

Special issue: Different perspectives on proper noun modifiers¹

Edited by

TINE BREBAN
The University of Manchester

and

JULIA KOLKMANN
University of York

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1 Introduction

Proper nouns used as modifiers, e.g. *the Watergate scandal, a London theatre, the many Shakespeare biographies*, are a common feature of the English language, perhaps most strikingly visible in news headlines. Their usage increased substantially as part of a general rise in usage of premodifying nouns in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Biber & Clark 2002; Rosenbach 2007; Biber *et al.* 2009; Biber & Gray 2011, 2016). Though part of general changes to the English noun phrase (see also Günther 2019), they stand out from other modifiers because of the special referential status of proper nouns. Where adjectival and nominal modifiers typically add further description, denoting, amongst others, subtypes (*red grapes, cat food*), properties (*black dog, linen curtains*) or evaluations (*beautiful day*), proper nouns in their prototypical usage refer to and identify individual people, places, organisations, etc. Used as modifiers, proper nouns retain their identifying function. In *the Watergate scandal*, *Watergate* refers to the Watergate office complex in Washington, DC, and singles out one particular scandal, i.e. the scandal happening in the office complex named Watergate. The function of proper nouns can be contrasted to common nouns in premodifying position (e.g. *water bed, stone cottage*), which serve to classify or describe rather than single out the entity denoted by the noun phrase.

The apparent incongruence of their occurrence as modifiers sparked interest not only for English, but also for other Germanic languages. The first scholars to single them out as special were Anette Rosenbach and Maria Koptjevskaja-Tamm (Koptjevskaja-Tamm & Rosenbach 2005). Since then, there has emerged a small but growing body of studies on English (Rosenbach 2006, 2007, 2010; Breban 2018), Swedish (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2009, 2013) and German (Zifonun 2010a, 2010b; Schlücker 2013, 2018), which rather than fully explaining the phenomenon raise a variety of interesting questions and topics to explore. These questions pertain to different areas of linguistics and require different empirical data and methods to answer

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them. This special issue brings together linguists from a variety of backgrounds to offer different perspectives on proper noun modifiers and to take proper noun modifiers as an empirical starting point to explore questions in their diverse areas of expertise.

We start by introducing the main topics related to proper noun modifiers featuring in the literature to contextualise the questions researched in this issue (section 2). In section 3, we provide an overview of the individual articles, focusing on the different perspectives and methods they use and the larger questions they address. We conclude by drawing together the findings about English proper noun modifiers from the different articles (section 4).

We'd like to thank first and foremost all contributors to this special issue for sharing their work and their insights. We are very grateful to the contributors as well as external reviewers, who provided extensive and constructive feedback which not only helped the authors but also provided us as editors with new insights and potential connections between the articles. Finally, we thank Javier Pérez-Guerra and Elena Seoane, who gave us the opportunity to convene a workshop at BICLCE2017 in Vigo where some of the articles in this issue were first presented, and the editors of *English Language and Linguistics* for hosting this special issue.

2 State of the art

2.1 *Proper noun modifiers: a form–function puzzle*

The central focus of several studies (Rosenbach 2007, 2010; Schlücker 2013; Breban 2018) is the puzzle of how to account for proper noun modifiers in models of the noun phrase. Proper noun modifiers can have an identifying function. They then restrict the denotation of the noun phrase to a particular referent, e.g. *the London marathon* identifies one specific marathon. In theoretical models of the noun phrase, elements with an identifying function are typically found at the left end of the phrase (amongst many others Teyssier's (1968) identifying > qualifying > classifying). However, as noun modifiers, proper noun modifiers occur at the right end of the premodifier string, in the position associated with elements with a classifying function.

Rosenbach (2007, 2010) deals with this mismatch by analysing proper noun modifiers as a particular case of constructional gradience between determiner genitives, with which they share the identifying function, and typical noun modifiers, with which they share the syntactic position. Schlücker's (2013) analysis focuses on German, where proper noun and head noun form a compound noun (see section 2.2). Her main goal is to show that the modifying elements in such compounds are not restricted to classifying functions. Within Rijkhoff's (2002) functional model of the noun phrase, she argues instead that identifying proper noun modifiers have a localising or anchoring function similar to determiner genitives. Breban (2018) questions the functional equivalence between determiner genitives and identifying proper noun modifiers. Instead she argues that modifiers such as *London* in *the London marathon* are 'shorthand' for a longer description of the referent, 'the marathon that takes place in London', and it is the description that leads to restriction of the denotation. As descriptive (or qualifying)

elements their more rightward position in the noun phrase is not unexpected. A second set of proper noun modifiers, e.g. *Coltrane in a Coltrane fan*, have a different function and require a different analysis as complement rather than modifier: they always occur immediately to the left of the head noun and are thematically dependent on it (cf. synthetic modification).

