

The Novel Interpretations of Nominal Plural Attributives in Modern English

Xiongyong Cheng

School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology, 450001 Lianhua Avenue, Zhengzhou High & New-tech
Industries Development Zone, China

Abstract—It is a common phenomenon in modern English for nouns to be used as attributives in the form of singulars, but there are more and more plural nouns used as attributives together with the popularity of nominal singular attributives. Whether the occurrence of this tendency is fortuitous or natural has been a hot issue among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lecturers and learners. As such, the current paper is aimed at facilitating EFL lecturers and learners' comprehension of the fundamental principle of language forms serving the expression of language significance, thereby pushing the enhancement of potential EFL instruction along the fit and sound path.

Index Terms—modern English, nominal singular, plural, attribute noun

I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional English grammar assumes that words modifying or restricting central nouns as attributives should be adjectives (Bo, 2006). Nevertheless, any language is variable, and the English language is no exception (Brown, 2011). For a long time, some of the so-called “standard rules” in English have begun to change quietly in one way or another (Zhang, 2001, p. 35). In control of the economical principles of language, people tend to express linguistic details with the structure of the simplest form (Chen, 1994), and instead many nouns in the absence of the same adjectives are frequently used as attributives, and the plural attributive “has increasingly become a tendency” (Jespersen, 1954, p. 23). It is likewise a hot and challenging issue for the majority of teachers, students, and English lovers in China to attend to (Liu, 1993). As such, this current paper attempts to start from the following four perspectives in search of the new rules and characteristics of plural nouns as attributives to cater for readers concerned: (1) the causes of attributive nouns, (2) the functional interpretations of attributive nouns, (3) the fundamental features of plural nouns as attributives, and (4) the different and diverse meanings of singular and plural noun attributives.

II. ATTRIBUTIVE NOUN ORIGINS

In English, a noun can be used as a modifier like an adjective before another noun if there is no corresponding attributive adjective with the same root as a noun concerned, and this noun word is called “noun adjective” or “attributive noun” (Bryant, 1959, p. 28). It is also one of the characteristics of modern English to express complex thoughts by drawing on simple structures. So-called noun adjectives are really nouns which directly modify other nouns, which actually play the role of adjectives, for example, “*science* students”, “the *Obama* Administration”, “*dinner*-time”, “*oil* industry”, “*Christmas* party”, and so on. There are usually seven reasons for noun adjectives to be used as attributives as follows:

- (1) Nouns replace adjectives or present and past participles, for instance,
 - a) *country* life → rural life
 - b) *China-U.S.* relations → Sino-American relations
 - c) a *launch* pad → a launching pad
 - d) *cube* sugar → sugar formed in the shape of a cube
- (2) Common nouns take the place of possessive nouns, for example,
 - a) good rapport between *consumer* and *producer* countries → good rapport between consumers' and producers' countries
 - b) a proposal for a ceiling on *ASEAN* commodity imports → a proposal for a ceiling on ASEAN's commodity imports
- (3) Nouns replace prepositional phrases, such as:
 - a) a *tool* box → a box for tools
 - b) a *television* program → a program on television
 - c) *apple* seeds → the seeds of an apple
- (4) Nouns regularly take the place of appositives, adjective clauses, or infinitive verb phrases, such as:
 - a) his *bank manager* son → his son, (who is) a bank manager
 - b) an *ASEAN joint* conference report → a report to be jointly made by ASEAN(members)

(5) Nouns in lieu of corresponding adjectives with the same roots are used to modify central nouns (Zhang, 2001). For example, such phrases as “*room number*”, “*telephone book*”, “*door bell*”, and “*television program*”, in which *room*, *telephone*, *door*, and *television* are respectively utilized as attributives to modify the central nouns to be followed subsequently in place of the corresponding adjectives concerned;

(6) Misunderstanding is to be avoided for some adjectives to be used as attributives (Yi, 1996). For instance, such expressions as “*health condition*”, “*snow mountain*”, “*mountain village*” are more commonly uttered in comparison with “*healthy condition*”, “*snowy mountain*”, “*mountainous village*” in that the latter would bring about ambiguity or semantic deviation. As such, we often say, for example, “*child laborer*” rather than “*childish laborer*” or “*history teacher*” in place of “*historical teacher*” in that the latter cannot bring out exact meanings;

(7) Pursuant to the economic principles of language, people always try to seek the minimal cost of cognition for the maximal thinking expression (Chen, 1994). For the sake of the need of economic communication, there are more and more nouns instead of adjectives used as pre-modifiers in modern English since many of the adjectives derive from the same root nouns by means of affix transformation, which are generally more complex than the related nouns in form, for example, “*a science fiction writer*”, “*a convenience food store*”, “*a heart attack patient*”, “*labor-management conflict*”, or whatever (Azar, 2008).

