Effects of Focus on Adjective Ordering Restrictions

Multiple prenominal adjectives in English appear in an underlying fixed order in unmarked prosodic contexts. However, when one of the adjectives is contrastively or emphatically focused, this order becomes more flexible (Hetzron 1978, Sproat & Shih 1991, Cinque 1994, Scott 2002, etc). This paper addresses two questions: 1) what orderings are possible in English when focus is involved, and 2) how can focus be represented in the syntax so that these orderings are accounted for?

In order to explore flexible, marked adjective orderings, it is first important to characterize the rigid unmarked ordering of prenominal adjectives. There is a lack of consensus in the literature as to which division of adjective classes is directly relevant for the syntactic adjective ordering restrictions observed. Adjective ordering restrictions have been explained by proposals with large numbers of nominal functional projections and precise classes of adjectives that attach to functional projections, such as SizeP or ColorP (Cinque 1994, Scott 2002, Laenzlinger 2005, etc). Contrastingly, there are proposals for broader classes of adjectives like Svenonius (2008), who shows that multiple stacked adjectives are more flexible than Scott's proposal, and argues that the interpretation of an adjective comes from functional nominal structure: crucially, gradability, intersectivity and whether the adjective can merge with a count noun are relevant to the syntactic ordering.

I will follow an analysis along the lines of Svenonius (2008), and argue for a more restricted hierarchy of adjectives, as Svenonius' approach has the advantage that it is a better descriptive account of English data. However, I will also show that neither gradability nor the mass/count distinction is the relevant semantic dimension for adjective ordering restrictions: in fact, there are cases of gradable adjectives that are ordered in the syntax, and there is a difference of interpretation in certain constructions of these two types of gradable adjectives. Additionally, there are non-gradable adjectives that cannot merge with mass nouns, which questions the relevance of this distinction. I will look towards comparatives and for-PP modification, in addition to the semantics of gradable adjectives (following Kennedy 1999 and Kennedy & McNally to appear) to show that the differences between the semantics of adjectives in these constructions match the observed syntactic ordering restrictions.

Returning to flexible, marked adjectives, the effect of focus on the ordering of adjectives is illustrated in the table below:

(1) the pretty yellow hat   (2) *the yellow pretty hat
(3) the PRETTY yellow hat (not the UGLY one)   (4) the YELLOW pretty hat
(5) the pretty YELLOW hat   (6) the yellow PRETTY hat

The ordering *yellow pretty* is unacceptable with 'neutral' prosody (cf. (2)), but becomes acceptable when either one of the adjectives is focused (cf. (4) and (6)). In fact, as the examples in (3)-(6) show, the ordering of the two adjectives is free when one of them is focused. Past analyses have defined focusing as movement to a higher FocusP (Scott 2002, Laenzlinger 2005, etc). Assuming that either the head or the tail of the focus movement chain may be spelled-out, such analyses will account for (3)-(5). But they cannot account for (6), since, in that structure, the focused adjective moves closer to the noun. Indeed, (6) could not be produced unless multiple FocP are postulated, or multiple transformations occur, neither of which is theoretically desirable.

Following Vergnaud (2009), the account proposed here derives the flexibility of ordering under focusing from the analysis of focus-quantification as a reduplication cum deletion process.

I argue that focusing should be formalized in terms of the concept of LINKER (den Dikken 2006), specifically defining the 'focus-quantifier' as a pair of linkers (L, L'). Focus-reduplication of Σ is then the particular case of copying or chain formation (Chomsky 1995, Vergnaud 2009) that arises when Σ is merged with the quantifier/connective (L, L'). Reduplication is followed by deletion at Spell-out. For English, I propose a rule of "blind deletion," whereby all non-focused material is deleted from the copy where the focused adjective lives. However, in English, the order ADJ+N is preserved (*yellow hat PRETTY). An output filter prevents overgeneration of the order ADJ+N. At LF, the reduplicated structure exists in its entirety, and leads to a semantics of focus along the lines of Rooth (1992). This paper incorporates a new representation of focus from Vergnaud (2009) that brings the syntax and semantics together in a more motivated way than a mere displacement to some new specifier position.

To summarize, unlike past accounts, ours correctly generates the four orderings of two adjectives which are observed under focusing in English. It does so by using a single general mechanism of reduplication cum 'complementary' deletion, rather than several ad-hoc transformations. The language-specific component of this system -the complementary deletion- allows focus to have slightly different ordering effects across languages.

Selected References:
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