

# A Systemic Functional Study of the Quantifying Selection in the English Nominal Group

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**Abstract**—The literature to date indicates that it is necessary to introduce the concept of selection into the description and analysis of the English nominal group. This paper will carry out a delicate exploration of the functional structure of the English nominal group with the quantifying selection. It aims to identify the function of the item *of* in the English nominal and thus to explore the whole functional structure of the English nominal group with the quantifying selection. Through the analysis, we found that besides the function as a preposition, and selector, the item *of* can also function as a finisher in the English nominal group.

**Index Terms**—the quantifying selection, the English nominal group, systemic functional linguistics

## I. INTRODUCTION

The literature to date indicates that there is great necessity to introduce the concept of selection into the description and study of the English nominal group. The present paper will carry out a delicate exploration of the functional structure of the English nominal group with the quantifying selection.

This research intends to investigate answers to the two questions as follows: (1) How do we distinguish the word class as well as the function of the item *of* in the English nominal group? (2) How do we analyze the structure of the English nominal group with the quantifying selection?

This paper begins with an overview of the traditional and the transformational analyses of the English nominal group containing the frequently occurring word *of*. There follows the systemic functional approach to the nominal group structure of the similar types. The central parts of the paper discuss the principle to identify the item *of* either as a selector or as a common preposition, and thus illustrate the systemic functional analysis of the English nominal group with the quantifying selection.

## II. TRADITIONAL AND TRANSFORMATIONAL ANALYSES

As can be observed from the literature, the concept of selection is closely connected with a tremendously frequently occurring word, *of*, which “comprises about two percent of all words in all types of text” (Sinclair, 1991, p.p. 84, 143). In view of its frequency in the English text, there are many arguments about its use and function. In this paper, we shall deal only with its relevance to the nominal group, although the item also appears frequently in other classes of groups and clauses.

Traditionally (e.g. Biber *et al.*, 1999/2000; Huddleston, 1984; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, 2005/2008; Quirk *et al.*, 1972, 1985; Sinclair *et al.*, 1990; Zhang, 1995; Zhang, 2002, 2008), *of* is regarded as a common preposition just like any other prepositions are, and the phrase with *of* is a prepositional phrase functioning as the Postmodification of the Head. In addition, the two nominal groups listed below in (1) and (2) have a structure identical to the nominal group *five of those books* where *of*-phrase is both regarded as the prepositional phrase serving as the Postmodifier or the Qualifier modifying or qualifying the Head of the matrix nominal group.

(1) *the confidant of three prime ministers*

(2) *the clash of two cultures*

(Fawcett, 2007, p. 175)

Figure 1 below shows the transformational analysis of the nominal group in (1) and (2). It is a formal and syntactic analysis in which every element of the nominal group is labeled by its word class, rather than by the function in the group.

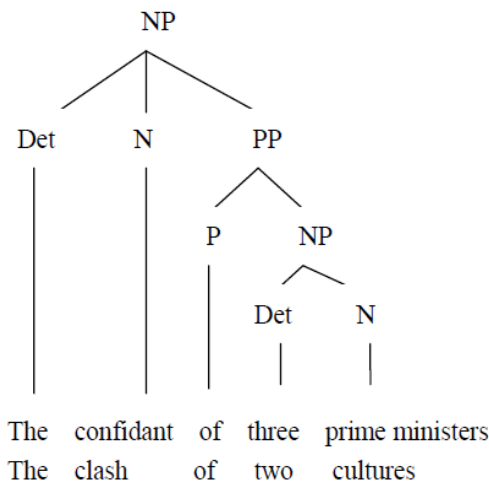


Figure 1: Transformational analysis of the nominal group with *of*-phrase (NP=Noun Phrase, Det=Determiner, N=Noun, PP=Prepositional Phase, P=Preposition)

Thus, the transformational description is much similar to the systemic functional analysis in the aspect of lexicogrammar demonstrated in Table 1 below. In both examples, the matrix NP is made up of three immediate elements, Det, N and PP, and the PP consists of two immediate constituents, P and another NP as the Complement. The Noun in the structure functions as the Head, and the Determiner and the Prepositional Phrase as the Premodifier and the Postmodifier respectively. Similarly, the structure of *five of those books* can be illustrated in the same way.

