

The textlinguistic dimension of corpus linguistics

The support function of English general nouns and its theoretical implications

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Corpus research can provide important insights into different areas of language description. The present paper takes a textlinguistic approach to the description of English and puts into perspective the ‘support function’ of general nouns such as *man*, *move* and *thing*. The support function captures various ways in which general nouns are used to present information appropriately in a given context. Specifically, three aspects of the support function are discussed: ‘giving emphasis’, ‘adding information in passing’ and ‘providing an introduction’. From a more theoretical point of view, the present paper argues for an integration of the pattern grammar approach with a textlinguistic perspective.

Keywords: support function, general nouns, context, textual functions, pattern

1. Introduction

A corpus linguistic approach to the description of language stresses the context dependency of words in naturally occurring language. It has become obvious that there are units of meaning larger than a single word form and that lexis and grammar cannot be separated. But we need to go a step further. There is a dimension to corpus linguistics which has not received enough attention so far: the textlinguistic dimension. To account for the complex ways in which meaning is created, textual relations between linguistic items play an important role. The factors that contribute to the meanings of words go beyond the phrasal

context, and the functions that words tend to fulfil in texts can be regarded as part of their meaning. For some words this seems to be more obvious than for others. The pronoun *he*, for instance, is typically characterised by its potential to function as a cohesive device, but it is not only the traditional ‘function words’ that fulfil textual functions. Textual behaviour can be an important feature for ‘lexical words’, too. In the present article I will illustrate this by looking at the support function of general nouns.

2. General nouns

The expression ‘general noun’ can be found in uses where no theoretical definition is implied, but it is also used in contexts that draw on Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) approach. Halliday and Hasan (1976:274) describe general nouns as “a small set of nouns having generalized reference within the major noun classes, those such as ‘human noun’, ‘place noun’, ‘fact noun’ and the like.” They give the following examples:

people, person, man, woman, child, boy, girl [human]
 creature [non-human animate]
 thing, object [inanimate concrete count]
 stuff [inanimate concrete mass]
 business, affair, matter [inanimate abstract]
 move [action]
 place [place]
 question, idea [fact]

(Halliday & Hasan 1976:274)

For Halliday and Hasan (1976:274) a general noun is “a borderline case between a lexical item [...] and a grammatical item”. Therefore such a noun can create a special kind of cohesion, which Halliday and Hasan (1976:279) illustrate with the following – by now famous – example:

I turned to the ascent of the peak.

}	(1) The ascent (2) The climb (3) The task (4) The thing (5) It	}	is perfectly easy.
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(Halliday & Hasan 1976:279)

Here we have a continuum of cohesive elements. Moving from top to bottom of this scale the expression becomes more general, and the general noun *thing* comes just before the pronoun *it*. Thus general nouns are compared to pronouns: in both cases “interpretation is possible only by reference to something that has gone before” (Halliday & Hasan 1976: 275). Halliday and Hasan (1976) raise an interesting point when they stress the functional interpretation of items which are typically described from a lexical point of view. General nouns have also attracted the interest of other researchers and this class overlaps to some extent with subcategories of nouns such as ‘anaphoric nouns’ (Francis 1986) or ‘shell nouns’ (Schmid 2000), for instance (for an overview see Mahlberg 2000).

The definition of general nouns that is used in this article derives from the analysis of natural language data. It captures the notion of ‘general meaning’ by considering the frequency of these nouns and their textual behaviour (cf. Mahlberg in preparation):

general nouns are nouns which are relatively¹ frequent and which fulfil several textual functions.

Within the scope of this article I cannot go into details about a description of general nouns, but I will focus on one of their textual functions. Textual functions are understood here as these functions of a word which connect it with its context and contribute to the creation of a text, i.e. a unit of communication. We can identify various kinds of textual functions and one word may fulfil several of them at a time. The cohesive function is one example of the textual functions that general nouns can fulfil, though a corpus linguistic approach opens a new view towards the concept that Halliday and Hasan (1976) suggest (cf. Mahlberg 2000).² The support function, which is the focus of interest of this article, is another important factor in the description of general nouns. As a feature of these nouns the support function illustrates how functional characteristics of words can be integrated into a description of their meaning.

3. The support function

The relationship between meaning and context is not only crucial for general nouns, it is one of the central issues in corpus linguistics. Its theoretical basis can be seen in Firth’s contextual theory of meaning, as is argued by Tognini-Bonelli (2001: 157f.), for instance. For Firth (1957: 19) all statements of mean-

ing are statements of contextual relations. Linguistic items have to be seen both in their linguistic and their situational context. In this way language can be seen as action (cf. Tognini-Bonelli 2001:4) and we can define meaning as use (cf. Stubbs 2001:20). Thus meaning and function are not separable. Within a corpus semantic approach, meanings are described on the basis of the evidence provided by natural language data (Stubbs 2001:20). This data, however, calls for new terms and concepts in order to arrive at an adequate language description. Some important steps in this direction have already been taken by Sinclair (1998), who offers an illuminating description of the notion of 'lexical item', and by Hunston and Francis (1999) with their highly innovative 'pattern grammar' approach.

