

English Grammar

Unit 1-1:

NOUNS & NOUN PHRASES (1)

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Nouns and Things

- Here are some common nouns in English:
water, air, earth, rice, sand, gold, paper, money, time, advice, courage
- As you know, nouns are names of ‘things’ – some we can touch, and some we can’t. We can talk about all of them:
 1. Water is hard to find in a desert.
 2. Rice grows well in a hot, humid climate.
 3. Courage is an admirable quality.

Mass Nouns

- But notice two things:
 - (i) All these nouns can be used *on their own* in a sentence (just as in Chinese or Japanese).
 - (ii) All these nouns refer to things that do not have a *natural* shape, size, or boundary, e.g. **water** -
- there can be a drop, a cupful, a tankful, or even an ocean of water, but it's still the same substance, water. There's no sense in talking about 'one water', 'two waters' and so on. The same goes for 'air', 'rice', 'paper', etc. That's why we call them '**mass nouns**'.

Measure words

- What happens if you want to refer to a particular unit or quantity of water or rice or paper? You'll need a '**measure word**', for example:
 1. A drop of water cannot do much, but a million drops of water can.
 2. There's not even a grain of rice left in the bowl.
 3. How many pieces of paper do you need?

Are all nouns like that?

- So far, it would seem that at least *some* nouns in English behave like nouns in Chinese (and other languages). If *all* English nouns were like that, students would probably make fewer mistakes, because all nouns would then be unchanging in *form*, as in the case of *water*:
 1. I can see water everywhere.
 2. Water is essential for life.
 3. After exercising, I have to drink a lot of water.

What about these nouns?

- Consider the underlined nouns in the following sentences. Is there something wrong with them?
 1. I can see soldier everywhere.
 2. Tree is essential for parks.
 3. After school, I have to read a lot of book.

Count Nouns vs. Mass Nouns

- A major difficulty in using nouns in English is this: How do we distinguish between nouns like *water, rice* and *paper*, and nouns like *soldier, tree* and *book*? There's nothing like this in Chinese, where all nouns are like *water, rice* and *paper* in the way they are used.
- Nouns like *soldier, tree* and *book* may pose a greater problem for our learners. We call them **count nouns** (or 'countable nouns') -- nouns like *table, chair, house, car, flower, man, woman, teacher, school, month, year*, etc. The other group (*water* etc.) are called **mass nouns** (or 'uncountable nouns').

Comparing the two

- Compare the ways in which the nouns *money* and *flower* are used below. Write down all the grammatical differences that you can find. Which is a count noun and which a mass noun? [NB. * = ungrammatical]

Money

1. Money grows on trees.
2. *Moneys grow on trees.
3. *A money grows on trees.
4. Much/a little money is good.

Flower

- *Flower grows on trees.
- Flowers grow on trees.
- A flower grows on trees.
- Many/a few flowers are good.

Grammatical differences

Mass noun

- Can be used on its own
- No plural form
- No numerical determiner
(*a, one, ten, etc.*)
- Used with *much/a little*

Count noun

- No (not in sing.)
- Yes
- Yes
- many/a few*

How to tell them apart

- Try asking yourself this question: ‘Does the noun refer to something that is *naturally bounded*?’ If so, it is more likely to be a **count noun**.
- Take something like *time*. Time is open-ended and has no natural or inherent boundary. The word *time* is thus a mass noun: ‘Time is precious’, ‘I don’t have much time’, etc.
- Now think of a **bounded** segment of time: e.g. a *second*, *minute*, *hour*, *day*, *week*, *month*, *year*, *century*, etc. However long or short, each of them has an inherent boundary, unlike ‘*time*’ itself. Thus, they are **count nouns**: ‘Do you have a minute’, ‘many days later’, ‘for several years’, etc.

Count or mass?

- Using the idea of 'bounded' vs. 'unbounded', divide the nouns below into **count** nouns and **mass** nouns:

water, lake, pond, sand, dune, money, dollar, cent, literature, novel, poem, vegetation, flower, tree, furniture, chair, table.

