

**John Flowerdew** and **Richard W. Forest**. *Signalling nouns in English. A corpus-based discourse approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 306 pp. ISBN 9781107022119. Reviewed by **Beatrix Weber**, Technische Universität Dresden.

In their monograph, *Signalling nouns in English*, John Flowerdew and Richard W. Forest address a type of abstract noun known also as ‘container noun’ (Vendler 1967), ‘carrier noun’ (Ivanič 1991), ‘unspecific’ or ‘metalinguage noun’ (Winter 1992) or most notably ‘shell noun’ (Hunston and Francis 1999; Schmid 2000). However, despite considerable overlap between these categories and the class of signalling nouns (SNs), there is no complete extensional identity. As a list of illustrative examples, Flowerdew and Forest provide *thing*, *fact*, *idea*, *argument*, *possibility*, *chapter* and *kind* (p. 10; interestingly, though, *kind* does not occur as an SN in their corpus). The last two cannot be subsumed under the category of ‘shell nouns’ according to the definition provided by Schmid in his 2000 monograph, which may be regarded as the seminal publication on the subject. Schmid’s account is based on the syntactic observation that some nouns are able to occur in patterns such as ‘noun + postnominal *that*-clause’ (e.g. *the fact that I have no money*) or ‘noun + *be* + complementing *that*-clause’ (e.g. *The problem was that I have no money.*) (cf. Schmid 2000: 3). As this does not work for words such as *chapter* and *kind*, these have been excluded from his class of shell nouns.

The first five chapters provide us with a delimitation of the class of SNs. Besides addressing grammatical, semantic and discourse features of SNs, the authors also point out difficulties that arise when SNs are investigated empirically in a corpus study. The second part of their monograph (Chapters 6 to 10) introduces their corpus and presents the results of their analysis. A short final chapter concludes the main part with some suggestions for further research and a few comments on pedagogical implications of the work on SNs. In several appendices further information on the contents of the corpus and on the SNs retrieved in the search is listed.

In contrast to previous studies on the SN phenomenon, the authors establish their class of signalling nouns with greater emphasis on textual function. As the term already suggests, the nouns function as signals in discourse. In signalling anaphorically or cataphorically, they are a specific means of textual deixis illustrated in examples such as (1) and (2):

- (1) **The n-type semiconductor behaviour of the nanocrystalline oxide film is determined by the presence of Ti(III) species.** This experimental **fact** is opposite to the behaviour observed by other authors in colloidal films. (p. 1)
- (2) Their **role** is **to carry out the depolarizing phase of an action potential.** (ibid.)

The SNs (in bold) refer to the underlined structures, which specify the lexical content of the nouns. The authors argue that “an SN does more than act as a ‘shell’ or ‘carrier’ of lexical specifics found in a content clause” (p. 7) because of its specific role in textual development. Therefore they reject a strictly syntax-based view on SNs and adopt a broader perspective, which is reflected in their definition of SNs as “abstract nouns which are non-specific in their meaning when considered in isolation and which are made specific in their meaning by reference to their linguistic context” (p. 1). Although this definition seems to intuitively capture the nature of nouns like *fact* in (1) and *role* in (2), the criterion of non-specificity is not a particularly convincing one. With regard to shell nouns, Schmid has already questioned “unspecificity” (2000: 74f.) as a valid semantic characteristic. For some very general, superordinate SNs/shell nouns such as *fact* or *process*, unspecificity might be reasonably postulated. For others, such as *opportunity* or *strategy*, it seems implausible to talk of unspecific meaning, as a glance at their dictionary definitions already reveals that paraphrasing their sense involves more than just one semantic dimension. Un- or non-specificity, therefore, needs to be qualified in order to be appropriately understood. In their chapter on semantic features of SNs, the authors refine their criterion of non-specificity by relating it to SNs exhibiting “both a *constant* (context-independent) and a *variable* (context-dependent) meaning” (p. 26). In examples (1) and (2), the latter is spelled out in the underlined structures. It is important to note, however, that in order for a noun token to be counted as an SN, the context-dependent part of its meaning has to be provided endophorically within the linguistic context and not – exophorically – via encyclopaedic knowledge or reference to other texts or prior discourses (p. 7f.).

Another way of referring to the relation between the SN and its lexical realization are the notions of “encapsulation” and “prospection”, which the authors introduce as discourse-based criteria for SN membership (p. 48). Where prospection opens up a cataphoric relationship, encapsulation is anaphoric but “not necessarily ‘backward pointing’” (p. 48) meaning that the SN takes up some prior text elements and carries their meaning forward, which is an important textual function.

