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NOUN PHRASE COMPLEXITY IN FILM DIALOGUE AS INPUT FOR SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING
A corpus-based study from a register-functional perspective

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Abstract – Since audiovisual dialogue represents a common means of informal contact with English (Pavesi, Ghia 2020), it is important to understand its characteristics. Following a study on clausal complexity in film dialogue (Formentelli *et al.* forthcoming), the present work investigates phrasal complexity, thus contributing to the provision of a broader overview of grammatical complexity in film dialogue. The results provide insights into which phrasal structures second-language (L2) learners accessing English through films are likely to encounter notice and internalise after repeated exposure (Kerswill, Williams 2002). The study investigates nominal pre- and post-modification in a corpus of 34 anglophone film dialogues by examining adjectival and nominal pre-modifiers and prepositional phrases as post-modifiers. Further analysis of the types of the most frequently modified nominal heads is also conducted. The results of the analysis are interpreted by adopting a register-functional approach to complexity (Biber *et al.* 2022); they suggest a degree of phrasal complexity in film dialogue that approximates trends in natural conversation while also performing register-specific functions.

Keywords: film dialogue; phrasal complexity; register-functional; English.

1. Introduction

Register-functional studies of grammatical complexity (see Biber *et al.* 2022) have shown that phrasal complexity is pivotal in the production of specialised written academic texts. Despite the fact that phrasal complexity finds its greatest expression in written registers, a study thereof can provide useful insights when applied to texts simulating spoken interaction, such as are found in films. The interest in studying the phrasal complexity of film dialogue is two-fold: first, it helps in establishing whether the written nature of film dialogue is mirrored in its grammatical complexity; second, since films have been found to be a frequently accessed source of English among second-language (L2) learners outside of the classroom (Sundqvist 2009; Pavesi, Ghia 2020), knowing more about the phrasal complexity of film dialogue contributes to a description of this crucial type of input for L2 acquisition.

Following previous investigations into the clausal complexity of film dialogue (Formentelli *et al.* forthcoming), the present study aims to contribute to building a more comprehensive overview of the grammatical complexity of this register by examining its phrasal dimension. A corpus of anglophone film dialogues is analysed to find patterns of phrasal complexity (pre- and post-modification patterns). The trends highlighted for film dialogue are subsequently compared to the data on phrasal complexity in spontaneous conversation that Biber *et al.* (2021) provided.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 briefly introduces the notion of phrasal complexity and the register-functional approach; Section 3 discusses the main characteristics of film dialogue as a register and as input for informal L2 learning; Section 4 outlines the research questions and describes the corpus and methodology used in the present study; Section 5 presents the results of the analysis of phrasal complexity features in film dialogue; Section 6 compares the phrasal complexity of film dialogue and natural conversation; Section 7 presents the results and discusses the adoption of the register-functional approach.

2. Phrasal complexity and the register-functional approach

The study of phrasal complexity is rather a recent matter. As Staples *et al.* (2016) point out, only a few studies on the development of academic writing have included a number of features of phrasal complexity (Crossley *et al.* 2011; Haswell 2000; Lu 2011), and even fewer have investigated the relation of such features with genre (cf. Lu 2011; Beers, Nagy 2009). This tendency seems to be related to the fact that for a long time, the study of grammatical complexity has actually meant study of subordinate clauses, which have long been considered the highest expression of syntactic complexity in English (cf. Bulté, Housen 2012; Biber *et al.* 2022). In the latest years, however, in particular in the wake of register-functional studies of grammatical complexity (Biber *et al.* 2022), it has been evidenced how subordinate clauses only represent one type of grammatical complexity. In fact, different registers display a preference for either clausal or phrasal complexity.

Corpus-based inductive analyses (Biber *et al.* 2022) have shown that grammatical complexity is better regarded as a multidimensional construct that is expressed in structurally different ways along the speaking-to-writing continuum. Specifically, the key difference between spoken and written registers is the reliance of the former on clausal complexity and the latter on phrasal complexity. While clausal complexity indicates long and elaborate dependent clauses, phrasal complexity refers to dense and compact pre- and

post-modified noun phrases (Biber, Gray 2016; Biber *et al.* 2022). These register-specific tendencies have been linked primarily to the circumstances of production and secondarily to the communicative purposes of a text (Biber *et al.* 2022, p. 463; cf. also Biber 1992). Since spoken language is produced on-line, with few or no opportunities for planning or revising, it makes extensive use of dependent clauses, which are added incrementally following the speaker's stream of thought (cf. Ferreira, Slevc 2007). Moreover, among dependent clauses complement clauses are a preferred strategy to express stance (e.g. *I think that*…, *I love how*…), thus a suitable linguistic strategy for the involved character of spontaneous, informal conversation (see example 1) (see Biber *et al.* 2021). Contrastingly, since written language can exploit the availability of planning as well as revision time and in its most prototypical forms it is used for informational purposes, it exploits phrasal complexity in order to compact as much information as possible (see example 2).

[1] Excerpt from a conversation (Biber, Gray 2016, p. 89)

Oh, I have to do three different kinds of reviews in my senior seminar class and so, it's a good excuse to go out for dinner. <laughing.> I – you know – my teacher was suggesting that we review a restaurant so I was trying to think of a good restaurant.

[2] Excerpt from an engineering textbook (Biber, Gray 2016, p. 71)

For applications with parallel shafts, straight spur, stepped, helical, double helical, or herringbone gears are usually used. In the case of intersecting shafts, straight bevel, spiral bevel, or face gears are employed.

