



## A CURSORY INSIGHT INTO PERMISSIBLE ORDER OF ENGLISH MODIFIERS (SHORT COMMUNICATION)

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### ABSTRACT



Syntagmatically, a well-ordered sentence is not only easier to read and comprehend but also considered grammatically correct. With this realization, this study is aimed at understanding the permissible order of modifiers in a noun phrase of English syntax. The findings of this study showed scope of eighteen types of modifiers that can be used before a nominal subject head in a sentence.

**Keywords:** Modifier, Permissible Order, English Syntax.

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### INTRODUCTION

The order of words as modifiers needs to be minutely assessed within a noun phrase in order to meet observational adequacy of the phrasal structure. An example from *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar*, (1994:192) will make the point clearer. In 'A light green shirt' light is hypotactic to green rather than shirt. The shirt itself is not light, whereas in 'An expensive green shirt', both the adjectives, i.e. expensive and green are in paratactic relation and thus the noun phrase 'An expensive green shirt' can be overtly paraphrased as "the shirt was expensive and green".

This study hypothesizes that the head of a noun phrase can be projected only in a finite order. The presence of head is the minimum requirement for a phrase as it determines the meaning of entire phrase. As for the identification of phrasal head, it's

desirable to point out that a noun preceded by the probable configurations of modifiers in Figure. 1 below will be the phrasal head. Most often, phrasal subject occurs in the form of nominal group or noun phrase, but very rarely one may come across prepositional group or phrase as subject, e.g. Over the fence is out. Similarly, some modifiers may appear in complex form joined with hyphen, but they do not pose problem in predicting the permissible order of modifiers, e.g. Good-looking girl, record-breaking feat or even clause, e.g. ready-to-wear dress.

It is the head, which decides what kind of, and how many modifiers a head may take. Modifier(s) which modifies the head, are dependents or subordinate elements to the head. For example, 'too' (with the sense "excessively") can function as dependent to an adjective or adverb (too careful, too

carefully), but not to noun or verb (~~their too extravagance, you shouldn't too worry~~). This phenomenon of dependency is called the valency of the head. Given the valency of head, this study presents below a brief account of particular type of constituent(s) that may occur in a permissible order as modifier(s) of a nominal subject in English syntax.

### FINDINGS

Since the English subject is often a nominal structure occurring before verb, the basic pattern of modifier for noun phrase as discussed by Scotts

(1973) and Muir (1974) can be presented in the form of a rule like  $MOD = \{D \rightarrow O \rightarrow E \rightarrow N\}$ . The rule prescribes probable occurrence of four grammatical categories from left to right as *determiner* followed by *ordinator*, *epithet*, and *nominator* respectively. The rule has been further elaborated diagrammatically in figure 1 that shows the occurrence of four grammatical categories with their sub-types along with six types of absolute construction (AC) that may occur before subject head in an English sentence.

