

The emergence of complex, polyfunctional modifiers in English(es)

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Recent corpus studies have reported an increasing use of nominal premodification in English. Biber et al. (2009) found a trend towards premodification over the past 300 years both in British and American English in terms of the use of attribute adjectives and premodifying nouns and a decrease of post-nominal *of*-phrases. Biber & Gray (2016) also found an increased use of prenominal material in academic writing. This growing preference for premodification over postmodification can be seen in the light of an ongoing trend towards a more compressed style in some written registers of English resulting from the need to condense information in an economic way, for example in academic writing and journalistic prose (sometimes referred to as “densification”, see Leech et al. 2009: 234, 249). More specifically, Günther (2018) showed that certain types of complex APs have been gaining ground in the prenominal position in American English over the last two centuries, most notably the *A-to-V* construction containing *tough*-predicates (as in *a difficult-to-answer question*) and some instances of the comparative-*than*-construction (as in *a larger-than-life character*).

The point of departure of this work-in-progress report is the observation that certain types of complex modifiers can occur in both preadjectival and prenominal position and could thus be argued to be polyfunctional modifiers as exemplified in (1) and (2) on the basis of material from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*:

- (1) a. I’ve found someone extraordinary, someone who’s **honest-to-god** unique.
(COCA 1997: FIC)
b. Maybe we continue this **honest-to-God** conversation upstairs over a glass of wine?
(COCA 2012: TV)
- (2) a. I’ve received thousands of e-mails from readers; most are reasonable, some are unreasonable, and some of them are **off-the-charts** crazy. (COCA 2016: MAG)
b. The Sharks have had **off-the-charts** talent before, but the team never has made it to the Stanley Cup Finals. (COCA 2009: NEWS)

As for the constructional aspects of this phenomenon, several compelling questions emerge: What is the diachronic and current productivity of this pattern in American English? What is the diachronic development of the two options (i.e., does the prenominal option predate the preadjectival one?) and what is the potential role of adverbial complements? For instance, in (2) *off-the-charts* can be used as a modifier to both nouns and adjectives, but originally it was most probably used as an adverbial as in *The readings are off the charts*.

Using data from American English retrieved in an ongoing pilot study, we will explore the possibility that complex modifiers may have spread to other Englishes under the influence of American English on global Englishes (Mair 2013). Previous studies on NP complexity in African and Asian varieties of English have offered competing hypotheses and findings as to the frequency and complexity of pre- and postnominal modification, typically referring to the influence of typological features and preferences of the substrate languages (see, e.g., Brunner 2014, who compares British, Singaporean and Kenyan English, or Brato, 2020, on Ghanaian English; Schilk & Schaub 2016 for a comparison of five varieties).

We will discuss some methodological challenges in data retrieval from electronic corpora in view of the complexity, heterogeneity and variable spelling of the prenominal modifiers mentioned above and present some preliminary findings.

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