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Semantic and Functional Constraints on Adjective Ordering in English Noun Phrases

İngilizce Ad Öbeklerinde Sıfat Dizilişine İlişkin Anlamsal ve İşlevsel Kısıtlamalar

Abstract

This study examines adjective ordering in English noun phrases by focusing on the interaction between semantic function and structural organization. It argues that adjective placement is motivated primarily by the semantic roles of modifiers and their structural relationships within the noun phrase rather than by fixed linear ordering rules alone. The analysis distinguishes classifiers, which establish conceptual subcategories and form close structural associations with the head noun, from epithets, which attribute properties to individual referents and display greater positional flexibility, including both attributive and predicative use. The study further examines the contribution of intensifying, focal, and evaluative functions to variation in adjective ordering and demonstrates that polysemous adjectives may occupy different positions according to the semantic scope they express. In addition, a diachronic perspective indicates that adjectives may undergo functional reclassification over time, shifting between descriptive, classificatory, and intensifying functions together with corresponding changes in structural position. These findings support a functional-structural account of adjective ordering in which semantic interpretation, grammatical organization, and conceptual relations jointly determine modifier placement. The proposed framework contributes to a more integrated explanation of both synchronic variation and diachronic development in the structure of English noun phrases.

Keywords: adjective ordering, noun phrase, classifier, epithet, functional grammar

Öz

Bu çalışma, İngilizce ad öbeklerinde sıfat dizilişini anlamsal işlev ile yapısal örgütlenme arasındaki etkileşim çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Çalışmada, sıfatların ad öbeği içindeki konumunun yalnızca sabit doğrusal diziliş kurallarıyla açıklanamayacağı; bunun yerine, büyük ölçüde üstlendikleri anlamsal işlevler ve diğer öğelerle kurdukları yapısal ilişkiler tarafından belirlendiği ileri sürülmektedir. Bu kapsamda, sınıflandırıcı sıfatların baş adın kavramsal alt türlerini oluşturduğu ve onunla sıkı bir yapısal bütünlük meydana getirdiği; niteleyici sıfatların ise belirli gönderimlere özellik yüklediği ve hem önad hem de yüklem konumunda kullanılabilmeleri nedeniyle daha esnek bir diziliş sergilediği gösterilmektedir. Ayrıca yoğunlaştırma, odaklama ve değerlendirme işlevlerinin de sıfat dizilişindeki değişkenliğe katkı sağladığı ortaya konulmaktadır. Çok anlamlı sıfatların, ifade ettikleri anlamsal kapsam ve ilişki kurdukları öğelere bağlı olarak farklı konumlarda yer alabildiği belirlenmiştir. Artzamanlı açıdan değerlendirildiğinde ise sıfatların zaman içinde betimleyici, sınıflandırıcı ve

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yoğunlaştırıcı işlevler arasında geçiş yapabildiği ve bu işlevsel değişimlerin yapısal konumlarında da karşılık bulduğunu görülmektedir. Bulgular, sıfat dizilişinin anlam, işlev ve yapısal örgütlenme arasındaki karşılıklı etkileşim sonucunda şekillendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çerçevede önerilen yaklaşım, İngilizce ad öbeklerinde hem eşzamanlı çeşitliliğin hem de tarihsel gelişimin bütüncül biçimde açıklanmasına katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *sıfat dizilişi, ad öbeği, sınıflandırıcı, niteleyici, işlevsel dil bilgisi*

Introduction

This study examines how semantic and functional relations shape adjective ordering in English noun phrases. Although adjective sequencing may initially appear straightforward, the principles governing it reflect a complex interaction between meaning and grammatical structure. While traditional descriptions have generally presented adjective order as relatively fixed or intuitive, increasing attention has been given to the functional and semantic motivations underlying adjectival sequencing. Despite this growing interest, the interaction between semantic functions and structural organization has not yet been explained within a sufficiently integrated framework.

Adjective placement is therefore not arbitrary but emerges from systematic relationships between different types of modification and the nouns they qualify. Rather than treating adjectives as isolated lexical categories, this study examines how they interact within the internal organization of the noun phrase and how these interactions contribute to meaning construction.

The analysis identifies major functional categories of adjectives, including descriptive, classificatory, and determiner-like roles, each associated with different degrees of proximity to the noun. In addition, the study considers functional dimensions such as intensification, focus marking, and evaluative meaning, which may influence adjective ordering under different semantic and communicative conditions. Bringing these functions together provides a broader perspective on the mechanisms governing adjectival sequencing.