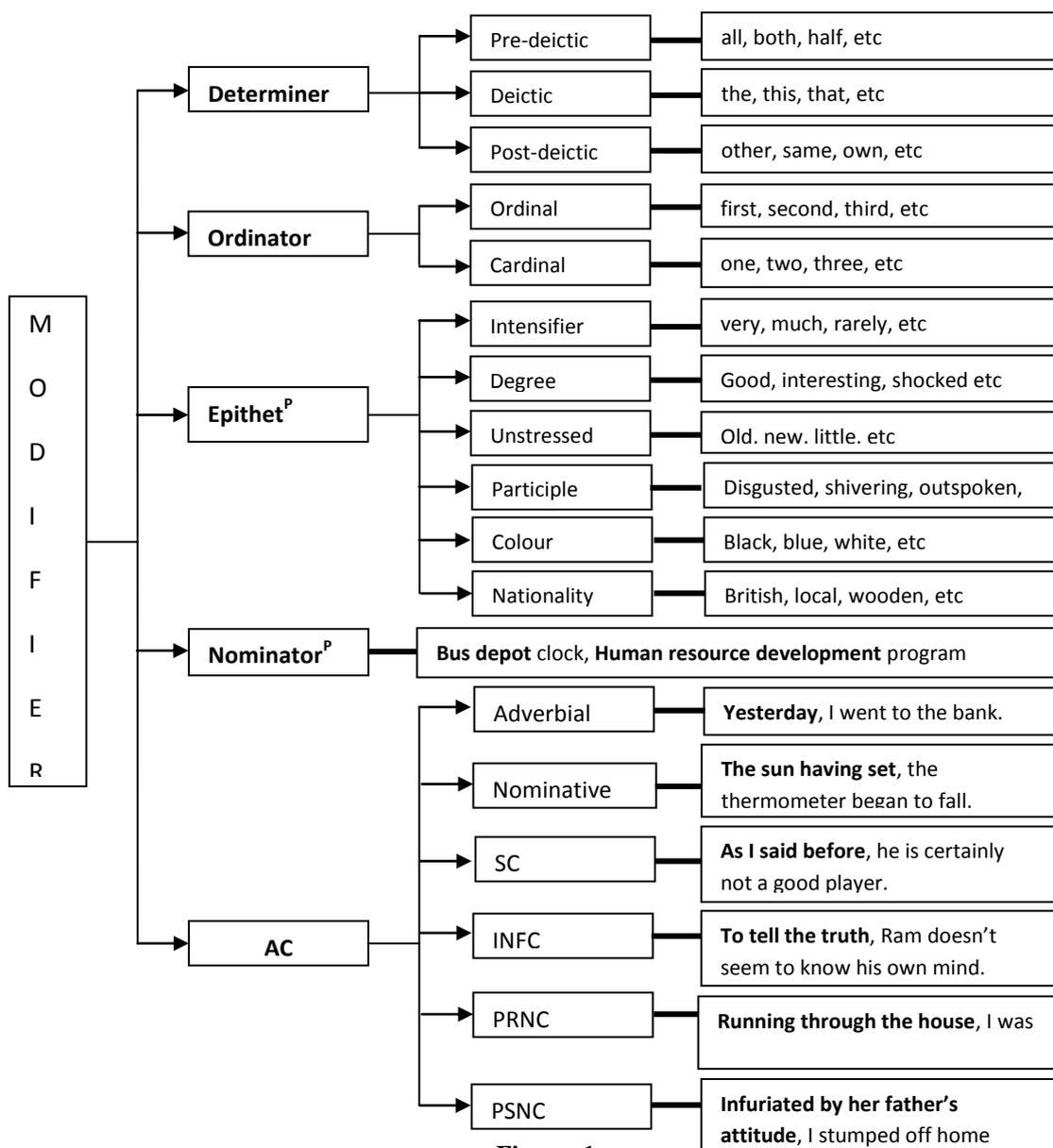


Figure: 1

**Abbreviations:** MOD=modifier, D=determiner, O=ordinator, E=epithet, N=nominator, AC= absolute construction, SC=subordinate clause, INFC=infinitive clause, PRNC=present participle non-finite clause, PSNC=past participle nonfinite clause, ( P ) =infinite further projection



The representation above in figure 1 is predictive in that not only four major modifiers namely *determiner*, *ordinator*, *epithet*, and *nominator* but also the sequence of their sub-types are expected to occur in their permissible order. For example, *determiner* shows the permissible order of its sub-types in the form of "Pre-deictic – Deictic - Post-deictic". The principle of permissible order says that first item may go before the second item; and second item may go before third item and so forth but not vice-versa. For example, the modifiers in the following sentence show the respective sequence of pre-deictic and deictic as part of determiner.

- All the dogs started barking furiously at Shyam. (Correct)
- The all dogs started barking furiously at Shyam. (Wrong)

Some sequences of modifiers may sometimes cause complications in terms of implying an intended meaning. For example, a classic sentence from (Paul Roberts, 1956:126) has been quoted below which explores five probable meanings as follows:

1. Pretty little girls' school (a girls' school that is pretty and little)
2. Pretty little girls' school (a girls' school that is rather small)
3. Pretty little girls' school (a pretty school for little girls)
4. Pretty little girls' school (a school for girls who are pretty and little)
5. Pretty little girls' school (a school for girls who are rather small)

In the above examples, '*pretty little girls*' functioning as modifiers of *school* is ambiguous because it is difficult to say which word classes the modifiers belong to. For example, here we do not know which word-classes '*pretty*' belongs to. If it is an adjective, then it must modify '*little girls*'. If it is an intensifier like *very*, *rather*, etc., it must modify '*little*', since intensifiers don't modify nouns. In such a case, one is advised to determine the word classes of such modifiers by examining the farthest modifier to the closet modifier of the headword, say, '*school*' in the above examples. Besides, ambiguities caused by modifiers can be removed by co-text and context of the text.

## CONCLUSION

This short communication can be viewed more as a utilitarian product rather than a theoretical discourse. This study, in its preliminary approach, tried to identify the permissible order of five types of modifiers of a subject head in an English sentence. Since a good number of learners especially *beginners* and *intermediate learners* fumble in understanding the permissible order of modifiers while writing and speaking English, this study will help the learners get a cursory insight into arranging order of modifiers in a noun phrase. As part of future works, this study intends to delve into identifying modifiers and qualifiers of subject, verb and object of English syntax from pedagogical perspective.

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