Journal of Languages and Linguistics

[ISSN 2958-1028]
Volume: 04 Issue: 01 | December-2025

JLL

A Reconsideration of Grammatical Categorisation: The Unit Phrase

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Cite this article in APA
Mintah, K. C., & Wiredu, J. F. (2025). A Reconsideration of grammatical categorisation: The unit phrase. *Journal of languages and linguistics, 4*(1), 105-116. https://doi.org/10.51317/jll.v4i1.815

OPEN ACCESS
A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history
Received: 2025-10-18
Accepted: 2025-11-26
Published: 2025-12-16

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Abstract
This study proposes a systematic grammar-based approach to the identification of the unit to replace the ambiguous term *phrase* with the more neutral term *group.* The unit *phrase* in grammatical analysis has long posed persistent problems of identification and subcategorisation in grammar**.** Two interrelated factors account for this difficulty. First, major syntactic frameworks offer divergent and sometimes incompatible definitions of what constitutes a phrase: what counts as a phrase in the Minimalist Program differs considerably from its treatment in Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar and traditional reference grammar. Second, many pedagogical and descriptive grammars lack a principled method for identifying this grammatical unit by frequently combining structural, semantic and notional criteria in an unsystematic manner. The consequence is widespread analytical inconsistency where formally identical structures are assigned different categorial labels on the basis of meaning or discourse interpretation rather than grammatical structure. This study addresses these by proposing a systematic grammar-based approach to the identification of the unit to replace the ambiguous term *phrase* with the more neutral term *group.* Drawing on descriptive-analytic evidence from English grammar, study argues that group identification should rely solely on grammatical information, specifically (a) constituent structure and headedness, and (b) grammatical functions realised within clause structure. By rigorously separating structural identity from functional realisation and excluding semantic considerations from categorial identification, the proposed approach offers a clear and consistent account of nominal, verbal, adjectival, adverbial, and prepositional groups. The analysis demonstrates that this approach resolves longstanding confusions in existing grammar descriptions and provides a more principled basis for grammatical analysis and pedagogy.

Key terms: Constituent structure, grammatical function, group, phrase, syntactic categorisation.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of developing knowledge about one's language has been emphasised in the literature on language acquisition and linguistic theory. As Fontaine (2013) notes:

> Becoming more knowledgeable about language often means having to learn something about grammatical analysis… understanding how language works means understanding how grammar works. (p. 1)

This position reflects a widely held assumption in linguistics that grammar constitutes a foundational component of linguistic competence and is central to both language development and language analysis. Supporting this view, Rushen (2005) observes that a crucial task for children in language development is the acquisition of grammatical categories such as *nouns, verbs,* and pronouns, among others. These categories function as syntactic primitives from which larger syntactic structures – *phrase, clause,* and *sentence* – are formed as they grow into adulthood. In this regard, grammatical categories are not merely descriptive labels but essential building blocks of linguistic structure.

This assumption is particularly evident in Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG), where it is argued that native speakers necessarily possess implicit knowledge of syntactic categories together with the rules and processes that govern their combination. Accordingly, such innate grammatical knowledge enables speakers to produce and interpret well-formed grammatical structures in their language (Radford, 1997).

In the literature of language study, several scholars have identified practical benefits associated with grammatical knowledge. For example, Greenbaum (1996) observes that knowledge of grammatical structures of a language facilitates appropriate and effective language use. This is because knowing grammar allows us to organise words and sentences into coherent, meaningful patterns which aid comprehension (Radden & Dirven, 2007).

More broadly, McDonald (2008) contends that understanding linguistic structure and grammatical rules enables individuals to gain much useful knowledge about themselves and the environment in which language operates. In a similar vein, Williams (2005) maintains that the ability to recognise the grammatical patterning of a language is what makes it possible to talk meaningfully about language.

According to Biber et al (1998), studies of language can be divided into two major areas:

1. Studies of structure, which involve identifying and describing the structural units of a language, and
2. Studies of use, which concern how speakers/ writers exploit the linguistic resources to construct texts.

Accordingly, grammatical knowledge functions as a crucial tool not only for language production but also for text analysis and interpretation.

