

## Discerning the Diverse Functional Roles of Noun Phrases in English Sentences

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### Abstract

*This article attempts to examine the functional roles of noun phrases in English sentences. It primarily deals with noun phrases and their syntactic functional roles which are to be studied in the grammar subject. The article writer has pursued the inductive method by presenting some examples of syntactic functions of noun phrases in the beginning, explaining them and then drawing the particular functions from the examples. This article basically deals with the major functional roles realized by the noun phrases. The functional roles are subject, object, direct object, indirect object benefactive object, subject attribute, object attribute, predicator complement and adjunct. This article is significant to those who are concerned with teaching learning English grammar.*

**Keywords:** English Language, Functional Grammar, Noun Phrases

### Introduction

English teachers must have profound knowledge of grammar for teaching their students at the school and campus levels. As English teachers, we are frequently asked more questions about grammar than any other aspects of English. Surprisingly, the students of English literature are found to be weaker in grammar than the students of English language and linguistics. Most of the students studying even at the Master level commit errors in grammar regarding the constituents that occur after the verb or verb phrase. They consider that any constituents that occur after the verb is an object. They do not even think that there might be other constituents that play different functional roles in English sentences. Moreover, they hardly realize that a phrase may have various functional roles in the sentences.

The writer of this article has attempted to present some basic sentences based on the noun phrases to enable the students to identify the functional roles of the noun phrases. This article exhibits that there are various constituents / components that contribute to the formation or structure of a noun phrase. It further underlines that the noun phrases do not only function as subjects or objects, but they also function as subject attribute, object attribute, predicator complement and adjunct in sentences.

A sentence is a combination of constituents based on grammatical rules, and the combination gives us a complete meaning. A sentence is the largest grammatical unit. It retains words, phrases and clauses that

execute functions. Sentence constituents can have different functions such as subject, predicator, direct object, indirect object, benefactive object, subject attribute, object attribute, predicator, predicator complement, and adjunct, apposition, pre-modifier and post-modifier. If we achieve knowledge about these aspects, we can enhance our language skill in writing and speech.

The article will turn to be serviceable to the English teachers and students who rear keen interest in learning English grammar, especially syntactic and functional roles of phrases.

### **Objectives of the Article**

The specific objective of this article is to examine the functional roles of noun phrases in English sentences.

### **Theoretical Review of Literature**

Theoretical review of literature involves definition of grammar, definitions and types of phrase, subject, direct object, indirect object, benefactive object, subject attribute, object attribute, predicator, predicator complement, apposition, determiner, premodifier and post-modifier.

### **Language and Grammar**

Language, a unique property of human beings, is a means of communication. Hockett (1958) considers language to be “the most valuable single possession of the human race” (p.1). Human language is creative. It involves the ability to produce and understand an infinite number of novel utterances which have never been heard and said before. Yule (1997) remarks that language has a feature of creating “novel utterances”(pp.22-23). Krishnaswamy and Verma (1999) view the language to be “structurally complex” (p.17). Doff (1997) points out that “learning a language involves being exposed to samples of language that we can understand; from this we can acquire the rules of the language and apply them to make an unlimited number of original sentences” (p.185). Brown (1994) assumes language to be “systematic and generative” (p.5).

Grammar is the study of rules for forming words and combining them into sentences. Carter and McCarthy (2006) regard grammar to be “concerned with how sentences and structures are formed” (p.2). They further affirm that a “descriptive approach to grammar is based on observation of usages: It states how people use the grammar of a language” (p.6). Yule (1997) deems that one type of descriptive approach is called “structural analysis and its main concern is to investigate the distribution of forms in a

language” (p.92). Tickoo (2009) highlights the importance of grammar and declares it has “an important place in one’s knowledge of a second or foreign language. it can provide a sound knowledge of usable rules, especially when teaching focuses on aspects of grammar that constitute the basic building blocks of the language” (p.165). Aarts (1997) articulates that “linguistic ingredients are arranged in accordance with a set of rules. This set of rules is called the grammar of a language” (p.3).