As a component of grammatical complexity, phrasal complexity is defined as the elaboration of phrases (nominal, adjectival, adverbial, prepositional), with a focus on the noun phrase and its pre- and post-modification (Biber *et al.* 2022). In her study on noun phrase complexity in English, Berlage (2014) points out that what is considered more or less complex in noun phrases remains an unresolved issue. She defines phrasal complexity as a combination of at least three factors: length, the number of embedded phrases and whether or not verb phrases are embedded in the noun phrase. She also claims that quantitative parameters alone cannot be determinants of the degree of noun phrase complexity, as the qualitative dimension also needs to be considered. According to Berlage (2014, p. 2), this dimension corresponds to noun phrases being or not being sentential, i.e. featuring verb phrases in their embeddings. Maintaining an integrated approach combining quantitative and qualitative dimensions of grammatical complexity, Biber *et al.* (2022) propose examining not only the types of syntactic patterns but also their function and distribution in a particular register. Therefore, the degree of phrasal complexity is dependent on how much sophistication can be found in the noun phrase in terms of how many and which types of elements (e.g.

adjectives, nouns, etc.) are added to its basic structure, as represented by a single noun, and where (pre-modification vs. post-modification).

Considering the findings of previous studies on register variation and complexity, the expectation for film dialogue is to find a low degree of phrasal elaboration, following the phrasal complexity tendencies found in natural conversation, which is the register film dialogue aims to simulate. In spoken English, noun phrases are not very complex since they feature few elements; they usually contain a head noun alone or with one pre-modifying element. Furthermore, post-modification is even less frequent than pre-modification; rarely are nouns both pre- and post-modified simultaneously (Biber *et al.* 2021, p. 572).

3. Film dialogue as L2 input in informal access to English

Audiovisual dialogue has been observed to be a preferred means to access English extramurally, outside of the educational context (Sundqvist 2009; Pavesi, Ghia 2020). In all models of L2 acquisition, both the quantity and quality of the input are considered essential to the learning process (cf., among others, Krashen 1985; Ellis, Wulff 2015; VanPatten 2015; Montag *et al.* 2018; Anderson *et al.* 2021). According to Caruana (2009), the incidental acquisition of an L2 is particularly supported in films and television because verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal elements coincide frequently therein. Additionally, L2 audiovisual input creating an immersive experience for the audience is considered an advantage for L2 learners, whereby they can become emotionally receptive if the L2 does not represent a barrier (Caruana 2009; Pavesi 2015; Pavesi, Ghia 2020). Furthermore, since the focus is on entertainment rather than language learning, incidental learning is more likely to occur (Reinders, Benson 2017), as evidenced in media psychology (d'Ydewalle, Pavakanun 1996, 1997; Green *et al.* 2004; Wissmath *et al.* 2009).

The widely evidenced similarity between film and television language to naturally occurring conversation (Quaglio 2009; Bednarek 2010, 2018; Forchini 2012, 2021; Zago 2015; Werner 2021) suggests that the former is ideal for the acquisition of informal English (Pavesi 2015). Moreover, audiovisual dialogue is mostly free from dysfluency phenomena, which may be obstacles to information processing among L2 learners. A further advantage to using audiovisual language as input for an L2 is found in its staging situations characterised by informal language use, which are difficult to reproduce in a standard learning environment. Obtaining access to informal language also means coming in contact with the interpersonal, involved and emotional uses of language due to the freer syntactic organisation of discourse (Finegan, Biber 2001; Warren 2006) and the variety

of pragmatic strategies used, including emphasis, information structure management and politeness.

However, audiovisual input is not free from the structural complexity that characterises English and spoken language, the latter bearing specificities related to on-line production and the constant management of the speaker-hearer relationship. Furthermore, film bears register-specific characteristics related to its narrative structure, time constraints and salient artistic–symbolic intent (Alvarez-Pereyre 2011). Concurrently, film has a sophisticated architecture due to the interplay between the diegetic and extradiegetic levels, the level of the story portrayed on screen and the level on which the dialogue is indirectly addressing the audience (Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Dynel 2011; Guillot, Pavesi 2019). This may all impact the linguistic make-up and grammatical complexity of film.

Studying the grammatical complexity of film dialogue is relevant to L2 acquisition in two main ways: quantitatively since frequently encountered linguistic expressions and patterns are more likely to be noticed and internalised (Bley-Vroman 2002; Bybee 2008); qualitatively since it is important to know which structure types are found in the input and what functions they perform in order to formulate expectations about learning outcomes.

4. Research questions, data and methodology

The present study aims to describe the main features of phrasal complexity in film dialogue by examining different types of pre- and post-modification strategies and their frequencies of occurrence. Drawing on the assumption that film dialogue is meant to imitate natural conversation, the expectation is to find a low degree of phrasal complexity, short phrases with little or no modification (Biber *et al.* 2023). However, since film dialogue is first produced in written form and is then performed by actors and interpreted by the audience as spoken language, it may bear traces of its production circumstances. Specifically, time for pre-planning and medium-related time limitations may result in more complex and compressed phrasal expressions. To qualify the phrasal complexity of film dialogue, the following research questions (RQs) were formulated:

1. What length and type of pre-modification characterise film dialogue?
2. What type of post-modification characterises film dialogue?
3. What nouns are most often pre- and post-modified in film dialogue?
4. Are the patterns of pre- and post-modification in film dialogue similar to those characterising natural conversation?

