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## The Noun Phrase In English

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### Abstract

This is an attempt to point out one of the grammatical areas that cause a number of difficulties for Arab learners of English i.e. the Noun Phrase in English . In this paper the researcher will concentrate on the theoretical part of the Noun Phrase in English .Then it is going to be followed with practical part to investigate those areas that cause difficulties for the Arab learners of English . The aim is to draw the attention to those areas so both teachers and learners can pay more attention to such areas when learning English tacks place .

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### Introduction

People all over the world use different languages in their education systems-often their mother tongue .

However , almost every country , in addition to the native language , uses a foreign language within the education system in order to enable the students to study the subjects where the literature is not available in its native language .

English is widely used all over the world as such an auxiliary language . Libya is no exception , where English is taught within its education system .

One must not forget that learning a foreign language is not an easy task and there are often areas of difficulties learners

encounter while learning a foreign language .

One of the grammatical areas that cause a number of difficulties for Libyan learners of English in particular and Arabs in general is the use of noun phrase in English .

This paper is to be followed by practical part of this study to investigate errors committed by Libyan learners of English in the Noun Phrase .

The aim is to account for these difficulties in terms of their sources and to give some guidelines which may help in reducing the frequency of errors to a minimum .

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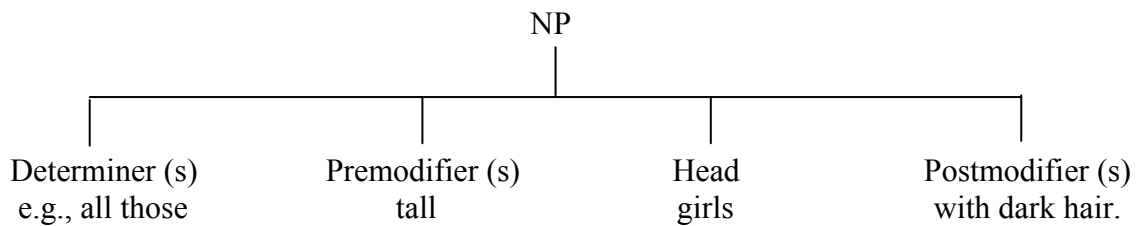
There are a number of grammatical features involved in the noun phrase; however I will confine myself to point out the areas that cause problems for Arab learners of English.

1. count and mass nouns,
2. definite and non-definite references,
3. possessives; the use of 'apostrophe's' and of forms,
4. compound nouns and adjectives.

**1.1: Noun Phrase Structure:**

*Leech and Svartvik* (1975, P.251) indicate that "A noun phrase which can act as subject, object, or complement of clause or as prepositional complement. It is called a noun phrase because the word which is its head (i.e. main part) is typically a noun".

There are four elements in a noun phrase as the following example shows:



**1.1.a: Determiners:** *Leech and Svartvik* (1975, P.225) define determiners as "words which specify the range of reference of a noun in various ways e.g., by making it definite (the boy), indefinite (a boy) or by indicating quantity (many boys)."

Determiners always precede the noun they determine. They can precede singular count nouns (a book), plural count nouns (the books) and mass nouns (some water) i.e. common nouns, whereas proper nouns normally take no determiners except when we refer to Mr. and Mrs. Green as 'the Greens'.

Determiners are divided into (a) central determiners, (b) predeterminers, and (c) post determiners.

(a)**Central Determiners:** are those which may be preceded by predeterminers and / or followed by post determiners. They include six groups:

- i) There are determiners which can be used with singular or plural count nouns and mass nouns: e.g., I've lost the book/books/the money.

Any car/cars/advice will do.

All the possessive determiners belong to this class e.g., my pen, his car, their books, etc.

- ii) Some determiners can be used with plural count nouns or mass nouns only; such as zero article,

e.g., They need cars/assistance from us.

- iii) Determiners with singular count noun or mass nouns only

e.g., This place is very interesting.

That water is very cold to drink.

- iv) There are determiners which can be used with singular count nouns only:

e.g., Give me a pen please?

People are standing on each side of the road.

Ali visits his uncle every year.

