

Nouns Attributively Modifying Adjectives in English

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1. Introduction

Nouns appearing as attributive modifiers of adjectives in English (NP-modifiers¹) have been a largely understudied phenomenon. Some have existed in the language since Old English, e.g. *pitch-black*, and have been lexicalized, as sometimes analyzed in the compounding literature (Cannon, 1978). However, this paper presents data showing that NP-modifiers occur not just with a small idiosyncratic set of nouns and adjectives, but rather freely with proper nouns, bare nouns, definite DPs, and more complex noun phrases.

Since this construction is fully productive, English speakers must have a compositional way of reaching the semantics of NP-modifiers. While in the past, forms like *snow-white* have been roughly glossed as *as white as snow*, NP-modifiers have multiple readings. In this paper, I will focus on two of the readings, the degree and dimension readings.² The degree reading is close but not equivalent to the equative (1). The dimension reading selects a new dimension on which the comparison is on (2);

(1) DEGREE READING

a. Mary is *Usain Bolt fast*.

b. MEANING: Mary's degree of speed is similar to Usain Bolt's degree of speed, (for their respective comparison classes)

(2) DIMENSION READING

a. I always wanted to be famous... but not *Osama Bin Laden famous* (@QueenDemetriax_, 2014)

b. MEANING: @QueenDemetriax_ didn't want fame similar to Osama Bin Laden's fame, with regard to the dimension of being from terrorist threats, or under investigation by the FBI.³

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¹ This name for the construction has some clear flaws, some DPs can appear in the construction, and following Morzycki (2015); McNally (2016), who attempt to formalize the definition of 'modifier', these nominals are probably not modifiers; in that they do not maintain the type of the thing they 'modify' in all readings.

² The other readings include a comparison class reading, which sets the comparison class for the adjective (i), and a judge reading which selects the perspective from which a predicate of personal taste is evaluated (ii). For purposes of space, I will not provide a formal account of these readings in this paper, postponing that for O'Hara (to appear).

(i) COMPARISON CLASS READING

a. It's not a heavy song, but it is *The Beatles heavy*.

b. MEANING: The song in question is not heavy (like metal) but compared to the rest of the Beatles output, it is heavy. (It's not a heavy song, but it's heavy for the Beatles.)

(ii) JUDGE READING

a. It's not spicy to me, but the salsa was *Alex spicy*.

b. MEANING: The salsa is considered spicy by Alex. (It's not spicy to me, but the salsa was spicy to Alex.)

³ @QueenDemetriax_ was a 14 year old Dutch girl who tweeted a (joke) terrorist threat at American Airlines and was subsequently arrested and had her twitter deleted.

2. Productivity of NP-Modifiers

2.1. Distribution of Nominals in NP-modifiers

A firm piece of evidence establishing that the degree and dimension NP-modifiers are fully productive, rather than idiomatic, comes from the ability of proper nouns to appear in these constructions, as shown above in (1-ii). It does not matter if the listener has heard the NP-modifier before, as long as they have an idea of how fast Usain Bolt is (or what kind of fame Bin Laden has, etc.), the sentence is licit. Clearly these are not lexicalized in the way *pitch-black* might be, or else for each adjective⁴ an English speaker would require an unbounded number of lexical items: *Bill Gates rich, Donald Trump rich, Oprah rich, P. Diddy rich*, [the richest person they know in real life] *rich* etc.

Like the original *pitch-black*, *lily-white* examples, a variety of bare nouns and NPs can appear in NP-modifiers as well.

- (3) I'm not *NBA player* tall.
- (4) Mary is *cheetah/rocket/souped-up sportscar* fast.

These forms refer to the commonly known speed of cheetahs or rockets or souped-up sportscars, or the average tallness of NBA players. Even though some cheetahs are slow, and some NBA players are short, the kind as a whole are fast or tall.

Definite descriptions can also appear in NP-modifiers, where they select the unique contextually-salient individual rather than the properties of the kind as a whole.

- (5) Our new congressman isn't just *prime minister of Canada* hot, he's *the prime minister of Canada* hot.

We might believe all prime ministers of Canada are somewhat hot; they are the most powerful people in their country. However, Justin Trudeau, the current prime minister of Canada is hotter than that; whereas *prime minister of Canada hot* selects the degree of hotness of the kind PRIME-MINISTER-OF-CANADA, the definite description selects Justin Trudeau's degree specifically, as the unique person who is the prime minister of Canada.

