Basics of Language for Language Learners

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Introduction

One of the basic functions of language is to talk about things: we need to refer to and describe things in the world. This chapter is about how languages perform these functions.

The words that refer to things are typically called “nouns.” We explore these questions about nouns:

- What kinds of meaning do nouns have?
- Where do nouns go in the order of words in a phrase and in a sentence in various languages?
- How do nouns contribute to the meaning of a sentence?
- What special forms do nouns have in different languages?

In the simplest cases, a single word can be used to refer to something, for example, Susan or computers. But in more complex cases, where we want to express some properties of what we are referring to, it is necessary to construct a phrase, for example, this computer, or every red chair, or the person that you said you were talking to. Although all languages can perform the function of expressing such properties, they vary dramatically in how they do this in terms of linguistic form. For example, in some languages, the words for ‘every’ and ‘red’ would follow the noun, not precede it as in English. Other languages lack words meaning ‘the’ and express the meaning conveyed by ‘the’ by locating the phrase containing the noun in a particular location in the sentence.
Nouns

To gain some perspective, we begin with some errors that non-native speakers make in English:

(1) a. Sun is hot.
   Store on corner is closed.
   b. He lives in the Peru.
   The Professor Goldmund is very dynamic.
   c. Student in this class very friendly.
   d. I bought a book. He was very expensive.

Let's compare these sentences with their correct counterparts. In (2), an underlined word is one that we have added to correct the sentence, and a word marked with a strikeout has to be removed to correct the sentence.

(2) a. The sun is hot.
    The store on the corner is closed.
   b. He lives in the Peru.
    The Professor Goldmund is very dynamic.
   c. The students in this class are very friendly.
   d. I bought a book. It was very expensive.

The examples in (2a) were discussed in the previous chapter; in English, words like sun (when referring to our sun) must be preceded by the (which is called the definite article). The examples in (2b) show that phrases in English that refer to particular people or places typically do not have an article. Example (2c) shows that English makes a distinction in the form of the noun between singular and plural. And Example (2d) shows that English uses the neuter pronoun it to refer to inanimate objects, rather than the pronouns he and she, which distinguish masculine and feminine gender.

We will see later on that some other languages in fact omit the definite article and use other ways to express the notion of definiteness. Other languages distinguish categories of words as “masculine” and “feminine,” a distinction that may get translated literally (but incorrectly) into English as he and she instead of it. And some languages do not distinguish singular and plural by marking the word, as English does. Speakers of such languages are likely to make errors of the sort seen in (1), and speakers of English are likely to have comparable difficulties in learning such languages.

A word that refers to a thing, like dog, is a type of noun. Words of this type can appear in English after the, a, etc. Let’s look more closely at the English examples that went into the construction of Table 8.1, which we used in the previous chapter. The words in column B are similar to one another in two ways. First, their meanings have something in common (they all refer to physical objects, in particular, to animals). Second, they
Exercise 1

Make up a nonsense word referring to a type of animal. Make up a half-dozen sentences with the word *dog* used in different ways, and then replace the word *dog* with this new word. Are all of these new sentences grammatical?
There are several basic types of nouns:

- Countable things, either physical or non-physical. These can appear with the and with words like every, as in every dog, every cat, every apple, every foot. These are count nouns.
  
  » A count noun can be used with a singular or a plural form in English, for example, dog/dogs, woman/women. However, if a word refers to a substance, it cannot be counted, so we cannot use every: *every milk, *every air, *every dirt, *every imagination, *every sincerity, *every anger.

- But a substance can be measured, so we can use a lot of before it: a lot of milk, a lot of air, a lot of dirt, a lot of wind. This type of noun is called a mass noun.

- The type of noun that is the name of something unique, like Paris, Albert Einstein, or Christmas, is called a proper noun.

Here is a summary of nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Use</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Refers to things that can be counted</td>
<td>every dog, three books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass</td>
<td>Refers to substances</td>
<td>water, air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proper</td>
<td>Refers to unique things, places, etc.</td>
<td>Albert Einstein, Paris, Frodo Baggins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This list is not exhaustive.

**Do Other Languages Have Nouns?**

Anyone who has studied another language knows that other languages have nouns. But even if we haven’t studied another language, we would guess that they do. Why? Because speakers of other languages must be able to refer to the kinds of things that speakers of noun may be a word that refers to:

- a physical thing, like dog, cat, apple, foot, moon, President;
- a physical substance, like milk, air, dirt, wind;
- a non-physical thing, like idea, sentence, thirty-three, infinity;
- organizations and other social entities, like government, presidency, family;
- non-physical qualities that we are able to perceive in ourselves or in others, like imagination, sincerity, anger, aggressiveness, friendship;
- times, like day, hour, month; and
- places, like inside, city, backyard.
English refer to. Moreover, people need to be able to indicate whether the thing they are referring to is familiar or definite (expressed by the in English), unfamiliar or indefinite (expressed by a in English), singular or plural, and so on. Words that perform this function are what we call “nouns.”

So all languages have nouns. However, the structures of phrases that contain nouns vary among languages. And languages differ in how they express such things as definiteness and number. As we have seen, English uses the for definiteness. The is called a **determiner** and, more precisely, an **article**. In many languages there are no words corresponding to the. Look at the following sentences from Chinese:

(3) Lai ren le.
    come person completed
    ‘Some person/people has/have come.’

