

Unpacking authentic academic texts: Approaches to the noun phrases on pre-sessional English language courses



BALEAP Conference,
Nottingham, April 2013

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Take your pick

1a Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 was the immediate cause of the outbreak of the Second World War.

OR

1b Germany invaded Poland in 1939, which immediately caused the Second World War to break out.

2a We analysed the data from the experiment, and it revealed that children react when they have too much sugar.

OR

2b The analysis of the data revealed children's reaction to excessive sugar intake.

Which is most readable? Which would you use in your own academic writing? Which would you teach? Why?

Nominalization: the process or result of forming a noun or **noun phrase** from a clause or a verb

(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

“For too long now the verb phrase has been the dominant focus of attention in course books, syllabuses, and teacher training programmes. Any teacher worth his/her salt will be able to tell you everything there is to know about base verbs, infinitives, progressives, perfectives, passives, and modals

But, please, let's not forget the noun phrase! Why? Because the noun phrase is a quintessential part of every sentence...”

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/noun-phrase>

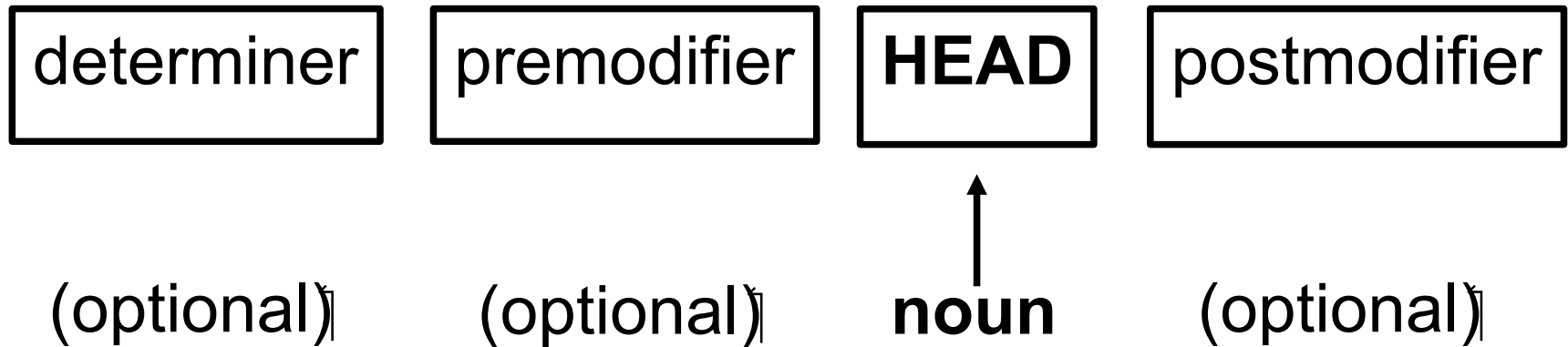
The noun phrase in EAP

“...if grammatical description equates to frequency ... an EAP grammar would devote about 15% of its space to verbs. And about 65% to noun phrases...”

Comment in a recent BALEAP Discussion List exchange.

What exactly is a noun phrase?

A noun phrase has the following basic structure:



The noun phrase

“Investigating **the reading-to-writing process and source use of L2 postgraduate students in real-life academic tasks**”

det + premodifier	head	postmodifier
	process and source use	
The	process and source use	
The reading-to-writing	process and source use	
The reading-to-writing	process and source use	of L2 postgraduate students in real-life academic tasks

Nominalizations in AW (Uni websites)

“One feature of academic style is the use of nominalisation. Nominalisation means you take a verb and change it into a noun **in order to make your writing sound more academic.**”

<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/my-studies/ess/nominalisation>

“If your study subject states a preference for very formal, abstract, academic writing, the technique of nominalisation (changing verbs to nouns) can be very helpful **to make your writing more academic and concise.**”

<http://www.une.edu.au/tlc/aso/students/factsheets/active-passive.pdf>

Nominalizations (Noun phrases) in EAP

“Noun phrases (grouping together a collection of words to act as one noun) are one of the keystones of academic writing.”

<http://aeo.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/Files/NounPhrases/Noun%20Phrases.html>

“It is useful to be able to combine nouns appropriately to create complex noun phrases. Being able to express abstract and complex concepts as concisely as possible is an important skill especially for academic writing. Economy of expression can also enhance your academic writing style.”

http://learn.lboro.ac.uk/file.php/5069/insessional_support_pages/EAPToolkit/grammar/forming_complex_noun_phrases.html

Why use nominalizations?

