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On English Order of Adjectives

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Abstract

This paper investigates an important subject in English; that is “the correct order of adjectives in front of a noun in a noun phrase”. If the learners of English wants to speak and write like a native speaker, they must avoid using wrong order of adjectives which sounds awkward and odd for native listeners.

The investigator of this article views that this research can be regarded as an important chance to improve the learners’ ability in understanding this aspect of English grammar because the research will show you how to list adjectives in the correct order, which will make you sound more natural when you speak.

Keywords: adjective, order, attributive, predicative, category.

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ترتيب الصفات بالانكليزية

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الملخص: تبحث هذه الدراسة في موضوع مهم بالانكليزية ألا وهو (الترتيب الصحيح للصفات بمواجهة الاسم) في العبارة الأسمية. فإذا أراد متعلمو اللغة الانكليزية أن يتكلموا ويكتبوا بالضبط مثلما يفعل الناطقون الأصليون بالانكليزية، عليهم أن يتجنبوا استعمال الترتيب الخاطئ للصفات الذي يبدو غريباً وغير معقول لهم. ينظر باحث هذا المقال على أن هذا البحث يمكن أن يعتبر فرصة مهمة لتحسين قابلية المتعلمين في فهم هذا الجانب من النحو الأنكليزي، لأنه يبين الترتيب الصحيح للصفات الذي يجعلك تبدو طبيعياً أكثر في حديثك.

الكلمات الدالة: صفة، ترتيب، منسوب، تنبيهي، فئة .

1. Introduction

An adjective gives us more information about a thing or a person. Adjectives are words located before a noun that qualify and describe in a noun phrase. In one case, adjectives come before nouns, but, in other cases, they can be used after verb to be or after the linking verbs. Both verb to be and the linking verbs are usually indicated as a complement of copular verbs.

The wrong order of adjectives and the normal order of them mean the same semantically, i.e, any order of adjectives whether wrong or right in a noun phrase is semantically understood by the listeners; so the meaning of wrong order of adjectives is also guaranteed though it seems an odd and strange use. Wrong adjectives word order signals learner's little knowledge of the mechanism of English grammar in this area. Mastering any language requires avoiding the common mistakes which can be overcome through hard work and continued practice.

This introduction, preceded by the abstract, represents the first independent section including the coming titles: problem, aim of the study, hypothesis, procedure, importance of the study and limitation of the study. Section (2) is allocated to the title, nature of adjective, which includes the subtitles: definition of adjective, features of adjective, adjective suffixes, how to handle adjectives, functions of adjectives and categories and order of adjectives, whereas sections (3) and (4) consecutively imply concluded outcomes and views recommended.

1.1 Problem

The learners of English usually make errors in using the correct order of adjectives before a noun. But, however, the meaning of the whole noun phrase and the sentence is always preserved. When the wrong sequence of adjectives takes place, the

logical rule of grammar is violated though the meaning is not affected. In other words, the meaning remains unchanged, e.g.

1. Beautiful English white girls
2. Beautiful white English girls
3. English beautiful white girls

Only example (2) refers to the correct grammar of order of adjectives, whereas example (1) and (3) are formed in the wrong way; the grammar in relation to the correct order of adjective is not applied to (1) and (3).

The difficulties of the subject, in fact, is due to existence of many types of adjectives so it seems hard for the learners to remember them all, especially, when several adjectives are required to be used in a sequence.

1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to help the learners of English have a deep look about the subject of the research by teaching them how to control using more than one adjective in the correct sequencing in a noun phrase.

1.3 Hypothesis

The researcher of this study is a hundred percent sure that Iraqi speakers of English usually make mistakes in producing the correct order of adjectives, especially, when there are more than two before a noun in a single noun phrase. The native speakers of English usually do not use more than three adjectives side by side in any noun phrase in English. This is the average number of adjectives before a noun. The writer of this paper, being a teacher of English for long periods, assures that most learners of English in Iraq get hesitant of using several adjectives in a correct order before a noun. Therefore, the mistakes in this area are expected on the part of learners of English.

