1 Introduction

1.1 The need for this book

This book sets out to explain the nature and arrangement of premodifiers in English nominal phrases by relating their order to their meaning and syntax and to other areas of language, and to show the significance of that structure for other work in linguistics. ('Premodifiers' covers uses like 'the nearby house'; 'a house nearby' has a postmodifier; the words *the* and *a* are excluded, as determiners.)

The book starts from three facts about English that call for explanation. A music reviewer (cited in the British National Corpus) once described the tambourine as 'your actual tinny round percussion instrument'. It is generally agreed among linguists and nonspecialist users of language that the order of modifiers in such a phrase cannot be varied freely: we cannot grammatically say *'your percussion actual round tinny instrument' or *'your tinny round percussion actual instrument', for example. There are evidently rules of some sort for the order; so the fundamental thing to be explained about the order of premodifiers in English nominal phrases is the nature of the rules.

At the place where *tinny* occurred in the phrase quoted above, it is possible to use several modifiers together. You could say 'your actual tinny, cheap, unpleasant round percussion instrument'; and the order of the words underlined may be varied but still be grammatical: 'cheap, tinny, unpleasant', for example. So a second phenomenon to be explained is why the order can sometimes be varied freely, and the nature of the variations.

A novelist wrote of one of her characters, 'Here was a young, impulsive, over-curious young woman.' (P. D. James, cited in Adamson 2000: 58.) That is acceptable and effective English; but most readers will feel intuitively that, while the second *young* is in normal position ('over-curious young woman'), the first *young* is in an abnormal position. So we must explain the acceptability and effect of such flouting of the rules.

Preliminary investigation of those phenomena, by assembling examples of premodifier order, reveals a few other features that call for explanation. Two of them are illustrated with *glassy*, in table 1.1.

Table 1.1 *Uses of* glassy

the	*glassy*	*green*	*[sea]*	*water*
the	*simple*	*glassy*	*arm*	*spines*
the	*present*	*disordered*	*glassy*	*state*

Table 1.2 *Uses of* golden

Sense	Premodifiers			Head
<1> Earliest	*enormous*	*nine-branch*	*golden* 'Made of gold'	*candelabrum*
<3> Later	*lovely*	*golden* 'Of the colour of gold'	*skin*	*tone*
<5> Latest	*golden* 'Characterised by great happiness'	*olden*	[*college*]	*days*

First, table 1.1 shows that the same word can occur in different positions in the phrase. Second, it shows that all uses of the word in different positions can have a common sense element – 'pertaining to glass', in the table – but that they differ in their precise meaning: in the first of its three positions, *glassy* means 'lustrous and transparent as glass' (sense <4> in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* – 'SOED' hereafter); in the second position, it means 'resembling… glass' (part of sense <1> in SOED); in the third position it means 'characteristic of glass' (another part of sense <1>). To sum up: the table illustrates two important features of premodification: that the same word can occur in different positions in the phrase, and that the meaning changes with the change in position.

A third important feature is shown by the history of words. *Golden*, for example, was used in Middle English, to mean 'made of gold' (sense <1> in SOED). A new sense developed by Late Middle English: <2> 'Yielding or containing much gold'. Then sense <3> developed: 'Of the colour of gold…'; then sense <4a> 'Resembling gold in value', and <4b> 'Precious, important, excellent'; then sense <5> 'Characterised by great prosperity and happiness; flourishing'. Those senses are used in different positions in the phrase, with the later senses being used in positions further from the head, as shown in table 1.2.

Putting the three features together, we see a three-way correlation between premodifiers' position in the order, their meaning and their history. That correlation also calls for explanation.

There are several things about premodifiers, then, that need explanation, but many writers have already tried to provide it; so making another

attempt needs justification. In general, previous explanations have been incomplete: nearly all writers have evidently been unaware of the variations in position and sense just noted, and, more fundamentally, cannot explain them;[1] and there are other examples they cannot explain. Most writers have been aware that their explanations are incomplete, emphasising that they are 'tendencies', or that the order they describe is only the 'preferred' one.

There are, moreover, some striking gaps. As far as I am aware, no work has studied the historical development of premodifier order as such. None has been based on a detailed modern understanding of semantics, although a couple of short articles have given some consideration to such semantics; for example, Adamson (2000) on *lovely*, and Paradis (2000) on 'reinforcing adjectives' as in 'absolute bliss' and 'an awful mess'. Apparently, no treatment has tried to evaluate the different approaches and explanations, or to integrate them.

Cruse (2004: 302) summed up the situation: 'Various partial explanations have been put forward, but none is comprehensively convincing.'

