

VERBS AND NOUN PHRASES - TWO TENDENCIES IN PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAYS

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Noun phrases are often used in academic writing to express the abstract character of the topics discussed. Nouns, especially nominalizations, make it possible to express complicated ideas in a condensed and compact manner, whereas the corresponding verbs make texts easier to understand and more dynamic. In my paper I will present a case study where I focus on the use of verbs and noun phrases in six philosophical essays. The texts can be characterized as "popular essays". Therefore, two opposite tendencies in the use of verbs vs. noun phrases can be expected. On the one hand, the abstract character of philosophy as a science can increase the frequency of noun phrases, but on the other, "the popular essay" as a genre encourages the use of verbs because it aims at ease of understanding.

Keywords: noun phrases, verbs, philosophical essay

1 INTRODUCTION

In the present paper I will describe a case study where I focus on the use of verbs and noun phrases in six philosophical essays. The study is a part of an ongoing research project concerning one scholar's individual style in Swedish. The material of the study consists of texts written by the Finland-Swedish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright (cf. Koskela 1997).

The use of verbs and noun phrases tends to reveal something about how specialized a text is. In philosophical essays two conflicting tendencies can be expected: on the one hand, the abstract contents of philosophical thought and the fact that the writer is a prominent scientist can lead to a more frequent use of noun phrases, whereas, on the other, the characteristics of the essay as a hybrid genre between science and literature can promote the use of verbs rather than the corresponding nominalizations.

The hypothesis is based on research results showing that the more specialized a text is, the more nominal phrases and the fewer verbs there tend to be (Benes 1981: 192 ff., Beier 1980, Koskela & Puuronen 1995: 127, Nordman 1992: 88, Sager, Dungworth & McDonald 1980: 219). However, it should not be taken for granted that noun phrases make texts difficult and verbs make them easy to read. The aim of this study is to find out how these features relate to each other in relatively popular texts written by a prominent philosopher.

2 ON THE CONCEPT OF ESSAY

The object of my study, the philosophical essay, is a genre that has proved exceedingly difficult to place in any ready-made genre categorizations.

The **essay** is conceived primarily as a literary genre, but its status as such has often been questioned because it falls partly outside the traditional literary tripartite division into poetry, prose, and drama. (cf. *Der Literatur* Brockhaus 1988: 624.) Consequently, in most definitions of the concept of **essay** not only is the literary aspect mentioned, but there seems to be a scientific side as well. A comparison between scientific writing and the essay reveals, however, that the authors of essays clearly have more liberties than those of scientific texts: for example, explicit references to literature or lists of references are not necessary in essays. In addition, essayists can choose to present only those aspects of scientific facts that they find relevant to their purpose without the strain of objectivity and criticism typical of scientific writing. What is more, the writers of essays can cross the borders of different scientific disciplines more easily than the writers of scientific texts. (cf. Grönstrand 1990.)

In some definitions of **essay** these two aspects, literary and scientific, are compared with each other, but sometimes the comparison can prove problematic. For example *Der Literatur Brockhaus* (1988: 642) explicitly states:

"Der Essay unterscheidet sich einerseits durch Stilbewußtsein und subjektive Formulierung von der objektiven, wissenschaftlichen Abhandlung (der Übergang zu dieser ist jedoch fließend)..."

According to the definition, the essay differs from the scientific monograph with regard to its stylistic features and its subjective nature. However, the difference is found to be fuzzy. This can safely be said of philosophical essays, as well as others. Additionally, the essay seems to be a literary form especially preferred by philosophers.

"Oft wurde die Bezeichnung Essay von Philosophen benutzt, um den Fragmentcharakter ihrer Abhandlungen zu betonen (Pascal, Locke, Hume, Voltaire)." (dtv 1990: 149)

From the definitions above, it becomes evident that **essay** is not a homogeneous genre. Figure 1 below describes how varied the concept of essay actually can be. The essay is here seen as covering a variety of writings from formal scientific treatises to personal sketches.