For the definite description to appear in a NP-modifier, the unique individual referred to by it must be apparent. One can't say *the actor cute* out of the blue, in the same way that we cannot say *the actor* out of the blue. However, if a previously occurring noun phrase pulls out a unique actor, these can work.

- (6) Dan found out that I made out with an actor last week.
 - a. (?) Dan isn't *the actor cute*, but is way more reliable, so I'm staying with him.
 - b. Dan isn't as cute as the actor, but is way more reliable, so I'm staying with him.

Judgements on these definite descriptions in NP-modifiers vary, but it seems that speakers prefer the one in (5), to the one in (6a). Schwarz (2009, 2013) considers *the actor* a strong definite in (6a), meaning that it is marked as definite for its anaphoricity rather than its uniqueness, like *the prime minister of Canada* in (5), a weak definite. The contrast between (5) and (6a) suggests that anaphora has difficulty reaching into an NP-modifier, and at least for some speakers NP-modifiers are anaphoric islands.

Pronouns show a similar distribution within NP-modifiers as definite descriptions. Speakers prefer pronouns when they would not require linguistic antecedents (7); as in first and second pronouns in their typical indexical uses, and deictic third-person pronouns with a strong visual cue as to the referent.

- (7) a. Look out, Usain Bolt! Mary is almost *you* fast.
- b. USAIN BOLT: Mary will never be *me* fast.
- c. A CHILD POINTING TO USAIN BOLT: I want to be *HIM* fast when I grow up!

⁴ For the purposes of space, in this paper, I will simply assert that NP-modifiers are possible with nearly all sorts of adjectives, regardless of their gradability or other properties; see O'Hara (to appear) for more details.

Speakers have more difficulty with third person pronouns when they are dependent on a clear linguistic antecedent, as in (8).

- (8) *Usain Bolt is Mary's hero, but she'll never be *him* fast.

Schwarz (2013) investigates *bridging* (Clark, 1975), a use of the definite also called associative anaphora (Hawkins, 1978), where the seeming antecedent of the definite does not have the same referent as the definite, but rather has some salient relation. Schwarz notes at least two types of relations that receive different types of definites: part-whole bridging (which patterns with the weak definite), and producer-product bridging (which patterns with the strong definite). Just like in other cases, the strong definite is worse in the NP-modifiers, so part-whole bridging is preferred (9).

- (9) a. The whole fridge was disgusting, but the shelves were not close to being *the crisper gross*.
 b. The memoir was a poorly-written mess. You'd have to be {**the author stupid/as stupid as the author*} to think it was insightful.

The difference in (9b) may be that the NP in the producer-product bridging is covertly *the author of the memoir*, which is anaphoric (like *the actor* in (6), or *him* in 8). On the other hand, in (9a), *the crisper* receives definiteness completely from situational uniqueness.

A distracting complication comes from indefinite DPs modifying adjectives, like in (10).

- (10) My computer was expensive, but not *a car expensive*.

This suggests that indefinite DPs can appear in NP-modifiers, but upon closer investigation, it appears that the DPs in question are actually irregular measure phrases. First, we can note that the dimension reading is not possible with an indefinite DP, as in (11).

- (11) a. My computer is expensive, but not *a Macbook expensive*.
 b. My computer is expensive, but not *Macbook expensive*.

Only the latter sentence can be true if my computer is as or more expensive than a Macbook, but it is not expensive because of its trendiness or brand-name, or flashy design, like one could argue a Macbook is.

Schwarzschild (2005) notes that only certain adjectives can appear with direct measure phrases, and *expensive* is not one of them in English, **five dollars expensive*. However, irregular measure phrases like *a car* seem to have wider distribution than their true measure phrase counterparts; *a car expensive* and *five cars expensive* are both totally valid.

This only holds for dimensions that are monotonic over the NPs, that is the more (or less for antonyms like *cheap* or *short*) of the substance (*cars*) we have, the greater the degree on the scale is (monetary-value) (Schwarzschild, 2006)⁵ We can see that these indefinite DPs cannot appear before nonmonotonic adjectives, for example, *hot* (12), yet bare NPs, in NP-modifiers still can appear. (12b) is fully compatible with a degree reading, suggesting that the degree reading is different than the irregular measure phrase.