Answers

- MASS NOUNS (notice that these are all ‘unbounded’ entities): *water, sand, money, literature, vegetation, furniture.*
- COUNT NOUNS (notice that these are all ‘bounded’ entities): *lake, pond, dune, dollar, cent, novel, poem, flower, tree, chair, table.*

An explanation

- Take the case of *water* vs. *lake*. Both are made up of exactly the same substance, *water*. But whereas *water* itself is not an inherently bounded entity, *lake* is inherently bounded – in fact, there would be no lake without a boundary.
- Hence *lake* is a count noun while *water* is a mass noun.

English Grammar

Unit 1-2:

NOUNS & NOUN PHRASES (2)

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Properties of count nouns

- Count nouns have a **singular** form (e.g. *book*) and a **plural** form (*books*)
- Mass nouns only have a singular form (*rice*)
- If you know that a certain noun is a count noun, **plural** number is usually a simple matter of adding a suffix **–s** to the noun:
- *A book, one book* vs. *ten books, many books, a lot of books*
- *I like to read a book* vs. *I like to read books*

Irregular plurals

- However, there are a limited number of count nouns in English which have an *irregular* plural form, e.g.:
man ~ men, child ~ children,
thesis ~ theses, radius ~ radii, etc.

Subject-verb agreement

- The singular/plural distinction is important also because the form of a **verb** in the **present tense** has to '*agree*' with the **subject** in terms of **number** (singular or plural), e.g.:
- The student **drives** to school in a sports car.
- The students **drive** to school in sports cars.

A major complication

- The idea of subject-verb agreement is simple enough ('the boy *plays*' vs. 'the boys *play*').
- However, there's one major complication. What if the subject is not a single word but a **phrase**, e.g. '*one of the boys*'? What should the verb agree with, '*one*' or '*boys*'? Should we say 'One of the boys is brilliant' or 'One of the boys are brilliant'?
- What about the phrase 'The boy who beat all his classmates'? Should the verb agree with 'boy' or 'classmates', and should we say 'The boy who beat all his classmates is/are brilliant'?

The Noun Phrase

- Most students tend to think of sentences as being made up of individual **words**. This, of course, *appears* to be true some of the time. For example, the subject of the sentence 'Girls are naughtier than boys' is the word (noun) 'girls'.
- However, if you look at the larger picture, you'll find that words often *group* themselves into **phrases**, and no matter how long these phrases are, they behave like *one single word*!
- For example, let's look at the underlined phrases in the following sentences.

Examples and a question

- a) The boy is a genius.
 - b) The young boy is a genius.
 - c) The young boy from Hong Kong is a genius.
 - d) The young boy from Hong Kong who won the chess tournament is a genius.
-
- Question: What are the underlined phrases basically about? Which of these phrases can be replaced by the pronoun 'he'?

Answer

- Each of the underlined phrases in (a-d) is about a certain '*boy*' (and not about 'Hong Kong' or a 'chess tournament'). All the other words in the phrase only tell us something more about this 'boy' – e.g. 'young' (the boy is young), 'who won the chess tournament' (the boy won the chess tournament), and so on.
- So, in a real sense, the noun 'boy' is the **head** of the whole phrase. And since the head is a noun, the *whole phrase* behaves like a **noun** too, and therefore the whole phrase can be replaced by a pronoun (like 'he').
- This kind of phrase is called a **noun phrase**. All the underlined groups of words in sentences (a-d) are noun phrases, and the whole noun phrase (not just the noun) is the **subject** of the sentence.

Structure of the Noun Phrase

- A noun phrase (obviously) has a **noun** as its **head**.
- In addition, it may have a **determiner** (like ‘the’ in ‘the boy’) and one or more **adjectives** (e.g. ‘young’) *before* it.
- It may also have other words *after* it, such as a **preposition phrase** (e.g. ‘from Hong Kong’) and a **relative clause** (e.g. ‘who won the chess tournament’).

