

Nouns and pronouns

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Nouns and pronouns

The noun is the most fundamental grammatical category in all languages of the world, together with verbs. The core semantic properties of nouns are similar in all languages. Nouns are mastered by children from the earliest age and all children with language disorders can use nouns, although they may not be able to master complex noun constructions.

The pronoun is a much more complex and diverse category, and contains various subtypes of elements, which are not all present in all languages. The complexity and abstractness of pronouns make them prone to create difficulties in young children's language and in children with language impairment.

Although pronouns are strongly related to nouns (as they often, but not always, stand for a noun), their properties are very different from the properties of nouns. So, we will clearly separate the presentation of nouns, in the first part, from pronouns, in the second part.

Nouns

Nouns are defined by their form and their meaning (or function), as is the case for all language categories. The dual definition (form and meaning) of nouns underlies widely different linguistic approaches, formalist or functionalist.

Nouns are first defined by their meaning: a prototypical noun is a word that refers to an object or a person. For example:

This is a book. This is Peter.

In these utterances, "book" and "Peter" are nouns. They refer to objects or people in the world. The ability to refer is fundamental to what a noun is. In these examples, "Peter" does not need any more information to be understood: this noun, a proper noun, has a clear unique reference in a given context. "book", on the contrary, comes with a determiner "a" (see entry "Determiners"). Other determiners can be used, which would induce different meanings, even in the same context. For example, using "the book" instead of "a book" suggests that "the book" refers to a specific book and that "the book" was already known in some way or another.

There are two fundamental types of nouns: proper nouns and common nouns. Proper nouns are names of specific people, places, days, months, etc. In most cases, they denote unique referents, which makes it possible to avoid the use of any grammatical markers, unlike common nouns (see below). Also, as they are unique, they are not ambiguous, so their grammatical category is lexically defined. Proper nouns can be extended to be used as common nouns, in which case they are accompanied by a determiner like common nouns. The specific grammatical features of proper nouns are not present in all languages. There are languages where proper nouns have the same syntactic properties as common nouns, but different semantic properties.

Common nouns have a generic meaning. They can denote one specific element, several elements, a whole set, a substance, or a quality. To differentiate the various uses, markers can be found on the noun (such as determiners). These markers and the position of the noun

in a sentence also define the form of the noun category. Every word that has these markers will be a noun, regardless of whether it refers to an object or a person, or something else.

The fact that nouns can be identified on the basis of the form is fundamental in language because this makes it possible to extend the reference of prototypical nouns to things that are not objects or persons. This explains how it is possible for example to extend the meaning of a verb to that of a noun. Another use is that a noun can refer to abstract principles, to actions, to elements in language, to qualities, to feelings, etc., even when there is no actual thing that can be pointed at, as is possible for an object or a person. In this case, the notion of reference is maintained, and common agreement within a linguistic community around a shared word form helps to define new meanings and new concepts.

The form of nouns (especially common nouns) is specific to each language, as the way nouns can be marked varies a lot from one language to another. For example, in English, nouns can carry number and are preceded by a determiner and adjectives. There is a different form to mark count nouns and mass nouns. Count nouns are used to refer to elements that can be denoted as individual items, for example, “a book”, “two books”, “ten books”. Mass nouns correspond to a substance or quality, for example, “information”, “some information”, but not “two informations”. In Spanish and French, nouns have gender, but there is no systematic difference between count nouns and mass nouns. In German, nouns carry gender and number, but also case, which indicates the relationship between a noun and the verb it accompanies in an utterance. In Chinese, nouns do not carry any marker, but can be accompanied by classifiers similar to those that exist in English for mass nouns. For example, 一本书 (yì běn shū) which means “one book” corresponds to “one (yì) volume (běn) of book (shū)”. The structure is similar to “a loaf of bread” (“of” is not necessary in the Chinese construction), but is used for all words, not only mass nouns. There is no specific construction for count nouns in Chinese.

