
UNIT 37 THE NOUN PHRASE-3: POST-MODIFICATION: THE PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE

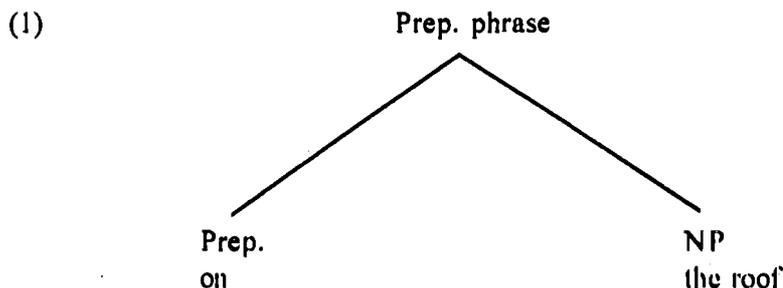
Structure

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37.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 36 you studied one important type of post-modification of Noun Phrases, namely by relative clauses. In this unit we shall study another type of post-modification of Noun Phrases, namely by prepositional phrases.

A prepositional phrase is a structure of the type 'preposition + NP', where the preposition is the head of the phrase (e.g. **on the roof**, **in the cupboard**, **at the party**). We may represent the structure of a prepositional phrase diagrammatically as in (1).



Prepositional phrases serve a variety of functions in English. They can be complements to verbs (**I agree with you. You can depend on me.**), complements to adjectives (**I am sorry for you. She is anxious about her mother.**), adjuncts (**I met her at a party. The train left at 10 p.m.**), or postmodifiers of noun phrases (**the man with the red beard, a matter of honour**). Postmodification of a noun by a prepositional phrase is far more common than by other structures.

In Section 37.2 we shall show you that the full range of prepositional phrases can appear in the post-modifying function. In Section 37.3 we shall examine what relationship there is between the preposition in the prepositional phrase and the head of the noun phrase. In 37.4 we shall see how the post-modifying prepositional phrase is interpreted in respect of the noun phrase it modifies. In Section 37.5 we shall analyse some complex structures involving more than one post-modifying phrase.

37.2 THE RANGE OF PREPOSITIONAL-PHRASE MODIFICATION

Prepositions may be broadly grouped into two classes: simple prepositions (*in, on, at, by, with, for, from...*) and complex prepositions (*away from, out of, owing to, due to, in case of, by means of*). Prepositional phrases with either of these can occur as postmodifiers of noun phrases. Let us illustrate this with a few specimen cases:

2) a) Prepositional phrases with a simple preposition:

in	:	the lion in the cage
into	:	a descent into the volcano
on	:	the cottage on the hill
at	:	the meeting at the university an adventure at dawn
for	:	a gift for Mary
above	:	a roof above us
below	:	the valleys below us
behind	:	the car behind us
before	:	the building before you

b) Prepositional phrases with complex prepositions:

measures *in view of* the emergency
action *in the light of* these developments
delays *owing to* unforeseen circumstances
treatment *by means of* counselling
a note *by way of* explanation
success *by dint of* hard work
a home *away from* home
progress *in spite of* illiteracy

(The complex prepositions in these examples have been italicized. In the first example, for instance, the complex preposition is *in view of*. This has its own complement, **the emergency**. The entire prepositional phrase, **in view of the emergency**, is a postmodifier of **measures**, which is the head of the NP: **measures in view of the emergency**.)

'Participial' prepositions (e.g. **pending**, concerning, regarding....) are, perhaps, best regarded as 'simple' prepositions. As can be seen from the examples below, they can also occur in post-modifier groups.

3) a delay **pending** further inquiry

the report **concerning** yesterday's incidents

the difficulty **regarding** this proposal

The 'simple' prepositions have both a 'local' and a 'figurative' or metaphorical meaning. The local meanings express relations in space and time. Thus movement towards an object is expressed by **to** (**He went to the station**); movement away from an object by **from** (**He returned from the office**); position (in space or time) by **at** (**My house is at the intersection of 7th Main and 10th Cross; the show begins at 6 p.m.**); position in terms of surface is expressed by **on** (**the tower on the hill**), **above** (**the sky above us**), **below** (**the valley below us**); **on, above, below** express vertical distinctions; horizontally, we have **before, behind, next to,...** in respect of an object. In respect of a three-dimensional object a further relation of **in, into** can be recognized.

These local meanings can be distinguished from non-local, often figurative or metaphorical meanings. The difference can be seen in paired examples involving the two meanings.

- 4) a) The cheetah is hiding in that cave.
b) I am in a fix.
a) The cat is on the roof.
b) The house is on fire
a) You can go through the tunnel.
b) I have gone through this book.
a) I was at her place yesterday.
b) He was at a loss for words.
a) The cat fell into the pond.
b) The man jumped into the fray.

