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Grammar as ideology, writing as evidence: diachronic insights from Noun Phrase use in the primary school context (1979–2021)

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ABSTRACT

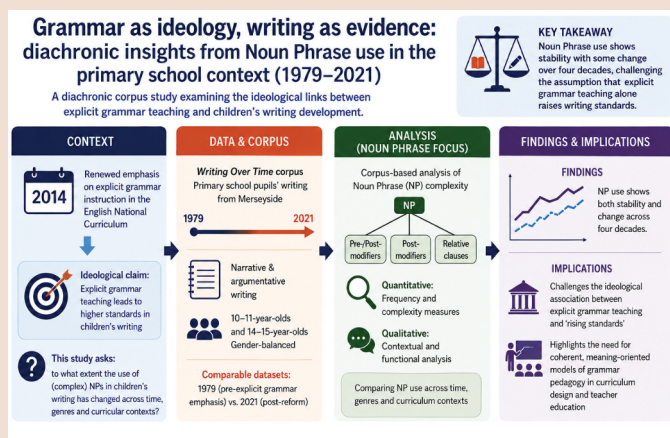
This paper explores the long-term ideological association between grammar teaching and children's writing development through a small case-study of Noun Phrase (NP) use across time and curricular contexts. Drawing on the *Writing over Time* corpus (1979–2021), a collection of narrative and argumentative writing from primary schoolchildren in Merseyside, it compares texts produced before and after the institutionalisation of explicit grammar instruction in the English National Curriculum. At the linguistic level, quantitative and qualitative analyses of NP complexity reveal both stability and change in NP use across time and genres. At the wider, socio-educational level, the linguistic findings are used to (a) question the historical standing of ideological associations between explicit grammar teaching and “rising standards” of language proficiency and (b) highlight, in line with previous synchronic-oriented scholarship, the need for more coherent, meaning-oriented models of grammar pedagogy as part of curricular language models and teacher training.

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Introduction

The current English National Curriculum, implemented in 2014, places renewed emphasis on the explicit teaching of transcriptional and compositional aspects of writing (Barrs 2019; Hardman and Bell 2018; Myhill and Clarkson 2021). Led by former Education Secretary Michael Gove, the reform was framed around discourses of “nostalgia” that called for enhanced academic rigour (Hodgson and Harris 2021, 208; Yandell 2013) and, for English as a subject, explicit grammar instruction as a way of reinstating high standards in literacy achievement.

The 2014 English curriculum reform was informed by substantial input from language experts (Dick Hudson, p.c.) and research emphasising the potential value of grammar teaching when embedded meaningfully into contextualised writing instruction (see, e.g. Jones, Myhill, and Bailey 2013; Myhill et al. 2012). This evidence-based input seems, however, only partially reflected in the final curricular documentation, where grammar is conceptualised as a sequenced body of knowledge that pupils should master through year-by-year acquisition (DfE 2014, English Appendix 2:1). The inclusion of (a) statutory requirements specifying which grammatical terminology and structures pupils need to acquire and (b) a Key Stage 2 (KS2) Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS) test reinforces this conceptualisation. Subsequent policy documents follow the same trend: Ofsted’s *Research Review: English* (2022, 6–7, 23) aligns literacy standards with explicit knowledge of syntax. Similarly, the *DfE Writing Framework* (2025, 4, 47, 72) promotes “sentence mastery” through explicit grammar teaching and sustained practice, signalling that grammatical competence is not only a curricular goal but also a measurable indicator of writing proficiency. The overall result is a curriculum presenting the relation between grammar knowledge and writing proficiency as simple and direct: grammar is a key mechanism for raising standards and improvement is understood primarily in terms of systematic “volume” (accumulation and measurable demonstration) of grammatical knowledge.

Recent UK-based research, however, problematises such direct alignment. Previous quantitative studies suggest that extensive formal grammar teaching has limited impact on children’s writing (cf. Wyse and Torgerson 2017; Wyse et al. 2022), while recent qualitative work (e.g. Safford 2016) indicates that the drive to meet end-of-key-stage outcomes can narrow teachers’ focus to terminological accuracy and surface correctness to the detriment of other aspects of the writing process. Significant impact of grammar instruction on learners’ writing (particularly in proficient writers) is by contrast found by Myhill and associates (Myhill et al. 2012; Myhill, Jones, and Watson 2013; Myhill et al. 2013; Myhill 2018), specifically in contexts where grammar is taught in an embedded manner by grammar-trained teachers. Together, these studies highlight a central paradox in the current English policy logic: grammar is taught in increasing quantity as a route to raising standards, even though evidence of its influence on children’s writing remains limited (in the UK research tradition) and, crucially, closely tied to the level of practitioners’ grammar knowledge and grammar teaching expertise (cf. Hudson’s (in preparation) review of language education in Europe and the positive impact of grammar teaching in, e.g. France or Germany, also Rogers and Graham (2008)).

The above-mentioned research evidence is mostly synchronic, i.e. it contrasts more/less grammar-focussed instruction within the same policy context (e.g. Andrews et al.

2006; Wyse and Torgerson 2017). Diachronic considerations, i.e. how current grammatical expectations linked to “raising standards” claims may reflect historical trends in pupils’ writing across time and contexts, remain largely unexplored.

This paper therefore aims to contribute to the field by examining, through a small-scale study of Noun Phrase (NP) usage, the robustness of long-term ideological associations between explicit grammar teaching and the raising of writing standards. In order to do so, we will compare (a selection of) texts written by primary school pupils in 2021 to comparable texts from primary school pupils in 1979 who have not been exposed to the same emphasis on explicit English grammar teaching and learning (see Section “Data and methods”). Such comparison should not be seen as an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of the 2014 National Curriculum but rather as an attempt to investigate empirically the rationale behind well-established socio-educational expectations about grammar in England.

NP usage in primary school writing (narrative and argumentative) has been chosen as the focus of the case study for the following reasons. Firstly, because the use and growing complexity of the NP is, compared to that of other phrasal units, a clear indicator of children’s writing development during compulsory education (Durrant, Brenchley, and McCallum 2021). Secondly, because the NP is a grammar construct that is explicitly taught and included in the assessment criteria at the end of KS2 (Durrant and Brenchley 2023, 241; STA 2018). Indeed, it is the most frequently specified phrasal category in the primary curriculum, with over 10 explicit mentions throughout the primary programme of study (DfE 2014).¹ Thirdly, narrative and argumentative writing are two genres with a long-standing teaching tradition in primary writing classrooms in England.