Language acquisition

Nouns are among the very first words understood and produced by young children. The first two words produced by 8-month-olds are “mommy” and “daddy”, two nouns. In this case, they should be considered as proper nouns. At the age of 12 months, words produced by more than 10% of children are either onomatopoeias, interjections or communicators (bye, hi, uh, oh, baa baa, yum yum, grrr, woof woof, vroom, night night, ouch, thank you, quack quack, peekaboo), or nouns (mommy, daddy, ball, dog, baby, bottle, kitty, duck, banana, cat, grandma, shoe, bird). The frequency of nouns in early child vocabularies has been explained by a bias toward whole objects, as whole objects and consequently names for whole objects (i.e. nouns) are cognitively simpler. The bias found for English-speaking children exists for many other languages. However, there are languages where this bias is not as strong, especially languages (Korean, Mandarin) where verbs are more frequent and morphosyntactically less complex than nouns.

The advantage for nouns also exists when children learn to use words productively with adequate syntax. They are able to do so in English earlier for nouns than for verbs.

Pronouns

As the etymology of the word indicates (from latin *pronomen*: *pro* "stands for", *nomem* "noun"), pronouns stand for nouns. However, as is often the case in linguistics, the reality is more complex. There are several sets of pronouns (called representing pronouns) that can be used in the place of a noun (called the antecedent), which avoids repetition of the noun. For example: "A sparrow is a kind of bird. It can fly." – "it" refers to "sparrow". But not all pronouns correspond to a noun. Other pronouns (called nominal pronouns) refer to people or objects, but not directly to previous nouns – for example: "I cannot fly" – "I" refers to the speaker but not necessarily to any previous noun. In this case, pronouns do not represent a noun, but they are used in a syntactic position where a noun phrase can occur and they express meanings that cannot be expressed using nouns. Also, in some cases, pronouns can be used to express a merely formal subject (such as "it" in "it rained"), which is called impersonal use.

When taking the place of a noun, pronouns have the same semantic value not only as the noun, but usually as the whole noun phrase. The reference is semantic and preserves the gender and the number (for languages where these categories exist). However, the reference does not take into account the syntactic position of the antecedent. The pronoun will have a syntactic form that is independent from the syntactic form of the antecedent. The pronoun can take the position of any verb argument or any adverbial. This explains why pronouns are often marked for case. For example:

He gives it to him.

"He", "it", "him" are pronouns. "He" is in the nominative case, "it" in the accusative case and "him" in the dative case, and here more specifically the recipient. "He" is marked both by the position (before the verb) and lexically ("he" is always nominative). "it" and "him" are marked only by their position in the sentence, as they would have other cases if they were in another position in the sentence.

Some pronouns do not refer to nouns. This is the case for the first person (the speaker) and the second person (the addressee). This is also the case in speech when the antecedent is semantically or pragmatically obvious, or when language is accompanied by gesture, pointing, and stance. In these situations, third person pronouns or demonstrative pronouns are used.

Pronouns are traditionally divided into classes according to their syntactic role or their semantic value: personal, possessive, demonstrative, relative, interrogative, indefinite.

Personal pronouns refer to the grammatical person (first person, second person, third person). In some languages, personal pronouns can have different lexical values depending on their grammatical case. For example, in English "I" is the first person personal pronoun for the nominative case, whereas "me" is the first person personal pronoun for other cases. In some languages, there is a subset of personal pronouns, clitic pronouns, which have to be used with a verb as they express the arguments of the verb. For example, this is the case in English for "he". Other pronouns such as "him" can be used as clitics (e.g. "he thanks him") or independently (e.g. "who is it? Him!"). In other languages, for example Spanish, there is no clitic nominative personal pronoun because the verb form contains a marker that refers directly to the subject (which corresponds to the nominative). Thus in Spanish, "*hablo*" means "I speak" and "I" corresponds to the suffix "-o". This form is different from the second

person and third person so clitic pronouns are unnecessary to discriminate persons. Clitic pronouns are important as they can create difficulties in language development and in children with language disorders.