The (a) sentences illustrate the local meanings; (b) sentences the figurative meanings. This distinction — between local meanings and figurative meanings --- carries over to prepositional phrases (PPs) used as postmodifiers of nouns. Here are some examples with PPs used as postmodifiers of noun phrases.

- 5) a) the dinner at the Taj
b) the point at issue
a) a gift for Mary
b) a man for all seasons
a) the house on the hill
b) a house on fire
a) the cat in the basket
a) a man in a hurry
b) the cobwebs under the roof
c) an officer under suspension

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Identify the prepositional phrases in the following passage and indicate the function of each.
- 1) PINNIPEDS — the “fin-footed” seals, sea lions and walruses --- all evolved from a common ancestor that returned to the water from the land.
 - 2) Their skeletons, particularly the bones of the flippers, show that they are much more similar to each other than to any terrestrial animal, implying a unique origin for the entire group.
 - 3) This conclusion will come as no surprise to molecular phylogenists, who study evolutionary relationships by examining the structure of molecules.
 - 4) As long ago as 1969, Vince Sarich, of the University of California at Berkeley, said that, on the basis of their protein structure, all pinnipeds had a single aquatic ancestor.
 - 5) This conclusion will also not surprise anyone who simply glances at a seal, a sea lion and a walrus; they do indeed look very similar.
 - 6) However, biologists see things differently.
 - 7) To them, the manifest similarities among the three main groups of pinnipeds are the result of convergent evolution.

English has a number of nouns, verbs and adjectives which are associated with fixed prepositions. The 'verb + preposition', 'adjective + preposition' or 'noun + preposition' in such cases has to be learnt as **one unit**. Often related words take different prepositions depending on how the word is used, e.g. as noun or adjective (**confidence in, confident of; ambitious of, ambition for; affection for, affectionate to....**).

Thus there are two cases where the choice of a preposition is dependent on a noun — in idiomatic expressions like **in a hurry, on the house, at issue....** and in expression like **compliance with, capacity for, adherence to...** In all other cases the choice of the preposition depends on the intrinsic meaning of the preposition and is not controlled by either the head noun or the noun in its own complement.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Frame suitable sentences in which the following nouns are followed by suitable prepositional phrases.

apology, compensation, comparison, antidote, incentive, distrust, proof, limit, objection, digression, exemption, assurance, result, key, attention, aptitude, candidate, opposition, sequel, reputation, confidence, allowance, charge, exception, need, concession, match, disgrace, fitness, alternative.

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37.4 THE INTERPRETATION OF POST-MODIFYING PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

In 36.4.5 it was pointed out that in phrases like **the man in the garden**, the PP may be viewed as the reduced form of a fuller structure, a relative clause (**the man who is in the garden**). Where there is no necessary or inherent connection between the head NP and the PP, this sort of analysis is usually possible (**the book on the table, the cottage on the hill, the lamp post at the corner**, etc.). The expanded structure usually has the verb **be** (often in the present tense: *is, am, are*).

Other cases admit of an interpretation with **have** as the verb in the expanded structure: **the man with the scar = the man who has a scar**. Similarly with: **the girl with the pigtail, a room with Venetian blinds, the sailor with bow-legs**, etc. In these cases there is a more intimate connection between the two NPs (the head noun of the whole phrase and the noun in the PP). Notice also that the preposition is **with**.

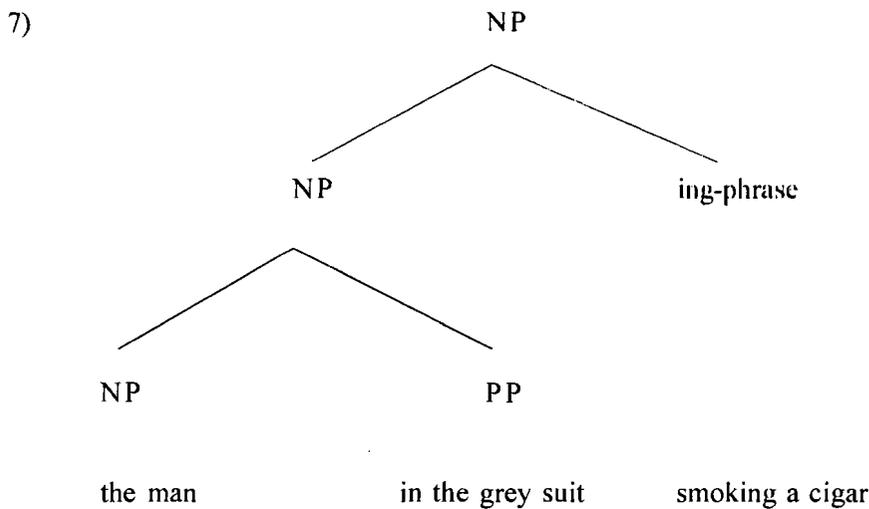
Other examples may be interpreted as equivalent to a sentence with **be**: **democracy as a way of life (=democracy is a way of life)**. The phrase is also interpretable with **regard** as the verb: **democracy regarded as a way of life**. Similarly with: **education as an instrument of social change, the President as the First Citizen, Parliament as a forum of the people, Peace as an interlude in War**.