1.2 The approach followed here, to fill the need

The first step in my approach to filling the need for a good explanation has been to examine the data – as many different nominal phrases as possible, from a wide variety of genres and varieties. (I have in effect examined all the nominal phrases I have met in five years of looking for them in research, and in meeting them incidentally in general reading.) The second step has been to seek an explanation for the order. Rather than follow a prior commitment to a particular linguistic theory, I have used explanatory concepts from a range of approaches – provided that they are compatible – treating the varying approaches as complementary, just as plan and elevation are complementary views of a house. For example, I felt forced to include the historical approach, because synchronic study left some things unexplained. The British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English have often been used to check proposed explanations.

The theoretical approach I have come to is closest to the Systemic Functional Grammar of Halliday (2004). In particular, I share his view that language is functional, that utterances and even individual phrases may serve several functions at once, and that those functions use syntax, semantics and phonology flexibly as means to a goal. In semantics, my approach is in the tradition of Leech (1974) and Cruse (2004, for example), where meaning includes not only concepts but also expressive and functional elements.

[1] Longobardi (2001: 577) and Adamson (2000) are aware of those facts, but do not apply them fully, or explain them.

Table 1.3 *Phrases illustrating the core argument*

Determiner	Premodifiers				Head
	1	2	3	4	
your	*actual*	*tinny*	*round*	*percussion*	*instrument*
a	*mere*	*250,000*	*live*	*television*	*audience*
a		*young, impulsive, over-curious*	*young*		*woman*
the		*present*	*disordered*	*glassy*	*state*
the		*simple*	*glassy*	*arm*	*spines*
the		*glassy*	*green*	*sea*	*water*
an		*enormous*	*nine-branch*	*golden*	*candelabrum*
her		*lovely*	*golden*	*skin*	*tone*
the		*golden*	*olden*		*days*
		little	*black and red*	*iron*	*fences*
		traditional	*creamy*	*vanilla and chocolate*	*ice-cream*

Discussion of syntax will include the effect of words on other words' meaning, as well as their position. Because I expect the approach and particular concepts to justify themselves by their explanatory power, I do not attempt to justify them theoretically. Terms and concepts will be explained as they become relevant; the index will help the reader find the explanations.

1.3 Core of the account to be given

The correlation noted above, among the order of premodifiers, differences in their senses, and their historical development, not only calls for explanation: it also leads to the explanation for the fundamental phenomena of premodifier order given above.

Table 1.3 presents the phrases already cited, and some others, as illustrative data for what follows. The positions in the order are numbered for reference.

The argument is that the premodifier positions, as in table 1.3, are zones of use, which may have one word, or several, or none. The zones have semantic characteristics (for example, words in zone 1 are like the adverb *very* in being intensifiers, not content words); and they have syntactic characteristics, which are interdependent with the semantic ones. That order of zones constitutes the normal order of premodifiers in English. Words within the same zone are in grammatically free order – 'black and red' may be 'red and black'. Premodifiers may be moved for special effect, in marked order (for example, 'a young… young woman').

1.4 Advantages of the account

The account just summarised provides us with rules for premodifier order comparable in simplicity and adequacy with the rules for the order of main clause elements in declarative clauses. The rules for clauses are: (1) the subject must be put first; (2) if there are several words in the subject, or several verbs, they may be put in any order; (3) for certain stylistic purposes, a marked reversal of the order may be used (as with the caption from romantic silent films, 'Came the dawn… '). Similarly with premodifiers: (1) words with a zone-1 sense must be put first, then zone-2 senses, zone-3 senses, and zone-4 senses; (2) if there are several words in one zone, they may be put in any order; (3) for certain stylistic purposes, a marked reversal of the order may be used (as with *young*, above).

That explanation accounts for the variation of sense and position. It also avoids the problems we noted with previous accounts: the distinction between grammatically required and grammatically free order avoids most of the problems with tendencies and preferences; the others are resolved by the marked/unmarked distinction and by the specification that the order is of senses not of words – so 'old fat' and 'fat old' are both possible (see §3.4.2.3), and both 'smooth dark' and 'dark smooth' (see §7.1.2). The explanation accounts for problem examples such as 'impossibly high high heels' (see §2.2.1.2, item (v)), and 'new old' and 'old new' (see §3.4.2.3). The zones have various semantic and syntactic characteristics and can thus serve different functions, which leads to the integration of semantic, syntactic and functional explanations, both synchronic and historical. That allows the explanation to fill the gaps noted previously, and to integrate valid insights from other theories with new insights.

Finally, the account to be given here avoids a further problem that arises from the tendencies-and-preferences theories. If speakers uttering a phrase with several premodifiers had to consider for each one a number of non-binding preferences for order, each relative to other positions and relative to words in the same position, they could not decide quickly what the order should be. Moreover, there is no likelihood that speakers would agree closely on the order. Yet speakers of English in fact arrange premodifiers quickly, without conscious thought, and in the same order as other speakers.