- (12) a. *The sauna was hot but not *a volcano hot*.
 b. The sauna was hot but not *volcano hot*.

We can also see a distinction in how the degree is evaluated, in irregular measure phrases and NP-modifiers. In (13a), the box is a square, as tall and as wide as Yao Ming is tall, since Yao Ming's height is his distinguishing length feature, selecting for the irregular measure unit. On the other hand, in (13b), the box may be much skinnier than it is tall, being as wide as Yao Ming is wide.

⁵ One might argue that expensiveness isn't truly monotonic over the item being sold, i.e. a clearance deal could make it so buying two cars is actually cheaper than buying just one. However, I argue that this is the exception rather than the rule, and without some strong price guides, we presume monotonicity.

- (13) a. The box is *a Yao Ming tall* and *a Yao Ming wide*.
 b. The box is *Yao Ming tall* and *Yao Ming wide*.

Unlike with strong definites and non-anaphoric pronouns, indefinites are not anaphoric. Why can they not appear in NP-modifiers? It seems to be based on being able to evaluate the meaning of the NP-modifier. It is simple to refer to a proper noun's or a weak definite's Adj-ness, since they refer to unique individuals; similarly a bare noun seems to refer to kinds in NP-modifiers, which would also have unique prototypical Adjnesses. However, an indefinite rather than being able to refer to the prototypical heat of a volcano or value of a car, might refer to any volcano, or any car across the whole variation of volcano heats and car values. The expensiveness of *a car* could be as low as a few thousand dollars to as high as a few hundred thousand dollars. Where, *car expensive* may refer to some average or standard value for cars, *a car expensive* can refer to anything in the range, making (14) strange, unless we know particularly the car we're referring to, (or the canoe is very expensive).

- (14) My canoe was *a car expensive*.

To wrap up, we've seen that NP-modifiers work with a full range of proper nouns, bare common nouns, weak definites, and non-anaphoric pronouns. They work notably worse on strong definites, anaphoric pronouns and indefinites. These distributional distinctions are likely due to the anaphoricity required of strong definites and anaphoric pronouns

2.2. Evaluativity of degree and dimension NP-modifiers

A crucial distinction between the degree and dimension readings investigated in this paper, and the comparison class and judge readings is that the degree and dimension readings are EVALUATIVE (in the sense of Rett (2007, 2008)) for the referent of the nominal within the NP-modifier. In other words, if DP Adj is a licit NP-modifier, DP is Adj must be true. For example *Danny Devito tall* is not licit (15), because in most contexts *Danny Devito is tall* is false.

- (15) *Mary is *Danny Devito tall*.

- (16) Am I the only one who thinks that baby looks creepy as hell? Like not *normal baby creepy*. (SmoothOctopus, 2014)

(16) also helps to illustrate this point. The sentence seems weird on its own, because to most readers, normal babies are not creepy; but to SmoothOctopus, the imgur user who posted that comment, normal babies are creepy, thus allowing them to construct the NP-modifier.

Degree questions and equatives are thought in the theoretical literature to be only evaluative for negative adjectives and not positive ones, *short* but not *tall*, *narrow* but not *wide*.⁶ It's totally alright to say *as tall as Danny Devito*, but *as short as Yao Ming* is less acceptable. However, as shown above, NP-modifiers always entail the positive form. Both, *Danny Devito tall* and *Yao Ming short* are unacceptable unless the contextually specified standard is far from the normal standard for evaluating human height.

Degree and dimension NP-modifiers actually differ in whether the adjective is evaluative for the subject of the sentence. *Is Chef Kalina Guy Fieri famous?* can be asking two things, whether Kalina's degree of fame is near Guy Fieri's, or if Kalina's fame is at the expense of her cooking, if she reaches to the lowest common denominator of the American palette. Importantly, if Chef Kalina does not surpass a contextually defined standard of fame, the second reading is hard to get.

In summary, both degree and dimension NP-modifiers require that the modifying NP surpasses a contextually specified standard for the adjective, only the dimension reading has a presupposition that the subject surpasses that standard.

⁶ However, experiments in Brasoveanu & Rett (2015) failed to show a difference in evaluativity based on adjective polarity.