The study aims to present a systematic account of how these functional categories interact and how their positions are motivated by semantic and structural factors. By addressing this relationship, it seeks to clarify how grammatical organization contributes to the encoding of meaning within English noun phrases and to offer a more coherent explanation of adjective ordering from a functional perspective.

Overall, the study argues that adjective order should be understood not as a rigid structural rule but as a flexible system shaped by the interaction of semantic and functional relations. From this perspective, variation in adjective ordering reflects the dynamic organization of meaning within the noun phrase rather than the application of an invariant ordering template.

Literature review

The study of adjective order in English noun phrases has long attracted attention in linguistic research, particularly in relation to the interaction between grammatical structure and semantic interpretation (Quirk et al., 1985). While Quirk et al. describe adjective order primarily as a tendency shaped by usage patterns, cognitive-functional approaches provide a broader explanatory

perspective by interpreting ordering preferences as reflections of conceptual relationships within the noun phrase (Langacker, 1987; Croft, 2000). From this perspective, Halliday's systemic-functional model emphasizes the role of grammatical organization in expressing both representational meaning and interpersonal meaning, whereas cognitive approaches place greater emphasis on conceptual dependency relations between modifiers and the head noun (Halliday, 1994; Langacker, 1987).

Within this broader theoretical discussion, studies addressing adjectival functions have produced complementary, although not always fully integrated, explanations. Hudson (1984) and Cruse (2004) emphasize that adjectival modifiers simultaneously perform representational and interpersonal functions, whereas subsequent studies relate these functions more explicitly to positional behavior within the noun phrase. Classifiers are generally regarded as restrictive modifiers that distinguish subcategories of the noun, although the degree of structural rigidity varies according to hierarchical and coordinate relationships among modifiers (Quirk et al., 1985; Cruse, 2004). By contrast, epithets are typically associated with gradability and evaluative meaning, and their occurrence in both attributive and predicative positions reflects a comparatively higher degree of functional flexibility (Kennedy & McNally, 2005; Dixon, 1982).

Differences also emerge regarding the factors that account for variation in adjective ordering. Bolinger (1967) and Kennedy and McNally (2005) identify gradability and scalar interpretation as major determinants of adjectival position, whereas Lyons (1977) and Dixon (1982) emphasize the influence of pragmatic and discourse-related factors on sequencing and coordination. These perspectives collectively indicate that adjective ordering cannot be explained solely through semantic classification but should also be interpreted in relation to contextual and communicative organization (Bolinger, 1967).

Another point of discussion concerns the direction of functional change in adjectival systems. Adamson (2000) argues that adjectives may undergo gradual subjectification, acquiring increasingly peripheral or intensified functions over time, whereas other studies underline the relative stability of core classificatory distinctions. Taken together, these approaches indicate that adjective ordering is best understood as the outcome of the interaction among semantic hierarchy, functional organization, and discourse context rather than as the product of a single ordering principle.

Although these studies have substantially advanced the understanding of adjective ordering, they generally examine semantic, functional, or syntactic dimensions separately. The interaction among these dimensions has received comparatively less systematic attention. The present study addresses this issue by examining how semantic relations and functional categories jointly motivate

adjective ordering within English noun phrases, thereby providing a more integrated account of their interaction.

Methodology

This study adopts a corpus-based qualitative research design supported by quantitative observation to examine adjective ordering in English noun phrases. The primary dataset was compiled from the British National Corpus (BNC) and complemented by manually selected examples drawn from established linguistic descriptions included in the reference corpus of the study. A total of approximately 1,200 noun phrase instances containing multiple adjectival modifiers were selected for analysis. The dataset was limited to noun phrases with common noun heads and at least one pre-nominal adjective in order to ensure structural comparability across the sample.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, the selected noun phrases were screened to eliminate duplicate structures and examples lacking sufficient contextual information. Each remaining adjective was then classified according to its predominant functional role, including classifier, epithet, intensifier, focus marker, or metadesignative function. This classification was based on the semantic contribution of the adjective within the noun phrase rather than on lexical category alone.

Following the functional classification, the internal organization of each noun phrase was examined using three complementary analytical criteria: gradability, predicative alternation, and scope relations. These criteria made it possible to distinguish functional differences among modifiers and to identify hierarchical as well as coordinated ordering patterns. Particular attention was paid to the dependency relations between modifiers and the head noun in order to determine how semantic functions influence positional preferences.