A given assumption in language study is that sentence construction relies on the proper and accurate application of the rules of grammar since these rules govern the organisation of linguistic elements into meaningful units. Thus, clarity regarding linguistic concepts used in the analysis of grammar is essential, for without such clarity, both theoretical description and empirical analysis are compromised.

However, there is a great deal of confusion regarding the identification, description and classification of the linguistic elements of analysis. In the view of Rauh (2010), there appears to be less consensus on what exactly many linguistic elements actually are. This apparent confusion stems from the fact that there are several differing theories/approaches that are applied in analysing the grammars of languages. The result is.

a. plethora of terminologies for grammatical units,
b. instances in which the same unit is referred to by different terms or a single term denotes different units, and
c. the absence of a recognizably defined basis for categorising grammatical units.

As a result, striking inconsistencies persist in grammatical terminologies and their references in language analysis. Rauh (2010) captures this problem succinctly:

> …the terms employed for linguistic categories do not give a clear picture. On the one hand,

different category labels are used for the same set of items, on the other, the same category labels refer to different sets of items (p. 4)

This problem is particularly evident with respect to the grammatical unit *phrase*. As Matthews (1981) states that the "present usage is confused and any definition would do violence to some grammarian's practice" (p. 160)

The goal in this study, then, is to offer a more consistent and structured approach to the grammatical analysis of this linguistic element, *phrase*. In doing so, the assumption is that this approach will remove (or, at least, minimise) the confusion that has characterised the identification and categorisation of the unit *phrase* in English.

THE CURRENT STATE

For a start, the literature reveals that the grammatical unit, *phrase,* has been defined in ways that are vague, inconsistent, and, in some cases, completely untenable. Several commonly cited definitions illustrate the extent of this problem:

1. a. "A phrase is a syntactic arrangement that consists of parts called constituents. (Wardhaugh, 1996, p. 33)
   b. "Any syntactic unit which includes more than one word and is not a sentence and its subject." (Matthews, 2007, p. 301)
   c. "A group of related words used as a single part of speech and not containing a verb" (Warriner, 1984, p. 41)
   d. "A group of words without a finite verb and which functions as a noun, an adjective, a verb or an adverb". (Dadzie & Grant, 2008, p. 8)

At first glance, these definitions appear to offer workable characterisations of phrases. However, closer examination reveals that the definitions offered in 1(a) – (c) are extremely general. For, while they can refer to examples like:

2. a. the three wise men
   b. before the arrival of the priest
   c. considerably more resilient

They can equally apply to the following structures:

3. a. the fewer, the merrier
   b. while in school
   c. though suspicious of her intentions
   d. when in doubt

However, these later structures (3a–d) do not conventionally qualify as phrases within standard grammatical analysis. The inability of the definitions in (1a–c) to exclude such forms demonstrates their lack of diagnostic precision.

Moreover, the definition offered in 1(d) implies that the following structures qualify to be phrases:

4. a. since joining the army
   b. deceived by our applause
   c. to pass the test
   d. for Paul to win the race

Since none of these constructions has a finite verb, they would all be classified as phrases, as per 1(d). However, such an outcome collapses important grammatical distinctions and obscures the structural differences among these constructions.

In addition to these definitional problems, there is a complication arising from the many types of phrases in the literature. Examples of such types are identified in 5 below:

5. absolute phrase
   adjective phrase
   adverb phrase
   appositive phrase
   gerund phrase
   infinitive phrase
   noun phrase
   participial phrase
   prepositional phrase
   verb phrase

This obviously presents a serious pedagogical and analytical challenge. For teachers, students, and text analysts alike, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what unifies these categories and on what principled basis they are distinguished in texts. These several types often exacerbate the confusion.

Another problem concerns the often-indistinct basis for establishing many of these sub-categories. In other words, the definitions offered are not only unhelpful but conceptually problematic. Consider, for example, the following definition of an *absolute phrase*:

6. An *absolute phrase* is said to be "a modifying parenthetical or subordinate phrase of a root sentence that includes a subject but does not have an acting verb so cannot stand on its own… it has no grammatical connection with the other parts of the sentence in which it occurs." (Djikunu, 2006, p. 552)

Apart from the fact that this definition is grammatically fatuous, it appears confusing, as well. If a structure lacks a verb, it is unclear on what basis it can be said to contain a *subject*. A linguistic form is identified as a *subject* only because it has a grammatical relationship with a verb. The absence of such a relation renders the notion of a subject incoherent in this context.