1.5 Outline of the book

The body of the book develops the core outlined above. Chapter 2 presents the zones in more detail. Chapter 3 gives a semantic explanation of the normal order of the zones; chapter 4 gives a syntactic explanation of it; and chapter 5 explains the order within zone 4, which has an internal semantic and syntactic structure of its own. Chapters 6 and 7 explain the

free and marked orders, using the same semantic and syntactic concepts. Chapter 8 complements the preceding synchronic explanations with a diachronic one, showing that the Old English order by part of speech became the modern syntactic order in Middle English, which was in turn reanalysed as being also a semantic order. Chapter 9 complements the preceding semantic and syntactic analysis with supporting explanations from the approaches of discourse, psycholinguistics and children's development of language. Chapter 10 is devoted to discussion of the wider significance of the previous analysis of premodifiers and their order – adding to the discussion developed incidentally in the preceding chapters. Chapter 11 concludes.

1.6 Further significance of the explanation to be given

The argument developed through the book, as just outlined, is intended to be satisfying for being based on copious and wide-ranging data, and for being detailed, comprehensive and well integrated. It is put forward as being new in several ways: in its use of modern semantics, which deals with expressive as well as conceptual functions of language, to solve an old problem; in its accounting for the insights of other scholars and other approaches; and in being psycholinguistically credible, while providing for all the subtlety and variety of English.

Along the way, the concepts and distinctions used to explain premodifiers will provide what I trust are insights into various controversies. For example, the historical explanation in chapter 8 will lead to the suggestion that words grammaticalise right through nominal phrases, from head to determiner, and in the other direction. The 'Discussion' chapter (chapter 10) will suggest an answer to the puzzlement about 'compounds'. (Is the phrase 'noun compound' itself a compound? It hardly seems to be, but it should be, shouldn't it?) In the same chapter, the nature of the zones will be shown to imply that we must accept the modern constructional approach to syntax, that the concepts of gradience and prototypes are applied too widely in recent linguistics, and that the traditional concepts of parts of speech such as 'adjective' simply do not apply to Present-Day English nominal phrases. Some oddities can also be explained. Why is it, for example, that although premodifiers are typically 'adjectives' they may be 'adverbs' ('the then prime minister'), 'participles' ('running water'), or 'nouns' ('noun phrase')? And why can numbers be used as premodifiers ('a mere 250,000 live television audience') although they are usually determiners ('250,000 mere mortals')? Finally, the concepts and distinctions used will imply some things that do not seem to have been considered before, such as that the very nature of English semantics has changed, just as English syntax and morphology have.

1.7 Conventions to be used

As well as the usual conventions, the book uses numbers in angle brackets – as in <2> – to represent the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*'s numbering of its meanings[2]. The hash sign – # – is used for expressions which I have constructed and regard as grammatically acceptable. Phrases without the hash are attested, even when the source is not cited, unless prefaced with expressions such as 'that could be expressed as'.

[2] I generally use the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (SOED) rather than the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) because it gives the historical development of word meanings more clearly; for my purpose, its being slightly more out of date than the online OED in some entries does not matter.

2 Zones, and types of order

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the basic structure of premodifier order, which the rest of the book will explain and discuss. It argues for three main points. First, premodifier order is a matter of zones (each containing one word, or several, or none), rather than of individual words. Second, there are four zones. Finally, there are three types of order: (a) 'unmarked' order, across zones, in which words occur in the grammatically set order of the zones; (b) 'marked' order, across zones, in which a user may flout the unmarked order for certain stylistic purposes; (c) 'free' order, within one zone, in which words may grammatically occur in any order. Those points will be asserted as empirical facts evident from the examples given; but the reader may prefer to treat them as working hypotheses, since the chapters to follow will substantiate them by explaining the nature of the zones and their order.

The concept of premodification zone will be introduced, the nature of each zone will be outlined, and each of the zones will be named. The concepts will be developed through much of the chapter. The rest of the chapter sets out the nature of the zones (§2.2), and the types of order (§2.3). The conclusion (§2.4) sums up, and looks forward to later chapters.

2.2 Zones of premodification

2.2.1 Premodification order as an order of zones

2.2.1.1 Four zones of premodification

I follow Quirk *et al.* (1985) in asserting that the overall order consists of four zones of premodification, approximately as shown in table 2.1 (after Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 1340).

