

# Pre-Noun Modifiers as a Means to Describe Product Characteristics<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article deals with the characteristics of noun phrases functioning in pre-position. Pre-noun modifiers, or attributive modifiers, are among the high-capacity structures in the contemporary English language, as they enable to do without prepositions and to describe objects in a laconic way. The goal of this research was to analyze the way scholars interpret this linguistic structure today, as well as to compare the terms used in defining such modifiers, and to analyze their structural and semantic characteristics. Findings of Russian and foreign researchers were compared, and semantic, syntactic and categorial ambiguity of pre-noun modifiers were illustrated. The material under study included latest publications in the sphere of design and architecture.

**Keywords:** Pre-Noun Modifiers; Attributive Structures; To Denote; Semantic Groups; Lexemes.

## 1. Introduction

Linguists have long been involved in the study of various attributive structures in the English and German languages. Among the Russian scholars who dealt with this issue in different decades were Latypov (1968), Fatykova (1987), Ripinskaya (1997). This linguistic structure is still of interest to contemporary scientists, as well as to those interested in the pragmatic aspects of language. Thus, it has become the object of research for PhD papers (Proskura, 2006) and, besides, it was analyzed in a comparative study by Zrazhevskaya and Guskova (1986) for the purposes of translation practice from English into Russian. A large-scale research of this phenomenon has been done by the University of Santiago (Gomez, 2009; Akkuzova et al., 2018). The significance of attributive structures from the point of

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view of their structure and their semantic potential does not seem to decrease, given the fact that spoken language keeps evolving.

## 2. Terminology

The structure in question may be denoted by different terms in a number of publications. In Germanic philology and Translation Studies it is mainly referred to as “an attributive structure” (Zrazhevskaya & Guskova, 1986), “attributive word combination” (Latypov, 1968), “attributive complex” (Kostrub, 2011). Kostrub uses the above term to denote “Noun 1+Noun 2” combinations.

Raumolin-Brunberg (1991) applies the term “Noun Phrase”. However, this term (“Noun Phrase”, or “Nominal Phrase”), may also be referred to postpositional attributes, while this study is focused on pre-positioned structures. Gomez (2009) gives a detailed consideration to the “Noun+Noun” attributive structure (“Noun+Noun Modifier”), but this term may only be applied to the structures where the attributive element is expressed with a noun. In this case, word combinations with a participial, numeral or adjectival attribute will not be included in the scope of study. Biber et al. (2010) in their work “Noun Phrase Modification” refer to attributive structures as “pre-modifiers”, accompanying them with the terms like “attributive adjective”, “participial adjective”, “noun as pre-modifier” etc.

Of the terms suggested by various authors in their research of attributive structures, we need to choose those which would describe the object of this research, that is, prepositional modifiers expressed with a noun, a participle, an adjective or a numeral (Nakhae & Nasrabadi, 2019).

As stated above, the term “Noun + Noun modifier”, though used by some authors, would be insufficient in respect to the linguistic structures under study. In this research the focus falls on both “Noun + Noun” modifiers, and “Participle + Noun”, “Adjective + Noun”, “Numeral + Noun” structures, where a noun, a participle, and adjective or a numeral is used in the attributive function. Given that both pre-positional and post-positional modifiers may be found in contemporary English contexts, it should be stressed that the focus of this study is on pre-positional, or “pre-noun modifiers”. For the purpose of this article, they will also be referred to as “attributive modifiers”, based on their syntactic function.

Thus, the object of research includes Pre-noun modifiers, or Attributive modifiers in the contemporary English language, where the attribute is represented with a noun, a participle, a numeral or an adjective.