To sum up, both the traditional and the transformational analyses stated above put much stress on the formal structure of the nominal group with *of*-phrase. The functional roles of the elements in the matrix structure are not discussed. By contrast, the SFL approach has an alternative way of looking at the structure of the two nominal groups as a consequence of the introduction of selection. In the following part, we shall concentrate on the SFL approach in depicting the nominal group of this type.

### III. THE SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS ANALYSIS

The Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL hereafter) approach is characterized by analyses of those types of nominal group with the quantifying selection. Different from the traditional approach and the transformational approach, the SFL approach explores the function, rather than the word class only, of the elements in the certain nominal group.

The analysis in Table 1 below demonstrates the SFL description of the nominal group in (1) and (2), and every immediate element of the nominal group are labeled by its specific function in the group structure. It is also shown that the item *of* in these two examples is embedded in the prepositional phrase, rather than in the matrix nominal group. The internal structure of the prepositional phrase can be further analyzed by delicacy.

TABLE 1:  
THE SFL ANALYSIS OF THE NOMINAL GROUP WITH *OF*-PHRASE

nominal group	<i>the</i>	<i>confidant</i>	<i>of</i>	<i>three</i>	<i>prime ministers</i>
	<i>the</i>	<i>clash</i>	<i>of</i>	<i>two</i>	<i>cultures</i>
lexicogrammar	determiner	noun	preposition	numeral	noun
				nominal group	
experiential structure	Deictic	Thing	Qualifier		
logical structure	Premodifier	Head	Postmodifier		
	← β	α	→ β		
			Process	Range	
			Numerative	Thing	

This table illustrates that the item *of* in (1) and (2) is a common preposition and functions as a minor verb. The SFL approach (e.g. Bloor and Bloor, 1995/2001; Halliday, 1985, 1994/2000; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004; Thompson 1996/2000) does not specify the function of *of* in such a nominal group as *five of those books* in the experiential perspective. Besides, the terms Premodifier and Postmodifier seem to have more sense of the formal labels than that of the functional labels, for the prefix morpheme *pre* and *post* just have the same meaning as *before* and *after*. In terms of the experiential structure, *a pack of* as a whole is regarded as the Numerative, but the internal structure of this Numerative is not analyzed by delicacy.

Prakasam (1996) treats these types of nominal groups as the construction of “NGp (Nominal Group) ^ of ^ NGp” structure, for the item that precedes and follows the item *of* is not a noun but a nominal group. If we take the nominal group in (1), *the confidant of three prime ministers*, as an example to state his arguments, the structure of the matrix nominal group is “NGp (*the confidant*) ^ of ^ NGp (*three prime ministers*)”. In his approach, *five of those books* and *a*

*pack of cards* can also be analyzed in an identical way, and the elements before and after *of* are respectively two nominal groups. Admittedly, this analysis has its redeeming feature in that the idea of two relatively independent nominal groups preceding and following *of* gives us insight when discussing the concept of selection as follows. In addition, Prakasam (1996) provides the delicate analysis of the nominal group alike.

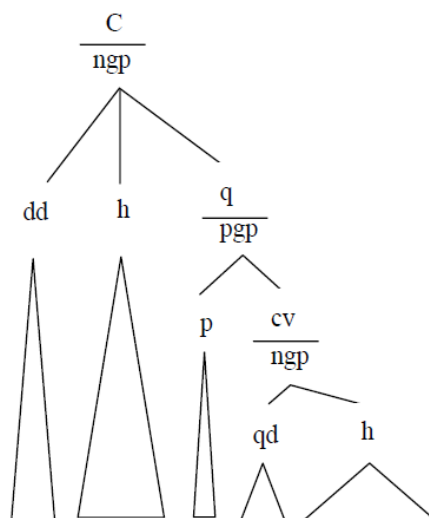
To conclude, among these analyses, it is the introduction of the concept of selection that seems to explain the internal semantic structure in a more persuasive way. The following part will present the details of the selection brought forward by the Cardiff Grammar (Fawcett, 2000, 2006, 2007).

