

Attributive Modifiers

English allows pre-head modification of nouns by adjuncts of various categorial types:

Adjective Phrase (AdjP):

those nice new green sandals you bought

Nominal (Nom, i.e. \bar{N}): *a labor union organizer*

Gerund-participial Verb Phrase (VP_{GPL}):

several quietly sleeping children

Past-participial Verb Phrase (VP_{PPL}):

the university's hastily developed pay reduction plan

Attributive Modifiers

With the ordering of attributive modifiers we find a phenomenon that appears to be syntactic at first but is, I think, truly semantic through and through — or at least, sensitive to both semantic and syntactic properties.

For example, in *nice new green sandals* it seems hard to reorder any of the adjectives:

- nice new green sandals*
- ?? *nice green new sandals*
- ?? *new nice green sandals*
- ?? *new green nice sandals*
- ?? *green nice new sandals*
- ?? *green new nice sandals*

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One suggested operational semantics for the ^{??} prefix would be “profoundly unlikely to get more than a tiny handful of non-spurious Google hits.”

For example: 100 instances of *friendly little white* + Noun can be found using Google; but for ^{??} *little white friendly*, only 10 hits, most spurious.

Attributive Modifiers

The conditions on sequencing of attributive modifiers are not strict like the condition that says the **Determiner** precedes the **Head**. They are **labile** constraints: violating them creates special effects, or lowers acceptability, but does not clearly mark the result as not being English.

Early modifiers (determinatives such as numerals; superlative adjectives; ordinal adjectives; primacy adjectives) have a strong tendency to precede **residual modifiers** (all others):

- *the two vital facts* [D + residual]
- *the largest known meteorite* [sup + residual]
- *the second abortive attempt* [ord + residual]
- *a key new proposal* [prim + residual]

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And within the residual modifiers, there is a weaker tendency to adhere to an order like this:

evaluative modifiers before

general modifiers before

age modifiers before

color modifiers before

provenance modifiers before

manufacture modifiers before

type modifiers

CGEL cites this NP:

an attractive tight-fitting new pink Italian lycra women's swimsuit

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Shifting any modifier leftward in its sequence tends to suggest it is being used contrastively with the following constituent presupposed:

pink Italian swimsuit if Italian swimsuits are under discussion;

Italian pink swimsuit if pink swimsuits are under discussion.