

## Forms and Functions of the English Noun Phrase in Selected Nigerian Texts

Adebola Adebileje (Phd)

Redeemer's University PMB 230, Ede, Osun State Nigeria.

---

**Abstract:** This research sets out to identify authors' use of noun phrases in texts to create effects in the description of their characters, objects and situations in projecting their themes. It exposes the textual and functional concerns of the English NP by doing a textual analysis of selected excerpts from contemporary Nigerian authors: *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie and *Broken Ladders* by Lekan Oyegoke highlighting the distribution of NP types in different textual categories. It also examines the NP complexity to ascertain whether or not it produces any stylistic effect in the selected texts and finally, to examine if there is any relationship between NP complexities, function and text type.

**Keywords:** English Noun Phrase, form, NP complexity and functionality.

---

### I. Introduction

The style of writing employed by authors distinguishes their writing as unique from one another as they convey purpose and perspective through their choice of words. Style, according to Strunk, William, and White, E. B. (2000) is the manner in which writing is packaged to project the specific context and purpose to the audience. This means that the author's word choice, sentence fluency, and his/her voice all contribute to the style of a piece of writing. Cali & Bowen (2003) explain that how a writer chooses words and structures sentences to achieve a certain effect is also an element of style. Prolific writers are concise and precise, getting rid of wordiness and selecting the exact word to convey meaning. Skilful choice of exact words such as active verbs, concrete nouns, and specific adjectives on the part of the author goes a long way in helping the reader to picture or imagine the meaning intended by the author correctly. Good writers will also use adjectives in moderation and instead of using adverbs frequently allow nouns and verbs to do the expression of their thought or idea. These usages produce different effects in texts.

The two texts selected for analysis are written by two prolific Nigerian authors Lekan Oyegoke (*Broken Ladders*) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus*). *Broken Ladders* focuses on childhood relationships among a group of pen pals whose future seems to be experiencing some bleakness at the beginning. But their tenacity brings them back to the ladder of heroism and success. Hence, the plot of the novel unfolds amidst teenagers. *Purple Hibiscus*, on the other hand dwells on life issues generally and captures the traumatic moments of the breakup of a wealthy Nigerian family as a result of the cruelty and religious fanaticism of the father who is literally presented by the author as the head of the family. Also, military brutality of the reigning government of the time is vividly captured with skilful choice of words. Here, the plots are unveiled in a complex and intricate setting unlike the childhood setting of *Broken Ladders*.

### 1.2 The Noun Phrase

Algeo (1995) observed that nouns along with verbs are a dominant part of speech, and that the semantic content of sentences is borne mostly by nouns. In other words, of all the constituent elements within a sentence, the noun and the verb, nouns especially, are of pivotal importance in English language. The syntax of a basic English sentence involves the Subject, Verb and Object or Complement and the forms of both the Subject and the Object and Complement are almost always nouns/pronouns or noun phrases. English has a variety of noun phrases, which differ greatly in structure. The English noun phrase can be described as a word group with a noun or pronoun as its head. Hence, it can comprise more than one word and/or even a clause, where the interactions within the elements in the noun phrase are emphasized by the function of the head and its dependents. In the noun phrase, dependent determiners (pre-modifiers and post-modifiers) are defined as lexical category. They include the articles and words traditionally classified as adjectives and pronouns. But some adjectives and most nouns found in this category are referred to as performing attributive functions similar to the grammatical level of a clause analysis (McArthur, (ed.) 1998). The simplest noun phrase consists of a single noun, as presented by Chimamanda Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus*:

*Lunch* (Noun = NP) (sub) was *fufu and onugbu soup* (noun + conj + noun + noun = NP) (obj).

In other words, the head of a noun phrase which is the noun can be accompanied by modifiers, determiners (such as *the, a, her*), and/or complements, as in

*Papa, himself* (Noun+ pronoun = NP) (sub) would have *a blank face* (det +adj + noun = (NP) (obj))...

Oyegoke in *Broken Ladders* also exemplified this form of the noun phrase in the following:

*Our Principal* (adj + noun = NP (sub) encourages *us* (prn =NP (obj)).

*Our new Domestic Science mistress* (premodifier + noun = NP (sub) has really planned *big for it* (adjunct adverbial + prepositional phrase = NP (obj)).