In a study by Thompson (in Hunston & Oakey, (2009), writers of low-rated Applied Linguistics dissertations were found to use fewer nominalizations than writers of high-rated dissertations.

‘Good’ essay writers not only used more nominalizations but used them more effectively.

Hunston & Oakey (2009)

No explanation of ‘effectively’.

Why use nominalizations? The NNS

Analysis of texts suggests that non-native speakers employ significantly fewer nominalizations than first-year native speaker students without formal training in writing, which can make non-native speaker text appear less academic.

Is this a problem? What is the model?

“using...nominalizations can make students’ texts appear less childish and simple and, ultimately, lead to better grades in mainstream courses”

Hinkel, 2004, p110

Do you think it does?

A note of caution?

“Sometimes if you expand your nominal group to include too much information your meaning may become unclear. In this case, it would be better to 'unpack' some of the information from your nominal group and put it into a separate clause.”

<http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/academic/3cvi.html>

“Nominalization is common in scientific, academic and bureaucratic writing, perhaps because it makes the text sound more official and 'objective'. It is not ungrammatical, but high levels of nominalization can make any book or article sound flat and dull.”

<http://www.mywritingblog.com/2010/05/nominalization-and-why-you-should.html>

Are these concerns valid?

Noun phrases with modification (AW)

- Noun phrases with a modifier are relatively rare in conversation – 15%.
- Noun phrases with a modifier are notably common in news and **academic prose**
- Proportionally in **academic prose, almost 60%** of all noun phrases have some modifier:
 - circa 25% have a premodifier
 - circa 20% have a postmodifier
 - an additional 12% have both

Biber et al, 1999. Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English

Investigating the reading-to-writing process and source use of L2 postgraduate students in real-life academic tasks: an exploratory study.

Sharon McCulloch

Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics and English Language

The difficulties that student writers, particularly second language writers, experience with source use in academic writing have been widely documented, particularly in relation to issues of plagiarism, patchwriting and over-reliance on quotation (e.g. Campbell, 1990; Howard, 1995; Keck, 2006; Pecorari, 2003, 2008; Pennycook, 1996; Shi, 2004, 2010).

It has been argued that problems with source use occur because of factors such as language proficiency (Campbell, 1990), cultural differences (Pennycook, 1996) and an imperfect understanding of what constitutes appropriate source use (Pecorari, 2003).

In much of the literature, problems with source use are characterised as writing-related, and the writing end of the reading-to-write continuum has received more attention than reading.

Those studies which have focused on the reading aspect of the academic reading-to-write process have tended to use rather artificial reading-to-write tasks that represent a poor reflection of the ways in which students actually read to write in higher education settings, particularly at postgraduate level (Ackerman, 1991; Kennedy, 1985; McGinley, 1992; Penrose & Geisler, 1994; Plakans, 2009a).

Teaching the use of the nominal group?

In a study by Gallagher and McCabe (2001), despite being exposed to academic writing across the curriculum through assigned readings, Japanese and Spanish students showed little approximation towards the register of academic writing with regard to the nominal group.

Gallagher and McCabe maintained that this “warrants the inclusion of more classroom activities which highlight the role of nominal groups in academic writing”.

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (St. Louis, MO, February 24-27, 2001).

How do contemporary EAP
course books handle the
noun phrase?

Course book A (2011)

Compare these sentences:

The efficiency of the machine depends on the precision of its construction.

Precise construction results in an efficient machine

The first sentence uses the nouns 'efficiency' and 'precision'. The second uses adjectives: 'precise' and 'efficient'.

Explanation: Although the meaning is similar the first sentence is more formal.

→ Adjective/verb to noun transformation tasks

This is all on nouns – nothing on noun phrases. Three sections on verbs.

Course book B (2012)

- Adding suffixes to verbs and nouns to form nouns (Unit 1)
- Identifying and unpacking NPs in terms of head noun, pre- and post-modification (Units 2 & 4)

Other course books (2012)

Explanations:

- “Expresses the idea more efficiently”
- “Identifies or gives more information”
- “Noun phrases are very common in academic English, both spoken and written. They are useful because they can express a large amount of information in a few words”.
- “Common partly because...they contain a lot of information in a shorter phrase...Help you paraphrase a text”
- “Express a large amount of information...help to summarize and link information, and often the basic units of a text”

The noun phrase in EAP course books

And that's about it. The noun phrase most definitely features, but is there/should there be more?