Another definition given for an absolute phrase is even more confounding:

7. An *absolute phrase* is said to be a grammatical construction that modifies an entire sentence……not grammatically connected to the main clause by a conjunction and does not modify any single word within the clause. (Warriner, 2008)

What does this mean in grammatical terms? What does it mean to claim that a structure occurring within a sentence has no grammatical connection with the other parts of the sentence? If a construction is genuinely unconnected grammatically, then what is it doing in the sentence in the first place? Definitions of this nature offer little guidance for the identification of whatever this phrase type is.

Similar issues arise in the definition of a *verbal phrase:*

8. A *verbal phrase* is a group of words built around a verb but acts as a noun, adjective, or adverb instead of a main verb in a sentence (Learn English Weekly, 2025)

Here again, the definition is overly broad and conceptually ambiguous. It conflates formal structure with functional role and provides no clear criteria for distinguishing verbal phrases from other constructions involving non-finite verbs. Such definitions, lacking in precision, cannot reliably aid the identification and application of the grammatical unit.

The problem is further compounded by the examples usually used to illustrate these definitions. For instance, the following sentences are cited as containing an *adjective phrase:*

9. a) Thunder struck down the tall *building with the red tower.*
   b) The captain *of the team* scored a goal.

By contrast, the following are offered as examples containing an *adverb phrase:*

10. a) Dzifa wrote her answers *with great care*.
    b) Hassan was walking *in the garden.*

To illustrate an *absolute phrase*, the following examples are provided:

11. a) *The game having ended,* the victors lifted the trophy.
    b) *Her husband was completely exhausted, so* she allowed him to rest.

Examples of the *gerund phrases* include:

12. a) *Walking to school daily* is a good exercise for me.
    b) We hated *his eating breakfast in class.*

Then, to explain a *participial phrase*, the following examples are given:

13. a) *Walking to school yesterday,* Haruna saw a snake.
    b) *Disturbed by her letter*, Phillip phoned Mercy.

Three major observations arise from these examples. First, the structures identified as *adjective phrases* in (9) are similar to those identified as *adverb phrases* in (10). The questions then are: what is the difference between them, and what is the basis for classifying them as different?

Indeed, a closer examination of the illustrative examples reveals that for adjective phrases, we have the sequences in (9) as follows:

14. a) with the red tower
    b) of the team

And, for an *adverb phrase*, we have the sequences in (10) as follows:

15. a) with great care
    b) in the garden

Though similar in morphological structure, the pair in (14) is treated as different from the pair in (15).
When examined critically, it is evident that we cannot separate 14 (a) and 14 (b) from the nouns they modify in (9). For instance, it is not possible to restructure the sentences in (9) as follows:

16. a) **With the red tower* thunder struck down the tall building
    b) **Of the team* the captain scored a goal

This suggests that the prepositional structures in (14) do not have independent occurrence from the nominal elements to which they are attached. They are complements to their respective heads in the Nominal Groups (NG). This can be seen in the analysis below:

17. Thunder struck down the tall building *with the red tower*
    NG=➔ ($_{d}$ the) ($_{m}$ tall) ($_{H}$ building) q[($_{p}$ with) [$_{NG}$ ($_{d}$ the) ($_{m}$ red) ($_{H}$ tower)]]

In other words, as regards the Nominal Group at object position, the prepositional structure, *with the red tower*, is a qualifier to the headword, *building*. This explains why it cannot be shifted, as shown in 16 (a).

Similarly, we can analyse 9 (b) as follows:

18. The captain *of the team* scored a goal.
    NG=➔ ($_{d}$ the) ($_{H}$ captain) q[($_{p}$ of) [$_{NG}$($_{d}$ the) ($_{H}$ team)]]

Where the prepositional structure is at the qualifier position to the Head, *captain*, accordingly, it cannot operate independently of its head. This explains the error in 16 (b).

