

ADJECTIVE POSITION WITHIN THE NOUN PHRASE IN PORTUGUESE: FOUR CENTURIES OF VARIATION

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Portuguese exhibits great flexibility in order of Noun Phrase constituents, with more freedom of placement for adjectives in comparison to English, where adjectives are always preposed to the noun. In this article, we study diachronic variation in the position occupied by adjectives in Portuguese. Our corpus includes various types of texts from the 18th to the 20th century, including notary public documents, business letters, advertising, and letters by newspaper editors or editorials, making up a total of 6679 noun phrases, of which 6453 date from the 19th and 20th centuries (Brazil=2894; Portugal=3569), and only 216 date from the 17th and 18 centuries. Our unit of analysis is each pair consists of a given adjective and noun.

In Portuguese, the position to the right of the head is unmarked. Sometimes this position is fixed, as in (1) and (2), while in other cases it is variable, without change of meaning, as in (3) to (6). The marked pre-head position, frequent in literary texts, results in a sense of greater subjectivity. Variable order is also a function of the degree of semantic unity with the noun, as in (7) and (8). Under some analyses, adjective position might be determined in the lexicon.

- (1) O livro *vermelho* / *O *vermelho* livro ‘the red book’
- (2) O deputado *federal* / *O *federal* deputado ‘the federal representative’
- (3) O amigo *simpático*. / O *simpático* amigo ‘the nice friend’
- (4) A situação *atual*. / A *atual* situação. ‘the present situation’
- (5) *módicos* preços / preços *módicos* ‘moderate prices’
- (6) *superiores* cômodos / cômodos *superiores* ‘better rooms’
- (7) nota *falsa* ‘false bill’
- (8) *falsa* modéstia ‘false modesty’

We test our syntactic/semantic and extra-linguistic hypotheses using the methods of Labovian quantitative sociolinguistics. The results of our variationist analysis revealed the following factor groups to be significant in favoring pre-head position (in order of selection): adjective type (evaluative or descriptive), the size of the adjective compared to that of the head, the date and type of text. We established that evaluative adjectives, that is, those that indicate a challengeable subjective noun characteristic appear most frequently to the left of the head (relative weight 0.73); analogously, phonically lighter (less salient) adjectives are found most frequently in pre-head position (relative weight 0.62). Our quantitative analysis also shows that when adjectives are preposed, the head is usually abstract and that participial adjectives are normally postposed. We observed that adjectives occur in preposed position more frequently in advertising (relative weight 0.54) and less often in editorial notes with informative content. Thus, our results show that adjective position is influenced more by semantic/discourse factors than by strictly syntactic criteria. In overall terms, the position to the left of the head is becoming progressively less frequent in the course of time (17th century = 0.65; 20th century = 0.36). Our results help deepen our understanding of the role played by various relevant factors and contribute to the development of more general studies on word order in Brazilian and European Portuguese.