- v) Others can be used with plural count nouns only:

e.g., I enjoy all these games.

In those days life was difficult.

- vi) Whereas some can be used with mass nouns only:

e.g., We didn't hear much news of you.

(b) **Predeterminers:** are the kind of determiners which precede the central determiners e.g., (Would you drink all this water?)

i) All, both, half are predetermines which can be used before articles, possessives or demonstratives, but never before determiners denoting quantity because they are themselves quantifiers.

e.g., All + plural count nouns or mass nouns:

Sami bought all these books/all this sugar.

Both + plural count nouns only:

Both books are available in the bookshop.

Half + singular or plural count or mass nouns:

Can I have half a pint/half the apples/ half the milk.

ii) There are some predeterminers which can be used with singular and plural count nouns or mass nouns denoting amount, degree, etc. These predeterminers are double, twice, three times, etc..

e.g., I wish I could earn twice his salary.

iii) The fractions one-fifth, two-sixth etc.. can be used before central determiners.

e.g., He spent one fifth of the time it took me to finish the job.

iv) Predeterminers such as what and such can be used before the indefinite article with singular count nouns, whereas it is used without an article with plural count nouns and mass nouns.

e.g., a car

what nice cars

dirty water

He bought such a car.

We saw such nice cars.

He was swimming in such dirty water.

(c) **Post Determiners:** are those determiners which follow central determiners and come before premodifiers.

They can be quantifiers or cardinal/ordinal numerals.

e.g., Nuri has got one apple.

The fourth tall man who came was English.

Would you have some more tea.

The few books he bought were expensive.

### **1.1.B: Modifiers:**

there are two kinds of modifiers in English; premodifiers which come before the head and post modifiers which come after it.

(a) **Premodifiers:** they are used after determiners but before the noun which is the head of the phrase. They can be adjectives, participles or nouns.

e.g., He's bought a new flat.

He's rented a converted flat.

He's lived in a country house.

(b) Post modifiers:: such modifiers occur after the head in a noun phrase.

They can be relative clauses (Did you see the man who was passing along the road?), prepositional phrase (Have you seen the book on the table?), non-finite clauses equivalent to relative clauses (The fact that he's an honest man is the only reason why I'd like to employ him.)

### **1.1.C: Head :**

the head of a noun phrase is typically a noun. It is the main part of a noun phrase.

However third person pronouns and adjectives can also function as a head of a noun phrase.

Pronouns may act as substitution for noun phrases in the context e.g., (Could you mend this window? I broke it yesterday.) adjectives which function as heads of noun phrases normally take a definite determiner - often the definite article - and they have no plural form, e.g., (The poor can not be expected to support their families).

**1.2: Nouns:**

"It is through nouns and noun phrases that grammar organizes the way we refer to objects."

*Leech and Svartrik*, (1975, P.43).

Nouns can be **proper nouns**- John, Mohammed, London; or **common nouns**- father, table, air, bird. Nouns are used to refer to something animate such as 'John' and 'bird' or inanimate such as 'table' and 'London'.

There are four classes of nouns in English:

1. A. concrete, count (e.g., a table, a filed).
2. B. concrete, mass (e.g., water, bread).
1. B. abstract, count (e.g., an argument, a loss).
2. B. abstract, mass (e.g., pleasure, advice).

This classification is both notional and syntactic. It is notional i.e. based on the meaning or reference, whereas it is also syntactic i.e. based upon the way nouns combine with other words to make well-formed expressions.

Abstract vs. concrete is purely notional whereas count vs.mass is partly notional but mostly syntactic.

Nouns which refer to objects and substances with physical existence such as things, animals and people are called concrete nouns (a girl, girls, water, wood, rock, etc..).

On the other hand, nouns which refer to events, states and feeling are called abstract nouns (music, news, etc.).

Count nouns are either singular which refer to one object (a table) or plural which refer to more than one object (two tables, three tables, four tables, etc.), whereas mass nouns normally refer to substances – liquid or solid – such as glass, flour, news, advice, etc. (see Table No.1)

There are many nouns like glass in table No.1 which can be treated as either count or mass.