37.5 MULTIPLE MODIFICATION

Consider (6)

6) *The man in the grey suit smoking a cigar* is my uncle.

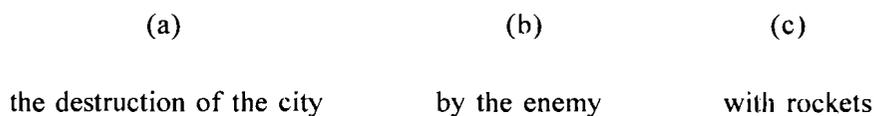
The italicized structure is a multiply modified (= modified more than once) NP functioning as the subject of the sentence. The prepositional phrase (**in the grey suit**) immediately modifies **the man**; the participial phrase (**smoking a cigar**) modifies **the man in the grey suit**. We can represent the structure as in (7):



You see, then, that where there is multiple modification, there is a hierarchy among these modifiers.

A similar analysis applies, for example, to

8) the destruction of the city by the enemy with rockets.



In these examples the modifiers were progressively 'higher' in rank: In (8) above (b) modifies 'head NP + (a)'; (c) modifies 'head NP + (a+b)'.

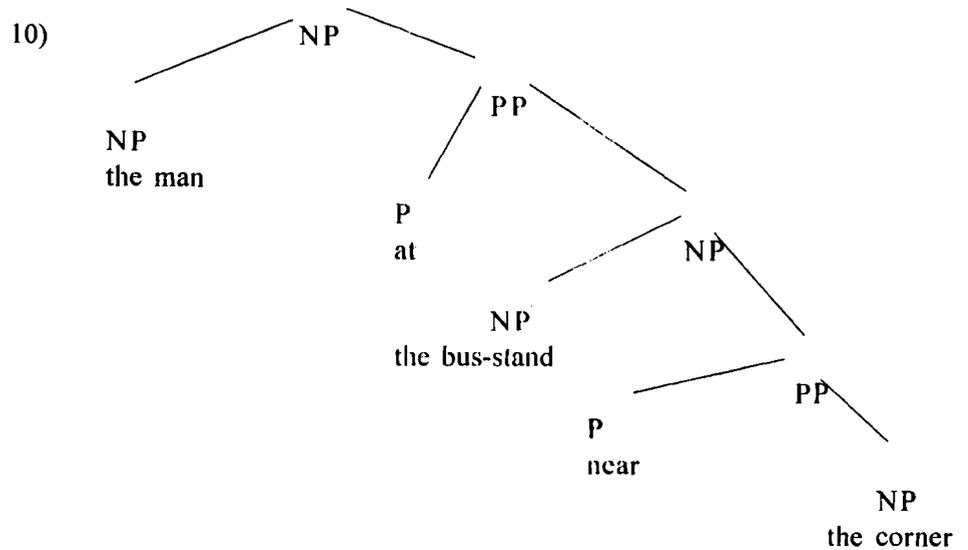
But it is also possible to have phrases where the modifiers are in a descending order.

9) The man at the bus-stand near the corner.

The meaning of this phrase is 'the man is at the bus-stand which is near the corner'. So the phrase *near the corner* modifies only the bus-stand. Schematically this may be shown as in (10).

Here is a longer phrase of the same type: **the hotel near the bus-stand at the intersection of 11th Main and 7th Cross in Jayanagar Extension**.

Needless to say, different types of structures might occur in the postmodifier position under multiple modification; in particular, it is quite common to find prepositional phrases and relative clauses (together).



Example:

- 11) the girl in the front row whose father you met yesterday

In principle there is no limit to the number of modifiers, but practical considerations (of clarity, ease of understanding) impose a restriction. Also, unless care is exercised there can be ambiguity, as in:

- 12) the boy with the girl whose father is a famous dentist. (is it the boy's or the girl's father?)

or unintended humour:

- 13) the girl in the swim-suit that was on display at Jenson's.

Check Your Progress 4

In the following passages identify cases of multiple modification. Give the structure in each case.