In particular, there is one more thing that should be noted with care enough. That is, is there any difference in meaning between the noun attributive and the adjective attributive with the same word root? Difference lies in it that the former emphasizes the contents or functions, whereas the latter focuses on attributes and characteristics. As such, a further comparison will be made between seven groups of phrases below for the sake of detailed differences:

- { *labor* intensity (= physical work density)
- { *laboring* people (= working people)
- { a *space* rocket (= a rocket to be sent to space)
- { a *spacious* room (= a wide and large room)
- { an *art* gallery (= a gallery displaying all kinds of art exhibits)
- { *artistic* effects (= effects with artistic characteristics)
- { a *history* department (= the department of history)
- { a *historic* relic (= a relic in history)
- { *riot* police (= police against riots)
- { *riotous* police (= riot-loving or trouble-making police)
- { a *stone* house (= a house made of stones)
- { a *stony* heart (= a cruel heart)
- { a *peace* conference (= a conference concerning peace)
- { *peaceful* construction (= no wars in the course of construction)

In addition, possessives as attributives are generally different from attributive nouns in functions. The former emphasizes the possessive relation to the modified noun or represents logical predicate relationships, while the latter elucidates on the nature of the modified noun. For instance, in the phrase “the *Party* member”, the noun “*Party*” as a modifier represents the nature of the modified noun “members”, but in the phrase “the *Party's* calls”, the modifier “*Party*” plays the role of an action issuer. While “calls” is a noun, it possesses the meaning of an action, which can also be more perfectly represented via another group of examples “a *student* teacher” and “a *student's* teacher”. In more detail, “a *student* teacher” signifies “a practice teacher”, while “a *student's* teacher” implies “the teacher of a student” as a result.

III. THE FUNCTIONAL INTERPRETATIONS OF NOUN ATTRIBUTES

Nouns used as attributes generally have no corresponding adjectives with the same roots as nouns. They can be either living or inanimate, either countable or uncountable. In modern English, attributive noun cases have become commonplace, in which attributive nouns often elaborate on the materials, functions, time, places, contents, and categories of modified nouns, so exploring the significance and function of noun attributives is necessary (Bryant, 1959; Halliday, 1994).

(1) Indicating the spatial locations or the sources of central words (Bo, 2006), such as “*New York City*”, “*London Big Ben*”, “*Beijing University*”, “*body temperature*”, “the *spaceship* floor”, “the *kitchen* window”, “*magazine* editorials”;

(2) Illustrating the occurrence times of central words like the phrases “*morning* exercise”, “*generation* gaps”, “*winter* vacation”, “a *day* bed”, “the *dinner* party”, “the *Spring* and *Autumn* Period”, “*evening* suit”, “*midday* luncheon”;

(3) Narrating the contents of central words (Liu, 1993), for example, in the phrases “a *rose* garden”, “a *story* book”, “*piano* lessons”, “*oxygen* supply”, “the *air* pressure”, “*grammar* rules”, and “a *picture* gallery”, the nouns *rose*, *story*, *piano*, *oxygen*, *air*, *grammar*, and *picture* are the narrations of the central nouns;

(4) Describing the use of central words (Azar, 2008), for instance, in the phrases “a *service* counter”, “a *railway* station”, “a *meeting* room”, “the *telephone* pole”, “the *trade* union”, “*water* pipe”, “*welcome* speech”, “*eye* drops”;

(5) Showing the texture of central nouns (Bo, 2006), for example, in the phrases “a *brick* wall”, “a *gold* medal”, “*rain* drops”, “a *diamond* necklace”, “a *bamboo* pole”, “*paper* money”, and “a *stone* bridge”;

(6) Elaborating on the relationship between noun attributives and central nouns (Bo, 2006), for example, in the

phrases “a *school gate*”, “a *book cover*”, “a *mountain foot*”, “*children problems*”, “*enemy soldiers*”, and “*bus drivers*”;
 (7) Describing the shapes of central nouns (Bo, 2006), for example, in the phrases “*cube brick*”, “*circle stage*”, etc.