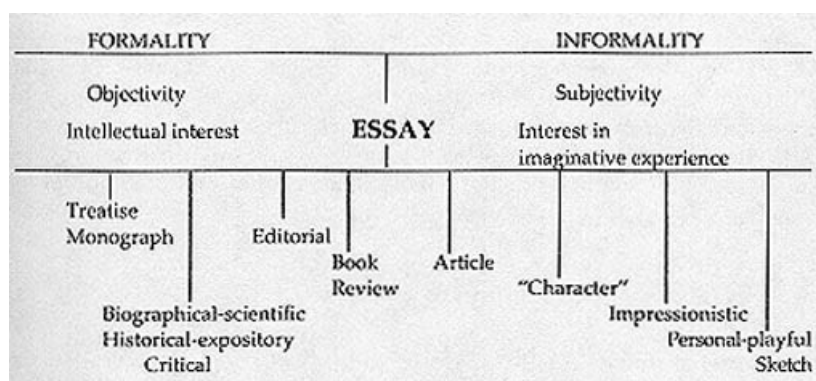


FIGURE 1. The variety within the concept of **essay** on a scale from formal to informal (According to Shipley 1964: 145).

In addition to science proper, essays have also been related to popular science. It is evident, however, that the essay cannot be considered to be a means of explaining scientific results to laymen. Unlike popular science, essays are not meant to be entertaining; rather, they demand a similar kind of intellectual and analytical grip from their readers as scientific texts do, and they tend to deal with subjects from a limited or personal point of view, which is not the aim of popular science. Furthermore, the literary qualities of essays are often replaced in popular science by a striving for clarity and "popularity" in the sense of "easy to understand". (see e.g. Grönstrand 1990.)

In the present paper, the **essay** is defined as a free but non-fictional presentation on a high intellectual level that lacks the neutrality and objectivity typical of academic writing. (cf. Cassirer 1979: 200.) The essays in my material have been written by a philosopher and thus have a natural connection with academic writing. However, as can be concluded from Figure 1 above, the essay is not a homogeneous phenomenon and can have different features even within one single field of science. At this stage it is difficult to establish precisely where on the scale these philosophical essays should be placed, but they seem to have characteristics of different types of essays.

One such characteristic is the topic of the present paper, i.e., the choice between a verb and a noun phrase. On the one hand, essays represent a high intellectual level, which is often combined with objective, abstract, and static ways of expression. On the other hand, they tend to embody a limited personal point of view, which calls for subjective, concrete and dynamic ways of expression. Therefore, the essay as a genre leads to mixed expectations when it comes to the use of verbs and noun phrases. Verbs tend to make a presentation dynamic and nouns static. Verbs also need to be connected with a subject which can make the presentation more detailed and personal, whereas nouns, especially nominalizations, can serve as tools of objectivity. However, it is this discrepancy that makes it interesting to study verbs and noun phrases in essays. The results of the study may present an example of how the balance can be maintained in philosophical essays.

Before I go on to discuss the role of verbs and noun phrases in texts more closely, I will first briefly present the material of the study and of its writer.

3 THE MATERIAL OF THE STUDY

The material studied (ca 18 700 words) consists of six philosophical essays written by Georg Henrik von Wright during the years 1986-1994. The essays were first published in distinguished national journals in Finland and later in three separate books (3 in *Vetenskapen och förnuftet, ett försök till orientering*, 2 in *Myten om framsteget. Tankar 1987-1992*, and 1 in *Att förstå sin samtid. Tanke och förkunnelse och andra försök*).

The material has been chosen on the basis of two main criteria: that the texts have been written in Swedish, and that they are as recent as possible. In addition, the material of the present study consists of texts that:

- do not represent scientific texts/academic writing proper
- are not popular science
- have special language features, but are not LSP

The texts investigated here have been characterized by their writer as follows:

"the essay...represents a literary genre ... It is a literary form sui generis. ... an essay about a philosophical topic does not argue for the validity of a certain thesis or point of view, but rather puts forward a view that the writer finds interesting and important, and one he hopes his reader would think over himself. The essay does not present any new findings but rather puts well known facts into a new perspective ... In this respect the essay is related to a short story or a novel". (von Wright 1997)

Von Wright's texts form an interesting object of study because he is known as being exceptionally aware of his style in writing. He seems consistently to strive to present the problems under discussion and their solutions in such a way that even a non-specialist can follow the argumentation (Sintonen 1996).