The analysis relies on data from 34 orthographic transcriptions of British and American film dialogues, which constitute the anglophone component of the Pavia Corpus of Film Dialogue[1] (PCFD), for a total of 380,219 words. The films included in the PCFD present stories about everyday life that are likely to trigger the representation of spontaneous conversation onscreen (Pavesi 2014). The PCFD is entirely POS-tagged using the CLAWS7 tagset (Galiano, Semeraro 2023) to enable the semi-automatic retrieval of syntactic patterns.

To answer RQs 1 and 2, the patterns selected from Biber *et al.*'s (2022, pp. 14-15) taxonomy of grammatical complexity features in English (detailed in Table 1) were analysed using the AntConc concordancer[2] (version 4.2.0).

Structural type	**Syntactic function within structural type**	**Specific structural/syntactic features**	**Examples**
Dependent phrase	Noun phrase modifier	Attributive adjective as premodifier Noun as premodifier Prepositional phrase as postmodifier	You know I bought Chris an ancient Greek fertility charm? (*Match Point*, Allen, 2005) Well, I had to pick a place for my party, and I read that article about you. (*Autumn in New York*, Chen, 2000)
	Adverbial phrase	Prepositional phrase modifying a clause	Has your mother talked to you guys about this stuff? (*Boyhood*, Linklater, 2014)

Table 1
Phrasal complexity features in English
(adapted from Biber *et al.* 2022, p. 14-15).

The noun phrase was analysed in its pre-modification by examining both adjectives and nouns as well as post-modification by prepositional phrases (PPs). In addition, PPs used as adverbials modifying clauses (both verb arguments and additional information) were included in the analysis for functional comparison (N-attachment vs. V-attachment). The analysis of pre- and post-modifying patterns relied on the semi-automatic retrieval of patterns of POS-tags. That is, all possible combinations of pre- and post-modifiers were converted into combinations of tags, as reported in Table 2. The use of wildcards (e.g. *) allowed for more comprehensive searches (see also Figure 1).

[1] https://studiumanistici.unipv.it/?pagina=p&titolo=pcfd
[2] https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/

Pattern	Description	Tag sequence
(Adj) + (Adj) + (Adj) + Adj + N	Any noun preceded by up to four adjectives	(*_JJ*) (*_JJ*) *_JJ* *_NN*
(N) + (N) + (N) + N + N	Any noun preceded by up to four nouns	(*_NN*) (*_NN*) *_NN* *_NN*
N's + (Adj) + N	Any noun (pre-modified or not) preceded by Saxon Genitive	*_GE* (*_JJ*) *_NN*
(Adj) + Adj + N + N	Any noun-noun combination preceded by up to two adjectives	(*_JJ*) *_JJ* *_NN* *_NN*
Adj + N + N + N	Any noun-noun combination preceded by adjective+noun pre-modifying combination	*_JJ* *_NN* *_NN* *_NN*
Adv + Adj + N	Any pre-modifying sequence containing an adverb modifying the adjective	*_RR* *_JJ* *_NN*
N + P	Any noun followed by any preposition	*_NN* *_I*

Table 2
Pre- and post-modification queries.

The concordances retrieved through the search for POS-tag combinations in AntConc were manually checked to prevent false positives, and in some cases, concordances were sorted into categories following functional criteria. For example, Figure 1 displays the concordances obtained when searching for nouns followed by prepositions. Since these contained both post-modifying and adverbial PPs, the occurrences needed to be sorted into two categories. Once the data were cleaned and sorted, frequencies of occurrence were normalised per 100,000 words.

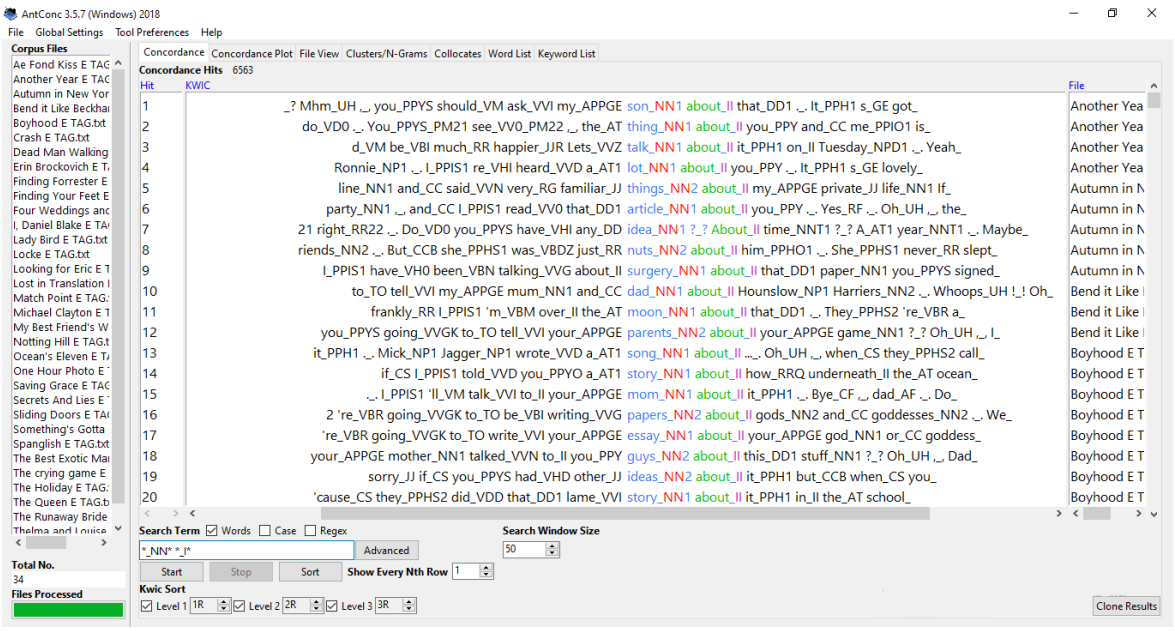

Figure 1
Sample of query results using the POS-tag sequence 'noun + preposition'.