Therefore, noun phrase, henceforth, referred to as NP, most commonly functions as a subject, object, or complement in the English sentence. Generally, NP performs ten main grammatical functions within sentences in the English language which are:

1. Subject
2. Subject complement
3. Direct object
4. Object complement
5. Indirect object
6. Prepositional complement
7. Noun phrase modifier
8. Determinative
9. Appositive
10. Adjunct adverbial

### 1.3 Structure of the Noun phrase

From the examples given above, it can be deduced that a simple noun phrase can consist of just one word, which is normally a noun, although pronouns can replace nouns, and adjectives occasionally stand in for nouns. A determiner is also usually required. While a noun or pronoun can sometimes stand alone as a single-word, simple noun phrase, a determiner such as the article (a, the etc) cannot stand alone and is defined by its function in relation to the item it determines. The noun or pronoun is therefore regarded as the HEAD of the noun phrase (Radford, 1993).

A complex noun phrase contains the obligatory head (a word that could stand alone as a simple noun phrase) as well as modification provided by a determiner (det), a premodifier (premod) and a postmodifier (postmod). Premodifiers occur before the head, whereas postmodifiers come after the head. Premodifiers are often adjectives, but other nouns can also modify the head, and when this occurs, the premodifying noun may be accompanied by a premodifying adjective. Postmodifiers can consist of relative clauses, non-finite clauses, prepositional phrases, adverbs, adjectives and noun phrases in apposition.

While the premod of the head are of two main types: determiners and modifiers; the postmod of the head are of three types: complements, modifiers, and peripheral elements (Huddleston, 1988).

## II. Methodology

Therefore, this paper describes selected NP from the two texts under review on the basis of headedness in NPs. Especially, in particular areas such as: (i).sort/kind/type-of constructions; (ii). apposition; (iii). of-appositions; and (iv). Bi-nominal constructions. Also, the distinction/relationship between post-modification, complementation and apposition is presented.

The two authors being studied employ the notion of apposition which spreads across the various forms within the NP structure. Apposition is when there are two NPs placed alongside (apposed to) each other in a relation of equivalence. It is a grammatical construction in which two usually adjacent nouns having the same referent stand in the same syntactical relation to the rest of a sentence.

### 2.2 Noun Phrases Descriptions in texts

Apposition can occur in two forms, restrictive and non-restrictive. A restrictive appositive provides information essential to identifying the phrase in apposition. It restricts or explains phrases in some decisive way that will give meaning to the sentence and/or change the meaning if the appositive were removed. In English, restrictive appositives are not set off by commas.

The NPs below use restrictive appositives:

*My good friend* (NP in apposition) *Phillipa* (NP appositive phrase) is a lecturer in Botany (Purple Hibiscus).

There is a relation of equivalence and the second term could stand alone. But even if the dependent term is grammatically omissible, its presence is semantically required to justify the selection of a definite NP.

A non-restrictive appositive provides information not critical to identifying the phrase in apposition. It provides non-essential information, and the essential meaning of the sentence would not change if the appositive were removed. In English, non-restrictive appositives are typically set off by commas.

For instance, both Adichie and Oyegoke present these non-restrictive appositives in their texts:

e.g. ... "your public complaints commissioner (NP), the honourable chairman of the public complaints committee (NP)" (Broken Ladders, pp148).

The public complaint commissioner and the honourable chairman are the same person but the second NP is not really needed to identify the first NP which is in apposition.

*A bloodied corpse (NP), a man in blue jeans (NP)*, lay on the roadside. (Purple Hibiscus, pp);

A bloodied corpse is the NP in apposition and a man in blue jeans is not needed to identify the bloodied corpse.

*Mr Umoru, your hygiene teacher* (Broken Ladders, p6).

The fact that Mr Umoru is your hygiene teacher was not necessary to identify him although, Mr Umoru is the same person as your hygiene teacher.

In these structures, the order is reversible, that is, either can occupy the head position, or either can stand alone. Therefore, the apposition relation here is non-restrictive. This is a case of syntactic and semantic headedness suggesting a referential status between the two nominal elements.

There are however, some other NP structures that are further removed from the central type of apposition where the second term is a content clause as in "*Segi, her heart beating, rapidly* put more distance... (Broken Ladders, p1). The equivalence between the two terms is that of complement, although the second term could often stand alone as "*Segi* put more distance..."