In contrast, the prepositional structures in (10) exhibit a greater degree of positional independence and can, therefore, be separated from the elements with which they co-occur. Thus, it is possible to have the following sentences:

19. a) *With great care*, Dzifa wrote her answers.
    b) *In the garden*, Hassan was walking.

20. a) Dzifa, *with great care*, wrote her answer.
    b) Hassan, *in the garden*, was walking.

These two variant realisations are possible because the prepositional structures are performing adjunctive (rather than complement) functions. This crucial difference between the prepositional structures in (9) and (10) must be captured in their identification. Accordingly, this difference must be captured in their respective definitions. Definitions that fail to encode such functional and distributional differences inevitably lead to misclassification and analytical inconsistency.

A related issue arises in the treatment of non-finite verb constructions, particularly in the distinction drawn between *gerund phrases* and *participial phrases.* Consider the examples in 21:

21. a) *Walking to school daily* is a good exercise for me.
    b) *Nodding his head*, Stephen agreed with my suggestion.

In some grammar texts, the example in 21 (a) is classified as a *gerund phrase*, while the example in 21 (b) is labelled a *participle phrase* (Djikunu, 2006). However, the basis for this distinction is often left unexplained. Given that both constructions involve non-finite verb forms, the question arises as to why they are treated as categorically distinct. Without explicit criteria, the classification appears arbitrary. As a result, learners and analysts are left without a reliable method for determining phrase type in comparable contexts.

Lastly, further inconsistency concerns the treatment of prepositional structures across different phrase categories. As illustrated in 22, the examples cited for *adverb phrase*, *adjective phrase* and *prepositional phrase* share similar constituent structures - that is, they all begin with prepositions:

22. a) The town is *beyond the river.* - Adverb phrase
    b) The boy *in a sailor's cap* fell off the cart. - Adjective phrase
    c) They used the staircase *on the left*. - Prepositional phrase

But no explanation is given as to why these similar prepositional structures are assigned different phrase categories. The obvious question which arises then is: are such distinctions necessary? If so, have these distinctions been properly treated in the literature? It

is the position taken in this study that these questions have not been satisfactorily addressed. It is problems of the nature discussed above that have served as motivation for this study. This has become necessary, especially since many English grammar textbooks used at the basic and secondary levels in Ghana rely on the definitions and subcategorisations discussed here, and teachers of English grammar frequently depend on these materials for instruction. Consequently, the theoretical inconsistencies and unclear identification procedures found in the literature are reproduced in pedagogical practice, thereby perpetuating confusion among both teachers and learners.

It is against this background that the present study is aimed. The persistent inconsistencies, inaccurate definitions and opaque classification principles with the unit *phrase* have generated our interest in this area of grammatical research. In response, this study aims to offer a more structured and principled approach to grammatical analysis of the phrase. Specifically, it seeks to propose verifiable definitions and plausible criteria for subcategorisation that are grounded in syntactic function and distributional behaviour. The underlying assumption is that such an approach will significantly reduce the confusion that has long characterised the identification and categorisation of the unit *phrase*.

THE PROPOSED SOLUTION

We begin this section by suggesting that the term *phrase* should be avoided as a grammatical label. It is argued here that the unit traditionally referred to as a phrase should not be designated as such, given the persistent lack of conceptual stability and terminological consistency associated with the term. This instability is not incidental but endemic to grammatical theory.

The confusion surrounding the term has long been acknowledged in the literature. Indeed, Matthews (1981, p. 160) explicitly remarks on the disorder in its usage, noting that the "present usage (of the term) is confused, and any definition would do violence to some grammarian's practice." This observation remains highly relevant as subsequent developments in grammatical theory have not resolved the problem but, in many aspects, have intensified it.

Notably, many reference grammars do not offer explicit definitions of the term at all (Quirk et al, 1985; Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002; Crystal, 2003). Rather than articulating what constitutes a phrase, they assume its existence in grammatical analysis as self-evident and proceed to the analysis of grammatical structures in terms of phrasal groupings.

Moreover, the major influential theories of syntax have contributed to the proliferation of competing and incompatible interpretations of the term. For instance, Matthews (1981, p. 161) describes the *phrase* in the following general terms:

23. A phrasal construction can…be defined as any construction which has a head, and a phrase as any construction which exhibits such a construction.

