

## A STUDY ON NOUN PHRASES IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

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**Abstract:** *Noun phrases (NP) might be very significant in any languages since it is considered as a basic component to form a meaningful sentence. However, most language can be different to each other in using noun phrases despite sharing a similar structure. In the process of learning and teaching English, it is important and essential to have deep understandings about the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese NP to minimize mistakes. This study aims to investigate English and Vietnamese noun phrases in terms of semantic- syntactic structure. Through it, it is expected that teachers partly help learners of English to identify the errors that they make in learning English and then avoid making errors. The paper also suggests some teaching implications based on what have been discussed.*

**Keywords:** *A study, English noun phrases, teaching English, Vietnamese noun phrases.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Words do not simply get together at random to form a meaningful unit. That is to say they should be combined systematically and grammatically into phrases, and then into sentences. For example, the group of words “the girls in their summer dresses” is a phrase. In English and Vietnamese, there are three kinds of phrases whose names are defined on the basis of the classes of the word that is the chief word or head of the phrase namely noun phrase, verb phrase, and adjective phrase. Among those phrases, noun phrase proves to be an interesting case that needs closer attention. The goal of this study is to understand the structure of noun phrase in English and Vietnamese. Attention is also given to the comparison and contrast between the structure of English noun phrase and Vietnamese noun phrase. Finally, some implications for language teaching and language learning will be under discussion.

### 2. CONTENT

#### 2.1. Theoretical background

##### 2.1.1. Contrastive analysis

Contrastive analysis is an inductive investigative approach based on the distinctive elements in a language (Kardaleska, 2006). Contrastive analysis is also the study and

comparison of two languages. As Lado (1957) has stated, it is aimed to predict linguistic difficulties experienced during the acquisition of a second language. It shows that those difficulties that a language learner may encounter in a new (second) language are stemmed from the differences between the new language and their mother tongue (first language). Their mistakes that have been made in learning a second language, therefore, could be predicted from interference by the first language. For years, there has been a number of researches on different language pairs, most of them have focused on English learners. A study of errors in lexical and syntactical usage was carried out among Czech learners of English by Dušková in 1969. Later in 1998, a similar investigation was conducted by Guilford in France to explore French learners' difficulties in various aspects including lexical and syntactical errors. Among these studies, commonly observed syntactic error types made by non-native English learners include subject-verb disagreement, noun-number disagreement, and misuse of determiners.

### 2.1.2. Noun phrases in English in terms of semantic- syntactic structure

A noun phrase is briefly defined as a group of words with a noun or pronoun as the main part and these phrases may consist of one word. According to Howard (1982), the noun phrase in English is composed potentially three parts. Among these parts, the head which is also characterised as the central part of the noun phrase is obligatory. As Howard stated, it is minimal requirement for the occurrence of a noun phrase. In contrast, the other two parts which are named respectively as pre-modification and post-modification can be optional. For example:

**Table 1.** The structure of an English noun phrase by Howard (1982)

<b>PREMODIFICATION (optional)</b>	<b>HEAD (obligatory)</b>	<b>POST MODIFICATION (optional)</b>
the	pen	on the table

**Pre-modification** (or **pre-modifiers**) is the one that comes before the head. Howard also provided some description about pre-modification by discussing the specific order of the word class and sub-classes as identifier – numeral/quantifier – adjective – noun modifier. He pointed out that “The class of identifiers includes articles (‘a’, ‘the’), demonstratives (‘this’, ‘that’) and possessive (‘my’, ‘your’, ‘his’, etc.)” and these identifiers always precede any numerals or indefinite quantifiers that may be present (E.g. the third bag). In addition, he showed that there has been only one identifier may occur in any noun phrase. So, it is impossible to say “*this her cat*” in English. Besides, if an article or a demonstrative identifier is combined with possessive, an “of-phrase” must be used with the possessive pronoun (E.g. *the book of mine*). Howard also gave a notice about numeral/ quantifier that is more than one numeral/ quantifier may occur in a noun phrase (p.13). He gave a favourite sequence of numeral/ quantifier: ordinal numeral -> indefinite quantifier (E.g. *the first few days*); ordinal numeral -> cardinal numeral (E.g. *the first five days*); indefinite quantifier -> cardinal numeral (E.g. *several thousand people*)

