

## 91. Order of Degree Word and Adjective

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### 1. Defining the values

This map shows the position of degree words with respect to the adjective that they modify. For the purposes of this map, the term *adjective* should be interpreted in a purely semantic sense, as a word denoting a property, since in many languages the words in question do not form a separate word class, but are verbs or nouns. Degree words are words with meanings like ‘very’, ‘more’, or ‘a little’ that modify the adjective to indicate the degree to which the property denoted by the adjective obtains. Degree words are traditionally referred to as adverbs, though in many languages the degree words do not belong to the same word class as adverbs; even for English there is little basis for saying that degree words belong to the same word class as adverbs which modify verbs.

@ 1.	Degree word precedes adjective  (DegAdj)	205
@ 2.	Degree word follows adjective  (AdjDeg)	177
@ 3.	Both orders occur with neither  order dominant	55
		total 437

The first type shown on the map consists of languages in which **the degree word precedes the adjective**. An example of such a language is Pumi (Tibeto-Burman; China), as in (1).

(1) Pumi (Ding 1998: 107)

*lealián*      *ggáo*

very          deep

Deg          Adj

‘very deep’

Most European languages, like English (e.g. *very tall*, *too small*, *somewhat afraid*), are also instances of this type. The second type

consists of languages in which **the degree word follows the adjective**, as in the example in (2) from Kairiru (Oceanic; Papua New Guinea).

(2) Kairiru (Wivell 1981: 74)

*nau*    *pulau*        *sek*

sea    murky        too

          Adj            Deg

‘... the sea is too murky.’

The third value shown on the map includes languages in which **both orders occur with neither dominant** (see “Determining Dominant Word Order” on the next page). In some languages, such as Kisi (Atlantic, Niger-Congo; Guinea), degree words in general can either precede or follow the adjective (Childs 1995: 256). In many other languages, however, individual degree words differ as to whether they precede or follow the adjective. For example, in Wari’ (Chapacura-Wanhan; Brazil), the degree word meaning ‘a little’ precedes the adjective, as in (3a), while the word meaning ‘very’

follows, as in (3b); no other degree words are apparently mentioned by Everett and Kern (1997).

(3) Wari' (Everett and Kern 1997: 346)

a.	<i>'amon</i>	<i>mixem</i>	b.	<i>mixem</i>	<i>tamana</i>
	a.little	black		black	very
	'a little dirty'			'very dirty'	

In English, the degree word *enough* differs from other degree words in that it follows the adjective (*large enough* vs. *very large*). One order is considered dominant if the number of degree words that occur on one side of the adjective is more than twice the number that occur on the other side. For example, in Indonesian, Sneddon (1996: 177-18

1) lists fifteen degree words that precede the noun, four that follow, and one that either precedes or follows, so Indonesian is coded on the map as placing the degree word before the adjective. Conversely, Wari' is coded as a language with both orders where neither order is dominant.

In some languages, the order of degree word and adjective depends on whether the adjective is being used attributively, i.e. modifying a noun, or predicatively. This is the case in Ndyuka (Creole; Suriname), in which a degree word precedes an adjective used attributively, as in (4a), but follows an adjective used predicatively, as in (4b).

(4) Ndyuka (Huttar and Huttar 1994: 173, 175)

a. *wan tumisi gaan makiti*

INDEF very great power

‘a very great power’

b. *i kon dyendee tumisi*

2SG come elegant very

‘You’ve become very elegant.’

Tetelcingo Nahuatl (Tuggy 1979: 76) and Quiotepec Chinantec (Robbins 1968: 59-60) are similar.

In some languages, there are degree morphemes which occur as affixes on adjectives. The comparative and superlative suffixes in English (*-er* in *stronger*, *-est* in *strongest*) are examples of degree

affixes. Similarly, in many languages, the meaning ‘very’ is expressed by an affix, as in the example in (5) from Maricopa (Yuman; Arizona).

(5) Maricopa (Gordon 1986: 141)

*man-sh m-hmii-hot-m*

2SG-SUBJ 2.SUBJ-tall-very-REALIS

‘You are very tall.’

This map does not include degree affixes, restricting attention to separate words expressing degree. Some languages are not included on the map because the only degree morphemes mentioned in available descriptions are affixes.

## 2. Geographical distribution

Languages in which the degree word precedes the adjective constitute the overwhelmingly dominant type, with very few exceptions, in Europe and Asia, except in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. It is also the dominant type in North America,

though with more exceptions. In South America it is the dominant type along the western side of the continent. It is a minority type in Africa and New Guinea. The distribution of types is quite mixed in Australia and among the Austronesian languages of Indonesia, the Philippines and the Pacific.

Languages in which the degree word follows the adjective are the dominant type in Africa and in New Guinea. They are the dominant type in South America except down the western side of the continent. They also constitute the dominant type in the mainland of Southeast Asia, in an area extending westward to include languages along the border between India and Myanmar.

Languages lacking a dominant order are widespread but are distinctly infrequent in much of Europe and Asia, again with the exception of the Middle East and Southeast Asia. They are particularly common in Southeast Asia and among Austronesian languages. The strong areal pattern across much of Europe and Asia is in striking contrast to the lack of patterning within Austronesian languages. Even within relatively small regions, such as Sumatra or the Philippines, both orders are found.