The recognised phrasal subtypes in this approach include:

24. a) Noun Phrase
    b) Verb Phrase
    c) Adjectival Phrase
    d) Adverbial Phrase
    e) Prepositional Phrase

While this definition appears straightforward, its breadth renders it analytically weak as it potentially subsumes a wide range of constructions without offering clear criteria for differentiation.

In Construction Grammar, syntax involves "the study and description of the arrangement of words into words, phrases and sentences…" and that the constituents of a phrase are "the HEAD, and the marginal parts serving in various adjunct functions." (Lockwood, 2002, p. 42). The phrasal categories recognised in this theory are:

25. a) Noun Phrase (NP)
    b) Pronoun Phrase (PronP)
    c) Verb Phrase (VP)
    d) Adjectival Phrase (AP)
    e) Adverbial Phrase (AdvP)

Although Construction Grammar adopts a usage-based orientation, its reliance on the term *phrase* adds to the terminological diversity rather than resolving it.

In the Minimalist Program, a *phrase* is not considered a major, fundamental grammatical unit with its own special rules and structure. Instead, phrases are simply the results of applying a very simple operation called Merge, which represents the combining of two elements into a larger structure. In the words of Radford (2004), the phrase can simply be considered as:

> An expression larger than a word, which is a maximal projection. In traditional grammar, the term refers strictly to non-clausal expressions. However, in more recent work, clauses are analysed as types of phrases. (p. 352)

While traditional grammar restricts the term to non-clausal expressions, Minimalist analyses extend it to include clausal structures as well. Accordingly, in theory, the following examples are treated as phrases:

26. a) the man refused the offer-Tense Phrase (TP)
    b) that she told a lie… -Complementiser Phrase (CP)
    c) the carpenter- Determiner Phrase (DP)
    d) … to see her mother- Verb Phrase (VP)
    e) … dependent on his strength- Adjectival Phrase (AP)
    f) … very efficiently- Adverbial Phrase (ADVP)
    g) … outside our office- Prepositional Phrase (PP)
    h) … many girls- Quantifier Phrase (QP)

The term, therefore, encompasses virtually all syntactic units above the level of word, including clauses. While this reconceptualisation may be internally coherent within Minimalist theory, it further distances the term from its traditional and pedagogical uses.

The situation is no less problematic within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). To begin with, within the rank scale proposed in this framework, there is disagreement concerning the appropriate label for the unit situated between the word and the clause. Some scholars identify this unit as the *group* between the word and the *clause* (Bloor & Bloor, 2004). Then, there are those others who use the terms *phrase* and *group* interchangeably to refer to the same unit (Eggins, 2004). For these people, the two terms refer to the same syntactic structure. Moreover, there is a third class of proponents who maintain a principled distinction between *group* and *phrase,* and treat them as distinct unit types with different internal structures and functions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Downing & Locke, 2002).

In highlighting this difference, Fontaine (2013, p. 36) explains that:

> *Groups* are units which are based on a head element, which may be modified by other elements; the head element is the only required element of the group, with all other elements being optional.

By contrast:

> *phrases* are those units which are based on a pivotal element, which must be completed by one or more elements… With a *phrase,* it is a combination of the pivotal element and the completing element(s)which define the phrase. In other words, one is not seen as a modification of the other but rather as a completion (or complement).

Within this strand of SFL, examples of such phrases may extend to include some *clause*, *prepositional phrase* and the *genitive phrase* (Matthiessen, 2019, 2023; McCabbe, 2011).

PROPOSED STRUCTURAL IDENTIFICATION

Given all this conundrum about what the unit *phrase* is, we propose replacing the term *phrase* with the more neutral (and generic) term *group*. This proposal draws on the rank scale articulated in Systemic Functional Linguistics, which provides a hierarchical organisation of grammatical units. The relevant units should, therefore, be ordered as follows:

27. …the clause-complex
    the clause
    the group
    the word

Adopting the *group* as the intermediate unit between word and clause allows for a consistent identification of grammatical structure and is free from theoretical ambiguities that have come to characterise the term *phrase* across linguistic traditions.