It is especially the concept of 'pattern' that plays an important role for the support function as a feature of general nouns: "The patterns of a word can be defined as all the words and structures which are regularly associated with the word and which contribute to its meaning" (Hunston & Francis 1999:37). Another important observation is the following: "words which share a given pattern tend also to share an aspect of meaning" (Hunston & Francis 1999:3). The data, however, shows that Hunston and Francis' (1999) concept alone is not sufficient to capture the phenomena under investigation. In Section 5, I will discuss the pattern grammar framework in more detail, but first, I will give a definition of the support function and look at examples to illustrate this concept before I move on to a discussion of its theoretical implications. The examples are taken from the British National Corpus and the Bank of English.³ In the present article a discussion of quantitative aspects is deliberately excluded, since the focus is on a qualitative description of the support function. This, however, is not to imply that qualitative and quantitative aspects are independent from each other (cf. Mahlberg in preparation).

The support function is defined as follows (cf. Mahlberg in preparation):

A noun fulfils the support function if it occurs in a construction where it does not contribute much factual meaning but helps to present information according to the communicative needs of the speaker/writer and hearer/reader.

The term 'support function' is partly motivated by an expression that Sinclair (1999) uses when he describes the functions and uses of the noun *way*. He argues that in a major part of its occurrences *way* can be characterised as "offering its 'noun-ness' as a support for other words" (Sinclair 1999:172). According to Sinclair (1999:172) most of the functions of *way* "seem to be of an enabling nature", i.e. that phrases with *way* can contribute "to the flexibility and ex-

tendibility of the syntax” (Sinclair 1999: 169). In the following concordance (1) we find instances of *way* introducing both finite and non-finite postmodifying structures into clauses (*way in which/of/to...*).

(1) *way* (BNC)

tional Geriatric Medicine Service. The way in which specialist health
ed towards Miss Shiffins and the funny way in which they (Pip and
aucus, have been deeply unhappy at the way policy has developed during
Lucky Penny insurance provides a sure way of boosting purchaser’s
ng to react, if we were going to find a way of cantering the problems we
able foods. A simpler and more pleasant way of achieving the same end was to
grammar and syntax, besides being a ready way to introduce general linguistic
ndfather had explained that the only true way to bake bread was to burn it
ence and technology, ,thinks that another way to save money is to merge Russia

While from a syntactic point of view such constructions can be interpreted as forming complex structures, with regard to the communicative situation the nominal expressions might contribute to the efficiency of the text, as in the following two examples of *move*:

- (2) (BoE) So Mr Clarke’s *move* at the Madrid summit to pre-empt further discussion by reiterating the Cabinet line has infuriated vocal sceptics such as John Redwood and Bill Cash.
- (3) (BoE) Dresdner, from Germany, has been mentioned as a possible bidder in the French market – a *move* to which the French Government is opposed – while Germany’s Commerzbank has been rumoured to be interested in buying up Flemings in the UK.

In example (2) *move* can be said to have the meaning ‘action’, or more precisely ‘action that you take in order to achieve something’, which seems to be among the most frequent meanings of this noun (cf. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 1995, *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* 2001). In our example the aim of the action is given in the infinitive construction: ‘to pre-empt further discussion’. The person who acts is given by the genitive. We learn where the action takes place and it is even stated what Mr Clarke does: he reiterates the Cabinet line. All this creates a long noun phrase which is packed with information. But the head of this noun phrase, the noun *move*, does not contribute much to the facts that are described. Instead, it provides a kind of hook onto which all the other information can be put. So the support by *move* enables this efficient packing of information. Similarly, example (3) illustrates an efficient way of presenting information. Here *move* allows some information to be added which is not directly integrated in the clause structure

but is given in hyphens like a kind of comment. The important thing is not to inform the reader that Dresdner's bidding in the French market is a move, but that the French Government is opposed to it. And the construction with *move* allows this point to be made in a compact and short form.

So far the description of examples has focused on the aspect of efficiency in packing information. However, the support provided by a general noun can also play a part in the creation of other effects. In the following, three aspects of the support function will be illustrated. Here it is important to stress that it is not the noun on its own that creates a special effect, but the noun contributes to a certain way of presenting information.

