrong adjective order	Expensive chemistry books
(b) John's expensive Chemistry five books	433	Chemistry five	Adjective before determiner	Five expensive chemistry
(c) John's five expensive chemistry books	321	-	-	Correct word order
(d) John's expensive five Chemistry books	634	Expensive five chemistry	Intensifier in between adjectives	Five expensive chemistry.
8(a) He is a young very nice tall man	636	Young very	Adjective before intensifier	Very young
(b) He is a very nice tall young man	236	-	-	Correct word order
(c) He is a tall nice very young man	366	Nice very young	Very in between adjectives	Very nice young
(d) He is a nice tall very young man	762	Tall very young	Very in between Adjectives	Very tall young
9(a) These are the first six small grey woolen bag	167	-	-	Correct word order
(b) These are the six small first grey woolen bag	530	Six small first	Adjective in between determiners	First six small
(c) These are the small grey six first woolen bag	473	Six first	Cardinal number before ordinal	First six
(d) These are the first grey six small woolen bag	830	First grey six	Adjective in between determiners	First six grey
10(a) These are two old very beautiful stables	810	Old very	Adjective before intensifiers	Very old
(b) These are two very beautiful old stables	288	-	-	Correct word order
(c) These are very beautiful old two stables	357	Beautiful old two	Adjectives before intensifiers	Two beautiful old
(d) These are very old two beautiful stables	545	Very old two	Adjective before numerals	Two very old

Table 1: Error Analysis of Students' Choice of Options in the Written Test

The analysis from the above table reveals that students have problems in ordering modifiers in the English noun phrase. The choice of the options with the wrong word order by majority of the students reveals the height of the problem.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the possibility of having a number of other grammatical elements pre-modifying the head word in a noun phrase can pose problems to the second language learner because the relative position of certain words in a noun phrase is fixed. The study therefore, concludes by noting that if teachers emphasize the established order of modifiers in the English noun phrase especially the pre-modifiers and where possible use language games to teach the students, the problems they have in ordering words in a noun phrase would be greatly reduced.

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