Schematic representation

- Here's a representation of the structure of a noun phrase like 'the young boy from Hong Kong who won the chess tournament'

[The] [young] **boy** [from Hong Kong]

| | | |
DET ADJ **HEAD** PREP PHR

[who won the chess tournament]

|
REL CLAUSE

English Grammar

Unit 1-3:

NOUNS & NOUN PHRASES (3)

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Subject-verb Agreement (again)

- The subject of each of the following sentences is a **noun phrase** [enclosed in brackets for easy identification]. In each noun phrase there are two or more nouns (given in **bold** print). Underline the noun which controls **agreement** with the verb.
 1. [The **leader** of the **rebels**] has surrendered.
 2. [The newly-elected **spokesman** for the **workers**] seems very inexperienced.
 3. [The former **lovers** of the **president**] have come forward one by one.
 4. [The **players** who lost to the **new-comer**] were taken by surprise.
 5. [The **disease** which struck fear in **millions** of **people**] was SARS.

Answers

- The noun which controls agreement with the verb is underlined for you:
 1. [The leader of the rebels] has surrendered.
 2. [The newly-elected spokesman for the workers] seems very inexperienced.
 3. [The former lovers of the president] have come forward one by one.
 4. [The players who lost to the new-comer] were taken by surprise.
 5. [The disease which struck fear in millions of people] was SARS.

The problem

- Notice (from the above examples) that it is the **head** of a noun phrase which controls subject-verb agreement, and not any other noun in the noun phrase. This is reasonable, since the head is what the whole noun phrase is all about.
- To say that the verb agrees with the head of the noun phrase is easy, but it may not be that easy for learners to decide *which noun is the head!*
- In Chinese, the head of a noun phrase is very easy to identify. It always occurs at the very *end* of the noun phrase. So instead of [the young **boy** who won the chess tournament], we have something like this:
- [the won the chess tournament young **boy**] is a genius.
[那個贏了象棋比賽的男孩] 是位天才

The case of English

- But English grammar does *not* work like that. The noun head in English need not be at the end of the noun phrase, and may be separated from the verb by several other words -- as in '[the boy who won the chess tournament] is a genius'.
- In identifying the noun head in an English noun phrase, you should ask yourself, 'what is the whole phrase about?' E.g., is it about a certain 'boy', or about 'chess tournament', or something else?

An exercise

- Fill in the blank with the correct form of the verb, so that it agrees with the subject:
 1. The schedule showing the jetfoil arrivals and departures _____ (be) out-of-date.
 2. His book of old photographs _____ (be) missing.
 3. The recent development of new public facilities _____ (have) led to an increase in tourism in the area.
 4. The trees in the park _____ (need) trimming.
 5. The floods which hit Hunan Province recently _____ (have) caused untold damage.

6. The search for the terrorists _____ (go) on.
7. The new neighbour who moved in yesterday with 11 dogs _____ (seem) a little weird.
8. The Olympic athlete with the greatest number of gold medals _____ (be) Mark Spitz.
9. A car with four doors _____ (cost) a little more than one with two.
10. The mathematician whose Nobel Prize surprised many people _____ (be) John Nash.

Answers

The noun phrase subjects are enclosed in brackets below, with the head underlined (it controls the form of the verb):

1. (The schedule showing the jetfoil arrivals and departures) is out-of-date.
2. (His book of old photographs) is missing.
3. (The recent development of new public facilities) has led to an increase in tourism in the area.
4. (The trees in the park) need trimming.
5. (The floods which hit Hunan Province recently) have caused untold damage.
6. (The search for the terrorists) goes on.
7. (The new neighbour who moved in yesterday with 11 dogs) seems a little weird.
8. (The Olympic athlete with the greatest number of gold medals) is Mark Spitz.
9. (A car with four doors) costs a little more than one with two.
10. (The mathematician whose Nobel Prize surprised many people) is John Nash.

