The Structure of English and Vietnamese Noun Phrase

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Learning a language involves many things such as vocabulary, grammar and skills…

Each of the above elements is very important. To improve the skills, learners have to base on vocabulary and grammar. And among those, noun phrase (NP) is very significant because it is the basic component to form a meaningful sentence. This research aims to analyze the structure of English noun phrase along with Vietnamese noun phrase, hopefully help learners with studying English to some extent.

English noun phrase

Definition

A noun phrase is briefly defined as “a group of words with a noun or pronoun as the main part” and these phrases may “consist of one word” (Nguyen, 2000, p. 53). In his book, Jackson supplements some more details which are about some optionally parts: pre-modification and post-modification (12).

For example:

A simple NP:

**Britney Spears** is my favorite singer.

A more complex NP:

I love a man who can be my shelter and to whom I can share every of my feelings.

Structure

A noun phrase usually consists of three elements: the head, the pre-modification and the post-modification.

The head, which is obligatory and the most important part of a noun phrase. Nguyen stated “the Head is a noun” (p.54). Meanwhile Howard added the head can be a noun or a pronoun (p. 12)

For example:

the pen on the table → a noun
She is my girlfriend. → a personal pronoun

Something happened to him. → an indefinite pronoun

Yours is red, mine is pink. → a possessive pronoun

That is so difficult. → a demonstrative pronoun

Who are you? → Wh-word

The other two elements are optional.

Pre-modification (or pre-modifiers) is what precede the head.

In Howard’s book, he gave a very clear statistic about pre-modification (p. 13). He mentioned the specific order of the word class and sub-classes as identifier – numeral/quantifier – adjective – noun modifier

For example: those ten excellent college students

He also makes it clear about each of the above items.

This can be summed up in the following table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-modifiers</th>
<th>Forms of pre-modifiers</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifiers (*)</td>
<td>articles</td>
<td><em>The</em> boy is playing a video game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>demonstratives</td>
<td><em>This</em> book is very interesting and informative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>possessives</td>
<td><em>My</em> favorite film is Twilight series.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeral/Quantifiers</td>
<td>ordinal</td>
<td>This is the <em>first</em> time I have been</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-determiner</td>
<td>Cardinal</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some quantifiers: all, both, half</td>
<td>twenty six students</td>
<td>All the singers are on the stage now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fraction</td>
<td>many scores of people</td>
<td>Three-fourths of our planet is water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noun modifier</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(*)& Howard gave a notice about identifiers, that is a noun phrase can contains only one identifiers or “articles, demonstratives and possessives are mutually exclusive in English” (p. 13).

(**) Howard gave an example of the order of the adjectives in a noun phrase which includes many adjectives. The order recommended is 1. epithet (charming), 2. size (small), 3. shape (round), 4. age (old), 5. color (brown), 6. origin (French), 7. substance (oaken), 8. present participle (writing).

(***) This case can be analyzed as:

the beautiful Hollywood silver screen star’s stylish dress

noun phrase genitive Adj head

This case is special also because there may be two heads in a phrase. Nguyen added that “when one structure contains another structure, we say that the second structure is embedded in the first” (p. 60).

For example:

Mary’s brother’s bicycle

The relationship among the elements can be illustrated in the following chart:
Nguyen added something about the so-called “embedding”. He defined “embedding” as “a feature of linguistic structure in which one function (or form) is inserted into another function (or form)” and remarked that “the principle embedding is critical to analysis of grammatical structures with any significant degree of complexity” (p. 62-63).

Post-modification (post-modifier)

Both Nguyen and Howard share the same opinion about kinds of post-modification. They can be relative clauses, non-finite clauses or prepositional phrases. In addition, Howard added two possible cases: adjectives or adverbs.

