

Adjectives

We have seen that adjectives inflect for comparative and superlative (good, better, best; blue, bluer, bluest) and that they are common premodifiers in noun phrases (in what is called "attributive" position: "the **good** life," "the **bluest** eye").

Adjectives are also very common as subject complements, in what is called "predicative" position:

- My world is **blue**.
- I am **happier**.
- My kitten is **grey**.

We think of adjectives as being modifiers or complements of nouns or noun phrases. But some adjectives can serve as the heads of noun phrases, when used for a group that shares the quality they describe, or an abstraction:

- Nurses tend the **sick**.
- I believe the **contrary**.
- Freud studied the **unconscious**.

Adjectives can be the heads of adjective phrases, which obey the rule

AdjP → [premodifier] adjective [postmodifier]

As with other rules we've drawn up, the bracketed elements are optional. All the following are good adjective phrases:

- grey
- very tiny
- afraid of his shadow
- quite sure that you will come round in time

Premodifiers of adjectives tend to be adverbs, in particular those adverbs that are called intensifiers, like "very" in the second example above. Postmodifiers of adjectives tend to be prepositional phrases ("of his shadow") or relative clauses ("that you will come round in time").

Remember that adjectives are only one kind of premodifier that can fit into what linguists call the "attributive" position in English. Nouns and participles (both -ing and -ed participles) can also precede and modify nouns:

- the grey cat (adjective)
- the family cat (noun)
- the sleeping cat (-ing participle)

- the contented cat (-ed participle)

Attributive nouns are very common premodifiers, probably more common than adjectives themselves. You can test for them by checking whether they have comparative and superlative forms, and whether you can move them to the predicative position as complements:

- the happy cat, the happier cat, the happiest cat; the cat is happy (adjective)
- the neighborhood cat, *the more neighborhood cat, *the cat is neighborhood (attributive noun)

semantics of adjectives

Adjectives seem to be basic descriptors, but they convey a very complicated range of meanings. Some things to think about when considering the meaning of adjectives:

Does the adjective convey something inherent about something, or something for the moment or in this case only (non-inherent)?

Tweedy is my **firm** friend. (inherent; he is always that kind of friend)

Tweedy took the mouse in a **firm** grip. (non-inherent; he might have gripped it loosely)

Does the adjective convey something inseparable from a role (non-predicating), or does it convey something about the individual (predicating)?

When you are charged with a crime, you need a **criminal** lawyer. (that role; non-predicating; the lawyer is not a criminal)

When plotting a conspiracy, you need a **criminal** lawyer. (that particular lawyer; predicating; the lawyer is a criminal)

Those uses of "criminal" be distinguished by whether you can use the adjective in the subject-complement, predicative position. Only in the second can you say "That lawyer is criminal."

Similar is the famous example:

Olga is a **beautiful** dancer. (Olga dances beautifully.)

Olga is a **beautiful** dancer. (Olga is a beautiful woman who happens to dance.)

Some adjectives are absolute and some are relative. For example:

Tweedy is **grey**. (absolute; Tweedy is always that color)

Tweedy is **small**. (relative. Is Tweedy small for a cat? Small for an animal generally? Small for the situation?)

Often, whether an adjective is absolute or relative depends on context:

Susan is an **old** friend. (I have known Susan what anyone would consider a long time.)
 Susan is too **old** for that. (Susan could be two, or she could be ninety-two.)

When adjectives are "stacked" as premodifiers, English seems to demand that they fall into a certain order. Some memes suggest a lock-step order of eight or more semantic types. Sometimes that order is clearly a stylistic option, but it does seem that English follows a rough "idiomatic" order that includes

Value > Age > Color

Maybe this places more "inherent" qualities closer to the noun, so that one can say

fine old black barrels

but not

* black old fine barrels

* fine black old barrels