English Grammar

Unit 1-4:

NOUNS & NOUN PHRASES (4)

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The Determiner

- If you open an English dictionary, you will find entries like the following for nouns like *car* and *policeman*:
- **Car:** *n.* motor vehicle with four wheels for carrying passengers
- **Policeman:** *n.* male member of the police force
- Notice that, in their *bare* form (i.e. ‘car’ or ‘policeman’), these nouns refer only to a *type* of object or person. ‘Car’ is a type of vehicle, and ‘policeman’ is a type of person. They do not refer to any actual, individual car or policeman in this world.

- Therefore, if you use these nouns in their bare form in an actual sentence, there is something odd about it:
 1. * I saw car in the garage yesterday.
 2. * The robber shot policeman outside the bank.
- Why is it odd? Because, when you see something, you see an actual object and not a type of object, and when you shoot somebody, you shoot an actual person, not a type of person!

What word would you use?

- What sort of word would you put before the nouns in the following sentences to make them sound right? (Think of as many different words as you can)
 1. I saw _____ car in _____ garage yesterday.
 2. _____ robber shot _____ policeman outside _____ bank.
 3. _____ friend works in _____ restaurant.
 4. _____ teacher gave _____ very boring lecture today.

Answers

Here are just some possibilities:

- I saw a/the/his car in the/a garage yesterday.
- The/a robber shot the/a policeman outside the/a bank.
- My/her friend works in a/this restaurant.
- The/our teacher gave a very boring lecture today.

What do determiners do?

- We find ourselves using words like these before the nouns in ‘I saw *a/the/this/that/her/your* car in *the* garage yesterday’.
- Each of these words – *a, the, this, that, his, her, my, your*, etc. -- ‘limits’ the noun *car* in some way, so that it refers to an individual car, and not just a type of object called ‘car’.
- Such words are known as **determiners**. Other words, like *each, every, some, one, two*, etc., which refer to quantity, also act as determiners.

An exercise

- Underline all the determiners in the following passage:

‘Once upon a time, there was an old man in Northern China called Yu Gong (‘Foolish Old Man’). In front of his house stood two tall mountains. To go to the nearest town, Yu Gong had to go around these mountains, which took a long time. So one day he called his family together, and announced that they would start digging and removing the mountains. He said, ‘When my sons and I are dead and gone, their sons will carry on, and their sons and their sons...’

Answers

- Once upon a time, there was an old man in Northern China called Yu Gong ('Foolish Old Man'). In front of his house stood two tall mountains. To go to the nearest town, Yu Gong had to go around these mountains, which took a long time. So one day he called his family together, and announced that they would start digging and removing the mountains. He said, 'When my sons and I are dead and gone, their sons will carry on, and their sons and their sons...'

Determiners and singular count nouns

- We've seen that **count nouns** have a singular and a plural form (e.g. *house* and *houses*), while mass nouns only have a singular form (e.g. *gold*). Now here is another grammatical difference between the two:
- A **singular count noun** *must* take a **determiner**
- Thus, it would not be grammatical to say *'This is house'. The singular count noun *house* must take a determiner, such as 'This is a/the/my/his house'. On the other hand, a singular mass noun, or a plural count noun, need not take a determiner (although they can): 'This is gold', 'These are houses', etc. are grammatical.

English Grammar

Unit 1-5:

NOUNS & NOUN PHRASES (5)

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The Article

- By far, the most common determiners in English are the **articles**, namely *a (an)* and *the*. Many mistakes are made by students who choose the wrong article, and part of the reason may be that there are no real articles in their first language (e.g. Chinese).
- The article *a* is known as the '**indefinite** article', and *the* as the '**definite** article'. It is not that simple to explain how they are used.

Think about this

- Underline all the definite and indefinite articles in the text below, and explain the choice of each of these articles in this context.

‘I’ve bought a new car. It is a Mazda sports car. It has a slim body and a powerful engine. The engine is turbo-charged, and the car can accelerate from 0 to 100 kph in 5 seconds.’

