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# ATTRIBUTES AND ATTRIBUTIVE ADJECTIVES

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It is generally agreed that nouns and adjectives were morphologically indistinguishable in Indo-European, but that, when one form modified another in a nominal phrase, determinans preceded determinatum.<sup>1</sup> This order, though by no means rigid, persisted down the ages in Indo-Iranian, Armenian, Albanian, Balto-Slavonic, Hellenic and Germanic, but it came to be reversed in Italo-Celtic.<sup>2</sup> Why was this so? Why does an Englishman now say *the white house*, but a Frenchman *la maison blanche* and an Italian *la casa bianca*? The primary cause may be sought in the fixing of the stress on the first syllable in Latin polysyllabic words and in the growing tendency to distinguish between attributes of size and quantity and those of description and quality. The former were preposed, and the latter postposed: *magna pars* but *pars aequa*, *omnes homines* but *homines Romani*. The government was *Senatus populusque Romanus*. The state was *res publica*, *respublica* or plain *res*, but never *publica res*. In Latin, a highly inflected language, word order was free, but no one would have said 'De publica re bene meritus est'. British statesmen still speak of *pax Britannica*. Scores of nominal phrases like *annus mirabilis*, *literae humaniores*, *loci classici*, *manu propria*, *persona grata*, *tabula rasa* and *terra incognita* are still heard in elegant conversation. The Linnaean taxonomy is universal, the name is the variety always following that of the species.

In the Latin literature of the Golden Age word order was largely determined by the requirements of emphasis, clarity, euphony and rhythm. In post-Augustan colloquial Latin the postposed attributive became more and more regular. People spoke of *domus alba* and, later, of *illa mansio blanca*, the antecedent of *la maison blanche* in present-day French. Several French adjectives, it is true, regularly precede: *beau*, *joli*, *vilain*; *bon*, *mauvais*, *méchant*; *grand*, *gros*, *vaste*, *petit*; *jeune*, *vieux*; *sage*, *sot*; *vrai*, *faux*. They express primary concepts and their antonyms: beautiful, ugly; good, bad; large, small; young, old; wise, foolish; true, false. Some adjectives may both precede and follow the nouns they modify, but with differences in meaning. *Un poète méchant* is 'a wicked poet', whereas *un méchant poète* is 'a poor, incompetent poet'. *Un brave homme* is 'a good fellow', but *un homme brave* 'a brave man'. *Un honnête homme* is 'a worthy man', but *un homme honnête* 'an honest man'. *Un pauvre écrivain* is 'an inefficient writer', but *un écrivain pauvre* is 'an impecunious writer'. *Venir les mains propres* signifies 'to come with clean hands', whereas *bâtir de ses propres mains* means 'to build with one's hands'. It is interesting to note that *proper* is the only attribute that shows this feature in current English. Compare *proper behaviour* with *architecture proper*.<sup>3</sup> In heraldry a *peacock proper* denotes not a symbolic bird, but an actual picture of a peacock 'in the natural colouring, not in any of the conventional tinctures'.<sup>4</sup> An heraldic crest may contain a *tiger proper* or an *open book proper*. In the sense 'strictly

so called, in the strict signification of the term' postposed proper is in living use. For instance, The Port of London Proper means the ninety navigable miles of the River Thames controlled by P.L.A., or the Port of London Authority, from the Nore Estuary upstream to Teddington Weir, neither more nor less.

In Old English the preposed attributive, inherited from Common Teutonic and Indo-European, remained normal. This order was further strengthened by the proliferation of tatpurusha compounds of the *wordhord* type in which the first noun component invariably defined the second. So *bordweall* 'phalanx', *cirictum* 'churchyard', *duruweard* 'janitor', *heafodcirice* 'cathedral', *larhus* 'school', and *stanbrycg* 'stone bridge'. The use of different inflexions in definite and indefinite forms did not affect word order: *hwit hus* or *pæt hwite hus*. One could also say *pæt hus pæt hwite* 'that house — I mean the white one', just as one could say in Greek  $\delta \lambdaευκός \omicron\iotaκος$  or  $\delta \omicron\iotaκος \delta \lambdaευκός$ . In Old English prose *eall*, *genog* and adjectives in *-weard* were frequently postposed.<sup>5</sup> *Fepa eall gesæt* 'all the troop sat down'; *medo genog* 'mead enough', *feondas genoge* 'enemies enough'; *fram þæm mriðan utewardum* 'from the outer (part of the) mouth'. *Enough* is indeed unique in preserving postposition as well as distinctive forms for singular and plural far into the modern period. *Enough* and *enow* were recognized as distinctive forms by Johnson and they are still preserved as such in certain dialects: 'fruit enough' but 'apples enow'. 'Time enough' means not only 'plenty of time', like Czech 'času dost' and German 'Zeit genug', but also 'sufficiently early'.