Compliments as post-head dependents in NPs differ from modifiers in that they are seen to be such by virtue of being obligatory since there are no clear cases of nouns that require a complement (Huddleston, 1988). Hence, a major distinguishing factor will be that complements depend on the presence of a noun head of the appropriate class for their occurrence. In other words, any common or proper noun can take a relative clause as a modifier (dependent) e.g. *An usher, wearing a Blessed Virgin Mary medal on her white cotton dress* had rushed forward to seat us... (Purple Hibiscus, pp 98). However, complements are comparable to those dependent on a verb or adjective e.g. "*Segi, her heart beating, rapidly* put more distance (Broken Ladders, p1) corresponds to *Segi's heart was beating rapidly* where *was beating rapidly* complements the noun *heart*. Another example is *The crowded roadside stores with their sparse shelves of goods* threatened to spill over onto a thin strip of road... (Purple Hibiscus pp (119). Here, the NP head *stores* has pre-modifier – crowded roadside – as well as a post-modifier – with their sparse shelves of goods (PP).

Also, predominantly used by the two authors are binominal constructions where two noun phrases are joined together by 'of' such as: *The head of the department of Biochemistry, the dean of the Faculty of Science, the Vice Chancellor of the university* (Broken Ladders); *The pungent fumes of kerosene smoke, Auntie Ifeoma and her children, The water-colour painting of a woman with a child, Cartons and bags of rice* (Purple Hibiscus).

One example of binominal NP above particularly has a complex structure with several layers of prepositional phrases embedded in it, that is, *The water-colour painting of a woman (PP) with a child (PP) was much like a copy of the Virgin (PP) and Child oil painting that hung in Papa's bedroom...* (pp 126). While the first aspect of the structure is the head-modifier: *The water-colour painting of a woman with a child*; the other aspect is of the head-complement constructions: *a copy of the Virgin...*

Also, the authors' use of determiners (a, the, an, etc.) in relation with the basic properties of the noun, e.g. *The skin at her knees* (Purple Hibiscus); *This golden epistle* (Broken Ladders) or the choice between the analytical prepositional pattern and the synthetic form of attributive adjectival modification e.g. *The blue-gray firewood smoke* or *The scarf wound around her head* (Purple Hibiscus); *The euphony of music, The nunc dimities of my habitual delirious nightmares* (Broken Ladders) can be seen as articulated choices leading to the highlighting of certain stylistic features such as point of view or metaphorical representation. However, constructions without determiners by the same authors are presented. For instance:

*Roses and hibiscuses and lilies and ixora and cotton* (Purple Hibiscus)

Chimamanda Adichie is fond of using long noun phrases, although NP can be infinite in length. For example, *The sisters, members of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal prayer group soon arrived and their Igbo songs, accompanied by robust hand clapping* echoed upstairs" (Purple Hibiscus pp29).

"The sisters, members of our lady of the miraculous medal prayer group"

The structure of this noun phrase contains three sections:

- (i) Pre-modification (determiner) = The
- (ii) Head (noun) = sisters
- (iii) Post-modification = members + (preposition phrase) of our lady of the miraculous medal prayer group.

But, Lekan Oyegoke uses short NPs usually often made of pronouns. Thus, such short phrases as *I, We, They* and proper Nouns such as *Anna, Uzo, Chuks* are predominant in Broken Ladders. However, his NPs (objects) are of more complex structures e.g. *a good girl with brain and beauty, my father's friend, a member of the Dramatic Society, very good actors in this school* etc. The implications of the various NPs' constructions are: first, it reveals the audience targeted by the authors and second, it reveals authors' ability to showcase creativity in language use. While Oyegoke's themes include childhood friendship, love and relationships,

Adichie's themes dwell on family, tyranny, religious fanaticism, etc. Hence, choice of words and syntactic arrangements of sentences are basically informed by these themes and audience.

The left-headed partitive constructions of the NP are also evident in the two texts, e.g. *One of the smaller sitting rooms, half of a drumstick*, (Purple Hibiscus); *one of those foolish girls, a member of the Dramatic Society* (Broken Ladders). These are nominal partitives based on the quantifier and the type of embedded noun used to indicate partialness.

In addition, possessive constructions like *Ade Coker's daughter, Yewande's visit, Father Amadi's sweetheart, The Igwe's palace* (Purple Hibiscus) and *Nosa's letter, Chuk's letter, Segi's reply, kid's stuff* (Broken Ladders) form another structure of the NP.