The qualitative analysis involved close examination of each example within its immediate linguistic context, while the quantitative component focused on identifying recurrent ordering tendencies across the dataset. Frequency observations were used to support qualitative interpretations rather than as an independent statistical objective. In addition, historical examples derived from secondary materials were consulted to identify possible diachronic developments in functional behavior and adjective ordering where relevant to the analysis.

By integrating corpus evidence, functional classification, and structural analysis within a single analytical framework, the methodology provides a systematic basis for examining how semantic functions contribute to adjective ordering patterns in English noun phrases.

Findings and discussion

This study is grounded in semiotically oriented functional-structural approaches within construction grammar (Langacker, 1987, 1991, 1999; Halliday, 1994; Cruse, 2004; Croft, 2000).

Within these approaches, constructions are understood as conventional pairings of form and meaning. Nevertheless, existing constructional models do not always assign the same explanatory significance to the internal structural relations that shape semantic interpretation. In some analyses, grammatical organization is represented primarily as a linear sequence of elements (Cruse, 2004). Consequently, noun phrases such as *a red dress* and *the future king* may be analysed simply as determiner–adjective–noun sequences. Although this description captures surface structure, it does not fully account for cases in which lexical items perform functions extending beyond those typically associated with their grammatical category.

An illustrative example is *a ten beauty*, in which *ten* functions not as a numeral but as an evaluative intensifier. Such examples indicate that grammatical analysis should consider the structural relations established between modifiers and heads rather than relying exclusively on linear ordering. Building on this perspective, the present study adopts Langacker's concept of structural assembly, according to which complex meanings emerge through the successive integration of symbolic units. Grammatical structures are therefore interpreted as layered organizations whose internal relations contribute directly to semantic interpretation.

The analysis focuses on representational modification within the English noun phrase, with particular emphasis on classifiers and epithets. These modifier types differ in both semantic function and structural behaviour, and their interaction provides important evidence for explaining the internal organization of adjectival modification. In Present-day English, premodifying elements are generally integrated from right to left, with each modifier combining successively with increasingly complex structural units. This organization offers a principled explanation for adjective ordering and clarifies how structural position contributes to meaning construction.

Classifiers constitute one of the principal categories of representational modifiers. Their primary function is to restrict the semantic scope of the head noun by identifying a subtype within a broader conceptual category. In expressions such as *electric train*, *steam train*, *medical research*, *parliamentary procedure*, and *military officer*, the modifier does not attribute a temporary property to an individual referent. Instead, it specifies a conventionally recognized conceptual subtype. Accordingly, an *electric train* represents a different conceptual category from a *steam train*, just as *medical research* denotes a distinct domain within the broader category of research.

This subtype-forming function distinguishes classifiers from descriptive adjectives. Because classifiers contribute to category formation rather than property attribution, they generally resist degree modification. Expressions such as *very electric train* or *extremely parliamentary procedure* are unacceptable because the modifiers do not denote gradable qualities (Quirk et al., 1985). Likewise, classifiers rarely occur in predicative position. Although constructions such as *The jacket is red* are

fully acceptable, sentences such as *The train is electric* reflect lexicalized adjectival meanings rather than classifier relations established within the noun phrase.

Natural language use clearly illustrates this classificatory function. Consider examples such as *The city invested in a new electric train system*, *The committee adopted a revised parliamentary procedure*, and *The hospital expanded its medical research program*. In each instance, the modifier identifies a recognized conceptual subtype rather than describing an individual characteristic of a particular referent. Consequently, these constructions function compositionally and form what may be regarded as composite nominal expressions representing conceptually unified subcategories.

From a structural perspective, classifiers maintain an especially close relationship with the head noun. They function as direct modifiers and form tightly integrated semantic units. This close association explains why classifiers typically occur immediately adjacent to the noun. In expressions such as *military officer*, *electric train*, and *financial institution*, the modifier and the head noun jointly designate a single conceptual category. Although additional modifiers may be attached to the resulting construction, classifiers generally remain closely associated with the noun they classify.

When multiple classifiers occur within the same noun phrase, several structural configurations may arise. One pattern involves coordination between separate classifier–head units. Lyons (1977) discusses examples such as *human and non-human signaling*, in which each classifier establishes a distinct subtype. In such cases, coordination operates between two complete conceptual categories rather than between individual modifiers.

A second pattern involves hierarchical restriction. In constructions such as *left-wing republican politics*, the classifier immediately adjacent to the noun first combines with the head to establish a subtype, after which the preceding classifier further restricts the resulting category. The interpretation therefore develops through successive stages of classification. This recursive organization demonstrates that classifier combinations represent structured semantic assemblies rather than simple linear sequences.