4 ON THE USE OF VERBS AND NOUN PHRASES

The use of verbs and/or noun phrases is a phenomenon that has been widely discussed and studied in different areas of linguistic research. The main rule that seems to apply to several languages is that an object or an entity is usually grammaticalized by a noun, and an action or an event by a verb. However, for different discursive reasons the functions assigned to entities and actions can be changed. For example, an action or an event can be expressed as a noun if this is appropriate for lexical reasons (e.g. the use of modifiers) or for topical reasons (e.g. a process compacted into a noun).

In Swedish language research, verbs and noun phrases have been discussed in connection with "bureaucratic language", often from a normative point of view (cf. Wellander 1973: 38ff.; Hellspong & Ledin 1997: 68). It has been stated, for example, that nominalizations tend to make texts abstract because they offer the possibility not to consider the time when something happens, and they also offer tools for exactness (Hellspong & Ledin 1997: 68). In this respect, Swedish seems to function in the same way as other languages, for example English (cf. Varantola 1984).

Nominal phrases have also been found typical of scientific writing, because they function effectively as objective, abstract, and static ways of expression, i.e. they fulfil the expectations required of a scientific presentation. (cf. Benes 1981: 192 ff.; Nordman 1992: 88, Sager, Dungworth & McDonald 1980: 219.)

In contrast, the role of verbs in academic writing and in special languages in general is often reduced to an auxiliary function: the nouns carry the actual meaning potential whereas the verbs are used to tie the nouns together to form a text. For example, Halliday and Martin (1993: 39) state that scientific English has now reached a point in its development where hundreds of verbs are replaced by a combination of a verb with a light meaning potential and a heavy noun phrase. This is done not only for practical reasons, but often routinely and for stylistic considerations. In many cases the use of a verb could be more effective, however. Verbs can make a text dynamic and they can make ideas flow forward continuously. This makes texts more interesting and easier to read. In this way, verbs can serve to awaken and keep up the reader's interest, something that has been considered valuable in popular science, and that could be valid for essays as well. (Koskela & Puuronen 1995: 124.)

Noun phrases are practical in many languages, at least English, Swedish, German, and Finnish (cf. Hoffmann 1985), because they make it possible to incorporate lots of information in a compact, synthesized form, and also function as markers of impersonal style. Additionally, they serve the purposes of thematic organization effectively because they can be used in a more varied way in different syntactic roles than the corresponding verbs can (cf. Hellspong & Ledin 1997: 85). In this way they make it possible to create a logical and coherently running discourse where each step is based on what has gone before (Halliday 1993: 39). Therefore, they are often stylistically and rhetorically well motivated. (See e.g. Nordman 1992; Wellander 1973: 41; Halliday & Martin 1993: 39.)

5 SOME RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Because the present study is a part of a work in progress, the results presented here are preliminary and meant to give an overview

of which aspects would be interesting for further study. Therefore, the aspects discussed are based on different methodological principles: in the analysis of verbs I have mainly considered quantitative aspects have been considered, and in the analysis of noun phrases, qualitative aspects. Further on, both principles will be applied to both phenomena. However, at this stage, the qualitative considerations concerning the noun phrases have been given priority in order to get a broader view of the interesting features of this particular aspect.

As already stated, the essay as a concept is heterogeneous (see figure 1 above). If the material studied here were placed on the scale in figure 1, it could be assumed that a large number of verbs would move the philosophical essay towards the right end of the scale, whereas a large number of noun phrases would move it to the left. Naturally, this is an oversimplification, but it can be useful as an indication of the characteristics of the material studied. Because the essay offers more liberties to the writer than academic writing proper, it could be assumed that the essays studied would contain a relatively large number of verbs and few noun phrases, but, as stated before, this need not necessarily be the case.