The goal of the research is to analyze the semantic and structural characteristics of such modifiers functioning in professional contexts of publications in the sphere of design and architecture.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The modifiers in question have been selected from latest publications on a real estate listings site, Mansionglobal.com (Ramchandani, 2017), as well as on a home improvement, remodeling, gardening and decorating resource, ThisOldHouse.com (Niranjan, 2016; Garsk, 2017; Vaglica, 2017; Jabbari et al., 2019). The methods applied included the method of contextual analysis and the continuous sampling method.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Speaking about the interpretation of what an attribute is, a definition by Proskura (2006) should be quoted. The linguist interprets it as “a category including a number of relations (features, characteristics, properties)”. Meshcheryakova-Klabakher (2015) describes an attribute as “a sentence part which has a meaning of a qualitative or a quantitative characteristic of an object, or of any other feature, whose adjunction to a component that may be expressed by various parts of speech does not depend on the valency requirements of the latter” (Bahreman, 2015). Pavlyuk (2012) interprets an attributive structure as a unit of complex nomination stating that: “1) an attributive structure is a means of nomination and 2) an attribute within an attributive structure is a means to generalize information and to single out significant properties (features) of the defined notion, i.e., of a specific object which is a fragment of reality” (p. 164).

As for the structure of an attributive modifier, it should be noted that its nucleus is made of a noun, while pronouns, adjectives, other nouns etc. become adjacent to it in pre-position. In particular, Gomez (2009) says that “the head noun in the noun phrase is traditionally the element around which all the dependents are placed, and one can usually recognize a prototypical NP structure in which the order of each of its elements can be observed” (p. 17).

The above statement also enables to conclude a linear structure of Pre-noun modifiers. Pavlyuk (2012) says that “the subject is the center of linearization in attributive modifiers”, and stresses that “the attributes and their interpretation depend on the type of a subject” (p.167). Linearization in “forming the entire meaning of a syntactic structure is a multifaceted and complex process which reflects the semiological, psychological (focus and rhematization), cultural, stylistic and other aspects of language (Pavlyuk, 2012, p. 167).

The semantic and syntactic characteristics of pre-noun modifiers should not be treated separately. Gomez (2009) points out the “semantic and syntactic ambiguity” of such structures as well as a “categorial ambiguity (pp. 65-67). A manifestation of the latter is nouns used as modifiers, where they “exhibit the criteria for the function of adjectival categories, but not for the form” (Gomez, 2009, p. 74). The syntactic nature of such modifiers, according to Gomez, may be proved by “exhibiting the characteristics of other syntactic combinations” (Gomez, 2009, p. 78). They should also “follow the pattern of right-hand, or end-stress, since stress in the noun phrases falls on the head element” (Gomez, 2009, p. 78). As lexical items, these structures “should share the characteristics inherent to morphologically complex nouns” (Gomez, 2009, p. 79).

Another semantic requirement stated by I. Gomez includes “transparency”, where “the meaning would be directly inferred from the overall meaning of the component parts” (Gomez, 2009, p. 79).

The requirement of “productivity” specified by the above scholar implies a possibility of adding new elements into the structure. As this step would require both semantic and syntactic compatibility of the existing elements and of the new ones that are added, it confirms the idea of semantic and syntactic ambiguity typical of attributive modifiers.

From the point of view of morphology, in the contexts under study devoted to the issues of design and architecture, pre-noun modifiers are made of participles, numerals, nouns and adjectives. Semantically, Participle II in this case denotes a method of processing or manufacturing, numerals are necessary to indicate digital data, including weight, dimensions etc. This may be illustrated with the sentence below, where a numeral used as an element of a Noun phrase (“10-foot ceilings”) specifies the height of a premise, and the participle in the combination “plank-engineered wooden floors” denotes the method of timber manufacture:

*“Some highlights include Liebherr and AEG appliances, key fob activated elevators, and 10-foot ceilings and plank-engineered wooden floors” (Ramchandani, 2017).*

It should be noted that the combination “plank-engineered” is already a compound grammatical structure (Noun+Participle), which is incorporated into a bigger compound structure “plank-engineered wooden floors”, thus producing a “nesting doll” effect.

Another attributive structure employed in the above context is “key fob activated elevators”. Syntactically, it follows the same pattern as the previous

modifier (“key fob activated”: Noun +Noun+Participle), and semantically, it denotes the method of operating.

Semantic types of attributive modifiers have been considered by Khanakhu (2007). In her research based on the analysis of relations between the components of nominal groups, the scholar describes the following types of attributive structures: A whole-part relationship; location; material of manufacture; temporal relations; comparative relations; characteristic; belonging; source; object relationship (e.g., lead exposure); subject relationship (e.g., Congress support); specifying, identifying (Khanakhu, 2007).