Tomorrow will be time enough  
To hear such mortifying stuff

Swift, *Stella's Birthday*<sup>6</sup>

In Old English poetry, however, attributive adjectives followed the nouns they modified fairly frequently: *leoht unfæger* 'ugly light', *wundor micel* 'a great marvel', and *medubenc monig* 'many a mead-bench' occurring within a short space in *Beowulf*, 727—776. This poetical feature persisted into Middle English, and it was a feature of some importance. It was important because it meant that there was no syntactic or stylistic clash when postposed adjectives became fashionable under French influence. Because *regnscuras swete* had been possible in Old English side by side with normal *swete regnscuras*, Chaucer's *shoures soote* did not sound very unusual, nor did other inversions used subsequently in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* such as *lokkes crulle*, *service divine*, *robes riche*, *barres smale*, *table dormant*, *magik naturel*, *his apostles twelve*, *tales tweye*, *whelkes whyte*, *wordes neue*, *eyen stepe*, and *fee simple*. This last expression still signifies 'absolute ownership' in legal parlance. Indeed, in the French-derived language of law postposed attributives are normal: court martial, notary public, body politic, freehold absolute, heir apparent (whose right of inheritance cannot be superseded by the birth of a nearer heir), heir presumptive (whose right will be forfeited if a nearer heir is born), Princess Royal, Chapel Royal, Attorney General, Lords Spiritual and Lords Temporal. To give someone the *lie direct* means to accuse him of falsehood to his face. To say that a custom has been observed *from time immemorial* is to state that that custom is older than any living man can remember. To describe a man as *the devil incarnate* is to imply that he is the very embodiment of Satan.

To the speech of poetry the postposed adjective often gives a peculiar affectiveness which cannot be analysed or defined. This is one of the miracles of language. Why, I ask (but cannot answer) does 'the vision splendid' of Wordsworth's *Intimations of*

*Immortality*, expressing, as it does, all the bright unsullied aspirations of youth, mean so much more than 'the splendid vision'? It would be illuminating to survey the whole history of English poetry with an eye to attributes alone, and more especially with an eye to the use of postposed attributive adjectives. In this last respect Chaucer and Spenser stand high. So much of their reading lay in Italian and French. No English poet, however, was more addicted to the postposed attributive than Milton, especially in his early poems. Take away the postposed epithets from the opening lines of *Lycidas*, and it is no longer the poem we know.

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more  
 Ye myrtles *brown*, with ivy *never-sear*,  
 I come to pluck your berries *harsh* and *crude*,  
 And with forced fingers *rude*,  
 Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.

The last line of *Lycidas* shows chiasmus:

Tomorrow to *fresh* woods and pastures *new*.

Milton was indeed rather fond of this crosswise arrangement in the ordering of epithets:

*Bright-harnest* angels sit in order *serviceable* (*Nativity Hymn*)  
*Shallow* brooks and rivers *wide* (*L'Allegro*)  
 Hymns *devout* and *holy* psalms (*At a Solemn Music*)

When two adjectives modify a noun six orders are possible:

- (a) good true men
- (b) good men true
- (c) true good men
- (d) true men good
- (e) men true good
- (f) men good true

The order (a) is normal, and it has two variations:

- (a)<sup>1</sup> good, true men
- (a)<sup>2</sup> good and true men

The comma in (a)<sup>1</sup> records open juncture emphasizing the fact that moral upright-ness and social loyalty are two separate concepts in the mind of the speaker. The copula in (a)<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand, has no semantic significance, but it provides a slight rhythmic variation which the speaker may prefer in a particular context.