1.4 Procedure

The following steps are pursued in writing this paper:

1. Data collection about the correct arrangement of adjectives in a noun phrase taken from books of grammar and previous researches is adopted.
2. This data is subject to sorting out in accordance with the paper's requirements.
3. The same data is discussed thoroughly and analysed deeply in addition to adding comments on the subject.
4. How adjectives are ordered correctly before a head in a noun phrase. Examples are given throughout the research.
5. Concluded points and recommendations are within the readers' reach in sections (3) and (4) which finalise the research.

1.5 Important of the study

The current article is anticipated to be invaluable theoretically and practically. The theoretical value can easily be obtained from many books of grammar and researches including the present one. All these sources talk about the classification of adjectives and their correct order before a noun.

The difficulty, in fact, lies in the practical side of the subject or, in other words, how to order adjectives before a noun correctly and automatically in speech and writing. This requires massive training and much more practice for long periods. The current study helps enhance the learners' ability in arranging several adjectives correctly before a head of a noun phrase.

1.6 Limitation of the study

The subject posed in this research is limited to adjectives word order proceeding a noun as a headword in an English noun phrase. Sometimes, adjectives that follow

verb to be or any of the linking verbs are given room of mention in this study. The verb to be and the linking verbs are indicated as a complement of copular verbs.

2. Nature of Adjective

2.1 The Term Adjective Defined

Looking up the term adjective in the books of grammar, one can confornt many definitions of it. Mitchell (1931:61) signifies an adjective as “a word that modifies the meaning of substantives”. The utterance substantive refers to a word or a group of words functioning as a noun. Greever and Jones (1939:88) tackle the meaning the term modifier as “a word or an expression used to describe or limit the meaning of another word.”

Francis (1958:242) deals with the subject of adjectives syntactically since they are marked by their ability of occupying certain places in the sentences and can be preceded by qualifiers. Adjectives have (-er) and (-est) for degrees of comparison and some adjectives end with the suffixes (-ness) in forming nouns and (-ly) for adverbs. Francis stresses that adjectives can be modified by other adjectives, such as: **icy cold; dark blue** etc.

Quirk *et al* (1972:231) provides a simple definition by saying “an adjective modifies or describes a noun or a pronoun.”

Bauer (1997:3) points out that “an adjective describes how something **is** it is used to describe a noun. It cannot be put a singular or plural form or a masculine, feminine and neuter form. Sometimes it can be put at the end of a sentence if it describes the subject of the sentence.” An adjective has also been given a definition by McArthur (1992:5) as “an addition to the name of a thing to describe the thing more to fully or definitely.”

Feder (2002:3) defines an adjective as “a word which describes or gives more information about noun or pronoun. It describes nouns in terms of such qualities as size, colour, number and kind.”

As far as the order of adjectives is concerned, they are words usually located in a position before a noun that they modify and describe forming a noun phrase. All the previous definitions, however, nearly share similar features and ideas in spite of using different language styles.

2.2 Main features of adjectives

Adjectives are characterized by certain features which are summed up in the following:

1. Adjectives are recognized by their ability to occupy the place between a determiner and a noun, besides they are used following a linking verb.
2. Two kinds of adjectives can be distinguished in English: non-derived adjectives and derived adjectives, for instance:
 - nice, young (non-derived adjectives)
 - beautiful, lovely (derived adjectives)
3. They can be utilized in attributive position, e.g.
 4. This pretty woman is our teacher.
4. They can appear predicatively, e.g.
 5. The guys are asleep.
5. Intensifiers can premodify adjectives, e.g.
 5. The blonde girl is very charming.
6. They can be made comparative and superlatives forms, e.g.
 - 6.a. The red sweater is bigger than the brown one.
 - b. The red sweater is the biggest one in the shop.