3. Degree NP Modifiers

The most immediately apparent reading of many NP-modifiers is the degree reading. As a first approximation, this reading can be paraphrased nonexactly with the equative construction. *Usain Bolt fast* means something like *as fast as Usain Bolt*. Yet, there are considerable distinctions between the degree NP-modifiers (17) and the (18).

(17) Mary is *Usain Bolt fast*.

(18) Mary is as fast as Usain Bolt.

First, we consider a situation where Mary is an elementary school track runner. In this case, the equative (18) is almost definitely false; it requires Mary to be able to run 100m in near 9.58 seconds, whereas (at least in Illinois) the record for even middle schoolers is 12.35 seconds. However, even if Mary is simply the fastest in the school, or perhaps the region this season, *Mary is Usain Bolt fast* can be judged true. While the equative could achieve such a reading through exaggeration, the NP-modifier doesn't need to be an exaggeration (19).

(19) You are {as fast as Usain Bolt/ #*Usain Bolt fast*}. Well not literally...

This remains true regardless of the comparison classes in question, even if Mary's comparison class is faster than Usain Bolt's. If Mary was sprinting against other superhumans who can run near the speed of a cheetah, (17) could still be true, even though Mary is much faster than Usain Bolt, if she is faster than the other superhumans.

This can be explained if instead of being paraphrased as a pure equative, the degree NP-modifier is paraphrased as an indirect equative (20). Bale (2011) argues that in indirect comparisons we are comparing two degrees that are on different scales: in this case, two scales of fastness, relativized by comparison classes supplied contextually.

(20) Mary is as fast for a [comparison class containing Mary/elementary schooler/superhuman] as Usain Bolt is for a [comparison class containing Usain Bolt/person/real world person].

However, even given an indirect equative, or fixed comparison classes, it's possible to be *NP Adj*, but not *as Adj as NP*. The Golden State Warrior's Stephen Curry has made it clear that he is one of the greatest NBA players of all time, the first unanimously voted MVP in the NBA's history. However, at least from my subjective perspective, growing up in Chicago during Jordan's peak, Stephen Curry is not yet his equal. Thus the sentence in (21) is true.

(21) Stephen Curry is *Michael Jordan good*, but he's not as good as Michael Jordan.

If we consider the sets of degrees that satisfy the NP-modifier and the equative, the NP-modifier must have a lower lower bound, since there exists a degree of goodness that Stephen Curry has that satisfies *Michael Jordan good*, but not *as good as Michael Jordan*.

We can also see that this works the other way. If Haneul is a 20 foot tall NBA player, we can always respond with (22c) to the equative question (22a), but not the NP-modifier as a question (22b).

(22) a. Is Haneul as tall as Yao Ming?

b. Is Haneul Yao Ming tall?

c. Yes, in fact Haneul is taller.

This is because to be as tall as Yao Ming, your height must be greater than or equal to 7'6", but to be Yao Ming tall, your height must be within the same ballpark as Yao Ming's 7'6". Thus, the upper bound on *Yao Ming tall* seems lower than *as tall as Yao Ming*, which is likely unbounded.

The degree reading does not select one degree, but instead quantifies over a set of degrees that are similar to the NP's degree on the adjective. Exactly how this similarity is defined remains to be seen, but it seems to care about the relative distance between members in the comparison class.

Stephen Curry in the 2015-2016 season made 402 three pointers, a 40% increase over the previous record (set by him in the previous season). On the other hand, when Barry Bonds broke the Major League Baseball record for home runs per season, he only surpassed Mark McGwire by about 4%.

(23) *NBA Three Pointer per Season Record*

Rank	Player	3P	Season
1.	Stephen Curry	402	2015-16
2.	Stephen Curry	286	2014-15
3.	Klay Thompson	276	2015-16

(24) *MLB Home Runs per Season Record*

Rank	Player	HR	Season
1.	Barry Bonds	73	2001
2.	Mark McGwire	70	1998
3.	Sammy Sosa	66	1998

A new player with 68 home runs is likely not *Barry Bonds good*, however, it's much easier to accept that a player with 374 three pointers is '15-'16 *Stephen Curry good*. This result is somewhat surprising, since both players have the same percentage of the record.

My intuition is that part of the bound of *Barry Bonds good* is set by proximity to *Mark McGwire good*. *Barry Bonds good* doesn't seem to be true until 72 home runs have been hit; similarly '15-'16 *Stephen Curry good* might be valid at 345 three pointers.