Grammar is the study of rules for forming words and arranging them into sentences. Cowan (2008) defines grammar as “the set of rules that describe how words and groups of words can be arranged to form sentences in a particular language” (p.3). Knowing grammar in English is the basic key to understanding the language and using it to communicate the concepts, messages, information etc. to others, that’s why English language learners desire to know how grammar in English works.

**Phrase:** A phrase is a group of words which functions as a unit of grammar. Crystal (2008) defines phrase as “a term used in grammatical analysis to refer to a single element of structure typically containing more than one word, and lacking the subject-predicate structure” (p.367). Aarts (1997) asserts that a phrase is “a string of words that behaves as a constituent and has a head as its principal element” (p.280). These definitions focus on the fact that a phrase is greater than a word, but smaller than a clause. There are mainly five types of phrases: Noun Phrase (NP), Verb Phrase (VP), Adjective Phrase (Adj P), Adverb Phrase (Adv P) and Prepositional Phrase (Prep P).

**The Noun Phrase (NP):** A noun phrase is basically a group of words with a noun as its head word. A noun phrase consists of a noun as the head word alone or with determiners and pre-modifiers which come before the noun and the post-modifiers which come after the noun. The whole phrase works as a noun in a sentence. Aarts and Aarts (1986) view a noun phrase as “a phrase which has a noun as its most important constituent” (p.60). For example: a cat, two boys, a very tall girl etc. A Subjective personal pronoun in a sentence can also be taken as a noun phrase. For example: he, *she*, *they*, *we* etc. Aarts and Aarts (1986) assert that “the head of a noun phrase is usually realized by a noun or pronoun” (p.104).

**The Verb Phrase (VP):** A verb phrase is a group of words with a verb as the head word. Quirk and Greenbaum (1996) affirm that “the verb phrase consists of a ‘head verb’ preceded by one or more auxiliary verbs” (p.17). Verb phrases can be either simple or complex (compound). Simple verb phrases have only one verb, whereas the complex verb phrases have more than one verb in the verb phrase. For Example: *can read*, *will be working*, *must have finished* etc.

Sinclair (1992) defines a phrasal verb as “a combination of a verb and an adverb or a verb and a preposition, or a verb, an adverb and a preposition, which together has a single meaning” (p.504). For example: keep up, go down etc. Such a phrasal verb functions as a verb phrase.

**The Adjective Phrase (Adj. P):** An adjective phrase is a phrase in which the head word is an adjective. Aarts and Aarts (1986) define an adjective phrase as “a phrase whose principle element is an adjective” (p.60). Aarts (19970) mentions that “an adjective phrase is headed by an adjective” (p.274). For example: *very good, extremely happy, too cold* etc.

**The Adverb Phrase (Adv. P):** An adverb phrase is a group of words which functions like an adverb. An adverb is the head word in an adverb phrase. Aarts (19970) mentions that “an adverb phrase is headed by an adverb” For example: *very quickly, so badly, really sincerely* etc.

**The Prepositional Phrase (Prep. P):** A prepositional phrase is a group of words that begins with a preposition and ends in a noun or a pronoun. Aarts (19970) mentions that “a prepositional phrase is headed by a preposition” (p.281). Quirk and Greenbaum (1996) assert that the prepositional phrase consists of “a preposition followed by a prepositional complement, which is characteristically a noun phrase or a wh-clause or v-ing clause” (p.140). For example: *in the room, on the table, with her* etc.