## Determining Dominant Word Order

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A number of maps in this atlas show the **dominant word order** of various sets of elements, in most cases pairs of elements (like adjective and noun) but in some cases sets of three elements (like subject, object, and verb). For any set of elements, there are some languages in which only one order is permitted and other languages in which more than one order is permitted. Among languages of the latter sort, one can further distinguish languages in which one order is used more frequently than others from languages in which this is not the case. For example, with respect to the order of adjective and noun, there are languages which only employ adjective-noun order, others that only employ noun-adjective order, and still others that allow both orders. Among languages that allow both orders, there are some in which adjective-noun order is more frequent, some in which noun-adjective is more frequent, and some in which both orders occur with comparable frequency.

Where a language is shown on one of the word order maps as having a particular order as the dominant order in the language, this means that it is either the **only order possible** or the order that is **more frequently used**. The maps do not distinguish these two possibilities, because it is often not possible to obtain reliable information from descriptive grammars on whether a particular order which is not the most frequent order is grammatical or not. While a grammar may say, for example, that the order of adjective and noun in a language is adjective-noun, it often turns out that the alternate order is possible, either in special discourse contexts or in special grammatical contexts, so it is rarely possible to conclude with confidence that only one order is permitted.

The expression *dominant order* is used here, rather than the more common expression *basic order*, to emphasize that priority is given here to the criterion of what is more frequent in language use, as reflected in texts. The reason for assigning priority to this criterion is that for most languages, this is the only criterion for which we have any relevant information. When a language allows both orders of adjective and noun, for example, grammars will often mention this but describe one order as the normal order or the more

frequent order. For some languages, the classification of a language in this atlas is based on actual text counts. The rule of thumb employed is that if text counts reveal one order of a pair of elements to be more than twice as common as the other order, then that order is considered dominant, while if the frequency of the two orders is such that the more frequent order is less than twice as common as the other, the language is treated as lacking a dominant order for that pair of elements. For sets of three elements, one order is considered dominant if text counts reveal it to be more than twice as common as the next most frequent order; if no order has this property, then the language is treated as lacking a dominant order for that set of elements. Of course, unless one examines a large number and a broad variety of texts, one cannot be sure that differences in frequency may not occasionally reflect the idiosyncratic properties of a particular set of texts. It is likely that in some cases, further text counts would lead to classifying a language differently.

For some languages, the classification on the map is based on a claim in the source that some order is basic or that it is pragmatically neutral. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, I

assume that these are also the dominant orders. Occasionally, however, such claims are at odds with frequency data provided by the author. For example, Abbott (1991: 25) characterizes OVS order (object-verb-subject) in Macushi (Carib; Brazil) as basic, and says that SOV order is used to highlight the subject. However, she cites text count data that show that OVS and SOV order are about equally common. I base my classification of Macushi here on the frequency counts, and since no order is more than twice as frequent as the next most frequent order, I treat this language as lacking a dominant order of subject, object, and verb.

For some word order features where more than one order is possible, such as the order of object and verb, the order will generally be determined syntactically or by extragrammatical factors. But for other word order features, it may be largely determined by specific lexical items. For example, in languages with both prepositions and postpositions, it is generally the case that each adposition is either always a preposition or always a postposition. In such cases, the classification of a language as prepositional or postpositional is based here on a combination of whether the number of prepositions outnumbers the number of

postpositions (or vice versa) and which adpositions express basic meanings and are thus likely to be used more frequently. For example, in Koyraboro Senni (Songhay; Mali), there are over a dozen postpositions but only three prepositions, and among the postpositions are a number with apparently higher frequency of usage, including one marking indirect objects, one marking locatives (covering meanings of ‘at’, ‘to’, or ‘from’), and one meaning ‘on’, while the prepositions tend to have more specialized meanings (‘since’, ‘until’, and ‘during’, though also ‘with’) (Heath 1999a). Because this suggests that postpositions are more frequent, Koyraboro Senni is classified here as postpositional.

Similarly, in Korowai (Trans-New Guinea; Papua, Indonesia), all adjectives can precede the noun, as in (1a), but a few, like the adjective meaning ‘big’, can also follow the noun, as in (1b).

(1) Korowai (van Enk and de Vries 1997: 69)

a.     *lembul*         *nggulun*

      bad             teacher

      ‘a bad teacher’

- b.     *yanop*        *khonggél-khayan*  
           man           big-very  
           ‘a very big person’

Again, it is assumed from this description that adjective-noun order is more frequent, and Korowai is treated on Map 87 as adjective-noun.

Some grammars will describe a particular word order as more contrastive. It is assumed from statements of this sort that the more contrastive order is used less frequently; hence the language will be coded according to the noncontrastive order. For example, in Asmat (Trans-New Guinea; Papua, Indonesia) adjective-noun order is described as contrastive, while noun-adjective order is neutral, as in (2).

(2) Asmat (Voorhoeve 1965b: 140)

- a.     *ów*        *akát*  
           people   good  
           ‘good people’
- b.     *akát*     *ów*

good people

‘good people (in contrast to bad people)’

The situation is similar in Ilocano (Austronesian; Philippines) except that the situation is reversed (Rubino 1998): in Ilocano, the neutral order is adjective-noun, while noun-adjective order is contrastive.

If a grammar indicates that both orders of a pair of elements are possible, without stating that one is more common or without any comment suggesting that one order is more common, then the language will be shown on the map as having both orders without one being dominant.