IV. THE CHARACTERISTIC ANALYSIS OF PLURAL NOUNS AS ATTRIBUTIVES

In accordance with traditional English grammar, “nouns as attributives in English are not expressed in plural forms” (Kruisinga, 2009, p. 126), and “attributive nouns are singular except that no singular form exists” (Thomson & Martinet, 1991, p. 22). Nonetheless, “this generally accepted rule now appears to be wrong” (Halliday, 1994, p. 92) since Jespersen (1954) claimed as early as in the year 1914 that plural nouns can be used as attributives, adding, however, the plural forms of nouns as attributives ought to be limited into a very narrow range. As a matter of fact, more and more plural nouns are beginning to act as attributes, which seems to be an irreversible trend of modern English (Zhang, 2001; Zhang, 1991). As such, under whatever circumstances are plural nouns used as attributives?

(1) Plural nouns are used for the sake of the highlight of the plural concept and the elimination of ambiguity caused by the number. In more detail, if a singular noun is used as an attribute, there may be two possibilities for the meaning expressions in that the quantity concept concerned is either “one” or “several” as well. In case a plural noun is used as an attribute, only one quantity concept is just “several”. As such, plural noun attributes can render the plural concept more specific and clear and avoid ambiguity, for instance, “soft *drinks* manufacturer” (a manufacturer which produces all kinds of soft *drinks*), “surgical *appliances* manufacturer” (a manufacturer which produces diverse *appliances*), “foreign *affairs* office” (an office dealing with various foreign *affairs*), “*materials* engineering” (engineering researching into a variety of *materials*), “*car parts* department” (a department selling all sorts of *car parts*);

(2) The singular and plural forms of some nouns have quite different meanings, and the plural noun used as an attribute can identify semantic meanings, for example, “arm” and “*arms*”, “good” and “*goods*”, “communication” and “*communications*”, in which singular and plural nouns differ in definition. As a result, this kind of difference renders users to choose corresponding appropriate nouns as attributes;

(3) Some plural nouns are conventionally used as attributes, for example, “*sales tax*”, or should be so out of common senses like “*sports meeting*” which in general involves a lot of “*sports*”. Likewise, the expression “*workers association*” signifies that if there are few workers, it is impossible to form an “association”. As such, it is the same with the phrases “*suggestions handbook*”, “*appropriations committee*”, “*VIPs home*”, “*advertisements attack*”, and so on;

(4) Some abstract nouns ended with *-ics* to denote “subject”, “theory”, “major”, “technology” are used as attributives still in the form of plural nouns (Zhang, 1995), for instance, “*mechanics student*”, “*physics problem*”, “*linguistics study*”, and “*statistics expert*” and so forth. By comparison, in case the singular form is used, in most cases, there might be ambiguity in meaning. For example, “a *mechanics student*” implies a student who is majoring in mechanics now, while “a mechanic student” signifies a student who is a mechanic as well;

(5) Some proper nouns with themselves appearing in plural forms are still to be used as attributives in the form of plurals, for example, “*United Nations Assembly*”, “*United States Senate*”, “*Olympics President*”, and so on;

(6) If an attribute noun is modified by numerals (greater than one), the noun must also be used in the plural form, unless there is a hyphen between the numeral and the noun. Make a comparison between “*100 meters race*” and “100-meter race”, or between “*two hours negotiation*” and “two-hour negotiation”;

