

## UNIT 2: NOUNS & NOUN PHRASES

The concept of ‘number’ (singular vs. plural) and of subject-verb agreement may seem fairly simple to you, but students do make lots of mistakes with it. The main part of this unit is designed not only to take you over familiar territory, but also to make you think in a new way about it. In addition to the questions, which will help you figure out the grammar for yourselves, you’ll also find a certain amount of explanation. We’ve tried to keep this to a minimum in the units themselves, as we do not want you to rely too much on explanations, but on your *own* analytic and problem-solving skills instead.

If we think there’s a need to elaborate on the simple explanations given in the units, we’ll do it here in the Students’ Notes. In this unit, the count/mass noun distinction may need some further explanation.

### Count and Mass Nouns

First of all, you must bear in mind that grammatical ‘explanations’ are seldom completely reliable. This is because the grammar of a language is *not* the result of ‘rules’ made by someone at some time in the past. Grammar develops naturally over time, and though many things in it are highly *systematic* or *regular*, it is rarely as simple as black and white. The so-called explanations offered by linguists (people who analyze language scientifically) are merely attempts to *generalize* over the language phenomena that they observe. So if an explanation seems to make sense to you, and to fit (to a high degree) the language phenomena that you yourself have observed, then by all means make use of it for whatever it’s worth. If not, just forget it!

The distinction given in this unit between count nouns and mass nouns (which we’ve borrowed from Cognitive Grammar) is based on the perceived distinction between things in this world which are *inherently bounded*, and things which are not. Take *water* and *lake*. Both words refer to things which are made up of the same substance, i.e. water. But the word *water* does not carry within itself a ‘natural’ or ‘inherent’ boundary. Sure, we can put an *arbitrary* limit on water, and say ‘this much’ or ‘that much’ water. But the point is that *water* itself is not naturally bounded. This means that *water* is infinitely expandable or contractible; it can be as little or as much as you want it, but whether it is a drop, a tankful, or an ocean of water, it is still water. *Lake*, on the other hand, is an inherently bounded body of water. It may be large or small, but the concept of a boundary is essential for it – without a boundary, there is simply no lake, and you cannot take a part of a lake and say, ‘this is a lake’. Think of the relationship between other mass and count nouns – e.g. *money* vs. *dollar*, *time* vs. *hour*, and you will see a similar distinction.

The ‘bounded’ vs. ‘unbounded’ explanation will go some way towards helping you understand the ‘count’ vs. ‘mass’ noun distinction. Ultimately, the ‘authority’ rests with the users of the language – whether they treat a particular noun as count or mass – or as both, with a fine distinction between the different senses of the noun. When in doubt, consult a dictionary.

The introduction makes the important point that nouns in English generally require a **determiner** to indicate what objects or persons they refer to. This is especially true of **singular count nouns** – like *car*, *policeman*, *book*, *house*, etc. A singular count noun must take a determiner (*a car*, *the car*, *this car*, *my car*, etc.), and would be ungrammatical without

one, as in: \*‘Car is here’, \*‘House has been sold’, etc. In this respect, English is different from Chinese, where a determiner is not needed if the ‘car’ or ‘house’ is understood (think of the equivalents of these sentences in Chinese).

In English, **singular mass nouns**, like *rice* or *water*, or **plural count nouns**, like *cars* or *houses*, do not require a determiner when used generally. When used to refer to specific objects, a determiner is used, as in ‘This rice is very good’ and ‘Those cars are expensive’.

But remember that not everything can be explained with reasons. The fact is that English grammar happens to require a determiner to be used with singular count nouns, so remember to write ‘The car is new’ or ‘He has bought a car’, instead of \*‘Car is new’ and \*‘He has bought car’.

## THE NOUN PHRASE

For Chinese learners, the biggest problems with the noun phrase are:

- (i) use of determiners
- (ii) plural forms of nouns
- (iii) modifiers that come *after* the noun instead of before it.

(iii) is especially hard for learners to get used to. The difference between English and Chinese is pretty big here. Let’s take the following English sentences, which contain a ‘complex’ noun phrase (given in square brackets):

1. [The book on the table] belongs to me.
2. [All people who love their country] should defend it with their lives.