IV. BASIC CONCEPTS OF SELECTION

The concept of selection related to the English nominal group is basically depicted in the Cardiff Grammar. It was Fawcett (1973/81) who introduced this concept to linguistics for the first time, providing novel insights into the intrinsic or the deep structure of the same language phenomenon. Moreover, the concept of selection makes the item *of* have a new function: selector in the specific kind of nominal group. This is the extension of the Cardiff Grammar to the whole theoretical framework of SFL.

The basic concepts of selection in the English nominal group by the Cardiff Grammar are presented in detail by Fawcett (2000, 2006, 2007). When analyzing selection, we cannot avoid mentioning again the word *of*, which is regarded by Fawcett either as a common preposition embedded in the prepositional group, or as a selector, a sister element with determiner, modifier, Head and qualifier in functional structure of the nominal group. Specifically, the two terms have the obvious difference that a preposition is a grammatical or syntactic unit, but a selector is a functional or semantic one referring to its function. As a consequence, the introduction of selection begins with distinguishing the item *of* either as a common preposition or as a selector.

When *of* serves as a common preposition, it has no difference from any other prepositions in the English nominal group. Namely, it is embedded in the prepositional group (prepositional phrase) that functions as the qualifier. Evidently, this analysis has much similarity to the traditional and the transformational analyses in the aspect of the formal structure, and it is even the same as Halliday’s analysis. Still, we take the examples in (1) and (2) to see the similarities as well as the distinctions between the Cardiff approach and other approaches.



- (1) (He was) the confidant of three prime ministers.
- (2) (It was) the clash of two cultures.

Figure 2: The ‘prepositional group as qualifier’ construction (Fawcett, 2007, p. 175 )

Figure 2 above demonstrates the Cardiff approach to the functional structure of the nominal group with *of*-phrase when *of* is categorized as a common preposition. Although the whole tree diagram is much similar to the transformational tree diagram, the essential idea is different as the labels in this tree diagram are functional ones. In fact, the systemic functional approach is not only a functional but also a syntactic one, for it illustrates not only the function of each element but also the syntactic relationships between every element in the whole structure. In addition, the Cardiff approach even shows the delicate relationships by different symbols. Although it takes much space, the tree diagram meanwhile carries much more information than the words only. According to the Cardiff Grammar, this figure provides at least the following information:

First, the capital letter C stands for Complement, which is the function of an immediate element of the clause. The principle is that in the Cardiff Grammar the function of each immediate element of a clause is represented in the tree diagram by a capital letter. In contrast, no functional labels in the nominal group begin with a capital letter, and in the tree diagram a small letter is used.

Second, in these two nominal groups, the qualifier in each case is filled by a prepositional group in which *of* serves as a preposition. In both examples in (1) and (2), *of* connects the different relationships. Namely, in the first clause, *of* connects the relationship between people, *the confidant* and *the three prime ministers*, and in the second it connects the relationship between the process and the participant role. The item *clash* is here a kind of process and *two cultures* is the participant role of the process.

When *of* is used as a common preposition, it functions just as any other prepositions do in terms of the location and the syntactic role it plays in the group. Simply, *of* is an element embedded in the prepositional group, and the prepositional group is embedded in the nominal group. Traditionally, the element after the preposition is named object, but in the Cardiff Grammar it is labeled as a completive.

To summarize, this section discussed the Cardiff way of looking at *of* as a common preposition embedded in the prepositional group that functions as the qualifier of the nominal group. As was pointed out earlier at the beginning of this section, *of* also functions as a selector embedded in the nominal group, which will be elaborated in the section right below.

Fawcett (2008, p. 72) points out that “the main problem for syntax analyst who is analyzing the sentences of a natural text is usually this: which words go with which to form a unit WITHIN a clause”. Although Fawcett refers to the aspect of the clause, this argument is also applied to the case of a nominal group in that the embedding situation of a certain item in the structure needs to be identified. More specifically, whether *of* is embedded in the prepositional group or in the nominal group determines the functional role it plays.