Comment

- ‘I’ve bought a new car. It is a Mazda sports car. It has a slim body but a powerful engine. The engine is turbo-charged, and the car can accelerate from 0 to 100 kph in 5 seconds.’
- What we could say after analysing the above text is that (i) the indefinite article *a (an)* is used when an object or person is mentioned for the first time in the context; and (ii) the definite article *the* is used when an object or person has already been mentioned earlier in the context.

Another example

- Underline all the definite and indefinite articles in the following text. Does the explanation you have given above explain the choice of articles here? If not, how can you explain these other uses of the articles?

‘I’ve bought a new car. The engine is turbo-charged and super powerful. The bumpers are made of a special material which can stand the severest punishment. The seats are made of the best leather, and are electrically operated.’

Comment

‘I’ve bought a new car. The engine is turbo-charged and super powerful. The bumpers are made of a special material which can withstand the severest punishment. The seats are made of the best leather, and are electrically-operated.’

- You’ll notice that, even when a noun has *not* been mentioned before in the context, the definite article can still be used if it is associated with an object already mentioned. E.g., when ‘a new car’ has already been introduced, its engine, bumpers, seats, etc. are now ‘definite’, since we now know which engine, bumpers or seats are referred to.
- Another use of the definite article is to refer to something of the ‘highest degree’, e.g. ‘the severest punishment’ and ‘the best leather’, since there’s (presumably) only one highest or best.

Some more questions

- Consider the use of the definite article in the following examples. Why do you think *the* is used, even though the noun is mentioned for the first time in this context?
 1. Do you have **the** key?
 2. Where's **the** switch?
 3. Turn on **the** light.
 4. Open **the** door.
 5. He went to **the** library.
 6. Call **the** police!
 7. He complained to **the** manager.
 8. She is at **the** airport.
 9. What's **the** time?
 10. What's **the** problem?

Comment

- In all these cases, the **context** makes it clear what the noun is referring to.
- In (1), when you say ‘Do you have the key?’, you are likely to be standing in front of a door (to a meeting room, office, home, etc.), and it is obvious that you are referring to the key to that door; or a place may have been mentioned previously, e.g. someone may have said, ‘Let’s go to the storeroom’, and when you say ‘Do you have the key?’, it obviously refers to the key to the storeroom; and so on. The same goes for examples (2-4).
- In other examples (5, 7, 8), your location at the moment of speaking makes it clear which library (the one on the campus where you are), which manager (of the establishment where you are), which airport (of the city where you are).
- In (6), there is only one police force in the place where you are (just as there is only one government). In (10), you would say such a thing only if you’re witnessing a problem before you, so it is clear which problem you’re referring to.
- In all these cases then, you use the definite article *the* because the **context** at the time of speaking makes it perfectly clear what the noun refers to, even without any previous mention.

When a definite article is needed

- Compare the following pairs of sentences (a/b), where an indefinite article is used in the first and a definite article in the second. Can you explain why the definite article is needed in the (b) sentences but not in (a)?
 - 1a) This is an interesting book.
 - 1b) This is the most interesting book I have ever read.
 - 2a) I bought a book on astrology.
 - 2b) I bought the only book on astrology in the bookstore.
 - 3a) I had a girlfriend in school.
 - 3b) She was the first girlfriend I ever had.
 - 4a) He found a key in his pocket.
 - 4b) He found the key to the safe in his pocket.

Comment

- In all the (a) sentences, we're referring to a noun whose identity is not yet established, and so it is 'indefinite'. In (b), enough information is provided *in the rest of the sentence* to make the identity of the referent (the thing referred to) unique or unmistakable. E.g., there is only one possible book referred to by (1b) '... most interesting book I have read', or (2b) '... only book on astrology in the bookstore'; and likewise only one possible referent for (3b) '... first girlfriend I ever had' and (4b) '... key to the safe in his pocket'. Therefore, the use of *the* is called for.

Definite article vs. no article

- In the following pairs of sentences (a/b), the same noun is used with or without a definite article. Is there a difference in **meaning** between the two sentences? If so, explain the difference.