Ren lai le.
    person come completed
    ‘The person/people has/have come.’

These examples show that when the noun ren ‘person/people’ is at the beginning of a sentence, it is interpreted as definite; that is, it refers to someone believed to be familiar to the participants in the conversation. But when the verb comes first, the noun is interpreted as indefinite; that is, it introduces someone or something new into the conversation.

Most significantly, there are no Chinese words that correspond to English the and some. A literal translation of Ren lai le is ‘Person come;’ which is just like one type of error that we saw earlier: Store on corner is closed.

Another type of error in English has to do with marking singular and plural, as we saw in the example *Student in this class very friendly.* Notice that in the Chinese example in (3), the singular and plural have the same form. Ren can mean either ‘person’ or ‘people.’ This illustrates the fact that not all languages have singular and plural forms for nouns. It is natural for speakers of languages that do not have such forms to make errors when they speak a language that does have such forms. A speaker of a language that systematically distinguishes singular and plural needs to become accustomed to the fact that the number distinction has to be indicated by using a numerical expression (such as ‘one’ or ‘many’) or has to be discernible from context.

In some languages that have articles, whether the phrase is singular or plural is marked not by the noun but by the form of the article. Here are some examples from Maori and spoken French:

(4) **Maori** | **French** | **English**
---|---|---
   te ngeru | le chat | the cat
   nga ngeru | les chats | the cats
The final -t and -ts are silent in the French words *chat* and *chats*, so the actual forms are [lɔ ʃa] and [le ʃa].

Let's look more closely at the functions of determiners and how languages express these functions.

**Determiners**

**WHAT IS A DETERMINER?**

Determiners are the words and expressions that in English (but not all languages) precede the noun and that are used to express distinctions of quantity, uniqueness, and definiteness. Here are some common determiners in English:

- one, two, every, each, some, many, much, the, a

Some determiners are used to pick out objects from a group of objects of the same type:

- this, that, these, those

We have already mentioned one rule of English, which is that the determiner must precede the noun. This rule is what tells us that any word from column A can precede any word from column B in Table 8.1.

Table 8.2 focuses just on determiners and nouns; it shows that there are a few other things that have to be noted in addition to the relative order of the words. We cannot simply combine a word from column A with a word from column B, even if we observe the ordering rule; we have to know something about the types of words we are dealing with. As we have seen, certain determiners go with mass nouns, and others go with count nouns.

In addition, some determiners go only with plural nouns:

(5) these apples, those pigs, many cats,
*these dog, *those imagination

Some go only with singular nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the</td>
<td>dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this</td>
<td>pig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that</td>
<td>rooster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>these</td>
<td>apple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>those</td>
<td>foot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td>moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two</td>
<td>idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>every</td>
<td>sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>each</td>
<td>milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some</td>
<td>air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>much</td>
<td>dirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>many</td>
<td>wind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>imagination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sincerity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>aggressiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Albert Einstein</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
And others go with mass nouns:

(7) some wind, some anger, much dirt, much sincerity

And still others go with count nouns:

(8) some books, many books, several people

And, finally, proper nouns do not have determiners:

(9) *every Albert Einstein, *much Albert Einstein

**AGREEMENT**

The idea that certain words “go with” certain words in terms of their form is what is called **agreement** in the description of languages. We see, for example, that *this* “agrees with” singular nouns, while *these* “agrees with” plural nouns. What agreement means in this case is that it is impossible to have *this* with a plural noun or *these* with a singular noun. These observations suggest what we call the Determiner Rule for English (see the box below).

The Determiner Rule describes how to create an expression in English that is based on a noun. Such an expression is called a **noun phrase**. All languages have noun phrases, but they may differ in various ways on how a noun phrase is made up. We’ll look at some examples of other ways of making noun phrases very shortly.

In the cases that we have been looking at, the determiner agrees with the noun in the property of **number**: singular determiners go with singular nouns, and plural determiners go with plural nouns.

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**Determiner Rule for English**

Determiner precedes Noun.

**Restrictions:**

- Count determiners go with count nouns.
- Mass determiners go with mass nouns.
- Singular determiners go with singular nouns.
- Plural determiners go with plural nouns.
- Proper nouns lack determiners.

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1. To be precise, they do not have determiners that imply or require that there be more than one thing with the same proper name. Emphatic *THE* is quite possible with proper names, e.g. *THE Albert Einstein.*
In some languages, agreement is quite pervasive, while other languages lack it entirely. Depending on the language, agreement may involve number and other properties of words. For example, if you look up the translation of ‘this’ in a French dictionary, it will tell you the following:

(10) ce (m), cette (f), cet (m) (before vowels)

What do (m) and (f) mean? We can figure it out if we see what happens when we put the determiners into column A and the nouns into column B for French, and start combining them freely as shown in Table 8.3.

