

HEADWORD

In English grammar, a *head* is the key word that determines the nature of a phrase (in contrast to any modifiers or determiners).

For example, in a noun phrase, the head is a noun or pronoun ("a tiny *sandwich*"). In an adjective phrase, the head is an adjective ("completely *inadequate*"). In an adverb phrase, the head is an adverb ("quite *clearly*").

A head is sometimes called a *headword*, though this term shouldn't be confused with the more common use of *headword* to mean a word placed at the beginning of an entry in a glossary, dictionary, or other reference work.

Examples and Observations

- "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful *friendship*." (Humphrey Bogart as Rick in *Casablanca*, 1942)
- "As the leader of all illegal *activities* in Casablanca, I am an influential and respected *man*." (Sydney Greenstreet as Senor Ferrari in *Casablanca*, 1942)
- "The head of the noun phrase *a big man* is *man*, and it is the singular form of this item which relates to the co-occurrence of singular verb forms, such as *is*, *walks*, etc.; the head of the verb phrase *has put* is *put*, and it is this verb which accounts for the use of object and adverbial later in the sentence (e.g. *put it there*). In phrases such as *men and women*, either item could be the head." (David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2003)

Testing for Heads

"Noun phrases must contain a head. Most frequently this will be a noun or pronoun, but occasionally it can be an adjective or determiner. The heads of noun phrases can be identified by three tests:

1. They cannot be deleted.
2. They can usually be replaced by a pronoun.
3. They can usually be made plural or singular (this may not be possible with proper names).

Only test 1 holds good for all heads: the results for 2 and 3 depend on the type of head." (Jonathan Hope, *Shakespeare's Grammar*. Bloomsbury, 2003)

Determiners as Heads

"Determiners may be used as heads, as in the following examples:

Some arrived this morning.

I have never seen *many*.

He gave us *two*

Like third person pronouns these force us to refer back in the context to see what is being referred to. *Some arrived this morning* makes us ask 'Some what?', just as *He arrived this morning* makes us ask 'Who did?' But there is a difference. *He* stands in place of a whole noun phrase (e.g. *the minister*) while *some* is part of a noun phrase doing duty for the whole (e.g. *some applications*). . . .

"Most determiners occurring as heads are back-referring [that is, anaphoric]. The examples given above amply illustrate this point. However, they are not all so. This is especially the case with *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those*. For instance, the sentence *Have you seen these before?* could be spoken while the speaker is pointing to some newly built houses. He is then not referring 'back' to something mentioned, but referring 'out' to something outside the text [that is, exophora]."