Other words that come before the identifier in a NP could be “all”, “both”, “half”, “one-third” (Howard, 1982) (E.g. *all the white hats, half of the old trees, etc.*)

Regarding the order of the adjectives in a noun phrase, Howard suggested it as “Opinion – Size – Shape – Age – Colour – Origin – Material – Purpose”. For example, 1. Opinion (charming), 2. Size (small), 3. Shape (round), 4. Age (old), 5. Colour (brown), 6. Origin (French), 7. Material (oaken), 8. Purpose (writing). Based on his perspective, noun modifiers which come between adjective and the head noun and noun phrase could be seen as the genitive case. It means that a noun phrase is often used to indicate possession. The pre-modification can be summed up in the following table:

**Table 2.** Pre-modification in English by Howard (1982)

Pre-modification		
	Forms of pre-modification	Example
Identifiers	articles	The cat is climbing on the tree.
	demonstratives	This house is so beautiful.
	possessives	My father has two cars.
Numeral/Quantifiers	ordinal	This is the first time I have watched this movie. • ordinal numeral + indefinite quantifier: “the first few girls” • ordinal + cardinal: “the first two years”
	cardinal	There are four people in my family. • indefinite quantifier + cardinal numeral: “many types of book”
Pre-determiner	some quantifiers: all, both, half	Both students make a mistake about spelling.
	fraction	Three-fourths of our planet is water.
	Adjective	This is a beautiful old white Greek house.
	Noun modifier	a reference book, a Christmas gift, a new company, etc.
A special case	genitive	the beautiful American silver screen star’s stylish dress

The **head** noun is characterised as the core component of a noun phrase. It is an important part which is obligatory to an English noun phrase. Heads, as Howard said, can be: (1) common nouns (E.g. “books” in “these new books”); (2) proper nouns (E.g. “Peter”, “Anna”, etc.); (3) pronouns. E.g:

- personal pronoun (For example: **He** is here)
- indefinite pronoun (For example: **Somebody** told me...)
- possessive pronoun (For example: **My** dress is quite expensive)
- demonstrative pronoun (For example: **This** table is very small)

**Post-modification** (or **post-modifier**) can be relative clauses, non-finite clauses or prepositional phrases. In addition, Howard added two possible cases: adjectives or adverbs. Howard also noticed that the most frequently used kind of adverbs is that can function as a preposition, for instance: *back*, *in front of*, *below*. If the relative pronoun functions as an object, it can be omitted, for example, “whom” is omitted. Non-finite clause is defined as a

clause without subject, “introduced by a non- finite form of the verb” (Howard, p. 16). These can be shown in the following table:

**Table 3.** Post-modification in English Howard (1982)

Post-modification		Example
Relative clause		The girl <b>I told you</b>
Than clause		He buys more bags in a month <b>than I buy in a year.</b>
Non-finite clause	infinitive clause	the first candidate <b>to attend the interview</b>
	present participle clause	the cat <b>running after the dog</b>
	past participle	the movie <b>produced by Walt Disney</b>
Prepositional phrase		the key <b>under the chair</b>
Adjective		something <b>new</b>
Adverb		the sentence <b>below</b>

### 2.1.3. Noun phrases in Vietnamese in terms of semantic- syntactic structure

According to Doan, Nguyen & Pham (2021), a Vietnamese noun phrase is defined as “a free combination of a noun nucleus and one or more than one subordinate elements”. It can be front elements that come before the nucleus noun and also end elements that come after the nucleus noun. In this regard, Diep Quang Ban (2008, 79) has claimed that front elements is the words of quantity of the nucleus and the end elements is words of quality of the nucleus. For example:

**Table 4.** Structure of Vietnamese noun phrases

Front elements	Nucleus	End elements
Hai	con gà	kia
Những	chiếc bút chì	màu đen này

In his point of view, the order of the elements in Vietnamese noun phrase could be described as:

Toàn bộ	những	cái	bút	màu đen	ấy
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2

The **nucleus** could be a noun or a combination of two components which is called “ngữ danh từ” (Diep Quang Ban, 2008). The first component is called “danh từ chỉ loại” (a classifier), the second component can be a noun, a verb, or adjective. They are aimed to indicate a specific object. For examples:

**Table 5.** Types of nucleus

Classifier + noun	chiếc bàn (a table)
Classifier + verb	cuộc họp (a meeting)
Classifier + adjective	vẻ đẹp (the beauty)

Besides, many other sub-nouns that can also act as a nucleus are listed in the table below:

**Table 6.** 10 sub-nouns are used as nucleus

Danh từ chỉ loại	Một cái này
Danh từ tập thể	Một đám đông
Danh từ đơn vị đại lượng	Một cân này
Danh từ đơn vị hành chính, sự nghiệp	Một quận nọ
Danh từ chỉ không gian	Một nơi nọ
Danh từ chỉ đơn vị thời gian	Một năm đó
Danh từ chỉ lần tồn tại của hoạt động, trạng thái	Một lần nghỉ học
Danh từ chỉ màu sắc, mùi vị, âm thanh	Một màu này
Danh từ chỉ người	Một cô gái nọ
Danh từ trừu tượng	Một khả năng nào đó

The **front elements** are mentioned in 3 positions which are in fixed order and can not be interchangeable (Diep Quang Ban, p.45).

Position 3	Position 2	Position 1	The nucleus
Từ chỉ tổng lượng	Từ chỉ số lượng	Từ chỉ xuất	
Toàn bộ	những	cái	bút

As Diep Quang Ban's stated (2008), the most common word for position 1 is 'cái' (E.g. "cái bàn đó", "cái hôm đó", "cái thành phố này", "cái đứa con gái ấy", etc.). Meanwhile, position 2 includes various types of word such as: cardinal numeral (E.g. "một", "hai", "ba"); estimate quantifier ("khoảng"); distribution words ("mọi", "mỗi", "từng"); numeral attributes ("những", "các"), and the word "mấy". The last position 3 refers to words which mean "total number", for examples: "tất cả", "toàn bộ", "hết thảy", "tất thảy".

**The end elements** are divided into two positions (Diep Quang Ban, 2008) named respectively: the position of descriptive words (thực từ), so-called position-1 and the position of demonstrative pronouns (từ chỉ định), so-called position-2. Position-1 is then classified into 3 different types in accordance to its function to the nucleus.

**Table 7.** Types of Position-1 in the end elements

	Position-1	Examples
in term of word class	nouns	hương <i>hoa sữa</i>
	verbs	xe <i>đạp</i>
	cardinal numeral	phòng <i>hai mươi</i>
	pronouns	điện thoại (của) <i>tôi</i>
	nouns of time	Chuyến bay <i>trước</i>
in term of structure	a principal-accessory phrase (cụm từ chính phụ)	khu vực <i>khách V.I.P</i>
	a coordinate phrase (cụm từ đẳng lập)	chiếc xe <i>đằng trước và đằng sau</i>
	a S-V phrase (cụm từ chủ-vị)	quán kem <i>tôi ăn</i>
in term of way of linking	direct way (link directly to the nucleus)	đơn <i>đề nghị</i> khu vực <i>thi công</i>
	indirect way (link to the nucleus by connectors)	món quà <b>mà</b> tôi mua chiếc túi <b>mà</b> cô ấy được tặng

Some examples of Position-2 which refers to the position of demonstrative pronouns could be “này”, “kia”, “ấy”, “đó”, “nọ”, etc. (E.g. “Chiếc túi màu hồng *đó*”).