A noun can be used as a count noun when it refers to one separate unit or to one occurrence of a phenomenon, whereas it is used as a mass noun.

Table No.1

Count Nouns	Mass Nouns		
a table		Differentiated	
Tables			
two tables			
three tables		Differentiator +head	
a glass	glass	a piece of	glass
	flour	a bag of	flour
	water	a cup of	water
	news	an item of	news
	advice	a piece of	advice
a piece			
a bag			
an item			
a cup			
1	2	3	

When it refer to substance or undifferentiated phenomena in general. 'Glass' is a mass noun when it refers to the substance in general, but it can be used as a count noun to indicate special meaning; 'a glass' means a drinking vessel, or a mirror.

This classification is notional i.e. based on the meaning.

At this juncture one must point out that the difference between Columns 1 and 2 in Table No.1 should not be confused with the difference between 2 and 3. in Column 3 a count noun is used as a differentiator before a mass noun (i.e. the head) in order to combine with other words to make a well-formed expression (i.e. syntactic).

We can say:

There is some water on the table.  
There are two cups of water on the table.

But not:

There are some waters on the table.  
There are two waters on the table.

**1.3: Definite and Non-Definite References:**

A. The definite article: the definite article 'the' can be used before a singular or

a plural count noun and before a mass noun.

A speaker uses the definite article assuming that his audience can identify the particular example (s) he is referring to. *Close* (1975, P.133) says that "the word the alone is insufficient to identify the example(s) but it is a signal that identification can be made by:

(a) something already said: reference backwards; (b) something about to be said; reference forwards; or (c) the context or situation." *Halliday and Hassan* (1976, P.33) call situational reference 'exophoric', reference backwards 'anaphoric' and reference forwards 'cataphoric'.

They indicate that if the reference is exophoric, the item can be identified in either of the following ways: **firstly**:

(i) when a particular individual or subclass is being referred to. For example, if someone says to his friend "wait, the boat is coming". In this case the speaker refers to the boat they are both waiting for.

(ii) It can be also used to refer to a class which has got only one member such as 'the sun' and 'the moon'.

**Secondly**: it can be used to refer to the whole class, e.g., 'the stars'.

B. The indefinite article 'a(n)': a(n) is regarded as the weak form of one. It can be used with nouns to refer to a class of things as a whole, for example:

A dog is said to be man's best friend.

A(n) is obligatorily used when a count noun singular is used as an indefinite complement of 'BE', e.g., (Heathrow is a famous air port).

A(n) can be ellipted when we refer to objects which are normally associated with each other (a knife and (a) fork, a hat and (a) coat).

C. The Zero article: the zero article occurs before a count noun plural which refers to the class as a whole such as (Dogs like

meat). It is also used with a count noun plural to refer not to the class as a whole but to an indefinite number of the class (Don't eat all the food.

There are still people to come). It can also occur before a mass noun used to refer to a substance generically, e.g., (Silver is a precious metal).

The zero article cannot occur before singular count nouns for example (Man is a creature). 'Creature' is a count noun. It therefore can not have the 'zero' article when it is singular.

However one must point out that when 'man' is used to refer to human beings in general, the 'zero' article occurs before it.

#### **1.4: Possessives:**

Possessives do not necessarily refer to the notion of possession. *Quirk and Greenbaum* (1973, P.95) indicates that it can be used as "genitive or origin (the girl's story), descriptive genitive (a summer's day, etc.)". Here the present writer would like to discuss the use of the genitive forms with apostrophe ('s) as opposed to the use of a phrase beginning with (of).

e.g., Last night I drove Muna's car.

We put our luggage in the boot of the car.

The genitive form with apostrophe ('s) is normally used with personal nouns and personal indefinite pronouns in order to indicate possession.

However it can be used with animals that are regarded as intelligent animals such as cats, dogs and horses.

The use of the 'of-construction' is more acceptable to modify inanimate nouns than the use of the apostrophe ('s) for example (the top of the mountain) is more acceptable than (the mountain's top).