If we take one word from column A, we get some grammatical French expressions:

(11) ce livre ‘this book’
cette maison ‘this house’
cet arbre ‘this tree’
cette table ‘this table’
cette chaise ‘this chair’
cette orange ‘this orange’

These are French noun phrases. But other combinations don’t work:

(12) *ce maison
    *cette livre
    *ce chaise
    *cet orange

The reason these don’t work is that there are two classes of words in French, called “masculine” and “feminine,” and the form of the determiner depends on which class the noun belongs to. These classes are called gender classes, and the words must agree in gender. So, ce is a masculine determiner that goes only with masculine nouns, and cette is a feminine determiner that goes only with feminine nouns. Cet is the form that ce takes when it precedes a vowel, as in cet arbre.

Another important observation is that determiners in these languages typically also agree in number with the nouns. So in French, for example, the form of the determiner is singular or plural, depending on whether the noun is singular or plural. Table 8.4 lists all the French words meaning ‘the,’ ‘this,’ and ‘that.’

Determiners show agreement for number, and for gender in the singular forms. The same kind of pattern holds for other determiners in French and for related languages like Italian and Spanish.
Exercise 2
State the Determiner Rule for French, given the information in Tables 8.3 and 8.4. Here's the first part:

- Determiner precedes Noun.

### GENDER AND SEX

It is important to recognize that gender is related to biological gender, but it is not the same as biological gender, or what we usually refer to as sex. There are two biological sexes for most living things—including humans, animals, and plants—namely, male and female. But inanimate things, abstract things like ideas and beliefs, and substances like water and wood do not have sexes per se, since they are not animate or even biological. But, amazingly, in languages like French, all nouns have gender. Everything is either “masculine” or “feminine.”

Gender is a classification of the nouns into groups. It is not a necessary property of the object or substance that the word refers to. It is true that in French the nouns for females are typically feminine, and the nouns for males masculine. This makes it easy to remember the gender for words like homme ‘man’ and femme ‘woman.’ But how can you figure out the gender of livre ‘book’ and maison ‘house’? You can't, because gender is for the most part simply a classification of the nouns.

So for most nouns, you just have to learn what the gender is. The words are mascu-
line or feminine, but the things that they refer to are neither male nor female. The properties that determine agreement are for the most part properties of the words, not of the objects. In fact, ‘(the) girl’ in German is (das) Mädchen, which is neuter, not feminine, even though girls are females. And ‘(the) person’ in German is (die) Person, which is feminine, even though some persons are female and some are male.

When we first encounter gender in another language, we might say to ourselves: ‘Hey, these people are weird—they think of tables and houses as female and books and beds as male. What made them think of that?’ But this idea is a mistake: nouns have gender, but the objects that they refer to do not actually have sexes. Gender in the category of nouns is a way of classifying them. It is just as though we said, “OK, for the fun of it let’s put the label red on all apples and the label green on all peppers” (with the labels in capital letters). It is true that many apples are red in color, but many are not, like Granny Smith apples. And many peppers are green, but many are not; some are red. And some apples and some peppers are neither red nor green. It is easy to get confused because the name of the classification label red is related to the actual color red, and many objects classified as red (that is, apples) actually have the color red. Similarly, we have gotten confused about gender in language because we have taken the classification scheme, using the labels “masculine” and “feminine,” which correlate with some real biological property of some of the objects (those that are animate), and we may have confused it with the biological property itself.

Making the situation a bit more complicated is the fact that in some languages, there are three or even more noun classes based on gender. These languages do help to show that grammatical gender is primarily word classification, not biology. Typically, when there are three classes, one is masculine, one is feminine, and one is neuter, as in German. This seems odd to us when we discover that certain animates are grammatically neuter even though biologically they are either male or female. And as the number of classes gets larger, the connection with biological gender becomes less and less secure.

The arbitrariness of gender can be highlighted by considering the gender of some nouns referring to the very same thing in different languages. Usually, if a noun refers to something animate that has biological gender, the noun will be in the corresponding gender class. But if the noun does not refer to something animate, and the two languages are not related, the gender is really quite unpredictable. Table 8.5 gives some examples; (m) means “masculine,” (f) means “feminine,” and (n) means “neuter.”

There appears to be no pattern and nothing about the meanings of these words that would predict their gender, except perhaps for ‘boy,’ which is masculine across all of these languages.

English appears to express gender only in the words he/him, she/her, his/her, and himself/herself. But this is, in fact, not grammatical gender. We use he/him and she/her to refer to people and animals, and the word that we use corresponds to the biological sex. He is used to refer to one male individual, and she to one female individual. English nouns do not have gender. We use it in English to refer to an inanimate object.
But because all French nouns must have gender, the French counterparts to English *he* and *she* have to be used to refer to all things according to their gender. Compare the following sentences:

(13) J’ai acheté un livre et il était cher.  
I have bought a book and he was expensive  
‘I bought a book and it was expensive.’

J’ai acheté une maison et elle était chère.  
I have bought a house and she was expensive  
‘I bought a house and it was expensive.’

The words *il* and *elle* are the same words that are used to refer to people, and when they are used in that way, they can be directly translated into English as *he* and *she*. So when we see the translation ‘it (masculine singular),’ we might be tempted to think that it is the same as *he*, and it is true that we would use the word *il* in French to refer to a single male person. But *il* does not mean ‘he’; it means ‘he/it’ and agrees with the gender class of the noun, not just the biological sex. So, translating *il* as ‘he’ and *elle* as ‘she’ in these sentences would be a mistake; they correspond to ‘it’ in English.