### III. Conclusion

In conclusion, language and language use according to Keizer, (2002) exhibit a representation effects, which means that classifications and categorisations, no matter how necessary and useful to both the linguist and the language user, should not be seen as strict and unchanging, but as imprecise and flexible. Therefore, the complexity of phrases reflects the complexity of syntax in different registers of English. This is revealed in the variety of noun phrases used by the two authors determined by their audience. The simplest structures most frequently occur in *Broken Ladders* while the complex structures occur more in *Purple Hibiscus* to corroborate intricacies and complexities of life portrayed in the text. Biber, Conrad, & Leech (2002) are of the opinion that complex noun phrases are prominent in conversations as well as academic writings and this assertion comes to fore in *Purple Hibiscus*. Chimamanda Adichie employs the first narrative approach in presenting her story and her plots are played out in a university, church, publishing, and home settings. Hence, her frequent use of complex noun phrases. Lekan Oyegoke against the background of teenagers' explorative experience as well as his didactic motive for writing the text skilfully presents a readable and enjoyable novel with the use of simple and short sentences to capture and sustain his audience's attention and guarantee its comprehension.

Hence, descriptions of the structures of NPs selected from the two texts reveal the interaction or relationship between the forms of noun phrases, their meaning, and their use based on the intentions of the two authors. In other words, there is a link between authors' choice of a particular noun phrase structure and the context in which it is being used. This analysis also shows how, despite the need in linguistic analysis for strict categories, consideration needs to be given to pragmatic and stylistic factors that come into play.

### Reference

- [1]. Adichie, C.N. (2006). *Purple Hibiscus*. Lagos. Kachifo Limited.
- [2]. Algeo, J. (1995). Having a look at the expanded predicate. In B. Aarts and C. Meyer (1995). *The verb in contemporary English: theory and description*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 203-217.
- [3]. Biber, D. Conrad, S. and Leech, G. (2002). *Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Longman.
- [4]. Cali, K. & Bowen, K. (2003). The five features of effective writing. [Online] Available: <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/few/cover> (Nov 21,2015).
- [5]. Charles F. Meyer. (2007). *Apposition in Contemporary English*. Cambridge University Press.
- [6]. Huddleston, R.D. (1988). *English Grammar: An Outline*. Cambridge. University of Cambridge Press.
- [7]. Keizer, M.E. (2002). Review of Inge de Mönnick, On the Move: the mobility of constituents in the English noun phrase: a multi-method approach. *English Language and Linguistics* 6/1, 210-216.
- [8]. Keizer, E. (2007). *The English Noun Phrase: The Nature of Linguistic Categorization*, Studies in English Language (series). Cambridge: CUP.
- [9]. McArthur, T. (1998). *Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford University Press.
- [10]. Oyegoke, L. (2003). *Broken Ladders*. Ibadan. Yoori Books.
- [11]. Radford, A. (1993). Head-hunting: on the trail of the nominal Janus. In Corbett, G. G., N. M. Fraser and S. McGlashan (eds) *Heads in grammatical theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [12]. Strunk, W., and White, E. B. (2000). *The Elements of Style* (4th Edition). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

### Appendix

#### Samples of Selected Noun Phrases from the two texts

1. An usher wearing a Blessed Virgin Mary medal on her white cotton dress
2. An usher with a scarf tied tight across her forehead
3. ...pamphlets with pictures of the priest's old house, uncertain arrows pointing at where the roof leaked...
4. Chief Umèadi, the only man in Abba,
5. ...The blue-gray fire wood smoke that hung heavy in the living room
6. Auntie Ifeoma and her children
7. The Igwe's palace
8. One of the smaller sitting rooms
9. Half of a drumstick
10. The scarf wound around her head
11. The sounds of forks meeting plates, of serving spoons meeting platters
12. The long bottles Sisi brought

13. A bloodied corpse, a man in blue jeans
14. The crowded roadside stores with their sparse shelves of goods
15. Roses and hibiscuses and lilies and ixora and cotton grew side by side like a hand-painted wreath
16. The skin at her knees
17. The pungent fumes of kerosene smoke mixed with the aroma of curry and nutmeg from the kitchen
18. The water-colour painting of a woman with a child
19. A copy of the Virgin and Child oil painting that hung in Papa's bedroom
20. The chicken leg
21. Nosa's letter
22. Chuk's letter
23. Segi's reply
24. Kid's stuff
25. One of those foolish girls, a member of the Dramatic Society
26. I
27. We
28. They
29. The euphony of music
30. The nunc dimities of my habitual delirious nightmares
31. Segi, her heart beating, rapidly
32. The head of the department of Biochemistry
33. The dean of the Faculty of Science
34. The Vice Chancellor of the university