5.1 The use of verbs in philosophical essays

My study of verbs concerns all verb forms except participles (present and past), because participles are used as modifiers and qualifiers and not in verbal functions. In order to make comparisons with previous research possible, I have chosen to consider all verbs in the material in the same way, i.e. auxiliaries are not discussed separately at this stage.

The results of the study indicate that in the material consisting of 18 663 verbs, there are 606 different verbs, which can be considered to be a large number. By way of comparison, it can be mentioned that Nordman (1992: 63 ff.) in a study of Swedish research articles (15 000 words) from six different fields (law, economics, computer science, electronics, communication studies, and linguistics) found 223 different verbs. As different fields can be expected to have their specific verbs, the large number of verbs in my material representing only one field is even more pronounced. As already mentioned, previous research has shown that there are fewer verbs in specialized texts than in general language ones, and therefore the large number of different verbs probably signals that the texts are of a more general nature than those studied by Nordman (cf. e.g. Benes 1981: 192 ff., Beier 1980; Koskela 1996: 113). Besides, the essay tends to cross interdisciplinary borders, which can add to the variation as well.

About half of the different verbs ($306/606 = 50,5\%$) occur only once. This could be due to different factors: many different topics discussed, limited material, conscious variation, the richness of the author's vocabulary. At this stage it is difficult to say which reason should be considered the most prominent. However, the most frequent verbs in my material, as can be expected, are the most common verbs in Swedish in general. (cf. Allén 1972.)

The five most frequent verbs in my material are *vara* (to be), *kunna* (can), *ha*, (to have), *skola* (shall), and *bli* (to become). All belong to the 70 most common words in Swedish according to Allén (1972). (cf. Strand 1984: 48 ff.) In other words, the most common verbs consist of two modal auxiliaries (*kunna*, *skola*) and three verbs that can be used in auxiliary functions (*vara*, *ha*, *bli*). All in all, only 32 verbs have a frequency of 10 or higher. This could, at least partly, result from the fact that the degree of speciality in the texts is relatively high. The most frequent verbs in the material seem to have a relatively low meaning potential, and they can thus be used effectively together with noun phrases.

The most common verbs in the philosophical essays are almost the same as the most common verbs found in linguistics by Nordman (1992: 63). The only verb that differs is *skola* in philosophy as compared with *använda* in linguistics. The resemblance is, of course, understandable, because linguistics as a human science comes closer to philosophy than the natural sciences considered by Nordman.

In some cases the style in my material could be called "verbal". In Swedish texts, verbal style usually contains many verbs and pronouns instead of nouns, as well as many adverbial prepositional phrases. The sentences can be long, but their length is usually due to long prepositional adverbials and a large number of subordinate clauses. (Hellspong & Ledin 1997: 78)

Consider the following example:

- (1) Det är ett välbekant och ofta omvitnat faktum att den värdegemenskap, ..., håller på att **erodera**, **försvinna**, **upplösas**.
(It is a well known and often proved fact that the shared values ... are eroding, vanishing, falling apart.)

At the end of the sentence in example 1 the author makes use of the strong descriptive character of verbs. He makes his point very clear by using as many as three almost synonymous verbs with negative connotations.

More interesting than the high frequency verbs, however, are those that occur only once. Some of them seem to be metaphorical and almost poetic. This kind of use of verbs is probably the result of a conscious choice by a rhetorically oriented writer. Two examples:

- (2) Den "**strömlinjeformar**" våra liv.
(It streamlines our lives.)

- (3) Att leva i enlighet med den insikt, som nåtts, är att **stämna sitt liv i harmoni** med dess av naturen givna villkor.

(To live in accordance with the insight reached is to harmonize one's life with the conditions imposed on it by nature.)

However, most of the verbs that occur only once are neutral and belong to standard language, for example: *avundas* (to envy), *belasta* (to burden somebody), *fara* (to travel), *glädjas* (to rejoice), and *tillverka* (to manufacture).

