## Nouns used to premodify other nouns: some limits and tips

Nouns can premodify another noun (i.e. can be used as adjectives before another noun), but this does not mean that any *of*-phrase can be transformed in this way. When the *of*-phrase is partitive, for example, we cannot usually make the noun governed by *of* premodify the noun. The most important classes of nouns which usually do not usually allow the noun of the *of*-phrase to become a premodifier are:

a)nouns that refer to sets or groups;

b) nouns that refer to number or quantity;

c)nouns that refer to sequence, series or lists

d)nouns that refer to class,

e)nouns that refer to part or portion:

*a group of people (~~a people group~~)*

*a set of problems (~~a problem set~~)*

*an amount of time (~~a time amount~~)*

*a sequence of steps (~~a step sequence~~)*

*a number of examples (~~an example number~~)*

*a kind of problem (~~a problem kind~~)*

*a type of mistake (~~a mistake type~~)*

*a class of beer (~~a beer class~~)*

*a sort of cigarette(~~a cigarette sort~~)*

*a portion of the program (~~a program portion~~)[[1]](#footnote-1)*

In general, the use of a noun (noun-2) to premodify another noun (noun-1) in technical English means that noun-2 indicates a sub-class of noun-1. Below you will find some examples:

*a home robot (vs. an industrial robot)*

*a computer network (vs. a telephone network)*

*database research (vs. materials research)*

*a learning system (vs. a sensory system)*

*a high-level task (vs. a low-level task)*

*machine intelligence (vs. human intelligence)*

*text retrieval (vs. data retrieval)*

*network operator (vs. computer operator)*

Obviously this rule is context sensitive. If you are writing an article about definitions of God, it could be possible to talk of the *Dawkins God definition*, but in most other contexts we would write *Dawkins’ definition of God*

***The Saxon genitive***

Here we find another interesting problem which is a bit difficult to explain limits on the use of the Saxon genitive.

A good rule of thumb, which is **too restrictive**, is to use the Saxon genitive to indicate possession with a human possessor. This is too restrictive, but the problem is that the best grammars of English add *a human* or *human-like* possessor. Unfortunately they do not give an algorithm to define what *human-like* means.

**Some points/tips**:

Formality: the *of* construction is more formal, so if you buy a book with all of Shakespeare’s plays, its title will be *The plays of Shakespeare*.

We can distinguish between the subject genitive and the object genitive:

***Dawkins defines God***

*Dawkins’ definition of God* 🡪the subject Saxon genitive

*God’s definition by Dawkins* 🡪 the object Saxon genitive.

**The subject Saxon genitive is more normalthan the object Saxon genitive.**

A short exercise about nouns premodifying other nouns:

## Nouns used as adjectives

How do we translate the following expressions into English. You should choose between the two alternatives (both may be correct).

1. una base de datos

**a) a database**

b) a base of data

2. recursos del sistema

a) resources of system

**b) system resources**

3. una cantidad de recursos

a) a resource quantity

**b) a quantity of resources**

4. un dispositivo de almacenamiento

a) a device storage

**b) a storage device**

5. recuperación de textos

a) texts retrieval

**b) text retrieval**

**(los adjetivos no van en plural pero hay excepciones: applications, communications…)**

6. el entorno Windows

a) the Window environment

**b) the Windows environment**

7. una parte del sistema

**a) a part of the system**

b) a system part

8. tiempo de recuperación

**a) retrieval time**

b) time retrieval

9. un tipo de gestión de memoria

**a) a type of memory management**

b) a memory management type

10. una petición de interrupción

**a) an interrupt request**

b) a request for interrupt

11. una rutina de memoria virtual

a) a memory virtual routine

**b) a virtual memory routine**

12. un sistema operativo para redes de área local

**a) a local networks operating system**

**b) a local network operating system**

13. un programa de gestión de recursos informáticos

a) a management resources computer program

**b) a computer resource management program**

14. un sistema operativo para la computación en tiempo real

**a) a real time computing operating system**

b) an operating system for real time computing

15. un sistema operativo de calidad para redes de área local

**a) a quality local area network operating system**

b) an operating system for quality local area networks

1. Precisely in the English of science and technology there are exceptions to these "rules", e.g. "data types", "data segment". [↑](#footnote-ref-1)