The order (b) is unusual in ordinary speech. It may be particularly impressive in the language of religion, law, and poetry:

very members incorporate (*Book of Common Prayer*)  
 holy church universal (*ibid.*)  
 civil body politic (*Constitution of New England*)  
 sweet thyme true (John Fletcher, *Bridal Song*)  
 sad occasion dear (Milton, *Lycidas*)  
 blest kingdoms meek (*ibid.*)  
 bright essence increate (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III)

human face divine (ibid.)  
tremulous cadence slow (Arnold, *Dover Beach*).

The order (b) with an inserted copula — good men and true — is, however, a favourite stylistic variation even in ordinary conversation. Indeed, it has a tradition of one millennium at least behind it. In the 995 version of the parable of the talents, the master commends the sensible servant (Matthew XXV 21) saying 'Beo blipe, þu goda peow ond getrywa', although both the original and the Vulgate texts have post-posed adjectives with copula: *Eὖ, δοῦλε ἀγαθὲ καὶ πιστέ*; Euge, serve bone et fidelis. The Wycliffite version (1389), which usually follows the Vulgate slavishly, nevertheless here follows the Old English pattern: Well be thou, good servaunt and feithful. So, too, does Tyndale (1526): Well, good servaunt and faythful. Under the influence, I suspect, of Luther's German (1534) the King James translators adopted the conventional order (1611): Well done, thou good and faithful servant. The Old English pattern was followed by Sir John Mandeville: In that contre ben longe apples, of good savour; and thei han grete long leves and large.<sup>8</sup> It was followed by Milton in the sonnet *On His Blindness*:

When I consider how my light is spent,  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide...

The orders (c) and (d) are, of course, the same as (a) and (b) with epithets reversed. What, then, determines the order of epithets? This order is determined partly by cohesion and partly by custom. The principle of cohesion (or immediate constituents) is hardly operative in the distinction between 'good true men' and 'true good men'. Custom alone decides in favour of the former. From custom people say 'a strong silent man' and not 'a silent strong man'. From custom they say 'a great big elephant' and not 'a big great elephant'. The orders (e) and (f) are not current without the copula: 'men true and good' or 'men good and true'. Such postposed epithets linked by the copula are especially frequent with antonyms: 'times good and bad', 'ways fair and foul', 'love sacred and profane', 'hymns ancient and modern', 'English past and present' (Trench), 'plays pleasant and unpleasant' (Shaw).

In multiple attribution, involving more than two epithets, word order may be significant. Adjectives expressing permanent qualities normally stand nearest the nouns they modify. 'True good men', as we have just seen, is a possible alternative to 'good true men' because both *good* and *true* can be said to adhere closely to the noun *man*.<sup>9</sup> But we cannot sensibly transpose the epithets *good* and *old* in the nominal phrase 'good old man' because *old* and *man* are closely joined. Indeed, in many languages 'old man' is one word.<sup>10</sup> In John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) Jimmy Porter was 'an angry young man' and not 'a young angry man'. 'My little white house' (possessive adjective + attribute of size + attribute of colour + noun) is the normal order in all the Germanic and Slavonic languages.<sup>11</sup> And yet, it might be argued, the size of my house is more permanent than its colour. True enough, since next spring I may decide to have it painted green. It would certainly be more difficult, not to say expensive, to have my little house enlarged and converted into a spacious mansion. In the ordering of epithets, however, people are guided, often subconsciously, by what is most prominent in their minds and imaginations as they speak. They are not concerned with future contingencies or even present realities.

In the nominal phrase 'my little white house' it is important to observe that *my* modifies *little white house* and not merely the head-word *house*, and that *little* modifies

white house, and not merely house. This is another way of saying that in *my little white house* the immediate constituents are *my* and *little white house*, and that likewise in *little white house* the immediate constituents are *little* and *white house*.