With respect to the use of verbs, von Wright seems to be a writer well aware of the power of verbs. The number of different verbs he uses is high, and the frequencies of the verbs are relatively low. The above discussion shows that the verbs that occur only once offer an interesting aspect for further study, especially their meaning (e.g. semantic fields) and function.

5.2 The use of noun phrases in philosophical essays

Noun phrases are found in all texts, but their proportion in special language text tends to be higher than in general language texts (Varantola 1984: 1). In the present study I will consider more closely 222 noun phrases, that can also be called nominalizations, found in the material where the writer, in my opinion, uses a noun even though it would be possible for him to use a verbal expression instead. However, as stated before, it is not my intention to quantify the noun phrases, but rather to discuss some possible reasons why the writer has chosen a noun instead of the corresponding verb phrase.

The reasons for choosing one linguistic structure rather than some other are some highly varied, of course, but the aim is always to convey the intended impression to the reader. The reasons can be, for example, structural, semantical, stylistic, or thematic, or any combination of these, and different contextual aspects. In my material, even the force of habit can in some cases be considered a reason for choosing certain constructions. In the discussion below, I will start from the assumption that the construction in itself and the impression the choice makes on the reader may give some idea of the motivation behind the choice of a particular expression, even though such an assumption implies subjective judgement.

In von Wright's essays, as can be expected, there does not always seem to be one single reason for the writer's choices. Both the verb phrase and the noun phrase seem to work equally well, to have the same effect, in some contexts.

(4) Producenterna **tvings till besparingar och rationaliseringar**.
(The producers are **forced to savings and rationalizations**.)

In example 4 the writer could well have chosen a somewhat lighter and shorter expression using the corresponding verbs: *tvings spara och rationalisera* (forced to save and rationalize). The difference in meaning seems to be a matter of degree: the noun phrases tend to make the phenomena more limited (countable) than the verbs. Thus, *the savings* and *the rationalizations* are seen as separate measures that have a beginning and an end, whereas the corresponding verbs describe an indefinitely ongoing process.

Some noun phrases that could well be replaced by verb phrases seem to have been chosen because of the choice of words in the rest of the expression:

(5) Också där det finns en språklig kontinuitet till nutiden, har ordens valörer förändrats ... språkformer arkaiserats eller försvunnit så att **en adekvat översättning inte längre kan ges**.
(Even in those cases where there is some linguistic continuity up to the present, the values of the words have changed ... the linguistic forms have become archaic or disappeared **so that an adequate interpretation can no longer be made**.)

In example 5 the author could have chosen the verbal expression *så att de inte längre kan översättas på ett adekvat sätt* (cannot be interpreted adequately) instead of the nominal phrase *ge en adekvat översättning* (make an adequate interpretation). These solutions do not differ much in length or interpretability. However, it is worth noticing that the adjective *adekvat* can be placed as an attribute before the noun, whereas with the verb it has to be placed after the verb as an adverbial construction. Placed before the noun, the adjective is more emphatic. In addition, the author's choice is clearly more compact than the alternative expression.

A similar problem arises when a nominal phrase is used instead of a subclause. In many cases, a subclause is no doubt easier for the reader to process than a noun phrase, but at the same time it is usually longer and can make the sentence structure complicated (cf. Hellspong & Ledin 1997: 78).

(6) **Det av FN sanktionerade krigsmålet** var att befria Kuwait ...
(The aim of the war sanctioned by the UN was to free Kuwait ...)

In this example, the writer could have chosen a subclause (*Krigsmålet som FN sanktionerade ...* The aim of the war which the UN had sanctioned) but has chosen the heavier noun phrase where the role of the UN is more emphatic. One possible explanation could be that the writer has treated the noun phrase *det sanktionerade krigsmålet* as an inseparable whole that he does not want to divide. In addition, the noun *krigsmålet* is quite an unusual expression in itself.

As the above examples show, different choices of expression often seem to function equally well in the same situation, but they still make a slightly different impression on the reader. In some cases the choices probably depend on personal preferences, but without a consistent pattern such an interpretation cannot be verified. However, there are also such choices where the motives are more obvious.