4. Presenting information

4.1 Giving emphasis

One of the effects that can be created with the help of a general noun is emphasis, as in the following examples:

- (4) (BoE) As there was only one gold medal, the tie was split in favour of Bruce Birchall because of his perfect 25/25 score on round two. A *man* who can state with conviction that 179084 is the number of cheese-graters in Swindon deserves the title of World Creativity Champion.
- (5) (BoE) IT would doubtless be too much to expect Spurs fans to suddenly express a sweetness for Alan Sugar, a *man* who's been subjected to more abuse and hate mail than the average child molester.
- (6) (BoE) The eye shadow looked so good that Liz's friend decided to borrow it (a *woman* who rarely spends less than <KPD> 20 on her on her make-up) and became an instant convert.

Example (4) contains the final sentences of a text about a creativity competition. Somewhere in the middle of the text the tasks of the contestants are explained and we learn that they have to deal with the following problem: If 179,084 is the answer, what was the question? The relative clause in the last sentence of the text refers back to this task and presents the suggestion that was regarded as the most creative one: Bruce Birchall suggested that 179,084 was the number of cheese-graters in Swindon. Since Birchall's answer is given in a relative clause that modifies the general noun *man* this information is presented in an indirect way. The use of *man* with the indefinite article helps to create a

sentence which could be used to talk about a class of people with the ability to give such an impressive answer. Thus the text presents it as almost inevitable that someone who was able to come up with this idea about the cheese-graters would win the competition. In this apparently general sentence, however, the information in the relative clause describes Bruce Birchall and what he did. By putting this information, which has not been mentioned before, in a defining relative clause it is given emphasis and the whole sentence is felt to create a strong impression and seems to be a good way to end the article. It even adds an ironic or mocking tone.

Examples (5) and (6) are similar to example (4) in the sense that information is presented in the form of a defining relative clause modifying a general noun. In example (5) the effect of the construction becomes particularly obvious when we compare this example with a sentence in which *a man* is left out so that the relative clause functions as a non-defining modifier of the proper name: *Alan Sugar, who ...* In this case the information appears more as an additional comment than a prominent point. Example (6) illustrates that the general noun construction can also allow for some flexibility for the position of the information presented in the relative clause, which can further contribute to giving emphasis.

4.2 Adding information in passing

While in the above examples the general noun helps to give prominence to some point that is made in the text, a general noun can also function in the opposite way.

- (7) (BoE) And, of course, where there's ladies (First or otherwise), there's George Hamilton. The *man* with the chicken tikka complexion pitches up in London this Saturday for a gig hosting the British Line Dancing Championships at Wembley Arena.

In this example the author of the text comments on the colour of George Hamilton's face which to him looks like chicken tikka. This information is not presented as a central point of the text, but is given 'in passing'. Although this description of George Hamilton's looks has not been mentioned before we find it at the beginning of the sentence where we can often expect given information. Furthermore, the noun phrase *The man with the chicken tikka complexion* refers to a person who has just been mentioned while the rest of the sentence provides a lot of new information. Thus the information given in the post-

modifier of *man* is integrated smoothly in the cohesive flow of the text and it is presented as if it were a point that could not be questioned. So the noun phrase with *man* allows the writer to simply slip in a comment.⁴ This way of presenting the information should also be seen in relation to the slightly mocking tone of the comment which is in line with the rest of the article.

4.3 Providing an introduction

The following two examples contain instances where the general noun can be regarded as a help to structure a sentence according to the information principle, which can contribute to the cohesion of a text and simplify the planning and/or decoding of a message (cf. e.g. Biber et al. 1999:896f.). The information principle assumes a preferred distribution of given and new information in the clause, so that the information load increases gradually, as in examples (8) and (9). Here the sentence begins with the general noun *man*, whose post-modifier refers back to given information which is then supplemented by new information. So the general noun helps to create a kind of introduction.

(8) (BoE) Later on in the Prime Minister's question Mr Major DID refer to the choice of a black barrister, Mr John Taylor, as the Conservative candidate for Cheltenham. He said the reported remarks critical of Mr Taylor were not sentiments that had any place in the Conservative Party. The *man* who called Mr Taylor a bloody nigger, Mr Bill Galbraith, has admitted that [...]

(9) (BNC) The *man* who played that part was Norman Lumsden, and [...]

Another important example of a general noun contributing to the creation of an introduction is found in the expression *the thing is*, as illustrated by the concordance lines below (10). The introductory function of this phrase, however, is somewhat different from that of the constructions in examples (8) and (9). According to Biber et al. (1999: 1073, 1075) the phrase *the thing is* can be called an 'overture'. This is a kind of 'utterance launcher', i.e. it has "a special function of beginning a turn or an utterance" (Biber et al. 1999: 1073). In such examples the noun phrase could be described as "more or less redundant from a purely propositional point of view" (Schmid 2000:9), but with regard to the communicative effect the general noun fulfils the support function. In the textual flow *thing* helps to provide a kind of introduction or focusing device. This construction is mainly used in spoken English, where it can also be used to give speakers time to plan or organise what they are saying.