In identifying what constitutes a *group*, we will draw on insights from Cognitive Linguistics, specifically, Evans and Green (2007, p. 492) characterise groups as:

> [words] that belong together as a group. Inside each phrase, there is a central word or head which carries the main meaning of the phrase and which determines what other kinds of words the phrase can or must contain. These other words are called dependents and are divided into complements (what is required by the head to 'complete' it) and modifiers (an optional element with a modifying function).

This study, therefore, define the group as a grammatical unit consisting of a head word and any associated dependents where the head is obligatory and determines the formal properties, internal structure, and grammatical behaviour of the unit, while the dependents, classified as complements or modifiers, are optional elements licensed by the head.

It must be pointed out that, in spite of the apparent divergences in the treatment of the *phrase*, most theories appear to agree that there is an obligatory constituent in such a sequence of words, which is recognised as the *head*. This agrees with an important principle in the Minimalist Program:

28. The Headedness Principle
    Every syntactic structure is a projection of a headword (Radford, 2004, p. 61)

It is this obligatory constituent in the sequence which:

29. a) determines the grammatical properties of the whole group
    b) determines the name tag that is given to the whole group

Accordingly, in our approach, it is recognised that there are five main groups in grammatical analysis:

30. Nominal Group
    Verbal Group
    Adjectival Group
    Adverbial Group
    Prepositional Group

Each group type is distinguished by the grammatical class of its obligatory head. The internal structure and properties of each group are discussed in the next section.

THE GROUP: CONSTITUENT STRUCTURES

A. The Nominal Group

The Nominal Group (NG) is defined by the presence of a noun as its obligatory element or head. As its name suggests, the whole group adopts the grammatical properties of a noun. Examples of Nominal Group structures are:

31. a) **stones**
    b) those **stones**
    c) those big **stones**
    d) **stones** from Tema
    e) these **stones** from Tema

In these examples, the headword is **stones,** which is a noun. Also, apart from this obligatory head (stones), all other words in the group are optional. Accordingly, the whole sequence is referred to as the Nominal Group.

B. The Verbal Group

The Verbal Group (VG) is characterised by a verb as its obligatory element. In the following examples, different realisations of the lexical verb, *visit,* function as the head of the group, and the whole sequence adopts the grammatical properties of the verb:

32. a) **visited**
    b) has **visited**
    c) has been **visiting**
    d) must have been **visiting**

As indicated in these examples, only the lexical verb *visit* is obligatory, and the other elements are all optional.

C. The Adjectival Group

The Adjectival Group (AdjG) is defined by the presence of an adjective as its head. The adjective determines both the grammatical properties and the label of the group. Examples of the group are:

33. a) **sure**
    b) quite **sure**
    c) quite **sure** indeed
    d) **sure** of his convictions

Here, *sure* functions as the obligatory element while the degree modifiers and complements are optional constituents.

D. The Adverbial Group

The Adverbial Group (AdvG) has the adverb as the obligatory element in this group, and it determines the constituents of the group**.** Examples of this group are:

34. a) **sufficiently**
    b) so **sufficiently**
    c) so **sufficiently** enough

E. The Prepositional Group

The structure of the Prepositional Group (PG) consists of an obligatory preposition and a completive element. Unlike the other groups, a preposition cannot occur alone as a group. It must always have a complement to 'complete' its structure. Examples of this group are:

35. a) **beside** the car
    b) next **against** the tree
    c) right **by** the roadside

From the discussion above, it is evident that each group is distinguished from the others by the grammatical class of its obligatory head.

THE GROUP: FUNCTIONAL EXPONENCE

In addition to the constituent structure, another way of distinguishing between group types is to consider how the specific group is realised in clause structure (that is, what grammatical function it performs in a clause). There are, in this case, two levels of exponence (primary and secondary), with the exception of the Verbal Group, which has only one level of exponence.

I. Primary Level of Exponence

The primary level of exponence refers to the functional role of a group as an element in clause structure. Each group primarily performs a grammatical function within a clause. These functions include:

Subject
Predicator
Object
Complement
Adjunct

A. The Verbal Group

The only grammatical function the Verbal Group can perform is the Predicator role. It cannot perform any other function within a clause**.** More importantly, the Verbal Group is the only group whose presence is obligatory for a structure to qualify as a clause. The grammatical roles of all other groups are defined in relation to the Verbal Group or Predicator. Examples of the realisations of the Predicator function in a clause include:

36. a) Martha **has seen** the book.
    b) You **weren't** available yesterday.
    c) I **left** the hall early.