One interesting and in my material frequently occurring motive for choosing a noun phrase instead of a verb seems to lie in the role of the agent (cf. Halliday & Martin 1993: 43). The noun phrase allows the agent to be suppressed or not mentioned at all, whereas the expression with a verb demands that the agent is explicitly stated. According to previous studies, the importance of the agent seems to vary from one field of science to another (see Puuronen 1997). Interestingly, in my material this tends to happen with verbs with negative connotations.

(7) Stormakterna i historien har ofta sett **sitt egenmäktiga ingripande i andra länders och folks öde** som uttryck för en civilisatorisk mission.
(The superpowers in our history have often seen **their high-handed interference in other countries' and peoples' destinies** as a civilizing mission.)

(8) Förslitning av naturresurserna och skadegörelse på miljön skall minimeras.
(**The overuse of the natural resources and the damage to the environment** must be minimized.)

When we look at examples 7 and 8 we soon realize that to explicitly mention an agent responsible for the effects that the verbs describe would imply an accusation. Therefore it is more neutral to suppress the agent by using a noun phrase. In this way a noun can, in an extreme case, be used as a manipulating tool as well.

A related phenomenon is discussed by Halliday (1993: 39). According to him, some nominalizations make what is said less negotiable than the corresponding verb phrases. Clauses can be denied, whereas the corresponding nominalization cannot.

(9) ... **en massmedial förvanskning av verklighetsbilden**.
(... a massmedial distortion of the picture of reality.)

At the end of a long sentence the writer has used the noun phrase *en massmedial förvanskning av verklighetsbilden* instead of expressing the idea with a statement in the active form *att massmedierna förvanskar verklighetsbilden* (that the mass media distort). Thus, the first choice tends to be taken for granted, whereas the second one can be denied more easily. Naturally, the fact that a structure is less negotiable is not necessarily the only motive for choosing a noun phrase.

The two last-mentioned motives, that of suppressing the agent and that of negotiability, can be placed into a larger framework: It is often possible to say less when using a noun, whereas with a verb there is always the need to fill in the "slots" for an agent and an object as well as making the tense explicit. The noun phrase leaves the reader more room for interpretation, and this can sometimes be justified in philosophical essays where one aim is to provide readers with new insights.

6 CONCLUSION

In the present paper I have given a brief overview of the occurrence of two central linguistic phenomena in philosophical essays: the use of verbs and noun phrases. The aim of the paper has been to find out how these phenomena relate to each other, and what they might tell us about the essay as a genre and about the author as a writer.

The results support the hypothesis that the essay is a hybrid genre between academic writing proper and literature. The results show that there are many different verbs in the essays studied but that their individual frequencies are usually relatively low. This again indicates that there are subjective, concrete and dynamic expressions typical of the language in the texts studied. However, the noun phrases found in the texts testify on their part to the objective, abstract and static use of language that is typical of academic writing.

Thus it seems to be possible for a skillful writer to make use of the expressive qualities of both of these linguistic means in order to create the intended impression in the reader. The author of the texts, the Finland-Swedish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright, no doubt masters the skills required and is familiar with the conventions of both academic writing and essay writing. Thus, he is able to create a text where the qualities mentioned above are represented in their right proportions, so that the reader can enjoy the intellectual challenge of the texts but still find them easy to read.

Because this paper presents a part of a work in progress, it has touched upon only limited aspects of the use of verbs and noun phrases in order to present an overview of those aspects interesting for further study. It has become clear that the less frequently used verbs are worth studying more closely: they probably give a better picture of the philosophical essay as a genre than the most commonly used words of the Swedish language that are found at the top of the frequency lists. Furthermore, the analysis has shown how interesting noun phrases are as a phenomenon. In order to study them further a clearer categorization for the analysis has to be devised.

Thematic and rhetorical aspects have not been considered here due to restrictions of time and space, but they obviously play an important role (cf. example 6), and therefore form an interesting object of further investigation. Naturally, there are additional factors I have not dealt with here, for example, restrictions on co-ordination and transitivity connected with the semantic properties of the verb in question. However, these questions need further analysis before being further elaborated on.

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