Our study intends to answer the following questions:

- Are there any differences in NP usage in primary schoolchildren’s writing (narrative and argumentative) across time (1979–2021)?
- What do those differences (or similarities) in schoolchildren’s NP usage mean in relation to the emphasis on explicit grammar teaching in the current primary school context?

The paper is structured as follows. Section “The NP in the English education system: contextualisation” contextualises the prominence of the NP in the curricular periods under investigation and applied linguistics literature. Section “Data and methods” outlines the methodology and dataset. Section “Analysis” is devoted to data analysis, whereas Section “Discussion of findings and conclusions” focusses on the discussion of main findings and the wider implications of the study.

The NP in the English education system: contextualisation

The period considered in this paper bridges significant transformations in the teaching of English in schools in England driven by curricular reforms and changing pedagogical approaches. This section therefore offers a brief overview of the prominence (or lack thereof) of the NP in English curricula across the periods examined. Where no centralised curricular guidelines were in place, we reviewed relevant assessment protocols, as

previous research has consistently shown that assessment frameworks typically influence (if not drive) teaching practice (Constantinou 2019).

Our earliest data derives from the pre-National Curriculum period (1979), commonly associated with the absence of explicit English language teaching after the eschewing of grammar teaching in the late 1960s. Traditional approaches were increasingly criticised as outdated and disconnected from pupils' lived experiences, while progressive movements promoted "personal growth" models prioritising creativity and self-expression over technical accuracy (Bell 2016, 149; Clark 2001, 84ff; Hodgson and Harris 2021, 208ff). At classroom level, this led to the belief that pupils, as native speakers, would develop linguistic knowledge through engagement with literary texts and creative writing activities (Clark 2001; Hudson and Walmsley 2005).

However, the late 1970s also saw the emergence of a new conceptualisation of language (and grammar) learning influenced by Halliday's functional linguistics (Clark 2001, 91ff). Such conceptualisation promoted a Knowledge About Language (KAL) approach where language was seen as a meaning-making device and the deployment of grammatical choice is determined by the content (text-making, discourse) and context (audience, domain) of the communicative function. These views were reflected in government reports of the time (e.g. DES 1988; HMI 1984) and constituted the conceptual baseline of the nationwide surveys of language performance carried by the government's Assessment Performance Unit (APU) between 1979 and 1988,² which assessed writing, reading, speaking and oracy.

The APU conceptualised language as purposeful activity and designed tasks "related as closely as possible to ways in which language is actually used" in daily life (Thornton 1987, 2; see also Gorman 1986, 3; White 1986, 1). Their assessment criteria were broad, emphasising overall language competence rather than providing lists of structures that assessors should attend to (Gorman 1986, 11). The APU assessment framework for writing included attention to phrasal elements within the *Knowledge of Grammatical Conventions* section; however, no specific mention to NPs (or to any other phrase type) is explicitly made (see Gorman 1986, 22–23).

Grammatical knowledge was included in the first National Curriculum (NC) (Cox 1989). It was, however, not explicitly tested but integrated into broader literacy activities. References to NPs were limited, though the Cox Report (Cox 1989; emphasis in the original), for example, specifies that primary pupils achieving Level 4 should "[s]how some competence in the structures of written Standard English ... [using] *eg. a wider range of subordinate clauses, expanded noun phrases etc.*".

More explicit attention to grammar followed with the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) introduced in 1998, as part of the New Labour government's drive to improve literacy standards (Beard 2000). The NLS included a framework (NLF) that specified the importance of grammar (Beard 2000). The framework used a three-block model with word-level, sentence-level, and text-level language work (Beard 2000; Myhill and Watson 2014, 43). Grammatical knowledge spanned "word"- and "sentence"-work levels. In this model, simple NPs are first introduced (but not explicitly labelled as NPs) in Year 3. The term NP is used in the Year 4 descriptions. Examples of complex NPs appear in Year 5, typically including head nouns with adjectival premodifiers and Prepositional Phrase (PP) postmodifiers (DfE 2000, 46, 90, 114).

Year	Typical ages (years)	Statutory content requirements
2	6-7	“expanded noun phrases for description and specification”, e.g. <i>the blue butterfly, plain flour, the man in the moon</i> .
4	8-9	“noun phrases expanded by the addition of modifying adjectives, nouns and preposition phrases.”, e.g. <i>the strict maths teacher with curly hair</i> . (p.78)
5-6	9-11	“using expanded noun phrases to convey complicated information concisely”, “using relative clauses beginning with <i>who, which, where, when whose, that</i> or an omitted relative pronoun[”].

Figure 1. NP learning requirements in primary level, NC 2014 (from Durrant and Brenchley 2023, 240).

Grammar knowledge is made more prominent in the (non-)statutory requirements of the 2014 NC (English programmes of study, GPS tests). Pupils encounter simple NPs in Year 2, learn about NP modifier types in Years 4–5 and, by Year 6, are expected to understand both the formal and functional role of NPs in conveying complex information concisely (DfE 2014, see Figure 1 and Durrant and Brenchley 2023, 240). This emphasis is also sustained in the DfE 2025 Writing Framework (2025, 53, 106), which reiterates the importance of phrase-level instruction for sentence structure.

NPs are also mentioned in the STA 2018 exemplification materials where reference to “expanded NPs” is made in three of the six samples of writing illustrating “work [...] at the standard level” (Leigh’s extracts A, C, E; STA2018: 8, 12, 19–20). Regardless of the text type being scrutinised, the use of (complex) NPs is highlighted as a stylistic feature that contributes to the creation of atmosphere and characters:

Descriptive detail (provided in 3 different ways) signals the turning point in the narrative [...]: an expanded noun phrase describes and specifies (mysterious and multicoloured hole in the wall) [...] (Text E, STA 2018, 20)

Overall, the brief historical overview above reflects a gradual reinvigoration of the value of explicit grammar instruction for pupils across National Curriculum iterations since 1989.³ The greater prominence of, and heightened expectations around, phrasal categories in the current school context is a likely consequence of such renewed grammar emphasis. The fact that the curriculum does not provide “clear articulation of a rationale for th[e] renewed emphasis on grammar” (Myhill and Watson 2014, 43) begs the question of why some phrasal units (in our case, the NP) should receive greater attention than others in the curriculum.