**Determiners:** Determiners are words placed in front of a noun to make it clear what the noun refers to. Articles, demonstratives, possessive pronouns, quantifiers, cardinal numbers, ordinal numbers, distributives etc. are determiners. Huddleston (1996) says that determiners “play a major role in the NP contrasts singular vs. plural, count vs. mass and definite vs. indefinite” (p.87). Determiners determine or specify the reference of the noun. Aarts and Aarts (1986) state:

*The function determiner can be realized by a wide range of items, such as the definite article, the indefinite articles, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, numerals, etc. These items occur in a fixed order with respect to each other (p.105).*

**Pre-modification and Post-modification:** Wales (2001) affirms that in modern grammar “pre-modification is used to describe all those elements in a noun phrase or nominal group which are subordinate to the noun and occur directly before it” (p. 316). Noun, adjective and adjective phrase can be the pre-modifiers in a non phrase. He also mentions that in modern grammar “post-modification describes all those elements in a noun phrase or nominal group which are subordinate to the noun as head word and occur after it” (p. 311).

**Function:** Grammatical function is the syntactic role played by a word or phrase in the context of a particular clause or sentence. It is called function. Sentence constituents / phrases can play the functional

role of subject, predicator, direct object, indirect object, benefactive object, subject attribute, object attribute, predicator complement, adjunct/ adverbial etc.

**Subject (Sub):** The subject of a sentence is the person, place, idea or thing that does the action or that is being described. It is what performs the action. Every sentence must have a verb. Aarts (1997) defines a subject “as the entity that carries out the action expressed by the verb in a sentence” (p.283). The subject of a sentence is one of the basic parts of a sentence. The other basic part is the predicate. The predicate tells us something about the subject. It tells us what action the subject is performing, or it describes the subject. Here are the main ways that a subject appears in a sentence:

- i. *The subject performs an action: My dog bit the postman.*
- ii. *The subject is described: My dog is lively. (When the subject is being described, the verb will be a linking verb.)*
- iii. *The subject is identified: My dog is the one in the middle. (When the subject is being identified (which is just another way of being described), the verb will be a linking verb.)*
- iv. *The subject has an action done to it: My dog was taken to the vet. (When the subject has an action done to it, the sentence is called a passive sentence)*

There are three types of subject. They are:

**Simple Subject:** A simple subject is just one word without any modifiers. For example: *Cats eat meat. Children were happy.*

**Complete Subject:** A complete subject involves a noun with the modifier(s). For example: *This dog is hungry. Those cars were old.*

**Compound Subject:** A compound subject includes more than one noun or pronoun as a subject. For example: *Rita and Gita work hard. Peter and John are friends.*

**Object (Obj):** An **object** is the part of a sentence that gives meaning to the subject’s action of the verb. It refers to someone or something that receives the action of the verb. An object answers the question “What?” or “Whom”. For example: We played *ball*. We drive *cars*. She will help *Rajan*. Peter man has killed *a tiger*.

**Predicate:** A predicate is a grammatical term that is part of a clause that includes the verb and the words that tell what the subject does. Aarts (1997) asserts that the predicate of a sentence is syntactically defined as “comprising all the linguistic material to the right of the subject” (p.281).

**Predicator:** The **predicator** is the central syntactic element in a sentence. This is the case because it is the predicator which determines the number of complements that will occur and, indeed, whether a particular element is a complement or an adjunct. Aarts (1997) defines predicator as “a functional label

applied to the verb in a sentence” (p.281). For Example: *eat, can eat, has been eating, will have been playing* etc.

**Complement:** A complement is a word, phrase or clause that is necessary to complete the meaning of an expression. A complement adds more information about the subject or object of the sentence. Aarts (1997) considers complement as “a functional label which denotes a constituent whose presence is required by a verb, noun, adjective or preposition” (p.275). There are six types of complement:

- Direct Object
- Indirect Object
- Benefactive Object
- Subject Attribute / Complement
- Object Attribute / Complement
- Predicator Complement

**Direct Object (Do):** A direct object is the receiver of action within a sentence. Aarts (1997) assumes direct object as “a function label which denotes an entity that undergoes whatever it is that the preceding verb expresses” (p.275). A direct object answers the question “*what?*” or “*whom?*”. *It can occur in a passive sentence. For example:*