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### TABLE 8.5

Examples of gender in different languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the house</td>
<td>la maison (f)</td>
<td>das Haus (n)</td>
<td>dom (m)</td>
<td>la casa (f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the table</td>
<td>la table (f)</td>
<td>der Tisch (m)</td>
<td>stol (m)</td>
<td>la mesa (f) la tabla (f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the boy</td>
<td>le garçon (m)</td>
<td>der Junge (m)</td>
<td>mal’chik (m)</td>
<td>el niño (m) el muchacho (m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the idea</td>
<td>l’idée (f)</td>
<td>die Idee (f)</td>
<td>ideja (f)</td>
<td>la idea (f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the problem</td>
<td>le problème (m)</td>
<td>das Problem (n)</td>
<td>problema (f)</td>
<td>el problema (m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the bed</td>
<td>le lit (m)</td>
<td>das Bett (n)</td>
<td>post’el’ (f)</td>
<td>la cama (f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the tree</td>
<td>l’arbre (m)</td>
<td>der Baum (m)</td>
<td>derevo (n)</td>
<td>el árbol (m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the water</td>
<td>l’eau (f)</td>
<td>das Wasser (n)</td>
<td>voda (f)</td>
<td>el agua (f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the trash</td>
<td>le rebut (m)</td>
<td>der Abfall (m)</td>
<td>drjan’ (f)</td>
<td>la basura (f)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOUN CLASSES

To see that French gender is a simple example of what can be a more complex phenomenon in other languages, consider the noun classes of Swahili, a Bantu language. In Swahili there are 15 noun classes—and thus the form of a word in the singular and the plural is determined partly by what class it is in, and agreement takes into account the noun classes. For example, the form *m-* (class 6) is attached to the beginning of a noun that refers to a person:

(14)  m-toto  ‘(a) child'
m-tu  ‘(a) person’
m-geni  ‘(a) guest’

To make the plural, the form *wa-* (class 7) is added to the noun:

---

**TABLE 8.6**

Definite articles across languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>pingguo</td>
<td>an apple, the apple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>apple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwamera</td>
<td>kuri u</td>
<td>this dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dog this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>mus-en</td>
<td>the mouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mouse-the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swahili</td>
<td>wa-toto</td>
<td>the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>class 7-child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgarian</td>
<td>kuche-to</td>
<td>the dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dog-the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>il cane</td>
<td>the dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the dog</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>le livre</td>
<td>the book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the book</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>voda</td>
<td>water, the water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>das Wasser</td>
<td>the water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Kwamera example from Tallerman, 1998.*
(15) \textit{wa-toto}  \textquote{‘children’}  \\
\textit{wa-tu}  \textquote{‘people’}  \\
\textit{wa-geni}  \textquote{‘guests’}

However, if the word refers to a small thing, the singular has the form \textit{ki-} attached to it, and the plural has the form \textit{vi-}:

(16) \textit{ki-toto}  \textquote{(an) infant’}  \textit{vi-toto}  \textquote{‘infants’}  \\
\textit{ki-kapu}  \textquote{(a) basket’}  \textit{vi-kapu}  \textquote{‘baskets’}  \\
\textit{ki-ti}  \textquote{(a) stool’}  \textit{vi-ti}  \textquote{‘stools’}

Notice the use of the form \textit{toto} for ‘child/children’ and ‘infant/infants.’

**WHERE DO DETERMINERS GO?**

Essentially, a French noun phrase looks like an English noun phrase, at least regarding the placement of the determiner. In other languages, though, the determiner follows the noun. In yet other languages, the meanings conveyed by English determiners are not expressed by distinct words, but are understood from context and from the overall form of the sentence. Some simple noun phrases from other languages are given in Table 8.6.

In Kwamera, Swedish, and Bulgarian, the word for the follows the noun. And in the other languages illustrated here, it precedes the noun. Finally, as we have seen, there are languages that lack articles and use other devices, such as word order, to indicate definiteness and indefiniteness.

**LEARNING TO USE DETERMINERS**

Part of the challenge of learning another language is to figure out in what ways it is different from the language or languages that you already know. This requires that you understand something about how your language works and that you be able to pinpoint those areas in which the languages differ. The relationship between determiner and noun is one such area where differences can arise.

Having recognized that differences exist between noun phrases in different languages in terms of whether there is agreement and what the order of the noun and the determiner is, the next question that we have to consider is how to learn to produce and recognize the differences most effectively.

Being able to do this goes beyond knowing what the rule is. It even goes beyond knowing that the noun \textit{maison} ‘house’ in French is feminine, while the noun \textit{lit} ‘bed’ is masculine. We have to get to the point where we automatically put the determiner in the right place and do the agreement without thinking about the rule. The essential step in learning how to get order, gender, and agreement right is to practice the forms together. That is, we do not want to simply memorize the following:
Memorizing the nouns alone won’t help us to handle the determiners *le, la, cette, ce,* and so on, without carrying out an extra step. Here are the mental steps that we would have to go through:

1. Ask your brain: what is the word for ‘house’?
   1a. Answer: *maison*
2. Ask: what is the gender of *maison*?
   2a. Answer: feminine
3. Ask: what is the feminine form for ‘the’?
   3a. Answer: *la*
4. Ask: where does the determiner go?
   4a. Answer: before the noun.