NP in children’s writing: a contextualisation

Previous scholarship on children’s writing confirms the central role of NPs in writing development (for a comprehensive survey of previous studies and their findings, see Durrant, Brenchley, and McCallum 2021, 81ff). They consistently report a systematic growth of NP internal complexity with age, manifested in an increase of different types

of pre- and postmodifiers (see Harpin 1976; Ravid and Berman 2010; Sampson 2003). Greater NP complexity also seems to be consonant with higher writing quality in particular text types. However, as Durrant, Brenchley, and McCallum (2021) highlight, significant discrepancies in the operationalisation of NP components were found across these previous studies, hence compromising the systematisation and comparability of findings.

Durrant and Brenchley's (2023, 250) work confirms the increase in NP structural complexity across time and school years and provides further detail about how that development takes place. They indicate that NP complexity grows at a constant rate across primary and secondary school writing, without genre-specific patterns. They also show that NP development seems driven post-nominally by increases (in frequency and complexity) of prepositional phrases, appositions and relative clauses. The premodifying string appears to be a locus for children's experimentation and creativity, with relatively greater use of participial (as opposed to adjectival and nominal) premodifiers and a greater presence of descriptive (as opposed to classifying) premodifying adjectives (e.g. *a big train* vs *an electric train*) than in standard adult writing. On the basis of these results, Durrant and Brenchley (2023, 259–260) observe that the curricular descriptions of the NP do not fully match the picture provided by corpus analysis. More generally, they highlight the advisability of further uses of their study “across other English-speaking contexts” to “evaluate the impacts of individual curricula and identify any maturational constraints on writing development” (Durrant and Brenchley 2023, 261). This is where our study comes in.

Data and methods

The corpus

The data for this study come from the recently-developed *Writing Over Time* corpus, a diachronic collection of primary (10–11-year-olds) and secondary (14–15-year-olds) schoolchildren's (narrative and argumentative) writing from Merseyside (1979–2021). The 1979 data come from the above-mentioned APU surveys of language performance from Merseyside (see [The NP in the English education system: contextualisation](#), also

Year	Gender	Text type	Total texts	Syntactically coded texts	No. words [syntactically coded texts]	No. of NPs [syntactically coded texts]
1979	female	Argumentative	50	25	2768	724
		Narrative	50	25	5914	1451
	male	Argumentative	50	25	2382	623
		Narrative	50	25	4551	1180
2021	female	Argumentative	50	25	3322	912
		Narrative	50	25	3813	952
	male	Argumentative	50	25	2415	655
		Narrative	50	25	2380	600

Figure 2. Composition of the *Writing Over Time* corpus (primary).

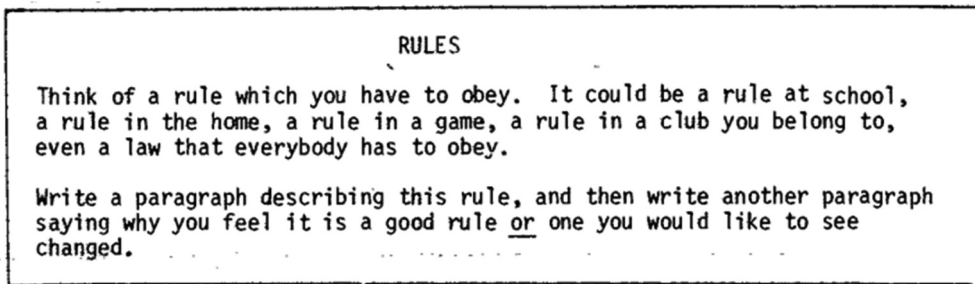


Figure 3. Expository task prompt used in the 1979 APU survey and replicated in 2021.

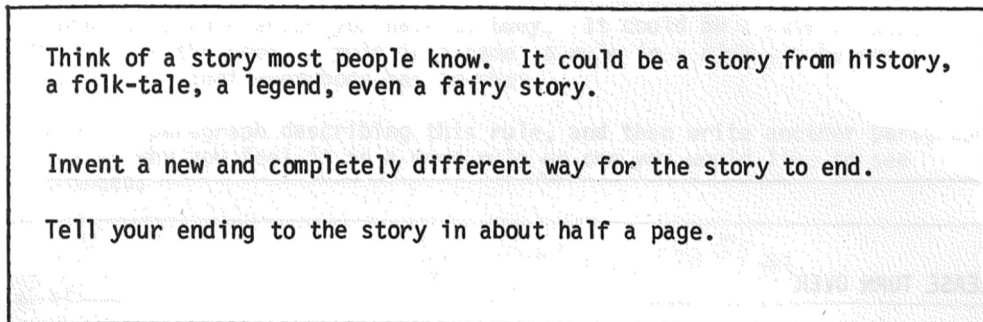


Figure 4. Narrative task prompt used in the 1979 APU survey and replicated in 2021.

Yáñez-Bouza and González-Díaz 2019). The present-day data⁴ are the result of the replication, under the same control conditions, of the 1979 APU tasks in five Merseyside schools in 2021. The corpus is gender-balanced across time and text types (50% male and 50% female writing, where one and the same pupil contributed one narrative and one argumentative text).

For this study, only the primary school component of the corpus was used. Figure 2 summarises the datasets;⁵ Figures 3 and 4 show the prompts used to elicit the data.

All pupil scripts were digitised, transcribed and normalised to Standard British English spelling. These normalised texts were automatically POS-tagged (Stanford CoreNLP parser; Manning et al. 2014). Following the automatic POS-tagging, 50% of the files per text type and year were manually coded by the research team using the *Growth in Grammar Project* syntactic annotation model (Brenchley and Durrant n.d.). The model was originally created to analyse a selection of grammatical constructions of developmental interest in children's writing – including NPs (see Durrant and Brenchley 2023, 248ff). All NPs were coded separately by two members of the research team. The analyses were compared and checked until agreement on all syntactic codes was achieved.

Data analysis procedure

For the present study, the syntactically-annotated sample of 50 texts per text type and year was used (200 texts in total; see Figure 2 above). All NPs were analysed in detail,

paying particular attention to NP structure (complexity), as this is heavily foregrounded in the current NC Primary English Programmes of study.

Several complexity constructs have been put forward in previous literature for NP structure (see, among others, Durrant and Brenchley 2023; Durrant, Brenchley, and McCallum 2021; Hunt 1965; Ravid and Berman 2010). These include:

- (a) length of the NP,
- (b) presence/absence of noun modifiers,
- (c) length and/or number of modifiers,
- (d) types of noun modifiers, and
- (e) presence/absence of syntactic dependencies within NP modifiers.