Compare these noun phrases in English and Chinese (the noun head is in bold print, and the modifier is underlined):

ENGLISH	CHINESE
1. the <b>book</b> <u>on the table</u>	the <u>on the table</u> <b>book</b>
2. all <b>people</b> <u>who love their country</u>	all <u>love their country</u> <b>people</b>

In Chinese, all modifiers (e.g. ‘on the table’) come before the noun head (e.g. ‘book’). It is easy therefore to know what the noun head is – it’s always at the end of a noun phrase in Chinese. In English, only determiners and adjectives come before the noun head (e.g. ‘the new book’). Other modifiers – such as **prepositional phrases** (e.g. ‘on the table’, ‘at the airport’, etc.) and **relative clauses** (e.g. ‘who love their country’, ‘which sold a million copies’, etc.) must come after the noun head (‘the book on the table’, ‘the book which sold a million copies’). This may make it hard for you to identify the noun head, because it may be far from the end of the noun phrase. Questions 6-7 and additional exercise 1 will give you more practice on this.

Answers to the questions are provided below. Remember that they are meant only as a check on how well you did. Learning these answers is of little value in itself – working them out is what really matters.

## SUGGESTED ANSWERS

### QUESTION 1:

Some examples are:

- He took *a breath of air*.
- There were *lumps of earth* on the bathroom floor.
- A grain of sand* stuck to his nose.
- An ounce of gold* isn't worth much these days.
- He has *loads of money* in the bank.
- She was away for *a period of time*.
- Let me offer you *a piece of advice*.
- He doesn't have *a bit of courage*.

### QUESTION 2:

- \*I can see soldier everywhere.
- \*Tree is essential for parks.
- \*After school, I have to read a lot of book.

The above nouns cannot be used here in the singular form, since the context implies a number greater than one. They should all be in the plural: *soldiers, trees, books*.

### QUESTION 3:

*Money* is a mass noun and *flower* is a count noun. The grammatical differences between the two types of nouns are:

- 1) Mass nouns but not count nouns can be used on their own without a determiner;
- 2) Count nouns but not mass nouns have a plural form;
- 3) Count nouns but not mass nouns can take a numerical determiner like *a*;
- 4) Mass nouns take the quantifiers *much/a little* while count nouns take *many/a few*.

### QUESTION 4:

MASS NOUNS (notice that these are all 'unbounded' entities): *water, sand, money, literature, vegetation, furniture*.

COUNT NOUNS (notice that these are all 'bounded' entities): *lake, pond, dune, dollar, cent, novel, poem, flower, tree, chair, table*.

### QUESTION 5:

Sentences (a-d) are all about the 'boy'. 'Boy' is the noun head of all the underlined noun phrases. All these noun phrases, no matter how long, can be replaced by the pronoun 'he'.

### QUESTION 6:

The noun heads, which control subject-verb agreement, are underlined:

1. [The leader of the **rebels**] has surrendered.
2. [The newly-elected spokesman for the **workers**] seems very inexperienced.
3. [The former lovers of the **president**] have come forward one by one.
4. [The players who lost to the **new-comer**] were taken by surprise.
5. [The disease which struck fear in **millions of people**] was SARS.

### QUESTION 7:

1. (The schedule showing the jetfoil arrivals and departures) is out-of-date.
2. (His book of old photographs) is missing.
3. (The recent development of new public facilities) has led to an increase in tourism in the area.
4. (The trees in the park) need trimming.
5. (The floods which hit Hunan Province recently) have caused untold damage.
6. (The search for the terrorists) goes on.
7. (The new neighbour who moved in yesterday with 11 dogs) seems a little weird.
8. (The Olympic athlete with the greatest number of gold medals) is Mark Spitz.
9. (A car with four doors) costs a little more than one with two.
10. (The mathematician whose Nobel Prize surprised many people) is John Nash.

### QUESTION 8:

There are several possibilities in the choice of determiners. Here are just a few:

3. I saw a/the/his car in the/a garage yesterday.
4. The/a robber shot the/a policeman outside the/a bank.
5. My/her friend works in a/this restaurant.
6. The/our teacher gave a very boring lecture today.