*Ram wrote a letter. (Active)*

*A letter was written by Ram. (Passive)*

*She sells flowers. (Active)*

*Flowers are sold by her. (Passive)*

**Indirect Object (IO):** An indirect object is the recipient of the direct object, or an affected participant in the event. There must be a direct object for an indirect object to be placed in a sentence. In other words, an indirect object cannot exist without a direct object. Aarts (1997) holds indirect object as “a function label which denotes an entity that expresses the goal of whatever it is that the preceding verb expresses” (p.278). An indirect object answers the question of “*to whom*”, “*for whom*” or “*for what*” For example:

*Peter taught us English. (Active) or*

*Peter taught English to us. (Active)*

*We were taught English by Peter. (Passive)*

*English was taught to us by Peter. (Passive)*

*Someone gave the boy a book. (Active)*

*Someone gave a book to the boy. (Active)*

*The boy was given a book. (Passive)*

*A book was given to the boy. (Passive)*

**Benefactive Object (BO):** A benefactive object of a verb is the person, animal, or thing that benefits from the action of the verb. A benefactive object may occur with an intransitive verb. Aarts and Aarts (1986) view that a benefactive object “resembles the indirect; it immediately precedes the direct object



constituent. It can also be substituted for by a prepositional phrase, which usually requires the preposition ‘for’ not ‘to’ (p.140). For example:

*Can you call me a taxi?*

*Can you call a taxi for me?*

*I bought my daughter a car.*

*I bought a car for my daughter.*

*He brought his wife a sari.*

*He brought a sari for his wife.*

**Subject Attribute / Complement (SA):** The subject attribute completes the verb relating to the subject of the sentences. It adds more details about the subject of the sentence. Aarts and Aarts (1986) affirm that “the function subject attribute is associated with a constituent which complements the verb and is related to the subject of the sentence” (p.140). For example:

*He is a new teacher.*

*Paul is my nephew. They are happy.*

**Object Attribute / Complement (OA):** Object attribute adds more details about the object of the sentence. Aarts and Aarts (1986) mention that there is a relationship between the direct object constituent and the object attribute constituent that “what is expressed by the object attribute is predicated of the direct object constituent” (p.141). For example:

*She called Ram a bull.*

*Everybody considers her a fool.*

*We appointed him the cashier.*

*We made her a teacher.*

**Predicator Complement (PC):** Predicator complement constituent resembles the direct object, but it cannot be used as the subject in the passive sentences. Aarts and Aarts (1986) remark that the predicator complement could be used “with reference to all those constituents that obligatorily complement the verb” (p.142). For example: This girl resembles *her mother*. That tin contains *tobacco*. He has *three cars*. His lecture has taken *a lot of time*.

**Adverbial / Adjunct (A):** This constituent generally answers the questions introduced by ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘how much’, and ‘how often’, ‘why’ etc. It is a part of a sentence that contains extra information; it is not necessary to complete the meaning of a sentence. Aarts (1997) holds adjunct as “a function label which indicates the where, why, when etc. in a proposition (p.274). An adjunct is a word, a phrase, or a clause that can be removed from a sentence without making the sentence grammatically wrong. For example: I am flying to London *next month*. She went out *quickly*.

### Presentation of Sentences for Examining the Functional Roles of Noun Phrases

Personal pronouns in the subjective case function as subjects, and those in the objective case function as objects but the writer does not deal with them here ;because they are easily understood by the teachers

and the students. The writer deals with the nouns that occur in isolation or come with other constituents that contribute to the formation of a noun phrase. In the presentation, the noun phrases are italicized.

**Presentation No. 1**

*A man* laughed.

[*A man*] is a noun phrase composed of an indefinite article [a] and a noun [man] as a head word. [*A man*] is a subject, because it performs an action of laughing.

**Presentation No. 2**

She will sell *the car*.