Regardless of the (different) operationalisations of constructs in the literature, the general idea is that longer NPs are often indicative of greater syntactic complexity, as they tend to include different modifiers. Furthermore, dexterous manipulation of different modifier types and the inclusion of additional levels of grammatical information via NP embedding show the writer's (greater) relative syntactic maturity (cf. Durrant, Brenchley, and McCallum 2021, 81, 83ff).

Drawing on these previous works, our construct of syntactic complexity included three variables: (i) the presence of modification, (ii) type of NP modifiers, and (iii) presence/absence of syntactic dependents at various sub-levels (level 1–5; see Figure 5). The tripartite model used for variable (i) and the sub-levels classification in variable (iii) are adapted from Laso Martín and Díez-Bedmar (2025), who in turn use Biber et al. (1999) model. It is also important to note here that our concept of noun modifier includes both NP modification (e.g. *a book that I like*) and complementation (e.g. *the idea that we'd finish early*). In this respect, all NP elements other than the determiner and the head noun are classed as modifiers in the current curricular guidelines.

Using the statistical software SPSS.22, we explored the distribution of these parameters across genres and time. Normality tests (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) were computed to know when parametric or non-parametric procedures were to be conducted. Comparisons between 1979 and 2021 cohorts were made via independent sample t-tests or Mann–Whitney U tests accordingly. The significance level was set to 0.05 (*), although alpha levels 0.01 (**) and 0.001 (***) are also reported throughout the paper. Given the number of comparisons conducted, we recognise that testing multiple differences at a conventional alpha level increases the likelihood of identifying some apparently significant effects due to chance alone. Effect sizes were calculated by means of Cohen's d, whose values are considered “small” if around +/-0.2; “medium” if about +/-0.5, and “large” if above.

Analysis

Argumentative writing

Figure 6 presents the analysis of the presence and type of modification in argumentative texts, reporting, as with most of the figures below, the mean (computed from the mean number of occurrences per text, normalised per 1,000 words), standard deviation and

Complexity variables			
Presence of modification	premodifier-only	<i>The thin air</i>	
	postmodifier-only	<i>One of the chimneys</i>	
	premodifier and postmodifier	<i>The overgrown mass of forest</i>	
Type of modification	premodifier types	Adjectival	<i><u>healthy</u> eating</i>
		Nominal	<i>the <u>classroom</u> learning</i>
		Participial	<i>the world's <u>growing</u> population</i>
		Other	<i><u>about</u> 3 pm</i>
	postmodifier types	Prepositional Phrase	<i>the side <u>of the road</u></i>
		Non-finite clause	<i>a lorry <u>going slower than the car</u></i>
		Finite clause	<i>A rule that you have to obey</i>
		Apposition	<i>the equipment (<u>hula hoops and tennis balls</u>)</i>
		Adjective	<i>the driver <u>responsible</u></i>
Embedding within complex NP modifiers	absence	Level 1: Simple NP	<i>The princess/ Mother Bear/ Rules/ They</i>
		Level 2: Complex NP [Pre- OR postmodifiers, no embedded dependents in pre/postmodifier element]	<i>A <u>great</u> help A rule <u>that we have to obey</u></i>
		Level 3: Complex NP [Pre- AND postmodifiers, no embedded dependents in pre/postmodifier element]	<i>The back seat <u>of the car</u> the <u>school</u> rule <u>I will describe</u> a <u>big bang on the door</u></i>
	presence	Level 4: Complex NPs [Pre- OR postmodifiers, with one or more embedded dependents in pre/postmodifier elements]	<i>A <u>terribly glamorous</u> wedding The passage <u>to the great lounge</u></i>
		Level 5: Complex NPs [Pre- AND postmodifiers, with one or more embedded dependents in pre/postmodifier elements]	<i>A <u>very strange</u> plant <u>poking through the bedroom window</u> A <u>large hut with the door unlocked</u></i>

Figure 5. Variables under study.

Factor	1979 Cohort Mean (SD)	2021 Cohort Mean (SD)	Significance
Presence of modification			
premodifier-only	23.76 (SD 16.28)	17.69 (SD 14.92)	$z=-2.082$, $p=0.037^{*7}$
postmodifier-only	22.74 (SD 19.39)	22.08 (SD 14.80)	$p>0.05$
premodifier and postmodifier	22.74 (SD 19.39)	22.08 (SD 14.80)	$p>0.05$
Type of modification			
<i>Premodifier types:</i>			
adjectival	20.58 (SD 13.58)	19.50 (SD 18.50)	$p>0.05$
nominal	6.73 (SD 9.87)	4.04 (SD 8.34)	$p>0.05$
participial	0.00 (SD 0.00)	1.04 (SD 3.44)	$z=-2.282$, $p=0.023^{*}$
other	1.12 (SD 3.53)	1.77 (SD 3.98)	$p>0.05$
<i>Postmodifier types:</i>			
adjectival	0.66 (SD 2.28)	1.18 (SD 3.94)	$p>0.05$
prepositional	12.62 (SD 14.36)	10.42 (SD 11.35)	$p>0.05$
finite clause	9.61 (SD 12.30)	12.25 (SD 12.77)	$p>0.05$
non-finite clause	2.88 (SD 6.80)	3.69 (SD 5.64)	$p>0.05$

Figure 6. Distribution of factors across time: argumentative texts.

significance for each factor. For clarity, significant contrasts are henceforth highlighted in bold type.

Statistically significant differences were recorded in relation to only two NP features: general number of premodified NP and presence of participial premodifiers. The effect size was medium in both cases, with Cohen's d values of 0.389 and -0.427 , respectively. Firstly, the 1979 data show a higher number of premodified-only NPs, with 40% of the 1979 argumentative texts featuring three or more premodified-only NPs per text. This figure is substantially lower (28%) in the 2021 dataset. Such premodified-only NPs normally include only one premodifier element (95% of the NPs in both 1979 and 2021 datasets). Those premodifiers are generally used to either provide details on the people or events under discussion (see (2) and (3)) or introduce the writer's evaluation of the rule/topic they have been asked to describe (see (4) and (5)).