By the time we go through all of these steps, our audience will be lost if we are speaking, or we will be lost if we are trying to figure out what someone is saying. Here’s another way to handle the determiners:

1. Ask your brain: how do you say ‘the house’?
   1a. Answer: *la maison*

1. Ask: how do you say ‘this bed’?
   1a. Answer: *ce lit*

In other words, we need to learn not just the gender and the rule for gender agreement, but also the actual forms that are required in order for there to be proper agreement as part of the noun. Doing so will save us many costly steps.

Clearly, we must learn the rule in order to understand why some phrases are different from others. But once we know the rule, we must use the rule to construct the expressions, and then we must learn the complete expressions so well that they become automatic. When we want to say ‘the house,’ we don’t want to have to waste time figuring out whether the proper form is *le* or *la;* we need to know that *la maison* means ‘the house’ and eliminate the extra mental steps. Learning the more complex forms reduces the amount of computational time that we have to go through, at those moments when time is precious.

**DESCRIPTING THINGS**

Let’s take another look at some examples of “foreign accent” in English.

(18) a. I gave her a rose red.
What is wrong with these sentences? We can understand each of them, yet in some way, each one is wrong. Let’s compare them with how they would be expressed in grammatical English. Underlines show where something should go, while strikeouts show something in the wrong place.

(19) a. I gave her a red rose red.
b. I have helpfuls friends.
c. The enrolled in community college student enrolled in community college (is my friend).
d. Here is the student which you met her last week.
e. The book that is on the table is mine.

As you can see, some of the differences are very subtle, but they have a considerable effect. Example (19a) shows that a word like red in English must precede the noun, not follow it. Example (19b) shows that only the noun is marked for plural; helpful is not. The words red and helpful are adjectives.

The remaining three examples illustrate properties of relative phrases or clauses in English. Example (19c) shows that the phrase enrolled in community college has to follow the noun (in contrast to red, which precedes it). Examples (19d) and (19e) are somewhat more complicated, and we’ll come back to them later.

Adjectives and relative clauses in English have the function of describing things. All languages perform these functions. Languages differ in the form of adjectives and relative clauses and in the location of adjectives and relative clauses in noun phrases. We discuss how this works next.

Adjectives

ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH

Adjectives are used to refer to properties of things and substances (physical and non-physical, and real and imaginary). The following are examples of the types of properties that can be referred to with adjectives:

- overall size; e.g. huge, big, little, small, tiny, enormous, middle-sized
- size in a particular dimension; e.g. tall, short, fat, slim, elongated, stubby
- shape; e.g. square, round, oval, squiggly, triangular, flat
- qualities perceived by one of our senses; e.g. loud, quiet, shrill, squeaky, wet, melodious, rhythmic, shiny, dull, dark, scratchy, rough, red, black, green, polka-dotted
• social or personal qualities; e.g. polite, rude, inquisitive, happy, sad, intelligent, silly, goofy

There are many others.

As we did in the case of determiners and nouns, we can say what the rule is for adjectives in English. First consider these examples:

(20) huge dog
    the huge dog
    this huge dog
    every huge dog

*dog huge
*the dog huge
*this dog huge
*every dog huge
*huge the dog
*huge this dog
*huge every dog

We know already that the determiner has to precede the noun, so we have to look only at where the adjective goes. These examples show that the adjective also precedes the noun; moreover, the adjective has to follow the determiner. If there is more than one adjective, all the adjectives must follow the determiner and precede the noun.

(21) the huge gray dog
    the huge gray howling dog
    the huge gray happy howling dog

**Adjective Rule for English**

In a noun phrase, an adjective precedes the noun that it modifies and follows the determiner.

These observations allow us to formulate the English Adjective Rule (see box above).

Table 8.7 gives a small sample of the possible noun phrases of English. If we take one word from column A, one from column B, and one from column C, we get sequences that look like English noun phrases, although some of them are nonsensical and others are simply bad English. For example, if the determiner and the noun do not obey the agreement restrictions of the Determiner Rule, the sequence is bad.

**TABLE 8.7**

Menu for simple English noun phrases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the</td>
<td>huge</td>
<td>dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>wet</td>
<td>water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>every</td>
<td>square</td>
<td>idea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this</td>
<td>intelligent</td>
<td>sincerity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>much</td>
<td>happy</td>
<td>foot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a lot of</td>
<td>stubby</td>
<td>proposal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Let's start at the beginning. *The, huge, and dog combine according to the Adjective Rule for English to form the huge dog. This is a proper expression of English, and we know what it means. Let's replace dog with the other nouns and see what we come up with.

(22) ☹the huge water
    ☺the huge idea
    ☹the huge sincerity

The first example, *the huge water*, sounds odd because it refers to a property of water that cannot be measured. Water can be heavy, or wet, or warm, but not huge. To indicate this type of oddness, we use the frowny face symbol ☹.

In comparison, an idea is a non-physical object. It can be counted (e.g. *every idea*), but because it is non-physical, it does not have a physical size. But we can talk metaphorically of a non-physical object as though it is physical, so we can use *huge* metaphorically to describe an idea. The smiley face symbol ☺ on *the huge idea* is used here to indicate this metaphorical usage.