Compounds were considered single units only when hyphenated (see examples 6 and 7), whereas complex routinised units (e.g. *prime minister*) were considered as being composed of a head noun (e.g. *Minister*) and a modifier (e.g. *prime*).

To answer RQ3, the noun heads most often (Mutual Information [MI] scores > 3; see Hunston 2002, p. 71) pre-modified by at least one adjective or noun and post-modified by a PP were analysed. The aim here was to determine what types of nouns are most frequently pre- and post-modified in film dialogue, as well as which nominal heads frequently occur with the various types of pre- and post-modifiers (e.g. nouns modified by adjectives vs. nouns modified by nouns). This part of the analysis used both collocate and cluster analyses of POS-tag combinations. To find the nominal heads most frequently pre-modified by adjectives, the POS-tag for adjectives ('JJ') was used as the search term, and a collocate search was performed for the element immediately following the adjective. Therefore, the span was reduced to two words and restricted to the right of the adjective (0L 2R). The minimum collocate frequency (MCF) was set to 20. Cluster analysis was used to obtain the nominal heads of the most frequent noun-noun combinations by setting the cluster size to a maximum of four elements and the minimum frequency to five. Finally, the nominal heads of post-modifying PPs were retrieved by conducting collocate analysis. The tag for 'any preposition in the corpus' ('I') was used as the search term, and the software was asked to find any element preceding the preposition, thus restricting the span to the left (2L 0R) with an MCF of 20 occurrences. Since a preposition can be preceded by elements belonging to different word classes, the 20 most frequent nouns were selected from the list of the most frequent collocates of prepositions. Nominal heads were subsequently analysed according to their semantic traits (e.g. general vs. specific, human vs. non-human) so that trends of combinations between the nominal head type and the pre- or post-modifying pattern could be discovered.

RQ4 was answered by comparing the corpus data with information on noun phrase complexity in natural conversation from Biber *et al.*'s (2021) study. Differences and similarities between the two registers were interpreted by intersecting the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the phrasal complexity of each register in a functional interpretation that considered production circumstances, the audience and medium-related specificities (Biber *et al.* 2022).

5. Noun phrase complexity in the PCFD

By examining the frequencies of the selected phrasal complexity patterns, film dialogue appears to have a register in which pre-modification plays a preponderant role compared to post-modification. That is, pre-modification is

three times as frequent as post-modification, with a strong preference for adjectival pre-modification over nominal pre-modification (see Table 3). As will be discussed in more detail in the following sub-sections, these tendencies may be related to the narrative requirements of film, which would also explain how different pre- and post-modification patterns trigger different categories of nominal heads.

Pattern	**Tokens**	**Frequency (per 100,000 words)**
Adjectival premodification	7857	2066
Nominal premodification	4261	1120
Post modification with prepositional phrase	4095	1077
Prepositional phrases as adverbials	10044	2641

Table 3
Phrasal complexity in the PCFD: Frequencies of phrasal patterns.

5.1 Pre-modification

The analysis of noun phrase pre-modification in the PCFD showed that adjectival pre-modification is twice as frequent as nominal pre-modification (2066 vs. 1120 per 100,000 words, respectively). The most frequent pre-modification pattern includes only one pre-modifier and, occasionally, a determiner (see example 3; see Table 4). Longer sequences of (three or more) pre-modifiers only comprise 0.6% of the pre-modification in film dialogue. Pre-modified nominal heads occur 2847.3 times every 100,000 words in film dialogue, suggesting that approximately one in four nouns in the corpus is pre-modified by at least one word.

As can be observed in Table 4, both adjectival and nominal pre-modification patterns containing only one pre-modifier (3) are more frequent than those containing two pre-modifiers (4), which, in turn, are more frequent than those containing three pre-modifiers (5).

[3]
You see, this is an unfair advantage. (*Thelma and Louise*, Scott, 1991)
I'm calling about the, um, job ad. (*Erin Brockovich*, Soderbergh, 2000)
[4]
She's with her new best friend. (*Lady Bird*, Gerwig, 2017)
We got back from the pardon board hearing. (*Dead Man Walking*, Robbins, 1995)
Do you realise that a severe anxiety attack can masquerade as a heart attack? (*Something's Gotta Give*, Meyers, 2003)

Great, listen, Harry has a really bad headache. (*Something's Gotta Give*, Meyers, 2003)
[5]
Go, let her go, she's got that big old bad joker there […]. (*Dead Man Walking*, Robbins, 1995)
You act like they're going to play a World Series championship game or something. (*Finding Forrester*, Van Sant, 2000)

The only exception to the trend is the Saxon genitive pre-modification, which is less frequent than N + N + N combinations. Overall, the tendency is a preference for shorter pre-modifying sequences. This was expected since film dialogue is meant to imitate natural conversation, which tends to rely on clausal rather than phrasal features, as mentioned in Section 2 (see Biber *et al.* 2022).