- (2) [I]f motorists went any faster than the limit they could crash into one another. Then, if they didn't crash there might be **a steep hill** a bit further along the road (W791ru_16089)
- (3) But the thing I don't like is that rugby players are allowed to wear **metal studs** and this is how the accident is worse than if you wore **plastic studs** (W791ru_16087m)
- (4) I think this **a sensible rule** and should be kept by everyone and not just a few people. (W791ru_16186f)
- (5) I thought masks were good and **an amazing protection** but now I find them uncomfortable (W211ru_LC13m)

In line with previous research (Durrant and Brenchley 2023), adjectives are the most frequent NP premodifiers in both datasets and, conversely, participles are the least-frequently attested premodifier type. In this respect, Figure 6 shows a statistically significant difference in the use of participle modifiers across cohorts (the 2021 dataset showing a greater frequency of the patterns). This difference is, however, to be taken with a pinch of salt, as the (raw) numbers are too low to draw any robust conclusions (4 participles in 2021 vs 0 examples in 1979).

In order to investigate further the difference in general premodifier frequency, we looked into lexical diversity matters. For each essay featuring premodified NPs, we computed separate type – token ratios (TTR) for premodifying adjectives and nouns (Figure 7). The analysis reveals a statistically significant difference with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.834$) in the distribution of adjectival TTRs between the 2 years ($U = 526.5$, $p = 0.002$).⁶ Specifically, the 1979 (adjectival premodifier) dataset exhibited greater lexical repetition, with more frequent reuse of the same adjective modifying types than the 2021 dataset. Noun TTRs do not differ significantly between 1979 and 2021 ($U = 81.5$, $p = 0.696$).

Lexical repetition is frequently used by developing writers as a cohesive strategy, helping to reinforce key ideas and maintain coherence across sentences and paragraphs (Crowhurst 1987; Struthers, Lapadat, and MacMillan 2013). In the examples in Fig. 8 below, repetition of the same NP (e.g. *the school gate* in Figure 8, Text 2) or of a recurring NP frame with minor variation (e.g. *a very good thing/idea* and *old age/pension* in Texts 1 and 3) helps the child to maintain topical focus and fulfil the evaluative purpose of the task. A particularly notable pattern was the repeated use of the adjective *good*. Given its prominence in the task prompt (Figure 3), its high frequency is unsurprising; however, it occurs significantly more often in the 1979 dataset (mean = 0.9, SD = 0.763) than in 2021 (mean = 0.4, SD = 0.67), suggesting closer adherence of the earlier texts to the task rubric ($t(166) = 3.483$, $p < 0.001$).

Our last measure of analysis considered the distribution of NPs across increasing levels of complexity, i.e. from simple NPs (Level 1) to complex NPs with varied pre- or postmodifier levels (Levels 2–5; see Figure 5 for examples). As Figure 9 shows, no significant differences in any complex types are attested. Only Level 1 structures (simple NPs) record a moderate difference with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.459$) across years ($p = 0.032$), with a higher presence of simple NP structures in the 2021 data.

Overall, the results indicate some minor differences in NP premodification across datasets, namely, the 1979 dataset features (a) a more frequent use of premodified-only NPs for description, text-cohesion and evaluation-enhancing purposes than its 2021 counterpart and (b) slightly greater reliance on the wording of the original task rubric to build the evaluative structure of the text.

Measure	Year	N (texts)	Median	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Significance
Adjective TTR	1979	43	1.00	0.75	0.29	0.29	1.00	$z = -2.60$, $p = 0.002^*$
Adjective TTR	2021	37	1.00	0.94	0.14	0.50	1.00	
Noun TTR	1979	15	1.00	0.86	0.22	0.50	1.00	$p > 0.05$
Noun TTR	2021	10	1.00	0.82	0.24	0.50	1.00	

Figure 7. Descriptive statistics for premodifier TTRs (adjectives and nouns).

Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
Passwords are a very good idea because only the people who belong to a club can get in. if the person does not know the password they will not be allowed in. A password is a very good thing if you do not want intruders into your meeting, house or something. if a new person joins the club then you must tell him or her the pass word or else they would not get in. I think that that rule should not be changed because it is a very good one and also it keeps out intruders and also violent people who would come in and destroy everything. if there were valuables in the place it would be better to pick a very hard password that the intruder would not guess so the valuables should be safe.(W791ru_20168m)	The rule I am thinking of is the rule of people parking outside the school gate we must not park outside the school gate in case any child runs out and slips up or trips up onto the car and breaks one of their bones. That's why I think it's a good rule. I do not think anything should be changed so long as the rule is kept that nobody should park outside the school gate. (W791ru_16192f)	One rule is for old pensioners and it is that if you are older than your husband or wife and you are old enough to have an old-age pension you have to wait until your husband or wife is over the age to be given the pension. My grandma is old enough to be given her old pension but she has to wait until her husband is old enough. I would like this rule to be changed and let the pensioners have their money when they are the right age so that they can keep in better health and have more money in their pockets, with all this income tax being taken out of their pockets (W791ru_16177f)

Figure 8. Examples of premodifier-only NPs in argumentative texts.

	1979	2021	significance
Level 1	21.22 (SD 8.51)	25.72 (SD 10.93)	$z=-2.139, p=0.032^*$
Level 2	4.22 (SD 3.21)	3.94 (SD 2.53)	$p>0.05$
Level 3	0.14 (SD 0.45)	0.28 (SD 0.64)	$p>0.05$
Level 4	1.04 (SD 1.00)	1.18 (SD 1.22)	$p>0.05$
Level 5	0.20 (SD 0.00)	0.20 (SD 0.53)	$p>0.05$

Figure 9. Levels of complexity analysis: argumentative texts.

Narrative writing

The comparison of NP modifier types in narrative writing is summarised in Figure 10. Only two variables feature significant differences across time: the presence of peripheral (“other”) modifiers in premodifier-only NPs and, in particular, the frequency of postmodifier PPs ($z = -2.396$, $p = 0.017$; Cohen’s $d = 0.269$). In either case, the 1979 dataset exhibits a higher frequency of both modifying options.

The “other” modifiers include stance, focussing, and approximative adverbs (e.g. *only*, *just*, *about*, *perhaps*; see (6) and (7)). These enhance the interpersonal import of the narrative by emphasising truth value (e.g. *just that*, *only first-years* in (6) Biber et al. 1999: 798–801) or by expressing the narrator’s chronological estimation (e.g. *about 3 weeks* in (7)). However, the dataset is too limited to draw strong conclusions, as these premodifiers are often clustered in a few texts across cohorts (see (6)), and the statistical effect is marginal ($t = -1.97$, $p = 0.049$; Cohen’s $d = 0.167$).