Sincerity is a non-physical substance. So it is odd to use an adjective that measures physical dimension to describe sincerity, even metaphorically. It would be equally strange to talk about ☹*the huge air* or ☹*the huge water*. ☺*The huge sincerity* therefore gets the frowny face symbol assigned to it.

Notice that the sorts of things that we are describing here are not specifically about the English language, but about how we understand the world as human beings. If we translated these expressions into some other language, they would be judged equally acceptable, metaphorical, or odd, to the extent that the words that we were using conveyed the same literal concepts. So ☹*la sincérité enorme* 'huge sincerity' should be as strange in French as it is in English, and in exactly the same way.

Notice also that there does not appear to be any agreement restriction between the adjective and the noun in English. While we found that we have to use *this* with singular nouns and *these* with plural nouns, the adjectives in column B can be used with either type of noun, as in the following example:

(23) this huge dog
    these huge dogs

Exercise 3

As we have seen, Table 8.7 gives rise to a number of perfectly good noun phrases and to a number of less-than-perfect noun phrases, e.g. *much happy foot, a lot of square water, a stubby sincerity, much wet idea*. For each of these bad combinations, say as precisely as you can why they’re bad.
Descriptive and Restrictive Modification

An adjective is a word like the English red, helpful, happy. We can say

- the happy dog
- The dog is happy.

With stress on dog, the phrase happy dog means simply that the dog is happy. This is the descriptive or attributive use of the adjective. With stress on happy, by contrast, the adjective is used to distinguish this dog from other dogs that are not happy. This is the restrictive or contrastive use of the adjective.

- As an exercise, use the expression the happy dog in a sentence to simply say that the dog is happy. You should be able to hear that the stress falls on dog. Try this with other phrases.

This means that we do not have to add any restrictions to the Adjective Rule.

ADJECTIVES IN OTHER LANGUAGES

Now, let’s consider how a language might differ from English in regard to the counterpart of the Adjective Rule that says where to put adjectives in noun phrases:

- In some other language, the adjective could follow the noun.
- In some other language, the adjective might be required to agree with the noun.

Let’s take a look at the examples in Table 8.8 on the following page. These examples show that the position of the adjective depends on the language. In Swahili, French, and Spanish it follows the noun, while in the other languages it precedes the noun. (Note that some adjectives in French may also precede the noun.) The determiner that means ‘the’ goes in different positions in different languages, as does the determiner that means ‘every.’ Each of these languages has a Determiner Rule and an Adjective Rule that says what the ordering requirements are and what the restrictions are, if any. We illustrate shortly.

Remember that in some languages there is agreement between determiners and nouns. Not surprisingly, in these very same languages, adjectives must also agree with the nouns. Let’s look at some examples from a language that we have not talked about yet—Italian. We indicate masculine with m, feminine with f, singular with sg, and plural with pl. First we look at noun phrases without adjectives, and then we throw some adjectives in. See if you can figure out what is going on:

(24) il libro
the-M.sg book-M.sg
‘the book’
**TABLE 8.8**
Adjective noun order across languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>un chien enorme a dog huge</td>
<td>a huge dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>der vernünftige Vorschlag the intelligent proposal</td>
<td>the intelligent proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>hao xuésheng good student</td>
<td>(a) good student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>den hungriga mus-en the hungry mouse-the</td>
<td>the hungry mouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>cada hoja verde every leaf green</td>
<td>every green leaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>kazhdyje zelënyje list’ja every green leaf</td>
<td>every green leaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swahili</td>
<td>matunda mazuri fruit nice</td>
<td>nice fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgarian</td>
<td>zeleni-te lista green-the leaves</td>
<td>the green leaves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

i libri
the-M.PL book-M.PL
‘the books’

la casa
the-F.SG house-F.SG
‘the house’

le casa
the-F.PL house-F.PL
‘the house’

il libro piccolo
the-M.SG book-M.SG little-M.SG
‘the little book’
What do we see here? First, as in French, the adjective follows the noun. Second, the form of the adjective varies according to the gender and number of the noun, just like the form of the determiner does. In fact, we can even make a good guess about what the form is. Look at the difference between piccolo and piccola. They are the same as far as the piccol- part is concerned, and they differ just in whether they end in -o or -a.

The four forms together suggest the following picture:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITALIAN ADJECTIVE AGREEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feminine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But notice that these same endings appear on the nouns themselves. We have highlighted the endings in **boldface** type so that you can compare them with those for adjective agreement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITALIAN NOUNS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feminine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And we can make a nice chart for the determiners as well. This chart very closely resembles the chart for the adjectives and the nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITALIAN DETERMINERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feminine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What these charts are telling us is that there is a pretty systematic way of indicating number and gender in Italian, and, moreover, the determiner, the adjective, and the noun all have to show number and gender and agree with one another in number and gender.

So consider the following Italian vocabulary:

(25) ragazzo ‘boy’
    ragazza ‘girl’
    strano ‘strange (m.sg.)’

How would we say ‘the strange boy,’ ‘the strange boys,’ ‘the strange girl,’ and ‘the strange girls’? We just follow the rules:

(26) il ragazzo strano
    i ragazzi strani
    la ragazza strana
    le ragazze strane

And this is the general pattern that we find throughout the language. (Maybe this is one reason is why many people find it easy to learn Italian.)