Pattern	**Tokens**	**Normalised (100,000 words)**
(det) JJ + NN	6394	1681
(det) JJ + JJ + NN	441	116
(det) JJ + JJ + JJ + NN	3	0.8
(det) NN + NN	2847	749
(det) NN + NN + NN	351	92
(det) NN + NN + NN + NN	12	3.1
(det) NN's + NN	301	79
(det) JJ + NN + NN	269	70.7
(det) JJ + JJ + NN + NN	33	8.7
(det) JJ + NN + NN + NN	16	4.2
(det) NN's + JJ + NN	15	4
(det) ADV + JJ + NN	144	37.9
Total number of pre-mod nominal heads	10826	2847.3
Premod ADJ	7857	2066
Premod N	4261	1120
Premod (tot)	12118	3187

Table 4
Frequencies of pre-modifying patterns in the PCFD.

However, film dialogue also displays complex pre-modifying patterns, although these occur much less frequently than short pre-modifying patterns. The longest pre-modification pattern in the corpus includes five pre-modifiers – or six if *special-edition* is considered to comprise two words – realising a complex pre-modifying sequence (see 6). Other examples of long sequences of pre-modifiers in film dialogue feature three and four pre-modifiers (see 7).

[6]
[special-edition plastic Burger King tray cups] (*Crash*, Haggis, 2004)
[7]
The [Evans County Threat Management Unit] (*One Hour Photo*, Romanek, 2002)
[cold-decking teen beat cover boys] (*Ocean's Eleven*, Soderbergh, 2001)
[T]he [strongest possible criminal attorney] (*Michael Clayton*, Gilroy, 2007)

Functionally, pre-modification allows for the identification and characterisation of the referent of the head noun by adding information about a variety of parameters such as physical appearance (e.g. *large, thin, heavy, pale*), evaluation (e.g. *bad, nice, beautiful*), classification (e.g. *German, chemical, legal*), etc. (cf. Feist 2012; Biber *et al.* 2022). Relying on pre-modification also allows for conveying information concisely, by using as few words as possible, to save space and time. This is an efficient way to provide substantial information about characters and events, especially in the context of film dialogue, in which a story needs to be told in a limited time. However, compacting information also leads to a lack of explicitness in the relationship between the head noun and its pre-modifiers (Biber *et al.* 2022). For example, in (8), the relationship between the three modifiers *little, horse* and *shit* and the head *attitude* is not explicitly coded.

[8]
Why don't you say goodbye to that little horse shit attitude? (*Boyhood*, Linklater, 2014)

By drawing on background knowledge, the expression can be interpreted as [little [horse shit [attitude]]]. That is, *attitude* is first modified by the already complex N + N expression *horse shit*, and the complex expression *horse shit attitude* is further modified by the adjective *little*.

The possibility of misunderstandings due to the ambiguity caused by the reduced explicitness of pre-modifiers is generally solved by drawing on contextual information: the speaker is expected to be aware of the information that the interlocutors already know, who then use less or non-explicit constructions (Feist 2012). For film dialogue, aside from relying on the dialogue itself, film can make referents and concepts accessible with images and sounds, which may allow for the broader use of inexplicit references through pre-modification. Such a relationship between dialogue and video, however, could not be investigated in the present study due to the nature of the corpus.

Although adjectives are believed to be the prototypical pre-modifying word class, evidence has been given for the increasing use of nouns as pre-modifiers over time (cf. Biber, Clark 2002; Biber *et al.* 2022). The N + N sequence represents a convenient strategy to compact information, as it allows for using nouns with an attributive function without needing to add morphological material, as is required with derived adjectives (e.g. *danger* > *danger-ous, care* > *care-ful*, *love* > *lovely*). Similar to attributive adjectives, N + N combinations express a variety of meaning relations between the head and the modifier, such as composition (9a), source (9b) and location (9c)

(Biber *et al.* 2021, p. 584), which are not immediately identifiable, thus adding to the vagueness of language onscreen (Quaglio 2009).

[9]

a. [...] we flew a paper airplane off. (*Boyhood*, Linklater, 2014)
b. [...] smelled like chicken fat. (*Erin Brockovich*, Soderbergh, 2000)
c. […] the duty officer at the Belmount Police Station. (*Locke*, Knight, 2013)

The strong prevalence of pre-modification with adjectives in film dialogue indicates a preference that may be related to the function of characterisation. Specifically, adjectives tend to add characteristics that are directly related to the referent of the head they modify. These thus represent a convenient strategy to provide information about the personality, appearance and cultural background of film characters. N + N structures, on the other hand, encode relations between the N1 and N2 making up the expression and likely refer to objects rather than people (see Example 9 and Section 5.3) and so are less explicit. Hence, their meaning must be inferred from the context or background knowledge.

5.2 Post-modification

In film dialogue, nominal post-modification with a PP is not particularly frequent compared to both pre-modification and PPs with an adverbial function. Approximately, only one in 10 nouns is post-modified by a PP in the corpus compared to one in four nouns that are pre-modified. Moreover, adverbial PPs are more than twice as frequent as post-modifying PPs (2604 vs. 1063 per 100,000 words, respectively; see Table 5). This tendency highlights the preference to add information at the clausal level in film dialogue, even when phrases are used, which adds to the findings on clausal complexity in film dialogue (Formentelli *et al.*, forthcoming).