B. The Nominal Group

The Nominal Group exhibits the greatest functional flexibility, often occurring in several primary grammatical roles including Subject, Object, Complement and Adjunct.

i. a Subject

37. a) **Human life** has improved greatly.
    b) **Announcements** were made today.
    c) **Koforidua** is a big town.

ii) an Object

38. a) They will not sign **the cheque.**
    b) Let's greet **all our friends.**
    c) You must **pay your debt**.

iii) a Complement

39. a) She is **a hardworking nurse.**
    b) It appears to be **a difficult assignment**.
    c) Nancy has become a **very stubborn child.**

iv) an Adjunct

40. a) They came back **the following week.**
    b) We'll visit you **this year**.
    c) They visited the town **the previous day.**

C. Adjectival Group

This group usually occurs in clause structure at the Complement position after linking verbs such as *become*, *feel*, *grow*, and *remain*, among others. Example:

41. a) The chairman has **become extremely angry.**
    b) After the verdict, I considered myself **very lucky**.
    c) Let's all remain **calm.**

D. Adverbial Group

This group occurs mainly at the Adjunct position in clause structure:

42. a) I wish he had spoken **more** honestly to us.
    b) **Quietly,** he entered the class.
    c) The prefect treated the class **very unfairly.**

E. Prepositional Group

The Prepositional Group has its primary function as an Adjunct in clause structure:

43. a) **Because of the rains**, we couldn't farm.
    b) He swam **against the river current**.
    c) Harriet greeted the elders **with the utmost respect.**

II. Secondary Level of Exponence

The secondary exponence refers to roles that indicate the clause-level functions of a group. Accordingly, functioning at this level involves instances in which the groups mostly function at rank-shifted positions within other groups.

A. The Nominal Group

The Nominal Group can perform two secondary exponence roles.

i. At a rank-shifted position, it functions as a qualifier in a Prepositional Group. At such positions, the NG performs a complementary function within the Prepositional Group. Examples of such use are demonstrated below:

44. a) throughout **the country**
    PG=PG=➔($_{p}$throughout)+q[$_{NG}$**(the)(country)**]
    b) behind **the tall trees**
    PG =➔ ($_{p}$ behind) + q[$_{NG}$ **(the) (tall) (trees)**]

ii. Within a genitive structure, which is a rank-shifted position, it functions as a modifier within a Nominal Group. Examples of its use are found as follows:

45. a) **their parents'** approval
    NG➔m(q[$_{NG}$($_{d}$**their**)($_{H}$**parents'**)])+H (approval)
    b) **my big brother's** car
    NG ➔ m($_{q}$[$_{NG}$($_{d}$**my**) + ($_{e}$**big**) ($_{H}$**brother's**)]) + H (car)

B. The Adjectival Group

The Adjectival Group may function as a rank-shifted modifier to a head noun in a Nominal Group:

46. a) two **very magnificent** houses
    NG =➔m (two+q[$_{AG}$ **(very)+(magnificent)**]) +H (houses)
    b) an **unfortunately vulnerable** position
    NG=➔m($_{d}$an+q[$_{AG}$ **(unfortunately)**+(**vulnerable**)]+ H (position)

C. The Prepositional Group

i. The Prepositional Group can occur as a rank-shifted qualifier within a Nominal Group. In such positions, the Prepositional Group acts as a complement to the head word:

47. a) the meeting **in my house** was rowdy
    NG=➔($_{d}$the)+H(meeting)+q[$_{PG}$**(in my house)**]
    b) his outburst **outside the court** was unnecessary
    NG=➔($_{d}$his)+H(outburst)+q[$_{PG}$**(outside the court**)]

ii. The group can also occur as a rank-shifted qualifier within an Adjectival Group. In such cases, the Prepositional Group acts as a complement to the head adjective:

48. a) dependent **on his strength**
    AG=➔H(dependent)+q[$_{PG}$**(on his strength**)]
    b) conscious **of our limitations**
    AG=➔H(conscious)+q[$_{PG}$ (**of our limitations**]