Whereas it is optional with inanimate nouns that refer to group of people, to places where people live, to human institution and so on e.g., (Libya's future, Britain's resources). *Hawkins* (1981)

argues that if both the head and the modifier are human beings both forms are acceptable.

e.g., Ali is Mohammed's brother.

Or Ali is the brother of Mohammed.

Whereas if one of the nouns is human and the other is not it will be more appropriate to use the structure in which the human noun comes first.

Therefore (Nuri's flat) is more acceptable than (The flat of Nuri).

**Hawkins** (1981, P.247/250) argues that "John's picture" means "(1) picture belonging to John; (2) picture depicting John; or (3) picture pointed by John". Whereas "the picture of John" "has only the second of these readings".

### **1.5: Compound Nouns:**

We often join two nouns or more in order to form a single lexical item.

They have three written forms (1) one word such as motorway, (2) with a hyphen such as tooth-brush and (3) two words such as hat shop.

One has to indicate that the first element in a compound noun normally keeps the singular form (hat shop, tooth brushes, etc.), whereas a compound noun whose final element is a mass noun has no plural form such as moonlight.

However one must not forget that there is sometimes a difficulty in deciding whether an expression consisting of noun + noun is a single word (a compound noun) or a modifier followed by a head.

E.g., 'bookcase' is a compound noun, while 'diploma certificate' is a modifier plus a head.

### **1.6: Adjectives:**

There are many adjectives which can be either attributive (acting as premodifiers of nouns), or predicative (acting as complement of verbs).

e.g., I met a nice girl. (attributive)

All the girls I met were nice. (predicative)

Adjectives can be modified by intensifiers (very, quite, etc.) to indicate degree, for example (How nice were the girls you met). 'They were very nice'. Too and very have a modifying function with small difference in meaning i.e. too indicates sufficiency and excess.

e.g., Nura is very pretty.

This car is too expensive for me to buy.

I am not too rich to buy this car.

There are some attributive adjectives which are derived from nouns (Mustapha works in a medical laboratory), and others can be related to adverbials (He was my former student).

Some adjectives can take comparative and superlative forms.

A superlative reference refers to the extremes of a scale. When we say that Joe is the tallest boy in the class, the class of objects in question is "the boys in the class).

Taking their height as the criterion for distinguishing them, we can say that Joe is the tallest or that Jim is the shortest.

Logically this way of distinguishing something is not confined to cases where the group contains more than two individuals.

"Joe is the tallest of the brothers: is a form of expression that is often used when there are only two brothers.

(The linguistic purists tend to deplore this usage, but it is observed to exist in the usage of speakers of standard English.)

The superlative form can be expressed by adding- est to the adjective (Milad is the oldest boy in the family), or placing most before the adjective (Huda was the most beautiful girl in the party).

The comparative form is used to relate one object to another by placing them on a specified scale. "Joe is taller than Jim" simply puts Joe higher on the scale of

height (without any reference to the extremes of the scale).

It is evident that when the class of objects is restricted to two the superlative and the comparative forms are equivalent: "Joe is the taller of the brothers" = " Joe is the tallest of the brothers"; or "Joe is taller"

= " Joe is the tallest: (when there are only two brothers in question).

The comparative form can be expressed by adding – er to the adjective (Salwa is older than Nadia) or placing more before the adjective (She looks more happy than her sister).

### العبارة الاسمية في اللغة الإنجليزية

محمد ميلاد ابو بكر

#### ملخص

هذه الورقة عبارة عن توضيح لأحدى العبارات اللغوية في اللغة الإنجليزية و هي العبارة الاسمية لتي تسبب بعض الصعوبات لدى الطلبة العرب عند تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية .  
في هذا الجزء النظري يتم التركيز على العبارة الاسمية من الناحية النظرية على أن تقدم لاحقا دراسة علمية لبيان المشاكل التي تقابل المتعلمين العرب للغة الإنجليزية وذلك من أجل إعطاء الفرصة للطلاب والمعلم للتعرف على هذه المشاكل و اخذ الحيلة عند حصول عملية التعليم .

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