

English Corner 6: order of sequential adjectives

Paired adjectives are adjectives that both describe a noun, pronoun or noun phrase, but which can modify it in the same or different ways depending on whether they are **co-ordinate** or **cumulative** adjectives. **Co-ordinate** adjectives, which modify the noun in the **same** way, are of **equal** importance and are **separated by commas**. **Cumulative** adjectives, which modify the noun in **different** ways, are necessarily of **unequal** importance and **are not** separated by commas and **their order is crucial** for the information they convey. The importance of the meaning of each adjective reflects its position relative to the noun, with the adjective closest taking precedence, as the meaning is ranked **from right-to-left**.

Co-ordinate paired adjectives can be *reversed* without a change in meaning

- The meaning of [A **healthy fertile** marmoset] is no different from that of [A **fertile healthy** marmoset], so they are of equal importance and thus **co-ordinate** adjectives, separable by a comma [A **fertile, healthy** marmoset] or [A **healthy, fertile** marmoset].
- The meaning of [The **overweight former** student], with emphasis more on the profession (no longer a student) than his weight (still overweight), provides different information from [The **former overweight** student], which emphasises the excess weight of someone still a student. They are therefore **unequal** in importance and thus **cumulative** adjectives, requiring no comma, but as shown, their order is important.

Co-ordinate paired adjectives can be separated by *and* without a change in meaning

- The meaning of [A **fertile and healthy** marmoset/A **healthy and fertile** marmoset] is no different from that of [A **fertile healthy** marmoset/A **healthy fertile** marmoset], so they are **co-ordinate** adjectives, which should be separated by a comma [A **fertile, healthy** marmoset/A **healthy, fertile** marmoset].
- The meaning of [The **former and overweight** student], implying that the person is no longer overweight and no longer a student, is different from that of [The **former overweight** student], where the emphasis is only on his previous weight. These are therefore **cumulative** adjectives that require no comma [The **former overweight** student].

Some pairs of adjectives can only be cumulative

- As seen above, attempts to use former and overweight as co-ordinate adjectives, whether written as [a **former, overweight** student] or [an **overweight, former** student], brings a contradiction: one adjective states that the person is no longer a student, whereas the other states he is an overweight student. This mismatch of adjectives implies that they only can be used as cumulative adjectives.

Co-ordinate adjectives provide unconnected information

- Used as **co-ordinate** adjectives, a [**fertile, healthy** monkey] is a monkey which is both **fertile** and **healthy**, and likewise a [**healthy, fertile** monkey] is a monkey which is **healthy** and **fertile**; as they mean the same thing, **the order of the adjectives** is not important.

Cumulative adjectives provide added information

- Used as **cumulative** adjectives, a [**fertile healthy** monkey], with **healthy** closer to the noun, describes primarily a **healthy monkey**: a **healthy** monkey which is **fertile**. The converse, a [**healthy fertile** monkey] is about a **fertile monkey**: a **fertile** monkey which is **healthy**. For both, the order is important, hence the term **cumulative**.
- Used as **cumulative** adjectives, in [The **former overweight** student] **overweight** lies closer to the noun and so takes precedence over **former**, so we know that the person still is a student but now no longer is overweight. On the other hand, in [The **overweight former** student] the emphasis is more on his occupation than his weight, and so provides different information; he may no longer be a student but he is still overweight.
- To describe a student who is no longer overweight can also be stated by providing an **adverb** to modify a single **adjective** [The **formerly overweight** student].

The order of some cumulative adjectives is dictated by what **should be emphasised**.

With adjectives describing a *method* and a *recipient*

- If [**male** contraception] meaning (contraception **for males**) and [**hormonal** contraception] meaning (contraception **by means of hormones**) are to be combined, should [**male hormonal** contraception] or [**hormonal male** contraception] be used? The adjective **to be emphasised** is placed **first**, because it will be read first (**from left-to-right**).
- Thus, when contrasting **hormonal contraception** between **men and women**, the common factor (**hormonal contraception**) would come last, so that the user (**males or females**) is emphasised by being read first [**Male hormonal** contraception (reading from right-to-left: contraception **by means of hormones** (hormonal contraception) **for males**) is more difficult to develop than **female hormonal** contraception].
- On the other hand, when contrasting **types of contraception** available for **men**, the common factor (**male contraception**) would come last, so that the nature of the contraception (**hormonal or otherwise**) is emphasised by being read first [**Hormonal male** contraception (from right-to-left: contraception **for males** (male contraception) **by means of hormones**) is easier to develop than **non-hormonal male** contraception.

With adjectives describing a *source of spermatozoa* with *species*

- Given [**epididymal** spermatozoa] means (spermatozoa obtained **from the epididymis**), [**ejaculated** spermatozoa] means (spermatozoa obtained **from an ejaculate**) and [**human** spermatozoa] means (spermatozoa obtained **from men**); if the **ejaculated** spermatozoa **come from men**, which order of the adjectives is best?
- For the individual phrases, the most natural order is to place the species first [**human ejaculated** spermatozoa] (right-to-left: spermatozoa obtained **from an ejaculate** (ejaculated spermatozoa) **from men**).

This phrase is clear, as the first two words (**human ejaculated**) on their own make no sense and need a noun (**spermatozoa**) to define.

- The alternative word order [**ejaculated human** spermatozoa] (right-to-left: spermatozoa **obtained from men** (human spermatozoa) **obtained from an ejaculate**) conveys rather clumsily the same information, but in this case the first two words (**ejaculated human**) make grammatical, if comical sense, with the meaning that the man had been ejaculated! This can be salvaged by separating the adjectives with a comma, to make them **co-ordinate**, rather than **cumulative**, adjectives [**ejaculated, human** spermatozoa].
- However, the former word order would be correct if spermatozoa from the **two sources** in the **same species** are to be compared, when the common factor (**species**) would come last, so that the **different sources** are emphasised by being read first: [In this study **epididymal** and **ejaculated human** spermatozoa were compared].
- Conversely, if spermatozoa from the **same source** in **different species** are to be compared, the common factor (**sperm source**) would come last, so that the **different species** are emphasised by being read first: [In this study **human** and **monkey epididymal** spermatozoa were compared].

In some cases only one word order is permissible

- **Sperm** is used as an adjective in [**sperm maturation**] meaning (maturation **of spermatozoa**), as is **epididymal** in [**epididymal maturation**] meaning (maturation [development] **of the epididymis**). In [**epididymal spermatozoa**] though, **epididymal** describes the source of spermatozoa (**from the epididymis**). When describing the process of **sperm maturation** occurring **within the epididymis**, **epididymal** is used in yet another way with the meaning (**in the epididymis**).
- This process should be defined as [**Epididymal sperm maturation**] (from right-to-left: maturation of spermatozoa (sperm maturation) occurring **in the epididymis**), since the alternative [**Sperm epididymal maturation**] makes no sense, confusing (maturation **of the epididymis** [**epididymal maturation**]) with (maturation **of spermatozoa** [**sperm maturation**]).