(7) Sometimes, using plural noun forms is for the sake of distinguishing other homonyms. In English, there are numerous nouns deriving from the verb plus the suffix *-ing*. If such *v-ing* forms are directly used as attributives to modify other nouns, this would lead to ambiguity since “*saving account*” is more easily considered as the verb-object structure, meaning “to save an account”. However, if “*savings account*” is used, in which “*savings*” has the functions of a noun to modify another noun “*account*”, the plural form is the unique feature of the noun (Sun, 2000). Similarly, as far as certain words whose adjectives and nouns are identical in forms are concerned, plural nouns are used as attributives for the purpose of the differences of parts of speech. For instance, in the phrase “a single competition”, “single” is a typical adjective, which determines “only one competition”. If “*singles competition*” is used, “*-s*” denotes that “single” is a sheer noun meaning “single event competition”. As well, “a right law” means “a just law” in comparison with “*rights law*” signifying “the law of the rights”;

(8) Conventionally used plural nouns are usually used in plural attributive forms (Xu, 2000), for example, in the phrases “*savings bank*”, “*talks table*”, and “*sports car*”, etc;

(9) The forms of few special nouns such as *man* and *woman* whose plural forms are irregular can change with the singular or plural form of the modified central noun to signify the gender (Bo, 2006; Zhang, 2001). The noun attributive mentioned here and the modified central noun are mutual appositions in relationship (Yang & Jiang, 1993), for example, from “a *woman worker*” to “*women workers*”;

(10) Some plural nouns used as attributives are really the omissions of genitives with apostrophes off since the economic principles of language suggest people expressing complex semantic contents with simple language forms (Bo, 2006; Chen, 1994), for example, in the phrases “a *teachers college*” (teachers = teachers’), “the *workers union*” (workers = workers’), “a *trousers leg*” (trousers = trousers’), “four *hours ride*” (four hours = four hours’ or four-hour);

(11) Plural forms have to be used as attributives in case their singular forms might produce ambiguity (Liu, 1993), for instance, in such expressions as “*seconds hand*” rather than “second hand” (used), “*plains people*” instead of “plain people”;

(12) Plural nouns that denote multi-level complex meanings are commonly used as attributives (Sun, 1988), for example, in such terms as “the foreign *languages* department”, “the *commodities* fair”, “the *problems* page”, “a *folksongs* concert”;

(13) Some structures are loose and long, which are really parallel noun phrases (Bo, 2006), for instance, in the phrases “equal *terms* policy”, “three *fourths* majority”, “the *United States* president”, “the *United Nations* organization”, etc.

(14) Plural noun attributes are frequently applied in the titles of different organizations, units, press papers, television, and broadcasting radios, for example, *Learning Skills Center*, *China Arts and Crafts Import and Export Corp.*, *Dalian Foreign Languages Institute*, *Foreign Languages Press*, *The Warring States Period*, *The Boys Club*, *The Watergate Tapes Affair*, *Jobs Cut*, etc. In particular, a couple of representative sentence examples are provided as follows for further reference: ①I did not go to parties except those thrown by my Camp Fire *Girls Club*. ②The judge also ordered Santiago to pay \$2000 into the State’s Crime *Victims* Fund for the children’s psychotherapy expenses. ③Martin Luther King led civil *rights* demonstrations in many cities. ④The Seal *Savings* Fund has passed a resolution which makes March 1st International *Seals* Day.

V. THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF SINGULAR AND PLURAL NOUNS AS ATTRIBUTIVES

(1) In modern English, many nouns ended with the letter “s” used as attributes modifying or limiting the subsequent nouns (usually subject nouns), which are plural in form but singular in meaning (Wu, 1985). If there is no –s suffix, these words can only be used as adjectives, not as nouns, and moreover, the meaning is changed as well (Bo, 2006), for example, in such phrases as “*news* agency”, “a *physics* teacher”, “an *economics* PhD”, “*ceramics* arts”, “*electronics* science and technology”, “a *headquarters* fighter”, “a *pincers* movement”, etc.