4. Dimension NP-modifier

Where the degree reading quantifies over degrees that are similar to the degree of the NP on the scale denoted by the Adj, the dimension reading selects a different dimension or quality for which to define this similarity over.

(25) I always wanted to be famous,... but not *Osama Bin Laden famous*.

Osama Bin Laden famous means something like, "having fame similar to Osama Bin Laden's fame in respect to being infamous for terroristic threats." Similarly, we can see that since Yao Ming is skinny and very tall, and Andre the Giant was bulky and very tall, the sentence in (26), means that the giraffe's height is similar to Yao Ming's and the elephant's to Andre the Giant's in respect to bulkiness.

(26) a. The giraffe is *Yao Ming tall*.
b. The elephant is *Andre the Giant tall*.

(27) a. # The elephant is *Yao Ming tall*.
b. # The giraffe is *Andre the Giant tall*.

In this context the elephant is not *Yao Ming tall*, even though the elephant is taller than Yao Ming. This remains true even if the elephant has a similar degree in its comparison class as Yao Ming, i.e. the elephant is as tall for an elephant as Yao Ming is for a person. In this context, *Andre the Giant tall* means to have a bulkiness to one's tallness similar to Andre the Giant's, where *Yao Ming tall* means to have a lankiness to one's tallness like Yao Ming has. In order to be *Andre the Giant tall* in this sense all that is necessary is that one is tall enough to surpass some standard for its own comparison class, and than that tallness is sufficiently bulky to surpass a standard of bulkiness.

Famous can easily be thought of as a multidimensional adjective—there are many potential sources of fame and there are many potential groups of people to be famous to. Kennedy (2013) notes that when there is uncertainty about the dimensions of evaluation, faultless disagreement effects can occur. Vardomskaya (2014) shows that this is true for comparisons of multidimensional adjectives, since the weighting of the different dimensions need not be the same for each speaker. Thus, we can see in (28), that *famous* allows faultless disagreement.

(28) a. Kanye West is more famous than Jesus.
b. No he isn't.

Neither speaker is wrong. The first might be using a dimension of fame that involves tabloid attention, or popularity among millenials; whereas the second might be using sheer name-recognition on a worldwide

scale, or some amount of how loved they are. Thus, it is not shocking that @QueenDemetriax_ was able to select a dimension specific to Osama Bin Laden in (25).

Tall is different, we expect it to map cleanly onto a scale of heights as it is a dimensional adjective (Bierwisch, 1989; Kennedy, 2013). We cannot get this faultless disagreement with comparatives for tall.

- (29) a. Yao Ming is taller than Naseem (who is 7'4" but skinnier than Yao Ming).
 b. # No he isn't.

Yao Ming is 7'6", it is not true that Yao Ming is not taller than Naseem, no matter what. This is curious however, because *Yao Ming tall* was able to select the dimension of lankiness, and Naseem is lankier than Yao Ming. Then where does this dimension come from? Clearly not any potential dimension would be valid—Andre the Giant was a more successful actor than Yao Ming, but we cannot take Kevin Peter Hall who played the Predator in the Predator films, and was 7'3" and very lanky and Robert Traylor, a similarly tall, but bulkier basketball player who never acted, and say that Kevin Peter Hall is *Andre the Giant tall*, while Robert Traylor is *Yao Ming tall*, because of their acting abilities.

Instead, the new dimension must be a property associated with tallness. One potential test for this may come from definite descriptions. Given two cups that are the same height, where cup A is skinnier than cup B; the sentence in (30) is false, but *the tall cup* refers to cup A.

- (30) #Cup A is taller than Cup B

Therefore, somehow *tall* encodes some information about width, in positions other than just in the dimension reading of NP-modifiers. Sassoon (2013); Vardomskaya (2014) claim multidimensional adjectives have many dimensions of differing weights. Under such an approach, while *tall* almost always puts almost all of its weight into the height dimension, it may have other dimensions available to it that simply are not as important, and weighted much lower, having near zero effect on the evaluation of the adjective normally, but available for dimension NP-modifiers or definite descriptions to reference.