When it comes to the selection in the nominal group, the concept *referent* should be clarified, for the selection actually occurs between the different referents within the matrix nominal group. In the theoretical basis of the Cardiff Grammar, each English nominal group has a specific referent. As far as the nominal group containing selection is concerned, it may contain more than one small nominal group, and each nominal group has a referent.

In the first place, the concept *reference* has a close and direct association with the concept *referent*. The definitions below may help us to have a general idea of what *referent* of a nominal group refers to.

1. Reference is (in semantics) the relationship between words and the things, actions, events, and qualities they stand for.
2. Reference in its wide sense would be the relationship between a word or phrase and an entity in the external world. For an example, the word *tree* refers to the object ‘tree’ (the referent).
3. Reference in its narrow sense is the relationship between a word or phrase and a specific object, e.g. a particular tree or a particular animal. For an example, *Peter’s horse* would refer to a horse which is owned, ridden by, or in some way associated with Peter.

(Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992/2000, p. 389)

From the definitions above, we can infer that reference is simply the relationship between the linguistic item and the entity, abstract or concrete, in the real world, and the entity in the real world is termed as the referent. The concept of referent in the framework of the Cardiff Grammar has a close connection with the definitions here. According to the Cardiff Grammar, every English nominal group has at least one referent, and the referent can be either in singular or in plural form and either concrete or abstract. For instance, the nominal group *those two splendid old electric trains with pantographs* has only one referent, i.e., two trains with special qualities in the real world, and this referent is in plural form and is concrete.

Selection occurs only when a nominal group has more than one referent and it is obviously the case that selection cannot play its role when a nominal group has only one referent. In this sense, the selection occurs between different referents represented by the different nominal groups. In other words, only when a matrix nominal group has at least two sub-nominal groups can selection find its place. Fawcett (2007, p. 183) points out that selection means “one referent is being selected from ‘within’ (in a broad sense of that term) another referent”. The referent can also be either particularized or unparticularized. The leftmost referent is the substantive referent, while the rightmost referent is the widest one.

This concept is to be made clear further through the nominal group *five of those books*. This matrix nominal group has two referents, one of which is the referent of *those books*, and the other of which is the referent of *five of those books*. This is what reference refers to in the third definition by Richards, Platt and Platt (1992/2000, p. 389) above. The referent of *five of those books*, which is the substantive referent, is more particularized and it is selected from that of *those books*, which is the widest referent and more unparticularized compared with the substantive referent. Selection in this sense occurs between these two referents, and the matrix nominal group is thus composed of four parallel immediate elements, qd, v, dd and h. In the tree diagram description, the selector is represented by the letter v.

The selection in *five of those books* is called selection by quantity, and according to Fawcett (2006, 2007) the relationship between *five* and *books* in *five books* is just the same as that between *five* and *those books* in *five of those books*. The selection in the nominal group *five books* is also a kind of quantifying selection. The referent of *books* is an unparticularized referent referring to all the books in the world, while the referent of *those books* is a particularized one referring to specific books. Selection here occurs without being made overt in the selector *of*, and consequently it is a kind of covert selection, compared with the overt selection in *five of those books*.

*Five* is labeled as the quantifying determiner in this sense, but not all *five* is the quantifying determiner. In the

following example in (3), *five* is a quantifying modifier (qtm) for it is used to depict the referent rather than to give the numerical information (Fawcett, 2006, p. 197).

(3) *her five grandchildren*

We have examined one kind of selection, the selection by quantity (or the quantifying selection), and there are many other types of selections in the Cardiff Grammar, to be dealt with other papers.

So far, we have briefly reviewed the concept of selection, and have had a brief glance of the quantifying selection. Admittedly, the introduction of selection can more clearly depict the internal structure of the English nominal group of this kind. Naturally, further improvements or modifications are still needed, for some of these selections are over-generalized and some types of selection cannot reflect the functional structure of the matrix nominal group. Possible modification will be concerned with the recognition of the preposition and the selector, the identification of the Head, the recognition of selection, and the analysis of the similar nominal group by delicacy.