Prepositional phrases	**Token**	**Norm.**
NP + PP (post-mod)	4095	1077
PP (adverbial)	10044	2641

Table 5
Post-modifying compared to adverbial PPs in the PCFD.

Functionally, PPs add information more explicitly than pre-modifiers since the preposition clarifies how the content of the PP relates to the item it modifies (see Example 10).

[10]

Like, the Freshmen satisfaction rate for new roommates used to be like 60%, and now it's 100%. (*Boyhood*, Linklater, 2014)

A balance between inexplicitness and explicitness is essential in film dialogue since it needs to be understood by a wide audience who does not share much background information about the characters and story portrayed onscreen until such information is given. Simultaneously, the higher frequency of adverbial PPs, with their elements of clausal complexity, may be ascribed to the imitation of the spoken register and thus the reproduction of tendencies that are typical of conversation (see Section 2) and that are aimed at achieving naturalness.

5.3 Pre- and post-modified nominal heads

As mentioned in Section 4, the most frequent pre- and post-modified nominal heads in the PCFD were obtained via collocate and cluster analyses of the tags for adjectives, nouns and any element preceding a preposition. Due to spatial limitations, the 20 most frequently modified head nouns for each category of pre- and post-modifier (adjective, noun, PP) were selected and analysed.

Beginning with the nominal heads that were found to be most frequently pre-modified by adjectives, the collocate analysis returned the list of nouns reported in Table 6.

Collocate	**MI score**
Minister	18,52
News	17,96
Ones	17,79
Birthday	17,48
Person	17,48
Girl	17,35
Deal	17,29
Thing	17,24
Hell	17.23
Side	17,01
Lady	17,01
School	16,97
Idea	16,97
Boy	16,94
Woman	16,91
Part	16,66
Night	16,65
Men	16,65
Friend	16,64
Bit	16,58

Table 6
Nouns collocating with the tag ‘JJ’ (adjectives).

Notably, nouns that are frequently pre-modified by adjectives tend to be generic and underspecified. Therefore, they need to be further characterised in order to be identified more clearly, which is the function of pre-modifying

adjectives. This is applicable to underspecified words such as *person*, *ones*, *girl*, *thing*, *lady*, *part* and *men* (see 11).

[11]
a. I am this horrible person. (*Boyhood*, Linklater, 2014)
b. Ah! Yeah, I like the old ones. (*Match Point*, Allen, 2005)
c. I've never seen an Indian girl into football. (*Bend it like Beckham*, Chadha, 2002)
d. Can you do one other big thing for me? (*Something's Gotta Give*, Meyers, 2003)
e. Don't mind the funny lady. (*Another Year*, Leigh, 2010)
f. This is just the best part of my day. (*Ocean's Eleven*, Soderbergh, 2001)
g. Would there be any wealthy single men in this evening? (*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, Madden, 2012)

Furthermore, the referents indicated by nominal heads pre-modified by adjectives most often identify people and everyday life events: eight out of the 20 nouns refer to people, namely *minister*, *person*, *girl*, *lady*, *boy*, *woman*, *men* and *friend* (see Examples 11a, c, e and g); six out of the 20 nouns refer to everyday life events and situations, namely *news*, *birthday*, *school*, *idea*, *night* and *deal* (see Example 12).

[12]
a. Well, excellent news. (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Newell, 1994)
b. Happy birthday, dear Roxanne. (*Secrets and Lies*, Leigh, 1996)
c. Erm, he was from this private school. (*Finding Forrester*, Van Sant, 2000)
d. Arthur downtown was not a good idea. (*Michael Clayton*, Gilroy, 2007)
e. See you soon. Good night. (*I, Daniel Blake*, Loach, 2016)
f. Oh, what's the big deal? (*Erin Brockovich*, Soderbergh, 2000)

As mentioned, pre-modification in film is preferred for providing more information about the characters whom the audience 'meets' for the first time. Therefore, if *girl*, *lady*, *boy*, *woman* and *men* provide information about gender and age, adjectives provide information about personal inclinations and features of the characters. Nouns referring to people were found to display greater variation in collocating adjectives compared to other nouns (see Appendix A). Adjectives also significantly pre-modify nouns referring to everyday life events and situations, often occurring in formulaic chunks expressing speech acts such as leave-taking (12e), good wishes (12b), comments (12a, f), etc.

For the cluster analysis of N + N combinations, the 20 most frequent nouns pre-modified by at least one noun are reported in Table 7. As shown, the referents of N + N combinations are all inanimate, except for *decision maker* and *football team*. The remainder of clusters refer to material things that are part of everyday life (e.g. *phone number*, *eye contact*,

thousand/million dollars, *ice cream*), except for *death row* and *pardon board*, which are overrepresented due to their high frequency of occurrence in the film *Dead Man Walking*.

Cluster	**Frequency (tokens)**
Heart attack	24
Million dollars	22
Parking lot	17
Death row	13
Phone number	13
Thousand dollars	13
Marigold Hotel	12
Decision maker	10
Eye contact	9
Phone call	9
Ice cream	8
Room service	8
Pardon board	7
Blood pressure	6
Bus stop	6
Cell phone	6
Dance floor	6
Detector test	6
Football team	6
Hundred years	6

Table 7
Cluster analysis of N + N combinations in the PCFD.

Finally, the collocation analysis of items followed by PPs resulted in the following list of the most frequent nominal collocates (Table 8).