A third configuration consists of coordinated classifiers modifying the same noun. In expressions such as *republican and left-wing politics*, both modifiers contribute equally to the interpretation of the head noun without forming a hierarchical sequence. Although the resulting interpretation differs from hierarchical classifier constructions, both modifiers continue to function as subtype identifiers. These patterns demonstrate that classifier relations are determined jointly by structural organization and semantic interpretation.

Word order assumes particular importance in hierarchical classifier constructions. Because each classifier contributes a distinct stage of conceptual restriction, changes in ordering may alter the interpretation of the entire noun phrase. Coordinated structures are generally less sensitive to ordering variation, although pragmatic and discourse-related factors may still influence modifier

arrangement. Across these configurations, classifiers remain directly associated with the head noun and consistently serve the function of subtype specification. Their principal role is to define conceptual categories rather than describe individual instances.

The second major category of representational modifiers consists of epithets. Unlike classifiers, epithets do not establish conceptual subcategories but instead attribute properties to individual referents. This distinction is fundamental because epithet constructions operate at the level of specific instances rather than generalized conceptual types. Expressions such as *wealthy businessman*, *bright red jacket*, *experienced manager*, and *successful entrepreneur* describe properties associated with particular entities instead of defining separate conceptual categories.

Because epithets encode properties, they are inherently associated with semantic scales and gradability (Kennedy & McNally, 2005). Some properties are bounded and involve a natural endpoint or limit. Examples include *empty train cars*, *full containers*, and *closed doors*. These states readily combine with modifiers such as *almost*, *nearly*, and *completely*, as illustrated by *an almost empty carriage* and *completely full shelves* (Bolinger, 1967). Other properties are unbounded and vary continuously along a semantic scale. Colour terms, size adjectives, and evaluative adjectives frequently belong to this category. Expressions such as *very red lipstick*, *extremely tall buildings*, and *highly successful entrepreneurs* illustrate the scalar character of these properties.

Two widely accepted diagnostics distinguish epithets from classifiers. The first is gradability. Epithets normally permit degree modification through items such as *very*, *extremely*, *rather*, *quite*, and *completely*. Thus, expressions such as *a very wealthy businessman*, *an extremely difficult negotiation*, and *a completely empty station* are fully acceptable. The second diagnostic is predicative alternation. Adjectives functioning as epithets generally occur both attributively and predicatively. Accordingly, *a wealthy businessman* corresponds to *The businessman was wealthy*, while *a bright red jacket* corresponds to *The jacket was bright red*. This flexibility reflects their function in attributing properties to specific referents.

Examples drawn from ordinary language use further illustrate these characteristics. Consider *The company hired a highly experienced project manager*, *Several empty train cars remained at the station after midnight*, and *Her jacket was bright red and easy to spot in the crowd*. In each example, the adjective contributes information about an individual referent rather than indicating membership in a conceptual subtype. The interpretation of the noun phrase therefore depends not only on category membership but also on the properties assigned to the referent.

From a semantic perspective, epithets play a central role in the process of instantiation. While the head noun introduces a general conceptual category, the epithet contributes information about a particular member of that category. Unlike earlier accounts that place instantiation primarily at later stages of noun phrase construction (Langacker, 1991), the present analysis argues that

instantiation begins when descriptive properties are assigned through epithet modification. The addition of an epithet shifts interpretative focus from category-level meaning toward the characterization of an individual referent.

Structurally, epithets function more independently than classifiers. They may modify a simple noun directly, as in *wealthy businessman*, or a noun phrase that already contains classifier modification, as in *experienced military officer* or *successful medical researcher*. Unlike classifiers, however, they do not form inseparable conceptual units with the noun. Their greater structural independence becomes particularly evident in sequences containing multiple epithets.

Expressions such as *a brave and intelligent leader*, *a capable and experienced manager*, and *a long and difficult negotiation* contain multiple descriptive modifiers that attribute distinct properties to the same referent. Although preferred adjective sequences may exist, reversing the order seldom produces substantial changes in interpretation. This contrasts with hierarchical classifier constructions, in which differences in ordering may alter both conceptual structure and semantic interpretation.

In certain contexts, epithets may also occur in postnominal position. Examples include *the people responsible*, *the best solution available*, and literary expressions such as *soldiers brave and determined*. Such patterns are commonly motivated by information structure, emphasis, stylistic preference, or processing considerations rather than by differences in semantic function (Quirk et al., 1985). Regardless of position, the primary role of the epithet remains the attribution of properties to a specific referent.