(10) *thing* BoE

t it. <ZG0> <FOX> Yeah. Well the thing is she offered me less really when we become European now the thing is the British Isles are to teachers? <M06> Yeah. He the thing is I mean he's not an ious appreciation. 'Anyway, the thing is, a lot of these old tly put the phone back. <p> The thing is, it was the same man both at's what we got in America. The thing is, more of us are out of the is bus: it's my mobile home. The thing is, you can be huge in Europe,

5. Levels of description

For a brief discussion of some major theoretical implications of the support function of general nouns, it is necessary to return to Hunston and Francis' (1999) concept of 'pattern'. In the above examples we found the nouns under investigation in some constructions that seem to be associated with these nouns and in this sense there is a similarity to the idea of pattern. For the representation of patterns Hunston and Francis (1999: 44ff) use a shorthand coding system. With such shorthand symbols we could represent the constructions found in examples (4) to (6), for instance, as *a N pron-rel*, where *N* stands for the nouns that occur in this construction, in our case *man* and *woman*, and *pron-rel* represents the relative pronoun. Such a pattern, however, cannot be found within Hunston and Francis' (1999) theoretical framework. They argue that "relative clauses can qualify almost any noun, and are not considered to be part of their complementation patterns" (Hunston & Francis 1999: 49). However, within the framework discussed here, relative clauses can belong to the characterising features of certain nouns because we take a larger contextual perspective: the context makes clear that the information which is presented in a construction containing a general noun is used to characterise a specific person. This person has been introduced in the preceding text and we can even find a name, like *Bruce Birchall* in the cheese-graters example (4), or another rather precise term, like *Liz's friend* (example (6)). It is because of this contextual information that the general noun can be interpreted as contributing to an effective way of presenting information that gives emphasis to some point made in the text.

Since the textual perspective focuses on different aspects of meaning than the pattern grammar approach does, it can unveil other associations between meanings and constructions. The description of patterns mainly takes into account what can be described as lexico-grammatical meaning while the identifi-

cation of the support function also depends on those aspects of meanings that belong to the textual behaviour of a word.⁵ Thus, for the concept of the support function it is essential to take two levels into consideration. First, we have the structural or grammatical level, where we look at the nouns in their immediate context and where we can identify which constructions they occur in. On this structural level we could even interpret some of the examples described in this article as cases where the general noun needs supporting information: since it could not stand alone, it needs a defining or restrictive modifier. But this leads to the second point: the textual level. On the textual level we look at the nouns in their broader context and here we can describe which effects the noun can help to create with regard to longer stretches of text or even the whole text. It is only then that we see how the general noun helps to **present** some piece of information in a certain way. When Halliday (1970: 326) talks about the textual function of language he points out an aspect which is of particular importance for the definition of the support function: “it is only because we can select the desired form of the message that we can also use language effectively both to represent and experience and to interact with those around us”. It is this textual point of view that makes us describe combinations of words as emphasising devices, as means to slip in comments or to provide an introduction, as in the examples above. Even though there seems to be some considerable overlap between patterns and those word combinations in which a general noun fulfils the support function, the textual point of view can lead to a different interpretation of a construction than would be the case in the pattern grammar framework.

6. Conclusion

As one of the factors that play a part in a corpus linguistic characterisation of general nouns, the support function is an example of how the textual behaviour of words can be regarded as part of their meaning. This textual perspective calls for an integration of structural description and functional interpretation. Within the scope of the present article, however, it was only possible to present some tentative steps in this direction. Having made clear that grammar and lexis cannot be separated, corpus research needs to go further and pay appropriate attention to the textlinguistic dimension of meaning. Then a corpus is truly exploited as a collection of texts and not only as a source of concordance lines.

Notes

1. Frequency has to be seen with regard to various factors such as 'genre', for instance.
2. An important point is the relationship between general nouns and pronouns. While theoretical approaches emphasise similarities and seem to suggest some extent of interchangeability of pronouns and general nouns, as in Halliday and Hasan's (1976:279) 'ascent' example, corpus data does not seem to provide strong support for this assumption (Mahlberg 2000).
3. Throughout the article I will use the abbreviations 'BNC' and 'BoE'.
4. Francis (1994) finds similar evidence for 'restrospective labels', which can bring in a comment or an evaluation "without having to make a special point of it" (Francis 1994:97).
5. The textual dimension is briefly hinted at in the Pattern Grammar when the group of 'shell nouns' is identified (cf. Hunston & Francis 1999:185ff.)

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