THE STUDY OF NOUNS IN ENGLISH LINGUISTICS

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Annotation:
Perhaps the earliest linguistic resource we have as babies learning to mean is the noun in categorizing the objects around us. The conventional association between the noun and the entity it denotes becomes exploited in use and the speaker learns that through grammar he or she can use nominal expressions to refer. This is one of our most powerful resources. The referring nominal group has the greatest potential for complexity and can serve as a measure of a text's 'nominality' and its density, including its role as an index of register.

Keywords: noun, nominality, reference, method, grammar.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the earliest linguistic resource we have available to us as babies when learning to mean is the noun because of its nature in categorizing the objects (including people) around us. I remember my son eventually learning that his use of juice did not work efficiently when he wanted to drink milk; he could use language to specify meaning by categorizing his experience. The association between the noun and the entity it denotes becomes conventionalized and the speaker learns that through grammar, i.e. words put to use to create meaning, he or she can use nominal expressions to refer. As noted in the quotation above by Halliday, all of this happens at a time that is beyond our recall and this is truly remarkable.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In Grammar, Society and the Noun, Halliday (2016) sought to consider "certain questions of language from the outside" [1]. In this paper, I will also look at questions of language but rather from the inside. These two alternative views can be thought of as social and cognitive. This paper seeks to answer questions such as, what is 'nominality'? Where and how does it fit in the grammar? What relationship does it have, if any, to context? I will argue that the study of referring nominal expressions

must involve both social and cognitive orientations since the very nature of nominal reference requires what we might call a 'full circle' process.

The first part of this paper will critically examine the noun and the notion of 'nominality' as discussed in Halliday's paper. The second part of the paper will examine the role of the noun in referring expressions. Using excerpts from transcripts from a hearing for an unlawful reprisal application, we will consider examples of referring expressions which were initially rejected by the speech partner due to a lack of agreement about the classification of the entity being referred to, i.e. noun selection is at the root of the problem. I will conclude by proposing that a combined cognitive and sociolinguistic approach to understanding nominals offers a stronger and more convincing solution to the core questions about nominality [2].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nominality is not only about nouns (our categorization of our experience of the world around us); it is also about what we maintain in discourse as a referent (a type of objectification). These ideas can be found in Halliday's early work but they are not sufficiently articulated. We use the term to talk about nouns and to talk about 'participating entities' and this is problematic to a certain extent. Nominality is the concept that allows us to combine nouns and participating entities. This is an important endeavour and as such, it needs to become a more explicit part of our thinking about language.

It is difficult to discuss the category of nouns without considering their use and function in the language. However before considering the grammar of nouns, it is useful to examine what is meant by the term noun and specifically what meaning it is given in this paper. After all we do not, as speakers, set out to use a noun; we set out with an intention to refer to something. In English the main grammatical resource we have for this is the noun phrase, or nominal group as it is commonly called in SFL [3]. When we think of the term 'noun' we may think of schooling and what is traditionally called parts of speech words. The noun category is perhaps the word class that people can identify with most easily because many nouns have typical concrete senses, e.g. dog and ball. In school most of us were told that a noun is a person, place or thing. While this definition is vague, it works reasonably well as long as the sense of 'thing' is taken as broad enough to encompass the real and imaginary, including feelings, thoughts, and abstract concepts such as jealousy or love. However this view masks some differences that are important if we move to a more technical definition. The term 'noun' denotes a category of words that share sufficiently similar properties. Words can be similar in a variety of ways but when we talk about lexical categories,

we generally mean a type of word that generally serves certain purposes and exhibits certain structural traits. We could say we can recognise a noun because it serves to denote a class of objects and because it is a lexical item that can carry plural information. If I say something like, I just love those trees, I can be confident that the person I am communicating with will understand what objects are included and which are not. For example, a house is clearly not a tree, but it might not be clear to everyone whether bamboo is a tree or a grass. This distinction in classification, or categorisation, would matter to a greater or lesser extent according to context. As has been well established in the field of linguistics, there is no direct relationship between a noun and an instance of the class. Rather, a noun denotes a class of objects that are culturally recognized [4].

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014:51) define the noun according to its functional (semantic) and structural (grammatical) properties respectively. Semantically a noun "expresses a person, other being, inanimate object or abstraction, bounded or unbounded, etc." and grammatically a noun "is either count or mass; if count, may be either singular or plural, plural usually inflected with -s; can be made possessive, adding -'s/-s'; can take the in front; can be Subject in a clause, etc.". The view of noun taken in this paper is very close to this definition but with two points of further precision. First, I would argue that a noun does not 'express' the person or object, but rather serves to denote its class, its cultural classification. The speaker uses the noun in an expression in order to refer to the entity (e.g. person or object). This may seem a subtle distinction but it is in fact quite important to stress that the noun is a category of type, defined by speakers. This point will be made clear in the second part of the paper. Second, since the noun has only a denotative sense, it cannot be Subject in a clause. A noun must be 'operationalised' in a nominal group in an act of referring in order to be Subject in a clause.

CONCLUSION

There is clearly a relationship between nouns and pronouns and indeed in what is enabled to act as a participating entity in the clause. The key is to approach this from the perspective of acts of reference, i.e. referring expressions.

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