### QUESTION 9:

Basically, these nouns refer to individual objects or people (rather than objects and people in general), and determiners help to limit their reference.

### QUESTION 10:

(Discuss with your classmates or teacher if you have problems understanding why any of these determiners are used)

Once upon a time, there was an old man in Northern China called Yu Gong ('Foolish Old Man'). In front of his house stood two tall mountains. To go to the nearest town, Yu Gong had to go around these mountains, which took a long time. So one day he called his family together, and announced that they would start digging and removing the mountains. He said, 'When my sons and I are dead and gone, their sons will carry on, and their sons and their sons...'

### QUESTION 11:

I've bought a new car. It is a Mazda sports car. It has a slim body but a powerful engine. The engine is turbo-charged, and the car can accelerate from 0 to 100 kph in 5 seconds.

- (i) The indefinite article *a (an)* is used when an object or person is mentioned for the first time in the context.
- (ii) The definite article *the* is used when an object or person has already been mentioned earlier in the context.

### QUESTION 12:

I've bought a new car. The engine is turbo-charged and super powerful. The bumpers are made of a special material which can withstand the severest punishment. The seats are made of the best leather, and are electrically-operated.

Even when a noun has not been mentioned before in the context, the definite article can be

used if it belongs to an object already mentioned. E.g., when ‘a new car’ has already been introduced, its engine, bumpers, seats, etc. are now ‘definite’, since we now know which engine, bumpers or seats are referred to. Another use of the definite article is to refer to something of the ‘highest degree’, e.g. ‘the severest punishment’ and ‘the best leather’, since there’s (presumably) only one highest or best.

### QUESTION 13:

In all these cases, the **context** makes it clear what the noun refers to. E.g., in (1), when you say ‘Do you have the key?’, you are likely to be standing in front of a door (to a meeting room, office, home, or whatever), and it is obvious that you are referring to the key to that door; or a place may have been mentioned previously, e.g. someone may have said, ‘Let’s get it from the storeroom’, and when you say ‘Do you have the key?’, it obviously refers to the key to the storeroom; and so on. The same goes for examples (2-4). In other examples (5, 7, 8), your location at the moment of speaking makes it clear which library (the one on the campus where you are), which manager (of the establishment where you are), which airport (of the city where you are). In (6), there is only one police force in the place where you are anyway (just as there is only one government). In (10), you would say such a thing only if you’re witnessing a problem before you, so it is clear which problem you’re referring to. In all cases then, you use the definite article *the* because the **context** at the time of speaking makes it perfectly clear what the noun refers to, even without any previous mention.

### QUESTION 14:

In all the (a) sentences, we’re referring to a noun whose identity is not yet established, and so it is ‘indefinite’. In (b), enough information is provided in the rest of the sentence to make the identity of the referent (the thing referred to) unique or unmistakable. E.g., there is only one possible book referred to by (1b) ‘... most interesting book I have read’, or (2b) ‘... only book on astrology in the bookstore’; and likewise only one possible referent for (3b) ‘... first girlfriend I ever had’ and (4b) ‘... key to the safe in his pocket’.

### QUESTION 15:

The (a) sentences refer to things in general (e.g. children or stray dogs in general), whereas the (b) sentences, with the definite article *the*, refer to specific things which are understood in the present context. E.g. in (1b), he loves certain specific children (understood in context as, e.g., his own children, or the children in a certain refugee camp, etc.), and not children in general. The same applies to all the other examples. (In (4b), we’re talking about a particular consignment of rice, such as the one now being sold in his shop, or in his pantry.)

### QUESTION 16:

The missing determiners are highlighted below. Where an existing determiner is redundant, it is enclosed in square brackets [ ].

1. The majority of **the** respondents agreed.
2. Most of **the** plants were giant plants.
3. All of them agreed that **the** ability to communicate was important.
4. The vitamin can inhibit **the** development of cancer.
5. It contains **a** large amount of carotene.
6. It is used by **the** human body.
7. We should save [the] energy as much as possible.
8. The layer of [the] mud became hard rock.