- 1) There is no built-in progress in the humanist culture. There are changes, but not progress, no increase of agreement. Ask yourself, was Van Eyek a worse painter than Cezanne? The answer is, he was different. Sometimes in the history of art, particularly in the visual arts, one can identify periods of what can, without absurdity, be called technical progress. But there is nothing ultimately cumulative about this passage through time.

(C.P. Snow. *Public Affairs*, Macmillan, 1971, p.95)

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- 2) A devout expression had come into the face of the young man in plus fours who sat with the Oldest Member on the terrace overlooking the ninth green.

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- 3) Among the names on the list of candidates up for election at the Drones Club, there appeared, proposed by R.F. Little and seconded by an influential crumpet, that of LITTLE, ALGERNON AUBREY.

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37.6 LET US SUM UP

Prepositional phrases can be complements of verbs and adjectives; they can be adjuncts. They can also be postmodifiers of Noun Phrases. Practically all the prepositions, both simple and complex, can be used in this function. As in other cases, the preposition may have a 'local' or a 'figurative meaning'.

The preposition in a prep.phrase (PP) can have a distinct meaning of its own and be independent of both the head noun preceding it and the noun in its complement. This is so where the preposition is used in its local meaning. In other cases the preposition may be controlled by either the noun in its complement or the preceding head noun. Numerous nouns, verbs and adjectives are followed by specific prepositions only.

The prepositional phrase modifying an NP has often an equivalent in the form of a relative clause or a sentence usually with **be** or **have**. But in many cases no such expansion is possible.

Noun phrases often show multiple post-modification — there may be more than one PP or clause. In such cases there will be a hierarchical structure, either ascending or descending.

37.7 ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- | 1) Prepositional Phrase | Function |
|--|--|
| 1) form a | common ancestor |
| that... land | complement to the verb evolved |
| to the water | adjunct to the verb returned |
| from the land | adjunct to the verb returned |
| (Note: 'Complements' complete the meanings of the verbs with which they occur. 'Adjuncts' are adverbial expressions, usually optional) | |
| 2) of the flippers | post-modifier of the NP the bones |
| to each other | complement to the adjective similar |
| to any terrestrial animal | complement to the adjective similar |
| for the entire group | adjunct modifies the non-finite VP implying a unique origin |
| 3) to molecular phylogenists | complement to the noun surprise |
| by examining...molecules | adjunct the verb study |
| of molecules | post-modifier of the NP the structure |
| 4) of the University...at Berkeley | postmodifier of the NP Vince Sarich |
| of California | postmodifier of the NP the University |
| at Berkeley | postmodifier of the NP the University of California |
| on the basis of their protein structure | adjunct to the verb said |
| of their protein structure | complement to the NP the basis |
| 5) at a seal....walrus | complement to the verb glance |
| 6) To them | modifies the sentence |

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>7) among the three main groups
of pinnipeds
of pinnipeds
of convergent evolution</p> <p>8) in the water
to a shared problem
in the water
of a shared ancestry</p> | <p>postmodifier of the NP the manifest similarities.
postmodifier of the NP
the three main groups
postmodifier of the NP the result
adjunct to the verb live
postmodifier of the NP solutions
postmodifier of the NP life
postmodifier of the NP echoes</p> |
|--|---|
- 2) (Figures in brackets refer to blanks in the passage.)
(1) of (2) at (3) of (4) of (5) from (6) of (7) by (8) out of (9) of (10)
at (11) with (12) for (13) among (14) of (15) by (16) on (17) in
(18) of (19) under (20) of (21) at

Check Your Progress 2

We make no *apology for* this detailed presentation.

You can claim *compensation for* damages.

There is no *comparison between* them.

There is no *antidote to* this poison.

A good word acts as an *incentive to* better performance.

I have an inborn *distrust of* friendly strangers.

The *proof of* the pudding is in the eating.

There are no *limits to* development.

I have some *objections to* your proposal.

This is a long *digression from* the main point.

On certain investments you can claim *exemption from* income tax.

We are awaiting *the result of* this experiment.

Hard work is *the key to* success.

Pay no *attention to* him.

He has an *aptitude for* Maths.

We have put up our *candidate for* the office of Joint Secretary.

He will brook no *opposition to* his plans.

What is the *sequel to* this story?

He has a *reputation for* idleness.

The shareholders expressed their *confidence in* their directors.

You have to make *allowance for* shortages.

What is the *charge against* him?

There is an *exception to* every rule.

We have begun to realize the *need to* develop self-sufficiency in defence equipment.

Government has announced new *concessions to* the handicapped.

P.T. Usha is *no match for* Evelyn Ashford.

You are a *disgrace to* your parents.

The *fitness of* the vehicle for high altitude use has not been tested.

There is no *alternative to* self-sufficiency.