In this issue, Rosenbach revisits the debate and defends her earlier analysis against the more recent proposals.

2.2 *Phrasal modification versus compounding*

The previous discussion already touched on the question about the morphosyntactic status of proper noun modifiers. For German and Swedish, this is not a question as proper noun modifiers are straightforwardly recognisable as part of compounds (Schlücker 2013 and Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2013 respectively). In English, by contrast, how to distinguish phrasal modification and compounding is a longstanding and vexed question (see Giegerich 2015 for a recent overview). Breban (2018) suggests a dual functionally motivated analysis with some proper noun modifiers being phrasal and other parts of compounds.

For most of the articles in this issue, the question is not a salient one that affects their argumentation. Alexiadou, for example, focuses solely on synthetic patterns, which she refers to as compounds. In other articles, the topic is touched on in passing, e.g. Rosenbach. Breban & De Smet show that the issue is not restricted to current English, but that the precursors of present-day proper noun modifiers are both clearly phrasal modifiers and likely compounds.

2.3 *Alternation of proper noun modifiers and determiner genitives*

Their relation to determiner genitives has been at the heart of the discussion surrounding proper noun modifiers. Rosenbach and Koptjevskaja-Tamm's seminal ideas were conceived against the background of their previous individual work on genitive and possessive constructions, and Rosenbach (2006, 2007, 2010) investigates proper noun modifiers as part of a wider research project on the grammatical variation and gradience between genitives and noun modifiers. Central to her argument is that determiner genitives and proper noun modifiers are semantically/functionally equivalent. This idea has been challenged: Breban (2018) argues that they both help identify the noun phrase referent but do this in different ways and are therefore functionally different. Schlücker (2018) argues that the two constructions are semantically different in that, even when they alternate, determiner genitives express relations within the 'genitive repertoire' and proper noun modifiers express relations from the 'noun modifier repertoire'.

In this issue, Breban, Kolkman & Payne also investigate the semantic relations expressed by determiner genitives and proper noun modifiers. But where Schlücker's argumentation was purely theoretical, they conduct an experiment in which

participants are asked to provide paraphrases for the two constructions in actually attested examples. In her contribution, Rosenbach responds to the challenges by Schlücker (2018) and especially Breban (2018), arguing that the very concept of semantic equivalence is not the same in semantic–pragmatic and functional analyses as in variationist studies.

2.4 *Languages in contrast*

From the start, it was noted that the incongruent use of proper nouns as modifiers was not limited to English but had counterparts in other Germanic languages. Most existing studies have a single language as their primary focus but draw on comparison with other Germanic languages and with findings of studies on these languages. Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2013) gives a detailed description of Swedish proper noun compounds but comments on similarities with and differences from English proper noun modifiers. Schlücker (2013) deals with German data but builds on Rosenbach's papers and draws comparisons with English. Papers highlight differences between the languages, including the morphosyntactic status of proper noun + noun, but also differences in the types of proper nouns attested. Most notably, English uses proper noun modifiers where German, for example, would use a prepositional construction or a derived adjective, e.g. *the Berlin theatre* vs *das Theater in Berlin* or *das Berliner Theater*.

Despite the comparison of different Germanic languages being a prominent feature throughout the literature, there are no systematic empirical contrastive studies. In this issue, Ström Herold & Levin set out to fill this gap using a new translation corpus LEGS (*Linnaeus University English–German–Swedish Corpus*). No studies so far have included discussion of the phenomenon beyond Germanic. Alexiadou, in this issue, builds a theoretical analysis of the status of proper nouns on the grammaticality of using them in synthetic compounds in English versus Greek.

2.5 *History of proper noun modifiers*

Rosenbach (2007, 2010) includes a diachronic corpus investigation of proper noun modifiers. She uses data from the British news section of the ARCHER corpus (1650–1999) to investigate whether the increase in proper noun modifiers in Late Modern English involved a semantic expansion of the types of proper nouns attested. She sought to provide support for the claim that where determiner genitives became possible with nouns lower on the animacy scale, noun modifiers at the same time gradually featured more animate types of nouns. The restriction to Late Modern English appears primarily motivated by knowledge about the history of the determiner genitive (see, e.g., Rosenbach 2002).

In this issue, Breban & De Smet are prompted by the specific restrictions imposed, including the exclusion of examples such as *York Minster* and *Christmas day*, which, as fixed expressions, do not alternate with determiner genitives, but which were used

well before 1650. They investigate the presence of and changes to proper noun modifiers across the entire history of English. Vartiainen is the first to investigate the development of a related construction, (proper) nouns modifying adjectives, e.g. *ice-cold*, *baby-soft*, *Einstein-smart*.

