

High frequency nouns in English: aspects of a grammatical description

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Abstract

The term 'noun' belongs to the basic terminology used both in theoretical descriptions of the English language as well as in school textbooks. Generally, nouns are characterised as referring to people, things, and abstract ideas; they are inflected for number, and they typically occur as the head of noun phrases, which in turn can fulfil a number of functions in the clause, such as subject, object, complement etc. Focusing on the relation between the noun and the action or situation described by the verb, semantic interpretations of clause elements often stress the association of nouns and noun phrases with semantic roles such as agent, affected, and recipient (e.g. Biber et al. 1999: 63). While such a characterisation might serve as an overview, we cannot expect that the behaviour of individual nouns or subgroups of nouns is sufficiently accounted for in this way. This becomes particularly obvious when we look at high-frequency nouns and their occurrences in natural language texts.

Among the ten most frequent noun forms, both in the Bank of English and the BNC, we find *time*, *year*, *years*, and *day*. The frequency of these nouns is to some extent related to their tendency to occur in time adverbials, for instance in 'frames' like *at _____ time, for _____ year(s)*. Such expressions provide circumstantial information and often take a peripheral role in the structure of clauses. Grammatical descriptions, however, seem to focus on more central functions of nouns in syntactic constructions. Thus it is easy to overlook, for example, the productivity of the singular forms *year* and *day* in combinations such as *13-year-old*, *five-year warranty*, *three-day event*, where one of the features of these nouns is their modifying function. Furthermore, corpus data provides examples of phrases such as *years of smoking/suppression*. Here the form *years* is regarded as the head of the noun phrase if we take a purely formal point of view, while a description of its meaning in the given context reveals the emphasizing function of *years* and identifies the following noun (*smoking/suppression*) as the notional head (cf. Sinclair 1991). These are some examples showing that high-frequency nouns are not easily accounted for by general grammatical descriptions.

With the focus on high-frequency nouns expressing time the present paper explores various aspects of grammatical descriptions of nouns and makes suggestions for descriptive categories that attempt to combine lexical, structural and textual criteria. Based on evidence from two large corpora, the Bank of English and the BNC, the theoretical approach that is taken stresses the inseparability of meaning, pattern, and function.

References

- Biber, Douglas; Stig Johansson; Geoffrey Leech; Susan Conrad; Edward Finegan (1999): *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Harlow: Longman.
Sinclair, John (1991): *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*, Oxford: OUP.