Collocate of the PP	**MI score**
Rid	9.10
Lots	9.04
Cup	8.96
Couple	8.70
None	8.60
Piece	8.37
Middle	8.31
Kind	8.29
Part	8.17
Lot	8.14
Front	8.10
Hands	7.91
Top	7.83
Deal	7.79
End	7.74
Bit	7.60
Sort	7.45
Side	7.37
Friend	6.88
One	6.79

Table 8
Nouns collocating with the tag '*_I*' (prepositions).

This group of nominal heads is of another type, namely identifiers of the quantities (e.g. *part, lot, bit, deal*), positions and parts (e.g. *front, top, side*) of the entities that are referred to in the dependent PP. In the most frequent N + PP combinations, therefore, the semantic core is found in the PP rather than in the nominal head, as shown in Example (13).

[13]
Your case looked good, lots of **motives**. (*Match Point*, Allen, 2005)
I only had a couple of **wines**! (*Bend it like Beckham*, Chadha, 2002)
Not in the middle of **winter**. (*Finding your feet*, Loncraine, 2017)

Exceptions to this trend are the nouns *hands* and *friend.* The former is frequently found in a command shouted by the police, as in (14), while the latter is followed by PPs describing a friendship (see 15).

[14]
a. **Hands** in plain sight! (*Crash*, Haggis, 2004)
b. **Hands** in plain view! (*Thelma and Louise*, Scott, 1991)
[13]
Jamal Wallace is a **friend** of yours? (*Finding Forrester*, Van Sant, 2000)

The nominal heads that significantly collocate with different types of pre- and post-modifiers were found to occur in a seemingly complementary distribution, different categories of nouns occur with different modification strategies. Adjectives tend to modify nouns referring to people and everyday life events and situations, whereas nouns tend to modify nouns referring to material things and common objects. Finally, PPs tend to modify nouns describing quantities, parts of an object and object locations. What is common to all, although it is less true of N + N combinations, is the under-specificity of the semantics of nominal heads that are most frequently pre- and post-modified, thus calling for further characterisation through modification.

5.4 Comparison with natural conversation

By comparing the data on the pre- and post-modification of the noun phrase with those provided by Biber *et al.* (2021), both similarities and differences are found between the two registers of film dialogue and natural conversation. Generally, the PCFD and natural conversation display similar tendencies of pre- and post-modification (see Figure 2). In both registers, adjectival pre-modification is more frequent than nominal pre-modification, while post-modifying PPs are much less frequent than adverbial PPs. Simultaneously, film dialogue displays a higher frequency of both pre-modifying adjectives and nouns, as well as PPs, compared to natural conversation (see Figure 2).

If, on the one hand, similarities in the trends of both pre- and post-modification point to a successful imitation of the register, on the other hand, film dialogue appears to rely more on the use of phrasal complexity features than natural conversation. Such differences, however, do not seem to affect the overall tendencies observed for phrasal structures, thus indicating that register-specific needs in film dialogue (compacting information and characterisation) do not eliminate the need to sound natural.

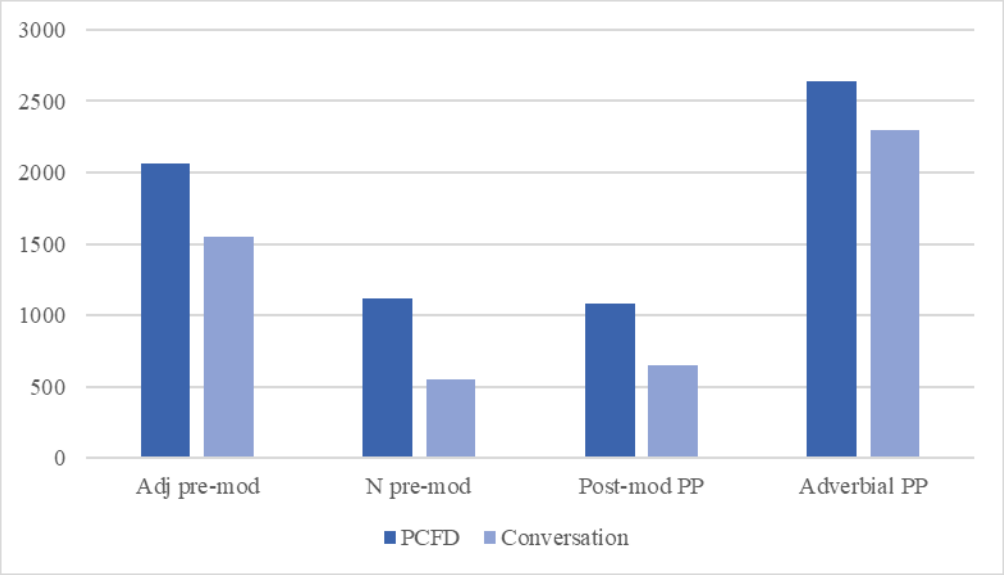

Figure 2
Adjective compared to noun pre-modification and PP modification
in film dialogue and conversation.

A final difference between pre-modification in film dialogue and conversation relates to the length of the pre-modifying sequence. Biber *et al.* (2021, p. 591) found that in conversation, a noun is not pre-modified by more than two words, whereas film dialogue displays occurrences of four-word pre-modifying sequences (excluding determiners, which would represent a fourth pre-modifying element; see Example 7).