7. Adjectives cannot be pluralized in English, e.g.

7. Linda prefers soft drinks.

8. Adjectives are used as modifiers since they do something to a noun, to modify or to change.

The points (3), (4), (5) and (6) are also suggested by Guirk *et al* (1985:402-403) as the most common features of most adjectives

2.3 Most Common Suffixes of Adjectives

1. ‘ -ive ’ is attached to the end of a word; it means doing or tending toward doing something like

active

attractive

2. ‘ -en ’ is added to the end of a word; it means made of something like

woolen

golden

3. ‘ -ic ’ is used to finalise a word; it means characteristic of something like

emphatic

atlantic

4. ‘ -al ’ is sometimes used to make an adjective; when it makes an adjective it means relating to like

enviromental

dimentional

5. ‘ -able ’ is used to finalise a word; it means able-----; can; or giving----- like

eatable

probable

6. ‘ -y ’ is used at the end of a word; it means having-----like

breezy

starry

7. ‘ -ous ’ is used at the end of a word; it means full of -----; having ----- like

dangerous

Jealous

8. ‘ -ful ’ is attached to the end of a word; it means full of -----; having --- like

beautiful

forceful

9. ‘ -less ’ is added to the end of a word; it means without like

careless

speechless

2.4 How to Handle Adjectives

Adjectives are usually dealt with either syntactically or semantically. The duty of adjectives is to give information about something or someone. As far as syntax is concerned, adjectives can be used after verb to be so the order is to be plus adjective, e.g.

8. a. She is tall.

b. He is strong.

The same could be applied to the linking verbs like look, seem, turn, get and so on. In this case, the order is linking verb plus adjective like

9. a. She seems attractive.

b. The principal looks smart.

These two cases are signified as complement of copular verbs.

Adjectives also have the ability to fill the position before nouns; so, in this case, the order adjective plus noun, e.g.

10. a. This is a red vase.

b. The slow car is hers.

Semantically, different meanings of a single adjective can be realized via its context, as in the following examples:

11. a. She is a simple girl.

b. A simple sentence can easily be understood.

2.3.1 Now how to obtain adjectives from verbs:

On and off some adjectives can be obtained through the present participle (-ing) and the past participle (-ed). Present participle adjectives are semantically considered active like interesting, smiling etc., whereas the past participle adjectives have passive meaning, such as; interested, broken etc.

2.5 Syntactic Functions of Adjectives

Attributive and predicative functions are considered the main uses of adjectives. So any word that cannot appear in attributive and predicative positions is not identified as an adjective. In line with this idea, Eagles (2003:7) remarks that adjectives can function attributively as noun modifiers, or predictively, as a complement of a verb like be, seem, consider, make etc. These two positions are the main ones for most adjectives. Adjectives can be utilized attributively when they qualify a noun, e.g.

12. Layla is an intelligent girl.

Adjectives are considered predicative when they constitute the predicate with verb to be or any other verb of incomplete predications e.g.

13. The statuim is big.

14. The boss became angry.

In both cases, whether in attributive predicative positions, adjectives are uninflected words for gender, number, person or case. Modification and predication are basic features of adjectives. Without these features, a word is not recognized as an adjective.

It is worth mentioning that many adjectives can't be utilized attributively like

15. a. The guy is asleep.

* b. The asleep guy is here.

16. a. The old man is ill.

* b. The ill old man left the hospital.

Although adjectives usually appear before nouns because they describe the nouns, in certain cases, adjectives can be situated after nouns, as in:

17. The ate rice with big spoons.

18. The children made the room untidy.

Therefore, the attributive adjective can be used both prenominal and postnominal though the postnominal position is not commonly-encountered in English. In special expressions, some attributive adjectives always appear postnominal like

19. Asia minor is a highly-populated country.

20. The UN secretary general has already arrived.

2.6 Adjective Categories and Their Sequence

Sometimes more than one adjective are wanted to describe something or someone. Therefore, when a set of various adjectives are used before a noun, they ought to be sequenced in accordance with semantic class: value > size > dimension > various physical properties > colour. The order of adjectives is subject to semantic limits of these classes. The following categories are used here as an interpretation to the semantic classes mentioned just now with new additions. So the categories of adjectives and examples are illustrated through the following table.