These can be shown in the following table:
### Kinds of post-modifier

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kinds of post-modifier</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>something <em>new</em>, somebody <em>strange</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverb</td>
<td>the days <em>after</em>, the sky <em>above</em> (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relative clause</td>
<td>the boy <em>who is the best student in this class</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the man <em>I told you about</em> (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>than clause</td>
<td>He earns more money in a month <em>than I earn in a year.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-finite clause</td>
<td>the first man <em>to leave the room</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>the man <em>running after the thief</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the book <em>written by Shakespeare</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prepositional phrase</td>
<td>the pen <em>on the table</em>, the man <em>after her</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Howard also noticed that the most frequently used kind of adverbs is that can function as a preposition, for instance: back, in front of, below… (p. 15)

2. If the relative pronoun functions as an object, it can be omitted. In this example, “whom” is omitted

3. Non-finite clause is defined as a clause without subject, “introduced by a non-finite form of the verb” (Howard, p. 16).

### Vietnamese noun phrase

A Vietnamese noun phrase is defined as “a free combination of a noun nucleus and one or more than one subordinate elements” which can be front elements (that stand before the nucleus noun) and end elements (that stand after the nucleus noun) (Doan, Nguyen, & Pham, 2001).

For example:
The Structure of English and Vietnamese Noun Phrase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Front element</th>
<th>Nucleus</th>
<th>End element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hai</td>
<td>cái bàn</td>
<td>này</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tất cả những</td>
<td>cuốn sách</td>
<td>về văn học ấy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mọi</td>
<td>con người</td>
<td>trên đất nước này</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The elements of the front and the end are not “free”, they must be “either front or end” (Doan et al., 2001).

Structure

In his book, Diep Quang Ban (2008, 79) gave a chart about the order of the elements in a noun phrase:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>tất cả</th>
<th>những</th>
<th>cái</th>
<th>con mèo</th>
<th>den</th>
<th>ấy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The nucleus

The nucleus of a noun phrase is not just a single noun; it is the combination of two components like in the following example:

Hai                  | quyền sách       | đây       |
front                | N1 N2             | end      |

nucleus

The role of N1 and N2 is different from the other:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N1</th>
<th>N2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>considered a classifier</td>
<td>a specific object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>functions</td>
<td>functions lexically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammatically</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The front component
Doan et al. (p. 101) classified the front element into two parts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>element</th>
<th>example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number showing exact quantity</td>
<td><em>ba</em> quyển sách này</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>number showing an estimate quantity</td>
<td><em>vài</em> người khách lạ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>words denoting “every”</td>
<td><em>mỗi</em> căn phòng trong tòa nhà (others: mọi, từng…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words denoting “a number of”</td>
<td><em>những</em> con đường dẫn đến thành công (others: các, một…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They also indicate some other points about subordinate elements that denote “all, all of”. They cannot co-exist with such elements as “vài, dăm, mười” because these are estimate numbers while “all, all of” require exact quantity.

For example:

- *vài cái bàn* → correct
- *tất cả cái bàn* → correct
- *tất cả vài cái bàn* → incorrect

Diep Qang Ban (p. 83) makes it clearer by analyzing each of the position in the noun phrase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post -3</th>
<th>Post -2</th>
<th>Post -1</th>
<th>The nucleus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tất cả</td>
<td>những</td>
<td>cái</td>
<td>con mèo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Position -1:

Usually, in this position is the so-called “từ đặc chỉ”, like demonstrative “cái”. For instance: cái cây này, cái người học sinh kia…
Sometimes “cái” is not used, but another noun. For example: con người khôn ngoan áy (not cái con người khôn ngoan áy)

Position -2:

There are a number of words that can fit post -2:

Definite numeral (cardinal number): một, hai, ba…

Estimate quantifier: vài, ba, dăm, dăm ba, mười, mười lăm…

Words mean “every”: mỗi, từng, mọi

Numeral attributes (Định từ chỉ lượng): những, các

The word “mấy”

Position -3:

Those are the words which indicate the total number: tất cả, hết thảy, tất thảy…

They can precede the following:

Definite numeral; một, hai, ba…

Collective noun: đàn, lũ, bó, nhóm…

General noun (Đành từ tổng hợp): quần áo, binh lính, xe cộ, máy móc…

“tất cả’ here means “all, all of”, not “even”

For example:

Tất cả các nam sinh đều che khẩu trang.

→ All the male students wear a mask.

