http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz

ResearchSpace@Auckland

Copyright Statement

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

This thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author’s right to be identified as the author of this thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from their thesis.

To request permissions please use the Feedback form on our webpage. http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback

General copyright and disclaimer

In addition to the above conditions, authors give their consent for the digital copy of their work to be used subject to the conditions specified on the Library Thesis Consent Form.
The order of premodifiers in English nominal phrases

by
James Murray Feist

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics,
The University of Auckland,

2008
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).
Acknowledgements

My two supervisors, Jim Miller and Frank Lichtenberk, have encouraged, supported and guided me throughout, in both the direction of my research and in details. I am very indebted to them.

John Laurie, linguistics librarian has been very helpful, especially with my use of the British National Corpus.

A research grant from the university helped me travel to the USA to present some of the thesis material to a conference in 2006, and I received Postgraduate Research Student Support money in 2007.

I am grateful to the graduate students’ seminar for discussion of ideas, and to Judith McMorland for comment on some drafts.
# Table of contents

## Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Phenomena to be explained .................................................. 2
2. Definition of the subject ...................................................... 5
3. Need for this study ............................................................. 7
4. Approach to the subject ....................................................... 7
5. Methodology .................................................................. 9
6. Conventions ................................................................ 10
7. Outline of the rest of the thesis ........................................ 11

## Chapter 2: Literature review

1. Introduction ................................................................. 11
2. Earlier studies: up to 1984 .................................................. 11
   2.1 American studies ......................................................... 11
      2.1.1 Particular authors ................................................. 11
      2.1.2 Conclusion: American studies .............................. 11
   2.2 Continental studies ....................................................... 11
      2.2.1 Particular authors ................................................. 11
      2.2.2 Conclusion: continental studies ............................ 11
   2.3 British studies ............................................................. 11
      2.3.1 Introduction .......................................................... 11
      2.3.2 Particular authors ................................................. 11
3. Recent studies ................................................................ 11
Chapter 3: zones, and types of order

1 Introduction

2 Zones of modification
   2.1 Premodification order as an order of zones
      2.1.1 Four zones of modification
      2.1.2 Nature of modification zones
   2.2 Discussion of zones
      2.2.1 Determining what zone a modifier is in
      2.2.2 Whether a premodifier can be on the borderline between zones

3 Types of order

4 Conclusion: the nature of premodifier order

Chapter 4: Semantic explanation of unmarked order across the zones

1 Introduction
   1.1 Introduction to the chapter
   1.2 Types and dimensions of meaning
      1.2.1 Types of meaning
      1.2.2 Dimensions of descriptive meaning
      1.2.3 Conclusion: types of meaning
   1.3 Data
   1.4 Word histories
   1.5 Conclusion to the introduction

2 Semantic structure of Classifiers
2.1 Introduction

2.2 Grammatical meaning, in Classifiers

2.3 Referential meaning, in Classifiers

2.4 Descriptive meaning, in Classifiers
   2.4.1 Perceptual meaning
   2.4.2 Conceptual meaning
   2.4.3 Intensity dimension: gradability
   2.4.4 Other dimensions
   2.4.5 Discussion of descriptive meaning of Classifiers
   2.4.6 Conclusion: descriptive meaning in Classifiers

2.5 Expressive and social meaning, in Classifiers

2.6 Discussion of Classifier meaning

2.7 Conclusion: the semantic structure of Classifiers

3 Semantic structure of Descriptors
   3.1 Introduction
   3.2 Referential meaning, in Descriptors
   3.3 Descriptive meaning, in Descriptors
      3.3.1 Perceptual meaning
      3.3.2 Conceptual meaning
      3.3.3 Intensity dimension: gradability
      3.3.4 Other dimensions
      3.3.5 Conclusion: descriptive meaning
   3.4 Expressive and social meaning, in Descriptors
   3.5 Grammatical meaning, in Descriptors
   3.6 Discussion of Descriptor meaning
   3.7 Conclusion: the semantic structure of Descriptors

4 Semantic structure of Epithets
   4.1 Introduction
   4.2 Descriptive meaning, in Epithets
      4.2.1 Perceptual meaning
      4.2.2 Conceptual meaning
      4.2.3 Intensity dimension: gradability and scalarity
      4.2.4 Other dimensions
      4.2.5 Conclusion to descriptive meaning
   4.3 Expressive meaning, in Epithets
4.3.1 Attitudinal meaning 76
4.3.2 Emotive meaning 77
4.3.3 Expressive meaning: general 78
4.4 Social meaning, in Epithets 79
4.5 Grammatical meaning, in Epithets 80
4.6 Discussion of Epithet semantic structure 80
  4.6.1 Epithets’ part of speech 80
  4.6.2 Borderline instances of Epithets 81
4.7 Conclusion: Epithet semantic structure 82

