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The order of premodifiers in English nominal phrases

by
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Abstract

The research reported in this thesis sought an explanation for the order of premodifiers in English nominal phrases. It aimed to establish what validity there is in the quite divergent earlier explanations, to find any other valid forms of explanation that might exist, and to integrate them all.

The method was to make a wide survey of as many varieties of current English as possible, by observation; to then analyse the order at all levels (semantics, syntax, and so on); and to check the accuracy of the results against the 100-million-word British National Corpus.

From that research, the thesis asserts that parts of most past approaches can be integrated into a comprehensive explanation; and that there is a new and important element of the full explanation, namely that of words' semantic structure, which is the combination of types and dimensions of meaning that make up the sense of each premodifier.

Other new elements in this treatment of the subject are analysis of long groups of premodifiers (up to 10 words), consideration of why premodifiers regularly occur in different positions in the order, and explanation from the historical development of premodifier order.

After an introductory chapter and a survey of the relevant literature, the thesis argues that the explanation of premodifier order in English nominal phrases is as follows. There are four positions for premodifiers, as in "your (1) actual (2) tinny (3) round (4) percussion instrument" [i.e. a tambourine] (chapter 3). The regular, unmarked order (illustrated in the phrase just quoted) has several elements of explanation: primarily, the semantic structure (chapter 4); secondarily, the syntactic structure (chapter 5). In a second type of order (when two or more words occur in one position), stylistic considerations control the order, not grammatical ones (chapter 7). In a third type of order, a marked one, a premodifier may be put in a position different from the position that the word's usual semantic structure would require, changing its meaning and stylistic effect (chapter 8). Some features of all three types of order are to be explained partly by their historical development - for example, the existence of borderline uses (chapter 9). There are some supporting explanations, from discourse structure and psycholinguistics, for example (chapter 10). The relevance of the previous chapters to wider issues, such as grammaticalisation, is discussed (chapter 11); and conclusions are drawn (chapter 12).
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1 Phenomena to be explained

A journalist once described the tambourine as "your actual tinny round percussion instrument".\textsuperscript{1} It is generally agreed among linguists and nonspecialist users of language that the order of modifiers in such a phrase cannot be varied freely: we cannot grammatically say *"your percussion actual round tinny instrument" for example. There are rules or patterns of some sort, for the order. So the fundamental thing to be explained about the order of premodifiers in English nominal phrases is:

- the nature of the rules or patterns for the normal order.

At the place where \textit{tinny} occurred in the phrase quoted above, it is possible to use several modifiers together. You could say “your actual \underline{tinny, cheap, and generally unpleasant} round percussion instrument”; and the order of the words underlined may be varied grammatically: “\underline{cheap, tinny, and generally unpleasant}”, for example. So a second phenomenon to be explained is:

- why the order can sometimes be varied freely, and the nature of the variations.

A novelist wrote:

(1) “Here was a young, impulsive, over-curious young woman.”\textsuperscript{2}
That is acceptable and effective English; but most readers will feel intuitively that “over-curious young woman” has \textit{young} in its normal position, but the first \textit{young} is in abnormal position. So we must explain:

- the acceptability and effect of such flouting of the rules.

To sum up, we should explain how a single system, the English language, can provide for such variation: how it can have a normal set order, a free order, and an order that breaches the normal order, and what the nature of each order is.

\textsuperscript{1} From a music review; cited in the British National Corpus.

\textsuperscript{2} P. D James; cited in Adamson (2000: 58).
2 Definition of the subject

I have so far assumed that what is meant by “the order of premodifiers in English nominal phrases” is self-evident. In this section, I will set out more precisely what that title covers.

Nominal phrases

Phrases are groups of one or more words which (along with subordinate clauses) function as elements of clause structure (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik 1985: §2.27). For example, "a splendid silver plastic suitcase" is a phrase; but “a splendid” is not, as it could not function as an element of a clause. Phrases have a head, which is the word that "provides both the semantic and syntactic type of the phrase" (McGlashan 1993: 204); for example, be and helicopter, in "He saw the southbound rescue helicopter", make their phrases nominal phrases, and saw makes its phrase a verb phrase.

"Nominal phrases" are phrases that function as subject, object or complement (and so on) of a clause, as in "He saw the southbound rescue helicopter" (Quirk et al. 1985: §2.27, on "noun phrases").

Premodifiers

Modifiers are words which depend on the head syntactically. I distinguish them from determiners, which "in general, determine what kind of reference a nominal phrase has: for example, whether it is definite (like the) or indefinite (like a/an), partitive (like some) or universal (like all)" (Quirk et al. 1985: 64; the italics are those of the original). Determiners include predeterminers such as half, both and all, articles such as a and the, and postdeterminers such as first, last and two. Premodifiers, by contrast, "add 'descriptive' information to the head, often restricting the reference of the head" (Quirk et al., 1985: 65), but those semantic generalisations do not define premodifiers. Premodifiers are modifiers which precede the head.

The premodifiers may be “adjectives”; but they may be “adverbs” (“the then prime minister”), “participles” (“running water”), or “nouns” (“noun phrases”). (I use noun, adjective and so on as they are used usually in linguistic studies, and without further definition.)
Chapter 1: Introduction

English

In studying nominal phrases in English, I am concerned with the resources available in the whole English language: I am not concerned to describe usage in a particular corpus, or in particular genres or varieties. I will draw on some varieties more often than others (for example, advertising, journalism and fiction), but only because they provide more examples of multiple modification, and illustrate its use more fully. I intend the conclusions I reach to apply to English generally.

Order

I take “order” widely, almost equating it with “position”. I will explain that use, and the reason for it, in chapter 3, on zones.

Exclusions from the thesis

I exclude from consideration several kinds of phrasal expression which I deem to be not nominal phrases at all:

- expressions intended to be nominal phrases which the speaker has evidently processed incorrectly; for example, when a man being interviewed described a flintlock rifle as "an old, cruddy old, piece of wood" - I take it that the speaker restarted his phrase after the first old;

- nominalisations which are clauses rather than phrases, as in "He liked hunting wild pigs" - that has the function of a nominal phrase (object of liked) but has its own verb + object structure;

- separate groups of modifiers, as in "Nervous and apprehensive, the man rose" (example from Teyssier 1968:245);

- appositional structures, as in "the poet Wordsworth" - I take that to be two phrases in apposition, “the poet” and “Wordsworth”.

I also generally exclude nominal phrases that have any of the following elements which might be deemed to be premodifiers, but which are sometimes modifiers and sometimes not, or which are controversial in status. I exclude them because considering them seems to lead to no further insight while raising other issues, and so would add needless complication.

- Rank shifted (or "embedded ") phrases and clauses, as in "a run-of-the-mill production", and "that what-do-you call-it thing".

31 I prefer "nominal phrase" to "noun phrase" because sometimes the head is not a noun but a pronoun (etc.).

4 New Zealand Herald, Feb 2, 2006