## ADDITIONAL EXERCISES:

### Exercise 1

1. [The first anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks] was commemorated all over the world.
2. [The families of the victims] were invited to attend memorial services in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.
3. [The names of all those who died in the World Trade Centre] are/were read out by the former mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, and others.
4. [Documentaries on the attacks and their aftermath] were shown on TV in Hong Kong.
5. [The documentary which caught the attention of most viewers] was about a young fireman on his first job in New York.
6. [The cameramen who shot this documentary] were two French brothers.
7. [The film which they shot inside the World Trade Centre during the attack] was the only one of its kind.

### Exercise 2

Blanks which need not be filled by a determiner are marked with (X):

#### Text 1:

(X) Evidence is growing of a link between global warming and the floods and droughts that devastated parts of Asia, southern Africa and Europe this year, the head of the United Nations' body on climate change said yesterday.

Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, told summit delegates there was undeniable proof that the Earth was warming.

"I think the evidence is becoming stronger that a lot of these extreme [weather] events are part of the overall process of climate change . . . there is a fair amount of statistical evidence and there is certainly anecdotal evidence . . . and I think the indications are that there is a link there."

#### Text 2:

A love-struck Chinese couple handcuffed themselves to each other during a tour outing and ended up being stopped by (X) policemen after a tourist mistook them for escaped convicts and alerted the authorities.

The man, identified only as Mr Wang, had returned to Shanghai recently to visit his girlfriend.

He had been studying in (X) Japan for two years, Shanghai Morning Post reported.

On (X) Wednesday night, the couple decided to travel to Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang province.

To show his deep love for her, he produced a pair of handcuffs and locked their wrists together, explaining to her that this was currently the most popular way of expressing love in Japan.

As they walked (X) hand in hand - literally - in the city, a tourist, thinking that they were (X) escaped convicts, reported them to a policeman.

#### Text 3:

A pet shop in Hong Kong is renting out (X) puppies in an effort to find a "solution to the problem of dogs being dumped by their owners" (South China Morning Post, August 29).

I am opposed to **this** horrible rental scheme, because it will not be good for **the** mental health of **the** puppies.

Imagine having **a** human baby on rental. **The** child would be traumatised and grow up without any sense of having **a** permanent identity. **The** puppies that are rented out will be troubled in **their** own canine way. As they grow up they may find it difficult to respond to **(X)** humans. It may be good for **the** pet shop's business, but **the** proprietor should think about how it will affect **the** dogs mentally.

**Text 4:**

Premier Zhu Rongji is more popular than President Jiang Zemin among **(X)** young Hong Kong people, **a** survey found yesterday - but late leaders Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong are admired even more.

Mr Zhu ranked fourth in **the** list of best leaders, with 23 votes, while Mr Jiang came 12th with only eight votes.

**The** survey of 502 people was conducted by **the** Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups. Topping **the** list was Sun Yat-sen, founder of modern China, followed by Deng Xiaoping and Mao.

Former US president Bill Clinton, at seventh, was **the** highest-ranking foreign leader.

**The** phone survey was carried out **(X)** last month and respondents were aged 15 to 34.

Democratic Party legislator Cheung Man-kwong said that Mr Zhu had successfully established **a** good image among **the** Hong Kong public with **his** determination to fight corruption on **the** mainland.

"It seems that Zhu is **the** type of leader Hong Kong people would accept," he said.

Interviewees were also asked to list **the** qualities needed most by **a** good leader.

**(X)** Integrity was ranked top, followed by **(X)** credibility, management skills and ability to communicate well.

**Text 5:**

Fixed-line phone networks were flooded with 26 million calls in **an** hour on Wednesday after **the** Observatory announced just before **(X)** midday that **the** No 8 typhoon signal would be hoisted.

**The** flood of calls between midday and 1pm was up to six times **the** capacity of **the** networks, which between them can handle only about four million calls an hour, **the** Office of the Telecommunications Authority (Ofta) said.

**The** mobile networks, which have **a** similar combined capacity, were flooded with 14 million calls in **the** same hour. There are four fixed-line operators and six mobile phone networks in **the** territory. Ofta secretary-general Anthony Wong Sei-kei defended the networks, saying all remained functioning and none crashed. "**The** reason people could not get through was because all the networks were over-loaded," he said.