- (6) The girl did **just** that ... There was **only** silence until a scream broke it all ... They were **only first-years** (W211ss_HE05f)
 (7) Scott got to the Pole early by **about 3 weeks** (W791ss_16087)

Factor	1979 Cohort (SD)	2021 Cohort (SD)	significance
Presence of modification			
premodifier-only	20.85 (SD 12.69)	22.68 (SD 16.41)	$p > 0.05$
postmodifier-only	19.49 (SD 12.80)	17.35 (SD 14.07)	$p > 0.05$
premodifier and postmodifier	3.89 (SD 5.50)	4.80 (SD 8.25)	$p > 0.05$
Type of modification			
<i>Premodifier types:</i>			
adjectival	24.36 (SD 14.29)	28.13 (SD 22.80)	$p > 0.05$
nominal	2.72 (SD 4.49)	6.37 (SD 10.37)	$p > 0.05$
participial	0.25 (SD 1.26)	1.24 (SD 4.41)	$p > 0.05$
other	2.53 (SD 3.03)	1.92 (SD 4.19)	$t = -1.970$, $p = 0.049^*$
<i>Postmodifier types:</i>			
adjectival	0.21 (SD 0.84)	0.88 (SD 3.23)	$p > 0.05$
prepositional	15.38 (SD 10.98)	11.89 (SD 14.71)	$z = -2.396$, $p = 0.017^*$
finite clause	4.22 (SD 6.12)	3.70 (SD 6.48)	$p > 0.05$
nonfinite clause	2.24 (SD 3.77)	3.59 (SD 7.99)	$p > 0.05$

Figure 10. Distribution of factors across time: narrative texts.

preposition	1979 Cohort (SD)	2021 Cohort (SD)	Significance
<i>about</i>	0.06 (SD 0.24)	0.00 (SD 0.00)	p>0.05
<i>against</i>	0.00 (SD 0.00)	0.02 (SD 0.14)	p>0.05
<i>around</i>	0.00 (SD 0.00)	0.02 (SD 0.14)	p>0.05
<i>as</i>	0.02 (SD 0.14)	0.02 (SD 0.14)	p>0.05
<i>at</i>	0.06 (SD 0.24)	0.00 (SD 0.00)	p>0.05
<i>between</i>	0.02 (SD 0.14)	0.00 (SD 0.00)	p>0.05
<i>except</i>	0.06 (SD 0.24)	0.00 (SD 0.00)	p>0.05
<i>from</i>	0.02 (SD 0.14)	0.10 (SD 0.36)	p>0.05
<i>for</i>	0.08 (SD 0.27)	0.04 (SD 0.20)	p>0.05
<i>in</i>	0.22 (SD 0.62)	0.08 (SD 0.34)	p>0.05
<i>inside</i>	0.00 (SD 0.00)	0.02 (SD 0.14)	p>0.05
<i>instead of</i>	0.02 (SD 0.14)	0.00 (SD 0.00)	p>0.05
<i>like</i>	0.02 (SD 0.14)	0.00 (SD 0.00)	p>0.05
<i>near</i>	0.00 (SD 0.00)	0.02 (SD 0.14)	p>0.05
<i>on</i>	0.12 (SD 0.33)	0.06 (SD 0.24)	p>0.05
<i>of</i>	1.84 (SD 1.49)	0.82 (SD 1.00)	z=-3.686, p<0.001***
<i>than</i>	0.00 (SD 0.00)	0.02 (SD 0.14)	p>0.05
<i>to</i>	0.08 (SD 0.27)	0.12 (SD 0.39)	p>0.05
<i>towards</i>	0.00 (SD 0.00)	0.02 (SD 0.14)	p>0.05
<i>with</i>	1.2 (SD 0.39)	0.06 (SD 0.24)	p>0.05

Figure 11. Preposition use in PP postmodifiers across time: narrative texts.

The use of PPs as postmodifiers is further explored quantitatively in [Figure 11](#); the results suggest that the significant differences between cohorts may be driven by the greater use of *of*-postmodifying phrases in the 1979 texts, as indicated by the large effect size of this comparison (Cohen's $d = 0.804$).

As Biber et al. (1999, 635) note, *of*-phrases are, in adult writing, the most frequent PP type across all registers, amounting to 60%–65% of PP postmodifier use due to “the extremely wide range of functions served by th[e] preposition”. Different functional taxonomies of prepositions were consulted with a view to further exploring the functional range of the postmodifying *of*-PPs in the data. Dixon's (2021) typology of prepositions was finally adopted for the study (see [Appendix](#)), as it provides an integrated grammatical-semantic overview of each preposition informed by cross-linguistic research. [Figure 12](#) summarises the results of the data analysis and provides some illustrative examples from each category.

Significant differences are found in two semantic categories, Relationship and Expansion. *Of*-phrases featuring a Relationship function indicate “spatial orientation, [...] origin or [...] reason” relative to the head noun (Dixon 2021, 113). Only the spatial

of-PP	1979	2021	significance	examples
<i>expansion</i>	0.06 (SD 0.79)	0.02 (SD 0.48)	$z=-2.923, p=0.003^{**}$	<i>the story of Little Red Riding Hood</i> <i>the name of a tree which you get fruit off</i>
<i>possession</i>	0.40 (SD 0.76)	0.22 (SD 0.47)	$p>0.05$	<i>the pocket of her apron</i> <i>the corpses of first years</i>
<i>quality</i>	0.22 (SD 0.84)	0.04 (SD 0.20)	$p>0.05$	<i>a house of straw</i> <i>an icy blanket of snow leading up to a freezing cold ice palace</i>
<i>quantification</i>	0.36 (SD 0.63)	0.24 (SD 0.56)	$p>0.05$	<i>a piece of rather squashy toffee</i> <i>a spoon of each porridge</i>
<i>relationship</i>	0.24 (SD 0.48)	0.04 (SD 0.20)	$z=-2.673, p=0.008^{**}$	<i>the other side of the forest</i> <i>the edge of the wall</i>
<i>feelings</i>	0.00 (SD 0.00)	0.04 (SD 0.20)	$p>0.05$	<i>the love of his life</i> <i>a bag of nerves</i>

Figure 12. Of-preposition uses: narrative texts.

orientation type is present in our data, often to indicate the whereabouts of characters in specific moments of the story (see (8) and (9)). Again, it is the 1979 stories where the inclusion of this type of information appears to be more frequent ($z = -2.673, p = 0.008$; Cohen's $d = 0.544$).

