

Unit 6 - The noun phrase

1 The noun phrase and head noun

As we saw in Unit 3, a clause can be made up of five basic elements : subject, verb, object, complement and adverbial. The **noun phrase** is the principal grammatical unit that can serve as three of these elements, subject, object and complement. It contains a noun or pronoun which acts as the phrase's focus or **head noun**. This noun may appear on its own : in syntax a single noun is referred to as a noun phrase, even though a phrase is usually defined as a group of two or more words.

In the sentence *Pierre a rencontré Marie en ville*, for example, *Pierre* is a noun phrase acting as the subject of the sentence, and *Marie* is a noun phrase acting as a direct object.

2 Determiners

More usually, however, a noun phrase contains one or more elements serving to give added information about the head noun. The **determiner** is a word appearing before a noun that gives information about the scope of reference of that noun. In French determiners include the articles *le, un, des* and so on, and certain types of adjective :

possessive : *mon livre*

demonstrative : *cette maison*

indefinite : *quelques personnes*

interrogative : *quelle rue ?*

numerical : *cinquante francs*

For example, in the sentence *Mon père a rencontré quelques amis en ville* the phrase *mon père* is a noun phrase acting as the subject of the sentence, and *quelques amis* is a noun phrase acting as a direct object.

3 Modifiers

The remaining elements of a noun phrase are called **modifiers**, and they are words or phrases giving information about specific attributes of the head noun rather than about its scope of reference. They can come before or after the head noun, but in French they tend to come after it.

3.1 Qualificative adjectives

These elements can be **qualificative adjectives**, that is adjectives that do not fall into the category of determiners :

un chapeau rouge head = *chapeau*, adjective = *rouge*

ta nouvelle maison head = *maison*, adjective = *nouvelle*

Sometimes a noun phrase can contain adjectives in succession, as in *ta jolie nouvelle maison*, or it might be qualified by an adverb, as in *ta très jolie maison*. In both cases the modifying words are said to form an **adjective phrase**. As with noun phrases, for the purposes of analysis a single adjective can also be said to constitute an adjective phrase.

ta nouvelle maison head = *maison*, adjective phrase = *nouvelle*

ta jolie nouvelle maison head = *maison*, adjective phrase = *jolie nouvelle*

ta très jolie maison head = *maison*, adjective phrase = *très jolie*

3.2 Noun complements

These are nouns that modify other nouns. In French they are usually introduced by a preposition. In this case the resultant expression is called a **preposition phrase** :

un cours d'anglais	head = <i>cours</i> , prepositional phrase = <i>d'anglais</i>
<i>an English class</i>	
un sac à main	head = <i>sac</i> , prepositional phrase = <i>à main</i>
<i>a hand bag</i>	

Sometimes a noun can modify another noun without the presence of a preposition. Unlike in English, this is quite rare in French except in set expressions :

La rue Balzac, le roi Louis	head = <i>rue</i> , noun complement = <i>Balzac</i>
[literally] <i>Balzac Street, King Louis</i>	
Côté sécurité, on n'a rien à craindre	head = <i>côté</i> , noun complement = <i>sécurité</i>
<i>Safety-wise, we have nothing to worry about</i>	

3.3 Completive clauses

As we saw in 4:3.1, these are introduced by *que* in French, and function as a noun. As such they can be seen as similar to noun complements mentioned in 3.2 above :

J'ai l'impression qu'il ment	head = <i>impression</i> , completive clause = <i>qu'il ment</i>
<i>I've got a feeling he's lying</i>	

3.4 Relative clauses

As we saw in 4:3.4, these are adjectival in function :

La femme que j'ai rencontrée	: head = <i>femme</i> , relative clause = <i>que j'ai rencontrée</i>
<i>The woman (who / whom) I met</i>	
Le document dont j'ai besoin	: head = <i>document</i> , relative clause = <i>dont j'ai besoin</i>
<i>The document (that) I need</i>	

3.5 Nonfinite clauses

These are clauses containing a nonfinite verb such as a participle or an infinitive. When these modify a head noun they are also adjectival in function :

J'ai des courses à faire	head = <i>courses</i> , nonfinite clause = <i>à faire</i>
<i>I have some shopping to do</i>	
La voiture garée devant sa maison	head = <i>voiture</i>
<i>The car parked in front of her house</i>	nonfinite clause = <i>garée devant sa maison</i>