Based partially on the above classification, as well as on the study of publications in the sphere of design and architecture, the research enabled to reveal several types of pre-noun modifiers falling within respective semantic groups. Such groups may denote: 1) the material used in the manufacture; 2) the product shape or method of manufacture; 3) age or origin of the product; 4) the purpose of the product; 5) dimensions; 6) method of working or mounting, 7) other characteristics.

Some contexts including pre-noun modifiers falling within the above semantic groups are provided below.

Speaking about the first semantic group from the above list, i.e., denoting the material used in the manufacture of the product, the following example may be provided: *“This solid-brass replica has the same pattern as the original and mounts to the door's stile”* (Vaglica, 2017). The “solid-brass” modifier represents the material, as well as the property of the mentioned alloy expressed with the lexeme “solid”. Thus, we can see that the laconic character of attributive modifiers enables to include several various characteristics in one and the same structure.

In the following example three noun modifiers can be found (“Canyon Ridge Ultra-Grain” steel, “carriage-house” door, “Victorian-era” garage) which incorporate heterogeneous characteristics, including those which denote the age and material of the objects in question:

*“The hardware, arched windows, and bracing of the Canyon Ridge Ultra-Grain steel and composite carriage-house door would be right at home on a Victorian-era garage”* (Vaglica, 2017).

Numerals used as part of an attribute structure may illustrate the size of the object described:

*“There is also a podium on the sixth floor, which houses a 27,000-square-foot amenities area designed by Cecconi Simone, and an amenities terrace over the podium, which is 19,000 square feet and designed by Janet Rosenberg + Associates”* (Ramchandani, 2017).

In quite a number of contexts, pre-noun modifiers have been found to represent technical characteristics of objects, as in the example with *“Full-extension, soft-close drawer glides”* (Garsk, 2017).

In most cases, pre-noun modifiers found in the articles under study, may be referred to several semantic groups at a time. Thus, the following modifier contains information on the material, as well as on technical characteristics of the structure:

*“Heavy-duty all-stainless-steel construction”*. Endurance of the material described is denoted with the help of the lexeme “heavy-duty”, which functions in this sentence as part of a pre-noun modifier” (Garsk, 2017).

To confirm the multifunctional character of attributive modifiers (whereby the multifunctional character means the ability to incorporate several “layers” of information in one structure), another context may be provided, which represents data on the style and origin and material of manufacture at the same time:

*“This reproduction light is a style that was popular in kitchens from 1921 until after World War II because it mixed Colonial-era styling, like scallop and bead details, with a stamped-brass body, which kept the price affordable”* (Vaglica, 2017).

Besides, attributive modifiers have proved to be effective in denoting the shape of objects:

*“Many floor mosaics from the Victorian era to the mid-1930s used a small hexagon, square, or penny-round tile to create patterns found in catalogs. These porcelain mosaics are made to the same specs today”* (Vaglica, 2017).

Another example of a pre-noun modifier describing shape is given below:

*“Two height-adjustable peanut-shaped shelves snake out and to the side in one fluid motion”* (Garsk, 2017).

The modifiers “penny-round” and “peanut-shaped” in the above project descriptions may seem much more impressive to the potential customer than just adjectives “round” and “oval” which might have been used instead. The word combination “penny-round tile” is more informative to the buyer than just “round tile”, as it may also indicate the size of the tile. While the combinations “hexagon tile” and “square tile” require an additional adjective to denote the size (“small”), the “penny-round” modifier does not, thus confirming the laconism of the linguistic structure under study. The same is true for the “peanut-shaped” modifier in the second example: the adjective “oval”, if it were used instead, would denote an even shape, while the shelves described “snake out and to the side”, thus looking more natural. (No peanut or any other natural product will boast an absolutely regular shape).

It should be noted, again, that pre-noun modifiers are seldom limited by mentioning only one product characteristic. Though we focused on lexical means denoting “shape” in the above analysis, we cannot ignore the use of other lexemes therein. So, the pre-noun modifier in the first example also indicates the possibility to adjust the position of the shelf: “height-adjustable peanut-shaped shelves”.

The study of various contexts also enables to find pre-noun modifiers used to describe the method of manufacturing, as in the following example:

*“This boutique development, which has launched sales and is scheduled for completion in 2019, has floor-to-ceiling glass windows and transparent terraces that create a contemporary, sleek shape” (Ramchandani, 2017).*

Apart from the semantic groups denoting the shape of objects, technical characteristics or manufacturing specifics, pre-noun modifiers have been found to describe the purpose for which objects are applied.