A heavier reliance on phrasal features such as pre- and post-modification, combined with the observed increased length of the pre-modifying sequences compared to natural conversation, corresponds to a higher degree of phrasal complexity in film dialogue. This may be seen as suggestive of the production circumstances of film dialogue: since it starts as written language, there is time for pre-planning and editing. As Fox (2007, p. 314) posited, writers have no time constraints placed on their production, which presumably allows for the use of more complex syntactic structures. Simultaneously, since phrasal features allow for maximising the compacting of information, they can be used in film dialogue since much information

about the characters and the story portrayed onscreen needs to be provided in the brief time given by the film format.

6. Conclusions

The present paper investigated the phrasal complexity of film dialogue by examining nominal pre- and post-modification and the typology of nominal heads that are most frequently modified. It was observed that film dialogue most often relies on nominal pre-modification with an attributive adjective, which is followed in frequency by pre-modification with a noun and post-modification with a PP. Since phrasal elaboration allows for conveying the most information using minimal coding (Levi 1978; Biber *et al.* 2022), these represent convenient choices for film dialogue, where much needs to be said in a limited time. Both pre- and post-modified noun phrases appear to be more frequent in film dialogue compared to natural conversation, which may reflect the register-specific requirements and production circumstances in the text's complexity. Using dense nominal expressions, however, also implies a loss of explicitness in textual information, especially in the relationship between the head and its modifiers. This requires more shared and contextual knowledge for disambiguation (Varantola 1993), which can be provided through the use of multiple modes (images and sounds) in film.

The analysis of the typology of nominal heads in film dialogue revealed a complementary distribution of nouns according to the modification strategy with which they occur: pre-modification with adjectives frequently occurs with nouns denoting people and everyday situations or events; pre-modification with nouns frequently occurs with concrete referents such as objects; finally, nouns that are most frequently post-modified by a PP mainly indicate quantities or parts of the referent found in the PP.

Aside from showing an increased degree of phrasal complexity in film dialogue, considered a consequence of register-functional linguistic strategies, the comparison between film dialogue and natural conversation yielded a second observation: the tendencies displayed for both pre- and post-modification in film dialogue are similar to those displayed by natural conversation, confirming that film dialogue successfully imitates natural conversation in many ways, including phrasal complexity. This may have important implications for L2 learning since learners encounter input that is both rich and faithful to natural spoken language. Furthermore, because of the frequency of exposure, it can be hypothesised that frequent structures in input may lead to noticing and internalisation (Bley-Vroman 2002; Bybee 2008). Future studies addressing the impact of accessing media in English outside of the classroom should consider formulating expectations about the learning

paths of phrasal complexity features following the typology and distribution of these features in film dialogue and other frequently accessed audiovisual products (see Formentelli, Zago this volume). Such learning expectations can then be tested against actual learners' productions, ideally in longitudinal studies, to gain deeper insights into the relationship between informal exposure to audiovisual English content and the learning outcomes of several grammatical complexity features.

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Annexes

Adjectival pre-modifiers collocating with nominal heads

Collocate	Premodifying adjectives
Minister	Prime
News	Good, excellent, bad, unwelcome, great, nightly, dreadful, local, worse
Ones	Small, little, sissy, whole, long, old, new, darling, loved, bad, white, new, unloved, larger
Birthday	Happy, big
Person	Bad, young, whole, lovely, cooperative, horrible, real, serious, white, black, missing, bad, nice, special, elderly, right, favourite, other, nervous, good, fragile, quiet, odd, new, complicated, smart, criminal, wrong, brave, stupid, influential, terrible, suitable, wonderful, stupidest, sweetest
Girl	Good, Irish, white, gorgeous, underage, sad, old-fashioned, Indian, blonde, young, good, lucky, pretty, busy, little, silly, sweet, big, American, adorable, friendly, beautiful, poor, nice, wrong, interesting, bad, depressing, British, lovely, funniest, greatest
Deal	Great, whole, big, good, bigger
Thing	Right, whole, wonderful, other, good, thoughtless, beautiful, Indian, big, small, little, terrible, poor, polite, simple, important, silly, crucial, strange, extraordinary, unforgivable, big, exciting, different, honourable, wrong, bad, favourite, stupid, clinical, wonderful, horrible, awesome, nice, communal, ridiculous, mad, new, fun, calm, funny, toxic, dreadful, weird, terrific, best, dumbest, sexiest
Hell	Bloody, fucking, living
Side	Other, bright, wrong, American
Lady	Young, lovely, funny, old, pregnant, special, leading, nice, little
School	Catholic, ordinary, non-denominational, medical, old, whole, high, middle, prep, private, new, agricultural, public, good
Idea	Good, great, whole, fun, bad, general, daft, stupid, bright, brilliant, marvellous, wrong, superb, better
Boy	Good-looking, good, naughty, pretty, clean-shaven, white, Indian, English, small, black, little, poor, clever, handsome, nice, lucky, wonderful
Woman	Strange, married, young, mature, poor, other, perfect, proper, English, old, white, free, beautiful, middle-aged, decent, divorced, non-threatening, amazing, Mexican, promiscuous, wild, happier, younger, best
Part	Whole, big, chemical, famous, hard, great, sane, other, important, better-lit, best, easiest, deepest, creepiest
Night	Late, wild, silent, holy, good, tough, cold, other, lucky, lovely, great, rough, insane, clear, busy, early, important, wonderful, extraordinary, remarkable, interesting, special, frantic, wrong, best
Men	Strong, gay, straight, favourite, black, white, accused, great, single, cruel, divorced, modern, needy, older
Friend	Old, Indian, feathered, good, dear, furry, Scottish, special, best
Bit	Wee, little, nice, tiny, easy, best, worst