

Geoffrey Leech

The English Noun Phrase: Aspects of its recent history

Abstract:

This presentation examines frequency patterns in the English noun phrase as revealed in corpora of written English over the last 100 years. Some rather remarkable changes have been taking place. First, the noun phrase has been growing more ‘compact’, with a steep increase in the use of Noun + Noun sequences and of genitives Noun’s + Noun, rather than constructions involving prepositions and other closed-class words. Second, the use of relativizers has been changing: there has been a big increase in the use of relative *that*, at the expense of *wh*- relativization. The reasons for these changes are bound to be speculative, but it appears that social factors have been playing a major role. Among the explanatory trends, two – *densification* and *colloquialization* – seem to be at cross-purposes. Densification is the process of compressing information into a smaller number of words; colloquialization is the process whereby written language acquires the habits of speech. A third factor – prescriptivism – has also been playing a role.