Cả nam sinh cũng che khẩu trang.

→ Even the male students wear a mask.

The end component of a noun phrase

Doan et al. indicated the classification of the end component of a noun phrase (p. 89)

In terms of part of speech
In terms of structure:

The end element can be:

A principal – accessory phrase: sách văn học Mỹ

A coordinated phrase: sách nghe và nói

A S-V phrase: sách mẹ tôi vừa mua

In terms of way of connection

Direct ways:

For example: tinh thân thép, mắt bồ câu…

Indirect ways:

For example: bộ phim mà anh thích, bài viết mà tôi vừa hoàn thành

In terms of the order of these elements:

The nucleus $\rightarrow$ A $\rightarrow$ B (a – b – c – d) $\rightarrow$ C

A goes with the nucleus to form a phrase (a compound noun). For example: phòng khách, bàn làm việc…
B describes the characteristics of the object that the nucleus mentioned. For example:

phòng khách rộng, bàn làm việc sang trọng…

a can be a noun, a verb or an adjective

b are groups like “vé + noun” or “bằng + noun”. For example: bàn làm việc sang trọng

bằng gỗ lim

c can be a group like “cửa + noun” or “ö + noun”. For example: bàn làm việc sang trọng bằng gỗ lim ở cuối phòng

d are clauses. For example: bàn làm việc sang trọng bằng gỗ lim ở cuối phòng mà sếp hay ngồi

hay ngồi

C are demonstrative pronouns such as “này, ấy, đó…”

At last, Doan et al. gave a table that summarizes the order of a Vietnamese noun phrase (p. 103)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Front position</th>
<th>Nucleus</th>
<th>End position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Element denoting “all”</td>
<td>Element denoting quantity</td>
<td>N1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tất cả, toàn bộ, toàn thể</td>
<td>1,2,3…, máy, cái, con…</td>
<td>quần</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vai, những, các</td>
<td>tem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sách</td>
<td>giáo khoa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example: Tất cả/ những/ cỏ câu/ sinh viên/ khoa Anh/ xuất sắc/ về kỹ năng nói/ ở trường đại học sư phạm thành phố Hồ Chí Minh/ mà các thầy cô vẫn thương hay khen /đó/
Common errors

The noun phrases of English and Vietnamese are quite different, which is the reason why many learners make quite a few mistakes when they talk or write.

Those who study Vietnamese may give the wrong classifier (N1) or lack this element.

For example: một sách or một cái sách instead of một quyển sách or một cuốn sách

In Vietnamese, there are some words indicating an object’s characteristics that may be confusing. For instance: the word “black” in English has some equivalent words in Vietnamese:

a black cat – một con mèo mun
a black dog – một con chó mực
a black horse – một con ngựa ô
a black cock – một con gà ô

Learners of Vietnamese might be upset with the order of the element mentioned above, which is quite different from English.

Learners of English may have some difficulties such as the way to translate from English into Vietnamese and vice versa. For example: một quyển sách hay – a book good or a book interesting. Or they just do not where to start when they have to translate a long English noun phrase into Vietnamese and vice versa. They may also be in trouble with the order of the adjectives in a rather long noun phrase with many adjectives. Actually, this is still controversial. In fact, many teachers have such a test and they give the score to students very mechanically, without telling them about the uncertainty of this point.

In addition, there are some ambiguous structures that teachers of English should tell their students so that they would understand these sentences easily. Besides, it is necessary to remind them that the context will decide the exact meaning of such an ambiguous sentence.

One more thing is that students learning English should avoid writing these sentences.
For instance:

The policeman killed the woman with a gun.

The first meaning: The policeman killed the girl who had a gun.

The second meaning: The policeman used a gun to kill the woman. (Nguyen, 2000, 194)

Here, it depends on whether we consider “the woman with a gun” a noun phrase or not.

Conclusion:

English and Vietnamese are totally different from each other. That is why concerning the difficulties the learners may face is a need. This must start from the most basic things, among which is noun phrase. Knowing how to form a phrase is the basis to form a complete sentence and use it in real life.
Reference


