Principle of proximity in the order of attributive adjectives

Principle of Proximity in the Order of Attributive Adjectives Among the most commonly used adjectives are attributive adjectives, which describe an inherent characteristic in a noun. Besides occurring before a noun, they are most often characterized by having no linking verb between them and the noun (Dirven, 1999). For instance, " John came home with a green card". Green is an attributive adjective, describing the inherent nature of the card as green. They are distinguished from predicative verbs which besides occurring after a noun have a linking verb. " The boy is slow". Slow is a predicative verb since it is linked to the noun boy by the verb is. Although the use of adjectives as attributive or predicative has existed for a very long time, there has been a growing emphasis in studying attributive adjectives. The studies arising from the need for ordering adjectives rightly are many. Out of these has arisen a general principle that adjectives which are more syntactically related to the noun should occur close to the noun while those that more objective be placed further from the noun. For instance, in " a beautiful plastic picture", plastic is an inherent concept of the picture. Therefore, it is closer to the noun. Beautiful, in its part is rather objective and hence occurs further. This paper will examine the dilemma present in the placement of adjectives and the guidelines which have been followed by scholars to order adjectives. It will also examine the difficulties experienced in classifying these adjectives in terms of syntactic proximity or objectivity. The conclusion will give some possible recommendations to these challenges and further studies. If two, or more, adjectives occur before a noun, there is some restrictive order in to which these adjectives occur. Some orders are more restrictive than others, while others are typically discretional. " Simple grammatical errors" is more acceptable as compared to " grammatical

simple errors". It is important to note that the orders suggested in this study as well as in any other are not binding rules but rather guidelines. However, there are models and sequences which are more grammatically acceptable than others, as well as those that are not acceptable at all (…). Dirven (1999) suggests an ad hoc model which can be used to explain the order of adjectives a nominal phrase. The model divides the adjectives in to five general categories namely qualifying, descriptive, participle, provenance and relational. He argues that the adjectives describing participle, provenance and relationship are more conceptual and hence occur closer to the noun. Provenance and relational adjectives mostly serve an attributive role. On the contrary, qualifying adjectives can serve either attributively, predicatively or postpositively. Provenance and relational adjectives usually indicate the presence of a third party. That is, the adjective refers not just to the noun itself, but probably to an agent which affected the noun, or the origins of the noun (Dirven, 1999). For instance, " a thatched house". " " implies the dependence on a third party. That is, the house was thatched by somebody. This implies a relational aspect of the noun. He also adds that the dependence should be such that the noun was greatly affected by the agent. Similarly, " a bamboo" house implies a third agent, that of the source of the materials used to build the house (Dirven, 1999). The same approach is followed by … who describes adjectives as denominal central, participial, or non-gradable. Denominal adjectives have some properties of nouns, whereas central adjectives are pure adjectives. He points out that more nominal adjectives occur closer to the noun, with the more adjectival occurring further. For instance; " Young African women" requires that African, which has some nominal characteristics be placed close to the noun women while

young, which is a central adjective be placed further. Role based adjectives, such as relational and provenance adjectives, are closely linked to the noun, followed by more objective adjectives, such as those of size, color and qualifying (or subjective) adjectives are furthest. The principle of proximity stipulates that the more objective the adjective, the closer it is syntactically to the noun. Participle adjectives reflecting a permanent effect are acceptable. In the stolen car, the adjective implies a state that is lasting on the car. It will be inappropriate to refer to the bought car, since this does not seriously alter the car's state. Statistics from several corpuses show that there is an increasing modification of order of attributive adjectives. Some adjectives are freely shifted in position whereas others are more restrictive. For instance in COHA, both circular blue and blue circular return 2 tokens. This is an implication that both adjectives are freely interchanged. In another instance, circular big returned 0 tokens whereas big circular returned 18. When an order is so much frequent than another, it is imperative that this order is more restrictive (Dirven, 1999). Objective adjectives, such as rocky and red are usually restrictively attributive, whereas subjective adjectives such as beautiful and big are freely attributive; they can serve both attributive and predicative roles, as shown below. Attributive: the ugly garden. Predicative: the garden is ugly. This arises from the ambiguous nature of the subjective adjectives. A big card may be big for a card but not so for a bill board. An ugly garden may be ugly for a garden but not for a quarry. Objective adjectives do not have such ambiguity. A red card will remain red even when compared to a red billboard, and a rocky garden will remain rocky even when compared to a quarry. Truswel (2004) observes an arising complexity between a red face and a red bus, noting that such

descriptions are relatively specific to the nouns they modify. He also points out that the numerical preferences of certain order of adjectives cannot be used to allow one order over another since the factors leading to such choices are not essentially grammatical (Truswel, 2004). For instance, " metallic red" generated 2, " red metallic" 2, " French red" 13, " red French" 3, and so forth. This follows that objective adjectives are freely ordered against one another. Similarly, subjective adjectives are freely ordered among themselves. For instance, " the old small henchmen" or " the small old Bible". However, these two cases usually have size preceding the age. From the above it can be seen that objective adjectives denote a more permanent state of a noun while subjective adjectives denote a less stable state of the noun. Dirven (1999) observes that even within the major categories, sometimes perception necessitates that the order be reversed. For instance, " the huge grey football stadium" features size before color. Intuitively, color is less permanent than size. However, since people perceive size before shape, shape before age and the three before color, there has evolved a common usage of these adjectives in that order. The order of the four classes is widely varied. For instance, " a large purple satin coverlet". The implication here is that the order of attributive adjectives is not only determined by the adjective class, but also by human perception and conceptualization abilities. The other criteria observed in ordering attributive adjectives occurs in modal adjectives, such as probable, possible, definite and obvious. Apart from a few cases, these adjectives precede the others. For instance, " possible late entry", " obvious early symptoms" are examples of the adjectives preceding other adjectives. Google books hits 48 in " red possible". The appearance of such adjectives in varying places shows that

they are not bound to a specific location. Conclusively, it is important to note that the order of adjectives varies from language to language and from location to location. The contemporary studies in the order of adjectives can only be used to generate a general theory on how adjectives are used but not dictate how adjectives should be used. A future research would probably propose a way of studying adjectives for their own sake, independent of how they are used in language. This is based on the fact that most studies on adjectives explore the field based on existing uses, and make conclusions based on the same. The conclusions that " wooden" and " red" can be used in any order leaves a lot to be desired, acknowledging that this conclusion is drawn from previous usage of the adjectives. A clear understanding here will facilitate the formulation of more reliable theories on the use of adjectives. Another area which needs exploration is the importance of understanding meaning. Most semantics scholars have argued that meaning is majorly got from usage, not vice versa. There is hence a need to address the importance of understanding meaning in itself without necessarily relying on common usage. References Bailey, R. Speaking American: A History of English in the United States. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Bakker, S. " The Noun Phrase in Ancient Greek: A Functional Analysis of the Order and Articulation of NP Constituents in Herodotus". In Amsterdam Studies in Classical Philology Series, Vol. 15. New York: BRILL, 2009. Berg, T. Linguistic Structure and Change: an Explanation from Language Processing, 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Dirven, R. and Radden, G. Cognitive English Grammar. Washington: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007. Fisiak, J. and Marcin, K. Advances in English Historical Linguistics. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998. Graffi, G. 200 Years of Syntax. Washington, D. C: John

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