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**Exercise 4**

Work out the Adjective Rule for Italian.

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**Exercise 5**

What would you say is the best way to learn how to productively construct grammatical noun phrases in Italian?

As we discussed earlier, there are 15 noun classes in Swahili, meaning that the form of a word in the singular and the plural is determined partly by what class it is in, and that agreement takes into account the noun classes. Consider again the examples we discussed. For example, the form *m-* (class 6) is attached to the beginning of a noun that refers to a person:

(27) m-toto ‘(a) child’
    m-tu ‘(a) person’
    m-geni ‘(a) guest’
And to make the plural, the form *wa-* (class 7) is added:

(28)  *wa*-toto  ‘(a) child’  
      *wa*-tu   ‘(a) person’  
      *wa*-geni  ‘(a) guest’

But if the word refers to a small thing, the singular has the form *ki-* attached to it, and the plural has the form *vi-*:

(29)  *ki*-toto ‘infant’  
      *ki*-kapu ‘basket’  
      *ki*-ti  ‘stool’

      *vi*-toto ‘infants’  
      *vi*-kapu ‘baskets’  
      *vi*-ti  ‘stools’

Here now are some examples of noun phrases containing adjectives:

(30)  *ma*-tunda *ma*-zuri  
      fruit          nice  
      ‘nice fruit’  

      *mi*-tego *mi*-wili  
      traps          two  
      ‘two traps’  

      *wa*-tu   ha-*wa* *wa*-zuri  
      people   these   nice  
      ‘these nice people’  

      *vi*-ti  *vi*-le  *vi*-kubwa  
      chairs those  big  
      ‘those big chairs’

What we see is that the class marker that attaches to the noun also attaches to the adjective and the determiner. Just as in Italian and French, Swahili shows agreement throughout the noun phrase.

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**Exercise 6**

Work out the Determiner Rule and the Adjective Rule for Swahili.
Relative Clauses

RELATIVE CLAUSES IN ENGLISH

Here are a few errors produced by Japanese learners of English:

(31) a. Based on many informations of the daughter gathered, . . .
   b. But the mystery of behind the door still remained.

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, the other way to describe or restrict something in terms of its properties is to use a relative clause. These are ungrammatical attempts to produce a relative clause—pay close attention to what is missing that should be there and what is there that should not be in these examples. In (31a), for instance, we find many informations. In English, information is not a count noun but a mass noun, so this phrase should be much information. But then there is of the daughter gathered, which should be that the daughter gathered, or which the daughter gathered, or simply the daughter gathered.

(32) Based on much information that the daughter gathered, . . .
    Based on much information which the daughter gathered, . . .
    Based on much information the daughter gathered, . . .

Japanese learners of English use of to introduce a relative clause, because a relative clause follows the noun in English, whereas in Japanese a relative clause precedes the noun. The learners know that of can be used to separate phrases within a noun phrase, e.g. picture of Sandy, so they seize on of as the way to deal with this particular grammatical problem. The same strategy appears in (31b), which should be simply the mystery behind the door.

Let's consider more closely at how a relative clause is formed.

(33) The dog that is happy is eating my socks.
    I chased the dog that was eating my socks.
    My mother made me let go of the dog that I caught.

The first relative clause is that is happy, the second is that was eating my socks, and the third is that I caught. We call dog the head of the noun phrase. Its function with respect to the meaning of the phrase is to pick out the type of thing that the relative clause describes. We sometimes say that “the head is what the relative clause modifies.”

What these examples suggest is that one way to form relative clauses in English is to take a complete sentence that says something about the head. For example, take the following clause:

(34) the dog is happy

Strike out the phrase that corresponds to the head and its determiner, if there is one:

(35) the dog is happy

Put that in front of the clause:

(36) that is happy

This works for the other relative clauses in the examples. So:

(37) I caught the dog →
    I caught the dog →
    that I caught

Striking out the phrase to form the relative clause means that a relative clause is a sentence with a gap in it that corresponds in meaning to the head. It is for this reason that there is something strange about one of the “foreign accent” sentences, (18d), which was introduced earlier in this chapter:

(38) Here is the student which you met her last week.

Because the relative clause modifies student and expresses the relation of meeting the student, there should be a gap after met. But instead we find the word her in this position. Some languages use a variant of the construction illustrated in (38), but standard English does not; the correct form is which you met—last week.

There are other ways to make relative clauses in English. One involves putting who(m), which, where, or when in front of the clause, instead of that.

(39) the man whom I saw
    the dog which is happy
    the place where I put the lasagna
    the time when I first saw Paris

Some of these are not entirely colloquial for many speakers of English and are associated more with a written or formal style.

It is also possible to leave out that, but not when the struck-out phrase is the subject of the relative clause:

(40) The dog I caught needed a bath.
    the first time I saw Paris
    *I bought a dog was happy.
(Compare: I bought a dog that was happy.)

Hence we have an explanation for what is wrong with another example, (18e), which was introduced earlier:

(41) *The book is on the table is mine.

The problem here is that the word that must appear in the relative clause, because the struck-out phrase is the subject: the book that is on the table. . . .