In the King of Brobdingnag's vitriolic denunciation of the whole human race (*Gulliver's Travels*, Chapter 6) Swift undoubtedly reversed the normal order of epithets in order to drive home the notion of repulsiveness and loathing: 'I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of *little odious* vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth'.<sup>12</sup>

Is it feasible to establish a working model for the order of attributives in English? Yes, but on the whole it is better to leave it fairly flexible, and not to try to make it too subtle.<sup>13</sup> That order will normally consist of determiner + attributive of quality + attributive of size or shape + attributive of colour or material + head-noun. Examples:

my pretty little white house  
some fine large brown tulips  
that solid round oak table  
several ancient lofty stone towers.<sup>14</sup>

Three attributives, apart from determiners, are stylistically acceptable. More than three overweight a nominal phrase unduly. The remarkable thing is that this order has remained basically unchanged over the last thousand years and that it is now followed by speakers and writers throughout the whole English-speaking world.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> H. Hirt, *Indogermanische Grammatik* 22 (Heidelberg, 1927); A. Meillet, *Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européennes* 7, 365 (Paris, 1934); E. Prokosch, *A Comparative Germanic Grammar* 259 (Philadelphia, 1939).
- <sup>2</sup> Today numerous British place-names show this reversed order in Celtic: Aspatria (Cumberland) 'Patric's ash', Brynmawr (Brecknock) 'great hill', Cumrew (Cumberland) 'hill valley', Kirkoswald (Cumberland) 'Oswald's Church', Llandudno (Caernarvon) 'Tudno's Church', Pencraig (Herefordshire) 'crag head'.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Extending principles which belong... to building into the sphere of architecture proper' J. Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture* 1. § 1. 7. A. Walde's derivation of *proprius* from *pro-p(a)trios* 'inherited from one's forefathers' was adopted by H. C. Wyld in his *Universal Dictionary* (London, 1932), but this attractive derivation has since been abandoned in favour of *pro privo* both by E. Partridge in *Origins* (London, 1958) and by C. T. Onions in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford, 1966).
- <sup>4</sup> O.E.D., S.v. peacock, 3.
- <sup>5</sup> R. Quirk and C. L. Wrenn, *An Old English Grammar* 87 (London, 1955).
- <sup>6</sup> First recorded in the fourteenth century: A man may stoupe tymes [C xii 197 tyme] ynow whan he shal tyne pe croune. W. Langland, *Piers Plowman* B xi 35.
- <sup>7</sup> Jean Frédéric Ostervald's version (ca 1730) follows French Academy rules strictly: Cela va bien, bon et fidèle serviteur.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted by G. H. Vallins in *The Pattern of English* 51 (London, 1956).
- <sup>9</sup> In fact, both *Goodman* (also spelt Godman, Goddman, and Goudman) and *Trueman* (also spelt Truman, Trewman, Troman, and Trowman) are personal names in Britain, North America and Australasia.
- <sup>10</sup> Greek *γέρον*, Latin *senex*, French *vieillard*, German *Greis*.
- <sup>11</sup> German *mein kleines weisses Haus*: Czech *můj malý bílý dům*.
- <sup>12</sup> See A. A. Hill, *An Introduction to Linguistic Structures* 271 (New York, 1958). In his autobiography *With an Eye to the Future*, London 1967, O. Lancaster alluded to Mrs Elvira Barney as 'that poor little rich girl'.

- <sup>13</sup> In 'Grammatical Categories', *Language* 21. 1—11 (Baltimore, 1945), B. L. Whorf divided adjectives into two main cryptotypes with sub-classes: (a) a group referring to inherent qualities such as colour, material, physical state, provenience, breed, nationality, function, use; and (b) a group referring to non-inherent qualities such as size, shape, position, evaluation (ethical, aesthetic, economic). He was, however, far from satisfied with this unduly sophisticated distinction.
- <sup>14</sup> See L. Bloomfield, *Language* 202—6 (New York, 1933); A. S. Hornby, *A Guide to Patterns and Usage in English* 174 (Oxford, 1954); I. A. Gordon, *The Movement of English Prose* 26 (London, 1966); E. A. Nida, *A Synopsis of English Syntax*,<sup>2</sup> 75—82 (The Hague, 1966).

## RESUMÉ

### Atributy a atributivní adjektiva

Pořádek atribut + substantivum v současné angličtině navazuje na stav v pragermánštině, snad i v indoevropštině, zatímco obrácený pořádek v románských jazycích vznikl z prokazatelných změn v latině. Pořádek determinans + atributy kvality n. kvantity + velikosti a tvaru + barvy a látky + řídící podstatné jméno je určen a) sémantickou soudržností a b) tradičním územ. Změnou tradičního pořádku je možno obohatit projev výrazným afektivním zabarvením.