This sentence retains only one noun phrase [*the car*] that is made up of the definite article [*the*] and a noun [*car*] as a head word. Here, [*the car*] is an object, because it that receives the action of the verb [sell]. It answers the question “What?”

**Presentation No. 3**

I gave *my son a car*.

This sentence has two noun phrases. The first one is [*my son*] that is formed of a possessive adjective [*my*] and a noun [*son*] as a head word. Here, [*my son*] is an indirect object, because it **answers the question of “to whom”**. The second noun phrase is [*a car*] that is contrived of an indefinite article [*a*] and a noun [*car*] as a head word. Here, [*a car*] is a direct object, because it **answers the question “What?”**

**Presentation No. 4**

She brought *a poor child a grammar book*.

This sentence contains two noun phrases. The first one is [*a poor child*] that is constructed of an indefinite article [*a*], an adjective [*poor*] and a noun [*child*] as a head word. Here, [*a poor child*] is a benefactive object, because it benefits from the action of the verb [bring]. The second one is [*a grammar book*] that is framed of an indefinite article [*a*], a noun [*grammar*] and a noun [*book*] as a head word. It is a direct object, because it **answers the question “What?”**

**Presentation No. 5**

She will buy *a poor boy an English book*.

This sentence has two noun phrases. The first one is [*a poor boy*] that is composed of an indefinite article [*a*], an adjective [*poor*] and a noun [*boy*] as a head word. Here, [*a poor boy*] is a benefactive object, because it benefits from the action of the verb [buy]. The second one is [*an English book*] that is formed of an indefinite article [*an*], an adjective [*English*] and a noun [*book*] as a head word. It is a direct object, because it **answers the question “What?”**

**Presentation No. 6**

He is *a new teacher*.

This sentence has only one noun phrase [*a new teacher*] that is composed of an indefinite article [*a*], an adjective [*new*] and a noun [*teacher*] as a head word. Here, [*a new teacher*] is a subject attribute, because it is related to the subject of the sentence.

**Presentation No. 7**

*A girl* called Mohan *a fool*.

This sentence retains three noun phrases. The first one is [*a girl*] that is made up of of an indefinite article [*a*] and a noun [*girl*] as a head word. Here, [*a girl*] is a subject, because it performs an action of calling. The second one is [*Mohan*] that is a personal proper noun. It is a direct object. It answers the question “to whom”. The third one is [*a fool*] that is constructed of an indefinite article [*a*] and a noun [*fool*] as a head word. Here, [*a fool*] is an object attribute. It is related to the object of the sentence.

**Presentation No. 8**

*Mohan, a new student*, is very intelligent.

This sentence has two noun phrases. The first one is [*Mohan*] is a personal proper noun as a head word. [*Mohan*] is a subject. It is described in the sentence. The second one is [*a new student*] that is composed of an indefinite article [*a*], an adjective [*new*] and a noun [*student*] as a head word. Here, [*a new student*] is a subject apposition. It gives an extra information about the subject [*Mohan*].



Presentation No. 9

*The new boy resembles my brother.*

This sentence involves two noun phrases. The first one is [*The new boy*] that is made up of a definite article [*the*], an adjective [*new*] and noun [*boy*] as a head word. [*The new boy*] is a subject. It is described in the sentence. The second one is [*my brother*] that is composed of a possessive adjective [*my*] and a noun [*brother*] as a head word. It is a predicator complement, because it complements the verb [*resembles*].

Presentation No. 10

He left *his sick wife last week*.

This sentence includes two noun phrases. The first one is [*his sick wife*] that is composed of a possessive determiner / adjective [*his*], an adjective [*sick*] and a noun [*wife*] as a head word. Here, [*his sick wife*] is an object. It answers the question "whom". The second one is [*last week*] that is formed of an adjective [*last*] and a noun [*week*] as a head word. It functions as an adjunct. It answers the question introduced by "when".