Det.	Opinion	Size	Age	Shape	Color	Origin	Material	Purpose	Noun
an	ugly	small	old	thin	red	Turkish	cotton	sleeping	bag
a	nice	-	-	long	white	French	silk	wedding	dress
		long	ancient	-	-	Greek	clay	flowers	vases

If we take the first letter for each category, it creates OSASCOMP which is an easy way to remember them. In other words, in this way, remembering becomes easier.

It is not common to have so many adjectives before a noun. But we do this to show the correct order of adjectives. The learners of English must remember that normally not more than three adjectives in front of a noun is used in English. Let's deal with the first example describing a bag.

Ugly is opinion. Small is size. Old refers to age. Thin refers to shape. Red is colour. Turkish refers to origin. Cotton refers to material the bag made of. Sleeping is the purpose of the bag. The adjective of opinion is always used before the other adjectives.

In the following table, the meaning of each category is given with illustrating examples.

No. of sequencing	Type of adjectives	Functional meaning	example
1	Opinion	An opinion adjective explains what we think about something or someone; our observation about something or someone	nice delicious difficult silly
2	Size	A size adjective tell us how big or small something is.	tiny large small big
3	Age	It tells us how old someone or something is.	new old modern young
4	Shape	A shape adjective tells us about the shape of something or how long or short it is. It can also refer to the width of someone or something.	oval round square flat
5	Colour	It refers to the colour or approximately colour of Something.	red green yellow gray
6	Origin	An origin adjective tells us where something is from or where it was created.	Thai French

No. of sequencing	Type of adjectives	Functional meaning	example
			Swiss English
7	Material	It means what is a thing made of? Or what is constructed of?	cotton gold silver metal
8	Purpose	It means what is it used for? What is the purpose of use of this or that thing? Many of these adjectives end in (-ing).	sleeping washing holiday frying

But we can add extra categories. We can add the adjective categories of number and condition.

No. of Sequencing	Type of Adjectives	Functional Meaning	Examples
1	Number	Number adjectives tell us the amount or quantity of something like one, two etc. It is not only for normal cardinal numbers; but also other words that refer to quantity, such as: many several etc.	one two many several
4	Condition	It tells us the general condition or state of something	clean rich dirty broken

Note: Number go before all adjectives even before the adjectives of opinion. And the condition element which best represented by the word rich, clean etc. is inserted in a medial position between a shape adjective and age one. The supporters of this order moves back the shape element before condition followed by the category of age.

The same explanation could be applied to order of adjectives in any prolonged noun phrase. The order of adjectives always remains unaffected even if some categories are not available in the sequencing of a noun phrase. In addition, when two adjectives of opinion are available in a noun phrase, the conjunction and or comma should separate them. And is always required between two colours.

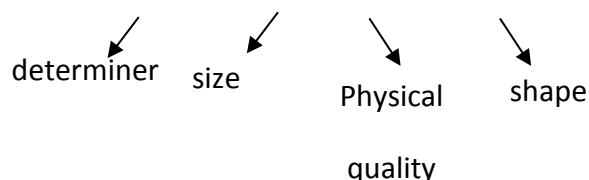
Another order of adjectives is suggested by some specialists in the field of grammar, in which new elements can be encountered in the sequence. The following order clarifies the added categories.

Determiner, opinion, size, physical quality, shape, age, colour, origin, material, purpose.

The new elements in this order are determiner and physical quality; The first is used at the beginning before the opinion adjective, whereas the physical quality is

placed in a central position between size and shape adjectives. Words like a, an, one their his etc. are used as determiners. One should carefully notice that parts of determiners are mentioned under number category which is referred to in one of the previous orders of adjectives. Physical quality, anyhow, is represented by adjectives like sharp, hard, soft, rough etc., e.g.

21. They ate their nice small hard round German candies.



3. Conclusion

Before reaching the final shape, the research has faced many obstacles, especially, during writing it. But in the passage of time, these challenging difficulties have gradually been overcome and the authorship of the research has reached the end successfully.

This article has required detailed explanations and clarification which are included side by side with the investigator's comments.