However, I qualify their account of Zone I ('precentral' modifiers). They describe Zone I modifiers as 'intensifying adjectives' (1985: 1338), which are also described (1985: 429) as having 'a heightening effect on the noun that they modify, or the reverse, a lowering effect'; the examples of intensifying adjectives given (1985: 429) include 'pure fabrication', 'outright lie', 'sheer arrogance', and 'complete fool'. I accept that description, but assert that

Table 2.1 *Zones of premodification (approximate)*

Determiners	Premodifiers				Head
	Zone I: precentral	Zone II: central	Zone III: postcentral	Zone IV: prehead	
our	*numerous*	*splendid*		*African tourist*	*attractions*
all this			*costly*	*social*	*security*
a	*certain*			*church*	*tower*
these			*crumbling*[,] *grey*	*Gothic church*	*towers*
some		*intricate*	*old*[,] *interlocking*	*Chinese*	*designs*
all the		*small*	*carved*	*Chinese jade*	*idols*
both the	*major*			*Danish political*	*parties*

some of their other examples do not fit it. In 'our numerous ..... attractions', *numerous* is a quantifying determiner, like *many*, *several* and *two*, as in 'several mistakes' and 'too many mistakes' (1985: 262), and #'two tourist attractions'; it is a postdeterminer here, in my judgement. If intended to be descriptive, it would belong in Zone II. *Major* is a synonym of *important*, and adds meaning to its head, *parties* (not intensifying it); it belongs in Zone II. Those two modifiers do not heighten or intensify the meaning of their head words. By hypothesis, I take that quality to be characteristic of Zone I (and will show that to be so, in chapter 3, on semantics), and discount the examples; 'pure fabrication' and 'outright lie' would be valid examples. With that qualification, I accept the zone structure given by Quirk *et al.* (1985). It will be the basis for my account of premodifier order in the rest of the book. That argument relies on defining determiners as being words that limit ('determine') the referent of the head using presupposed information (working by deixis or quantification); modifiers are words that use asserted information to either limit or describe the referent.

The zone numbers used by Quirk and others (1985) give no indication of the nature of the zones; so, instead of 'Zone I' and so on, I will use more descriptive terms, as follows. I will use 'Reinforcer' for Zone I words (like *sheer, complete, absolute*, as used in table 2.1); they reinforce the sense of the noun they modify; in 'absolute idiot', *absolute* reinforces the concept IDIOCY in the noun. (The term comes from Paradis 2000, 2001.) I will use 'Epithet' for the expressive Zone II words, such as *splendid* and *intricate.* (The term is from Halliday 2004, but applies there to both Zones II and III.) I will use 'Descriptor' for the factually descriptive Zone III words, such as *crumbling, grey, interlocking.* I will

Table 2.2 *General illustration of the zones*

Determiner	Premodifiers				Head
	Reinforcer	Epithet	Descriptor	Classifier	
your	*actual*	*tinny*	*round*	*percussion*	*instrument*
a	*mere*	*useless*	*gibbering*	*stop-the-war-at-any-price*	*pacifist*
	sheer	*desperate*			*necessity*
a	*complete*	*bloody*			*fool*
		little	*black*	*iron*	*fences*
a		*shabby*	*dark*	*city*	*suit*
a		*lissom*	*young*	*TVNZ*	*reporter*
some		*gangbuster*	*new*	*McKinsey*	*idea*
the		*beautiful*	*sunny*	*winter*	*weather*
the		*huge*	*annual*	*ram*	*sales*
		ugly	*trailing*	*overhead*	*wires*
		smooth	*panning*	*camera*	*movements*
her		*lacy*	*tin-roofed*	*row*	*house*
a		*distinctive*	*checked*	*baseball*	*cap*
the		*filthy*	*colonial*	*military*	*compounds*
		traditional	*creamy*	*vanilla*	*ice-cream*

use 'Classifier' for Zone IV words, which commonly subclassify the referent of the head word. (This term is also from Halliday 2004; a number of authors use 'classify' for the function of such words – for example, Teyssier 1968, Warren 1984, Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1340, Adamson 2000: 60, Bauer 2004: 13.) I intend the words' everyday senses to suggest the nature of the zones, and I will characterise the zones in the next two chapters; but I use the words as technical terms to name the zones; the descriptive meaning of the terms does not define them. Section 2.2.1.2 below identifies the zones more fully.

Since the zones will not be fully explained until I have set out their semantic and syntactic characteristics in the next two chapters, I give further illustrations in table 2.2, to give the reader an intuitive feel for their nature, and to help the discussion in the rest of this chapter. (Some examples are repeated from above.)

There are few phrases which combine Reinforcers with other premodifiers; and there are extremely few with all four zones filled (for reasons that will be made clear in §4.3.1) – the first example in the table is from the British National Corpus, and the second from Fries (2000: 312).

2.2.1.2 *The nature of premodification zones*

It is important for the argument that we can be confident which zone the word being discussed belongs in, since the examples will be used as