Possessive pronouns are pronouns that contain semantic information about something owned by someone or something. For example:

Look at this hat. It is mine.

"mine" is a possessive pronoun that, as a pronoun, refers to "this hat" and as a possessive pronoun refers to the speaker herself.

Demonstrative pronouns are pronouns with deictic reference, which depends on the context shared by the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader. The reference can be to an object in a conversation or some shared knowledge. For example:

Look! This is a famous painting.

"this" is a demonstrative pronoun that refers to an object in the real-world or discourse context but not to a noun or an antecedent.

Relative pronouns are pronouns that link and organize relative clauses with respect to the main clause. For example:

This one is "The Mona Lisa", which is a famous painting.

In English, relative pronouns are "that", "which", "who", "whom", "whose", and the zero form ("that" can be omitted). In English, their syntactic position is to introduce relative clauses. Relative pronouns can have a syntactic function of subject, complement, adverbial, postmodifier, prepositional complement, or object in the relative clause, irrespective of their position as the first word of the clause.

Interrogative pronouns are, in English, similar to the relative wh-pronouns, with the addition of "what". However, they do not refer to an antecedent, but on the contrary are used for requesting information which was not previously known. This category of pronouns is a good example of the dual role of many pronouns, which is to refer to previous language, or to be used in a syntactic position where a noun or a noun phrase can be found, and used in this case with semantic values that are more generic than nouns.

Indefinite pronouns are used to refer to people or things without saying exactly who or what they are, instead of having a specific reference, unlike other pronouns. In English, these pronouns are everybody, somebody, anybody, nobody, and similar sets built around -one, -thing, and -where. Indefinite pronouns are a good example of how pronouns can be used to express new meanings where no specific word (or noun) can apply.

Language acquisition

There is a lot of variation in the mastery of pronouns in language acquisition because the category contains many elements that vary hugely in terms of phonological complexity, frequency, and grammatical complexity. The main results in the acquisition of pronouns by English-speaking children could be described as follows. When children start to combine words in their second year, they will often use their own name or a term such as "baby" rather than "I" or "me". This often reflects the way adults speak to the child and is an echo of child-directed speech. The first pronoun used productively is "it", which is used for

objects. The second pronoun used productively is one with first person reference, such as “me”, “my”, “mine”, or “I”. Some confusion is observed in the use of pronoun cases, especially for subject pronouns. Similar confusion also occurs for object pronouns, for example “me”, “him”, “her”, “us”, “them” can be used even where they are not used by adults. Plural pronouns occur later than singular forms, and second person pronouns occur later than first and third person forms. By age 3, normally-developing children produce 71% of correct third person singular forms, and 98% by age 5.

Language disorders

As for language acquisition, there is a large variety of behavior in the children with language impairment when they are handling pronouns. Children with specific language impairment (SLI) have considerable difficulties with morphosyntactic markings, with complex phonological patterns, and complex grammatical constructions. They are usually efficient when using simple constructions that underlie basic linguistic interactions. For instance, they are usually efficient in using constructions acquired by young children but have difficulties when handling the linguistic structures acquired when children are older. This is confirmed by various results on different languages. Weak stressed forms such as subject pronouns are difficult for children with SLI, as compared to MLU-matched normally-developing children. Not all studies confirmed the existence of difficulties when comparing language-matched children, but the difficulties with personal pronouns were confirmed when comparing age-matched children.

Another example of specific difficulties with pronouns is the case of accusative clitic pronouns in Romance languages. For example, in French-speaking children, the accusative clitic production remained weak long after childhood in adolescents whose language developed atypically, no matter what the cause of the atypical development was. It suggested that the computation involved in the production of these elements places a particularly heavy load on performance systems. Similar results and explanations are suggested for another Romance language, Portuguese.

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Further readings

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Cross references

Grammar, Language disorders in children, Morphology, Syntax and Grammar

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