We will conclude this section by making two key observations:

i. First, groups may realise two broad types of functional roles within the clause structure: primary and secondary. Therefore, it is our claim that these two roles provide a robust basis for identifying a *group*.
ii. Second, while the primary function of the *group* within a clause is obligatory, the secondary function is not. That is, it is not necessary that a *group* should perform a secondary grammatical role. However, there must always be a primary function for a *group* in a clause**.**

In other words, no matter what *group* category we are dealing with, there is always a specific primary grammatical role it will perform. However, in addition to this primary role (obligatory for all *groups*), there

may be a secondary grammatical role which some *groups* may perform in the clause.

The implication is that it is possible to identify a *group* by its primary (and, in addition, its secondary) grammatical role. In both cases, there is no need to make reference to any semantic information about the *group* if we want to identify it. In our view, this information is strictly grammatical. This function-based approach, thus, offers a principled and systematic method for identifying and classifying groups in grammatical analysis.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study set out to address a persistent source of confusion in the grammatical description of the unit group (often referred to as a *phrase*). The central argument advanced in this study is that in the attempt to identify a *group* in grammar, there is no reason to use semantic information as a basis. As has been demonstrated here, this can create confusion. A clear illustration of this problem is found in Murthy's (2009) treatment of the prepositional structure *in the white car* in examples 49 (a) below as an Adjective Phrase but in 49 (b) as an Adverb Phrase:

49. a) The lady gave me a lift **in the white car**.
    b) The lady **in the white car** is my sister.

As far as we are concerned, it has the same prepositional structure since its constituent structure has not changed. In both instances, the sequence consists of a preposition followed by its complement and therefore constitutes a Prepositional Group. In terms of structure, there is no motivation for assigning different group labels, such as Adjective Phrase in 49(b) and Adverb Phrase in 49(a).

The apparent difference arises not from the constituent structure but from the functional realisation within the clause. In 49 (a), the Prepositional Group functions as an Adjunct in the clause, while in 49 (b), it is performing a qualifier function as a rank shifted Prepositional Group in the Nominal Group (which is the Subject of the clause). Thus, while grammatical function varies, the grammatical identity remains constant. Thus, to the question: what is the grammatical structure of *in the white car* in both examples? The answer is: it is a Prepositional Group. To the question: what are its grammatical roles in each clause? The answers are:

1. In 49 (a), the PG is an Adjunct in the clause.
2. In 49 (b), the PG is a qualifier rank shifted in the NG subject of the clause.

A similar pattern is observed in the structure from *last year* in the examples below:

50. a) The couple visited me **last year.**
    b) The tournament **last year** was successful.

In both cases, *last year* is a Nominal Group; its grammatical identity does not change. What differs is its functional deployment. It serves a different role in each clause:

1. As an Adjunct in 50 (a)
2. as a qualifier rankshifted in the NG Subject of the clause in 50 (b)

The point being emphasised is that in discussing such a syntactic phenomenon, it is important to separate the syntactic information from the semantic information. In our view, the reliance on semantic information in identifying groups leads to inconsistencies and contradictory classifications. It is our belief that the approach suggested in this work identifies the unit *group* in grammatical analysis more efficiently and more clearly than what exists in many grammar texts.

The case made reinforces a broader theoretical point that cuts across grammatical frameworks. Within SFL, the separation between rank, function and realisation is a foundational principle; however, it is not always consistently applied. Within the Minimalist framework, headedness is central to consistent identification, but functional variation is sometimes conflated with categorial status. Traditional grammar descriptions frequently rely on semantic notions to label phrases, thereby obscuring the formal structure. We demonstrate, through this study, that a head-based functionally articulated approach provides a clearer account than mixed criteria systems.

Recommendations: The recommends that grammar instruction on the identification of the grammatical unit *group*, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels, should explicitly focus on and distinguish between group identity based on constituent structure and head, and group function based on the

roles of the group in the clause. It is important that descriptions of the grammatical unit, *group,* that conflate semantic roles with structural categories, be revised, especially in grammar textbooks. This, we believe, can make the understanding and identification of the grammatical unit easier for learners.

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