Conclusion and recommendation represent sections (3) and (4) which finalise the whole research. The following are the concluded results about the subject of the paper.

1. Adjectives mostly add the suffix (-ly) in forming adverbs; but, in certain cases, some adjectives have this suffix though it is mainly an indication of adverbs like lovely, kindly, friendly, daily, weekly etc. Many adjectives are independent words (without added suffixes), such as: nice, young, clever, pretty etc., whereas there is a group of adjectives which can be used as adverbs, too like fast, hard, late etc. Words, such as: daily, weekly, monthly and others can be used as nouns in special cases besides being used as adverbs and adjectives, e.g.

22. a. A weekly paper issues every week. (adjective)

b. The weeklies are rare in Iraq. (noun)

c. That newspaper issues weekly. (adverb)

2. Adjectives are studied and taught as a main part of speech in English besides verbs, nouns and adverbs. Two main types of adjectives are distinguished in the language. Those adjectives which are void of any inflectional suffix. They are called base adjectives and adjectives which are derived by the process of adding suffixes, such as: (-ful) – helpful; (-able and -ible) – changable and possible; (-y) – windy; (-en) - golden and other suffixes.

3. Adjectives usually come before nouns as clarified throughout the content of the current paper. But they could be used following verb to be and any of the linking verb as well, e.g.

23. This is a young girl.

24. These apples are green.

25. The well turned empty.

4. When there are more than one adjective before a noun, their order requires us to follow a strict rule which is not arbitrary in order to sound natural in speaking and writing. So the correct order of adjectives in English is the following:
opinion, size, age, shape, colour, origin, material, purpose
5. The order mentioned in previous point should be preserved even in the case of missing certain categories; or, in other words, when certain categories are absent, i.e. the order is not affected if some categories are not available.
6. Notice the following examples:
 26. A handsome young American man watered the garden.
 27. He is wearing a purple and white dress.
 28. It is a difficult and expensive project.
 29. This is a beautiful, expensive ring.

As for the first example, it is wrong to insert and or a comma between opinion and age adjectives. But when we have two colours as in (2) and is required between the two adjectives of colour. The third example requires and or comma when we have two quality adjectives in front of a noun. The fourth instance requires a comma between the two opinion adjectives.

7. The researcher's deep investigation into the subject of the study shows that there is a big disagreement among grammarians in identifying the elements of adjectives and their order; therefore, the researcher tends to elect the most common one which is adopted by most specialists of English grammar.
8. Adjectives can be used in attributive and predicative positions, as in:
 30. The hardworking sailor led the ship.
 31. The sailor is hardworking.

But some are only attributive adjectives like

32. a. The main issue is discussed.
- * b. The issue is main.

In other cases, some other adjectives fill only the predicative positions in the sense, they don't accept the attributive position, as in:

33. a. The captain of the team is ill.
- * b. The ill captain of the team is not ready for the match.

9. Wrong order of adjectives makes full sense to the listeners as far as meaning is concerned. But wrong use of adjectives order seems awkward and unnatural to the native speakers of English.
10. Wrong order of adjectives can take place due to little knowledge on the part of learners about the compulsory rule of ordering which should be followed in producing a noun phrase including several adjectives.
11. Indeed, there is no strict rule of sequencing before a noun in Arabic. The sequence of adjectives is random in Arabic. This is a big difference between English and Arabic which creates a great problem for the learners and is considered the main reason in making errors in this area of grammar whether in speaking or even in writing.

4. Recommendation

1. Experience in teaching for long asserts that many more learners cannot dominate the exact order of adjectives before a noun. Continued practice and hard work of training are required to enhance the learners' ability in using various adjectives in the right order. In reality, intensive exercise helps them use the correct order of adjectives automatically.

2. The researcher assures the idea that the topic of adjectives word order is not universal. The Arabic language supports this belief since a set of Arabic adjectives is put arbitrarily (in random order) in a noun phrase. This is the reason to believe the non-universality of the topic now under study. Anyhow, it is recommended that the final decision concerning this matter is left for the specialists and scholars who study at least several globe's languages to resolve this problematic issue.

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