1a) He loves children

1b) He loves the children

2a) Where can I buy DVDs?

2b) Where can I buy the DVDs?

3a) He kept stray dogs as pets.

3b) He kept the stray dogs as pets.

4a) They imported rice from Thailand.

4b) They imported the rice from Thailand.

5a) He found money under his bed.

5b) He found the money under his bed.

Comment

- The (a) sentences refer to things in general (e.g. children or stray dogs in general), whereas the (b) sentences, with the definite article *the*, refer to specific things which are understood in the present context. E.g. in (1b), he loves certain specific children (understood in context as (e.g.) his own children, or the children in a certain refugee camp, etc.), and not children in general. The same applies to all the other examples.

Correcting errors

- The following sentences were written by students. Identify and correct any errors that you may find in their use of articles.
 1. The majority of respondents agreed.
 2. Most of plants were giant plants.
 3. All of them agreed that ability to communicate was important.
 4. The vitamin can inhibit development of cancer.
 5. It contains large amount of carotene.
 6. It is used by human body.
 7. We should save the energy as much as possible.
 8. The layer of the mud became hard rock.

Answers

- The missing articles are highlighted below. Where an existing article is redundant, it is enclosed in square brackets [].
- 1. The majority of the respondents agreed.
- 2. Most of the plants were giant plants.
- 3. All of them agreed that the ability to communicate was important.
- 4. The vitamin can inhibit the development of cancer.
- 5. It contains a large amount of carotene.
- 6. It is used by the human body.
- 7. We should save [the] energy as much as possible.
- 8. The layer of [the] mud became hard rock.

Recapitulation

- To recapitulate, in this unit we've seen that a **noun phrase** (however long) behaves just like a single **noun**. Thus, in the sentence:
'[The powerful **typhoon** which swept past Hong Kong last week] did not cause too much damage',
the whole bracketed phrase [the powerful **typhoon** which swept past Hong Kong last week] is a noun phrase, and it can be replaced by a pronoun 'it', just like any other noun.

Structure of the noun phrase (recapitulation)

- First, a **noun phrase** must have a **noun** (e.g. 'typhoon') as its '**head**'. The noun head is what the whole noun phrase is all about, and it controls **agreement** with the verb.
- Other constituents of a noun phrase:
 - a) BEFORE THE NOUN:
 - A **determiner** (obligatory for singular count nouns) – e.g. 'the typhoon'
 - One or more **adjectives** – e.g. 'the powerful, swift typhoon'
 - b) AFTER THE NOUN:
 - A **preposition phrase** – e.g. 'the powerful typhoon from the south'
 - A **relative clause** – e.g. 'the powerful typhoon which swept past Hong Kong last week'

Exercise

In each sentence, fill in the blank with the appropriate form of the verb in brackets, making sure that it agrees with the head of the noun phrase:

1. The first anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks _____ (be) commemorated all over the world.
2. The families of the victims _____ (be) invited to attend memorial services in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.
3. The names of all those who died in the World Trade Centre _____ (be) read out by the former mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, and others.
4. Documentaries on the attacks and their aftermath _____ (be) shown on TV in Hong Kong.
5. The documentary which caught the attention of most viewers _____ (be) about a young fireman on his first job in New York.
6. The cameramen who shot this documentary _____ (be) two French brothers.
7. The film which they shot inside the World Trade Centre during the attack _____ (be) the only one of its kind.

Answers

1. [The first anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks] was commemorated all over the world.
2. [The families of the victims] were invited to attend memorial services in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.
3. [The names of all those who died in the World Trade Centre] are/were read out by the former mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, and others.
4. [Documentaries on the attacks and their aftermath] were shown on TV in Hong Kong.
5. [The documentary which caught the attention of most viewers] was about a young fireman on his first job in New York.
6. [The cameramen who shot this documentary] were two French brothers.
7. [The film which they shot inside the World Trade Centre during the attack] was the only one of its kind.