#### V. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PREPOSITION AND THE SELECTOR

It was stated earlier that *of* in the English text is a very frequently used word. Based on our analysis above, it functions either as a common preposition or as a selector. It has been pointed out that these two terms are quite different in that the former is a syntactic unit and the latter a functional one. The principle of recognizing these two different concepts is the main focus of this section.

The analysis of the above examples indicates that the two nominal groups *the confidant of three prime ministers* and *five of those books* are similar in structure but different in the focus of meaning in terms of reference. The concept of selection provides alternative perspectives in analyzing the similar nominal groups and this is a great contribution to SFL in the aspect of lexicogrammar. This section will discuss these differences, attempting to conclude how to recognize whether selection occurs in the nominal group by identifying the different relationships between the referents.

Above all, not only the nominal group with selection has two or more referents. Each of the two nominal groups, *the confidant of three prime ministers* and *five of those books*, has two referents. In the former case, the referents are *the confidant* and *three prime ministers*, with *the confidant* referring to one person and *three prime ministers* referring to three other persons. In the latter case, the two referents are *five (books)* and *those books*, with the referent of *five (books)* selected from that of *those books* that refers to books of the certain number. The following example (4) is slightly different from the above two.

(4) *the release of three of their colleagues*

This nominal group contains three referents, with *the release* referring to an action, *three* referring to three persons, and *their colleagues* referring to many persons. Besides, the first *of* connects the relationship between the process and the participant role and the second *of* connects the relationship between people. According to the analysis above, the first *of* is a preposition and the second one is a selector.

When looked into further, the relationships between the referents in the above cases are not the same. In (1) and (2), the two referents do not belong to the same type of entity in that *the confidant* does not refer to one person among the three persons represented by *three prime ministers*. In other words, the two referents do not express the same cultural classification, and thus *of* serves as a common preposition and the prepositional group with *of* is labeled as the qualifier of the nominal group. In the example *five of those books*, on the other hand, the two referents denote the identical cultural classification, *books*. The referent of *five (books)* is the member of that of *those books*, and in view of this, selection occurs in the sense that the referent of *five (books)* is selected from that of *those books*. As to the example (4), *the release of three of their colleagues*, the first *of* is a preposition and the second one is a selector, for the first *of* relates the process (*the release*) to the participant role (*three persons*), and the referent of *three* is selected from that of *their colleagues*.

In light of these distinctions, a conclusion can be drawn that in the nominal group with *of*, *of* functions as a selector when the referents belong to the same cultural classification, and as a common preposition if the referents are not categorized in the same cultural classification. This is the criterion to recognize whether or not the selection exists in the English nominal group.

As to the example *five books*, Fawcett (2006, 2007) argues that the structure is just the same as that of *five of those books*. This is over-generalized and thus unnecessary. If *five books* contains selection, any nominal group does. The example we have analyzed above, *those two splendid old electric trains with pantographs*, also has selection, for it refers to the two trains selected from all the trains in the world. It is suggested that we treat *five* as the quantifying determiner, and *books* as the Head in the nominal group *five books*.

#### VI. THE NOMINAL GROUP WITH THE QUANTIFYING SELECTION

Identifying the Head of the nominal group is the first step, and the delicate analysis of the matrix structure is conducted revolving the Head. We argued in Chapter 5 that the Head in the nominal group *five of those books* is *five*, for it has a covert Head expressing the cultural classification of the referent. Meanwhile, *of* functions as a selector in this case. However, there may also arise a question: How do we label the other two elements, *those* and *books*? Evidently, they must have new names, or more exactly, new functional roles.

As to the structure of *five of those books*, Fawcett (2006, 2007) provides three options, two of which are shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 respectively. Fawcett discusses in detail the problem of these two analyses. His argument is that to consider *of* as a common preposition may cause a further problem hard to solve. In other words, it is difficult for us to label the element with question mark in the two figures. Admittedly, it is not appropriate to treat *of* in this example as a common preposition simply because it is hard to identify the functions of the other elements in the same way in dealing with the functional structure of the nominal group with prepositional group as the qualifier.