This adds a difficulty for acquisition of these additional dimensions; if in all positions except these forced definite description choices and NP-modifiers these additional dimensions for dimensional adjectives like tall add no effect to the truth conditions, how would children learn to attribute them with the adjective? Instead of thinking of these many dimensions as part of the denotation of *tall*, perhaps these "additional dimensions" are simply properties not of Yao Ming, but of his tallness. If Yao Ming's tallness is salient enough to refer to, and ascribe properties to, he must be above some contextual standard for tall, explaining the evaluativity for the DP in the NP-modifier on the original adjective in the dimension reading, since the degree on that adjective is not referred to. Under such an approach, *tall* remains mono-dimensional but *Yao Ming tall* means something like having a tallness like Yao Ming's on some dimension. A tallness can be skinny, but it's harder for a tallness to result in acting skill.⁷

5. Distinguishing the Readings

An interesting distinction between the degree and dimension readings is that the dimension reading can appear under overt degree morphology, like a gradable adjective.

- (31) Yao Ming is more *giraffe tall* than Andre the Giant.

The sentence (31) cannot mean that Yao Ming is closer to a giraffe's height than Andre the Giant is (except under a coerced metalinguistic reading, say if Andre the Giant is not considered *giraffe tall*). Instead this refers to some other dimension, say lankiness; Yao Ming's tallness is lankier than Andre the Giant's is.

This is somewhat surprising considering that both readings seem to invoke some amount of similarity, either *is similar to in terms of degree* or *is similar to on a different scale*. If we can say Yao Ming is more similar to the giraffe than Andre the Giant with regard to how lanky their tallnesses

⁷ Though in an appropriate context (perhaps a casting agency), *Andre the Giant tall* may get the acting skill reading intended above.

are, why can't we say Yao Ming is more similar to the giraffe than Andre the Giant with regard to the degree of tallness. This fact adds complications to attempts to unify these two readings under a single semantics.

This can further be seen by sentences like (32). Here again *Yao Ming tall* must be the dimension reading, bringing up the lankiness degree.

(32) Naseem (who is 7'4" but way skinnier than Yao Ming) is more *Yao Ming tall* than Yao Ming.

If *Yao Ming tall* were just to denote a similarity relation in the dimension reading, we would not expect that anything could be more *Yao Ming tall* than Yao Ming himself, because whose tallness could be more like Yao Ming's than Yao Ming?

This problem might be solved by allowing the *Yao Ming* that is part of the NP-modifier, and the *Yao Ming* in the comparative *than* clause, to be evaluated in different comparison classes in regards to their lankiness. While Yao Ming is the epitome of lanky tallness in the comparison class including just Yao Ming and Andre the Giant, which we had been using; Naseem's tallness surpasses Yao Ming's. Thus, when Yao Ming is compared to Naseem as the standard of the comparison, Naseem's tallness' degree of lankiness in the new comparison class is actually closer to Yao Ming's in the smaller comparison class than Yao Ming's is in the larger class.

However, even if a similarity based account can be put forward for both the degree and dimension readings, we cannot deny the syntactic fact that degree readings cannot appear below degree morphology, but dimension readings can. These readings must have some difference, whether semantically or structurally.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented data showing that NP-modifiers are much more productive than previously assumed. It has also described the meaning of two of the readings of these NP-modifiers, further showing that there is evidence that these readings are distinct. NP-modifiers offer input on many semantic issues, from definiteness to degree comparison to multidimensionality.

This paper has ignored several potentially related types of constructions. As mentioned above, some NP-modifiers select the comparison class or judge. Further, evidence suggests that some things that are far less nominal-like can appear in semantically similar constructions. In the writer's room to a comedy TV show, we might hear something like the sentences in (33).

- (33) a. I think the scene is funny, but I don't think it is *kill someone off funny*.
 b. I think this replacement scene is funny, but I don't think it is *killing someone off funny*.

In (33a), the only available reading is *funny enough to kill someone off*—the writers don't think the scene is sufficiently funny to warrant the loss of a character— but in (33) a more typical degree reading is available—loosely, the scene in question is not as funny as a scene of killing someone off. Further, some constructions that include no adjective at all seem to obtain the degree reading as well.

(34) We are still in a drought, but we are no longer in the *worst snowfall in 500 years drought*.

How these types of examples fit into the different readings outlined above, remains to be studied more carefully. Yet, some of these results are not particularly surprising, *killing someone off* can be a nominal, whereas *kill someone off* cannot; and a drought may well be a scalar noun.

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