## 2.2. Some differences between English and Vietnamese noun phrase

First, in English, it is important for language users to follow the occurrence of a noun and its determiners. It means that a noun in singular form must go with a determiner. This, therefore, seems inadequate to say “I will not buy car” in English but still possible to say “tôi sẽ không mua xe” in Vietnamese. The difference in the functions of pronouns as a head of a noun phrase between two languages is also worthily concerned. Pronouns usually occurs without any kind of modification in the English language and pre-modification is virtually impossible for pronouns. However, the combination of pre-modification and pronouns has occurred frequently in Vietnamese. For examples, saying “*mấy anh mua hàng đi*” is accepted in Vietnamese, but it will be considered as grammatical errors if one says “*some he go shopping*”. In addition, the head in English noun phrases must be a noun or a pronoun, whereas the nucleus in Vietnamese can be a noun or a phrase called “ngữ danh từ”. This “ngữ danh từ” which may include a classifier noun + a noun, a verb, an adjective is a distinctive element in Vietnamese when comparing to English. The appearance of identifier within a noun phrase in English and Vietnamese is also different. While an English noun phrase mostly shows only one identifier (E.g. “a book” or “my book”, not “a my book”), many Vietnamese noun phrases may accept more than one identifier in the same word (E.g. “một cuốn sách của tôi”). In this case, the correct translation form this Vietnamese phrase into English must be “a book of mine”. Fourth, the front elements in Vietnamese noun phrases indicate quantity while the end elements do with the quality (E.g. “Một cô gái đẹp”). However, the pre-modification in English noun phrases may include words of quality (E.g. “A beautiful girl”). It shows that the way front elements in two languages occur within the phrase is different to each other. In English, it is possible to put an adjective phrase before the head noun, but that is ungrammatical in Vietnamese (E.g. It is impossible to say “Một đẹp cô gái” in Vietnamese). Apart from that, some other differences between the use of noun phrases in English and Vietnamese are shown in the table below:

Elements	English	Vietnamese
demonstratives	before the head noun ( <i>this</i> girl)	in the end of element + after the nucleus (cô gái <i>này</i> )
possesives	before the head noun (her dress, your house)	always begin with ‘của’ + after the head noun (chiếc váy của cô ấy, ngôi nhà của bạn)
noun modifier	before the head noun (the children books)	act as and end element (sách thiếu nhi)
ordinal numbers	before the head noun (the third person)	act as and end element (người thứ ba)

## 2.3. Teaching implication

The analysis of difference between English and Vietnamese approaches to NP could be useful for teachers of English in Vietnam when it comes to teach their students grammatical points involving NP. Many Vietnamese learners these days seem still confused to translate and English phrase into Vietnamese due to the differences in the word order (E.g. “một chiếc

váy mới” may be translated into “a dress new” instead of “a new dress”). Or they sometimes forget to put determiners when translating a Vietnamese phrase into English (E.g. “cô ấy sẽ mua chiếc ô” could be translated into “she will buy umbrella” instead of “she will buy an umbrella”). And it should not be neglected to mention many other possible mistakes that can cause students anxious to study NP are the order of adjectives, modifiers, possessives and ordinal numbers. Teachers, in this case, should ask students to pay attention to these negative transfers so that they can avoid making mistakes. For instance, the OSACOM (Opinion-Size-Age-Colour-Origin-Material) rule could be a suggestion to help students having troubles in putting adjectives in a correct order before a head noun to remember them easily.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Noun phrases in English and Vietnamese have some interesting thought-provoking differences that are really necessary to recognize. That is not only for implication in teaching - learning but also in translation. A careful study is very useful. This paper has mentioned some of many interesting differences between the two languages, but it can not be a thoughtful and informative enough writing about noun phrases.

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### MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ CỤM DANH TỪ TRONG TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT

**Tóm tắt:** Có thể nói cụm danh từ luôn đóng một vai trò rất quan trọng đối với bất kỳ ngôn ngữ nào bởi nó thường được xem như một thành phần cơ bản trong việc tạo nên một câu hoàn chỉnh và có nghĩa. Tuy vậy, hầu hết các ngôn ngữ cũng sẽ xuất hiện sự khác biệt nhất định trong việc sử dụng cụm danh từ bất kể chúng có thể mang nhiều đặc điểm tương đồng về cấu trúc câu. Trong quá trình dạy và học tiếng Anh, việc nắm được sự giống và khác nhau giữa cụm danh từ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt là vô cùng cần thiết nhằm giúp giảm thiểu việc mắc lỗi sai trong câu. Nghiên cứu này sẽ tiến hành khảo sát và so sánh về cấu trúc ngữ nghĩa-cú pháp giữa cụm danh từ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt, từ đó góp phần giúp người học và người dạy có thể xác định và giảm thiểu những lỗi sai thường gặp phải trong quá trình học tiếng Anh. Bài viết cũng đưa ra một số đề xuất ứng dụng vào công tác dạy học tiếng Anh dựa trên những vấn đề được thảo luận.

**Từ khoá:** Nghiên cứu, cụm danh từ tiếng Anh, dạy tiếng Anh, cụm danh từ tiếng Việt.