In view of the problems of the two options, Fawcett (2006, 2007) provides his solution by introducing the concept of selection. In the third option, the item *five* is treated as the quantifying determiner, *of* as the selector, *those* as the deictic determiner, and *books* as the Head. It is in the present section that we will discuss the problem of the third option. Li (2009b) conducts an analysis, but we shall make a restatement and modification here in this part.

The analysis in Figure 1 indicates that the four elements *five*, *of*, *those*, *books* are on the same level of status in the matrix nominal group. In other words, the four elements are sister elements in the matrix construction. As far as the selection is concerned, the referent of *five* is selected from that of *those books*, rather than from that of *books*. In this sense, the nominal group seems to have three elements, which are *five*, *of* and *those books*. The element *five* has the same status as *those books* as a whole instead of as *those* and *books* respectively. Consequently, the matrix nominal group contains three immediate elements, rather than four, and this reflects the semantic relationship between the different referents within the matrix nominal group. To summarize, it seems that there should be three elements in a nominal group with the quantifying selection: (1) an element that is selected, (2) selector and (3) an element that is selected from by the selector.

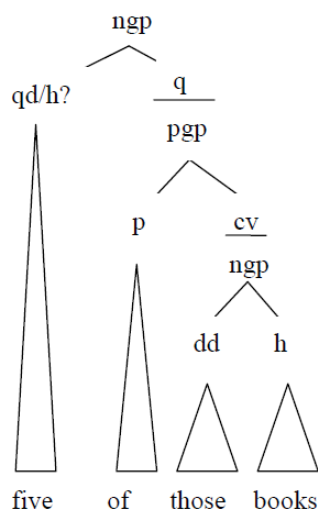


Figure 3: The structure of a nominal group (1) (Fawcett, 2006, p. 192)

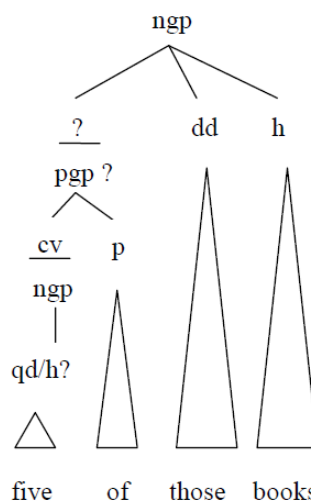


Figure 4: The structure of a nominal group (2) (Fawcett, 2006, p. 193)

From the above explanations, we note that the referent of *those books* is what is selected from by the selector. Can we just give it a new name **selected from** and label it as *sf*? This is a sister element with Head and selector, and then the *sf* is filled by another nominal group. Thus, the headword becomes the referent of the matrix nominal group. As was found above, *five* is what is selected, and thus it should serve as the Head of the whole group. Figure 5 below is the modified version of the structure of this nominal group, and the analysis suggests that the English nominal group containing the quantifying selection has three elements, h, v and *sf*. This analysis may also cause problems to the basic structure of the English nominal group “Modifier ^ Head ^ Qualifier”. In fact, the introduction of the concept of selection to the analysis of the English nominal group has already made a modification to the basic nominal group structure “Modifier ^ Head ^ Qualifier”, for it is not appropriate to regard selector as a Premodifier or Postmodifier.

Figure 6 is the modified analysis of the nominal group in (4), in which *of* functions as a preposition and a selector respectively. The revised version reveals the logical relationship between the Head and the other elements: the referent of the Head is selected from that of another element, and each element can be further analyzed. The nominal group with the quantifying selection has a three-element structure.

The above argument is the brief summary of previous analysis (Li, 2009). Specifically, the term *sf* used seems brusque and risky, and thus we need a more appropriate label to take its place. Can we be adventurous again to borrow the name used by Halliday (1994/2000) in describing the functional structure of the English nominal group? Since it is a technical term used in the framework of SFL, it is more acceptable to replace the name *selected from* by Thing, abbreviated as *th* in the tree diagram. Another good reason to use the term Thing is that *th* is the combination of the first letters of the word *Head* and *Thing*.

For one thing, Thing is just the thing being talked about, and the referent of the Head is selected from that of the

Thing. Thing is the element in the nominal group expressing the cultural classification. Based on this principle, the two nominal groups can be analyzed in the way shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8 below.