Presentation No. 11

I bought *a big arm chair*.

This sentence has one noun phrase [*a big arm chair*], but it can be framed into two noun phrases. The first one is [*a big arm*] that is composed of an indefinite article [*a*], an adjective [*big*] and a noun [*arm*]. It is followed by a noun [*chair*] as a head word. Here, [*a big arm*] is a premodifier of the noun [*chair*]. It occurs before the noun [*chair*] to modify it.

Presentation No. 12

We are sitting in *the large classroom*.

This sentence retains only one noun phrase [*the large classroom*] that is made up of a definite article [*the*], an adjective [*large*] and a noun [*classroom*] as a head word. It takes place after a preposition [*in*]. Here, [*the large classroom*] functions as a prepositional complement because it complements the preposition in the sentence.

Presentation No. 13

*Swimming is a great form of exercise.*

This sentence has two noun phrases. The first one is [*Swimming*] is a gerund as a head word. It functions as a subject, because it is described. The second one is [*a great form of exercise*] that is formed of an indefinite article [*a*] an adjective [*great*] and a noun [*form*] as a head word followed by a prepositional phrase involving a preposition [*of*] and a noun [*exercise*]. It functions as a subject attribute, because it is related to the subject.

Presentation No. 14

*Inviting the neighbours was a big mistake.*

This sentence involves two noun phrases. The first one is [*Inviting the neighbours*] that is composed of a gerund [*inviting*], a definite article [*the*] and a noun [*neighbours*] as a head word. It functions as a subject, because it is described. The second one is [*a big mistake*] is framed of an indefinite article [*a*], an adjective [*big*] and a noun [*mistake*] as a head word. It functions as a subject attribute, because it is related to the subject.

Presentation No. 15

*The flowers in the vase on the table are beautiful.*

This sentence has one noun phrase [*The flowers in the vase on the table*] that is framed of a definite article [*the*] and a noun [*flowers*] as a head word that is post-modified by two prepositional phrases composed of a preposition [*in*], a definite article [*the*] and a noun [*vase*] of the first prepositional phrase and a preposition [*on*], a definite article [*the*] and a noun [*table*]. [*The flowers in the vase on the table*] functions as a subject, because it is described by indicating where and how the flowers are.

Presentation No. 16

He bought *this Japanese car two days ago*.

This sentence retains two noun phrases. The first one is [*this Japanese car*] that is composed of a determiner [*this*], an adjective [*Japanese*] and a noun [*car*] as a head word. It is a direct object. It answers the question "what?". The [*two days ago*] is a noun phrase composed of an adjective [*two*], a noun [*days*] as a headword post modified by an adverb [*ago*]. Here, [*two days ago*] functions as an adjunct because it answers the question asked by using "when".

**Table 1: Summary of the Functional Roles of Noun Phrases**

Functional Roles of Noun Phrases	
<b>Subject</b>	
Complement	Direct Object
	Indirect Object
	Benefactive Object
	Subject Attribute
	Object Attribute
	Predicator Complement
<b>Adjunct/ Adverbial</b>	
Others	Prepositional Complement
	Premodifier of Noun
	Apposition

### Expected Result

The writer of this article anticipates that this article will be able to supply the students and teachers with the basic concept about noun phrases and their functions. Their understanding of functions of noun phrases will make them curious to learn the other phrases with diverse functions. It will enhance their knowledge in the field of grammar.

### Conclusion

A phrase noun can have multiple functions depending on its position in sentences. A noun phrase can be a subject, subject attribute, direct object, indirect object, benefactive object, object attribute, predicator complement and adjunct. It can be observed that different parts of speech play a prominent role in the formation of a noun phrase; therefore Students and teachers need to have sound knowledge of the parts of speech. Discerning the functions of noun phrases can be intricate for average students, but incessant study and practice will enable them to examine diverse syntactic functional roles of noun phrases in English sentences.

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