(2) There are also numerous nouns ended with the letter “s” used as attributes, which are plural both in form and meaning (Yi, 1996). For example, “a *glasses* frame” means “a frame of a pair of glasses”, while “a *glass* frame” signifies “a frame made of glass”; *honors* students in the system of higher education in Western countries are different from *generals* students; college students choosing to pursue the *honor* degree need to spend four years completing twenty courses prior to graduation, while college students choosing to pursue the *general* degree will have got to spend three years fulfilling fifteen courses before graduation (Hedge, 2002). For another example, “*sales* centre” is “the center of production sales”, while “*sale* center” is “cheap commodity distributing center” (Yang & Jiang, 1993). In addition, we often utter “*clothes* brush” rather than “*cloth* brush”, “*goods* train” signifying commodity train in lieu of “*good* train”, and “*customs* official” in place of “*custom* official” etc., in which *clothes* and *cloth*, *goods* and *good*, *customs* and *custom* are extremely different while used as attributes;

(3) Sometimes, the plural forms of nouns used as attributives lay emphasis on the respective plural concepts, often bringing about a kind of solemn dignity or with some emotion (Yi, 1996). Nevertheless, their corresponding singular meanings seem to be relatively dull, equivalent to the general descriptive or restrictive adjective functions (but not really adjectives) (Sun, 1988). For instance, in the term “*pests* officer”, the plural noun word “*pests*” would probably give a person a kind of very seriously emotional experience, highlighting the seriousness and responsibility of officers’ “inspection and quarantine work”. In further comparison with “the pest house” and “the pest control staff”, hereby the semantic difference between *pest* and *pests* sticks out a mile (Wu, 1985). For another instance, the evening paper *Evening Standard* in London covered a piece of news with the headline and contents described as follows:

CAREERS GIRL

At the age of 18 , Anne Giles starts on her fourth career on Thursday --- as a television actress. (*Evening Standard*, 1954) (Wu, 1985, p. 184)

The plural noun “*careers*” in the above title “*careers* girl” implies “(the girl) having a kind of occupation out of her reach and having to go for another occupation at all times”, which is burdened with obvious irony (Wu, 1985, p. 184). Nevertheless, supposed the author changes to apply “career girl” as a title, it would signify “a girl making a living by means of a certain occupation” without any satirical implications (Wu, 1985, p. 184). Of course, this complex relationship between the forms and the meanings of singular or plural nouns cannot make blind generalizations, which should depend on the specific circumstances instead. For example, “*careers* tutor” means “tutor guiding students to choose occupations successfully” with *careers* being positive in meaning, while “career politician” refers to “occupation politician” with a derogatory sense (Yi, 1996);

(4) In modern English, although there are many nouns whose implications do not make much difference in singular or plural forms from the perspective of objectivity, more and more people are willing to choose plural attributives (Zhang, 2001). This tendency is particularly prominent in the titles of the press and media (Cook, 2012). A large number of singular nouns as attributes originally also begin to gradually evolve into plural attributes in the end (Zhang, 2001), for instance, *The Harrogate Toy Fair* has now become *The Harrogate Gifts and Fancy Goods Fair*, on top of the expressions like *the College Exams Board*, *the Disputes Commission*, *the Salaries Agreement*, *the wool textiles commodity*, *the ideas man*, *the old pensions project*, or whatever (Wu, 1985). The diverse titles of numerous governmental and congressional acts and regulations seem to keep pace with the times and fashions, attempting to draw on plural noun attributes, for example, *the Industrial Relations Bill*, *the US Civil Rights Bill*, *the Small Dwellings*

Acquisition Act, the Aliens Order, etc (Wu, 1985). The frequent appearance of such expressions might contribute to the dissemination and development of plural noun attributes (Fu, 2013), which also represents a new orientation of contemporary English (Cowan, Light, Mathews, & Tucker, 1979). If the current terms “*tonsils operation*” and “*seeds-mixtures*” are compared with the previous “*tonsil operation*” and “*seed-mixtures*” from *Oxford English Dictionary* respectively, it is easily known that the difference of semantic logic results from their difference in form because “*tonsil operation* cannot be performed only in a *tonsil*” and also since “*containing only one type of seed* cannot count as ‘*mixture*’” (Liu, 1993; Wu, 1985). As such, it seems more logical and justifiable to draw on plural noun attributes (Yi, 1996).

VI. ANALYSIS OF COMPLEX ATTRIBUTIVE NOUNS

Since attributive nouns are increasingly popular, the restriction of people’s application of such attributives is smaller and smaller. As such, overlapping attributive nouns have taken shape little by little, which has also been recognized by grammarians. Terminologically, this type of attributive consisting of two or more nouns is named the complex noun attribute as well, which is equivalent to the attribute of a prepositional phrase in that “in most cases, noun attributes correspond to prepositional phrases as post-modifiers” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1330). The noun attributes in the following noun phrases are equivalent to post modification prepositional phrases: the *foreign languages department*→ the department of foreign languages, *water pollution situation*→ the situation in water pollution.