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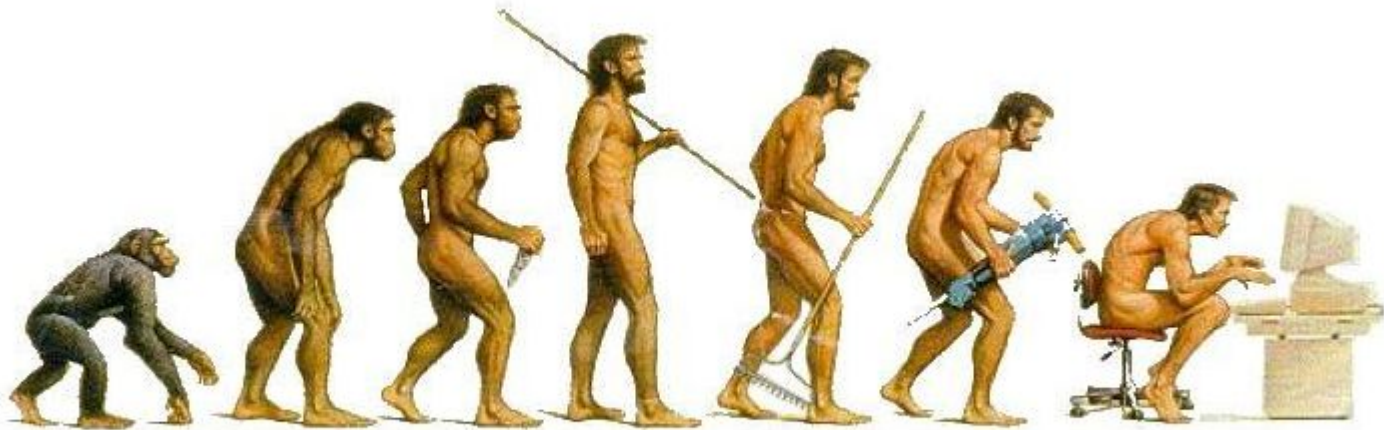
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The more Billy pushes on this pane of glass the faster the cracks will grow.

Glass cracks more quickly
the harder you press on it.

thing *a* undergoes process *b* in manner *c*
to the extent that in manner *x*
person *w* does action *y* to thing *a*

Cracks in glass grow faster
the more pressure is put on.

(complex abstract) thing *b-in-a*
acquires property *d* in manner *c*
to the extent that
(abstract) thing *xy* has process *z* done to it

Glass crack growth is faster
if greater stress is applied.

(complex abstract) thing *abc* has attribute *c*
under condition that (abstract) thing *xy*
has process *z* done to it

The rate of glass crack growth
depends on the magnitude of
applied stress.

(complex abstract) thing *c-of-abd* causes / is
caused by (complex abstract) thing *xyz*