The other thing that we know about English relative clauses is that they follow the head of the noun phrase.

(42) *The that is happy dog is eating my socks.
*I chased the that was eating my socks dog.
*I My mother made me let go of the that I caught dog.

Thus, a third example of a relative clause error from the beginning of the chapter can be explained:

(43) *The enrolled in community college student (is my friend).

Here, enrolled in community college is a type of “reduced” relative clause that does not follow the noun; in a language like German or Japanese, however, such a relative clause would precede the noun.

Relative clauses, like adjectives, have two functions. One is restrictive, and the other is called “non-restrictive,” “appositive,” or “attributive.” Consider the following examples:

(44) I saw the dog that/who was happy.
I saw the dog, who was happy.

The first example is understood as picking the happy dog out from a group of dogs. The second example is simply stating that the dog was happy. Thus the non-restrictive function is the same as the attributive function of the adjective that we discussed earlier. Typically the two are distinguished in written language, as shown in the example: a comma separates the non-restrictive relative from the noun, but there is no comma used when the relative clause is restrictive.

**RELATIVE CLAUSES IN OTHER LANGUAGES**

The relative clause in French is similar to that in English in that it has a gap. The forms that appear at the beginning of the relative clause are selected on the basis of the struc-
ture in which the gap appears. If the gap is an object, the relative clause begins with *que*. If it is a subject, the relative clause begins with *qui*.

(45) l’homme que j’ai vu
the-man that I-have seen
‘the man that I saw’

l’homme qui m’a vu
the-man that me-has seen
‘the man that saw me’

Notice that by making use here of the notions of subject and object, we are able to state in a very simple way how the French relative clause is formed.

In Italian the relative clause always begins with *che*:

(46) il uomo che ho visto
the man that I-have seen
‘the man that I saw’

il uomo che mi ha visto
the man that me has seen
‘the man that saw me’

The relative clause in these languages follows the head noun, which makes it relatively easy for speakers of English to deal with them. But in other languages, the relative clause precedes the head noun. Look at the following examples from Korean:

J.-topic run.away-rel.imperf thief-acc catch-past-decl
(lit. ’John running away thief caught.’)
‘John caught a/the thief who was running away.’

J.-topic thief-nom run.away-rel.imperf kes-acc catch-past-decl
(lit. ’John thief running away who caught.’)
‘John caught a/the thief, who was running away.’

The head that the relative clause modifies is in **boldface**. In the first example, the relative clause precedes the head. There is no word corresponding to English *that* or *who*, but there is a marker -*nun* on the verb (*tomanga*nun) that indicates that it is in

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3. Examples adapted from Min-Joo Kim, “Internally-Headed Relatives,” 2004. *rel* marks the verb as being in a relative clause, *imperf* indicates that the action lacks a fixed endpoint, *nom* marks the subject, *acc* marks the object, and *decl* indicates that the sentence is declarative.
a relative clause. But Korean also has a construction in which the relative clause follows the noun. In this case, there is a following pronoun kes, similar to the Italian che, but following the relative clause, not preceding it.

German also has two types of relative clauses, one that precedes the noun and one that follows it:

(48) der in seinem Büro arbeitende Mann  
the in his study working man  
‘the man working in his study’

(49) der Mann der in seinem Büro arbeitet  
the man that in his study works  
‘the man who is working in his study’

Japanese is similar to Korean. The relative clause precedes the noun.

(49) Yamada-san ga saru o kat-te i-ru.  
Yamada-Mr nom monkey acc keep-part be-pres  
‘Mr. Yamada keeps a monkey.’

(50) Yamada-san ga kat-te i-ru saru.  
Yamada-Mr nom keep-part be-pres monkey  
‘the monkey which Mr. Yamada keeps’

The relative clause also precedes the noun in Chinese:

(50) Zhāngsān mǎi de qīch hèn guì.  
Zangsan buy nom car very expensive  
‘The car that Zhangsan bought was very expensive.’

**Summary**

We began this chapter with a few examples of typical errors that non-native speakers make. Here they are again:

(1) a. Sun is hot.  
   Store on corner is closed.  
   b. He lives in the Peru.  
   The Professor Goldmund is very dynamic.

(continued on next page)

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Summary (continued from previous page)

c. Student in this class very friendly.
d. I bought a book. He was very expensive.

These errors show us that some languages lack articles corresponding to the and a; that some languages use articles with proper nouns, unlike English; and that some languages make grammatical gender distinctions among nouns, while English does not.

In this chapter we looked at two kinds of modifiers of nouns, adjectives, and relative clauses. In some languages, adjectives precede the noun that they modify, and in some they follow. Like adjectives, relative clauses precede the noun in some languages and follow it in others. Relative clauses show a number of variants of form as well, in terms of whether they have something introducing them (like that or Italian che) that marks them as relative clauses, or something following them (like Korean -nun), or nothing at all, as in Chinese.

Additional Exercise

1. Choose a language that you are familiar with other than English. How do you construct the counterparts of the following underlined relative clauses in this language?

   a. the book I bought
   b. the salesperson that I bought the book from
   c. the salesperson who sold me the book

Discuss the differences between the rules for forming relative clauses in your language and in English. Also, state clearly where the relative clause appears in the sentence with respect to the noun that it modifies.

References