2.6 Proper noun modifiers and genre

Koptjevskaja-Tamm & Rosenbach (2005) identified news as a genre in which proper noun modifiers were particularly prolific, and Rosenbach (2007) subsequently focused her corpus investigation on this genre. Breban (2018) specified that news headlines in particular often made use of proper noun modifiers because of their condensed form, without prepositions or other additional marking. The association of proper noun modifiers and written news text matches up with the more general connection between noun modifiers and written genres (Biber & Gray 2011, 2016). Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2013) and Breban (2018) also draw attention to ad hoc proper noun modifiers in informal, everyday speech, e.g. university students talking about *Masja courses* to denote ‘courses taught by Maria Koptjevskaja-Tamm’.

In this issue, Ström Herold & Levin contribute the corpus-based study of a different written genre, non-fiction, and put forward that different genres may favour proper noun modifiers denoting different types of entities, i.e. organisations in non-fiction versus places in news texts. Breban & De Smet discuss to what extent the focus on formal written genres in the historical study of proper noun modifiers affected recognition of their presence in much earlier stages of English.

3 Different perspectives represented in this issue

3.1 Alternation of proper noun modifiers and genitives: variationist and semantic–pragmatic perspectives

Rosenbach’s article ‘On the (non-)equivalence of constructions with determiner genitives and noun modifiers in English’ is situated in a variationist tradition. Her aim is to unpack the differing interpretations of equivalence in theoretical and variationist linguistics. She defines variationist equivalence as involving descriptive meaning (Cruse 2000) in choice contexts at usage level rather than at system level and discusses what this entails in the case of determiner genitives and (proper) noun modifiers. She argues against criticism by Breban (2018), Schlücker (2018) and Breban, Kolkmann & Payne (this issue), while underlining how semantic–pragmatic and variationist approaches can benefit from one another.

In their article ‘The impact of semantic relations on grammatical variation: An experimental study of proper noun modifiers and determiner genitives’, Breban, Kolkmann & Payne report on an experimental investigation into the semantic relations associated with the determiner genitive and proper noun modifier constructions. They use a bottom-up approach deriving semantic relations from paraphrases given by

the participants. Their main conclusion is that none of the relations distinguished are categorically associated with one of the constructions, but that different relations are probabilistically associated with the two constructions. They argue that, for their data, semantic relations are more instructive than animacy-based distinctions, but warn against relying solely on researchers' intuitions when assigning semantic relations to examples.

3.2 *Languages in contrast: perspectives from translation and theory*

'*The Obama presidency, the Macintosh keyboard and the Norway fiasco: English proper noun modifiers and their German and Swedish correspondences*' brings in expertise from translation studies. Ström Herold & Levin conduct the first large systematic corpus study assessing the differences and similarities between English, German and Swedish proper noun modifiers. They use a new parallel corpus, LEGS. A main advantage of the corpus is that it contains three versions (original and two translations) of every example. The texts in the corpus are all popular non-fiction texts, diversifying the range of genres investigated. They find that proper noun modifiers are more frequent in English originals than in translations, and in English compared to German and Swedish both in originals and in translations. German and Swedish employ more explicit strategies such as prepositional phrases. The fact that the less explicit and more condensed proper noun modifier construction is used when translating more explicit constructions into English shows that translation direction and type of structure can trump general observations that translations favour explication over implication. Where the literature so far has focused on semantic types of proper nouns, Ström Herold & Levin draw attention to the prominence of acronymic proper nouns in their corpus.

Alexiadou contrasts English (and other Germanic languages) with Greek. Her article 'Proper name compounds: A comparative perspective' is a theoretical exploration of the syntactic status of compounds and proper nouns. Her starting point is the observation that where English proper nouns occur in deverbal synthetic root compounds (e.g. *Kerry supporter, Luther year*), Greek does not allow this, despite the grammaticality of such compounds with common nouns. Instead a genitival construction has to be used. Within a Distributional Morphology framework, Alexiadou argues that proper names in English are referential (have 'rigid designation') in the absence of an explicit determiner through D-n merger, in contrast to Greek where an explicit determiner is obligatory to achieve this. Combined with the proposal that compounding involves incorporation in Greek but phrasal movement in English, this explains the different behaviours of proper nouns and common nouns in Greek compounds but not in English.

3.3 *Historical change: quantitative and qualitative perspectives*

Breban & De Smet set out to find the earliest proper noun modifiers in their article 'How do new grammatical patterns emerge? The origins and development of the English proper

noun modifier construction'. They use a mix of quantitative and qualitative analyses and visualisations to identify precursor constructions and possible paths of development. They conclude that new grammatical patterns develop gradually, combining multiple existing patterns and exploiting ambiguities and areas of overlap. They advocate a data-driven approach combining macro and micro analysis and warn against imposing generalisations based on theorising on historical change.