(8) At this the wolf ... tripped over a stone and landed on some more stones **at the bottom of the hill** where they were standing and knocked himself out. The first little pig climbed the hill and pushed against a big rock **at the top of the hill** (W791ss_16164m)

(9) [Humpty Dumpty] was so happy with himself that he started to dance. little did he know he was **on the edge of the wall** and "Boom!" he fell down (W212ss_LC05f)

Expansion of-PPs, which clarify "what type of Y is being referred to by X [the head noun]" (Dixon 2021, 111), are also more common in the 1979 cohort ($z = -2.923, p = 0.003$; Cohen's $d = 0.061$). In our data, such of-phrases typically occur at the beginning and end of stories, particularly in (a) outcome-focussed contexts for characters or actions (e.g. see (10), *And that was the end of the Big Bad Wolf*), and (b) story titles (e.g. *This is the story of X*). Title uses are especially frequent in the 1979 narratives: over 72% begin with a title, and 50% of these include an of-postmodified NP (as in (11)). In contrast, this pattern is much rarer in 2021: 52% of texts lack a title, as in (10), and only one story (8%) includes an of-phrase, with the remainder using short titles (compare *The story of the three little pigs* vs *The three little pigs*).

(10) **[No story title]**

"Little pig little pig are you in?" "No I'm not". But the wolf took no nonsense. [...] But the pig had set the wolf up[...]" "Oh really, I'll eat and I'll beat and I'll knock your teeth out!" yelled the pig. **And that was the end of the Big Bad Wolf.** Game over. (W211ss_GA07m)

(11) **The story of the princess and the pea.**

One day there lived a King and a beautiful Queen and a handsome prince. (W791ss_16181f)

Finally, Figure 13 shows NP distribution across complexity levels. Beyond Level 1 ($z = -5.076$, $p > 0.001$; Cohen's $d = 1.085$), significant differences appear in complex patterns with (Level 4; $z = -2.510$, $p = 0.012$; Cohen's $d = 0.443$) and without (Level 2; $z = -2.936$, $p = 0.003$; Cohen's $d = 0.637$) modifier dependencies, with higher frequencies consistently found in the 1979 data.

	1979	2021	significance
Level 1	42.80 (SD 19.49)	24.48 (SD 13.79)	$z = -5.076$, $p > 0.001^{***}$
Level 2	7.16 (SD 3.99)	4.82 (SD 3.32)	$z = -2.936$, $p = 0.003^{**}$
Level 3	0.28 (SD 0.50)	0.36 (SD 0.60)	$p > 0.05$
Level 4	1.96 (SD 1.84)	1.20 (SD 1.58)	$z = -2.510$, $p = 0.012^*$
Level 5	0.44 (SD 0.73)	0.26 (SD 0.60)	$p > 0.05$

Figure 13. Levels of complexity analysis: narrative texts.

A closer look at the specific grammatical patterns within each level in Figure 14 suggests that, at Level 2, the significantly higher data frequency in the 1979 texts appears to be associated, in line with the results noted in Argumentative writing, with postmodifying PPs (e.g. *the rest of their lives*, *the middle of the wood*) ($z = -3.315$, $p = 0.001$; Cohen's $d = 0.630$).

Level 2	1979	2021	significance
Complex: adjectival premodifier	3.02 (SD 2.24)	1.96 (SD 2.12)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: nominal premodifier	0.42 (SD 0.81)	0.34 (SD 0.69)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: other premodifier	0.66 (SD 0.94)	0.56 (SD 0.79)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: clausal postmodifier	0.82 (SD 1.08)	0.48 (SD 0.76)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: adjectival postmodifier	0.00 (SD 0.00)	0.06 (SD 0.31)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: nominal postmodifier	0.12 (SD 0.38)	0.12 (SD 0.38)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: prepositional postmodifier	1.72 (SD 1.47)	0.86 (SD 1.25)	$z = -3.315$, $p = 0.001^{***}$
Complex: other postmodifier	0.06 (SD 0.24)	0.04 (SD 0.20)	$p > 0.05$

Figure 14. Level 2 complexity analysis: narrative.

Prepositional postmodifiers are also the feature that drives the (moderately) higher frequency of the 1979 dataset at Level 4 reported in Figure 15 ($z = -2.388$, $p = 0.017$; Cohen's $d = 0.481$). The data and corresponding effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.419$) for the "Other-premodifier" NP structures are too low to allow meaningful conclusions (cf. Figure 5).

Level 4	1979	2021	significance
Complex: adjectival premodifier	0.50 (SD 0.93)	0.56 (SD 0.95)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: nominal premodifier	0.02 (SD 0.14)	0.08 (SD 0.27)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: other premodifier	0.08 (SD 0.27)	0.00 (SD 0.00)	$z = -2.031$, $p = 0.042^*$
Complex: clausal postmodifier	0.32 (SD 0.65)	0.14 (SD 0.40)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: adjectival postmodifier	0.06 (SD 0.24)	0.00 (SD 0.00)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: nominal postmodifier	0.12 (SD 0.28)	0.06 (SD 0.24)	$p > 0.05$
Complex: prepositional postmodifier	0.74 (SD 0.90)	0.36 (SD 0.66)	$z = -2.388$, $p = 0.017^*$

Figure 15. Level 4 complexity analysis: narrative.

Discussion of findings and conclusions

The analyses above suggest more stability than change in the use of NPs across time and genres. Stability appears greater in argumentative writing, where the main difference concerns the higher presence, in the 1979 data, of premodified-only complex strings, a feature that has been highlighted as non-developmentally salient in L1 learners' writing (Durrant and Brenchley 2023).

In narratives, differences are attested in complex NPs (with and without syntactic dependencies in the modifiers), which are significantly more frequent in the 1979 dataset. The follow-up analysis of grammatical patterns suggests this is (mainly) the result of greater use of postmodified phrases, and, particularly, prepositional phrases. This difference is important at the wider, developmental level: the growth of NP complexity in children's writing is driven by an increase in selected postmodifier types, one being prepositional phrases (Durrant and Brenchley 2023, 249). The fact that developmentally significant differences in complexity appear only in narrative texts (when NP development is, according to previous literature, genre-neutral across school-aged writing) may indicate greater short-term diachronic variability in children's narrative structure and styles. This suggestion may be supported by the fact that, in our data, the postmodifying differences across time appear to pertain to selected types of PPs (*of*-PPs) and specific qualitative contexts (expansion and relationship uses in specific stylistic uses, e.g. titles or adverbials of place). The difference is also interesting because of the association, in previous literature, of greater NP complexity with non-literary rather than literary texts (Ravid and Berman 2010; Verhoeven et al. 2002).

