

## The position of French attributive adjectives: a closer look at semantic considerations

In French, attributive adjectives can appear both before and after the noun, as shown in (1.).

- (1) a.     une agréable soirée  
          a nice evening  
          'a nice evening'
- b.     une soirée agréable  
          a evening nice  
          'a nice evening'

It is often assumed that the variation of position is a purely semantic phenomenon. For example, (Bouchard, 1998) considers that prenominal adjectives modify "internal components of the noun" (Bouchard, 1998:139), whereas postnominal ones modify the noun as a whole. Such an approach would lead to claiming that there is a systematic difference of meaning between the prenominal and the postnominal version of the same adjective.

There are, of course, cases where the interpretation of the adjective differs in pre- and postnominal position. In (2.), the adjective *gros* 'fat' can have an intensifying interpretation when it is in prenominal position of an agentive noun such as *fumeur* 'smoker'. But this is not possible with other agentive nouns, like *coiffeur* 'hairdresser' (3.). (Thuilier, 2014)

- (2) a.     un gros fumeur  
          a fat smoker  
          'a heavy smoker'
- b.     un fumeur gros  
          a smoker fat  
          'a fat smoker'
- (3) a.     un gros coiffeur  
          a fat hairdresser  
          'a fat hairdresser'
- b.     un coiffeur gros  
          a hairdresser fat  
          'a fat hairdresser'

However, claiming a systematic distinction in meaning tied to the position of the adjective "appears to be false" (Thuilier, 2014:288). First of all, because there exist noun-adjective pairs

with the same meaning disregarding the position of the adjective. As pointed out by (Thuilier, 2014), in (4.), both versions mean ‘a charming boy’, “without any possible variation in interpretation” (Thuilier, 2014:288).

- (4) a. un charmant garçon  
a charming boy
- b. un garçon charmant  
a boy charming

Another challenging claim for (Bouchard, 1998) comes from Cinque (Cinque, 2010). He states that there exist cases where “exactly the same reading is found both prenominal and postnominal” (Cinque, 2010:5). A judgment that has been reached by other authors as well (Abeillé & Godard, 1999; Aljovic, 2000; Ewert & Hansen, 1993).

In his book, Cinque examines the behaviour of some Italian and English adjectives with regard to a number of semantic distinctions. His basic conclusion is that, whereas English adjectives are ambiguous between two values in prenominal position and have only one value in postnominal position, Italian adjectives show the opposite distribution: they are ambiguous in postnominal position and have only one value in prenominal position.

Since Cinque, in a second step, claims that all Romance languages behave like Italian (and all Germanic languages like English, but this part will not be taken into account here), I will examine more precisely how French behaves on the basis of the examples that Cinque uses for Italian.

## References

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