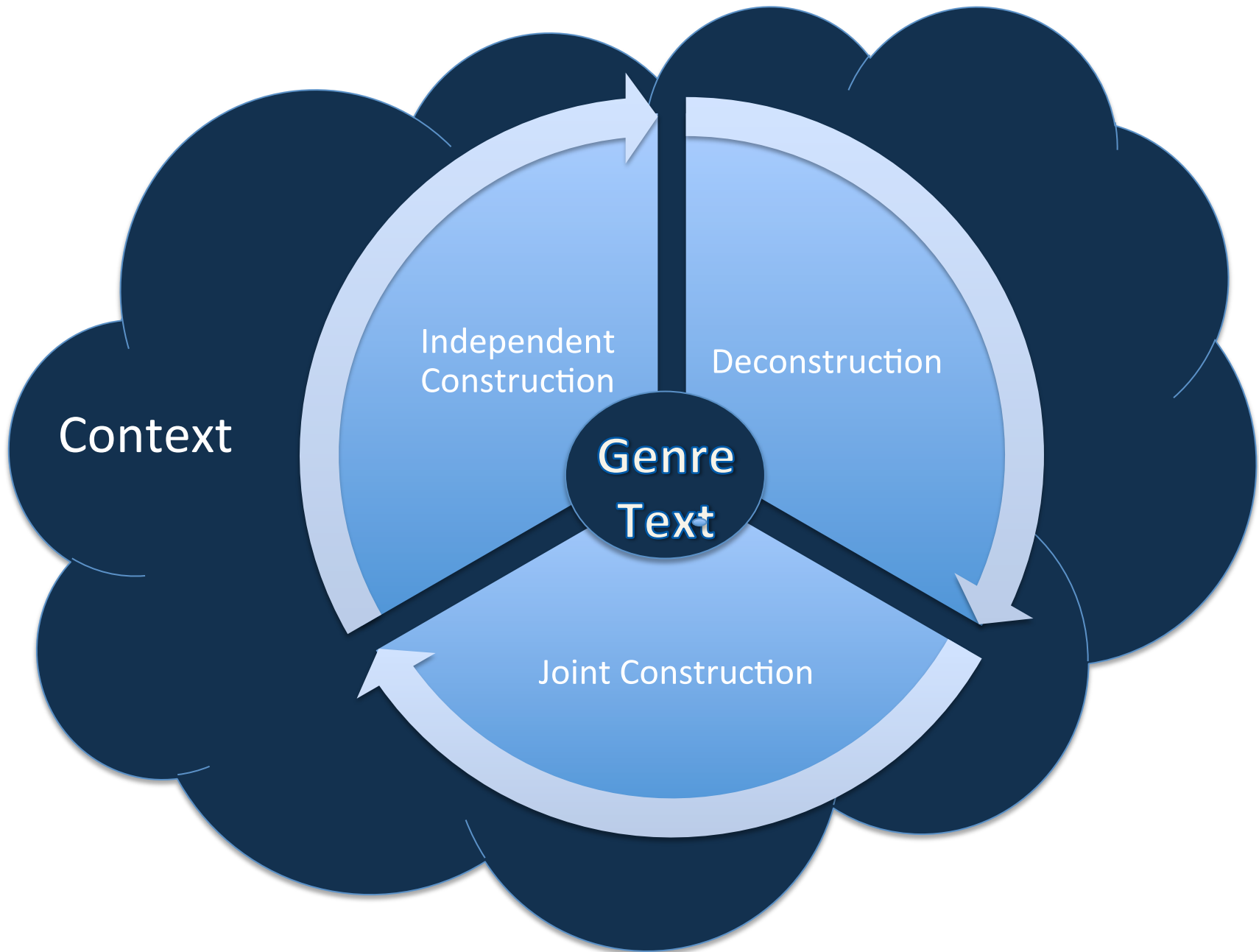
Glass crack growth rate is
associated with applied stress
management.

(complex abstract) thing *abcd* causes / is
caused by (complex abstract) thing *zyx*



Move 1	Establishing a territory
Step 1	Claiming centrality and/or
Step 2	Making topic generalization(s) and/or
Step 3	Reviewing items of previous research
Move 2	Establishing a niche
Step 1A	Counter-claiming
Step 1B	Indicating a gap
Step 1C	Question-raising
Step 1D	Continuing a tradition
Move 3	Occupying the niche
Step 1A	Outlining purposes
Step 1B	Announcing present research
Step 2	Announcing principal findings
Step 3	Indicating RA structure

(Swales, 1990, p. 141)



The difficulties that student writers, particularly second language writers, experience with source use in academic writing

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particularly in relation to issues of plagiarism, patchwriting and over-reliance on quotation

(e.g. Campbell, 1990; Howard, 1995; Keck, 2006; Pecorari, 2003, 2008; Pennycook, 1996; Shi, 2004, 2010).

1. Match each sentence a - j with a sentence with similar meaning 1 - 10.
2. Order the series of sentences with 1 as the most concrete.
3. Write an explanation of each sentence [or text] for a child aged x.
4. Rewrite a congruent sentence using a incongruent process.
5. The noun group much of the literature is underlined in the text. Underline other noun groups that refer to the same thing.
6. Identify the New information in each of the sentences (1 - 10) and re-phrase them as the Theme in the following sentences.
 - a. Select an article that you have to read for an assessment and identify its purpose and stages.
 - b. Read the introduction. Explain what the article is about to your partner.
 - c. Identify six features which tell you that it is academic writing.
 - d. Underline the the three longest noun phrases in the text. For each one, explain how the noun phrase works in the text.

- i. Summarize your favorite film (using 5 then 4 then 3 then 1 sentence).
- ii. Think of something unusual about life in the UK and put a (noun-phrase) label on it
- iii. Rewrite a questionnaire item as a caption for a table of data.
- iv. Rewrite your research question as a title using a noun phrase.

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