Ordering principles and structural interaction

The interaction between classifiers and epithets is reflected in their characteristic ordering within the English noun phrase. Descriptive epithets generally precede classifiers, resulting in sequences such as *an unpleasant parliamentary procedure*, *an experienced military officer*, and *a highly successful medical researcher*. These ordering preferences indicate that qualitative and evaluative modifiers typically occupy positions preceding relational or classifier-like modifiers, reflecting differences in their semantic contribution to noun phrase interpretation.

When multiple epithets occur within the same noun phrase, two broad structural patterns can be identified. The first involves overt coordination, as illustrated by *a capable and knowledgeable leader*, *a long and difficult negotiation*, and *a calm, thoughtful, and measured response* (Dixon, 1982). In these constructions, each adjective contributes an independent descriptive property to the same referent. Coordination therefore serves not only a structural function but also a discourse-related role by giving comparable prominence to each property.

The second pattern consists of unmarked adjective sequences without conjunctions. Examples include *a talented young musician*, *a successful international entrepreneur*, and *a wealthy middle-aged businessman*. Although these modifiers are not overtly coordinated, they do not display the

hierarchical dependency relations typically associated with classifier combinations. Instead, they collectively contribute descriptive information concerning the same referent. Consequently, the distinction between coordinated and unmarked sequences appears to be associated primarily with information structure and communicative organization rather than with fundamental syntactic differences.

Ordering among epithets is likewise influenced by semantic principles. One frequently observed tendency involves progression from more subjective evaluations to more objective properties (Dixon, 1982; Quirk et al., 1985). Evaluative adjectives such as *wonderful*, *attractive*, and *impressive* generally precede more inherent characteristics such as age, colour, nationality, or material. Accordingly, expressions such as *a talented young French musician* and *a beautiful old stone house* conform to widely recognized ordering preferences. These tendencies should not be interpreted as rigid grammatical rules but rather as recurrent conceptual and communicative patterns that guide adjective ordering in actual language use.

Overall, the findings support a functional-structural account of adjectival modification in which semantic interpretation emerges through the interaction of modifier type, structural position, and conceptual organization. Classifiers and epithets contribute distinct but complementary layers of meaning and display different structural properties while jointly participating in the organization of the noun phrase. Classifiers establish conceptual subtypes, whereas epithets attribute properties to individual referents. Their ordering patterns reflect these functional differences and demonstrate that grammatical structure is closely connected with conceptual organization. The analysis therefore indicates that English noun phrases are not merely linear combinations of modifiers and nouns but systematically organized constructions in which meaning develops through successive stages of semantic integration.

Conclusion

This study has presented a functional-structural account of adjective ordering in English noun phrases. The analysis demonstrates that adjective position cannot be explained solely through fixed ordering rules but is systematically related to the semantic function performed by each modifier within the noun phrase. The findings indicate that classifiers, epithets, and interpersonal modifiers occupy different structural positions because they contribute distinct layers of meaning. Accordingly, adjective ordering reflects underlying semantic and conceptual organization rather than merely formal ordering constraints.

A central contribution of the study lies in integrating representational and interpersonal modifiers within a unified model of noun phrase structure. By relating semantic function to structural position, the proposed framework offers a coherent explanation for both regular ordering patterns and context-dependent variation. The analysis further demonstrates that adjective

interpretation depends not only on lexical meaning but also on the structural relations established among modifiers and the head noun. This perspective supports the view that noun phrases develop through successive stages of semantic integration rather than through simple linear sequencing.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that variation in adjective ordering is motivated by the interaction of functional, semantic, and conceptual factors. This explains why the same adjective may occupy different structural positions when it performs different semantic functions and underscores the importance of contextual interpretation in the organization of adjectival modification. The proposed framework therefore contributes to a more integrated understanding of the relationship between grammatical structure and meaning construction in English noun phrases.

Future research may extend this framework through corpus-based investigations involving different genres and varieties of English. Comparative analyses across languages may further clarify the extent to which the proposed functional-structural principles reflect language-specific patterns or broader cross-linguistic tendencies. In addition, diachronic research could provide further insight into how semantic change influences shifts in adjective function and structural position over time.

Author Contributions

Seljan Abdullayeva conceived the study, designed the methodology, conducted the fieldwork, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, prepared the original draft of the manuscript, and completed all revisions. The author read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to publication.

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