Such is the commonplace case that several nouns are put together to form a whole to modify the last noun, for example, “*world record holder*”, “*fire escape ladder*”, “*Christmas morning exchange of presents*”, “*mountain village school teacher*”, “*house property tax office building*”, etc. In particular, English for Science and Technology (EST) tends to be concise and clear, in which the cases of multiple nouns as attributes are even more frequent, for instance, “*tungsten filament lamp*”, “*television transmission satellite*”, “*air surface vessel radar*”, “*motor car repair and assembly plant*”, “*high voltage switch gear factory*”, and so on.

From the above examples, it is found that complex noun attributes may bring about some difficulty with people’s apprehension, even cause possible misunderstanding. As such, two aspects are to be taken into account for this sake as follows.

(1) The modification correlation between complex attribute nouns and central nouns should be shed light on. Noun attributes and their central nouns have generally two cases of relationship in such examples as *the State Health Commission* and *the income tax rate*. Apparently, in the former example case, *State* and *Health* individually modify the same central noun *Commission* simultaneously. Nevertheless, in the latter case, *income* firstly modifies *tax*, and then *income tax* as one modification unit modifies *rate*. Typically, the more wording items complex noun attributes possess, the more complicated the correlation between attribute nouns and the central noun will be in the end.

The semantic analysis of complex attributive nouns ought to be clarified. For complex attributive nouns, it is a must to analyze multi-semantic relationships between the attribute nouns and the central noun, to identify the multi-level semantic modification of the internal structure, and to clarify the meaning the complex attributive nouns. For instance, the complex attributive noun phrase *U.S. Air Force aircraft fuel systems equipment mechanics course* is really long and is not easy to distinguish between the nouns. As such, the internal structure of the example ought to be analyzed step by step so as to reveal different connections between words inside. In another example *nozzle gas ejection ship attitude control system*, there are six noun attributives prior to the central noun *system*, which have respective attributive functions in four divisions: ① *control* representing functions of the modified; ② *ship attitude* expressing the application of the central noun; ③ *gas ejection* and ④ *nozzle* referring to the mode of operation. The noun modifier *nozzle* means a little further so that its position is just farther from the central noun as a result.

Therefore, when two or more nouns are used together as an attributive, each of them would have distinct relationships with the central noun. Typically, the first noun on the left of the central noun is the direct modifier attribute to the central noun, and then farther to the left is in the second by turns. The attribute nouns in order firstly illustrate the nature, secondly the functions, thirdly applications, fourthly the mode of operation, and then the material production quality of the central noun concerned, and so on.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, some grammatical rules of English we are familiar with are changing quietly, and these alterations are gradually to meet the need of people using simple linguistic structures to express complicated thoughts. More and more nouns are directly used as attributes or the modifiers of central words, which is also a major characteristic of development of modern English. Whether singular nouns or plural ones are used as attributes will rely on the detailed implications of corresponding collocations under specified circumstances. In recent years, either in British English or in American English, nouns as attributes are really frequent and popular. In particular, plural nouns as attributes are more endless, which seems to keep pace with the usage of singular nouns as attributes. Whether singular nouns or plural nouns are used as attributes, there are specific rules to be followed, and we cannot make an over simple summary only using “exceptions” to elaborate on the usage of plural nouns as attributes. As such, in the course of modern English learning, it is really timely and indispensable to reinforce the further exploration of plural nouns as attributes, and it is

also of great value for us to further understand the developmental principles and laws of modern English in the future.

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Xiongyong Cheng was born in Xinyang, China in 1966. He is an associate professor in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology, China. His primary research interests are EFL testing and assessment in relation to classroom instruction. He holds an MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from Henan Normal University, China, and a PhD in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) from the University of Malaya, Malaysia.

His current research interests encompass EFL teaching, inter-cultural communication, teacher education, professional development, and the evaluation of curriculum implementation. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Cheng was awarded the honor title "National Excellent Education Gardener" by the Ministry of Education of China in 1993.