5 Semantic structure of Reinforcers 82
  5.1 Introduction 83
  5.2 Descriptive meaning, in Reinforcers 83
  5.3 Expressive meaning, in Reinforcers 83
  5.4 Social meaning, in Reinforcers 84
  5.5 Grammatical meaning, in Reinforcers 84
  5.6 Discussion of Reinforcers 85
  5.7 Conclusion: Reinforcers 86

6 Discussion of premodifier semantic structure 86
  6.1 General discussion 89
  6.2 Semantic structure as characteristic of the zones 92

7 Conclusion: semantic explanation of unmarked order 92
  7.1 The semantic explanation 93
  7.2 Prospect: later chapters 93

Chapter 5: Syntactic explanation of unmarked order across the zones 94

1 Introduction 96

2 Modification of a preceding modifier 96
  2.1 Introduction 96
  2.2 Types of previous-word modification 96
  2.3 Discussion: modification of a preceding modifier 98
  2.4 Conclusion: modification of a previous word 99
3 Modification of a later modifier
   3.1 Introduction
   3.2 Types of later-modifier modification
   3.3 Discussion: modification of a later modifier
   3.4 Conclusion: modification of a later modifier

4 Modification of the act of ascribing properties
   4.1 Introduction
   4.2 Modal modification
   4.3 Reinforcement
   4.4 Discussion: modification of the act of ascription
   4.5 Conclusion: modification of the act of ascription

5 Modification of a discourse element other than the head entity
   5.1 Introduction
   5.2 Types of other-element modification
   5.3 Discussion: modification of another discourse element
   5.4 Conclusions: modification of another discourse element

6 Modification of the discourse situation
   6.1 Introduction
   6.2 Types of situation modification
   6.3 Discussion: modification of the discourse situation
   6.4 Conclusion: modification of the discourse situation

7 Modification of the head: closeness of the syntactic bond
   7.1 Introduction
   7.2 Closeness to the head of modifiers in the different zones
   7.3 Conclusion: modification of the head

8 Discussion: syntactic explanation of unmarked order
   8.1 Other syntactic features of the zones
   8.2 Other syntactic features of premodification

9 Conclusion: syntactic explanation of unmarked order
   9.1 Summary
   9.2 Conclusions drawn
9.2.1 Syntactic nature of the zones
9.2.2 Relationship between syntax and semantics
9.3 Prospect

Chapter 6: Unmarked order within the Classifier zone

1 Introduction
   1.1 General introduction
   1.2 Outline of the argument
   1.3 Introduction to Classifiers’ semantic relations
   1.4 Introduction to the types of Classifier order
   1.5 Outline of the rest of the chapter

2 Classifier constructions
   2.1 Participant-head construction
      2.1.1 The order of Classifiers in Participant-head constructions
      2.1.2 Explanation of the order in Participant-head constructions
      2.1.3 Discussion of the Participant-head construction
   2.2 Process-head construction
      2.2.1 The order of Classifiers in the Process-head construction
      2.2.2 Explanation of the order in the Process-head construction
      2.2.3 Discussion of the Process-head construction
      2.2.4 Summary of the Process-head construction
   2.3 Circumstance-head construction
      2.3.1 The order of Classifiers in the Circumstance-head construction
      2.3.2 Explanation of the order in the Circumstance-head construction
      2.3.3 Discussion
   2.4 Intensive-attribute-head construction
      2.4.1 The order of Classifiers in the intensive-attribute-head construction
      2.4.2 Explanation of the order in the intensive-attribute-head construction
      2.4.3 Discussion of intensive-attribute-head construction
   2.5 Possessed-attribute-head construction
      2.5.1 The order of Classifiers in the possessed-attribute-head construction
      2.5.2 Explanation of the order in the possessed-attribute-head construction
      2.5.3 Discussion of the possessed-attribute-head construction
3 Constructionless uses of Classifiers

3.1 Introduction
3.2 Types of constructionless Classifier
3.3 Discussion of constructionless Classifiers

4 Discussion of Classifier order

4.1 Relation between Classifier phrases and compounds
4.2 Completeness of the account of Classifier constructions
4.3 Relation of Classifier constructions to each other
4.4 Relation of Classifier constructions to the overall modification structure

5 Conclusion: order within the Classifier zone

5.1 Summary
5.2 Prospect: the following chapters

**Chapter 7: Free order**

1 Introduction
2 Constraints on the order within a zone
3 Order with the most important modifier first
4 Order with the most important modifier last
5 Arbitrary order
6 Discussion of free order
   6.1 The basis for free order
   6.2 General discussion
7 Conclusion: free order
Chapter 8: Marked order