In the final article in this issue, 'From *twig-skinny* to *Kate Moss skinny*: Expressing degree with common and proper nouns', Vartiainen proposes a construction grammar analysis for (proper) nouns added to adjectives for intensification conveying very high degree. He argues that it is the construction that coerces the degree meaning of the (proper) noun, but also places pragmatic restrictions on the noun in particular which has to be relevant to the property and, in the case of the proper noun, a paragon. Vartiainen thus provides support for the inclusion of pragmatic information as part of constructional specification (cf. Cappelle 2017). Vartiainen seeks to provide evidence for entrenchment of the construction by looking at increases in token and type frequency and hapax legomena in historical data from the COHA corpus. The occurrence of proper nouns appears to be facilitated by the introduction of human common nouns in the construction. Vartiainen links the developments with changes in word formation patterns in the English noun phrase in general.

4 Perspectives on proper noun modifiers

This special issue brings together new theoretical and empirical studies on proper noun modifiers, showcasing new data, a variety of methods and highlighting how a single phenomenon sparks different but related interests in different subfields. What is noteworthy in one field might not be deemed special or interesting in another, or findings might seem contradictory when talking at cross-purposes. Rosenbach's contribution to this issue deals with such a case, where interpretations of key concepts differ in unobvious but significant ways across different subdisciplines. This special issue was an opportunity to create dialogue beyond subdisciplines, theories and methods. We want to end this introductory article by pointing out some connections and parallel conclusions across the different contributions.

Rosenbach makes a case for cross-fertilisation between variationist and other approaches. Theoretical approaches can help define and operationalise the scope of alternations, as illustrated by Breban, Kolkman & Payne for the role and operationalisation of semantic relations in the genitive alternation. Translation studies such as Ström Herold & Levin's provide an insight into possible alternation as perceived by highly skilled language users. It is interesting to note that, in both Ström Herold & Levin's translation research and Breban, Kolkman & Payne's experimental study, unexpected findings, including non-proper noun modifier constructions that were translated as proper noun modifiers in English (Ström Herold & Levin) and incongruent semantic interpretations (Breban, Kolkman & Payne), provide keen insights into the delimitation of different variants. It is suggested that the relation

between proper noun modifiers and determiner genitives is motivated and complicated by the fact that proper noun modifiers appear to have developed out of Old English (morphologically marked) genitive expressions (Breban & De Smet). They are thus historically a part of the different genitival constructions that emerged after the reduction of nominal inflections, providing further support for their inclusion in (historical) variationist studies. The analysis of English proper noun modifiers as referential items, central to Rosenbach's variationist equivalence proposal (2007, this issue), is also an important part of the theoretical analysis of Greek and English proper nouns in Alexiadou.

The two diachronic articles both indicate a historical link with Old English compounds. However, whereas Breban & De Smet propose a direct link between Old English compounds with proper nouns and the present-day English proper noun modifier construction, Vartiainen shows that degree compounds with proper nouns are a later development. The occurrence of proper nouns in the construction is a twentieth-century phenomenon and mainly involves proper nouns denoting persons. Plausible sources for the occurrence are the expansion of types of common nouns to those referring to humans, e.g. *baby-soft*, as well as the occurrence of human proper nouns modifying nouns. Proper nouns modifying adjectives could be a further 'syntactic expansion' (Himmelmann 2004) of the proper noun modifier construction. Breban & De Smet include the distinction between onomastic and non-onomastic noun phrases as a variable in their diachronic study. The source constructions of the proper noun modifier constructions are argued to be strongly onomastic. Breban, Kolkmann & Payne's experiment shows a strong association of the proper noun modifier construction and a 'name relation', e.g. N is named PN or N is named after PN. This can be taken as evidence of persistence (Hopper 1991) of the source constructions in the present-day English construction.

Finally, several articles touch on the question of proper noun modifiers and genre. Breban & De Smet do not restrict their historical data to a particular genre and find that in early Modern English certain novel types of proper noun modifiers are found in less formal written texts, such as diaries and private letters. Ström Herold & Levin find that proper noun modifiers denoting organisations outnumber those denoting place in their popular non-fiction texts. A systematic investigation of different genres and a detailed investigation of proper noun modifiers in 'headlines' are still outstanding. Another open question (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2013; Rosenbach this issue; Breban, Kolkmann & Payne this issue) concerns the role played by the discourse status of the referent in the choice between determiner genitive and proper noun modifier. It is suggested that where noun phrases with determiner genitives often introduce new referents, noun phrases with proper noun modifiers refer to already activated referents. These questions offer opportunities for future perspectives on proper noun modifiers.

Guest editors' addresses:

Department of Linguistics and English Language
The University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
United Kingdom
tine.breban@manchester.ac.uk

Department of Language and Linguistic Science
University of York
York YO10 5DD
United Kingdom
julia.kolkmann@york.ac.uk

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