Nouns, Determinatives, and NPs

Plan for the next part of the course:

- Nouns and their definition
- The category of Determinatives
- The Determiner function
- The DP Hypothesis and why it’s a mistake
- Prenominal attributive modifiers
- Pronouns, and why they are really nouns
- Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude: Singular *they*
‘I got through 12 years of state funded schooling with the sum total of my grammatical knowledge being — Nouns are thing words, verbs are doing words, and adjectives are describing words. I suspect we never covered adverbs.’

John Wilkins, on his blog
Evolving Thoughts (14 June 2008)
Defining nouns: history without evolution

‘We declared war on terror. We declared war on terror – it’s not even a noun, so, good luck. After we defeat it, I’m sure we’ll take on that bastard ennui.’

Jon Stewart, in a graduation address at the College of William and Mary
Defining nouns: history without evolution

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‘I think – uh – the con– th... the phrase “the war on terror” – uh – as... as if there could be a war on an adjective, I mean it’s – it’s just – or an adverb – it doesn’t really work.’

Stefan Halper, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs in New York, interviewed on radio WHYY
Defining nouns: history without evolution

Where did the ‘thing-word’ caricature come from?

- Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762): A noun is ‘the name of any thing conceived to subsist, or of which we have any notion’

- Murray, *English Grammar* (1795): A noun ‘is the name of any thing that exists, or of which we have any notion’

- Curme, *English Grammar* (1925): ‘A noun . . . is the name of a living being or lifeless thing’


250 years of saying the same old same old!
Nouns: they don’t all denote things

fire: process of combustion (rapid oxidation)
absence: not being there
emptiness: nothing being there
failure: not managing to
lack: failing to be provided when needed
method: how (by what means) something is done
assistance: being there with supportive actions
Nouns: they don’t all denote things

*fire*: process of combustion (rapid oxidation)
*absence*: not being there
*emptiness*: nothing being there
*failure*: not managing to
*lack*: failing to be provided when needed
*method*: how (by what means) something is done
*assistance*: being there with supportive actions

We don’t get our definition of ‘Noun’ from metaphysics; we get our metaphysics from the use of our nouns.
Nouns: what they do have in common

- Four inflectional forms: singular and plural plain case × singular and plural genitive case
- Serve as heads of NPs with functions like Subject, Object, Predicative Complement, Complement of Preposition
- Preceded by determinatives like *the* or *a(n)*
- Modified by (preceeding) adjectives like *big*
- Modified by (following) relative clause modifiers like *who I didn’t recognize*
Nouns: an irregular paradigm

Inflectional forms of *child*, a highly irregular lexeme with four distinct phonological forms in its paradigm:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PLAIN</th>
<th>GENITIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SINGULAR</td>
<td><em>child</em></td>
<td><em>child’s</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL</td>
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Phonologically, regular nouns are only half as complex:

Inflectional forms of *dog*

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SINGULAR</td>
<td>/dag/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>/dagz/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Determinatives as a distinct category

The ‘qualifies a noun’ definition of Adjective leads all dictionaries to include among the adjectives:

(i) both the articles (\textit{the}, \textit{a(n)})

(ii) both demonstratives (\textit{this}, \textit{that})

(iii) all quantifiers (\textit{all}, \textit{some}, \textit{most}, \textit{several}, \ldots)

(iv) all numerals (\textit{one}, \textit{two}, \ldots, \textit{243}, \ldots)

(v) the dependent genitive forms of pronouns (\textit{my}, \textit{your}, \ldots)

Treating these as Adjectives makes a complete hash of the syntactic properties of that category.
Determinatives as a distinct category

The proposal defended here (and in CGEL):

- Determinative is a **category** of words (like Noun or Preposition), distinct (but not disjoint) from Adjective, containing about 35 basic items plus all the numerals.

- **Determiner** is a **function** (like Subject or Head).

- Determinatives often (but not always) serve as Determiner.

- The Determiner function is often (but not always) filled by a Determinative.

- **Genitive NPs** can also serve in Determiner function.
Determinatives as a distinct category

_A Grammar of Spoken English_ (Harold Palmer and F. G. Blandford, 1939) cites some criteria for distinguishing adjectives from a class of determinatives (Fr. _adjectifs déterminatifs_) from the class of adjectives:

(a) Determinatives cannot be used predicatively.

\[
\text{Alert residents objected. } \sim \quad \text{The residents were alert.} \\
\text{All residents objected. } \not\sim \quad *\text{The residents were all.}
\]
Determinatives as a distinct category

(b) Determinatives only rarely express grade (comparison).

*Those who succeeded were more motivated than the others.*

*Those who succeeded were more most than the others.*
Determinatives as a distinct category

(b) Determinatives only rarely express grade (comparison).

*Those who succeeded were more motivated than the others.*

(c) Determinatives only rarely take modifiers, and in particular do not take intensifying modifiers.

*[Very alert] residents objected.*

*[Very all] residents objected.*
Determinatives as a distinct category

Four considerably more reliable criteria also distinguish Adjectives from Determinatives:

(d) Determinatives do not stack, or even (for the most part) co-occur in NP structure.

Responsible, alert, intelligent residents helped out.

*These, the, all residents helped out.
Determinatives as a distinct category

(e) Adding a Determinative can make a singular count noun into a grammatical NP but adding an adjective cannot:

\[ I \text{ heard } [\text{NP } \underline{\text{this guy}}] \text{ was asking about me.} \]

*\[ I \text{ heard } [\text{NP } \underline{\text{thin guy}}] \text{ was asking about me.} \]
Determinatives as a distinct category

(f) Most Determinatives occur in the **fused determiner-head** construction, where a Determinative serves as Determiner and Head simultaneously and thus constitutes a whole NP. No adjective does this.

\[
I'd\ like\ to\ hear\ more\ about\ [\text{NP}\ \text{this}].
\]

\[
*I'd\ like\ to\ hear\ more\ about\ [\text{NP}\ \text{thin}].
\]
Most Determinatives occur with a following *of*-phrase in the **partitive** construction, which no adjective can do.

\[
\begin{align*}
[\text{NP } \text{Some of the children}] & \text{ began to cry.} \\
*[\text{NP } \text{Small of the children}] & \text{ began to cry.}
\end{align*}
\]

*Take* \([\text{NP } \text{all of the samples}]\) that you like.

*Take* \([\text{NP } \text{pretty of the samples}]\) that you like.
Determinatives as a distinct category

In addition (though this is just a curiosity, and not very important), there is a phonological condition sufficient to guarantee non-adjectivehood:

(h) Adjectives can never begin with phonological /ð/, but determinatives can, and some do (*that*, *the*, *this*).

As a result of a historical accident, initial /ð/ is never found in Nouns, Verbs, or Adjectives.