*“Located in midtown, this mixed-use development, which is set to launch sales very soon, is for the buyer who wants to be in the center of a city but be able to find refuge within it” (Ramchandani, 2017).*

The “mixed-use” lexeme specifies the recommended application of the objects in question.

Pre-noun modifiers prove to be a rather effective means of specifying various characteristics of objects in a laconic way. The examples below demonstrate the use of pre-noun modifiers denoting the method of work, method of mounting parts etc.

*“An update of the old reach-in-and-spin organizer has two pivoting half-circle shelves that slide out from the cabinet” (Garsk, 2017).*

*“A gooseneck with pull-down sprayer stands high enough to accommodate lobster pots and cookie sheets, works in both traditional and contemporary kitchens, and comes in an array of finishes and designs from just about every major manufacturer” (Garsk, 2017).*

Attributive structures seem to be quite effective in stressing product advantages. For example, lexemes “zero-maintenance” and “zero-worry” may describe a product which is easy to use:

*“Engineered stone offers a quarried look, minus the variable veining, with a zero-maintenance, zero-worry surface” (Garsk, 2017).*

The structure of pre-noun modifiers revealed in the contexts under study enables to combine characteristics relating to several semantic groups in a single

sentence: “*The rock-hard quartz-and-resin slabs also come in brilliant colors that you can't find in nature, such as green apple, juicy orange, and fire-engine red*” (Garsk, 2017).

If it were not for the pre-noun modifier, the above description would require the use of several clauses: “the slabs are rock-hard” and “they are made of quartz and resin”. Besides, the metaphoric color description - “fire-engine red” - adds to the expressiveness of the context and enables to avoid using a simile “as red as a red-hot engine”.

In the context below, attributive modifiers contain information on the origin, weight, shape and maintenance specifics: “*What started as a Victorian-era invention, bonding porcelain to cast iron, became a bathroom standard after World War I, when easy-to-clean 300-pound claw-foot tubs graced many homes of the era, such as Colonial Revivals, Tudors, and Neoclassicals*” (Vaglica, 2017).

Several examples of ambiguity have been provided throughout the research. Moreover, according to I. Gomez, ambiguity can also arise in pre-noun modifiers “when the same extralinguistic reality may be expressed in more than one way (Gomez, 2009, p. 68). The “Victorian era” modifier in the above sentence may be interpreted two ways: either it was made at the stipulated time, or its design meets the style requirements. Failing any background information, a conclusion may be drawn which is most logical (a bath designed to look like Victorian era facilities).

A similar interpretation difficulty may arise when reading the following example: “*The stepped basin, sweeping pedestal, and bright chrome faucet on this vitreous-china sink replicate the luxurious look of a 1930s Art Deco bathroom*”.

The modifier “a 1930s Art Deco” + bathroom may also be interpreted as a “bathroom designed in 1930s falling within the requirements of Art Deco style”, or “one that has specially been designed in the mould of Art Deco style, which has regained popularity”. The lexeme “replicate” in the context confirm that the second conclusion is true.

Thus, the laconism and the ability to incorporate various informative elements make attributive structures easy-to-use, but sometimes difficult to interpret.

## 5. Conclusions

The research enables to compare the approaches to the problem of pre-positioned noun modifiers in contemporary English contexts. A linear structure of such modifiers has been revealed, where the elements follow a specific sequence. Syntactically, the modifiers in question may be compiled of participles, nouns, adjectives, numerals functioning as attributes. This implies a categorial ambiguity of



this language structure, as a noun or another part of speech actually performs adjectival functions.

Semantically, such modifiers may fall within several groups denoting various characteristics of objects, including shape, purpose, material, origin etc. Such semantic groups may be different depending on the field of knowledge represented by the pre-noun modifiers.

The structure is considered to be productive, as it may include new elements.

Attributive modifiers may be described as rather a high-capacity structure which enables to express a variety of characteristics in one and the same phrase. The continuing trends of conversion and substantiation, which take place in the contemporary spoken English, confirm the timely character of the research.

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