The linear analysis of the two nominal groups is presented as follows:

*five* [h] *of* [v] *those* [dd] *books* [th]

*the* [dd] *release* [h] *of* [p] *three* [h] *of* [v] *their* [dd] *colleagues* [th]

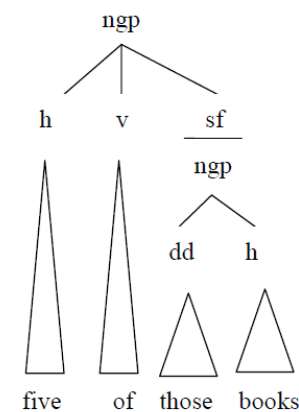


Figure 5: The modified structure of a nominal group with 'selection'

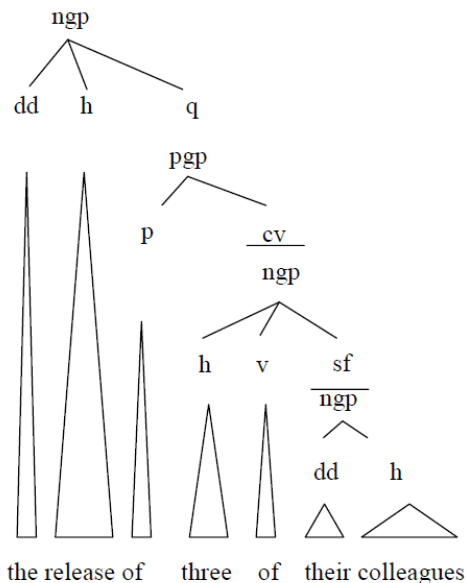


Figure 6: The structure of a nominal group with *of* as both a preposition and a selector

Figure 7: The modified analysis of the structure of a nominal group with 'selection'

Figure 8: The modified analysis of the structure of a nominal group with *of* as both a preposition and a selector

In the latter case, the item *release* is the Head of the matrix nominal group *the release of three of their colleagues*, but the item *three* is the Head of the nominal group *three of their colleagues* functioning as the completive of the preposition *of*.

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the delicate analysis of the English nominal group with the quantifying selection. The chapter began by summarizing the traditional approach and the transformational approach to the English nominal group with the word *of*. These two approaches both treat *of* as a common preposition embedded in the prepositional phrase functioning as the Qualifier of the nominal group and modifying the Head. Distinctively, the SFL approach describes the functional structure of the nominal group of this kind, and every element in the structure is given a functional label.

Furthermore, the introduction of the concept of selection provides an alternative perspective to explore the nominal group with the item *of*. We then reviewed the definition of reference and referent that are closely associated with the concept of selection. On this basis, we provided our arguments of the criterion to distinguish the role of the item *of* either as a preposition or as a selector in the English nominal group. The key point is to identify whether it is embedded in the prepositional phrase or in the nominal group.

We then progressed to the delicate analysis of the nominal group containing the quantifying selection by using *five of those books* as an example of illustration. Since the Head identification of the nominal group of this kind had been explored in the previous chapter, this chapter dealt with the functions of the other elements by delicacy. To serve the purpose, we boldly borrowed the term *Thing* used by Halliday (1994/2000). All these considerations result in our modified analysis of the nominal group of this kind within the framework of SFL.

Based on all of the arguments, we come to the conclusions about the nominal group with the quantifying selection as follows: (1) There is great necessity to introduce the concept of selection in depicting the English nominal group, and it is the contribution to the whole system of SFL. Selection reveals the internal logical relationship among the elements of the English nominal group. (2) The function of each element in the nominal group is determined more by its collocations with the other elements in the structure than by its word class. In our terms, the embedding or the dependency relationship among the elements is vital in identifying the function of a particular element. As a consequence, it is not appropriate to treat *of* as a common preposition, or as a selector in all cases. The functional role of the item *of* depends upon the different embeddings and the semantic core of the group. (3) The Cardiff description of the nominal group containing selection also needs improvement and modification. The analysis in the present paper indicates that Head and Thing may or may not coincide and that they can co-occur in the same nominal group in which the referent of the Head is selected from that of the Thing.

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