At the wider, education level, the paper contributes a diachronic perspective on debates about grammar instruction in the (primary) classroom. Specifically, it offers an opportunity to question the historical validity of educational discourses assuming a linear relationship between (the volume of) grammar learning and writing proficiency. Thus, our data did *not* reflect a systematically greater use of different types of complex NPs in the

2021 texts across genres, even though the current curricular emphasis on grammar involves explicit teaching of complex NP structures from an early school age (cf. STA 2018). In fact, our findings showed that, when differences in *complex* NP usage across genres were attested, it was often the 1979 dataset (coming from a curricular period with *no* explicit emphasis on the teaching of the NP structure) that often recorded greater frequency of the specific NP construct. It is also worth noting that greater frequency of NP complexity constructs cannot be automatically interpreted as greater NP proficiency either. Note, for instance, that the higher use of premodified-only NPs in the earlier (1979) argumentative dataset seemed motivated by a reliance on modifier (adjective) repetition and adherence to the original writing prompts. Moreover, the small number of statistically significant differences observed across datasets may plausibly reflect threshold effects associated with multiple testing rather than consistent diachronic change.

We are not, of course, suggesting that there is no place for grammar teaching and learning in the curriculum – as linguists, that would be a rather unfortunate move to make. Our aim is to draw attention to the *historical persistence* of an unhelpful ideological conceptualisation of grammar in education, which, if left uncontested, has important consequences for classroom practice. Clarkson (2024), for instance, observes that primary teachers struggle to provide consistent interpretations of the grammar assessment criteria because curricular guidance is often unclear about how grammatical features contribute to meaning-making, focussing instead on surface use of the feature. This difficulty reflects a broader systemic issue: teachers are frequently expected to teach grammar despite having had limited opportunities to develop robust subject knowledge or confidence in teaching linguistic description effectively, largely due to the historically marginal status of linguistics in teacher education.

Similarly, our recent CPD work with Merseyside primary schools shows that a lack of a nuanced conceptualisation of grammar as a resource in the writing classroom reinforces teachers' negative attitudes towards grammar instruction (described as a "grammar bingo", Alaine Sanders, p.c.; see González-Díaz et al. in prep.) and impacts on their professional understanding of what "effective" use of linguistic resources means. This, in turn, fosters skewed conceptualisations of "good" writing in schoolchildren (e.g. good writing is ... "neat handwriting and expanded noun phrases"), slowing their development as independent writers, which is, ironically, the opposite of what the inclusion of grammar teaching in the curriculum intends to achieve (González-Díaz, Parr, and Nourie 2025b).

The recent Ofsted review of teachers' CPD provision (Ofsted 2024) and its inspection toolkit (Ofsted 2025) opens up opportunities for reconfiguring how grammar as knowledge is transmitted in the school context. However, the challenge is not simply how grammar is transmitted, but how grammatical knowledge itself is framed and made available as professional knowledge, an issue that will remain unresolved if policy simultaneously invites pedagogical depth but favours a narrow conceptualisation of grammar. Unless sustained attention is given to the development of practitioners' knowledge of grammar and how to teach it effectively, both teachers and pupils are likely to continue working within constrained models of linguistic competence in the writing classroom.

Notes

1. Phrasal units other than NP (verb phrase (VP), adjective phrase (AdjP), prepositional phrase (PP), adverb phrase (AdvP)) are less explicitly named as phrase-level constructs in the English programmes of study (KS1-KS2; DfE 2014). For instance, PPs (3 mentions) are recorded in the context of NP postmodification or indirectly via adverbials. Adjectives are taught as word-class only. Verbs and especially clauses (as higher-order units) are frequently discussed – but not VPs.
2. The *Assessment of Performance Unit* (APU) was created in 1975 at DfE to “promote the development of methods of assessing and monitoring the achievement of children at school, and to seek to identify the incidents of under-achievement” (Foxman, Hutchinson, and Bloomfield 1991, 8). The APU language surveys, conducted 1979–1988, responded to growing concerns about literacy levels and the effectiveness of English teaching in schools. Although the APU was later dissolved, its work influenced the development of standardised testing and accountability measures in UK education policy (see Maybin 1988). Language-wise, their legacy is visible in the adoption, in the first National Curriculum (Cox 1989), of a general Knowledge About Language approach to language learning embedded across attainment targets (cf. Clark 2001, 133; Myhill and Watson 2014, 42–43).
3. How that grammatical knowledge is transferred to the teaching and learning in the classroom (embedded as part of a holistic KAL approach across subjects vs de-contextualised and restricted to English language leaning; Myhill and Watson 2014; Wyse 2006) is of course important, although such a consideration can only be noted this paper.
4. Writing from pupils who have English as an additional language was not considered in either (1979/2021) data collection process.
5. A clear quantitative difference appears across cohorts. Although both groups (1979 and 2021) had the same writing time allocation (15 minutes for the argumentative task and 25 minutes for the narrative), the 1979 pupils wrote more than twice as many words in the narrative as in the argumentative task. By contrast, the 2021 pupils produced similar word counts in both genres. The research team found no substantive explanation for this difference.
6. Note, however, that the median TTR is 1.0 in both cohorts.

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Appendix

Dixon's (2021) *of*-categories

Meaning	Different uses	Example
possession	ownership	[The house of the manager] is up for sale
	creatorship	I just bought [the autobiography of Trotsky]
	association	[The sister of our neighbour] just walked by
	material part	[The injured foot of the bishop] is swollen
expansion	attribute	I dislike [the bad smell of that youth]
	object nominalisation	[The execution of King Charles] was long overdue
		[The mystery of Agatha's disappearance]
		I bought [a couple of the horses] which Fiona had for sale
quantifying		Sean is [a native of Canada]
relationship		[An artefact of value]
quality		Jenny is [ashamed of her rudeness]
feelings, attitude, or competence	the issue arouses feelings in the subject	George is [guilty of the crime]
	the subject has a certain property with respect to the issue	Mavis [boasts of her daughter's success]
	the subject has feelings or an attitude towards the issue	The duke is [a collector of Ming china]
	the subject has specialised competence with respect to the issue	Mildred has knowledge of the decision
knowledge		After the spraying, the lawn is [free of weeds]
dissociation		