The semantic identity between the SN and its lexical realization is referred to as “agnation” (p. 40) – a term borrowed from Gleason (1965). Agnate structures are semantically alike but may differ structurally, as may be the case with an SN and its lexical realization. The latter is required to convey the semantics of a clause or of a clause complex (p. 40). A typical realization of an SN is thus a finite or a non-finite clause. However, clause-like semantics may also be conveyed in the form of a nominalization. For this reason, postmodifying *of*-phrases containing deverbal/deadjectival nouns or gerunds are treated as lexical realizations of SNs, as the following examples illustrate (cf. p. 57):

- (3) the **possibility** of a return to depression
- (4) this **idea** of using scavengers
- (5) the **assumption** of the complete credibility of policy changes

In counting all kinds of semantically clause-like structures that construe a process (including nominalizations) as potential realizations of SNs, the authors account for a larger number of SN cases as was done in previous studies dealing with this phenomenon. They arrive at an extensive list of 29 different structural patterns identified for SN usage (pp. 73, 161). Besides these structural patterns, the authors also distinguish between six different semantic categories of SNs, which they label as “act”, “idea”, “locution”, “fact”, “modal fact” and “circumstantial fact” (pp. 29–32).

After their discussion of theoretical issues concerning the delimitation of the SN category, they turn to the empirical side of their project in Chapter 6 by providing information about their corpus and methodology. Essentially, their analysis is based on the Flowerdew Corpus of Academic English (FCAE), which was specifically compiled for the project. It is a small corpus with only 613,514 words, consisting of texts drawn from the natural and the social sciences. It includes lectures, textbook chapters and journal articles from biology, chemistry, engineering science, physics, ecology, economics, political science, law, sociology and business studies, all in roughly equal shares. The authors have counted all SN occurrences in the corpus and have tagged them structurally as well as

semantically. Although their search has been supported by electronic means, the final analysis had to be carried out manually, requiring each of the authors to read through the whole of the text (p. 72). The authors have opted for such a time-consuming method because their view of SNs focusses on their role in discourse organization rather than on any structural properties (which are more suitable for an automated corpus search). This also accounts for the comparatively small size of the corpus.

The results of the corpus analysis are presented in Chapters 7 to 10, with Chapter 7 providing a list of examples of the 29 structural types identified. With regard to lexical types, the search yielded 845 different nouns used as SNs in the corpus – with *case*, *way* and *problem* being the most frequent ones (cf. appendices C to F for complete lists of all types). The remaining chapters (8 to 10) address a variety of quantitative findings that can be obtained from comparing the numbers of SN occurrences (types as well as tokens) in the different disciplines (including the broad distinction of natural vs. social sciences) and genres (lectures, textbooks, journal papers). The deviations of interest found in the data are discussed individually in more detail.

However, the corpus analysis does not yield any truly unanticipated results. Most of the findings are more or less expectable, and their principal merit seems to be quantitative in nature. With regard to the SN *right* the authors argue that it “is found only in the social sciences and predominantly in the discipline of law, which accounts for 80.7 per cent of its occurrences in our corpus, much higher than expected, given that law accounts for 11.1 per cent of the total of words in the corpus” (p. 88). From a strictly numerical point of view, this might indeed be surprising; given the specific contents of the corpus, however, it would in fact be extraordinary if law did *not* account for a great majority of the occurrences of *right*. The authors elaborate further:

In this case, where an item shows low variation across genres but an uneven distribution by discipline, the SN can be linked to the subject area and vocabulary of the field. In this respect, *right* is a particularly good example: the examination and establishment of legal rights is a core concern of the legal discipline, both for students and professional legal scholars. (p. 91)

The observations on *thing* are no less stating the obvious:

[...] the most evenly shared of the frequent SNs in terms of discipline (*thing*) is also the least evenly shared frequent SN when viewed from the perspective of genre. A closer look at the data shows that this word

is characteristic of the spoken mode, where it seems to be, in general, used by lecturers in the natural and social sciences alike. However, its use is almost entirely restricted to lectures, which account for 91.5 per cent of its uses in the corpus. (p. 89f.)

The fact that *thing* is very frequent in lectures but barely used in textbooks or journal papers hardly needs to be empirically confirmed.

The most valuable insights that can be gained from the book can be found in Chapter 5, where the authors delineate the difficulties they have encountered in analysing their corpus data. There are several problematic constellations where it is not immediately obvious whether a noun is used as an SN or not. These include – among others – the problems of repetition, bivalent SNs, technical terms, prefabricated patterns and partitives (pp. 50–64). In all of these cases, there are obstacles to identifying a clear one-to-one relationship between the (potential) SN and its lexical specification, which has direct implications for counting. What these cases nicely illustrate is the inherent fuzziness of the SN phenomenon, especially when viewed from a discourse perspective. As the authors rightly put great emphasis on their discourse approach to SNs, it might have been preferable to concentrate on a more qualitative account of SNs instead of focussing the empirical analysis almost exclusively on counts. The flexibility of SNs as a text-structuring device and their overlap with other – equally text-structuring – strategies would have been an interesting object of inquiry in its own right. The findings presented in Chapter 5 might be a suitable starting point for an investigation into these phenomena of discourse organization.

## References

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