1 Introduction
   1.1 General introduction
   1.2 Cautions
   1.3 Outline of the rest of the chapter

2 Marked order used to change modification structure

3 Marked order used to change meaning
   3.1 Introduction
   3.2 Marked by position relative to other premodifiers
   3.3 Marked by coordination
   3.4 Marked by being graded
   3.5 Marked by semantic clash
   3.6 Discussion: marked order used for change of meaning

4 Marked order for control of information structure

5 Discussion of marked order
   5.1 Borderline instances
   5.2 Other discussion

6 Conclusion: marked order

Chapter 9: Historical explanation of premodifier order

1 Introduction

2 Old English period
   2.1 Introduction
   2.2 Order of premodifiers in Old English
      2.2.1 The order
2.2.2 Nature of the order

2.3 Discussion: the Old English period

3 Middle English period
3.1 Introduction
3.2 Syntax in Middle English
3.3 Semantics in Middle English
3.4 The nature of premodifier order in Middle English
3.5 Discussion: the Middle English period
3.6 Conclusion: the Middle English period

4 Early Modern English period
4.1 Introduction
4.2 Syntax in Early Modern English
4.3 Semantics in Early Modern English
4.4 Zones, as syntactic-semantic structures, in Early Modern English
4.5 Discussion: the Early Modern English period
4.6 Conclusion: the Early Modern English period
4.6.1 Summary
4.6.2 Explanatory power of the history in this period

5 Later Modern English period
5.1 Introduction
5.2 Classifier zone in Later Modern English
5.3 Epithet zone in Later Modern English
5.4 Discussion: the Later Modern English period
5.5 Conclusion: the Later Modern English period
5.5.1 Summary
5.5.2 Explanatory power of the history in this period

6 Discussion of the historical explanation of premodifier order
6.1 Introduction
6.2 Mechanisms by which premodifier order evolved
6.3 Words changing zone
6.3.1 Introduction
6.3.2 Word histories to illustrate issues
6.3.3 Results of analysis
6.3.4 Discussion of words changing zone
6.3.5 Conclusion: words changing zone

7 Conclusion: historical explanation of premodifier order

Chapter 10: Supporting explanations of premodifier order

1 Introduction

2 Psycholinguistic explanation
   2.1 Introduction
   2.2 Types of order
   2.3 Semantics
   2.4 Syntax
   2.5 Discussion of the psycholinguistic explanation
   2.6 Conclusion: psycholinguistic explanation

3 Discourse explanation
   3.1 Introduction
   3.2 Structure from the system of information
   3.3 Structure from the system of theme
   3.4 Discussion of the discourse explanation
   3.5 Conclusion: discourse explanation

4 Language acquisition
   4.1 Introduction
   4.2 Evidence from general research
   4.3 Evidence from particular children
   4.4 Conclusion: language acquisition

5 Morphological and phonological explanations

6 Discussion

7 Conclusion: supporting explanations
Chapter 11: Discussion

1 Introduction

2 Premodification zones
   2.1 Introduction
   2.2 Zones’ significance across linguistic levels
   2.3 Zones as constructions
   2.4 Limits to the importance of zones and of apparent zone structure
   2.5 Conclusion: premodification zones

3 Grammaticalisation of premodifiers
   3.1 Introduction
   3.2 Construction grammaticalisation
   3.3 Word grammaticalisation
      3.3.1 Introduction
      3.3.2 Scale of grammaticalness
      3.3.3 Historical change of zone as grammaticalisation
      3.3.4 Discussion of word grammaticalisation
   3.4 Conclusion: grammaticalisation
      3.4.1 Construction grammaticalisation
      3.4.2 Word grammaticalisation

4 Other theories of premodifier order
   4.1 Introduction
   4.2 Conceptual theories
      4.2.1 Introduction
      4.2.2 Conceptual classes
      4.2.3 Conceptual scales
      4.2.4 Conceptual theories: Conclusion
   4.3 Semantic theories
   4.4 Syntactic theories
   4.5 Grammatical theories
      4.5.1 Order is by part of speech
      4.5.2 Order is by transformations undergone
4.5.3 Order is by functional projections

4.6 Functional theories
  4.6.1 An order of functions determines the order
  4.6.2 A single functional principle determines the order

4.7 Psycholinguistic theories

4.8 Theories of free and marked order
  4.8.1 Free order
  4.8.2 Marked order
  4.8.3 Orders that are "tendencies"

4.9 Discussion of other theories

4.10 Conclusion: other theories

5 Conclusion to discussion

Chapter 12: Conclusion

1 Introduction

2 General conclusions

3 Specific conclusions

4 Explanatory conclusion

5 Fulfilment of the purpose of the thesis

6 Beyond the thesis: further research

Appendixes, References, Index

Appendixes
  1 Appendix A: Middle English
  2 Appendix B: Words changing zone

References

Index